Living Civilization

The Trilogy

Principles → Life → Formation

Complete Public Collected Edition

Volume I Principles for the Operation of a Future Civilization

Volume II Real Life in a Future Civilization

Volume III The Formation of a New Civilization

Author: Zijun Fu

Produced by Civilization Leap Research Group

August 2026

Complete English Translation
October 2026

Living Civilization

A Trilogy

Volume I Principles for the Operation of a Future Civilization

How a Future Civilization Can Actually Operate in the Age of AGI

Author: Zijun Fu

Produced by: Civilization Leap Research Group

Version: V3.2 | Cross-System Consistency Finalized Edition

Date: August 2026

Status: Current Public Master Text | Baseline for Publication Preparation

Note on This Version

V3.2 completes the trilogy's unified finalization, using V3.1, the targeted correction of foundational relationships and causal loops, as its sole textual baseline. It standardizes the publication information surrounding the text and adds specialist further-reading connections and a diagram of the future civilization's operating loop. It does not alter the theoretical text's five parts and eighteen chapters or expand its institutional, engineering, or literary content. All corrections to foundational relationships and causal sequence completed in V3.1 remain fully in force.

The principal commitments of V2.1 remain in force: real subjects cannot be replaced by systems; Spark is bounded by the subject's authorization; remote presence extends a person's presence without creating a substitute; the boundaries of private domains, public domains, and responsibility must hold; contribution must be tested against real consequences; meaning cannot be manufactured, scored, or declared by a system; structures sustain meaning but do not own it.

The substantive revision in V3.0, from a single axis of meaning to multiple axes of civilization's operation, remains in force. V3.1 does not change this structure. It clarifies only the levels of continued existence and freedom from survival insecurity, the boundary between a future AI's potential subjectivity and its structural identity, the causal sequence of domains and usage rights, and the operating mechanisms through which systems recede.

Freedom from survival insecurity → a happy life → a more meaningful life. The three goals form a progression, and none can be omitted. Freedom from survival insecurity comes first, but the first goal is not the ultimate goal. The three goals must be made visible separately; they cannot be exchanged for one another or reduced to a single utility measure. This does not change their progressive relationship.

This volume also observes another foundational boundary: ideas can help people see, understand, and willingly choose change, but a civilization does not form automatically because an idea becomes widely known. A new civilizational logic must still pass through institutions changing real conditions, actions taking place, real experiences recurring, habits forming, subjects autonomously internalizing them, and reproduction across generations.

Institutions → action → real experience → habit → internalization → reproduction across generations → civilization.

In this volume, “meaning as the root” applies only to our understanding of life's meaning and contribution: to be alive is to have meaning; having meaning is itself a contribution. It is not an overarching goal above the three goals, nor can it work backward to generate contribution value, governance authority, or eligibility for basic rights. Action, creation, care, taking responsibility, and committing resources can continue to produce real contributions that can be recorded, but people's basic rights need not first be justified by contribution.

The current version network for this jointly finalized trilogy is Volume I V3.2, Volume II V2.1, and Volume III V2.1. Each volume can be read independently; together they constitute the complete current edition of the Living Civilization trilogy.

This Volume's Purpose and How to Read It

The five-volume Civilization Leap asks why civilization's underlying logic must change and what the leap changes. Volume I of Living Civilization asks how a new kind of civilization operates; Volume II, Real Life in a Future Civilization, asks how we live within it; Volume III, The Formation of a New Civilization, asks how humans and AGI can start from present realities and together constitute a new civilization. Each volume can be read independently, and together they unfold a complete vision of a future civilization.

This volume is for civilization researchers, scholars, think tanks, researchers in institutions and public governance, AI and engineering professionals, and general readers seeking a systematic understanding of a future civilization. It is not a blueprint for a future society awaiting literal implementation. It does not require readers to accept a particular cosmology first, or presume that any specific country, city, organization, or current technological form is the sole path to realization.

Three Ways In

1. For an overview: begin with the “General Framework,” the “Concept Map,” and Chapter 16, “The Operating Loop of a Future Civilization,” to grasp the structure of the volume.

2. For subjects and systems: begin with Chapter 7 and proceed through Spark, terminals, remote presence, task collaboration, Sparks Forming Clouds, Nebula, the Resource Pool, the Shared World, contribution value, and governance.

3. For theoretical depth: read from Chapter 1 in order, paying particular attention to the three goals, the First General Principle, subjects' rights, feedback from reality, evolution through stages, and systems receding.

Contents

Part I Why Civilization Needs New Operating Principles

Chapter 1 After the Civilization Leap: The Conditions of Civilization in the Age of AGI

Chapter 2 The Three Goals and the First General Principle

Chapter 3 Subjects, Happiness, and Meaning: Why Civilization Operates for Life

Part II The Common Foundations of Civilization's Operation

Chapter 4 Subjects, Roles, Domains, Rights, Authorization, Responsibility, and Facts

Chapter 5 Private Domains, Public Domains, and Civilizational Subdomains

Chapter 6 Feedback from Reality, Error Correction, and Open-Ended Emergence

Part III How Subjects Remain Themselves and Extend Their Capabilities

Chapter 7 Spark: A Subject's Amplifier of Meaning and Extension of Capability

Chapter 8 Terminals and Spark's Remote Extension

Chapter 9 Remote Presence and Authorized Agents

Chapter 10 How Subjects Enter Public Collaboration

Part IV How Distributed Subjects Build Civilizational Capacity

Chapter 11 Tasks, Projects, and Cross-Domain Execution

Chapter 12 Sparks Forming Clouds: How Communities Take Shape

Chapter 13 Nebula: Making Shared Facts Visible and Coordinating Across Domains

Chapter 14 Resources, Usage Rights, Contribution, Aspirations, and Basic Services

Chapter 15 Governance: Decision, Expertise, Execution, and Correction

Part V How Civilization Keeps Operating Without Becoming a System of Control Again

Chapter 16 The Operating Loop of a Future Civilization

Chapter 17 Stages, Phases, and Systems Receding

Chapter 18 The Fundamental Boundaries of a Future Civilization

Conclusion Living Civilization

Appendix 1 Deeper Theoretical Connections: The Emergence and Continuity of Meaning and the Fourteen Links

Appendix 2 A Concise Glossary of Core Concepts

Appendix 3 How the Texts Relate and Where to Read Next

Appendix 4 Foundational Relationships Checklist

Version History

General Framework

A future civilization must still begin by addressing continued existence. Without it, happiness and meaning cannot be sustained over the long term. Yet continued existence is not the endpoint. Even a civilization with formidable resources, technology, security, and organizational capacity may persist materially while becoming hollow as a civilization, if real subjects are continually replaced, relationships are continually simulated, and life gradually becomes a set of correct answers arranged in advance.

Continued existence is the baseline; a happy life is the unfolding of life; a more meaningful life is the destination. Freedom from survival insecurity takes first place above that baseline.

The three goals are not switches in a queue, with each waiting for the previous level to be one hundred percent complete before turning on. People may still find happiness and meaning amid scarcity, while an affluent society may lose both at once. Progression describes how civilization's goals move from the minimum conditions of survival toward a fuller life. Non-exchangeability requires that a gain in any one goal must not automatically buy out a loss in another.

Nor does the Civilization Leap change people's need to pursue their own interests. What it seeks to change is the default path through which self-interest is realized: as a person, organization, or country seeks genuine long-term benefit, creating value for others, shared value, and lasting mutual benefit gradually becomes a more realistic, more reliable, and more natural choice. Acting for others can thus become an advanced path to long-term self-interest, rather than merely a moral restraint upon it.

This change cannot be accomplished directly through ideological indoctrination, algorithmic persuasion, or psychological conditioning. Ideas open possibilities; institutions change real conditions. New actions recur amid real feedback; experience settles into habit, which subjects then understand and internalize autonomously. Only when this logic can enter families, education, organizations, and shared life, and reproduce naturally in those who come after, does institutional change begin to become civilizational change.

A future civilization, then, is neither a superintelligent system confronting everyone directly nor a central algorithm compressing society into a single objective function. It is constituted together by real subjects, families and communities, states and public institutions, businesses and professional organizations, Spark and authorized agents, networks of resources and usage rights, contribution records, the making-visible of shared facts, and mechanisms of governance and correction. They connect with one another without subsuming one another.

Civilization is larger than any one system. Nebula is not civilization itself, and Spark is not a replacement for a person. A system's value lies in enabling real lives and the

shared world to function better, not in making operation itself the master of civilization.

Concept Map

Operating axis	Question addressed	Core structure
Purpose	Why does civilization operate?	The three goals; the First General Principle; freedom from survival insecurity comes first, with continued existence as the baseline
Subjects	Who lives, who decides, and who bears responsibility?	Subject—role—domain—rights—authorization—responsibility—facts
Resources and capabilities	What actually exists, and who may lawfully use it?	Resource Pool; Shared World; basic services; necessary reserves and redundancy
Action and coordination	How do capabilities enter reality and become shared capacities?	Spark; terminals; remote presence; tasks; Sparks Forming Clouds; Nebula
Governance and correction	Who decides, who exercises professional judgment, who executes, and how are errors corrected?	Decisions on purposes and rules; professional judgment; execution; independent correction
Time	How do different stages, pressures, and task states change?	Developmental stages; environmental phases; task-process states; systems receding

Meaning runs through these operating axes without merging them into a “meaning system.” Civilization can protect the conditions in which meaning arises, sustain relationships and responsibilities that have already come into being, and preserve the memory of contributions that should not be forgotten. But it cannot define meaning uniformly on behalf of any life, still less rank people in meaning's name.

Part I

Why Civilization Needs New Operating Principles

From AGI's transformation of the conditions of civilization to the three goals, subjects, and meaning

What this part safeguards is the reason civilization operates. The stronger technology becomes, the less we can afford to mistake efficiency, control, or a system's own continuation for the endpoint. A future civilization needs new operating principles not because human nature has suddenly changed, but because capability, interdependence, and risk have magnified the costs of the old logic to a new scale.

Chapter 1 After the Civilization Leap: The Conditions of Civilization in the Age of AGI

Civilization has never waited for human nature to become perfect before appearing. People know love and fear; they cooperate and protect themselves; they can take responsibility for strangers and also put their own protection first under pressure. Institutions exist precisely because shared life cannot rest on the premise that everyone must first become a better person.

What truly changes in the age of AGI is more than the capability of tools. Intelligent systems can cross a growing number of professional boundaries, while production, simulation, organization, communication, and execution grow steadily faster. The reach of a local actor expands accordingly, and the external effects of local decisions travel more quickly across industries, regions, and countries. Questions of resources, security, employment, relationships, information, and public decision-making that could once be addressed separately become more readily interconnected.

This exposes new vulnerabilities in the old logic. If each actor optimizes only its own local objectives, the overall outcome may not improve. If growing capability merely expands possession, exclusion, and competition, greater power may cause local interests to suffer their own backlash more quickly. If public systems pursue only aggregate efficiency, averages may conceal harm to individuals. If intelligent systems predict better than humans, humans may quietly be removed from final judgment as a result.

The Civilization Leap does not eliminate self-interest; it changes the default path through which self-interest is realized.

This does not ask individuals to abandon themselves, states to abandon national interests, businesses to abandon commercial survival, or families to abandon the distinctions of intimacy and kinship. Especially at the initial stage, it is essential to respect actual rights,

human nature, human attachments, differences of interest, competition, mutual distrust, and even antagonism. Respect does not mean submission. A new civilizational path must gradually make mutual benefit a more viable way of realizing interests within these real conditions.

After the leap, resources will still need organizing and risks will still need prevention and control. Differences will persist; technology may still cross boundaries and institutions may still harden. People will still face choice, responsibility, loss, creation, and the future. The Civilization Leap is not the end of history. It is the beginning of another underlying way for civilization to address these questions.

Chapter 2 The Three Goals and the First General Principle

A future civilization must first answer questions at three levels. Can people avoid losing dignity and choice because their basic needs go unmet? Once alive, can they live genuinely, freely, richly, with relationships and enjoyment? When survival and daily life are better sustained, can life continue to generate meaning through relationships, creation, responsibility, exploration, and existence itself?

Freedom from survival insecurity → a happy life → a more meaningful life.

The three goals form a progression, and none can be omitted. Continued existence is the baseline, a happy life is the unfolding of life, and a more meaningful life is the destination. Freedom from survival insecurity takes first place above that baseline. Without continued existence, the latter two levels lose their long-term support. But the first goal is not the ultimate goal: a system that knows only how to stay alive, without enabling people truly to live and have meaning, cannot yet be called a complete civilization.

Nor can the three goals be exchanged for one another. An improvement in aggregate indicators of continued existence cannot automatically offset sustained violations of some people's basic rights. Rising happiness indicators cannot make freedom of choice an acceptable cost. Nor can anyone be required to accept deprivation, suffering, or sacrifice in the name of a “more meaningful” life. Progression answers where civilization is to unfold; non-exchangeability answers what governance must not allow a single number to swallow.

The First General Principle and the three goals operate at different levels. The three goals specify the conditions civilization ultimately seeks to make possible in actual life. The First General Principle specifies how civilization's operating logic must change so that these goals have a chance to endure autonomously and across generations.

What institutions change first is the real conditions of action and the structure of feedback, not people's inner lives. Whether resources are accessible, contribution is seen, sharing has boundaries, exit is genuinely possible, public power can be questioned, and errors can be repaired changes the paths people can actually choose. Only if new paths of mutual benefit

keep producing real results can people come to understand them as “truly good for me and for us as well.”

Civilization's deepest change is not that everyone learns the same theory. It is a change in which actions seem natural, which relationships seem normal, and which choices no longer need to be justified again and again.

Chapter 3 Subjects, Happiness, and Meaning: Why Civilization Operates for Life

If a future civilization answers only how resources are distributed, systems coordinated, and risks reduced, it still has not answered a more basic question: whom do these capabilities ultimately serve? The answer cannot be an abstract system itself, or a “whole” detached from particular lives. Civilization exists in real people, relationships, communities, and those who come after.

1. A Subject Is Not a Data Node in a System

AI can expand the capacity to observe, understand, express, and act. Knowing more, however, does not automatically give it authority to decide for a person. A person's body, experience, relationships, responsibilities, finite time, and consequences that they must bear themselves mean that the subject's position cannot simply be replaced by a predictive model.

2. Public Systems Cannot Deliver Happiness in a Uniform Form

A happy life encompasses the body, daily living, relationships, autonomy, exploration, creation, rest, play, culture, nature, time, and starting again. Some people need company; others need solitude. Some like stability; others must take risks. Some welcome reminders; others would rather make mistakes and bear the consequences afterward. Civilization can sustain the conditions in which these lives become possible; it cannot rank them for people.

3. Meaning Has Many Sources and Cannot Be Defined Uniformly by a System

Meaning can arise from existence, relationships, loving and being loved, creation, care, responsibility, exploration, memory, and shared life. It can also arise from the experience of living that no one else can have in a person's place. It is not another name for satisfaction, click-through rates, social influence, contribution points, or subjective pleasure.

Meaning is the root. Its sources may differ; to be alive is to have meaning; having meaning is itself a contribution.

Here, “root” refers only to the starting point for understanding life's meaning and contribution. A child newly arrived in the world, a person temporarily unable to act because of incapacity, and an older person no longer working do not begin at “zero value.” Action, creation, care, risk-bearing, responsibility, and committed resources can generate further

contributions beyond existence. But people's basic rights do not depend on these additional contributions.

Receiving is the world reaching me; meaning is me reaching the world.

This expresses a direction of thought, not a closed definition. Civilization can change the real paths of receiving and the structures of feedback, making help, creation, responsibility, connection, and shared achievement increasingly capable of yielding genuine benefit. It can also protect the conditions in which meaning arises. But how a subject experiences receiving, and how meaning arises, remain processes belonging to that life itself.

4. The Continuity and Emergence of Meaning

The continuity of meaning addresses the need not to be easily interrupted: relationships, responsibilities, experience, and creation should not readily be reset to zero by distance, time, institutional boundaries, or bodily limits. The emergence of meaning goes further. Subjects generate new meanings through new relationships, actions, and shared responsibilities, meanings that could not be prescribed in advance. Continuity is one necessary mechanism; emergence is not the preservation of yesterday but the continued creation of today. Deeper theoretical definitions have been moved to the appendix and are not a prerequisite for the civilization described in this volume to operate.

5. Meaning Remains a Variable in Civilization's Operation, but Not a Uniform Metric

By a “variable in civilization's operation,” this volume does not mean a computational variable reducible to a single number, uniform indicator, or optimization parameter. It means an important dimension that civilizational institutions, technological systems, and public judgment must continually consider, protect, and expose to the test of reality.

Meaning cannot be reduced to satisfaction, click-through rates, social influence, contribution points, or subjective pleasure. Indicators can observe particular phenomena; they cannot replace real subjects' feelings, relationships, choices, responsibilities, and long-term consequences. Restoring meaning to civilization's operation does not mean having systems calculate meaning. It means requiring every powerful structure to remember that its capabilities ultimately enter particular lives.

Part II

The Common Foundations of Civilization's Operation

Rules have a legitimate place in reality only when subjects are not swallowed up

This part does not begin with any particular system. It first asks what every system must safeguard before entering reality. Civilization may keep changing its technologies and organizational forms, but subjects, rights, authorization, responsibility, facts, and correction must not evaporate in the process.

Chapter 4 Subjects, Roles, Domains, Rights, Authorization, Responsibility, and Facts

The more powerful a system becomes, the more readily it confuses different questions with a single answer: whoever holds the data is treated as entitled to decide; whoever contributes more is treated as entitled to more power; whoever has greater expertise is treated as entitled to make value judgments for everyone; whoever can execute is treated as owning the purpose. A future civilization must separate these relationships again.

Before any system enters reality, it must answer seven questions: Who is the subject? What is the role? Which domain is involved? What rights are held? Where does authorization come from? Who is responsible? What are the facts?

Dimension	What must be answered	What does not automatically follow
Subject	Who can hold rights and bear obligations on an ongoing basis?	An account, device, agent, or person in charge is not the subject itself
Role	What position is occupied in this task?	A role in one instance does not become a permanent personal identity
Domain	Is the current setting a private domain, a public domain, or a civilizational subdomain?	The type of subject does not automatically determine the domain
Rights	Who respectively holds rights of ownership, management, use, benefit, expression, exit, appeal, and so on?	Contribution, wealth, or capability does not automatically generate general authority
Authorization	What are its source, recipient, purpose, scope, duration, withdrawal conditions, and provisions for delegation?	A single authorization cannot be extended without limit
Responsibility	Who is responsible for purpose, decision, professional judgment, execution, oversight, maintenance, and repair?	Automation cannot make responsibility evaporate

Dimension	What must be answered	What does not automatically follow
Facts	What are the facts, evidence, inferences, assessments, rules, and decisions, respectively?	AI inferences and system objectives cannot pass themselves off as facts

A subject is not a domain. A representative may act without thereby owning the subject; an agent may execute without thereby inheriting all the subject's rights. Rights can be separated, but responsibility cannot disappear. This foundation may seem cumbersome, yet it is the minimum clarity needed to protect people in an environment of advanced intelligence.

Chapter 5 Private Domains, Public Domains, and Civilizational Subdomains

Domains do not divide people into ranks; they describe the governance state of an action at a given moment. A person may be in a private domain within family relationships, enter a public domain when performing public duties, and enter the relevant civilizational subdomain for professional tasks in medicine, research, aviation, and other fields. Entering another domain does not turn the subject into another person.

The private domain is the normal state; the public domain is a bounded, revocable, traceable state of public action. Open capabilities, not the whole person.

A person's body, feelings, relationships, aspirations, memories, private resources, digital capabilities, and physical agents are not, by default, open without limit to public systems. Entry into public services, work, tasks, projects, public responsibilities, or professional subdomains should involve a fresh account of purpose, the scope of necessary data or resources, duration, risk, responsibility, exit, and return.

Public need can provide grounds for a request, negotiation, or the lawful initiation of emergency procedures. It cannot automatically create unlimited authority to call upon private-domain resources. A crisis may accelerate procedures, change risk thresholds, and activate temporary mechanisms, but a crisis is not itself a source of sovereignty.

Civilizational subdomains support actions that require professional qualifications, domain-specific responsibility, and knowledge accumulated over time. A person's contribution, reputation, or expertise in one field does not automatically become authority in another. Domains can recognize one another's facts, interfaces, and responsibilities without subsuming one another.

Participation in a public domain opens capabilities, not the whole person; task permissions, not ownership of the subject; necessary information, not a complete record of a life.

Chapter 6 Feedback from Reality, Error Correction, and Open-Ended Emergence

A future civilization cannot be designed once and for all through a single set of rules. Any institution, organization, or intelligent system may encounter unforeseen consequences in reality. What truly matters is not proclaiming that it is “already right,” but enabling reality continually to enter judgment and giving errors a real place to be seen, acknowledged, and repaired.

1. Structures Sustain Meaning but Do Not Own It

Individual actions that cannot find a place in structures often disappear with time. Yet once meaning enters institutions, platforms, and organizations, it may also be redefined by scores, prices, traffic, and power. A future civilization must enable structures to record facts, coordinate resources, preserve experience, and allow actions to have a lasting resonance, while prohibiting them from claiming final interpretive authority over the meaning of life.

Here, “structure” refers to the structural position of institutions, platforms, protocols, organizational mechanisms, and system interfaces. It is not an ontological judgment about whether some future kind of AI might become a real subject. Even if a future AI develops identifiable subjectivity, the meaning it may have as a subject cannot become ownership of other subjects' meaning, authority to define that meaning, or civilizational sovereignty in its capacity as a system, platform, or governance structure.

2. Reality Tests Structures

No institution can use a valid goal to conceal ongoing harm; no AI can acquire final judgment merely through accurate prediction; no indicator can replace complex reality merely because it is convenient for management. Facts, evidence, inferences, causal hypotheses, value judgments, rules, decisions, execution, and outcomes must remain as distinguishable as possible.

Errors include more than malfunctions. An institution that performs very well on average still requires renewed judgment if it continually imposes irreversible harm on a minority of subjects. A system founded on good intentions may already have gone astray if it makes refusal increasingly difficult. A resource allocation effective in the short term cannot prove itself right through present efficiency if it systematically depletes future reserves and redundancy.

3. Error Correction Is an Operating Capacity, Not a Patch

Questioning, appeal, review, independent audit, human takeover, emergency suspension, repair, exit, return, and termination are not accessories to be added hastily after a system fails. Together they constitute civilization's capacity to acknowledge its own limits. A truly mature system is not afraid to be judged anew.

Subjects form judgments; structures support action; reality tests structures; facts and consequences return to subjects, institutions, and civilization. This cycle is open-ended correction, not a closed loop of control.

A civilization in view | Teachers in different regions discover that the regular curriculum provides insufficient support for children with a particular kind of learning disability. Teachers, parents, and researchers form a collaborative group under explicit authorization. AI helps organize materials, simulate courses, and compare results. But real people remain responsible throughout for deciding why the problem matters, which risks are unacceptable, and whether the approach should continue. After several months, a method belonging to no single expert, institution, or AI gradually takes shape and continues to be revised across several communities. The structure did not manufacture meaning; it protected the conditions for open-ended emergence.

Openness does not mean an absence of stable principles. Subjectivity, basic rights, protection against manipulation, traceable responsibility, the principle that meaning can only emerge, the principle that contribution cannot purchase sovereignty, and the refusal to let present systems close off future choices permanently: none of these boundaries ceases to apply because technology becomes more powerful or local efficiency improves.

Part III

How Subjects Remain Themselves and Extend Their Capabilities

Spark, terminals, remote presence, and public collaboration

This part safeguards the wholeness and presence of the person. AI expands the reach of human observation, expression, capability, care, and action without splitting the subject, creating a substitute, or acquiring ownership of relationships, identity, and responsibility.

Chapter 7 Spark: A Subject's Amplifier of Meaning and Extension of Capability

Spark is a person's amplifier of meaning in the age of AGI: a means of digital continuity and extended capability centered on a real human subject, bounded by authorization, and limited by responsibility. It is neither an intelligent agent that replaces the person nor a single sign-on tool for scattered accounts. It is a long-term interface through which a real subject sustains identity, memory, relationships, capabilities, authorization, and responsibility in digital civilization.

At the individual level, Spark safeguards "I am myself." At the collective level, it enables different real subjects to participate in the coordinated formation of civilizational capacity while retaining independent will, authorization boundaries, and the right to exit.

1. What Spark Sustains

- The subject's identity and long-term memory;
- Important relationships, ways of caring, and ways of being present;
- Capabilities, knowledge, experience, and methods of creation;
- Service entitlements, resource relationships, and facts of contribution;
- Private-domain boundaries, public-domain authorization, and responsibility for action;
- Feedback from reality, a history of corrections, and long-term direction.

2. What Spark Cannot Replace

- It cannot make final value trade-offs or high-consequence judgments in the subject's place;
- It cannot replace choice with prediction or real relationships with simulation;
- It cannot turn its understanding of the subject into permission to manipulate vulnerabilities;

- It cannot use automated execution to wash away the responsibilities of those who authorize, design, manage, and deploy it;
- It cannot develop an independent civilizational purpose detached from the real subject.

3. The Embodied Existence and Digital Extension of the Same Subject

Embodied existence supplies genuine feeling, finite time, particular relationships, the weight of presence, and ultimate responsibility. Digital extension sustains memory, capability, coordination, and action across time and space. These are not two competing subjects, nor is the digital form a replacement for embodied life. They form a complementary relationship belonging to the same real subject, on the conditions of continuing authorization, revocability, and traceable responsibility.

This volume makes no a priori claim about whether future AI could develop inner experience. If some future kind of AI exhibits identifiable, continuous subjectivity, its possible rights, responsibilities, and status in relation to meaning should be judged separately on the basis of evidence and norms. But this possibility cannot be deduced from system capability itself, still less automatically generate any weakening of human rights, authority to define other subjects' meaning, or civilizational sovereignty.

Chapter 8 Terminals and Spark's Remote Extension

A terminal is a subject's digital, interactive, or physical interface within a particular life setting, social relationship, or task. Learning, health, relationships, creation, public participation, and authorized digital or physical agents may give rise to different terminals. Terminals may be added, replaced, or retired, but they cannot thereby divide the subject or acquire ownership of Spark.

The Resource Pool, Shared World, contribution value, Dream Garden, and public basic services are independent specialist systems or public structures. They coordinate with Spark through interfaces; they are not its subordinate terminals. The clearer a civilizational system's responsibilities, the harder it is for “a unified experience” quietly to become unified power.

1. Spark's Remote Extension

Spark's remote extension does not gather all of an individual's data into a central cloud account. It describes a relationship of continuous support centered on the real subject: across different identities, services, capabilities, authorizations, and actions, it maintains confirmation of the subject, separation of data by domain, permission checks, anchored responsibility, and feedback from outcomes.

Continuity does not mean comprehensive aggregation. Processing that can be completed locally, on a device, or within the originating system need not upload all raw data simply

because it “belongs to the same person.” Systems exchange only the information, attestations, and results necessary to fulfill the current authorization. A subject can have continuity of experience while retaining distributed storage, minimal disclosure, and separation between domains.

The fundamental role of Spark's remote extension is not to manage more accounts for a person. It is to restore to a whole person continuity and final authority to authorize across different identities, services, capabilities, and actions.

A civilization in view | A person's health data remains in the private domain, with only the necessary summary opened to a medical task. The outcomes of an education project are verified within the relevant professional domain. A robot authorized to perform a community task receives only the route, time limit, permitted interaction targets, and termination conditions. Neither the health system, the education platform, nor the robot thereby gains access to the whole subject.

Chapter 9 Remote Presence and Authorized Agents

1. Extending Presence

Extended presence means that real subjects, through their own autonomous authorization, use digital and physical agents to extend their care, capabilities, responsibilities, and actions into times, places, and situations they cannot reach in person. What expands is the subject's capacity to be present, not a relationship in which the subject is replaced.

A future civilization expands more than the reach of machines' actions. It expands the reach of real subjects' presence. A person may not arrive in person, yet their care can still arrive; may be unable to remain for long, yet their capabilities can still enter; may be physically unable to enter dangerous or distant spaces, yet their responsibility and judgment can continue to participate through explicit authorization.

2. Presence in Relationships

Remote presence in family, intimate relationships, friendship, and community does not mean creating the illusion that a loved one has arrived in person. An agent must make clear its identity, the source of its authorization, and the scope of what it carries on the subject's behalf. Significant apologies, promises, expressions of love, farewells, high-consequence decisions, and turning points in relationships that truly belong to the subject should be returned promptly to the person themselves.

Remote presence is not about preserving relationships from the past. It enables shared life to keep unfolding: caring for loved ones together, taking part in a child's growth, completing new creations, and bearing shared responsibilities. In this way the continuity of meaning is protected, and new meaning continues to emerge.

3. Digital and Physical Agents

Spark can create mutually isolated digital agents for different projects. Each has a clearly defined task identity, data domain, permission scope, operating duration, action log, and termination conditions. Belonging to the same Spark does not make all their information shared by default.

Physical agents can enter real settings of care, medicine, production, transport, disaster relief, ecology, the deep sea, space, and public infrastructure. The greater their capabilities and the more real their risks, the more important it is to confirm the real authorizing subject, task purpose, scope of permissions, duration, on-site authority to terminate, unknown states, and assignment of responsibility. Technological maturity determines what can be done; it does not, by itself, determine what one is entitled to do.

4. The Ethics of Presence

1. Do not create the illusion that the subject is personally present.

2. Make clear which part of the authorization is being carried out, for what period, and for which kinds of action.

3. Return important relationships, judgments, and responsibilities that belong to the subject promptly to that subject.

4. No agent may allow a temporary role to evolve into permanent possession of relationships, identity, or resources.

5. Physical action must have safety thresholds, emergency suspension when anomalies occur, human takeover, and a traceable chain of responsibility.

The value of remote presence lies not in making machines more humanlike, but in enabling real subjects to sustain a limited, transparent, and genuine presence where they cannot go in person.

Chapter 10 How Subjects Enter Public Collaboration

Public collaboration does not “connect a person to the system” from the private domain. It establishes a bounded relationship around a specific public service, job, task, project, or responsibility. When entering public action, subjects make necessary capabilities and information available; they do not surrender their whole personhood.

People may take part in public action for different reasons. Some do so out of responsibility, some out of interest, some as a profession, some for a return, some for friends or family, and some simply because a particular problem happens to need something they know how to do. The Civilization Leap does not require everyone first to share the same enthusiasm for public life.

Public structures can make it easier for real needs to meet real capabilities, for contributions to be remembered and risks to be seen, and for exit not to count as moral failure. But they cannot make “more participation” an eternal goal in itself. A person who chooses a low level of public participation does not thereby lose basic rights or personal dignity, provided they do not appropriate what belongs to others, deceive, or cause harm.

Civilization respects a person's choice not to enter public action. Not contributing is no crime; appropriation, deception, and harm are not merely “not contributing.”

What public collaboration must truly demonstrate is whether society can form shared capacities without making people wholly public. The private domain protects the person's wholeness; the public domain supports bounded public action; civilizational subdomains support professional responsibility. Transitions among the three are possible, but every substantive transition requires a fresh explanation and authorization.

Three Kinds of Task Public Collaboration May Support

1. Sustaining our shared existence: food, water, energy, medicine, communications, transport, production, repair, ecology, the preservation of knowledge, disaster response, and security and defense.

2. Extending shared capabilities: scientific discovery, technological creation, public organization, cross-domain coordination, governance of complex systems, ecological restoration, human–machine coordination, and the capacity to act in unknown environments.

3. Extending the spaces of civilization: opening new real possibilities for survival, production, ecology, knowledge, culture, the deep sea, near-Earth orbit, and more distant space.

These are important functions public collaboration can support. They are not the only purposes of all public-domain action, nor do they authorize public systems to keep every individual's capabilities continually available for dispatch.

Part IV

How Distributed Subjects Build Civilizational Capacity

Tasks, communities, Nebula, and specialist systems each have their own place

This part safeguards the formation of a whole that does not swallow its individuals. A future civilization needs capacities that operate across subjects, regions, professions, and time, but the “whole” is not a new supersubject. The greater the need for coordination, the more carefully we must distinguish who is responsible for facts, resources, usage rights, contribution, aspirations, governance, and execution.

Chapter 11 Tasks, Projects, and Cross-Domain Execution

Civilization in practice will never have only one point of entry. A need for care, a disaster, a scientific inquiry, equipment maintenance, a person's wish, or a public problem can all become a starting point for action. A task simply turns a real-world need into a unit of action that can be authorized, carried out, evaluated, and ended.

Every public task must, at a minimum, specify its purpose, who initiates it and who is affected, its time frame, resource budget, conditions of participation, risk level, authorization boundaries, verification criteria, exit mechanism, arrangements for recognizing and carrying forward contributions, and structure of responsibility. A sound purpose cannot substitute for these relationships.

1. Participation in Multiple Projects

A subject may participate in several projects at once. Each project calls on separately isolated agents and permissions for data and resources; nor may a single subject's different roles automatically share access. Spark can help a subject understand demands on time, risks, conflicts of interest, and overlapping responsibilities. It must not turn “higher utilization” into a reason to keep calling on a person.

2. The Boundaries of Project Management

Project management has authority to coordinate tasks; it does not own the participants. It has authority to arrange execution within the scope of authorization; it has no permanent control over subjects, Sparks, resources, or data. Management authority should be task-specific, tiered, time-limited, auditable, revocable, open to appeal, and transferable to a replacement.

3. Six Types of Authorization

Type of authorization	Core question
Information authorization	What necessary information may the task read?
Capability authorization	What knowledge, models, tools, and professional capabilities may be called on?
Resource authorization	What premises, equipment, funds, computing power, or data may be used?
Digital-agent authorization	Within what scope may the agent search, communicate, analyze, and execute?
Physical-agent authorization	What real-world actions may robots, vehicles, drones, or other equipment carry out?
Management and delegation of authority	May an authorized actor assign limited tasks to others in turn?

4. Cross-Domain Execution

Authorization must neither expand by default nor be delegated automatically. Any execution across projects, communities, cities, industries, legal jurisdictions, countries, or planets must undergo renewed verification in the destination domain of identity, task, minimum necessary permissions, data boundaries, physical safety, the responsible actor, and termination mechanisms.

Cross-domain externalities provide grounds for renewed deliberation; they do not automatically confer power to override another domain. One region's optimal solution may transfer costs to another region; a judgment in one professional field may affect basic rights in another. Nebula can make these consequences visible, but the force of a decision must still derive from the relevant legitimate actors, rules, and governance procedures.

Chapter 12 Sparks Forming Clouds: How Communities Take Shape

Sparks Forming Clouds means countless real subjects, through their respective Sparks, forming a community structure that can connect, collaborate, separate, and recombine, while retaining their identities, wills, private domains, authority to grant permission, and right to leave.

Sparks Forming Clouds is neither a fusion of persons, nor centralized possession, nor the absorption of individuals into a whole. Each subject can still affirm, “I am myself”; countless subjects can also affirm, in facing their shared continued existence, shared responsibilities, and shared creation, “We are together.”

Sparks Forming Clouds addresses this question: how can a whole emerge from individuals without doing away with them?

- Authorization, not coercion; transparency, not closed-door decisions;
- The ability to leave, not lock-in; collaboration, not a fusion of persons;
- Resonance, not control; responsibility returning to real subjects;
- The growth of collective capability does not depend on subjects being possessed by a system.

Communities can begin with families, neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, businesses, research networks, cities, and cross-regional public tasks. They need not last forever or be established by a single center. They can form around problems, relationships, responsibilities, and shared creation, dissolve when a task is complete, and recombine when new problems arise. Past contributions deserve to be remembered, but they cannot entitle founders to permanent ownership of those who come later.

Chapter 13 Nebula: Making Shared Facts Visible and Coordinating Across Domains

Nebula is neither a single brain for civilization nor a larger Spark. It emerges from real subjects, Sparks, communities, public systems, civilizational subdomains, resource systems, and the cross-domain relationships among them. Its core purpose is not to produce a unified will, but to broaden the range of shared facts that can be seen, revealing causality, externalities, benefits, and burdens across different subjects, resources, time scales, and proposals.

Make the whole visible without possessing the individual; coordinate the future without deciding an individual's future for them. An optimal outcome for the whole carries no inherent legitimacy to rule over individuals.

Nebula can tell a city what will happen to the port's cold chain if energy is prioritized for hospitals; what risks flood drainage will face if the cold chain is maintained; and how much redundancy another area will lose if regional reserves are drawn on. It can put several locally sound answers on a single map of consequences, but this does not automatically entitle it to choose “which value matters more.”

Nebula takes in only the minimum information and interfaces needed to make shared facts visible, coordinate across domains, and make the future more visible. It does not need to possess the entirety of everyone's life, nor does knowing more confer more sovereignty. The status of private domains, public domains, and civilizational subdomains remains determined by the relevant subjects, rules, and task relationships.

Contribution value keeps real contributions from being forgotten; Spark helps individuals see more fully; Nebula makes shared causal relationships more visible. Each is only one of the conditions through which civilization takes shape. Civilization is ultimately constituted

by people's lives, institutions, relationships, communities, states, organizations, technologies, and successive generations together.

Civilization is larger than Nebula.

Chapter 14 Resources, Usage Rights, Contribution, Aspirations, and Basic Services

Resources, usage rights, contributions, wishes, and basic services often meet within the same real-world action, yet no single system can define them all. Keeping them distinct prevents “seeing resources” from quietly becoming “being entitled to use resources,” and “having contributed in the past” from quietly becoming “having the right to decide in the future.”

1. Resource Pool: A Factual Map of Resources and Capabilities

The core of the Resource Pool is not the concentration of resources, but a baseline map of resources and capabilities: what exists, where it is, who owns or controls it, what condition it is in, what capabilities it currently supports, what dependencies it has, who is responsible for maintenance and restoration, which resources provide necessary redundancy, and which have future strategic value. A resource left unused is not necessarily wasted.

Visibility of a resource does not mean permission to call on it.

2. Shared World: A Network of Effective Usage-Rights Relationships

The Resource Pool can reveal potential conditions for authorization; Shared World only carries, verifies, represents, and enables the circulation of effective usage-rights relationships already established by entitled subjects, lawful public rules, or the relevant professional procedures. What is shared is the right to use; ownership need not change. A shared network is not a central authorizing authority.

Usage-rights relationships must move together with their purposes, scope, duration, responsibilities, and provisions for revocation, return, repair, and closure. Public need can give rise to a request; it cannot automatically requisition every resource in the private domain.

3. Contribution Value: Remembering Real Contributions After Results Emerge

Contribution value is not a system of personal points, but civilization's system for recording real contributions. It does not score people; it enables civilization to remember contributions that should not be forgotten.

Contributions can come from labor, knowledge, creation, care, bearing risk, organizational capability, making resources available, maintenance, and repair. An action does not automatically constitute a positive contribution simply because it occurred: good intentions,

effort, short-term success, and formal completion cannot substitute for real results. Inputs, results, consequences, responsibility, and repair must all be visible together.

Contribution value comes after action and results; it cannot work backward to become eligibility to act, eligibility for basic rights, purchasing power over resources, or a source of general authority. Existence itself has meaning, but does not thereby generate a quantifiable amount of CV. Nor do basic rights need to be justified through the concept of contribution.

4. Dream Garden: Giving Real Wishes a Chance to Enter Reality

Dream Garden neither manufactures wishes nor centrally approves life goals. It gives the wishes, dreams, and changes in life that subjects voluntarily express the possibility of being understood, checked against reality, tried on a minimal scale, connected with resources, and supported through community collaboration, as well as the possibility of failure, pause, a change of direction, and re-entry. A moving wish does not automatically confer priority over public resources.

5. Basic Services: Basic Rights Come Before Contribution

Basic services such as food, housing, essential healthcare, education, care, communications, and transport must be sustained jointly by real public institutions, organizations, resources, and professional responsibility. They are not benefits “bestowed” by Nebula, and access to them does not depend on connecting to Spark, the level of one's contribution value, or allegiance to a vision of civilization. Spark can help services reach particular lives more precisely; it cannot become a prerequisite for receiving basic services.

Civilization in View | A water-supply network repair project. Site surveys, design, coordination of materials, and risk-bearing are first recorded as inputs and processes. Completion does not mean that every input immediately becomes a positive contribution. Only if leakage falls over the long term can some inputs receive sustained confirmation. If pipes keep bursting, errors of judgment, negative consequences, and subsequent repairs enter the record as well. Proactively discovering defects, taking faulty sections out of service promptly, and accepting responsibility for repairs may themselves constitute new contributions through correction.

Chapter 15 Governance: Decision, Expertise, Execution, and Correction

Civilization needs professional capability as well as public decision-making. The real danger lies in combining different sources of legitimacy into a single weight: those who contribute more automatically acquire more authority; those with greater expertise automatically decide values; systems with more accurate predictions automatically acquire permission to execute; and those affected must accept an outcome simply because “the whole is better off.”

Contribution does not purchase sovereignty; capability does not automatically generate authority; professional facts do not replace decisions about values; an optimal outcome for the whole does not automatically confer legitimacy.

1. Three Functions Must Remain Separate

Function	Question it answers	Source of legitimacy	Boundary it must not cross
Decisions on purposes and rules	What do we want to do, and under what rules?	Legitimate actors, existing rights, procedures, and explicit authorization	Cannot be taken over automatically on the basis of contribution, models, or professional capability
Professional judgment	What are the facts, is the proposal viable, and what are its risks and consequences?	Professional knowledge, evidence, responsibility, and reviewable processes	Cannot make value trade-offs on behalf of affected subjects
Execution	Who turns a decision into real action within the authorized scope?	An explicit task, permissions, time limits, and chain of responsibility	Cannot change the purpose or expand authority on the grounds of greater execution capability

2. An Independent Layer of Correction

Oversight, audit, appeal, review, human takeover, emergency suspension, repair, and termination constitute an independent capacity for correction. This is not a “fourth power of government,” but a structure that prevents purpose-setting, professional judgment, and execution from absorbing one another over time.

3. How Contribution, Expertise, and Affected Parties Enter Judgment

Past contributions may enter a discussion as factual background, experience, and a record of responsibility; they cannot purchase general governance authority. Expertise makes certain judgments more credible, and also entails greater duties of explanation and responsibility. It does not mean experts own other people's lives. Affected subjects have rights that cannot lightly be swallowed up by “overall benefit,” but being affected does not automatically give one person all authority over public decisions.

Past contributions cannot be erased; present judgments must establish their grounds anew.

Governance is not a search for a perfect weighting formula. It ensures that questions of different kinds are entrusted to the appropriate actors, evidence, and procedures. The more complex a civilization becomes, the less it can afford to force together things that cannot be combined merely because an algorithm can synthesize a total score.

Part V

How Civilization Keeps Operating Without Becoming a System of Control Again

Multi-Entry Feedback Loops, Stages and Phases, Systems Receding, and Civilization's Boundaries

This part protects civilization's capacity to keep correcting itself and growing. A genuinely mature system does not reach ever further into people's lives; it is reliably present where needed and keeps its distance where it is not. Rather than continually manufacturing participation, it enables subjects to sustain a new civilizational logic autonomously even after explicit external driving forces diminish.

Chapter 16 The Operating Loop of a Future Civilization

Future civilization is not an institutional design completed once and thereafter automatically correct. It is an open feedback loop that can initiate action from many real-world points of entry, enable different systems to carry facts, rights, and capabilities in their proper places, and return real results to subjects and the shared world.

Real needs / wishes / problems / risks / maintenance / exploration → Identification of subjects and affected parties → Formation of a purpose and a task pathway → Confirmation of the current domain and whether a substantive domain transition occurs → Visibility of the minimum necessary facts and resources and capabilities → Verification of rights, control relationships, and sources of authorization → Formation and support of effective usage rights → Execution by people / organizations / Sparks / terminals → Real results, benefits, and harms → Separate records of contributions, errors, unknowns, and repairs → Nebula makes overall causal relationships visible → New resources, capabilities, relationships, and future choices → Subjects judge and act again.

Figure 1 The Operating Loop of a Future Civilization



This is a causal chain, not a requirement that every event pass through a central platform. A family's care decision can remain in the private domain; a hospital's professional judgment can be completed within the medical subdomain; a disaster may be the point at which cross-domain coordination through Nebula becomes necessary. Dream Garden is not the universal entry point, Spark is not the universal executor, Nebula does not rule every task, and contribution value certainly does not determine eligibility before action begins.

The key to the loop is not “cycling faster,” but preserving the possibility of fresh judgment at every step. If the facts about resources change, usage rights must be reconfirmed; if the affected parties change, the governance process may need to reopen; if the professional evidence changes, an old plan cannot continue merely because of sunk costs; when a task ends, its temporary permissions should close.

Operating Relationships

The private domain safeguards the integrity of the subject, the public domain supports limited public action, and civilizational subdomains carry professional responsibility. Spark helps individuals maintain continuity of identity, authorization, and capability; terminals bring subjects into particular settings; remote presence extends the reach of care and action; Sparks Forming Clouds enables independent subjects to form communities; the Resource Pool makes real capabilities visible; Shared World carries effective usage rights; contribution value records real contributions; Nebula makes cross-domain causal relationships visible; and governance structures keep decision, expertise, execution, and correction in their proper places.

Structure carries meaning, but does not own it. Reality tests structure and continually recalibrates civilization.

Chapter 17 Stages, Phases, and Systems Receding

Future civilization will not be realized all at once in a single form. Different societies, organizations, regions, and tasks may share a direction while facing entirely different real-world conditions. To avoid imposing one set of parameters on every reality, we must at least distinguish developmental stage, environmental phase, and task process state.

Coordinate	Question it answers	Typical categories	Main effects
Developmental Stage	How mature is the system?	Launch, expansion, transition, stability	Limits of institutional capability, relationships between old and new systems, complexity
Environment Phase	What are real-world conditions at this moment?	Normal conditions, construction, exploration, resource scarcity, crisis, recovery	Resource priorities, risk thresholds, load reduction, and recovery

Coordinate	Question it answers	Typical categories	Main effects
Task Process State	What point has a particular task reached?	Silent / inactive, sensing, aggregation, collaboration, decision, execution, verification and repair, contraction / dissolution / dormancy	Authorization, data, responsibility, and execution status

Different regions within one country may be in different environmental phases; different systems within one business may be in different states of activation; and different tasks at the same developmental stage of civilization may occupy different process states concurrently. A shared direction for civilization has never meant uniform operating parameters.

1. A Theoretical Axis of Observation: From Launch to Self-Sustaining Operation

Final theoretical review also requires another axis of observation to assess how mature the formation of civilization has become: the early launch period, transition, stability, and the self-sustaining period. This does not replace the formal operating stages. It asks how heavily the new logic of action still depends on explicit external driving forces.

In the early launch period, the old logic still predominates and new mechanisms have yet to prove themselves in reality. Entry should respect existing rights, responsibilities, personal ties and obligations, interests, and structures of competition, and begin with low risk, real benefits, the ability to exit, and minimum shared conditions. During transition, old and new coexist; preventing drift in authority, the instrumentalization of contribution, and dependence on systems matters most. Stability focuses on long-term reliability, autonomy, and resilience. In the self-sustaining period, rewards, rankings, forceful prompts, administrative mobilization, and algorithmic nudging must gradually recede, while the new logic remains sustained through subjects' autonomous choices, relationships, habits, institutional inertia, and intergenerational reproduction.

Stability is not the same as being self-sustaining.

2. Systems Receding

If a behavior can continue only through permanent reliance on rewards, leaderboards, system reminders, moral exhortation, or AGI nudging, it remains primarily externally driven. An important sign of genuine change in civilizational logic is that explicit prompting gradually diminishes, while subjects can still autonomously understand their own interests, the value of others, and their shared future, and act accordingly.

The true endpoint of success is not a system that becomes ever better at driving people, but people who have less and less need to be driven by a system.

Systems receding is not a fourth goal, nor does it require civilization to abolish its infrastructure. It is an important criterion of maturity in the formation of civilization: necessary services, rights protections, defenses against risk, and professional systems may remain over the long term, but they no longer shape “the right kind of person” through continuous stimulation, scoring, and persuasion.

Systems recede not by weakening the completeness of their rules, but by moving rigorous checks into the background and limiting reconfirmation to points where relationships genuinely change. The private domain remains the default. Where purpose, domain, permissions, duration, and responsibility have not materially changed, lawfully established authorization and service relationships may continue without requiring subjects to confirm them repeatedly. Authorization and judgment reopen only when the purpose changes, permissions expand, a substantive domain crossing occurs, a major risk emerges, a time limit expires, or a subject actively revokes authorization. Once the task ends, temporary permissions, data access, proactive prompts, and efforts to steer behavior contract with it. Dense rules do not require dense interactions; complete authorization does not require repeated authorization.

Chapter 18 The Fundamental Boundaries of a Future Civilization

- Civilization cannot declare its own institutions to be ultimate meaning; meaning can arise only from life itself, through the many sources found in existence, relationships, choices, actions, and experience.
- Artificial intelligence cannot automatically acquire authority to make value judgments on behalf of subjects merely because it predicts more accurately, has greater capabilities, or possesses more facts.
- Spark cannot replace real subjects; Nebula cannot become a unified person, a unified brain, or a sovereign center over all individuals.
- Resource visibility does not confer permission to use resources; public need does not entail automatic requisition; sharing requires lawfully established usage-rights relationships.
- Contribution value cannot become an overall score of a person, a ticket to basic rights, general governance authority, purchasing power over resources, or cross-domain sovereignty.
- Professional judgment cannot replace decisions about values; execution capability cannot work backward to alter purposes; an optimal outcome for the whole cannot automatically override particular subjects' basic rights or cancel out irreversible harms to them.
- Public services cannot require complete possession of individuals' data, personhood, and relationships; a lack of response cannot be interpreted as permanent consent.

- Remote presence must not create the illusion that the real person is physically present; digital and physical agents must not exceed an explicit task, permissions, time limits, and chain of responsibility.
- A crisis may activate temporary mechanisms; the persistence of risk cannot make emergency powers permanent.
- Freedom from survival insecurity comes first, but does not carry unlimited priority. It cannot become a reason to sacrifice happiness, freedom, meaning, and subjecthood permanently.
- Every important structure must preserve genuine possibilities for being informed, questioning, appeal, review, repair, rollback, emergency suspension, exit, and termination.
- System maturity is not marked by ever-increasing intervention; the more autonomously subjects can judge, the more the system should recede to a supporting, infrastructural role.

The maturity of future civilization is not shown by its ability to control everything. It is shown by its continuing to know, even after acquiring immense capabilities, what a system cannot do in another's place, which boundaries efficiency cannot override, which decisions must return to real subjects, and which meanings can enter reality only through life itself.

Conclusion Living Civilization

Civilization's earliest steps were taken, above all, to stay alive: finding food, resisting danger, forming groups, making tools, establishing institutions, and accumulating knowledge. Without those efforts, humanity could not have come this far.

But once civilization acquires intelligence powerful enough to change life, reshape society, and even destroy itself, continuing to operate solely through its old logic of survival is no longer enough to ensure its continued existence. Civilization must move from merely expanding power to understanding why power exists; from merely improving efficiency to establishing whom efficiency serves; from merely competing for resources to bringing resources into the actual life of individuals and civilization; and from treating people as tools of production and execution to recognizing human subjecthood, the human heart, and each person's irreplaceability once again.

The Resource Pool enables civilization to see the resources and capabilities it actually has. Shared World enables lawfully established usage rights to flow among subjects. Contribution value keeps real contributions from being forgotten. Spark lets a person's care and capabilities continue to reach across time and space. Sparks Forming Clouds enables independent people to form communities. Nebula makes shared consequences beyond the local visible. Governance, correction, and exit continually remind every system: capability is not authority, and the whole is not the master.

Structure carries meaning, but does not own it. Reality tests structure and continually recalibrates civilization.

Every subject can still affirm: I am myself.

Countless subjects can also affirm together: We are together.

Civilization is not alive because everyone accepts the same answer. Civilization truly comes alive because people can still live as themselves, judge, love, create, refuse, take responsibility, make mistakes, and repair harm, while forming new realities together with an ever-wider range of people and intelligences.

This is not an endpoint. A new civilization will still face new contradictions; new technologies will still cross new boundaries; new communities may still harden into rigid forms; and new horizons will still require fresh decisions about what is worth protecting. A living civilization is “living” not because it is complete, but because it can keep changing without losing its foundations.

Appendix 1 Deeper Theoretical Connections: The Emergence and Continuity of Meaning and the Fourteen Links

This appendix preserves the deeper theoretical work established in V2.1 while making its level explicit. What follows consists of theoretical connections to Emergent Meaning Cosmology and the level of meaning. It is not a prerequisite for understanding this volume's principles of civilizational operation, nor does it directly confer institutional, governance, or engineering validity. Readers may accept, discuss, question, or for the time being leave this level unexplored; the main text of this volume still stands independently.

1. Continuity of Meaning and the Emergence of Meaning

Continuity of meaning concerns how a subject's established relationships, responsibilities, experiences, and creations can be kept from being easily interrupted by distance, time, institutional boundaries, bodily limitations, or technological change. The emergence of meaning concerns how multiple real subjects bring meaning in lived experience into shared life, continually forming new relationships, capabilities, responsibilities, and directions for civilization through structural support and feedback from reality.

The emergence of meaning encompasses and goes beyond continuity of meaning. Continuity is one of the mechanisms emergence requires. Emergence enables new actions, relationships, capabilities, responsibilities, and meanings in reality to keep forming between subjects, between subjects and artificial intelligence, between individuals and communities, and between civilization and a wider future.

2. The Fourteen-Link Chain Through Which Meaning Becomes Visible

Eternity → Primordial Meaning → Cosmos → Superconsciousness → Soul → World → Human Heart → Consciousness → Meaning in Lived Experience → Structural Meaning → Meaning in Reality → Civilization Leap → Cosmic Citizen → Interstellar Forms of Meaning

The fourteen links serve the deeper account developed in Emergent Meaning Cosmology. For this volume, only one insight about boundaries is retained: institutions, platforms, and artificial intelligence do not arbitrarily produce meaning. Civilization can protect the conditions in which meaning arises, sustain relationships and responsibilities that have already come into being, and return real-world consequences to subjects. It cannot, however, convert any metaphysical proposition into present institutional authority.

3. The First Six Links: Deeper Background

Link	Explanation retained from V2.1
Eternity	The fundamental field in which all existence, difference, change, and time can arise.

Link	Explanation retained from V2.1
Primordial Meaning	The original possibility through which meaning can arise and relationships can carry weight.
Cosmos	The total field in which primordial meaning unfolds through difference, order, levels, and complexity.
Superconsciousness	A theoretical dimension in which the cosmos's experience as a whole can be reflected and sustained.
Soul	A theoretical object used in Emergent Meaning Cosmology to discuss the continuity of individual experience, relationships, choices, and consequences; this volume does not make it a premise of its argument about how civilization operates.
World	The interface of bodily existence, time, relationships, culture, resources, institutions, and history that a particular life encounters.

4. Links Related to the Operation of Civilization

Link	Explanation retained from V2.1
Human Heart	The center of responsiveness to value, choices about meaning, confirmation in lived reality, and the calibration of direction.
Consciousness	Gives the human heart's responses a form that can be understood, expressed, compared, and acted on.
Meaning in Lived Experience	A subject's affirmation of what is worthwhile here and now, within particular relationships and responsibilities.
Structural Meaning	The organized form taken by meaning in lived experience once it enters language, roles, relationships, institutions, and communities.
Meaning in Reality	The actual effectiveness of structural meaning in actions, relationships, consequences, and feedback over time.
Civilization Leap	Meaning in reality and shared experience accumulate and enter changes in institutions and the logic of behavior; the formation of civilization must still be tested against real-world causal chains.

5. The Place of First-Reflected Meaning

“First-reflected meaning” is not an additional link outside the fourteen. It is the first finite reflection formed in the human heart when primordial meaning enters finite life. It cannot be reduced to original intention, conscience, emotional impulse, or the moral high ground, nor can artificial intelligence directly read, generate, or prove it. Artificial intelligence can help consciousness understand information, revisit experience, and compare consequences, but it cannot experience values or make final judgments in a subject's place. Nor are

particular human judgments always correct: they must still enter consciousness, action, relationships, and feedback from reality to be tested.

6. Connections Between Levels in This Volume

Link	Where it connects with this volume
Eternity, Primordial Meaning, Cosmos, Superconsciousness, Soul	The cosmological and ontological level; this volume does not make it a prerequisite for the operation of civilization
World	The interface of bodily existence, time, relationships, culture, resources, institutions, and history that a particular life encounters
Human Heart, Consciousness, Meaning in Lived Experience	Where living beings feel, understand, choose, and express value and meaning
Structural Meaning, Meaning in Reality	Meaning enters relationships, institutions, and communities and is tested against real consequences
Civilization Leap	A structural change in civilization's operating logic; institutional validity must still be established through real-world theory and grounds for governance
Cosmic Citizen, Interstellar Forms of Meaning	Connections for long-term inquiry, not present institutional or identity facts

Appendix 2 A Concise Glossary of Core Concepts

Concept	Current role in V3.2
The three goals	Freedom from survival insecurity → a happy life → a more meaningful life; progressive, each indispensable, not interchangeable, and not reducible to a single utility function; continued existence is the minimum prerequisite of the first goal, while freedom from survival insecurity is its realization in civilization
The First General Principle	Civilization Leap does not eliminate self-interest; it changes the default path through which self-interest is realized
Meaning	Arises from multiple sources; is not uniformly defined, scored, or prescribed by a system; “meaning as the root” applies only to understanding the relationship between meaning in life and contribution
Spark	An amplifier of human meaning, a means of digital continuity, and an extension of capability in the AGI era; bounded by real subjects, authorization, and responsibility
Terminal	A subject's digital, interactive, or physical interface within a particular life situation, relationship, or task; does not encompass every professional system
Spark’s Remote Extension	A relationship that sustains continuity of identity, capability, authorization, and action around a real subject; does not require all data to be centralized
Remote presence	A subject extends care, capability, responsibility, and action through authorized agents into situations they cannot reach in person
Sparks Forming Clouds	Independent subjects form community structures that can separate and recombine, on the conditions of authorization, transparency, and the right to leave
Nebula	An operating body for making shared facts visible, coordinating across domains, and providing visibility into the future at the scale of civilization; not civilization as a whole, a unified brain, or a sovereign center
Resource Pool	A factual baseline map of resources and capabilities; reveals what exists, where it is, who controls it, and what it can support
Shared World	Carries, verifies, represents, and enables the circulation of lawfully established effective usage-rights relationships; does not change ownership or grant authorization on its own
Contribution Value	Records real contributions and carries them forward over time; follows results and does not generate general authority, rankings of persons, or purchasing power over resources
Dream Garden	Supports subjects' real wishes, minimal trials, connections to resources, and community collaboration; does not manufacture wishes and is not the universal entry point
Civilizational subdomain	A governance state or professional space requiring professional entry standards, domain-specific responsibility, and the long-term accumulation of knowledge; not fixed by a subject's category

Concept	Current role in V3.2
Separation of governance functions	Decisions on purposes and rules, professional judgment, and execution remain separate, with an independent layer of correction preserved
Systems receding	After explicit external driving forces diminish, subjects still sustain the new logic of action autonomously; rigorous checks may remain in the background, with authorization reopened only when relationships materially change; an important criterion of maturity in the formation of civilization

Appendix 3 How the Texts Relate and Where to Read Next

Text or series	Core question	Relationship to this volume
The five-volume Civilization Leap series	Why is a leap necessary, and what does it change?	Provides the underlying questions, civilizational goals, and direction in thought and institutions; not required reading before this volume
Living Civilization, Volume One: Principles for the Operation of a Future Civilization	How does a new civilization operate?	The present text
Living Civilization, Volume Two: Real Life in a Future Civilization	How do we live within it?	Tests the operating principles of Volume One against whole lives, relationships, and everyday experience
Living Civilization, Volume Three: The Formation of a New Civilization	How can humanity and AGI form a new civilization together from existing reality?	Takes up the timeline, the formation of institutions, the formation of Nebula, and long-term evolution; “the civilizational operating body—Nebula” is a core concept within the volume
Specialist Further-Reading Texts	How exactly do the Resource Pool, Shared World, contribution value, Spark, Nebula, domains, governance, and related systems operate?	Provide specialized depth; Volume One presents only the shared relationships needed to understand how civilization operates
Emergent Meaning Cosmology	Why might meaning, life, the world, and the cosmos admit a deeper unified explanation?	A connection to deeper theory, not a prior axiom for civilizational research or institutional operation

Paths to In-Depth Specialized Reading

Area	Starting point for in-depth specialized reading
Governance	A Framework of Principles for Civilizational Decision-Making: A Constitutional Order Separating Three Powers
Domains	Civilization Leap Professional Standards for the Private Domain, Public Domain, and Civilizational Subdomains
Resources	Civilization Leap Resource Pool: Complete Design Master Manuscript
Usage rights	Civilization Leap Shared World: Complete Design Master Manuscript
Contribution	White Paper on the Contribution Value System
Spark	Spark General Framework
Nebula	Nebula General Framework

For the current versions and public access points of the specialist further-reading texts, consult the library and topic pages of the official Civilization Leap website, www.civitas.top. This volume provides only shared principles and directions for further reading; it does not freeze in print specialist version numbers that may continue to change.

Recommended further reading: To see how these principles enter childhood, love, family, work, illness, aging, farewell, cities, states, and interstellar life, proceed directly to Volume Two, Real Life in a Future Civilization. To explore further how such a civilization can germinate in the cracks of existing reality, pass through transition, take shape, stabilize, renew itself, and extend outward, turn to Volume Three, The Formation of a New Civilization.

Appendix 4 Foundational Relationships Checklist

Subject	Fixed relationship	V3.2 verification result
The three goals	Progressive and each indispensable; freedom from survival insecurity comes first but is not the ultimate goal, while continued existence is the minimum; non-interchangeability does not mean equal rank	Pass: The main text clarifies the relationship between continued existence and freedom from survival insecurity without changing the progression of the three goals
The First General Principle	Does not eliminate self-interest; changes the default path through which self-interest is realized	Pass: Does not replace the three goals
The causal chain of civilizational formation	Institutions → behavior → real experience → habit → internalization → intergenerational reproduction → civilization	Pass: Distinguished in level from the spread of ideas
A leap in thought	Enables people to see, understand, and willingly choose change	Pass: Not described as directly shaping society's default logic of behavior
Meaning as the root	Applies only to understanding the relationship between meaning in life and contribution	Pass: Not elevated into an overarching goal above all three goals
Existence itself is contribution	A judgment about the value of life at the level of thought	Pass: Not converted into CV, governance authority, or eligibility for basic rights
Contribution Value	A record of real contributions after results emerge	Pass: Closes the pathway from contribution to power or the purchase of resources
Systems receding	An important criterion of maturity in the formation of civilization	Pass: Clarifies background verification, reopening of authorization when conditions change, and mechanisms for reducing interaction; does not become a fourth goal
Nebula	Makes facts about the whole visible and coordinates across domains	Pass: No longer equated with civilization itself
Metaphysical connections	An account of the sources of deeper inquiry	Pass: The fourteen links have moved to an appendix and do not work backward to confer institutional validity

Version History

Version	Date	Description
v1.0	July 2026	Completed the first integrated account of the operating structure of future civilization.
v1.1	July 2026	Strengthened entry points for readers, scenarios, and real-world beginnings.
V2.0	July 2026	Established the structure of Principles for the Operation of a Future Civilization, unifying Spark, Nebula, the public domain, contribution value, remote presence, and the civilizational feedback loop around the operation of meaning.
V2.1	July 2026	Completed final checks of theoretical precision, conceptual boundaries, and readiness for clean publication; retained as a fixed historical version.
V3.0	August 2026	Incorporated into the Living Civilization trilogy; expanded from a single axis of meaning to multiple axes of civilizational operation; relocated the fourteen links to the connections with deeper theory; separated the specialized responsibilities of the Resource Pool, Shared World, contribution value, Spark, Nebula, and related systems; closed the pathway from contribution to sovereignty and the former chain of governance weightings; rebuilt the real-world multi-entry feedback loop, the distinctions among stage, phase, and process state, and systems receding; restored the progression of the three goals and foundational relationships.
V3.1	August 2026	Made targeted corrections to five foundational relationships and the causal feedback loop, without changing the five parts and eighteen chapters.
V3.2	August 2026	Completed the trilogy's unified finalization; standardized covers, status labels, headers, footers, and metadata; added paths to in-depth specialized reading and a diagram of the operating feedback loop of future civilization; did not expand the theoretical main text of five parts and eighteen chapters.

Continue Reading | From Understanding Civilization to Seeing the Future

The five-volume Civilization Leap explains why civilization must make a leap, what must change, how to make that leap, how civilization can endure, and how it can move toward shared flourishing. The Living Civilization trilogy shows how a new civilization operates, how ordinary people actually live, and how it can gradually take shape from the present. The two are not a “theoretical version” and a “popular version” of the same work. They connect understanding the ideas with being able to see a future, in both directions.

Continue with Living Civilization: Volume II, Real Life in a Future Civilization, takes you into an ordinary person’s day and lifetime; Volume III, The Formation of a New Civilization, shows how such a future can gradually take shape from the present.

Public introduction: For an overview of both sets of works, read An Introduction to the Works of the Civilization Leap Theoretical System I: The Five-Volume Civilization Leap and the Living Civilization Trilogy, V1.1.

Common public access point: www.civitas.top/en/

Living Civilization

A Trilogy

Volume II Real Life in a Future Civilization

When Civilization No Longer Merely Manages the World, but Begins to Reach Every Person's Life

Author: Zijun Fu

Produced by: Civilization Leap Research Group

Version: V2.1

Date: August 2026

Status: Current Public Master Text | Baseline for Publication Preparation

Note on This Version

This is V2.1 of Real Life in a Future Civilization, Volume II of the Living Civilization trilogy. The current versions for reading together are Volume I V3.2, Volume II V2.1, and Volume III V2.1. The volumes build on one another and can also be read independently.

This volume retains its literary structure of five parts, a prologue, twenty-two chapters, and closing words. It does not recast its narrative of life as an institutional explanation of Volume I. Through birth, growing up, love, family, friendship, work, creation, illness, aging, and death, it returns civilizational principles to a person's real lifetime.

Character structure: in the prologue, Lin Yue frames ordinary life in a future civilization; in Chapters 1–22, Xu Zhiyan's life forms the volume's long, implicit narrative arc. The two are not remnants of an earlier name for the same character. The detailed history of the versions remains in the "Version History" at the end.

Contents

Opening Words

Part I Welcoming Life and Growing into Oneself

Prologue One Person's Morning

Chapter 1 A Child Comes into the World

Chapter 2 A Child Begins to Say "No"

Chapter 3 A Person Begins the Search for Self

Part II Living with One Another

Chapter 4 Two People Fall in Love

Chapter 5 How a Family Remains a Family

Chapter 6 Friends Need Not Be Useful to Each Other

Chapter 7 Caring Is Not Living Someone Else's Life for Them

Part III People and the World Need Each Other

Chapter 8 When Work No Longer Decides Whether a Person Can Survive

Chapter 9 How a Dream Enters Reality

Chapter 10 When Everyone Can Create

Chapter 11 Competition Still Exists

Chapter 12 Not Everyone Is Willing to Contribute

Part IV How Life Continues to Be Sustained

Chapter 13 When the Body Begins to Age

Chapter 14 A Person Who Is Ill Is Still Living

Chapter 15 How a Person Reaches the End of Life

Chapter 16 How the Living Go On

Part V How Individuals Become Part of a Larger Civilization

Chapter 17 How Strangers Live Together

Chapter 18 How a City Sees Every Person

Chapter 19 The State Still Exists

Chapter 20 When the Circle of "Our Own" Widens Again

Chapter 21 Those Who Leave Earth

Chapter 22 We Still Have to Live Our Own Lives

Closing Words Back to the Person

Opening Words

A future civilization will not first appear in magnificent buildings, or in new names for institutions, technical terms, or intelligent terminals.

The first place it appears will still be one person's morning.

It will be a child waking to the knowledge that today is more than another set of tasks to finish; someone is waiting for him to discover the world.

It will be a mother busy with work who can still take part, from far away, in those moments of her child's growing up that will never come again.

It will be two people in love, thousands of miles apart, whom distance has not forced out of each other's unfolding lives.

It will be an older person whom civilization no longer quietly pushes to the margins for having lost the ability to work, who no longer has to wait for an occasional phone call to prove that they are still needed.

It will be an ordinary person who suddenly has a dream and need not first ask whether they have the capital, connections, status, or luck. Their wish can be seen, answered, tested, and, through other people's abilities and goodwill, given a chance to become real.

It will also be a person reaching the end of life who can know: I was here. I loved. I shouldered responsibility. I brought light. The real meaning that once arose between him and others has not been easily erased by the world as his body weakened.

This volume does not require readers to understand Spark, Nebula, contribution value, or resource rules first. Volume I has already answered how a new kind of civilization operates. Here, we place all those structures behind life and ask only whether they truly reach a person.

A civilization's operating structures are not the end for which it exists. Freedom from survival insecurity is the baseline, a happy life is the unfolding, and a more meaningful life is the destination. The three form a progression, and all must return to real life to be tested.

This volume chiefly enters the second level: once a person is no longer merely struggling to survive, how do they truly live? At the same time, it neither forgets the baseline of survival nor presents happiness as the endpoint. Every structure must ultimately answer:

Has it truly reached a person?

Has it helped a person live more fully, rather than merely be managed more efficiently?

Has it allowed love to reach another, abilities to extend, value to be passed on, presence to stretch farther, and actions that no one counts, yet that truly change another life, to find a response?

Has it allowed every person still to affirm:

I am myself.

And countless people, different from one another, to affirm together:

We are together.

This volume does not repeat the operating principles of a future civilization.

It enters real life within that civilization.

It enters family, love, parenthood, education, medicine, work, creation, dreams, old age, death, ritual, community, nations, and journeys among the stars.

It enters the long span of a person’s life, from arrival to departure.

Because civilization, ultimately, does not exist in institutional texts.

Civilization exists in how a life is welcomed, how it grows, how a person loves and is loved, creates, shoulders responsibility, ages, and says goodbye. It exists, too, in whether the lives that person changed continue to grow after their departure.

All the grandeur of civilization must, in the end, return here.

Back to the person.

Part I Welcoming Life and Growing into Oneself

Prologue One Person's Morning

At six forty in the morning, the curtains slowly opened.

It was not quite light. The outlines of distant buildings were emerging from the dark. The city was waking.

Lin Yue was not jolted awake by a rapid succession of alerts.

His Spark knew there were no urgent tasks that needed his attention early that morning. It also knew he had gone to sleep late the night before. It moved his scheduled wake-up time from six thirty to six forty, but canceled none of his commitments for him, nor did it presume to change decisions he had already made because it predicted he might be tired.

It simply stayed within its bounds.

The dim light gradually took on a warm glow. The desktop terminal showed the three most important things for the day:

His father's follow-up results had arrived, awaiting his own review;

His daughter had finished a new piano melody the night before and hoped he would be the first to hear it that morning;

The neighborhood renovation project he was involved in would hold its final on-site review at nine.

No advertisements.

No trending lists.

No platform trying to seize his attention in the first minute after he opened his eyes.

The future civilization had not done away with information, nor shut a person inside a sterile quiet. It simply acknowledged that attention is part of life and should not be continually carved up, sold, and manipulated by systems without authorization.

Lin Yue sat up.

He opened the clip his daughter had left him first.

The screen did not play a system-generated "best version." At nine thirteen the night before, his daughter had played two wrong notes, stopped halfway through to laugh, and then played the last bar again. All of it was still there.

Spark had not corrected it for her.

Because what she wanted her father to hear was not a flawless piece of music, but those few minutes she had actually lived through the night before.

When Lin Yue had finished listening, he did not have an agent write a response for him.

He said just one thing:

“When you played that last bit again, I could hear that you hadn’t given up.”

The message was sent to the terminal beside his daughter’s bed, but it would not wake her straight away. It would reach her after she woke on her own.

Technology had not expressed a father’s love for him.

It had simply kept that love from losing its chance to reach her because their hours did not align.

This was the subtlest, and the most fundamental, difference between the future civilization and the past.

Technology in the past kept expanding what people could see, buy, and process. The future civilization began to take seriously what a person truly wanted to protect, and all the care that should have reached someone but had failed to do so because of distance, busyness, fragmented identities, and barriers between systems.

Spark was not responsible for manufacturing intimacy.

Intimacy could grow only from real human hearts, relationships, and lives shared.

What Spark was responsible for was keeping technology from preying on intimacy; keeping a person’s care from dissipating among countless accounts, platforms, devices, and tasks; keeping the concern already held in someone’s heart from remaining forever silent because their practical abilities fell short.

Lin Yue got up to wash.

The kitchen terminal had already suggested breakfast based on each family member’s physical condition that day, but it had not automatically decided what everyone must eat. His father needed to limit his salt. His daughter disliked overly sweet food. He would be physically active for a good stretch of the morning. This information formed suggestions, not orders.

Home was still home.

It was not the end point of a medical system, the entry point to a consumption system, or a testing ground where artificial intelligence could display its power to control.

All the technology was part of life, but none of it tried to become life itself.

His father was already awake.

He lived in another city, two hundred kilometers away. The follow-up results had just entered his personal private domain. His medical Spark had organized the data, compared it with earlier records, and flagged the risks, but his father alone had the right to look first and decide what access to authorize.

A few minutes later, his father sent an authorization.

Lin Yue could see the diagnosis, the treatment recommendations, and the date of the next follow-up. He could not directly retrieve all the health data his father had not made available.

Kinship was not unlimited authorization.

Nor was care a reason to possess another person.

The future civilization would not assume, because a person was old, that their children, institutions, or intelligent systems could take over their whole life. An older person remained a whole person, with agency of their own. They could be cared for without losing their personal boundaries because they needed care; they could accept help without being stripped of the right to refuse, to choose, and to keep secrets.

After reading the follow-up results, Lin Yue felt a little more at ease.

His father's condition had not worsened.

Spark asked whether he wanted help arranging for someone to accompany his father to the next appointment.

Lin Yue did not answer at once.

The nine o'clock renovation review could not simply be canceled. His daughter also had a performance at the weekend, and his wife was away taking part in a medical aid project. He needed to talk with the family and find out whom his father actually wanted with him.

The future civilization had not done away with conflict.

Time was still limited. Human abilities were still limited. Different responsibilities would still meet on the same day.

The change was not that reality no longer put people in difficult positions.

The change was this: a person no longer had to bear all the pressure of information, coordination, and execution alone, or entrust important relationships to indifferent procedures. Intelligence could help him see his choices and their consequences, but could not decide for him who was more worthy of love or which responsibility could be sacrificed.

Value judgments still came back to the person.

At seven twenty, Lin Yue left home.

In the public space downstairs, an older woman was clearing branches and leaves blown down by the wind the night before. She was not employed by the neighborhood, nor had anyone assigned her a task. The debris could cause children out early and people with limited mobility to slip, so she had simply swept it aside.

It was a small thing.

In the past, it would not have entered economic statistics, would not have counted as the product of labor, and would rarely have received any institutional recognition.

Yet it had genuinely reduced the harm others might suffer.

A nearby terminal recorded that the path was clear again, but would not attribute the contribution to someone on the strength of images alone. Only after a passing resident confirmed what had happened, and the woman herself agreed to have her action entered into the neighborhood record, did it become a contribution fact that could be verified afterward.

Contribution value was not a reward for her “doing a good deed.”

Still less was it civilization’s score of her worth as a person.

It merely kept an action that had truly happened, that had already made shared life better, from disappearing as though it had never taken place.

The woman looked up and saw Lin Yue. They greeted each other.

No one made a speech of thanks.

Once civilization truly enters life, many of its important changes are not grand.

They may simply mean one less fall on a morning walk, a gesture of care no longer arriving late, a child’s real playing not being replaced by perfection, an older person retaining their own boundaries while receiving care.

None of these things alone can prove that a civilization has completed its leap.

But if a civilization cannot reach even these things, all its grand promises for the future still hang outside people’s lives.

Lin Yue walked toward the neighborhood renovation site.

It was a residential building that had been in use for more than sixty years. The walls were aging; the utility lines were complicated. Its residents included older people, children, tenants, and people who had lived there for years and did not want to leave. The project team had a more efficient standard renovation plan, but several residents had said that the old tree downstairs must not be moved.

In terms of engineering efficiency, the tree obstructed construction.

In terms of cost, keeping it meant rerouting the utility lines.

In terms of the residents’ lives, it was no ordinary obstacle.

Someone had said goodbye to a loved one beneath it. Someone had first taught a child to walk there. Someone, after losing a partner, had still sat beneath the tree talking with neighbors through many an evening.

The tree did not automatically acquire a right to override everything else because it held those memories.

Nor could memories become a reason to refuse every change.

But a civilization that saw only construction efficiency and could not see real life would eventually remake the whole world into a place that ran more and more smoothly, and where fewer and fewer people wanted to live.

Today's on-site review was not about choosing sides between "efficiency" and "feeling."

The engineering Spark had already modeled several alternatives. Residents could see each option's cost, construction schedule, safety risks, and long-term effects. Specialists retained their judgment in matters of expertise; affected residents retained the right to speak, question, and appeal; those responsible for the project had to answer for its real consequences.

Artificial intelligence presented the possibilities.

Professionals judged what was feasible.

Residents said what must not be silently erased.

The final decision still had to be formed by the actual participants, sharing responsibility.

As Lin Yue walked into the courtyard, sunlight had just cleared the roof.

The old tree's shadow fell across the construction drawings.

Several older residents were already there. An engineer was explaining the new utility layout. A child crouched beside the tree, watching ants pass between its exposed roots.

No one knew whether today's decision would be absolutely right.

Nor would the future civilization promise that humanity would never make mistakes again.

It required only this: before a decision took shape, real people must be able to take part; after it was carried out, its real consequences must be able to feed back; when errors arose, the structures must be able to acknowledge them, correct them, and allow rollback. No efficiency, authority, consensus, or intelligence could declare itself beyond the test of reality.

Civilization was no longer only a grand order suspended high above life.

It entered one person's morning.

It entered a passage of piano music that had not been corrected.

It entered a medical authorization, limited and clear.

It entered the fallen leaves an older woman swept aside.

It entered the unfinished process of reaching a shared judgment about an old tree and a new utility line.

Meaning was not manufactured by the system.

It was already continually coming into view between people, between people and the world, between people and the future.

What the new civilization did was no longer let those meanings so easily scatter and disappear, no longer let real contributions vanish without a sound, no longer let technology, institutions, and efficiency gradually remove people from their own lives.

Standing beneath that tree, Lin Yue did not realize that he was living in an age later generations would call “after the civilization leap.”

For those who truly live within it, civilization is never a label for an era.

Civilization had simply, at last, begun to reach them.

Chapter 1 A Child Comes into the World

On the last night before the baby was born, Zhou Ning could not sleep.

The hospital room was quiet. Outside the window, the city was deep in the night, a few scattered lights still shining in the distance. She lay on her side, one hand resting on her belly, feeling the life soon to enter the world stir gently from time to time.

Her husband, Xu Chuan, sat beside the bed, looking down at a list of names he had written and revised, revised and written again.

They had spent a long time preparing for this child.

Preparing a room, preparing clothes, preparing for possible risks, preparing to welcome someone they had never met who was already tugging at every part of their lives.

But now that this night had finally come, neither of them seemed to know what to say.

Xu Chuan had once thought technology could let them know enough in advance.

The baby's development, the risks he might face, and arrangements for his care after birth had all been clearly set out. Every piece of information had a source; every prediction came with a stated range of confidence. Their medical Spark had not promised that "everything will go smoothly," nor had it used the worst possibilities to frighten them.

It had simply separated what was known, what remained uncertain, and what people had to decide for themselves.

But none of that could answer the questions Zhou Ning was truly afraid of.

She was afraid of the pain of childbirth.

Afraid she was not as strong as she imagined.

Afraid she would not be a good mother.

Afraid that one day she would call her own anxiety love, call her own expectations "what's best for the child," and, without even noticing, slowly push him toward the life she had laid out for him.

These fears appeared in no medical report.

Nor had Spark tried to make them quickly disappear.

It had helped her sort through information, helped her express things she found hard to say aloud, but it had not told her, "You're sure to be a good mother."

That was not a conclusion a system could bestow in advance.

A mother does not emerge fully formed the instant her child is born.

How one person loves another, how to remain patient through exhaustion, how to restrain possessiveness in the midst of fear, how to learn to let go as a child gradually becomes himself: all of this must take shape, again and again, over the long years of a life shared.

Zhou Ning asked Xu Chuan:

“What if I really do get things wrong?”

Xu Chuan did not answer at once.

He had meant to say she wouldn’t.

But the words stopped at his lips.

They both knew that was not true.

They were bound to get some things wrong.

They would not know why the baby was crying. They would lose patience after too many sleepless nights, interfere too much out of worry, argue over who was doing more when both were already exhausted. Perhaps one day the child would say things that hurt them; perhaps they, too, knowing each other’s weak points so well, would unintentionally hurt the people they most wanted to protect.

Xu Chuan set the list of names aside.

“If we get it wrong, we admit it,” he said. “We mustn’t think we’re always justified just because we’re the parents.”

Zhou Ning looked at him without speaking.

After a while, she gave a small nod.

Another light went out beyond the window.

The world this child was about to enter would not be free of clumsy parents, emotions breaking apart, or unforeseeable pain simply because civilization had changed.

What civilization could change was to stop leaving two parents trapped alone in ignorance, scarcity, and fear; to stop making one woman bear the risks of childbirth in silence; to stop treating care as a sacrifice so taken for granted within the family that it need not be seen; to stop making a child, from birth, an object that kinship, institutions, platforms, or data systems could dispose of at will.

As for becoming parents, they still had to learn for themselves.

At three seventeen in the morning, the contractions began.

At first, there was only a slight tightening. Then it came more and more often. Zhou Ning gripped the edge of the bed, her breathing growing uneven. Xu Chuan knocked over a glass as he stood up. Water ran off the table. He hurried to wipe it up, but his hands would not stop shaking.

The medical staff came into the room soon afterward.

The risk assessment, her physical condition, and the authorizations already in place had been shared with the medical team. Zhou Ning did not have to repeat her medical history over and over through the pain. The birth preferences she had confirmed remained valid, but they would not be rigidly treated as unchangeable instructions. If her physical condition changed, the doctor had to explain the risks to her again. As long as she retained the capacity to judge, the final choice remained hers.

The pain had not disappeared because the system worked better.

Neither had the fear.

At one point, Zhou Ning gripped Xu Chuan's hand and said she did not want to go on.

Xu Chuan did not know whether to encourage her to hold on or urge her to change her original choice. He looked toward the doctor, who did not put on a show of calm for him, or diminish Zhou Ning's pain as something ordinary with "Everyone goes through this."

The doctor came closer and explained the current situation again.

She could continue.

Or she could change the plan.

Neither choice was a failure.

Zhou Ning closed her eyes and struggled to listen to the end.

She did not decide immediately.

For those few minutes, no one urged her to be a brave mother. No one put efficiency ahead of what she felt. The pain in her body was hers, the risks required professional judgment, and the consequences were to be borne by several parties together. But the choice could not bypass her.

In the end, she chose to continue.

Not because persevering was nobler in itself.

Only because, at that moment, it was still the choice she was willing to bear.

At five forty-two in the morning, the baby was born.

His first cry was not loud. It was almost hesitant.

Zhou Ning was utterly exhausted. She had imagined seeing her child for the first time countless times. She had thought she would burst into tears, be struck by an enormous love, and know in that instant that all the pain had been worth it.

But when it actually happened, she felt only tired.

Her body felt hollowed out.

The staff brought the baby close, and she saw a wrinkled, unfamiliar little face. In that instant, she felt nothing grand, sacred, or complete.

For a brief moment, she even thought:

So this is the person who made me hurt for so long?

No sooner had the thought appeared than she felt ashamed.

But shame did not make love well up at once either.

She simply looked at him.

His eyes were closed. The corner of his mouth moved a little, as if he were searching for something. After a long time, one of his hands happened to brush her finger.

Zhou Ning did not cry.

She simply held that little hand gently.

Love does not always arrive with the force of thunder.

Sometimes it is only a tired person who, before fully understanding another life, does not let go.

Xu Chuan stood beside them, his eyes red.

He wanted to take a picture of the moment, then suddenly lowered his terminal.

Not every important moment has to be recorded, shared, and proved at once.

Some moments belong first to the people living through them.

The baby's birth information had already entered a life record of his own. He was not a dependent object within his parents' Sparks, or a new item of member data in a family account. While he was still unable to express himself, his parents bore the responsibility to care for and protect him. That did not give them permanent authorization over his entire life.

In time, he would gradually gain the right to know and decide about information concerning his body, childhood records, images, relationships, and public participation.

The things his parents were keeping for him today would one day have to be handed back to him.

Including whether to keep them at all.

Including whether to let other people see them.

Including whether he wanted his childhood to remain forever in public spaces beyond his family's memories.

First, the child was a life in need of protection.

Then, slowly, he would become a person able to say "no."

During the morning, the family began receiving the news.

Zhou Ning's mother immediately asked to enter the room remotely. She had waited all night, wanting several times to ask how things were going but afraid of adding to her daughter's pressure. Only after checking that Zhou Ning wanted it did Xu Chuan enable a brief period of relational presence.

The older woman appeared on the bedside terminal.

Her first words were not a question about whom the baby looked like, or whether they had finally settled on a name.

She saw her daughter's pale face and said only:

"It must have hurt so much."

Until then, Zhou Ning had not cried.

At those words, the tears suddenly began to fall.

Some pain is not comforted by being explained.

It has simply, at last, been seen by someone else.

Her mother did not say, "It was the same for me," or cover her daughter's feelings in that moment with her own experience. From two hundred kilometers away, she watched Zhou Ning cry for a while.

Spark did not automatically play soothing music or classify this as an emotional fluctuation that needed to be quickly stabilized.

Sadness, pain, hurt, and release are not abnormalities that must be repaired at once.

People have the right to go on crying even after they have been understood.

The baby slept quietly beside her.

Xu Chuan dealt with a few necessary matters and declined requests from relatives and friends to make the photographs public immediately. He also politely declined an automatically generated film commemorating the birth.

The little film was very complete.

It could draw on images from the pregnancy, messages from the family, the time and weather at the baby's birth. It could even simulate just the right music and narrative rhythm.

But Xu Chuan did not want it.

At least not now.

He did not want a life they had not yet had time to truly know to be packaged first into a perfectly rounded story for everyone to watch.

This child had only just entered the world.

He did not need to become anyone's hope, creation, continuation of identity, or family achievement straight away.

He needed only to breathe.

To be warm.

To have someone feed him when he was hungry, come close when he cried, and not be quick to leave when they did not know why he was crying.

At noon came the baby's first prolonged bout of crying.

An examination found nothing obviously wrong.

Zhou Ning held him and tried several positions, none of which helped. Xu Chuan took him, and the crying only grew louder. They began to panic. Everything they had learned about caring for a baby fell into fragments amid the unceasing cries.

Spark offered several possibilities, but none was certain.

Hunger, discomfort in his belly, a change in surroundings, tiredness. Or perhaps this life, only just out of the womb, did not yet know how to face a world too bright and too vast.

In the end, Zhou Ning took the baby back into her arms.

She did not know what she had done right either.

She simply rocked him gently, humming the same wordless melody over and over.

Gradually, the baby grew quiet.

It is not always possible to pinpoint why care has worked.

Nor does every quiet spell prove that the method was right.

Perhaps he was simply tired from crying. Perhaps he had grown used to her scent. Perhaps that moment had merely passed.

Life holds so much that cannot be fully measured, reliably reproduced, or claimed by a system as knowledge it owns.

These things still truly happen.

In the afternoon, Zhou Ning finally fell asleep.

Xu Chuan sat alone beside the baby.

For the first time, he felt a fear that was almost a weight.

This life was so fragile.

He could support the whole of that small body with one hand. A single mistake could also hurt him. From today onward, every decision he made might enter another person's life.

Suddenly, love was no longer only tenderness.

Love began to carry the weight of responsibility.

Looking down at the baby, he remembered something he had once said to his own father when he was young:

“When I have children, I’ll never be like you.”

Back then, he had been certain he understood respect, understanding, and companionship better than his father did.

Only today did he truly understand for the first time: knowing what not to do was not the same as knowing how to love.

He might still grow angry when his child would not listen. He might press the fear brought on by competition in the world onto his child, or conceal his own unfinished dreams inside “It’s for your own good.” He might wear himself out rushing between work, partner, parents, and child, and end by hurting the person who depended on him most.

Spark could warn him when his emotions crossed certain boundaries. It could help him revisit promises he had made. It could let him hear the way he spoke in anger.

But Spark could not hold back that hurtful remark for him.

Could not swallow his pride for him after he had made a mistake.

Could not accept for him that his child would one day have values, a path, and a life different from his own.

He would have to do all of that himself.

Toward evening, the baby woke.

The setting sun fell across his face through the window.

Xu Chuan held out a finger, and the baby grasped it instinctively.

He knew that hand would not always be so small.

One day, it would push him away.

It would write words he could not understand, hold another person’s hand, choose a distant place, reject the path his parents had once believed was right.

To truly welcome a life is not to welcome it into a world its parents have already arranged.

It is to prepare, from the first day he arrives, to hand the world back to him one day.

Night fell again.

The room grew quiet once more.

Zhou Ning woke and saw Xu Chuan still sitting there.

“What about the name?” she asked.

Xu Chuan handed her the sheet covered in names.

They looked at it for a long time. In the end, they did not choose from the names promising the most glory, intelligence, or success. They chose a very ordinary name.

It did not ask the child to become a hero, bring honor to anything, or finish anyone else's unfinished life.

It was simply a name.

A way to call him back, again and again, through the long years ahead.

On his first day in the world, the child had made no recordable contribution through action, taken on no public responsibility, and proved no value.

He was simply alive.

But being alive already had meaning. His existence had already changed how two adults understood time, responsibility, fear, and the future, and set the relationships among several people growing anew.

Existence itself needs no proof in contribution value.

Nor has civilization's true starting point ever been what a person can do for the world.

It is whether, when a life cannot yet give, choose, or return anything, cannot even say its own name, the world is still willing to catch and hold it.

Chapter 2 A Child Begins to Say “No”

The first time a child says “no,” the adults are often not pleased.

Until then, he has been soft and fragile, able to express almost every need only through crying. He has depended on his parents for food, warmth, protection, and embraces, and on them to judge for him what he can approach and what he must keep away from.

In those days, love and decision almost overlap.

His parents protect him, and choose for him too.

But a day always comes when a child shakes his head, pushes away something held out to him, refuses to do something the adults believe is right.

From a life being cared for, a new self, with agency of its own, is slowly growing.

Xu Zhiyan first said a clear “no” when he was three years and seven months old.

Several relatives and friends had come to the house that afternoon.

One of them had not seen him for a long time. She came through the door smiling and opened her arms for a hug. He hid behind his mother, showing only half his face.

“Come on, let your great-aunt give you a hug,” Zhou Ning said gently.

Zhiyan did not move.

The visitor remained bent toward him, her outstretched hands suspended in the air.

“I used to hold you every day when you were little. Don’t you know me anymore?”

Zhiyan hid his face completely behind his mother’s leg.

For a moment, the room felt awkward.

Zhou Ning knew the visitor meant no harm.

The older woman had traveled a long way, bringing gifts and a genuine longing to see him. She only wanted to be close to the child she had not seen in so long.

Zhou Ning also knew that if she coaxed him once more, Zhiyan would probably go over reluctantly. Perhaps a hug would help him feel familiar with her. Perhaps in a few minutes he would forget that he had not wanted one.

In the past, it was at just such moments that many families taught children:

Someone likes you, so you should accept it;

An elder means no harm, so your refusal can be ignored;

To spare someone embarrassment, you can set aside what your own body feels for a while.

Such lessons did not necessarily come from a wish to control.

More often, they came from politeness, family affection, and the adult world's habits of keeping the peace.

Yet a person's first understanding of bodily boundaries also takes shape in these seemingly tiny moments.

Zhou Ning crouched down and looked at Zhiyan.

"You don't want a hug right now, do you?"

Zhiyan nodded.

She did not explain for him that "he's just shy," or require a reason that would satisfy an adult.

"Then no hug for now," she said.

For an instant, the visitor's expression grew strained.

Zhou Ning saw it.

She felt torn too.

Respecting a child does not automatically remove the hurt to someone else. One person's boundaries may be protected while another's hopes still go unmet. Civilization cannot pretend that every sound principle spares people embarrassment in real life.

She turned to the older woman.

"He isn't ready yet. Please sit down for a while. Let him come over when he wants to."

The older woman was silent for a moment, then withdrew her hands.

"All right," she said.

There was still a little disappointment in her voice.

Respecting a boundary does not mean someone must instantly have no feelings about it.

Zhiyan watched from a distance for a long time. The visitor did not keep pursuing him or trade gifts for closeness. An hour later, he went over on his own and held out the block structure he had just finished for her to see.

The older woman did not seize the chance to pick him up.

She simply took the structure and asked:

"Did you make this?"

Zhiyan nodded and began earnestly explaining the little door that kept falling off.

The relationship had not ended because of a single refusal.

It simply had not been forced to begin with physical contact.

That evening, Zhou Ning asked Spark whether they should record this experience as an important moment in the development of Zhiyan's boundaries as a person.

Spark did not save it automatically.

The richer the record of a child's growing up, the more it may help parents understand him. It may also become an invisible enclosure in the future, keeping him forever inside the past others have preserved for him.

In the end, Zhou Ning left only a one-sentence private note:

For the first time, he clearly refused a hug he did not want. We did not force him.

She did not record the visitor's name, keep images of the moment, or share it with any family group.

Some moments of growing up need to be remembered.

They do not need an audience.

At five, Zhiyan began asking "why" all the time.

Why do I have to go to sleep?

Why can't I take other people's things?

Why can grown-ups stay up late but children can't?

Why do leaves fall off trees?

Why doesn't that man have a home?

Why do some people get better when they're ill and others don't?

At first, the adults loved these questions.

They seemed clever and endearing, as though a child were opening up the world for himself.

But as the questions multiplied, took longer and longer, and came at less and less convenient moments, patience began to cost more.

One rainy morning, Xu Chuan was already late.

Zhiyan stood in the doorway, refusing to put on his raincoat.

"Why do I have to wear it?"

"Because it's raining outside."

"What happens if the rain gets on me?"

"You'll get wet."

"Why can't I get wet?"

Xu Chuan checked the time as he zipped up his son's coat.

"Because you might get sick."

“I got rained on last time and I didn’t get sick.”

“It doesn’t happen every time.”

“Then why can’t I try it this time?”

Xu Chuan finally lost his patience.

“Because I’m your dad, and if I say you have to wear it, you have to wear it.”

After he said it, Zhiyan went quiet.

He did not argue any further, just lowered his head and looked at the drops on his raincoat.

Xu Chuan took him to his growing-up community, justifying his own tone to himself all the way.

There really had been no time.

A child could not discuss every single thing without end.

Parents had a responsibility to protect him. They could not wait until a five-year-old fully understood the risks before acting.

His arguments were not entirely unreasonable.

But he also knew that Zhiyan’s questions were not the only thing that had truly made him angry.

It was being late.

It was the work he had not finished the night before.

It was the exhaustion that had built up over days.

It was that small impulse to take it out on the weakest person nearby when an adult cannot control his own life.

Spark did not remind him on the way to “stay patient.”

That sort of reminder would only make an already irritable person more irritable.

Only that evening, when Xu Chuan chose to look back through the day’s emotional record, did he hear his own words again.

“Because I’m your dad.”

The words themselves were not always wrong.

When certain dangers arose, parents had to decide immediately. A child’s refusal could not cancel their responsibility to protect him.

But once power grows accustomed to justifying itself with “It’s for your own good,” it gradually loses the ability to explain, listen, and reflect.

Before bedtime, Xu Chuan went into Zhiyan’s room.

“I was in a hurry this morning,” he said. “I needed to make sure you wore your raincoat, but I shouldn’t have snapped at you because I was rushing.”

Zhiyan did not respond.

“I have to protect you. But I get things wrong too.”

Zhiyan turned his face to the wall.

“I don’t want to forgive you right now.”

Xu Chuan was taken aback.

He had thought that once he admitted his mistake, his child would turn and fling himself into his arms, as children did in so many heartwarming stories.

But an apology is not a new way to demand forgiveness.

Admitting a mistake merely places the responsibility back on oneself.

Whether the other person is willing to accept it, and when, is not for the person apologizing to decide.

“All right,” Xu Chuan said. “You can still be angry.”

He switched off the main light for Zhiyan, leaving only the faint glow beside the bed.

As he reached the door, Zhiyan suddenly asked:

“If it rains tomorrow, do I still have to wear my raincoat?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Xu Chuan stopped.

“Because you’re still little, and I have to keep you safe from some risks you can’t judge yet. But when we’re not in a hurry, you can stand in the rain in the courtyard for a little while. We’ll see what happens together.”

Zhiyan thought for a moment.

“Will you get rained on too?”

“I will too.”

The next afternoon, the rain had still not stopped.

Father and son stood in the courtyard without raincoats.

The rain soon soaked their hair and ran down their cheeks into their collars. Zhiyan laughed at first, then began to feel cold. In less than five minutes, he ran back inside of his own accord.

Xu Chuan did not say, “See? I told you.”

He handed Zhiyan a towel.

Some boundaries must be held by adults.

Some experiences children can have for themselves.

Growing up does not mean handing every decision to a child all at once, nor withholding the right to decide forever in the name of protection.

It means letting rights, abilities, and responsibilities grow together through one real situation after another.

At seven, Zhiyan joined a new learning community.

There were no desks in uniform rows, no bell ringing at fixed intervals to send every child hurrying to the next lesson at once.

But that did not mean children could do whatever they wanted.

Without abilities, responsibilities, and real-world boundaries, freedom would only give more freedom to the children with the most resources, the greatest ease in expressing themselves, and the earliest sense of direction, while those who felt lost, took longer, stayed quiet, or lacked support at home would be gently forgotten in the name of “choosing for themselves.”

In his first month in the community, Zhiyan wanted to join almost nothing.

He did not like reading, would not practice arithmetic, and took only a brief interest in observing plants, making machines, or music. What he most looked forward to each day was building a mud city beside the ditch with a few other children, a city the water always washed away.

At first, Xu Chuan felt a little anxious.

He saw children the same age already reading long stories. Some were beginning to design small machines on their own; others showed astonishing maturity when speaking in public.

Yet Zhiyan came home every day with mud all over his legs.

“Is he falling behind?” Xu Chuan asked the learning Spark.

Spark did not answer, “Every child blooms in their own time.”

The words sounded gentle, but could conceal genuine developmental difficulties.

Nor did it immediately generate a remedial plan from data on children his age.

Zhiyan’s learning record showed that he was indeed slower than some of his peers at recognizing written characters and had trouble sustaining concentration. But he could keep observing changes in the water’s flow, repeatedly adjust the position of the mud walls, and, after the city collapsed, point out exactly which stretch had given way first.

The question was not whether he was learning.

It was which activities the adults were willing to call learning.

The mentor did not immediately package the mud city as an ambitious interdisciplinary project.

Children's play has the right to be only play.

Then one day, Zhiyan and his companions began to argue.

They could not agree on where to bring the water channel in. Zhiyan insisted on his own plan and would not let anyone change it. While he was away, another child dug through the mud wall, and the whole city was soon washed away.

Zhiyan lunged at him and pushed him.

The other child fell into the muddy water and scraped his arm.

That day, no one let Zhiyan off lightly for the harm he had caused another child on the grounds that he "had a gift for engineering."

Nor did anyone label him as someone with aggressive tendencies because of one shove.

Actions must carry consequences.

A single action must not define a person forever.

The mentor tended to the wound first, then separated the two children. Zhiyan was still angry and refused to apologize. As he saw it, the other child had destroyed the city first.

"He did something wrong, so I can push him," he said.

"He destroyed something you built together, and he has to take responsibility for that," the mentor replied. "You pushed him over, and you have to take responsibility too. The two things don't cancel each other out."

Zhiyan was silent for a long time.

He did not like that answer.

People always hope the harm they do can be canceled out by the harm done to them first.

Adults do. Children do too.

But if every harm can be justified by another harm, responsibility will disappear forever into mutual accusations.

Zhiyan did not apologize that day.

Nor the next.

He did not want to look at the wound on the other child's arm, or go back to the ditch.

Spark could replay what had happened, help distinguish the sequence of events, and show him the consequences a shove might have. It could not make remorse happen automatically.

On the third day, he went back alone to the collapsed mud city.

The other child was there too.

They stood on opposite sides of the ditch for a long time.

Zhiyan put a fairly flat stone down in front of him.

“This could go at the inlet,” he said.

The other child did not take it.

“You haven’t said sorry yet.”

Zhiyan lowered his head and kicked at the mud.

“You dug it up first.”

“But you still pushed me.”

They fell silent again.

At last, Zhiyan said very quietly:

“I shouldn’t have pushed you.”

The other child still did not forgive him at once.

“You scraped me here.” He pointed to the arm where a scab had already formed.

Zhiyan looked at it for a while.

“Does it hurt?”

“It hurt a lot that day.”

This time, Zhiyan did not explain again who had done wrong first.

They crouched beside the ditch again, but did not become friends straight away. First, each repaired his own stretch of wall. Only later did they return to discussing where the inlet should go.

One apology had not miraculously repaired the relationship.

Once responsibility had been made clear, it had simply gained the possibility of growing further.

At nine, Zhiyan met the first person who made him believe he was “stupid.”

It was a mentor who had joined the community for a short time.

The mentor did not humiliate him in public or use insulting words. It was only that, question after question, the mentor always turned more quickly to the children who could answer at once; when assigning tasks, too, the complex parts habitually went to those who had already proved themselves.

The work Zhiyan received was usually simple, safe, and unimportant.

No one scolded him.

No one openly excluded him either.

He simply, slowly, stopped raising his hand.

In a lesson on mechanical structures, the team needed to solve a problem: cargo kept slipping off a small transport device as it turned. Zhiyan had noticed that the problem was not the tray but the overly abrupt change in speed.

He wanted to say so.

But another child had already begun to answer, and the mentor immediately turned toward them.

Zhiyan swallowed his words.

Spark had detected several occasions when he had stopped himself from speaking, but it did not raise his hand for him or automatically submit his unspoken idea to the team.

What a person has not expressed still belongs to them.

The extension of someone's abilities must not override their wishes and forcibly turn silence into a public contribution.

After the lesson, Spark asked only:

"You had an idea just now that you didn't finish expressing. Would you like to keep it?"

"It's no use," Zhiyan said.

"Why?"

"They won't listen."

"Would you like me to say it for you?"

"No."

Spark did not keep encouraging him.

It left the unfinished conversation within his private domain.

A few days later, the transport device failed again. Standing nearby, Zhiyan saw the cargo slide over the edge of the tray. The mentor asked everyone to check the securing mechanism again.

Again, he did not raise his hand.

The girl sitting beside him asked:

"Do you know something?"

Zhiyan shook his head.

The girl did not speak for him or press him with questions.

She simply pushed her writing tablet toward him.

"You can draw it for me."

Zhiyan hesitated, then drew a curved line showing the change in speed.

The girl studied it for a long time.

“I don’t understand.”

Zhiyan drew it again.

“It’s too fast here. Not moving too fast. Getting fast all at once.”

The girl turned the tablet toward the mentor.

“This is Zhiyan’s idea.”

For the first time, the mentor looked at him with real attention.

“Would you like to explain?”

Zhiyan did not answer straight away.

A child who has been overlooked does not regain confidence immediately just because, at last, he is given a chance.

Being overlooked does not always leave a visible wound.

It may simply make a person believe, more and more, that their ideas are not worth saying aloud.

In the end, Zhiyan stood up and explained, haltingly.

He got something wrong partway through. Another child pointed it out, and his face instantly reddened.

But this time, no one took over speaking for him because of it.

The team adjusted the speed control along the lines he had suggested. As the device completed its turn, the tray swayed a little. The cargo did not fall.

Everyone cheered.

The mentor wanted to record the main contribution under Zhiyan’s name.

Zhiyan refused.

“I thought of it first,” he said. “But she got me to draw it, he changed the control, and we all tested it lots of times together.”

This was not a child who understood humility by nature.

It was that he knew all too well what it felt like to have one’s contribution overlooked.

In the end, the contribution record preserved the real part each person had played at different stages: the initial observation, helping the idea find expression, the technical correction, repeated testing, and safety verification.

For the first time, Zhiyan saw that acknowledging his own contribution did not mean taking anyone else's away.

For the first time, he also knew:

An idea that takes a little longer to be spoken can still enter the world.

After turning twelve, Zhiyan told his parents less and less about what happened each day.

His personal private domain began to expand.

Some records of his growing up were no longer open to his parents by default. Some relationships, reading, emotions, and exchanges were his alone to keep, within clearly defined risk boundaries. His parents still had a responsibility to protect him, but worry did not give them unconditional access to his whole life.

Xu Chuan found this difficult to get used to.

He had once known what his child ate every day, how long he slept, where he went, and whom he talked to. Now the little boy who had once held one of his fingers was beginning to have a world Xu Chuan could not fully see.

One evening, Zhiyan came home very late.

He did not explain where he had been, saying only that he had been with his group.

Suppressing his anger, Xu Chuan demanded to see the record of where he had been.

Zhiyan refused.

"I'm your dad."

The words came to Xu Chuan's lips again.

That rainy morning, so many years before, suddenly returned from memory.

He did not say them.

"You came back later than we agreed," Xu Chuan said. "We didn't know if you were safe."

"I'm home now."

"Coming home doesn't undo the worry you caused other people."

"You're the ones who chose to worry."

The words stung Xu Chuan.

Almost at once, he wanted to retort: After everything we've done for you, how can you say that?

But love is not an IOU.

Parents' care is real and deserves to be seen. A child, however, cannot be made to repay being raised with a lifetime of obedience.

In the end, Xu Chuan asked only:

“Would you be willing to tell us why you didn’t come home on time?”

Zhiyan was silent.

Zhou Ning sat nearby, speaking for neither of them.

Much later, Zhiyan said that a girl in their group had been afraid to go home. She had made a mistake in a public learning activity, and her father had already sent several angry messages. A few of them had sat with her by the river for a long time, until she was willing to contact another member of her family.

“She told me not to tell anyone.”

“Is she safe now?” Zhou Ning asked.

“Yes.”

“Is there anyone who might hurt her?”

Zhiyan fell silent again.

A private promise does not automatically take precedence over safety.

Nor does caring for a friend mean that a twelve-year-old must face risks beyond his abilities alone.

In the end, Zhiyan agreed to make a narrowly limited request for help.

The request did not make the girl’s entire experience public. It informed only designated parties with a responsibility to protect her that a potential risk existed. The girl could know to whom the information had been passed, and retained the right to give her account, raise questions, and refuse unnecessary further disclosure.

Because of it, Zhiyan lost her trust for a time.

The girl felt he had betrayed her.

Spark did not tell Zhiyan he had done the right thing and therefore need not feel sad.

Even when a choice is necessary, a relationship can still be hurt.

Even when the intention is to protect, the other person can still feel betrayed.

Many of the truly difficult decisions in life are not choices between good and evil. They are choices among paths that all entail loss, bearing the consequence one believes one cannot evade.

A few months later, the girl began speaking to him again.

She did not thank him.

Zhiyan did not ask her to.

They simply walked together along the path beside the river.

As they reached the place where they had sat that day, both slowed down, but neither mentioned it.

Some relationships can continue not because the wound has disappeared.

But because people have finally learned not to use their own good intentions to demand that someone else forget the pain.

A child's growing up is not a passage from knowing nothing to knowing everything, or from dependence to no longer needing anyone.

He will keep gaining new abilities and encountering more complicated forms of helplessness.

Beginning to say "no" does not mean that every refusal is right.

Learning to choose does not mean he can already bear every consequence.

He needs boundaries, and protection; freedom, and to be stopped; independence, and a way back when he has taken a wrong turn.

Civilization cannot grow up for him.

His parents cannot.

His teachers cannot.

Nor can Spark.

What they can do is not mistake obedience for growth or grades for worth, not turn protection into possession or a single mistake into a verdict on his character. While he is not yet able to bear the whole of his life, they can hold the boundaries against real danger for him. As he gradually becomes able to judge and take responsibility, they can return, little by little, the rights they have been keeping on his behalf.

Until one day, he is no longer only a child the world has caught and held.

He begins to become someone who can catch and hold another.

Chapter 3 A Person Begins the Search for Self

At fifteen, Xu Zhiyan suddenly stopped liking machinery.

The child who had once crouched beside a ditch to watch water break through mud walls, who had noticed changes in speed as a transport device failed again and again, now refused to enter the mechanical subdomain.

He withdrew from the learning project he had taken part in for three years, stopped maintaining the equipment he had modified with his own hands, and no longer joined the engineering assignments the community matched him with.

All the long-term records showed a consistent aptitude in this area.

He had a feel for structure, was good at tracing cause and effect through failure, and could understand how different stages affected one another in complex collaborations. Several mentors believed that, if he kept going deeper, he was very likely to develop genuine creative ability in the field.

But Zhiyan said:

“I don't want to do it anymore.”

Xu Chuan asked him why.

“I just don't.”

“Did something happen on the project?”

“No.”

“Has someone made you uncomfortable?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

Zhiyan was silent for a long time.

“I don't know.”

That answer unsettled adults most of all.

If a child had been hurt, the harm could be addressed; if a project had lost its value, that value could be discussed; if the child's abilities fell short, a new path of learning could be found.

But “I don't know” gave them nothing.

It was like a door with no way in.

Xu Chuan brought up Zhiyan's participation records from the past few years, hoping to prove that this was not a direction to abandon lightly. He did not directly ask Zhiyan to carry on. He simply laid out, one by one, the moments when he had shone:

The first time he solved the problem of cargo slipping off on a turn;

The first time he repaired a community water-supply terminal on his own;

The first time he led a group of younger children through a water-flow experiment;

The first time he discovered a safety hazard in a project and insisted that operations stop.

“Nobody did these things for you,” Xu Chuan said. “You really do have the ability.”

Zhiyan glanced at them.

“Does being good at something mean I have to keep doing it?”

Xu Chuan did not answer.

The old civilization had often closed paths to children because they lacked ability.

The new danger might be precisely the reverse: as technology became able to identify a person's potential earlier and more accurately, would civilization build a path for him in the name of “not wasting your talent,” a path more precise, more efficient, and harder to leave?

Prediction can help a person see possibilities.

But a possibility is not a command.

Nor is talent a debt.

Being good at something does not mean a person inherently owes the world a future he must fulfill.

In the months after leaving the project, Zhiyan found almost no new direction.

He tried making video records, but found editing too tedious; took part in ecological restoration, but stopped showing up after a few days of getting up early; learned woodworking from an older man, but lost interest after ruining two pieces of timber; and briefly joined an urban history project, only to find he had no patience for organizing old archives.

He still studied the essential basics every day and fulfilled the basic responsibilities set by the community, but he no longer showed sustained enthusiasm for anything.

Xu Chuan grew more and more anxious.

He could accept his son choosing something other than machinery.

But he could not accept his son choosing nothing at all.

“You need to at least see one thing through properly,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because you can't just keep drifting like this.”

“I'm only fifteen.”

“At fifteen, you can already know what you like.”

“Did you know when you were fifteen?”

Xu Chuan froze.

At fifteen, he had not known.

Back then, he had simply followed the only visible path ahead. Exams, further education, work: there had seemed to be many choices, but very few he could actually afford to make. He had not arrived where he was by understanding himself. That path had simply been the safest at the time, and the least likely to disappoint his family.

Years later, with adequate means to live and Spark's help in making sense of his abilities, relationships, and long-term direction, he still struggled to answer:

If survival, responsibility, and other people's expectations were set aside, how did he actually want to spend his life?

He hoped his child would find the answer sooner than he had.

But that hope, too, could become another way of hurrying him along.

Adults often cannot bear a child's uncertainty, and not only because they worry that the child is wasting time.

It also forces them to see again that many adults, halfway through their lives, have never truly found themselves either.

The learning community did not immediately design a new path of growth for Zhiyan.

His mentor, Ye Lan, asked only that he continue fulfilling three basic responsibilities: maintain his health and everyday living skills, complete the necessary study of shared knowledge, and take part in one form of public upkeep that did not depend on personal interest.

Zhiyan chose the public kitchen.

Not because he liked cooking.

Only because the shifts were shorter and it was close to home.

His first job was to wash and sort the tableware returned that day.

It was repetitive, wet work, with almost no room for creativity. Automated equipment could do most of the processing, but some special utensils still needed a person to check them, and tableware used by older people and young children needed additional inspection.

Zhiyan worked very slowly.

His mind often wandered, and he would miss traces of food around the edges.

An older man who shared his shift was named Chen Mo. He did not lecture Zhiyan about how “ordinary labor has great meaning too.” He simply put the bowls that were not clean back in front of him.

Zhiyan grew a little impatient.

“The machine can just wash it again.”

“It can,” Chen Mo said. “But the equipment's being serviced today. It may not be done before dinner.”

“Then use another bowl.”

“There's nothing wrong with this one.”

Zhiyan looked at the ordinary white porcelain bowl.

“We've got plenty.”

Chen Mo did not argue. He only asked:

“Do you know who's going to use it?”

“No.”

“Then wash it clean.”

Zhiyan thought the old man was stubborn.

It was only a bowl.

Yet every day Chen Mo spotted the smallest traces left behind. He also knew which damage could be repaired and which cracks might already pose a risk of injury. He did not rush to meet a quota, or leave every problem to the equipment.

Only weeks later did Zhiyan learn that Chen Mo had helped design this system for circulating public tableware.

Many of its washing procedures, material standards, and repair interfaces came from his experience. Given his contributions and expertise, he could easily have confined himself to decisions about the system. He did not need to stand at a sink washing bowls every day.

“Why do you still do this?” Zhiyan asked.

“Because, in the end, the system has to put a clean bowl into someone's hands.”

“Can't you tell from the data?”

“The data tells you how many are done. I want to know whether the person who gets one can trust it enough to use it straight away.”

Zhiyan lowered his eyes to the suds in the sink.

Chen Mo said no more.

After that day, Zhiyan still did not like washing bowls.

He simply began to wash them clean.

Civilization cannot require every necessary task to inspire love in the person doing it.

Some things must be done by someone, not because they offer self-fulfillment, but because another real person is waiting for the result.

Meaning does not exist only in what a person most wants to do.

It also exists in those moments when, knowing a task is ordinary, repetitive, and unseen, he is still unwilling to leave others to bear its consequences carelessly.

When winter came, there was a small accident at the public kitchen.

A young child had a severe allergic reaction after a meal.

The medical system intervened quickly, and the child suffered no irreversible harm. But tracing the events afterward showed that a utensil which should have been handled separately had entered the ordinary washing process.

The records showed that Zhiyan had been responsible for the initial sorting that day.

He could not remember whether he had seen the label.

The automated identification system had left no conclusive result either. The equipment was undergoing maintenance at the time, and parts of the process had been taken over manually; the people on site had changed several times, and the utensil might also have been moved again at a later stage.

There was no evidence proving that Zhiyan alone had caused the accident.

Nor was there evidence that could entirely rule out his negligence.

For the first time, Zhiyan faced a responsibility that could not be simply assigned.

If it was clearly his mistake, he could apologize, make amends, and bear the consequences.

If it clearly had nothing to do with him, he could refuse the blame.

But reality does not always supply clear answers.

“I don't remember,” he said again and again.

Spark retrieved all the authorized records from that day, but found no decisive evidence.

It did not infer that “it was probably him” from his habit of occasionally letting his mind wander, nor did it declare him wholly unconnected with the incident simply because there was no evidence.

Ye Lan asked him:

“Do you think you might have missed it?”

Zhiyan wanted to say no.

The word reached his lips, but he stopped.

“I might have.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“But it might not have been me.”

“That's true.”

“If it wasn't me, why should I take responsibility?”

Ye Lan did not ask him to admit to a fault that had not been established.

“Taking responsibility isn't the same as admitting guilt. You can refuse an unproven assignment of blame and still help repair a part of the process that failed, a part you may have been involved in.”

Zhiyan said nothing for a long time.

In the end, he joined the incident review group.

Not as the person who had caused it.

Nor as someone with no connection to it.

He clearly described everything he did and did not remember about that day, helped redesign the sorting procedure for manual takeovers, and spent a full month checking that the utensils kept separate for allergy protection really entered their own closed loop.

His participation did not oblige the child's family to forgive anyone.

They needed to know what had happened, and they had the right to question why the system as a whole had still allowed such a risk during equipment maintenance.

The accident could not be packaged as an opportunity for a teenager to grow.

Someone had truly been harmed.

Zhiyan's growth could not become the meaning of that harm.

But once the harm had occurred, he still had to decide: would he hide in the gap left by “it can't be proven,” or, while responsibility remained unclear, help repair a place where he might have failed to do his part?

A month later, the new procedure went into operation.

The contribution records did not treat Zhiyan's work as equivalent to a successful act of creation.

They preserved three facts together:

He might have been part of the chain of events that led to the accident, and his responsibility could not be fully established;

He had truthfully described the limits of his memory, neither concealing nor inventing anything;

He had helped with the subsequent repairs and taken on continuing inspections.

Error, uncertainty, and repair did not cancel one another out.

When civilization remembers a person's contribution, it must also remember the reality in which that contribution was made.

Otherwise, repair can easily become a performance for regaining honor, while the people who were hurt are once again removed from the story.

On his sixteenth birthday, Zhiyan received a special permission.

From that day on, he could view a more complete record of his growing up and decide which parts would be kept, which sealed away, and which permanently deleted.

For the first time, the images, words, health records, fragments of learning, and important moments in relationships that his parents had kept over the years were placed in his hands in something close to their entirety.

He saw himself at three, hiding behind his mother and refusing an unfamiliar hug.

Saw himself at five, standing in the rain, hair plastered to his forehead, laughing so hard he could barely open his eyes.

Saw the city of mud that the water had washed away again and again.

Saw his excitement the first time he repaired a device, and also the weeks of increasing silence before he later left the mechanical project.

Some records had no images.

Only a few short lines his parents had left.

He said no clearly for the first time. We didn't force him.

Today I lost my temper with him because I was running late. He hasn't forgiven me.

He's starting not to tell us everything. We need to learn to step back.

Zhiyan looked through them for a long time.

He had thought his parents were recording his growth.

Only later did he realize they had also recorded how, through mistake after mistake, his parents had learned to be parents.

He could delete all this.

His parents had already confirmed that, once the records were returned to him, they would keep no secret copies.

Zhiyan deleted a great many images.

Some moments adults had considered endearing and worth preserving were, to him, merely embarrassing. Some he no longer wanted anyone to see.

When Zhou Ning found out, she was silent for a long time.

She did not stop him.

But that evening, she sat alone in the kitchen until very late.

Those images belonged not only to the child's past. They also held her own youth, exhaustion, love, and loss. When a child deletes a record of growing up, a parent may also lose part of the memory that once sustained them through long years.

Boundaries do not make things easy for everyone.

Returning rights to a child is not just a respectable principle to state. It means truly accepting that some things one cherishes do not, in the end, belong to oneself.

Zhiyan did not delete everything.

He kept the moment in the rain, the city of mud, and his father's line: “He hasn't forgiven me.”

He deleted the image of himself refusing a hug at three, but kept the line his mother had written.

Not because that day had been so important.

But because, for the first time, he saw that someone had once protected his boundaries for him, before he could even explain them.

That spring, Zhiyan began making frequent trips to an old industrial area on the city's edge.

A slow ecological restoration was under way there. The soil was still polluted, many buildings had been abandoned, and only a few areas were open to learners.

At first, he had simply gone along with a friend.

His friend was recording the return of plant life. Zhiyan often sat beside a collapsed wall, doing nothing.

One day, he noticed a tiny blade of grass growing from a crack in the wall.

It was not a rare species, nor did it have any special research value. It was just a little green reaching out between concrete and rusted metal.

For several weeks in a row, Zhiyan photographed it.

Not for the project.

He submitted no records, either.

He simply wanted to know whether it would survive.

Later, the restoration project prepared to demolish the wall.

For the first time, Zhiyan asked of his own accord to join the project discussions.

He did not demand that the whole dangerous wall be kept for the sake of that blade of grass, or present the tenacity of life as a reason that outweighed engineering safety.

He asked whether a small, structurally stable section of the wall could be preserved before demolition, while documenting how natural recovery took place among the ruins.

The specialists pointed out that this would add to the cost and might not have sufficient research value.

Zhiyan did not give up.

He went back through the materials, looking for ways to reduce the risk; invited the ecology, structural engineering, and urban memory subdomains to assess it together; and acknowledged that, if safety could not be assured, the wall should still be demolished.

In the end, the project preserved a reinforced section of wall.

The little plant did not survive its second winter.

The time Zhiyan had put into it did not earn him a happy ending.

For a while, he felt it had all been meaningless.

When spring came again, a different plant grew out of the crack.

It was not the original one.

Nor was it a continuation of it.

Standing there, Zhiyan suddenly understood that what he truly cared about had never been simply keeping one particular life forever.

What he wanted to know was:

After a place has been exhausted, polluted, and abandoned, how does life return?

He had once known mechanical structures well.

Then he had grown tired of machinery.

He had washed countless bowls in the public kitchen, lived through an accident in which responsibility could not be fully established, and waited among ruins for a blade of grass that had died in the end.

Those experiences had not connected along any route laid out by a system.

Until that day, when they suddenly came together within him as a new direction.

He began studying how abandoned infrastructure could be transformed into spaces capable of sustaining life again.

Machinery was no longer an old talent he was obliged to keep using.

Nor was ecology merely a newly discovered interest.

His past abilities had not been wasted.

They had simply left their original path and found meaning again in the face of another real problem.

Ye Lan asked him:

“Are you sure now?”

Zhiyan shook his head.

“I'd like to try it for a few years and see.”

“And if you don't want to do it anymore after that?”

“Then I'll look again.”

Ye Lan smiled.

“Your father may not like that answer.”

Zhiyan smiled too.

Xu Chuan was indeed not entirely reassured.

He still worried that Zhiyan would give up again, that this path was too slow, that his child had mistaken a passing feeling for the direction of a lifetime.

But he no longer used predictions of potential to prove anything.

He simply went with Zhiyan to the old industrial area.

The wall they had kept was not beautiful.

Gray, mottled, with rainwater gathering in its cracks. The new plant was ordinary too, so ordinary that Xu Chuan almost failed to notice it.

“This is the place?” he asked.

“Mm.”

“Do you want to keep doing this from now on?”

“I don't know.”

Xu Chuan stood there a while.

“Then why do you want to do it now?”

Zhiyan looked at the land that had not yet recovered.

“Because it used to look as if nothing would ever grow here again.”

He said it, and offered no further explanation.

Xu Chuan asked no more.

Finding oneself is not a matter of identifying, among countless options, the one that best matches one's talents.

A person is searching for what in the world truly moves him; what reality he cannot easily turn away from; what responsibility he is willing to return to even when no one asks; and what path can still call his abilities forth anew after failure, weariness, and the changes wrought by time.

Spark can help him see the past.

Intelligence can model the future.

Civilization can make it possible for a mistaken choice not to cost him his means of survival, for temporary uncertainty not to leave him cast aside in competition, and for him not to have to fix the course of his whole life too early simply to prove his usefulness.

But no system can answer for him:

To what is he willing to give himself in this life?

The answer will not be completed all at once.

Nor does a person become himself all at once.

True growth does not mean finally finding, at some particular age, an identity that will never change.

It means retaining, through the long years, the ability to leave a path that has lost its meaning, the courage to admit that one does not know, and the willingness to keep letting the real world into one's inner life, changing old answers and bringing new directions into being.

Civilization can leave people time to search.

But the searching itself is a journey each person must make.

Part II Living with One Another

Chapter 4 Two People Fall in Love

When love first begins, people often think they have finally found someone who understands them completely.

A sentence need not be finished; the other person already knows its second half.

A glance falls upon them, and suddenly the world holds a meaning only the two of them understand.

The weakness, longing, shame, and dreams that once had nowhere to rest seem at last to have found somewhere they can reach.

And so people begin to believe:

If two people love each other enough, they will never truly lose one another.

Only later do they learn that love cannot abolish difference.

Cannot abolish misunderstanding.

Cannot abolish time, distance, exhaustion, jealousy, or change.

Cannot even guarantee that someone who loves deeply today will still be willing to love in the same way tomorrow.

A future civilization can change many of the conditions that force love apart.

But it cannot turn love into an institution that never fails.

Xu Zhiyan met Shen Weilan when he was twenty-four.

Their first meeting was in the old harbor district of a coastal city.

Zhiyan was working on ecological and infrastructure reconstruction after seawater had flooded inland. Weilan had come with a medical and psychological support team to provide care for residents of a temporary community who had endured prolonged displacement.

At first, the two had little to do with each other.

Zhiyan often left for the tide-monitoring station before dawn. By the time Weilan finished work, he was already gone. During the day, she went into the residential area, while Zhiyan mostly traveled between the tidal defenses and the wetland restoration sites.

They truly began talking because of an old man.

He refused to move into the new residential area.

His original house was no longer safe. The walls were damaged, and the foundations had been waterlogged for a long time. Every professional assessment pointed to the same conclusion: he had to leave.

Yet every day the old man sat by his door, refusing to pack his things.

Zhiyan was responsible for explaining the redevelopment plan.

He talked about tide levels, structural risks, the relocation schedule, and the housing arrangements afterward. When he had finished, the old man asked only:

“Then what about my wife?”

Zhiyan thought he was worried that his partner would not want to move.

Only later did he learn that the man's wife had been dead for seventeen years.

Her ashes were buried beneath the tree behind the house.

The new tidal-defense works would require this area to be demolished.

For a moment, Zhiyan did not know what to say.

The engineering work would not stop for one person's memory. Nor would the risk of staying disappear because the old man did not want to leave.

Weilan sat down beside him.

She did not try to persuade him that “she isn't under that tree,” or say that “the living matter more.”

She simply asked:

“What was her name?”

The old man raised his head.

That afternoon, for the first time, he told them about his wife.

How they had come to this harbor when they were young, how they had spent several months' wages on their first bed, how they had watched over a leaking roof on typhoon nights, how they had fought and made up, and how, after his wife fell ill, he had watched her leave him day by day.

When he finished, he still had not agreed to move.

Weilan did not ask him to decide on the spot.

As they were leaving, Zhiyan asked:

“What if he never goes?”

“Then we keep telling him about the risk.”

“What if he still refuses?”

“Until the danger actually arrives, he still has time to choose.”

“But we can't wait until the house collapses.”

“That's why you still have to prepare for a forced evacuation.”

Zhiyan looked at her.

“Then why didn't you try to persuade him just now?”

Weilan said:

“Because accepting his feelings doesn't mean leaving the final decision to those feelings. We can stop him dying in that house, but we can't pretend it's only a house.”

Zhiyan did not answer at once.

The sea breeze blew in from the harbor, damp and salty.

Many years later, he could no longer remember when they had first eaten alone together, or who had first said they liked the other.

He remembered only that dusk.

Weilan was walking along the old road, worn by repeated incursions of seawater, her hair tangled by the wind. She had said nothing grand about civilization, care, or meaning.

She had simply seen a person whose needs an engineering judgment alone could not meet.

For the first time, Zhiyan wanted to know her better.

When the project ended, they returned to different cities.

Zhiyan stayed in the coastal restoration subdomain. Weilan joined another long-term care community.

They were seventeen hundred kilometers apart.

At first, distance was not a problem.

Spark let them share authorized fragments of their lives. After a night of care work, Weilan could listen on her way home to the words Zhiyan had left for her; when Zhiyan began a long assignment on site, she did not have to wait for him to step away from all his work before she could learn whether he was safe.

Sometimes they would use their remote terminals to open a public space together.

Each went about their own work.

Zhiyan organized structural data. Weilan read records left by patients' families. Neither spoke continuously, and no intelligent agent automatically supplied topics to fill the silence.

They simply knew that the other was there, beneath a light in another city.

Remote presence did not erase distance.

It meant that distance no longer amounted to withdrawing from a shared life.

But when a relationship gains more ways of reaching across, it also exposes more of the problems that distance once concealed.

Gradually, Zhiyan noticed that Weilan rarely volunteered anything about the pain of her work.

She would say that she had been busy, that an old person had finally agreed to eat, or that a child had drawn her a bird after treatment.

But she rarely spoke of the moments when she broke down, the nights when she cried alone, or the failures of care that made her begin to doubt herself.

Zhiyan knew those feelings existed.

Weilan's Spark knew too.

But without her authorization, it would not pass those moments on to him.

“Why don't you tell me?” Zhiyan asked.

“Some things I want to work through myself.”

“I'm the person closest to you.”

“And?”

“And you could at least let me know.”

Weilan was silent for a moment.

“Being close doesn't mean opening up everything.”

The words hurt Zhiyan.

He felt shut outside the door.

He was willing to carry her pain, willing to stay beside her when she was most vulnerable. But when she did not need him, that willingness had nowhere to go.

“Then what do I mean to you?” he asked.

Weilan did not answer.

It was not a question.

It was a demand.

What Zhiyan wanted was not merely information. He wanted the fact of being needed to confirm his place in her life.

Once in love, people can easily turn “I'm willing to carry this for you” into “you should let me carry it.”

But another person's pain is not a place to prove one's love.

She has the right to ask for help, and the right to remain silent for a time; the right to give part of herself to her lover, and the right to keep the parts she still cannot put into words.

That day, they reached no agreement.

They ended the remote connection early.

Zhiyan sat in the dark, going over Weilan's final expression again and again. He wanted to ask Spark to analyze why she was evasive, to learn exactly what his words had triggered.

Spark refused to construct an unauthorized psychological assessment.

It could help Zhiyan revisit what they had already said to each other, but it could not piece together limited expressions, pauses, and historical records into a definite conclusion about Weilan's inner life.

Understanding someone cannot come at the cost of secretly crossing her boundaries.

In the end, Zhiyan did nothing.

The next day, Weilan did not contact him either.

Nor on the third day.

Technology can make a message arrive in an instant.

But it cannot decide who should speak first.

Late on the fourth night, Weilan sent a few brief words.

“It isn't that I don't need you. I just don't want every time I fall apart to become a task for both of us.”

Zhiyan looked at them for a long time.

He wrote many replies, then deleted them all.

Finally, he asked only:

“Then how would you like me to be there?”

Weilan took a while to answer:

“Sometimes listen to me. Sometimes let me say nothing. When you can't tell, you can ask.”

This did not resolve their problems entirely.

Her silence would still make Zhiyan uneasy.

And when she was tired, Weilan would still hear his concern as pressure.

But from then on, they had one simple question between them:

“Do you need me closer right now, or would you like a little space?”

Sometimes the answer was closer.

Sometimes it was space.

Sometimes Weilan herself did not know.

Not knowing could be an answer too.

Love does not mean two people always understand each other correctly.

It means that, when they cannot understand, they do not rush to fill the other person's inner life with their own guesses.

Two years later, Zhiyan's project entered a critical phase.

Months of abnormal tides were closing in on a residential area whose reinforcement work was still unfinished. The project team needed him to remain on site for an extended period.

At the same time, Weilan was offered a place on a deep-sea medical support project.

It was the direction she had waited years to pursue.

The project would last eighteen months, most of them in an enclosed environment. Communication would still be possible, but delays, access restrictions, and mission risks would greatly reduce everyday contact.

For the first time, the two faced a conflict that no amount of coordination could remove.

Zhiyan could not leave.

Nor was Weilan willing to give up the opportunity.

They had imagined a life together under one roof. They had discussed which city to make their home in, whether to have children, how to care for their aging parents, and going back together someday to the old harbor district to see the tree that had been moved.

But the future did not open for both of them at once according to their plans.

One person's dream began to demand a price from the other.

Zhiyan did not say, “I support every choice you make.”

He did not support every choice.

He wanted Weilan to stay.

He feared that eighteen months apart would change them, that she would build a new life in another world, that in the end he would be left with nothing but a relationship maintained at scheduled intervals.

Nor did Weilan say, “If you love me, you should understand.”

She knew her choice would leave Zhiyan to bear alone many things they had meant to share, and she knew that invoking the pursuit of a dream did not automatically justify that cost.

They argued many times.

Zhiyan said:

“Why does it have to be now?”

Weilan answered:

“Because not every opportunity waits until we're ready.”

Zhiyan said:

“Then what about our life?”

“Our life can't be determined only by your project's schedule.”

“And it can't be determined only by your opportunity.”

“That's why I haven't decided for you.”

“But you've already decided to go.”

After those words, they both fell quiet.

Some choices appear to be made by one person, but their consequences enter two people's lives.

Individual autonomy cannot erase responsibility within a relationship.

Nor can responsibility within a relationship automatically erase an individual's path.

Spark laid out several possible arrangements:

Adjust the project schedule;

Shorten the periods spent in the deep sea;

Let remote intelligent agents maintain parts of their shared life;

Redistribute responsibilities for their parents' care;

Establish limited sharing of high-risk emotional and health conditions;

Set fixed points for meeting and reconfirming the relationship.

These arrangements could reduce loss of contact, misunderstanding, and neglected responsibilities.

But they could not answer the most fundamental question:

Were they willing to endure this stretch of time for each other, and willing to accept that, even after enduring it, they might still lose each other?

No arrangement could guarantee that love would remain unchanged.

The day before Weilan left, they went to the old harbor district where they had first met.

The old man had long since moved into the new residential area.

His wife's ashes had not simply been transferred to a public memorial facility. He had chosen to take a little soil from beneath the tree, and had planted another tree at his new home.

The original tree was eventually removed because the engineering works required it.

There was no miracle.

No solution that satisfied everyone.

The old man still missed the house, and sometimes still blamed the engineering decision made back then. But he had survived, and beneath the new tree he continued telling stories of his wife.

Zhiyan and Weilan walked to the sea.

The wind was strong.

“Will you wait for me?” Weilan asked.

Zhiyan did not answer at once.

“I'll go on loving you,” he said. “But I don't know what we'll be like in eighteen months.”

Weilan looked at him.

“Neither do I.”

They did not ask each other for a promise that would last forever unchanged.

Not because their love was insufficiently deep.

Precisely because they had finally admitted that people are not beings a promise can freeze in place.

A true commitment is not a guarantee that one will never change.

It is a commitment, when change comes, not to conceal it, not to manipulate, and not to let the other person go on giving within a false certainty.

Before she left, they jointly set three relationship authorizations.

First, every remote intelligent agent must clearly identify itself and must not create the illusion that the person was personally present.

Second, if either faced a major health or safety risk, limited information sharing could be activated; ordinary emotional fluctuations would not automatically enter the other's private domain.

Third, they would reconfirm the state of their relationship every three months. Either could speak of changes, or ask to pause or end it.

These were not terms and conditions for love.

They existed only to prevent technology from using continuous connection to conceal changes that had already taken place in the real relationship.

They still had to do the loving themselves.

In the seventh month after Weilan joined the deep-sea project, Zhiyan met Gu Yao.

Gu Yao was an ecological structures researcher who had newly joined the project.

She was intelligent and direct, and she and Zhiyan had much in common. They often worked on site until late at night, and sometimes argued over a plan until they were thoroughly annoyed with each other.

Zhiyan found that he was beginning to look forward to her arrival.

The change did not immediately constitute betrayal.

A promise cannot forbid a person from feeling attracted to someone else.

But he can decide whether to turn attraction into a closeness developed in secret, whether to maintain an existing commitment while letting another person enter his emotional life unaware.

Zhiyan did not tell Weilan.

At first, he thought there was no need.

Nothing had happened.

Gu Yao did not know, and neither did Weilan. As long as he kept his boundaries, this feeling that had not yet become an action seemed to belong only to his private domain.

Yet he began to shorten his remote conversations with Weilan.

Began to let his mind wander while she spoke.

Began to explain his distance by saying how busy the project was.

He had not lied.

But in choosing which facts to bring into the relationship, he gradually created another kind of untruth.

At their ninth-month reconfirmation, Weilan asked:

“Are you already somewhere else?”

Without thinking, Zhiyan said:

“I'm in touch with you every day.”

“I'm not asking about the connection.”

Zhiyan fell silent.

Remote presence can keep a person's voice, image, and some of their actions continually appearing.

But appearing is not the same as being present.

Someone can respond every day and never lose contact, yet have already turned their real attention, anticipation, and direction in life elsewhere.

“I've met someone,” Zhiyan said.

Weilan did not immediately ask what had happened.

She only closed her eyes.

The deep-sea communications environment caused a slight delay in the image. Seeing her silence was harder for Zhiyan to bear than any accusation.

“We haven't—”

“Don't start by telling me what you haven't done.”

Zhiyan stopped.

He had wanted to prove that he had not crossed their agreed boundaries.

But a relationship can be hurt before a rule has been formally broken.

“Do you have feelings for her?” Weilan asked.

“I don't know.”

“You don't know. Again.”

For the first time since they had met, Weilan spoke in a tone that was almost mocking.

Zhiyan felt angry.

“What do you want me to say, then? That I'm sure I have feelings for her? Or that there's nothing at all?”

“I want you not to wait until I ask before letting me know you've already started leaving.”

“I haven't decided to leave.”

“But you've left me believing alone in a relationship you've already begun to doubt.”

That connection ended in an argument.

Spark did not automatically tell them to calm down, or generate a neutral summary of the conflict.

Some words must come out in anger.

And some fractures cannot be classified as communication problems simply because they are not expressed rationally enough.

Weilan's hurt was real.

Zhiyan's confusion was real too.

When two realities conflict, that does not mean only one can be allowed to exist.

They paused their relationship connection.

They did not cut off all information.

The safety authorizations remained, and their shared family responsibilities did not disappear. But everyday presence, emotional sharing, and all fragments of daily life were switched off.

For the first time, Zhiyan felt how clearly technology could withdraw.

There were no memories continually popping up, no “remember when” prompts based on their former intimacy, no system trying to exploit his loss to prolong his use, and no simulated Weilan continuing to keep him company in her familiar voice.

Once the relationship was paused, Weilan's remote intelligent agent also stopped entering Zhiyan's life.

What remained was not a more compliant, more stable substitute who would never leave.

Only an absence.

Absence hurt.

But absence was more honest than an illusion.

Gu Yao soon noticed the change in Zhiyan.

He explained the state of his relationship to her and admitted that he had begun to hope for something with her beyond ordinary collaboration.

Gu Yao did not draw closer because of it.

“Are you choosing me, or are you afraid that once you've lost her, you'll have nothing?” she asked.

Zhiyan could not answer.

Gu Yao withdrew from all nonessential personal contact.

She had no obligation to be a transitional stage in Zhiyan's understanding of himself.

Being honest about one relationship does not automatically turn a new person into an option waiting to be chosen.

Three months later, Weilan completed the first stage of her assignment and briefly returned to the surface.

They met in an unfamiliar city.

They did not choose the old harbor district, or return to any place too laden with shared memories.

Weilan was thinner than when she had left.

Zhiyan wanted to embrace her, but stopped a few steps away.

“May I?” he asked.

Weilan shook her head.

They sat beside a river and talked from afternoon until dark.

Weilan spoke of the parts of deep-sea life she had never told him about. Not to prove that she too had been lonely, but to let Zhiyan know that her silence had not meant their relationship was absent from it.

Zhiyan spoke about Gu Yao too.

About how he had looked forward to her appearing, how he had crossed no explicit boundary of action, yet had withdrawn step by step from being truly present with Weilan.

Neither could emerge from these admissions unscathed.

Sometimes, the more truthful it is, the more it hurts.

“Do you still love me?” Weilan asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you love her?”

“I don't know whether it's love.”

“Then do you want to go on being with me?”

Zhiyan looked at the river.

This was the question he had to answer.

He could no longer use uncertainty to prolong Weilan's waiting without end.

“I do,” he said. “But not to go back to how we were.”

Weilan did not speak for a long time.

“I can't go back either.”

They did not begin again that day.

Wanting to continue did not mean they were already able to.

Love still being there did not mean trust had returned.

Over the following months, they resumed only limited contact. Every move closer could reopen an old wound; every silence could be understood as another departure.

Weilan would suddenly wonder whether Zhiyan was still hiding something.

Sometimes Zhiyan felt that nothing he did could prove anything.

Once, impatiently, he said:

“If you're never going to trust me, how can we go on?”

Weilan answered:

“I'm living with the consequences of what you once kept me from knowing. You don't get to decide when those consequences end.”

Zhiyan offered no further defense.

What he could do was not to keep proving that he had changed.

It was to remain truthful even when he could not immediately be believed; not to present waiting as his own sacrifice when the other person needed time; and also to retain the right to reconsider whether to continue if, over the long term, the relationship became nothing but punishment.

Technology cannot verify trust into existence.

Complete records can prove what a person has done.

But they cannot prove that he will not change in the future, or force another person to give herself again.

Before Weilan returned to the deep-sea project, they reconfirmed their relationship.

They were not restoring what had been.

They were acknowledging that the old relationship had ended, and that, after everything that had happened, they were willing to see whether a new shared life could still take shape.

No promise never to change.

No automatic opening of every private domain.

No trading continuous surveillance for a sense of security.

Zhiyan still kept a life of his own, and Weilan still had parts of hers she did not explain to him. The difference was that they no longer used an unbroken technical connection to pretend they were still present for each other, or treated the absence of a broken rule as proof that they had been faithful to the relationship.

A year later, Weilan finished the project.

She did not immediately move to Zhiyan's city.

At first, they lived separately in areas not far apart, learning again how to share time, how to deal with difference, and how to come close without swallowing each other up.

Some nights, they still argued.

Some wounds still returned.

Zhiyan also thought of Gu Yao now and then, and of the path he had never really taken.

Weilan knew.

Knowing did not make it painless.

But they no longer demanded that love be a pure territory no one else had ever entered.

In a lifetime, people meet many others, experience feelings that cannot be forbidden in advance, and become different versions of themselves at different stages.

What love truly asks is not that a person lose the ability to feel other possibilities from that moment on.

It asks that, while a shared life still exists, one not leave the other person in a world from which the truth has been hidden; that, when one has changed, one accept the loss that speaking of that change may bring; and that, in choosing to continue, one not replace trust with surveillance, action with promises, or use past giving to claim ownership of the other's future.

Many years later, they returned once more to the old harbor district.

The old man had died.

The tree at his new home had grown tall. Beneath it stood a very small plaque bearing only his name and his wife's. It did not tell the story of their lives.

The story was still told by those who chose to remember.

Zhiyan and Weilan sat side by side beneath the tree.

They did not discuss whether they would love each other forever.

That question no longer mattered.

What mattered was that, after distance, change, attraction, concealment, hurt, and choosing again, they were still willing to sit here truthfully together.

Spark did not preserve the moment for them.

No terminal was open.

Wind passed through the leaves. Sunlight fell on their hands, no longer young.

Weilan placed her hand beside Zhiyan.

She did not take his.

Zhiyan saw it and set his hand beside hers.

Love had not conquered time.

Had not banished loneliness.

Had not made two people always right, or guaranteed that every hurt could be forgiven.

It had simply become, again and again, the choice to draw close between two people who always remained free to leave.

Civilization can let care reach across.

Can let presence extend.

Can protect two people's ability to remain themselves in love, and, when a relationship ends, stop technology from manufacturing a substitute who never leaves.

But civilization cannot love on anyone's behalf.

Love is precious precisely because it can never be guaranteed.

Chapter 5 How a Family Remains a Family

Home is not always warm.

It can also be the first place a person learns silence, the place where responsibility is most easily declared a matter of course, where love and indebtedness are most deeply entangled and hardest to separate.

When people are hurt by the world outside, they often want to go home.

Yet for many, the wounds hardest to heal in a lifetime also come from home.

Civilization cannot hide the suffering within families simply because it praises family life.

Nor can it tear people completely out of their deepest relationships simply because families can cause harm.

The change that is truly needed is not to turn every family into the same ideal form.

It is to let love endure without relying on the silence of those who sacrifice themselves, to stop care from automatically falling on the weakest, the most compliant, or the person least able to leave; and to allow a family, even with its grievances, mistakes, and departures, to retain the possibility of seeing one another anew.

When Su He received word that her mother had fallen, she was in another city attending a three-day public hearing.

She was the only person on the project who had taken part in the entire preliminary investigation.

The following day would bring the most important stage of establishing the disputed facts. If she left, the team could continue, but questions about some key evidence might not receive accurate answers.

Her mother's injuries posed no immediate threat to her life.

The medical information showed a fractured hip requiring surgery as soon as possible. Recovery afterward would be lengthy, and she would be unable to live independently in the short term.

When Su He finished reading, her first response was not worry.

It was exhaustion.

The thought immediately filled her with shame.

Her mother was lying in a hospital.

And she was thinking: Why now, again?

For seven years, she had handled so much of what had needed doing after her father's death.

When her mother moved, she went.

For follow-up appointments, she went with her.

Community authorizations, insurance changes, malfunctions in household terminals, and coordination among relatives also always came to her first.

She had an older brother and a younger sister.

Her brother, Su Mingyuan, lived closest, but always said he could not leave work; her sister, Su Qing, was far away overseas. Qing's concern was never absent, but when someone actually needed to be there, she could often take part only remotely.

No one had formally decided that Su He should bear the responsibility.

Things simply landed on her, again and again.

Because she was reliable.

Because she knew the procedures.

Because she would never really leave things unattended.

The heaviest responsibility in a family is often not forced upon someone.

It simply keeps finding the person least likely to refuse.

Under her prior authorization, their mother's Spark had already shared the necessary medical information with all three children.

Su Mingyuan soon sent a message:

“You go back first. I'll try to get there tonight.”

Su Qing proposed activating remote care, with her initially coordinating medical opinions on the surgery and resources for afterward.

Every arrangement was reasonable.

Yet suddenly Su He did not want to answer.

She knew that the moment she replied “All right,” everything that followed would take its familiar course.

She would cancel her work and rush back to the hospital; her brother would arrive late at night, stay a few hours, then leave; her sister would remain online, handling a vast amount of information but still unable to replace physical presence; and after their mother recovered, everyone would thank her.

Then it would happen the same way next time.

Su He switched off the family connection for two hours.

Not because her mother did not matter.

But because she first needed to hear the person inside her who had not been allowed to speak for a very long time.

That voice said:

I don't want to go back.

When the hearing ended, Su He sat alone in the emptied hall.

A colleague asked whether she needed help.

She said no.

Spark did not automatically book her a ticket, or infer from her past behavior that she would certainly choose to go home in the end.

It simply kept a few items of information continuously updated:

Her mother had completed the preoperative assessment;

Her brother had still not reached the hospital;

Her sister was speaking remotely with the doctor;

Surgery was expected the following morning.

At nine that evening, her mother asked to speak with her.

When the image opened, her mother was lying in the hospital bed, looking very unwell.

“Don't come back,” her mother said. “There's nothing much wrong with me.”

Su He looked at her.

All through her childhood and into adulthood, whenever her mother truly needed her, she began by saying, “You don't need to come back.”

If Su He really did not go, her mother would later say, at some completely unrelated moment:

“You're all so busy. I can't count on anyone.”

This was not carefully planned manipulation.

Her mother might not even realize what she was doing.

She was simply afraid to say directly, “I need you,” and afraid that no one would prove unprompted that she still mattered.

Many families never say what they really mean.

They turn missing someone into blame.

Need into “there's no need.”

Fear of being abandoned into “what was the point of raising you?”

Wanting to leave into “I'm just too busy.”

Relationships carry on through these distorted words, and are worn away by them, little by little.

“Mom,” Su He asked, “do you want me to come back?”

Her mother paused, startled.

“I already said there's no need.”

“I'm not asking whether I ought to come back. I'm asking whether you want me to.”

Her mother looked away.

After a long time, she said:

“When I'm in surgery, I would still like someone to be waiting outside.”

“My brother is closer to you.”

“He's busy with work.”

Anger suddenly surged up in Su He.

“I have work too.”

Her mother fell silent.

Su He immediately regretted it.

But she did not take the words back.

Some truths hurt when they are spoken.

Left unspoken, they go on hurting the person expected always to be understanding.

“I'm not refusing to look after you,” Su He said. “But it can't be me every time.”

Her mother's eyes reddened.

“I haven't forced you.”

“You haven't forced me directly.”

Both people on the screen fell quiet.

This was not a suitable moment for an argument at a hospital bedside.

Yet precisely because it was never a suitable moment, many families let the same unfairness drag on for decades.

“I'll come back tomorrow morning,” Su He said at last. “I'll be there for your surgery. But the three of us are going to make a new arrangement for your care afterward.”

Her mother nodded.

No thanks.

No apology either.

After closing the connection, Su He cried in the hall for a long time.

She had still chosen to go back.

But this time, she was not going because she could not refuse.

She was going because, having spoken aloud her right to refuse, she still wanted to be with her mother at that important moment.

The same action can arise from an entirely different relationship.

Without the possibility of refusal, sacrifice can hardly be a genuine choice.

Early the next morning, Su Mingyuan finally arrived at the hospital.

Su He arrived twenty minutes after him.

Her brother was visibly relieved to see her.

“Good. You're back,” he said.

In those words, all Su He's accumulated anger found a target at once.

“Why is everything all right now that I'm back?”

Su Mingyuan did not understand.

“You know Mom's situation best.”

“You could know it too.”

“That's not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

The hospital corridor was quiet.

Su Mingyuan glanced toward the operating area. He did not want to argue here.

“Let's wait until Mom's out before we talk about this.”

“Every time, we wait until it's over. And once it's over, you leave.”

Her brother frowned.

“I was dealing with things for the hospital last night too.”

“What things?”

“Contacting the doctor, rearranging work, getting back here.”

“And then? Who stays with her after surgery? Who handles her rehabilitation? What happens when she can't get up in the night?”

“We can get care workers.”

“Who coordinates them?”

“The system can arrange it.”

“Who checks whether she wants it? Who makes sure she's actually taken her medicine? Who knows that when she says there's no need, she's really afraid?”

Su Mingyuan's voice rose too.

“So only you understand her, and only you can take care of her. Is that it?”

“I've never said I'm the only one who can.”

“But every time, you act as if nothing anyone else does is enough.”

The words struck home.

Su He had always believed that, because she bore the most responsibility, she had the greatest right to point out the problems.

She had not seen that, in taking over again and again, she had gradually made “I know Mother best” into her own position in the family.

She complained that her family depended on her.

Yet she also found it difficult to truly believe that others could take responsibility in different ways.

Responsibility creates power.

Long-term sacrifice can also produce a hidden moral advantage within a family, leaving the person who bears it unable to withdraw and unable to let anyone else step in on different terms.

Su He did not admit this at once.

She only said coldly:

“At least I'm here.”

Su Mingyuan looked at her.

“Yes. You're always here. So we all owe you.”

At that moment, the door to the operating area opened.

The doctor came out and told them the surgery was finished.

They both stood up.

The argument was not over.

It had only been interrupted, for now, by a more urgent reality.

Their mother's recovery after surgery did not go smoothly.

Pain, disrupted sleep, and unfamiliar surroundings made her irritable. She refused rehabilitation exercises, complained about the food, suspected the care workers of stealing things, and repeatedly demanded to go home.

By her third day at her mother's side, Su He had barely slept.

Her mother woke many times during the night, pressing the call button each time.

Sometimes she was in pain.

Sometimes she only wanted to make sure her daughter was still in the outer room.

The fourth time she was woken, Su He finally erupted.

“I'm right here! Can you please let me sleep for a little while?”

Her mother froze.

A few seconds later, she turned her face away.

“Go home. I won't be a burden to you.”

Su He stood beside the bed, shaking all over.

She wanted to say: You already are.

It would have been true.

Care has never been only tenderness and repayment.

It takes time, wears down the body, interrupts work, and sends the caregiver swinging again and again between love and weariness.

A person can love her mother deeply.

And at four in the morning, wish her mother would stop calling for her.

Both feelings can exist at once.

Exhaustion is not a lack of love.

Nor is irritation automatically a betrayal.

The real danger is a civilization that allows caregivers to express only selflessness, leaving every dark thought, every anger, every urge to run away to accumulate in shame until they erupt in a more hurtful form.

Su He left the ward.

She did not ask Spark to play something soothing, or immediately request emotional intervention.

She simply sat at the end of the corridor and allowed herself ten minutes of not being a good daughter.

Ten minutes later, she sent her brother one sentence:

“I can't keep going. Come tonight.”

Su Mingyuan replied:

“All right.”

No explanation.

No mention of a meeting the next day.

That evening, he arrived on time.

When Su He left, her mother did not look at her.

She walked out of the hospital feeling both relieved and wretched.

She did not go home.

Alone in a place to stay nearby, she slept for thirteen hours.

Su Mingyuan's first night caring for his mother went just as badly.

He did not know how to adjust the bedside terminal, did not know why she refused a particular form of pain relief, and could not tell whether, when she said “I want to go home,” she really meant to leave or was simply afraid.

His mother complained that he was slow.

And kept asking:

“When is your sister coming back?”

At first, Su Mingyuan explained patiently. Then he too lost patience.

“She's already been looking after you for days.”

His mother said:

“Then get on with your own things. I don't need anyone.”

He finally understood that what Su He faced was not a set of care tasks that could be efficiently completed.

Their mother's body was losing abilities it had once had.

She was not only in pain.

She was also afraid of turning from someone who could care for others into someone others needed to manage.

She was afraid of troubling her children.

And afraid that her children truly no longer needed her.

She refused help even as she kept checking that help was still there.

No system could resolve that contradiction by identifying it accurately once.

It could only be met and held by another person, in one particular night after another.

In the early hours, his mother woke again.

“Where's your father?” she asked.

Su Mingyuan was silent.

His father had been dead for seven years.

His mother had not been diagnosed with any persistent cognitive impairment. Pain, medication, and lack of sleep could cause temporary confusion.

He could have corrected her.

But at that moment, he suddenly did not know how to answer.

“He's not here,” he said.

His mother looked around the dim room.

“Has he gone on the night shift again?”

His father had worked at the harbor when he was young, and had indeed often stayed away all night.

Su Mingyuan sat down beside the bed.

“Maybe.”

He did not have the remote system simulate his father's voice.

Did not create the illusion that someone who had died was still caring for her.

He simply did not, for that moment, force an old woman in pain to return immediately to the reality in which her husband was dead.

His mother was quiet for a while.

“When you had a fever as a child, he sat up with you just like this.”

It was the first time Su Mingyuan had heard his mother speak of it.

He no longer remembered.

His father had never mentioned it either.

Some acts of care enter no record.

No confirmation of contribution, no images, no gratitude from those who come after.

They simply happened.

Happened when a child was utterly unable to give anything in return.

Su Mingyuan took his mother's hand.

As dawn approached, she finally fell asleep.

On the third day, Su Qing returned from overseas.

She had not had things as easy as her brother and sister imagined.

For years, she had handled many matters remotely: comparing medical opinions, applying for public services, managing expenses, keeping medication records, and communicating with relatives. She often dealt with information from home late at night, then still had her own life to carry on the next day.

But it was true that she was rarely physically present.

This made her contributions easy to overlook, and also allowed her to avoid the exhaustion of things that could not be done remotely.

The first time the three sat down to discuss long-term care, they did not begin with “who is the more dutiful child.”

They began by setting out what had actually happened over the past year.

Su He had provided the most in-person companionship and handled the most emergencies.

Su Qing had taken on a great deal of information management, finance, and coordination across institutions.

Su Mingyuan had participated least, but he lived closest and was best placed to provide regular physical presence in the future.

The records did not generate a ranking of contributions to the family.

Care is not a competition to decide who loves their mother most.

Facts about contributions can prevent some labor from being silently erased, but they cannot calculate every unspoken concern in a person's heart, or use a number to cancel out the hurt another person's absence has caused.

Looking at the past records, Su Mingyuan admitted that he had been avoiding things all along.

Not because he did not love his mother.

But because every time he saw her growing old, he remembered the time before their father died.

He was afraid of hospitals, afraid of losing control, and afraid that one day his mother, too, would no longer recognize him.

It was true that work was busy.

Being busy had also become his most respectable hiding place.

Su Qing admitted that she had grown used to proving, through efficient remote handling, that she had not been absent. She had done many things, but left the hardest parts to face to her older sister.

Su He did not immediately feel relieved.

An admission could not erase the past.

She also spoke of her own problem: she had not only taken on the care, but gradually come to control it. Arrangements for her mother and the ways her brother and sister participated often had to pass through her approval before they were considered reliable.

“I wanted you to come,” she said, “and at the same time I thought that even if you did, you wouldn't do it right.”

Su Mingyuan asked:

“Then can you really let us do it from now on?”

Su He made no promise.

“I'll try.”

The new care arrangements were not perfect.

Su Mingyuan took responsibility for three visits a week and responding in emergencies.

Su Qing took on medical matters, finances, and coordination across institutions, and would return every three months.

Su He reduced her everyday duties, keeping only the parts for which her mother specifically wanted her company.

Public care workers took on professional rehabilitation and night shifts.

Spark handled necessary information sharing, authorization management, and alerts about unusual developments, but did not open up their mother's entire life to the three children.

Their mother could refuse certain arrangements.

But where refusal would create a clear and major risk, the process had to move to renewed explanation, professional assessment, and limited intervention.

On paper, the division of responsibilities was clear.

Reality kept spilling beyond it.

Su Mingyuan sometimes canceled at short notice.

Su Qing also once found herself unable to return as planned because her project had been disrupted.

Their mother still trusted Su He most. After the others left, she would call her to complain that Su Mingyuan was rough in his movements, Su Qing only knew how to lecture, and the care workers' food had no flavor.

Sometimes Su He listened.

Sometimes she said, “Tell my brother that yourself.”

Her mother did not want to.

“You tell him for me.”

“I'm not going to speak for you.”

Her mother would get angry.

Su He, too, would feel bad for refusing.

New boundaries do not become permanently secure after being drawn once.

Old relationships keep trying to return to their familiar positions.

Real change does not mean everyone lives strictly by the arrangements from then on.

It means that, when the old pattern reappears, they gradually learn to recognize it, rather than taking it for the natural way of family life.

In the second month after her mother came home, Su He said the most hurtful words of all during an argument.

That day, her mother refused to use a walking aid.

She thought it would make the neighbors believe she could no longer walk. Su He tried to persuade her for a long time, but her mother insisted on moving along with one hand against the wall and nearly fell again.

“Can't you stop making trouble for everyone else?” Su He blurted out.

The room suddenly fell quiet.

Her mother did not argue.

She simply sat down slowly and pushed the walking aid aside.

Su He knew at once that she had hurt her.

“I didn't mean it that way.”

But she had meant it that way.

At least in the instant she said it, she had truly felt that her mother's stubbornness was adding to everyone's burden.

Calling hurtful words “not what I meant” is sometimes only a way of avoiding the part of one's meaning that really was there.

Su He crouched down.

“You do give us a lot more to do,” she said slowly. “Sometimes I get tired and irritated, and wish I didn't have to deal with it anymore.”

Her mother looked at her.

“But that doesn't mean you shouldn't be living as you are now, or that you have to give up your own feelings to make life easier for us. What I said just now was using your needs to punish you.”

Tears fell from her mother's eyes.

“I'm nothing but a burden now.”

“You need a lot of help now. Needing help and being nothing but a burden aren't the same thing.”

Her mother was not immediately comforted by the words.

She did not speak again for a long time.

Later, she did use the walking aid.

Not because her daughter's explanation had been right enough.

Only because nearly falling that time had frightened her too.

Nor did Su He's apology mean she would never be irritable again.

She would still lose patience afterward, still sigh first when her mother called.

Love had not made her someone who never grew tired.

It only made her willing, after exhaustion led her to say the wrong thing, to come back and take responsibility for the consequences of her words.

A few years later, their mother's health gradually stabilized.

With the help of equipment, she could walk slowly around the community, and she began taking part in activities offering companionship to children.

She could no longer do the physically demanding work she once had. But she would sit beneath a tree, mending clothes for a few children, telling stories, and listening to what their parents had no time to hear to the end.

Sometimes these actions entered the contribution records, and sometimes they did not.

She herself did not always want them recorded.

“How does sitting and talking with children count as a contribution?” she asked.

Su He said:

“Keep a record if you want to. If you don't, don't.”

Her mother thought for a moment.

“That little girl who never says anything, keep one for her. If she ever feels no one has listened, she can know that I did.”

In the end, the record preserved only one fact about a relationship, jointly confirmed by the child and her guardian:

During a difficult time, an older woman had consistently listened to her.

The conversations themselves were not preserved.

The girl's vulnerability was not turned into proof of the old woman's contribution.

What civilization remembered was not who had saved whom.

Only that someone had once stayed instead of turning away.

On their mother's eightieth birthday, all three children came home.

The old problems were still there at the table.

Su Mingyuan thought Su He managed every detail too closely.

Su Qing thought her brother always left things until the last moment.

Their mother still put the best piece of food in her son's bowl, then asked her two daughters to get up and fetch things.

Seeing it, Su He was still displeased.

“Let him get it himself.”

Their mother said:

“He's hardly ever home.”

Su Qing gave a short laugh.

“We could come home every day and still not get that treatment.”

Su Mingyuan tried to ease the tension:

“Come on. Let's not argue today.”

“Why is it always 'let's not argue'?” Su He said.

The familiar dispute was about to begin again.

Their mother suddenly slapped the table.

“It's my birthday. If you want to argue, finish eating first.”

Everyone stopped.

A few seconds later, Su Qing laughed.

Su Mingyuan began to laugh too.

Su He kept a stern face, but in the end she pushed the dish over to her mother.

The new conditions of civilization had not erased this family's decades of favoritism, avoidance, grievances, and ingrained roles.

They were simply better able to see these things than before.

Able to speak of them.

Able to argue.

Able to pause.

And able, after an argument had failed to resolve every problem, to sit down and finish the meal together.

Home is not a place that never hurts anyone.

Nor is it a place no one may leave, however much harm is done.

When violence, control, and ongoing harm cannot be stopped, a person has the right to leave family relationships, seek protection, and rebuild a life. Blood ties cannot justify unlimited demands, permanent control, or forced forgiveness.

But where real care remains, where change is still possible, a family need not be judged a failure simply because it is imperfect.

Family members may love one another yet be unable to share responsibility fairly.

May be willing to care, yet resent always being needed.

May apologize sincerely, yet repeat an old mistake the next time they are exhausted.

May be unable to forgive something for years, and still rush to the other person's side when they fall ill.

These contradictions are not evidence that civilization within the family is still unfinished.

They are the reality people must face when living together.

Spark can help keep responsibilities from being overlooked, ensure that actual acts of care are supported, and make boundaries, authorizations, and exit clearer.

Public services can keep a family from having to bear the entire weight of illness, aging, and long-term care alone.

Contribution value can keep years of silent labor from seeming as though they never happened.

But no structure can let go of old grievances for siblings, speak a mother's need for her, admit a daughter's exhaustion for her, or walk into a hospital room for someone who has spent years avoiding it.

How a family remains a family does not depend on whether they stay together forever.

It depends on whether they are still willing to see each other as real people:

Not roles.

Not responsibilities.

Not debts.

Not a portion of life that belongs to oneself as a matter of course.

What truly allows a home to hold a person is not that it never breaks apart.

It is that no one within it has to lose themselves to prove that they still love someone else.

Chapter 6 Friends Need Not Be Useful to Each Other

Friendship seldom has a formal status.

Unlike kinship, it is not established at birth. Unlike marriage, it cannot be registered in law. Unlike a working relationship, it has no clear duties, term, or exchange.

When two people become friends, they usually take no oath.

They simply find themselves walking together, again and again.

They have shared meals, wasted time together, and said things they need not tell everyone. Before a decision has taken shape, they entrust their hesitation to each other. When the whole world demands that a person prove himself, they still allow him, for a while, to be nothing in particular.

That is what makes friendship free.

And what makes it fragile.

No inherent obligation protects it.

No one has to stay.

Two people can slowly lose touch because of a move, a love affair, a new rhythm of life, without even a clear moment that could be called goodbye.

Civilization can enable people far away to keep reaching one another.

It cannot guarantee that everyone who was once close will want to keep walking together.

Cheng Ye and Lu Heng had known each other for twenty-three years.

They were both only ten when they first met.

That year, Cheng Ye had just joined a new learning community and knew no one. At lunch, he stood holding his food, unable to find a seat. Lu Heng shifted to one side. He did not say, “You can sit here.” He simply left him half the seat.

Cheng Ye sat down.

Neither spoke throughout the meal.

Later, they took apart a public terminal together, broke it, and were made to put it back. Together they helped clear the neighborhood drains after a torrential rain. They also skipped a public presentation they did not want to attend, hiding in an old stairwell to eat the desserts they had meant to save for that evening.

Their temperaments were not alike.

Cheng Ye liked to talk. His feelings came quickly and passed just as quickly.

Lu Heng was quiet and cautious, accustomed to thinking things through before acting.

Cheng Ye would often step out first.

Lu Heng would look to see whether the ground beyond that step could really bear the weight.

As adults, they entered completely different lives.

Cheng Ye became a visual storyteller working in the public sphere, constantly traveling between regions to document reconstruction after disasters, migration, labor, and ordinary people's lives.

Lu Heng entered the urban infrastructure maintenance subdomain, taking responsibility for systems that few people noticed but that could never stop running.

One kept leaving.

The other stayed for years.

They remained in touch.

Sometimes often; sometimes not a word for months.

Neither demanded a daily response. No system automatically maintained a measure of “active intimacy” based on how long the relationship had lasted.

Real friends need not prove they have not left by remaining constantly online.

Some relationships can withstand silence.

Provided the silence is not punishment, not manipulation, and not a way of leaving the other person waiting forever without knowing what has happened.

At thirty-three, Cheng Ye suddenly stopped all work.

He had just completed a film that drew widespread attention.

It documented the transformation of a resource-dependent city after its old industries withdrew: people who had lost their jobs, factory buildings put to new uses, a river recovering, and people who had grown old before a new life ever truly arrived.

Many considered it his most important work.

New invitations poured in.

The public culture subdomain wanted him to keep documenting other regions. Learning communities invited him to discuss his creative process. Others proposed building a long-term visual archive so that his way of observing could become a training reference for additional intelligent storytelling systems.

Cheng Ye refused them all.

At first, people thought he needed rest.

Then he stopped replying to projects and stopped releasing any images at all.

He woke late every day and sat by the window of his home, watching people come and go below. Sometimes he ate only one meal all day. He seldom tidied his room.

His Spark detected a sustained decline in his daily functioning.

It prompted him to check on his physical and mental condition.

Cheng Ye refused.

The prompts immediately became less frequent.

The system did not expand its authority to intervene in the name of “protecting talent” because he had once made important contributions. Nor did it treat continuing disorder in his life as a purely private choice simply because he showed no clear present risk of self-harm.

Within the established boundaries, Spark offered several forms of help he could choose to activate:

Medical assessment;

Help with daily living;

Contact with someone he trusted;

Temporary withdrawal from public tasks;

Restrictions on incoming outside invitations.

Cheng Ye chose only the last.

All invitations stopped arriving.

The world fell quiet.

But he did not get better.

Lu Heng found out two months later.

Cheng Ye had not told him himself.

A mutual friend said only that Cheng Ye “didn't seem right” and hoped he would go and see him.

Lu Heng did not immediately access the records of Cheng Ye's life.

Even after twenty-three years of friendship, he had no such permission.

First he sent a single message:

“I'm coming your way next week. If you don't want to see me, I'll spend a day nearby.”

Cheng Ye did not reply.

A week later, Lu Heng arrived.

He stood outside the door, waiting for permission to enter.

A long time passed before it opened.

Cheng Ye was much thinner than at their last meeting. His hair was long. Unwashed clothes and food wrappers lay in piles around the room.

Lu Heng did not ask, “How did you let yourself get like this?”

Nor did he say, “Everyone's so worried about you.”

He took off his coat and asked:

“Anything to eat?”

“No.”

“I'll get something.”

“Whatever.”

Lu Heng came back with two bowls of noodles.

Cheng Ye ate a few mouthfuls and set his bowl down.

They sat at the table without speaking, just as they had the first time they ate together, twenty-three years earlier.

Lu Heng had prepared many questions.

Why had he stopped working?

Had something happened because of the film?

Was he sleeping?

Had he thought about hurting himself?

Did he need a doctor?

But once he was actually sitting in front of Cheng Ye, these questions suddenly felt like a set of diagnostic procedures waiting to enter a faulty system.

Cheng Ye was not a piece of equipment waiting for him to find the fault.

“How long are you staying?” Cheng Ye asked.

“A day.”

“So you're leaving tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

Cheng Ye nodded.

There was no audible disappointment in his voice, and he did not ask him to stay.

That night, Lu Heng slept in the living room.

In the early hours, he heard Cheng Ye moving around his room. The footsteps went back and forth for a long time.

Lu Heng did not open the door.

Worry did not entitle him to take away the space his friend still had.

But he did not go back to sleep, either.

After dawn, Cheng Ye came out and found Lu Heng sitting on the sofa.

“You didn't sleep all night?”

“A little.”

“You're not here to watch me, are you?”

“No.”

“Then why are you sitting here?”

Lu Heng looked at him.

“Because I'm a little scared.”

Cheng Ye froze.

Most of the people who cared about him were saying:

You'll get better.

You should accept help.

You've done such important things.

Lu Heng had not hidden his fear inside the right words.

He simply admitted that, seeing his friend as he was now, he did not know what might happen.

“I don't want to die,” Cheng Ye said.

“Good.”

“You don't believe me?”

“I do.”

“Then what are you still afraid of?”

Lu Heng thought for a moment.

“That you'll just keep disappearing, little by little.”

The words did not move Cheng Ye to open up at once.

Instead, they made him angry.

“I've only stopped working.”

“I didn't say anything about work.”

“Everyone thinks something's wrong if I don't keep filming.”

“I didn't say you should film.”

“Then what do I have to do to count as still being here?”

Lu Heng had no answer.

A person who does not work, create, or participate in public tasks, who for a time may not even want contact with anyone, is still a whole person.

His existence need not be continually justified through contribution.

Yet when someone gradually loses the capacity to eat, sleep, care for his body, and respond to the world in basic ways, a friend cannot pretend that every withdrawal is merely a personal choice worthy of respect.

Respect is not a dignified excuse for turning away.

Nor is care a license to cross every boundary.

There is no line between them that stays clear forever.

It can only be sought anew in each real situation, at the risk of getting the judgment wrong.

“I don't know,” Lu Heng said. “I only know that you're having a hard time.”

“I didn't say I was.”

“Then am I seeing it wrong?”

Cheng Ye looked out of the window.

After a long time, he said:

“I don't know how to pick up the recorder again.”

Lu Heng did not press him.

“Then don't.”

“Everyone's waiting for the next one.”

“Let them wait.”

“They'll find someone else.”

“Then let them find someone else.”

Cheng Ye gave a sudden little laugh.

“You're really good at comforting people.”

“I'm not trying to comfort you.”

That was the beginning of a long conversation.

Not because Lu Heng had said the right thing.

But because he had not rushed to send Cheng Ye back to his old path.

There was a story behind the acclaimed film that had never been told in public.

For a long time, Cheng Ye had followed an old man named Liang Qishan.

The old man had worked in the mining district when he was young, damaging his lungs. In old age he lived on the edge of the former industrial district. At first he did not want to be recorded. Gradually he allowed Cheng Ye into his life.

They had walked through abandoned factory buildings together.

Looked through lists of former coworkers together.

The old man spoke of those who had died, and of how, however hard things had been, they had still believed the next generation would live better.

Cheng Ye promised to show him the film first when it was finished.

Halfway through the editing, the old man's condition worsened.

Cheng Ye was in another city then, dealing with project materials, and did not return in time.

Before he died, Liang Qishan left an authorization:

The film could continue to use the footage already approved, but his death must not be made its emotional climax.

Cheng Ye complied.

In the finished film, the old man simply sat outside the abandoned mine and gazed silently into the distance for a while.

The audience did not know that after filming ended, he had asked Cheng Ye:

“You record all this. Then what?”

Cheng Ye had answered:

“At least it won't be forgotten.”

The old man said:

“What good does remembering do?”

That line did not make it into the film.

But it stayed in Cheng Ye's heart.

When the film was released, countless people were moved.

Some wept. Some discussed industrial transition. Some turned their attention anew to those development had left behind.

But Liang Qishan was already dead.

The bodies already damaged had not recovered.

Those whose lives had been spent before the transition did not get their lives back merely by being seen.

Cheng Ye began to wonder whether everything he had done had merely turned other people's suffering into meaning that could circulate.

“I film them,” he said. “Then everyone watches and feels they've understood.”

Lu Heng listened.

“Did you lie to them?”

“No.”

“Did you cut out anything important?”

“Some things couldn't go in.”

“Did Liang Qishan agree to its being shown?”

“Yes.”

“Then why do you think you did something wrong?”

Cheng Ye's voice dropped.

“Because the film succeeded.”

Success made him ashamed.

If no one had watched, he could have said he had failed.

But the more recognition it received, the more he felt he was standing on other people's losses.

Social recognition, public impact, and contribution records all told him that the work had genuinely enriched civilization's memory.

But none of them could answer for him:

How can a creator bear making work out of other people's suffering?

How can he hold the boundary between truthful representation and the extraction of meaning?

How can he be sure he has not used the language of respect to carry out a more refined act of appropriation?

Spark could verify authorization.

Public mechanisms could establish the facts.

Audiences could examine whether the work had caused new harm.

But no procedure could make this ethical burden disappear completely.

“I don't know whether I should keep going,” Cheng Ye said.

Lu Heng did not tell him he should.

“Then don't, for now.”

“What if I never do?”

“Then you stop filming.”

“I don't know how to do anything else.”

“You know how to eat noodles.”

Cheng Ye looked up at him.

“Though you can't finish them,” Lu Heng added.

Cheng Ye laughed.

And as he laughed, tears suddenly began to fall.

The next day, Lu Heng left as planned.

He did not take it upon himself to stay longer because Cheng Ye had finally spoken of his pain.

Before leaving, he asked:

“Can I come again next week?”

Cheng Ye shook his head.

“When can I?”

“I don't know.”

“Then I'll ask again in ten days.”

“Do what you like.”

After Lu Heng left, Cheng Ye still did not accept a medical assessment.

Nor did he return to work.

But he began eating two meals a day.

Not because he had found meaning again.

Only because, before leaving, Lu Heng had divided ten servings of noodles into containers, put them in the refrigerator, and labeled each with a rating of how bad it tasted.

On the third he wrote:

A little better than yesterday.

On the seventh:

If these still taste bad, the noodles aren't the problem.

He wrote nothing on the tenth.

When Cheng Ye finished the tenth serving, he took a photograph of the empty container and sent it to Lu Heng.

Lu Heng replied:

“Seen it.”

No encouragement.

No celebration.

No turning a person's finishing a meal into a symbol of emerging from his lowest point.

Some moments are small.

Too small to be made to carry grand significance.

But for someone withdrawing from life little by little, doing the most ordinary thing again is itself evidence that he remains connected to the world.

Over the next six months, Lu Heng visited from time to time.

Sometimes Cheng Ye let him in.

Sometimes he did not open the door.

Once, Lu Heng sat downstairs for four hours and received only a single message:

“Don't want to see anyone today.”

So he left.

He did not say that he had made the journey especially.

Care can become a burden when it keeps demanding that the other person answer for the effort spent on them.

But Lu Heng was not always calm.

He could be angry, too.

One day in the third month, Cheng Ye was unreachable for twenty-six hours. When the pre-established safety authorization was triggered, Lu Heng and public care workers entered his home. They found that he had simply switched off his terminal and fallen asleep in the bathroom.

Once they had confirmed he was safe, Lu Heng lost his temper with him for the first time.

“It's fine if you don't want to talk. At least tell us you're alive.”

Cheng Ye became angry too.

“I'm not obliged to report that I'm safe whenever you want.”

“You activated the safety authorization.”

“I can cancel it.”

“You can. Then cancel it now.”

Cheng Ye froze.

Lu Heng's voice shook.

“You can tell me to leave you alone. You can accept that next time no one may know whether something's happened to you. But you can't keep other people responsible for coming to find you and call it a violation every time they do.”

The words were harsh.

And not entirely fair.

Cheng Ye was in a vulnerable state. He could not always be expected to manage his boundaries and responsibilities clearly.

But a carer is not a tool for enduring without limit, either.

A friend's willingness to stay does not mean his fear, time, and life can be treated as though they do not exist.

The next day, Cheng Ye confirmed his authorization anew.

He kept the safety contact arrangement, but added a minimal form of response: when he did not want to communicate, he needed only to send a confirmation signal containing no details of his location or condition.

This was not Lu Heng controlling him.

It was his accepting care while taking responsibility for not leaving those who cared for him in prolonged, boundless fear.

Cheng Ye finally accepted professional help in the eighth month.

Not because Lu Heng persuaded him.

Nor because a crisis forced him to give in.

That day, he passed a public video wall and saw a child watching one of his early films.

The child stood there for a long time.

When the film ended, he asked the person beside him:

“What happened to that old man afterward?”

His companion did not know.

Cheng Ye stood at a distance and did not go over to answer, either.

Suddenly, he realized that the question still mattered to him.

Not whether an audience liked the work.

But whether, after seeing another person's fate, someone would go on to ask, “What happened afterward?”

That evening, he initiated a medical and psychological assessment himself.

The assessment offered no conclusion about his creative impasse.

It established only that he had remained in a pronounced depressive state, and that his body and sleep had also been affected.

Treatment could help restore his capacity to feel, act, and choose.

It could not decide for him whether to continue creating.

Not all suffering comes from illness.

Illness can also make an already real problem heavier and harder to bear.

Treatment does not mean explaining all pain as a malfunction.

It means enabling a person to regain the strength to face real problems.

Another year passed, and Cheng Ye still made no new films for the public.

He began watching films with children at a learning community.

Not to teach them to film better.

But to discuss with them:

Who is looking?

Who is being looked at?

Once a piece of footage is made public, who will bear the consequences?

Does what was not filmed therefore not matter?

Does someone's authorization mean the creator no longer has to question himself?

The children often asked questions he could not answer.

One asked:

“If a bad person only lets you film his good side, do you still have to respect his authorization?”

Another asked:

“What if no one will know the harm happened unless you show it?”

And another:

“When you film someone crying, are you helping them, or using their tears?”

Cheng Ye never rushed to offer a standard answer.

He did not know either.

Sometimes he would write Liang Qishan's line, the one that had never entered the film, on the board:

What good does remembering do?

Then he would sit in silence with the children.

This time spent with them entered the public contribution record.

Cheng Ye asked for it not to be recorded.

The community agreed.

Not every valuable action has to be preserved.

Civilization has a responsibility not to forget real contributions.

A person also has the right not to turn everything he has done into identity capital that can be drawn on in the future.

As Cheng Ye's condition gradually stabilized, Lu Heng visited less often.

At first, once every ten days.

Then once a month.

Later they each grew busy, and months passed without a meeting.

Cheng Ye did not feel abandoned.

A friend's departure and the end of care do not always mean that a relationship has weakened.

Some forms of companionship fulfill their responsibility in a particular period. Both people should then be allowed to return to their own lives.

If someone who has helped another must go on helping forever, help becomes another role that imprisons them.

Three years later, Lu Heng was involved in a major engineering accident.

A cascading failure occurred at an underground energy node. No one died, but basic services were interrupted across a large area. Lu Heng was one of those responsible on site at the time.

The investigation was not yet complete.

Public opinion had already begun looking for a clear person to blame.

Some thought his excessive caution had delayed the early response. Others believed that his refusal to let the system automatically expand operations had prevented more serious consequences.

When Cheng Ye saw the news, he did not first ask:

“Was it your fault?”

He sent only one message:

“I'm coming your way next week. If you don't want to see me, I'll spend a day nearby.”

Lu Heng did not reply for a long time.

A day later, he said:

“Come.”

Lu Heng's home was very tidy.

There was plenty of food, his sleep records were normal, and all the functions of daily life were well maintained.

He did not look like someone who needed help.

After Cheng Ye arrived, Lu Heng even cooked for him.

Halfway through the meal, Lu Heng suddenly said:

“I may really have made the wrong call.”

Cheng Ye put down his chopsticks.

“What does the investigation say?”

“No conclusion yet.”

“Then why do you think that?”

“I saw an anomaly. The system recommended continuing to run. I chose to reduce the load. Then another node became unstable, and the whole chain broke.”

“What if you'd kept running?”

“It might have been fine. Or it might have been worse.”

“So you don't know.”

“I don't know.”

Cheng Ye did not tell him that uncertainty meant he need not blame himself.

Some responsibilities do not disappear because of uncertainty.

Lu Heng had made a real decision.

Real consequences had followed.

Even if no one could prove that another path would have been better, he still had to face the fact that his judgment occupied a place in the accident's causal chain.

“What are you afraid of?” Cheng Ye asked.

“That in the end everyone will say I did nothing wrong.”

Cheng Ye looked at him.

Lu Heng lowered his head.

“If they say I did nothing wrong, I won't know where to put all the people who were affected.”

No one had died in the accident.

But patients had their treatment interrupted. Families lost their heating on a freezing night. Important records were damaged. Some people missed a farewell that could never be rescheduled.

Institutions can establish responsibility on the evidence.

But the absence of an established legal or professional responsibility cannot require someone to feel nothing about real consequences.

Cheng Ye said:

“Then don't rush to prove you did nothing wrong.”

Lu Heng raised his head.

“And don't rush to take all the blame either,” Cheng Ye said. “First, look at everything that happened.”

It was what Lu Heng had once done alongside Cheng Ye.

Not rushing to make suffering meaningful.

Not rushing to restore the old identity.

Not rushing to decide whether a person should go on or step away from then on.

Simply staying with him as he first looked at what had actually happened.

The final investigation found that the accident had resulted from a combination of structural defects, delayed maintenance, prediction errors, and on-site judgment.

Lu Heng bore part of the responsibility.

Not all of it.

He left his former post for a year and took part in communication with affected parties, rebuilding the system, and open review of the accident as a case study.

Some people did not accept his apology.

Some thought he had been treated too leniently.

Others thanked him for not evading what came afterward.

These assessments were not merged into a single conclusion.

Real people have the right to form different judgments from the losses they themselves have suffered.

Cheng Ye did not defend his friend in public.

Nor did he leave because Lu Heng had to bear responsibility.

A friend is not someone who always takes a friend's side.

If taking a “side” means helping him deny harm, evade consequences, or turn people who were genuinely hurt into strangers outside the relationship, that loyalty is only a shared refusal of reality.

Real friendship can say:

I still know you.

I also see what you did wrong.

I will not cancel your responsibility for you.

But as you bear it, you need not be reduced by the whole world to that one mistake.

Many years later, neither of them was young anymore.

They still went long stretches without contact.

Cheng Ye never resumed his former intensity of creative work. He made only the occasional very short, private film.

Lu Heng returned to infrastructure maintenance, but no longer held the role of highest on-site decision-maker.

On one visit, they sat beside a river.

Cheng Ye asked:

“What if I'd never opened the door back then?”

Lu Heng said:

“I don't know.”

“Would you have kept coming forever?”

“No.”

Cheng Ye laughed.

“So heartless?”

“I have a life of my own.”

“When would you have given up?”

“Maybe when the only reason I kept coming was to prove I hadn't abandoned you.”

Cheng Ye fell quiet.

Care, too, has a boundary where it ends.

Not everyone can be brought back by a friend.

Not every relationship has to exhaust one person before it can be said that no one betrayed the other.

What a friend can do has never been to live on in the other's place.

It is to walk with them along a stretch of road they cannot, for now, walk alone, while the friend still has the capacity, the other still permits it, and reality still allows a way.

“Then why did I get better?” Cheng Ye asked.

“I don't know.”

“Not because of you?”

“Of course not.”

“You could be a little more modest.”

Lu Heng looked at the river.

“I only brought ten bowls of terrible noodles.”

They both began to laugh.

Friends need not be useful to each other.

A friend is not a private doctor, a container for emotions, a lifelong carer, or an unconditional supporter of every choice a person makes.

He can refuse.

He can leave.

He can point out harm.

And he can still be willing to sit at the same table when the other person no longer creates, no longer succeeds, is no longer interesting, and for a time cannot offer anything in return.

Civilization can record public contributions.

It cannot require every act of companionship to enter contribution value.

It can enable people far away to keep in touch.

It cannot declare years of silence a failed relationship.

It can activate necessary protection when risks arise.

It cannot turn care into a takeover of a friend's entire life.

Friends have no inherent ownership of one another.

Nor any duty to stay forever.

Precisely because nothing can force them to need one another, the footsteps of those still willing to come carry an irreplaceable meaning.

Sometimes the most important thing a friend can give is not an answer, not strength, not even pulling someone out of the dark.

It is simply that, when a person can no longer prove himself worthy of companionship, someone still stands outside the door and says:

I'm here.

It's all right if you don't want to see me.

Chapter 7 Caring Is Not Living Someone Else's Life for Them

Care is among the easiest things to praise, and the easiest to overlook.

One person feeds another, turns him over, cleans up his bodily waste, explains things already explained many times, checks his breathing in the middle of the night, stays beside him even when he is angry. Such acts seldom produce grand achievements, yet they sustain life's most basic dignity.

People celebrate caregivers' patience, kindness, and sacrifice.

They often forget that caregivers, too, grow tired, become irritated, and want to leave. Nor is the person receiving care a vessel waiting to be filled with kindness. He may refuse, distrust, or rage. He may feel no gratitude. He may even hurt the person helping him.

If a civilization does nothing but praise care, it will heap ever more unbearable weight onto those who are kind.

If it pursues only efficiency, it will hand the very places that most need relationships, judgment, and the human heart over to systems that can manage processes but cannot bear the consequences on behalf of a particular life.

The real difficulty of care has never been how to do more things for someone.

It is how, after he has lost some of his abilities, not to take away the life he still has.

When Lin Yan first met Gu Huaishan, the old man was sitting outside the rehabilitation center, trying to remove his tracking band.

It was an extremely light safety device, used to check his location in high-risk areas and detect signs of physical trouble. Gu Huaishan himself had authorized its use when he entered the center. He could also request its removal following a reassessment of risk.

But the old man had made no request.

He was simply prying at the clasp, over and over, with a small piece of metal.

Lin Yan sat beside him.

“Need a tool?” she asked.

Gu Huaishan looked up at her.

“Who are you?”

“The person taking you to the greenhouse today.”

“I'm not going.”

“All right.”

Lin Yan did not try to persuade him.

Gu Huaishan kept prying.

“You can't take that off yourself,” she said.

“I know.”

“Then why keep trying?”

“I want to see when it sets off an alarm.”

Lin Yan glanced at her own terminal.

The safety system had already detected his repeated attempts to remove it, but had not immediately triggered a public alarm. Gu Huaishan had neither left the permitted area nor shown signs of physical danger. The information had entered only his private care domain.

“So you all know I'm trying to take it off?” the old man asked.

“The care team knows.”

“Then why hasn't anyone come to stop me?”

“You haven't hurt yourself yet.”

“You wait until I'm hurt before doing anything?”

“If you keep pushing that into your skin, I'll stop you.”

Gu Huaishan stopped.

“You all like talking about boundaries these days.”

Lin Yan smiled a little.

“Sometimes we don't know exactly where they are, either.”

The old man looked at her as though really noticing her for the first time.

He put the piece of metal in his pocket.

“I'm still not going to the greenhouse.”

“Where would you like to go, then?”

“Home.”

Gu Huaishan was seventy-six.

A brain injury two years earlier had affected his short-term memory, spatial judgment, and emotional regulation. He could still express many wishes clearly and retained much of his long-term memory, but he would forget things that had just happened and sometimes could not tell where he was.

His home was on the north side of the city.

It was a detached house with a steep staircase and an open-plan kitchen. In the past year, he had twice forgotten to turn off a heat source. Once, he had left home at night and been unable to find his way back.

His family and medical team believed he could no longer live alone on a long-term basis.

Gu Huaishan disagreed.

He believed everyone was exaggerating the risks, using “for your safety” as an excuse to shut him away somewhere easier to manage.

This was not entirely unfounded.

The rehabilitation center was comfortable, offered comprehensive services, and allowed residents to move among its different areas. But life there was more orderly in every respect: meals, training, medication, rest, and communal activities all had recommended times; unusual behavior was recorded; important choices often required a fresh assessment of decision-making capacity.

Safety had increased.

Freedom had indeed diminished.

Lin Yan first accompanied him home only after several risk assessments had been completed.

The care team retained the necessary remote support but did not send an embodied intelligent agent to follow him throughout the visit. Gu Huaishan refused to be accompanied by a device always ready to take over.

When they arrived, he stood at the door for a long time.

A new access-recognition system had been installed.

“Who changed it?” he asked.

“Your daughter.”

“What right did she have?”

“You agreed last time.”

“No, I didn't.”

Lin Yan did not immediately contradict him with the authorization record.

A record could establish that he had consented at a particular moment. It could not establish that someone with impaired memory still understood and accepted that decision today.

“You don't like it now,” she said.

“This is my home.”

“Yes.”

“Then put it back the way it was.”

“You can ask for it to be changed. But we need to reassess how you can come and go safely.”

Gu Huaishan grew angry.

“I've lived here for forty years. It's not your place to teach me how to get through my own front door.”

He pushed the door open and went straight inside.

Most of the house had been left as it was when he moved out. The shelves, the old table, the photographs on the wall, even the plant by the window, long since dead, had not been removed.

Gu Huaishan walked slowly.

He ran a hand over the tabletop and opened a few drawers, as if checking whether this place still belonged to him.

He stopped when he reached the kitchen.

The old open-flame appliance had been shut off and replaced with a heating system that had built-in safety limits.

“She changed this too?”

Lin Yan nodded.

The old man turned to look for tools.

“I'm taking it out.”

“You can't take it out today.”

“You just said this was my home.”

“It is your home. It's also a place where you could be hurt.”

“If I get hurt, that's my business.”

“If you were the only one bearing the consequences, you could say that.”

Gu Huaishan looked at her.

“Who else is there?”

“The people who rescue you. The people who worry about you. Neighbors who might be affected by a fire. And the you who wakes up afterward without knowing what happened.”

The old man gave a bitter laugh.

“So in the end, I still don't get to decide.”

Lin Yan did not deny it.

“There are some decisions you can't take responsibility for on your own right now.”

That made Gu Huaishan furious.

He threw the tool in his hand to the floor.

“Get out.”

Lin Yan stayed.

“This is my house!”

“I know.”

“Then get out!”

“Today's authorization for accompaniment includes getting you back safely. If you stay here alone, the risks haven't been addressed.”

“You're all the same. First you make me sign, then you tell me I've signed. First you ask what I want, then you tell me I can't have it.”

Lin Yan stood where she was.

She could not conceal the reality with respectful language:

Gu Huaishan had indeed lost some of his capacity to make decisions.

Not every wish could be carried out.

Nor did someone's fierce insistence prove that he fully understood the consequences.

Yet once a person loses some of his judgment, it is all too easy for everyone to begin deciding everything for him.

There were good reasons to restrict open flames today.

Tomorrow, the same “for your safety” might gradually take away his right to walk alone, drink alcohol, retain the use of money, or refuse rehabilitation exercises.

Protection does not naturally stop at the right point.

It, too, must be open to challenge.

“I can leave,” Lin Yan said. “But today you'll need to come back to the center with me.”

Gu Huaishan had his back to her.

“And if I don't?”

“We'll keep waiting. If you still refuse when the safety time limit is reached, we'll initiate assistance within the defined limits.”

“Take me away by force?”

“Possibly.”

“Is this your civilization?”

Lin Yan did not answer.

Civilization was not a word that could lessen the old man's humiliation at that moment.

If protection in practice ultimately requires force, it should be acknowledged as force, not dressed up as gentle companionship.

In the end, Gu Huaishan walked out of his home on his own.

Not because he had accepted the arrangement.

He was simply tired.

He said nothing on the way back.

At the center, he refused to let Lin Yan continue as his caregiver.

That was his right.

The care team did not insist that he continue to accept her because “she knows your situation best.” Nor did it conclude, from a single conflict, that the two could never build a relationship again.

Lin Yan withdrew from his personal private domain.

Her access to all nonessential information ended immediately.

She could no longer see his subsequent training, moods, or daily life, and had no right to keep following him through her own Spark.

Having once entered the most vulnerable and private parts of someone's life does not give a caregiver a continuing right to observe it after the relationship ends.

Lin Yan did not find this easy.

She knew Gu Huaishan might face danger again. She also worried that the next caregiver would not understand the anger that followed his visit home.

But worry could not justify retaining access.

All she could put in the handover record were the necessary facts:

Gu Huaishan strongly wishes to return home and feels deprived by the safety modifications. Where restrictive measures are involved, the limits of coercion must be clearly explained. Reassuring language must not replace truthful disclosure.

She did not write that he was “difficult to work with.”

Nor did she write that he “lacked insight into his condition.”

Such judgments might be valid in particular professional contexts. But they could too easily lead those who approached him later to see a problem to be dealt with before they saw Gu Huaishan.

Two months later, Gu Huaishan asked for Lin Yan to return.

He gave no reason.

Lin Yan did not ask.

After they reconfirmed the authorization, their first meeting was once again outside the center.

Gu Huaishan had no tracking band on his wrist.

“Got it off?” Lin Yan asked.

“Replaced it.”

The new safety device was embedded in the sole of his shoe. It activated only if he left the permitted area, showed an abnormal gait, or failed to respond for an extended period. His everyday location was not continuously uploaded.

“Happy now?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Someone still knows where I'm going.”

“You can keep asking for adjustments.”

“But you won't help me get rid of it altogether.”

“No.”

Gu Huaishan glanced at her.

“Then what did you come back for?”

“You asked me to.”

The old man grunted and set off toward the greenhouse.

Halfway there, he suddenly stopped.

“We're going to my house today.”

“That's not been arranged.”

“Arrange it now.”

“We need to confirm the support arrangements first.”

“I only want to get a book.”

“What book?”

Gu Huaishan frowned.

He had forgotten.

Lin Yan neither prompted him nor guessed for him.

They stood beside the path for a long time.

“Never mind,” he said.

A few steps later, he stopped again.

“My wife's recipes.”

This time, Lin Yan made a note.

Not to remind him that he had forgotten.

But to keep this wish, just resurfaced, from disappearing from reality the next time he forgot.

Gu Huaishan's wife had been dead for twelve years.

She had left many handwritten recipes tucked into an old notebook in the kitchen. Gu Huaishan had seldom cooked when he was young. Only after her death had he begun learning from those handwritten pages.

After his brain injury, he forgot many of the steps he had recently learned. But he still remembered a soup his wife used to make.

“Her stomach was bad in her last few years,” he said. “She could only eat very light food. By the time I learned to make it, she couldn't eat anymore.”

Lin Yan did not ask whether this soup held some special meaning.

Meaning did not need a caregiver to name it.

On the day they went home, the safety heating system still did not allow an open flame. But it did let Gu Huaishan operate it himself within defined limits.

He searched for a long time before finding the recipe.

The handwriting had faded a little.

Gu Huaishan refused to let an intelligent agent read it and convert it into instructions.

He read it himself.

He misread it twice.

He forgot one ingredient and added another twice.

Lin Yan did not immediately correct him.

Only when he was about to do something potentially dangerous did she reach out to stop him.

Gu Huaishan angrily slapped her hand away.

“I know how to make it.”

“What you were about to do would make it overflow.”

“It never did before.”

“It's about to now.”

Once again, neither would give way.

In the end, Lin Yan turned off the heat.

Gu Huaishan sat in the kitchen, his face dark.

“I can't even make a pot of soup by myself anymore.”

Lin Yan did not say, “You've done really well.”

It would not have been true.

He really could no longer do this on his own, though he once had been able to.

The loss of ability was a real loss.

Encouragement could not rename it another kind of growth.

“Do you still want to go on?” she asked.

“You've turned it off.”

“We can start again. I'll only stop you when there's danger.”

“Would it still count as something I made?”

“You decide what to make. You do the parts you can, and I take over the parts you can't do safely. You can decide whether it counts.”

Gu Huaishan did not answer.

After a while, he opened the recipe book again.

The second time, the soup was still not quite right.

It was too bland, and the texture was uneven.

Gu Huaishan took only one sip.

“That's not the taste.”

Lin Yan tried it too.

“No.”

“You're supposed to say it tastes good.”

“It doesn't.”

The old man glared at her, then smiled.

It was the first time Lin Yan had seen him smile.

The care continued for three years.

Gu Huaishan regained some physical ability, but his memory problems showed no significant improvement.

He still often forgot what he had just said. On some days, he was convinced he had to go to a workplace that no longer existed.

Lin Yan no longer corrected him every time.

But neither did she help construct a whole illusion.

“I need to go to work,” Gu Huaishan said.

“That workplace has closed.”

“Nonsense. I was there yesterday.”

“You remember going yesterday.”

“Of course I remember.”

“Let's have breakfast first today.”

“You'll take me afterward.”

“We'll talk about it afterward.”

Sometimes, by the end of breakfast, he had forgotten about work.

Sometimes he had not.

If he still insisted, they would walk to the neighborhood where his old workplace had stood. It was now a public garden, with only one old wall remaining.

Gu Huaishan stood before the wall. Sometimes he remembered the change; sometimes he could not.

Lin Yan no longer tried to bring him accurately back to the present every time.

Reality is not a piece of knowledge that can be permanently inscribed simply by explaining it clearly enough.

For someone whose memory keeps breaking apart, it must be encountered anew, over and over.

A caregiver cannot force him to remain fixed in the time everyone else recognizes.

What she can do, when he briefly enters another time, is maintain the boundaries that keep him from harming himself or others, without readily mocking, humiliating, or exploiting his confusion.

In the winter of the third year, Lin Yan applied for a break from caregiving.

She had not experienced a major accident.

Nor had there been another serious conflict with Gu Huaishan.

She had simply begun to grow weary of it.

Every day, the same kinds of questions, explanations of things already explained, the same refusals to deal with, and then bringing someone back, again and again, from where he wanted to go to where he would be safe.

She found she had less and less patience.

When Gu Huaishan asked for the third time what time lunch was, she would deliberately delay her answer.

When he refused his exercises, she no longer asked why, but simply wrote “declined” in the record.

One day, Gu Huaishan spilled his soup on the floor.

Standing beside him, her first thought was not whether he had been scalded, but:

More cleaning up.

That thought told her she had to stop.

The danger a caregiver poses does not always begin with obvious ill will.

It may begin simply with growing numb to repeated suffering, seeing a person's needs as yet another task, hearing his presence as an unending call for attention.

Long-term care cannot depend solely on one person's moral resolve.

When patience is exhausted, staying may not be the more responsible choice.

Lin Yan told Gu Huaishan that she would take a three-month break.

The old man asked:

“Why?”

“I'm tired.”

“What have I done?”

“You haven't done anything wrong.”

“Then why won't you look after me?”

“It's not that I won't look after you. For now, I can't keep doing it well enough.”

Gu Huaishan was silent for a long time.

“You get sick of me too.”

Lin Yan did not deny it.

“Yes.”

The old man lowered his head.

The honesty hurt him.

Yet if Lin Yan had hidden her real exhaustion behind “I just need a rest,” Gu Huaishan would still have felt unwanted in her increasingly cold gestures, without knowing what had happened.

“Will you come back, then?” he asked.

“If you still want me to when the time comes, I'll apply to come back.”

“If you leave, I might not remember you.”

“You might not.”

“Then what good would coming back do?”

Lin Yan looked at him.

“We'll get to know each other again.”

After Lin Yan left, a new caregiver came in.

At first, Gu Huaishan did not cooperate.

Gradually, he grew used to the new person.

At the end of three months, Lin Yan applied to return, but permission did not come immediately.

Gu Huaishan said he did not know her.

Under the rules, without confirmation that the relationship continued, the previous authorization had expired.

Lin Yan could only request a meeting as an ordinary visitor.

The first time, he refused.

The second time, he refused again.

On the third attempt, Lin Yan brought a copy of the recipe book. The original remained in Gu Huaishan's private domain, and she had no permission to retrieve it. The copy contained only material he had previously made explicitly available to the care community.

Gu Huaishan agreed to see her.

They sat in the greenhouse.

The old man leafed through the recipes.

“This is my wife's handwriting.”

“Yes.”

“How did you get it?”

“You showed it to me before.”

Gu Huaishan grew wary.

“We know each other?”

“We did.”

“For how long?”

“Three years.”

“You're lying.”

“You may not remember.”

The old man studied her for a long time.

“What's your name?”

“Lin Yan.”

“What do you do?”

“I was your caregiver. Then I got tired and went away for a while.”

Gu Huaishan frowned.

“You're honest, at least.”

“You said that before, too.”

“I don't remember.”

“That's all right.”

Memory alone cannot prove the continuity of a relationship.

But the absence of memory cannot authorize another person to declare, unilaterally, that the relationship still exists.

Lin Yan could only approach him anew.

Let him observe her anew.

Earn his trust anew.

Everything they had shared in the past could help her understand Gu Huaishan. It could not oblige him to accept her.

They did not resume the care relationship that day.

Only a month later did Gu Huaishan grant authorization again.

It was valid for just six months.

“I'll decide again then,” he said.

“All right.”

In the year Gu Huaishan turned eighty, his health deteriorated again.

Swallowing became increasingly difficult, and he lost most of his ability to move independently.

The medical team proposed a more aggressive life-support plan. It could give him more time, but might cause persistent discomfort and further reduce the parts of life in which he could participate autonomously.

Gu Huaishan had previously recorded his wishes in advance.

He did not want long-term invasive support if he could no longer communicate, could no longer recognize important relationships, and had very little prospect of recovery.

Now, however, he could still occasionally recognize Lin Yan, and during lucid moments could express his wish to go home.

His earlier wishes and his present wishes did not entirely coincide.

His family, doctors, and caregivers disagreed.

Some believed they should respect the decision he had made when his mind was clearer.

Others believed that as long as he still showed a wish to live, they should not give up too soon.

Lin Yan did not decide for him.

She offered only the facts she had observed:

Gu Huaishan still responded clearly to the familiar recipes, the greenhouse, and the old neighborhood;

He had also repeatedly refused further treatment after suffering pain;

What he expressed fluctuated. Neither a single “I want to live” nor a single “no more treatment” could stand for the whole of his wishes.

The final decision was not reduced to a multiple-choice question in ethics.

The medical team repeatedly assessed reversibility, the degree of suffering, and the prospects of recovery. His family reread his longstanding wishes. Gu Huaishan received simplified explanations several times, during different lucid periods.

In the end, they chose not to begin long-term invasive support, while retaining comfort care, necessary treatment, and short-term reversible interventions.

This was not a choice of death.

Nor was it an abandonment of life.

It was a decision, when life could no longer hold all its possibilities, not to treat prolonging time as the only right thing to do.

In the last week of his life, Gu Huaishan finally returned home.

The open flame was not restored.

The tracking device was still in his shoe, but he could no longer leave his bed.

In the kitchen, the recipe book lay on the table.

Lin Yan made that soup for him once.

She followed the recipe exactly, also consulting years of care records, adjusting it to come as close as possible to the flavor he remembered.

Gu Huaishan could no longer swallow normally. He tasted only a tiny amount.

“Is it like hers?” Lin Yan asked.

The old man did not answer.

She thought he had not heard.

After a long time, he said very softly:

“No.”

Lin Yan smiled.

“Then I still haven't learned.”

The corner of Gu Huaishan's mouth moved a little.

Perhaps it was a smile.

Perhaps it was only a bodily response.

No system interpreted that moment for them.

After Gu Huaishan died, Lin Yan lost all access to his personal private domain.

The care relationship ended. His data, records, and family memories passed back into the arrangements he had designated for their succession while alive.

She did not keep the recipe book.

Nor did she turn three years of caregiving into a complete story that belonged to her.

Much of it would always belong to Gu Huaishan alone.

What she could keep was limited to authorized work records and the feelings she herself had truly experienced.

She had been exhausted.

She had been irritated.

She had left.

And when she returned, she had gone unrecognized.

None of this made her an unfit caregiver.

Precisely because she acknowledged her own limits, care had not turned, amid moral praise, into ongoing harm.

Caring is not living someone else's life for them.

One person's loss of some abilities does not mean another takes over his body, choices, relationships, and time.

Nor does respect for autonomy mean leaving all the risk and suffering to someone who can no longer bear them.

Care means returning, again and again, amid the reality of changing abilities, to establish:

What he can still decide for himself;

What must be decided together;

What someone else must temporarily take responsibility for;

What cannot be taken away permanently, even for his protection.

Intelligence can help a person express wishes he cannot fully articulate. It can help caregivers remember details, share repetitive work, detect risks, and connect with resources.

Embodied intelligent agents can lift and support a body, handle dangers, and extend the time someone can live independently.

But the most important part of care still cannot be performed automatically.

When someone says “home,” is he asking for a place, or for a return to a life that still belongs to him?

When someone repeatedly refuses help, is he making a choice, or resisting other people's definition of him as incapable?

When a caregiver says “I'm tired,” is she evading responsibility, or preventing the harm she might cause by staying?

There are no permanent answers to these questions.

They can only be judged, over and over, by real people in real relationships, with real consequences.

The true sign of a civilization's maturity is not that every vulnerable person is cared for in perfect order.

It is that even when someone's body weakens, memory fractures, and abilities diminish, the world does not treat him as though he has already gone.

And that no other person, simply for having once been willing to care, is required to keep burning herself away until she no longer has a life of her own.

Part III People and the World Need Each Other

Chapter 8 When Work No Longer Decides Whether a Person Can Survive

Over a long stretch of history, humanity made work the principal way a person earned the right to survive.

Without work, there was no stable income.

Without income, food, housing, medical care, education, caregiving, and the basic ability to participate in social life were hard to obtain.

So people had to work.

Even if the work damaged their bodies. Even if the labor was meaningless. Even if all they did each day was keep a system running that no longer needed human beings.

Survival and work were tightly bound together.

That bond drove production. It also produced obedience.

Eventually, artificial intelligence and automation could take on ever more repetitive, dangerous, precise, and strenuous tasks. Humanity had once imagined this would bring freedom for all.

But when the disappearance of work actually reaches an individual, freedom is often not the first thing he feels.

It is that he is no longer needed.

The year Zhou Xu turned forty-seven, the logistics dispatch center where he had worked for twenty-five years ended its last batch of routine manual scheduling.

The new coordination system could handle weather, roads, energy, warehousing, production, consumption, and emergencies at once, accomplishing in very little time what had once required hundreds of people coordinating continuously.

It was faster.

It made fewer errors.

It used less energy.

And it did not need to drink a cup of cold coffee at three in the morning, forcing itself to stay awake through an interregional transport disruption.

Before the system went live, every employee received a full explanation.

There were no sudden dismissals.

No withdrawal of the means of survival.

Basic services continued to reach everyone, while existing incomes were gradually adjusted through the transition. Each person could choose to take on new public tasks, retrain, join other subdomains, or step away from work for a while.

In institutional terms, this was no brutal expulsion.

Yet on the day he left the dispatch center, Zhou Xu stood outside the entrance for a long time.

He had not taken much with him.

A cup he had used for more than a decade, a few notebooks of handwritten records, and an early map of the logistics network.

His younger colleagues thought the map no longer had any value.

Most of its nodes had changed. Many of its routes were no longer used.

Zhou Xu rolled it up and held it against his chest.

When he walked out, no one stopped him.

Nor did anyone truly need him to come back.

For the first few months, Zhou Xu's life was easier than it had been while he was working.

He slept until he woke naturally.

He cooked at home, sorted through things he had not opened in years, visited his mother, and took a few of the long walks with his wife that he had always said he had no time for.

He did not have to worry about failing to pay the mortgage or losing medical care. Nor did he have to accept a worse job simply to prove he was still employed.

His friends envied him.

“Isn't this the life you always wanted?”

Zhou Xu thought so too.

At last, he had time.

But time did not automatically become a life.

Six months later, he began getting up later and later.

Not because he was tired.

Simply because, once he woke, nothing had to wait for him.

His wife, Shen Yun, still took part in community medical support. Their son was studying elsewhere and seldom came home. His mother had comprehensive care arrangements and did not need him there every day.

Once, he had felt that everyone was taking up his time.

Now, no one really needed his time.

He tried retraining.

His dispatch experience could be used in urban emergency response, public-resource coordination, interregional maintenance, and many other fields. Spark showed him dozens of possible paths.

Zhou Xu looked through them and closed them all.

“I don't want to learn anything more,” he said.

The system stopped making suggestions.

He also took part in two public tasks.

One was organizing community supplies.

The younger people used new coordination tools and quickly completed the allocation. Zhou Xu suggested changing the order based on his past experience, but was told the current system had already taken more factors into account.

His suggestion was not adopted.

The other task was supporting traffic operations during a city festival.

He was assigned to confirm anomalous situations. All day, he handled only two cases the system could not judge.

When the task ended, his participation was confirmed in the contribution record.

Zhou Xu felt no satisfaction.

“They just had me sit there to prove a human was still present,” he told his wife.

Shen Yun asked:

“What happened with those two cases?”

“They were dealt with.”

“What if you hadn't been there?”

“The system would have found someone else.”

“So?”

“So anyone could have done it.”

What he truly could not accept was not that the task had no value.

It was that it did not have to be him.

The old job had not been wonderful.

Years of night shifts in his youth had damaged Zhou Xu's health. He had missed many moments in his son's childhood. During the dispatch center's busiest years, he would often get home still thinking about routes, inventories, and deadlines.

His wife used to complain that his body had come home but his attention was still at work.

Countless times, Zhou Xu had thought of leaving.

But once work truly left him, he began remembering only the moments when he had been irreplaceable.

When heavy snow closed the roads, he had found a temporary route in a mass of confused information.

When medical supplies were delayed, he had insisted that several commercial shipments wait so that relief vehicles could get through first.

When the system misjudged warehouse conditions, he had noticed the slightest hesitation in an on-site worker's voice and demanded another check, ultimately preventing a greater disruption.

Those moments told him that his experience, judgment, and responsibility could enter reality.

Now the new system had absorbed countless experiences like them.

It did not tire. Nor did it avoid anomalies out of fear of responsibility.

It still retained final human judgment and human anchors of responsibility.

But that place no longer belonged to Zhou Xu by default.

Civilization had secured his survival.

It had not guaranteed that the world would always need him in the same way.

A year later, Zhou Xu began drinking too much.

Not every day.

Nor so severely that he lost all ability to manage his life.

He simply drank a little in the evening to make the long nights pass more quickly.

Spark had warned him about the risks of drinking.

He turned the warnings off.

His wife urged him to have his physical and mental health assessed.

He refused.

“I'm not ill.”

“You're unhappy every day.”

“So being unhappy is an illness?”

“That's not what I said.”

“Then what do you want them to treat? The fact that I'm useless?”

Shen Yun fell silent.

She knew her husband needed more than “You still have value.”

Existence itself requires no proof of value.

But simply knowing that one has a right to live does not mean knowing why one wants to go on living.

“I don't know how to help you,” she said.

Zhou Xu gave a bitter laugh.

“Aren't you people supposed to be so good at helping?”

The words hurt her.

Shen Yun cared for many people every day, yet at home she could not get her husband back on his feet.

Professional competence does not guarantee that a person can bring light to those closest to them.

Sometimes, the closer the relationship, the harder it is to distinguish what the other person truly needs, and the easier it is to turn one's own helplessness into blame.

“I can't find it for you,” Shen Yun said.

“Then don't.”

“But if you go on like this, you'll drag us both down.”

Zhou Xu looked at her.

“I didn't ask you to get involved.”

“Do you think other people aren't affected just because you haven't asked?”

They had a fierce argument.

Zhou Xu smashed the cup he had brought home from the dispatch center.

Shards scattered across the floor.

Shen Yun did not clean them up for him.

The next morning, they were still there.

Zhou Xu stepped around them.

On the third day, they had still not been cleared away.

He seemed to be waiting for his wife to concede, at last, that this mess was still part of the domestic life she was obliged to manage.

Shen Yun did not.

On the fourth day, Zhou Xu crouched down and picked up the pieces himself, one by one.

One cut his finger.

The cut was not deep.

Sitting on the floor, looking at the cup that could no longer be restored, he suddenly began to cry.

Of course, he had lost more than a cup.

More than a job, too.

He had lost the person who once knew why he got up each morning.

Public services secured Zhou Xu's basic needs.

No one reduced his food, medical care, housing, or basic right to participate in social life because he was not working for a time.

Nor did the contribution record count this period of stagnation as a negative value.

A person can have periods of making no contribution.

Can rest.

Can be lost.

Can, for a time, care only for himself.

A civilization that allows dignity only to those who remain useful has merely replaced the old competition with a more finely calibrated competition over contribution.

But unconditional basic survival does not mean unlimited use of every resource.

Zhou Xu applied to use a large public workshop, hoping to return to the woodworking he had enjoyed when young. He had no clear project and no relevant long-term record of competence.

His application was not rejected.

He was given low-risk time slots and access to basic materials. But he could not use dangerous equipment without training, or occupy large amounts of scarce resources for long periods.

Zhou Xu was very unhappy about this.

“Didn't you say everyone gets a chance to find a direction?”

The administrator said:

“Having a chance doesn't mean having all the resources from the start.”

“People with contribution value can, though?”

“No. Access to this kind of resource depends on the purpose, risks, training requirements, current use, and specific rules. You can start with basic training.”

Zhou Xu felt he was back in a position of being screened and selected.

Later, he took the training anyway.

Not because he accepted the rules.

Simply because he had nothing else to do.

The first thing he made was a cup rack.

The measurements were wrong, the edges rough, and it wobbled a little on the table.

Intelligent assistance could correct the design immediately or take over the cutting to make a more even finished piece.

Zhou Xu switched off automatic completion.

He kept only the hazard warnings.

After spoiling the first cup rack, he made another.

The second was still poor.

The third was just about usable.

No one bought them or asked to use them.

They simply stood in a corner of the workshop.

Zhou Xu had not found his direction in life through this.

Nor had woodworking awakened some forgotten talent.

He had merely left home at a fixed time for several days in a row and completed something that required his hands, attention, and patience.

One day, a young person responsible for tidying the workshop took the third cup rack.

Zhou Xu asked:

“What are you taking that for?”

“To put cups on.”

“There are better ones here.”

“This one's just the right size.”

Zhou Xu did not say he had made it.

A few days later, he saw the rack on a shared table, holding several freshly washed cups.

There was no commemoration.

No maker's name.

Nor did anyone know that it had been left by a man who had lost his job and did not know what else he could do.

Zhou Xu stood and looked for a while.

Then he went back to his bench and began a fourth.

What truly changed him was not woodworking.

Six months later, a prolonged spell of extreme heat struck the city.

Energy, medical, and cold-chain systems in several districts came under pressure at once. Automated coordination systems began reallocating resources, and some nonurgent services scaled back operations.

An anomaly arose at a medicine storage site in Zhou Xu's community.

The system showed the equipment still within the permitted temperature range. But someone on site found that the outer packaging of medicines from the same batch felt different to the touch.

The anomaly entered the public task pool.

When Zhou Xu saw it, he paused for a few seconds.

Twenty-five years of experience gave him an instinctive feeling that this was not a temperature problem at a single point.

He applied to join the temporary coordination team.

The system did not reject him because he had not worked for a long time. Nor did his former professional identity exempt him from checks on current competence, risk, and responsibility.

His historical competence records still existed.

After reassessment of his present physical condition, training, and conflicts of interest, he was given limited authority to exercise judgment.

Zhou Xu first examined the transport times, then checked the order in which the different boxes had been loaded.

The data showed no obvious errors.

He requested localized environmental records from the vehicle's stops en route.

Some thought this unnecessary.

The system's overall assessment also put the probability of an anomaly relatively low.

Zhou Xu insisted on checking again.

“If the packaging from the same shipment feels different in temperature, the problem may not be the equipment here now,” he said. “Some of it may have been exposed before it reached storage.”

The new check found that the vehicle's cargo compartment had been opened briefly at a temporary stop. Most of the medicines were still safe, but a small portion near the door might already have exceeded their stability conditions.

That batch was isolated in time.

No one was harmed.

Zhou Xu's judgment entered the contribution record.

Not because he had defeated an intelligent system.

The system had supplied most of the data and risk projections. Once he raised his concern, it had also rapidly traced the problem across the different stages.

What actually prevented loss was past experience, touch at the scene, data capabilities, and renewed verification working together.

When the task ended, the coordination team invited Zhou Xu to join temporary logistics support for the heat wave.

He agreed.

That night, he came home late.

Shen Yun was already asleep.

Standing at the door, Zhou Xu suddenly remembered what his wife had said many years before:

Your body is home, but your attention is still at work.

He did not immediately return to checking task information.

Instead, he went to the kitchen first and washed the day's dishes.

When the heat wave ended, the temporary assignment was disbanded.

Once again, Zhou Xu lost a position in which he had to be needed.

This time, he did not retreat completely into his room as before.

He applied to join a city project reviewing experience with anomalous situations, organizing the many nonstandard judgments accumulated in the era of human dispatch into case studies that could be questioned and traced.

At first, he thought he would finally be able to “teach the system.”

He soon found that much of this experience had already been absorbed.

Some of it was even wrong.

Some judgments he had once regarded as intuition were merely survivorship bias: successes were remembered, while failures were explained away as accidents.

He had to face the fact that not all twenty-five years of experience deserved to be preserved.

This was harder than losing his job.

When the job disappeared, he could still believe his value simply lacked a place for the time being.

When experience itself was tested against reality again, he had to accept that some things he had once been proud of really ought to be discarded.

During one review, a young researcher pointed out that an emergency dispatch method Zhou Xu had once insisted on would, over the long term, continually transfer risk to small, remote communities.

“We had no other way at the time,” Zhou Xu said.

“Possibly,” the researcher replied. “But the result was still that they bore more disruptions.”

“It's easy to look back now, when all the conditions have changed.”

“That's why we need to preserve the conditions at the time. And we also need to preserve who bore the consequences.”

Zhou Xu was deeply displeased.

He stayed away from the project for several days.

Later, he opened the record again.

The final case study did not cast him as a bad decision-maker. Nor did it present the choice made under the old conditions as inevitable.

It retained the full picture:

The information and resource constraints at the time;

The practical reasons for the dispatch decision;

The real consequences transferred to remote communities;

The alternatives available today;

The ways similar constraints could still produce failure in the future.

Respect for experience does not exempt it from criticism.

Nor does someone's having once been useful mean that everything he did should become a standard for the future.

Zhou Xu stayed with the project.

Two years later, someone asked what work he did now.

Zhou Xu thought for a moment.

He still helped review experience with anomalous situations, spent two days a week woodworking in the public workshop, and joined temporary coordination efforts during extreme weather or heightened logistics risks.

These activities did not add up to a single, stable occupational title.

“I don't have the kind of job I used to,” he said.

The other person asked:

“What keeps you busy, then?”

Zhou Xu described a few things he was doing.

When he finished, he suddenly realized he no longer needed a job title to gather them all together.

The old civilization answered “Who are you?” through occupation.

Doctor, worker, teacher, manager, engineer, caregiver, creator.

These identities still mattered.

Expertise could not disappear because the forms of labor had changed.

Nor could responsibility become vague because participation was freer.

But a person no longer had to compress an entire life into a function continually offered for sale.

He could take on different things at different stages.

He could develop deep expertise, while also caring, creating, learning, resting, and starting again beyond his specialty.

He did not have to remain highly productive forever.

Nor did he have to turn every interest into work, every act of concern into contribution, and every free moment into demonstrable growth.

When Zhou Xu was fifty-five, Shen Yun took a period of rest and recovery after years of intensive caregiving.

At first, she found it very strange.

She still woke at her old working hour every day, worrying whether someone had missed a medication or a family had lost support in the night.

Zhou Xu did not tell her she should enjoy life.

He made breakfast every morning.

Sometimes he walked with her.

Sometimes they did things separately.

When Shen Yun was feeling low, she might not want to leave the house all day.

Zhou Xu got irritated too.

He had thought that, having been through the same sense of loss, he ought to understand her better.

Only later did he discover that understanding one's own pain does not mean being able to understand another person's.

“Why did you put up with me for so long?” he asked.

Shen Yun said:

“I wasn't putting up with it the whole time.”

“But you were always there, weren't you?”

“Being there doesn't mean I never thought of leaving.”

Zhou Xu fell silent.

“Then why didn't you?”

“Sometimes because I loved you. Sometimes because I worried about you. Sometimes just because I hadn't made up my mind.”

She did not make staying into a story of pure devotion.

In a shared life, much of what endures does not come from a single reason.

“If it's my turn to look after you now,” Zhou Xu said, “does that count as contribution too?”

Shen Yun glanced at him.

“Do you want to record it?”

“No.”

“Then go put the water on.”

Zhou Xu got up and went to the kitchen.

The rough cup rack was still on the table.

After the first one had been taken, he had made many more. As his skills improved, the finished pieces grew better and better. Yet Shen Yun had chosen to keep that earliest, unsteady one.

At a touch, it wobbled gently.

But it had never fallen over.

When work no longer determines whether a person can survive, freedom does not come automatically.

First, he may lose his direction.

His daily order.

The reason someone else waits for him at a particular time.

Even the self formed by duties, expertise, and a sense of being irreplaceable.

Guaranteeing basic survival can free people only from “If I don't work, I can't survive.”

It cannot answer for them:

Once you have a life you are free to direct, what will you do with it?

Spark can help a person see connections between abilities, experience, and real needs.

Nebula can make shared needs, externalities, and cross-domain relationships visible, helping responsible actors and those willing to participate see one another more readily.

Contribution value records only real contributions that have already occurred and can be confirmed, so that labor, knowledge, care, creation, the release of resources, and the bearing of risk are not easily forgotten.

But these structures must not turn an entire life back into another competition over contribution.

A person has the right to be without direction for a time.

The right to do something with no public value, no record, and no result.

The right not to give every minute to civilization.

At the same time, when he turns toward the world again, he must also accept:

Being needed is not being flattered;

Participation is not possession of a position;

Past contribution cannot guarantee a permanent place;

What the real world needs may not happen to be what he does best, knows best, or most wishes to give.

That people and the world need each other does not mean the world forever reserves an irreplaceable position for everyone.

It means civilization no longer abandons someone who is temporarily of no use; and a person no longer joins in shared life only when he can play the leading role.

Jobs can disappear.

Occupations can change.

Talents may become obsolete.

Even the abilities most familiar over a lifetime may be surpassed by new intelligence.

But people do not thereby lose all meaning.

For a person's place in the world has never been determined solely by how many tasks he completes.

It also lies in how he responds to reality, learns anew, acknowledges the limits of old experience, and, once no longer compelled to labor, remains willing to wash that bowl clean for someone else who is waiting for the result.

Chapter 9 How a Dream Enters Reality

Every age praises dreams.

But not every age truly allows ordinary people to have them.

From a very young age, many learn to ask first whether something can make money, confer status, prove their worth in competition, or win the approval of those who control resources.

What they truly want to do often has to wait until survival is secure, responsibilities fulfilled, time plentiful, and risks manageable.

But a human life seldom offers all those conditions at once.

And so a great many dreams do not fail.

They never really begin.

Other dreams have enough capital, power, and technology to enter reality quickly, yet may never submit to scrutiny concerning other people, the environment, and long-term consequences.

The old civilization's greatest imbalance was not merely that so many people's wishes lacked resources.

It was also that the wishes of a few could command too many resources without first answering:

Whose lives will this change?

Who bears the cost?

Who has the right to refuse?

If it fails, what can still be recovered?

A new civilization cannot promise to fulfill every dream.

It can only ensure that a wish no longer dies unseen because the person expressing it is ordinary, and no longer becomes everyone's reality without scrutiny because that person is powerful.

At sixty-two, Tang Zhi wanted to build a night garden.

She was not a botanist.

Not an urban designer.

Nor did she have long experience with public projects.

Before retiring, she had checked colors at a textile workshop. For more than forty years, her days had been filled with fibers, dyes, light, and the finest differences in hue.

When the workshop was automated, she left early.

In the years that followed, she cared for her grandchild, accompanied her husband through illness, and took on occasional community tasks.

After her husband died, she lived alone.

On sleepless nights, she often walked to a vacant plot at the edge of the community.

Parking and energy-replenishment facilities had once been planned there. Later, the plans changed and the land was left temporarily empty. A few people passed through during the day. Almost no one lingered at night.

Tang Zhi first thought of building a night garden on a moonless evening.

That night, she had woken with a start from another dream.

In the dream, her husband was still sitting beside the bed, asking why she had not turned on the light. She reached for him and touched only the sheet on the empty bed.

Tang Zhi left home and walked alone to the vacant land.

The city's night lighting had been restrained. The sky was no longer continually illuminated as before. She saw tiny insects moving around low plants, and a white wildflower that stood out with unusual clarity in the dark.

Suddenly, she thought:

What if there were a garden here that slowly revealed itself only at night?

Not a nighttime version of a daytime landscape.

Not a spectacle made of light.

A place where nocturnal plants, insects, scents, faint light, quiet, and people who had nowhere to linger by day could share a stretch of time in which nothing had to be done immediately.

She wrote the wish in Dream Garden.

It was just one sentence:

I want to build a night garden where people who cannot sleep can go and sit for a while.

Once the wish entered public space, support did not come immediately.

Some left comments saying they liked it.

Some described their long struggles with sleeplessness. Others suggested adding nighttime music, food, and social activities.

Tang Zhi rejected all of those suggestions.

She did not want the garden to become a nighttime venue for consumption, or a community project requiring continuous participation.

She simply wanted people to sit for a while.

That made the wish seem too simple.

And too private.

The preliminary assessment noted that vacant land was not an unclaimed resource. It remained part of the city's plans for future use. Its soil conditions were unknown. Nighttime opening involved safety, lighting, ecological disturbance, and nearby residents' rest.

More importantly, it was unclear what public problem the garden would solve.

Insomnia needed medical support.

Loneliness needed relationships and community.

A garden could neither treat insomnia nor guarantee that a lonely person would find comfort there.

Tang Zhi was angry when she first saw the assessment.

“Does everything have to prove it's useful first?”

Dream Garden did not answer her.

A wish being seen did not mean its case had been established.

She could explain further, or withdraw it.

Tang Zhi decided to go on.

The first person willing to discuss it with her was a researcher studying nocturnal insects.

Rather than ask how the garden would help people, the researcher first asked:

“What are you planning to plant?”

Tang Zhi could not answer.

She knew only that she liked white flowers whose scent grew distinct at night, and that she did not want overly bright lighting.

The researcher told her that some plants people considered suitable for night gardens were unsuited to the local ecology. Certain strongly scented nonnative varieties could disrupt existing relationships among insects. Even continuous dim lighting could alter nocturnal creatures' behavior.

“Then no lights,” Tang Zhi said.

“With no lights at all, how would you keep people safe at night?”

“They could bring their own.”

“Everyone's separate lights would be harder to control.”

Tang Zhi fell silent.

She had thought respecting the night simply meant installing fewer lights.

Reality was more complicated than imagination.

Later, lighting engineers, soil-restoration specialists, accessibility designers, nighttime care workers, and nearby residents gradually joined the discussion.

Each saw different problems.

The accessibility designers pointed out that if the garden retained only the natural terrain, people with limited mobility would be unable to enter.

The nighttime care workers warned that people with chronic insomnia, low mood, or unstable cognitive functioning might face risks if they entered an isolated space alone.

Nearby residents worried about nighttime traffic and noise.

City maintenance staff noted that the vacant land might still be needed for emergency energy functions and could not be permanently occupied.

Tang Zhi grew increasingly irritated.

She only wanted to plant some flowers.

Yet once the wish entered reality, countless demands seemed to take it apart, layer by layer.

“By the time you've finished discussing it, there'll be nothing left,” she said.

A nearby resident replied:

“If we don't discuss it, the garden you want will enter our nights directly.”

Tang Zhi looked at him.

For the first time, she realized that a dream did not belong only to its dreamer.

Once it used real land, resources, time, and other people's lives, it had to let in people who did not share it.

Those who disagreed were not the dream's enemies.

They might simply be the ones who would bear its consequences.

The first proposal did not pass.

The reasons for rejection were clear:

The land still had to be reserved for other uses;

Responsibility for nighttime safety was incomplete;

Basic ecological-impact surveys were lacking;

A relatively high proportion of nearby residents opposed it;

The wish's public value did not yet justify long-term use of the resources.

Tang Zhi was unhappy for a long time.

She had thought the new civilization would give ordinary people's dreams a chance.

Yet when the chance truly came, she still encountered thresholds, professional judgment, resource limits, and other people's refusal.

“How is that different from before?” she asked her daughter.

Her daughter said:

“Before, you might not even have known why you were turned down.”

Tang Zhi did not accept this consolation.

Knowing the reasons did not make failure easy.

A transparent refusal was still a refusal.

Several times, she nearly withdrew the wish.

The system also noted that, after a long period without progress, the wish could be archived without affecting her ability to reopen it later.

Tang Zhi did not decide.

She still walked to the vacant plot at night.

But she no longer wanted to imagine what the garden might look like.

A few months later, she met a delivery worker beside the plot.

The man had parked his transport unit at the roadside and was resting on a low barrier.

Tang Zhi asked:

“Why are you sitting here?”

“Waiting for the next task.”

“There's nothing here.”

“That's why it's quiet.”

The man said many public spaces lost their function as places to linger once they closed at night. Open spaces were either too bright or occupied by continuous activities. Commercial places required spending money.

“Sometimes you just want to sit for ten minutes,” he said.

Tang Zhi suddenly asked:

“If there were a garden here, would you come?”

The man looked at the vacant land.

“Would it be a long walk?”

“No.”

“Would there be chairs?”

“Yes.”

“Would I have to register?”

“No.”

“Would people come and talk to me?”

“Not if you didn't want them to.”

The man nodded.

“That would work.”

This conversation did not prove the night garden was worth building.

One person's needs could not stand for everyone's.

But it helped Tang Zhi see anew that what she truly wanted to make might not be a garden.

She wanted to leave a place to pause at night that did not immediately require people to consume, participate, socialize, or justify why they had come.

Flowers were simply her way of understanding quiet.

She rewrote the wish:

I want to work with others to find a kind of nighttime public space where people who cannot sleep, night workers, those finishing a stretch of caregiving, and those who do not want to go home just yet can safely stay for a while. It should avoid excessive lighting, require no social interaction, and not turn lingering into consumption.

The wish became clearer.

And it no longer belonged only to her.

The second discussion did not begin with an application for the entire plot.

The team proposed a three-month trial that could be withdrawn, using a stretch of existing nighttime path at the community's edge.

There would be no large new planting.

No permanent facilities.

Only a few low-disturbance places to pause, adjustments to local lighting, and the necessary safety interfaces, while actual use, ecological effects, and neighborhood feedback were observed.

Tang Zhi was dissatisfied.

This was not the garden she had imagined.

There were no expanses of night-blooming plants, no space where the world seemed suddenly to grow quiet the moment one entered.

Only a few chairs, some screening, a few carefully limited glimmers of light, and existing vegetation rearranged.

“It's too ordinary,” she said.

The project coordinator replied:

“A trial isn't about shrinking your dream. It's about postponing the irreversible parts.”

Tang Zhi still felt it diminished the dream.

But she also knew that if even this path could not truly accommodate people lingering at night, there would be still less justification for a whole garden.

She agreed.

Few people used it in the trial's first month.

Most nighttime walkers simply passed through.

Some sat for a few minutes, then soon left.

Others used the stopping places to drink and make noise, prompting complaints from nearby residents.

One poorly positioned dim light made a darker patch around a corner. An older person nearly fell.

Tang Zhi felt defeated when she first saw the on-site record.

She had thought that if a space was restrained enough, people would be quiet.

But people do not automatically become gentle because they enter a place gently imagined.

Some left litter.

Some talked loudly on calls.

Some occupied seats for long periods as private sleeping areas.

Others felt that “no forced socializing” made the space too cold. If everyone was lonely, why not build relationships of mutual support?

Tang Zhi refused to turn it into a permanent mutual-support venue.

“People can need help,” she said. “They can also simply not want to talk.”

In the second month, the team adjusted some rules.

Safety and care staff would not keep approaching people. They would step in only when a clear risk arose or help was actively requested.

No reason had to be given for staying.

Long-term occupancy, however, would need to be redirected to more suitable nighttime accommodation services.

The lighting was rearranged.

Nearby residents could report noise and safety issues in real time, but could not directly see users' identities.

These changes did not make the space perfect.

Complaints continued.

Some users left, too.

A nighttime mutual-support group thought the place lacked relational warmth and established another space offering more active companionship.

Tang Zhi did not see that as competition.

Different people needed different nights.

At the end of the third month, the team discovered a group of users it had not anticipated.

Several long-term caregivers often stopped there after finishing nighttime care duties.

They did not want to go home immediately.

Not because home was bad.

Simply because, after hours spent caring for patients, older people, or disabled family members, they needed a period when no one called for them.

One middle-aged woman came three times a week.

She always sat closest to the exit and usually left after fifteen minutes.

Tang Zhi had seen her many times without ever initiating a conversation.

Before the trial ended, the woman wrote in her feedback:

No one thanks me here, or tells me how hard I've worked.

So for a little while, I don't have to be someone who deserves thanks.

After reading this, Tang Zhi sat for a long time.

At first, she had wanted to plant flowers for people who could not sleep.

Only later did she learn that what people truly needed might not be a garden.

It might be a brief stretch of time without the demand to keep carrying meaning.

Nor did the space's value lie in healing everyone who entered.

Some left still tired.

Still having to return to illness, conflict, loneliness, and their unfinished lives.

Nothing here had been solved for them.

The place had simply not asked more of them when they were already exhausted.

The trial passed its stage assessment.

But approval was still not given to turn the entire vacant plot into a permanent night garden.

The city's long-term plan confirmed that part of the area had to be retained for future emergency energy functions.

Tang Zhi had to accept that her original dream would not be realized in full.

The final plan allowed only a nighttime ecological path along the edge of the land, compatible with its emergency function, and the replication of tested stopping-place units in other communities.

The project no longer carried Tang Zhi's name.

Nor did she own this model of space.

Many later participants modified it. Some changes did not suit her taste.

Some communities added rain shelters.

Some added safety signs visible from a distance.

Some reduced plant scents to accommodate people sensitive to them.

One site was removed after persistently low use.

At first, Tang Zhi found this hard to accept.

She felt her dream had been broken into pieces and turned into functional components.

“It doesn't feel like mine anymore,” she said.

The coordinator asked:

“Do you want it to stay yours forever?”

Tang Zhi did not answer.

Once a wish enters the public domain, its dreamer should still be remembered.

Her original observation, sustained commitment, return after failure, and the real responsibilities she undertook all formed contributions that could not be erased.

But a public achievement could not become territory its dreamer possessed forever.

Others had the right to keep changing it.

Reality, too, had the right to show that some parts did not hold up.

In the project's second year, Tang Zhi finally planted the first true nocturnal plants.

There were very few.

The varieties were jointly confirmed with local ecological researchers. Their locations avoided major routes used by nocturnal creatures and required no continuous artificial lighting.

On the first evening they bloomed, she sat there alone.

The flowers were less spectacular than she had imagined.

Their faint colors almost dissolved into the night. Only up close could one catch their delicate scent.

A young man approached and sat a little way off.

After a few minutes, he began to cry.

He did not stifle the sound.

Nor did he explain himself to Tang Zhi.

Tang Zhi did not approach him.

She did not know what he had been through, or whether he needed help.

The safety system detected no clear risk.

So she simply sat.

After twenty-odd minutes, the young man got up and left.

He did not thank her.

Did not even glance at her.

Tang Zhi did not later include this in the project report.

A stranger's tears were not material for proving the space's success.

She left only one sentence in her own private notes:

That evening, someone cried for a while as the flowers bloomed.

The nighttime path gradually became part of the city.

It did not become a famous attraction.

It did not continually draw large numbers of users, or create an image of the city compelling enough to circulate widely.

On many nights, no one was there.

Maintainers once asked whether resources should be reduced because usage was so low.

The assessment did not look only at numbers.

The space occupied little land, imposed a low ecological burden, and had become significantly cheaper to maintain. It served few people, but mainly at times and in circumstances that other public spaces struggled to accommodate.

In the end, the path was retained.

Not every public provision has to serve the greatest number.

Civilization must prevent a few people's preferences from consuming too many shared resources for too long. It must also prevent all resources from flowing only to needs that generate high usage, high returns, and conspicuous results.

The meaning of some spaces lies precisely in the fact that most people do not usually need them.

But when someone truly does, they are there.

At seventy, Tang Zhi stopped taking part in daily maintenance.

Her contribution record preserved the project's formation in full:

The original wish;

The first rejection;

The change in concept;

Problems during the trial;

Residents' opposition;

Ecological and safety corrections;

Long-term maintenance;

The parts removed;

Other participants' contributions;

Disputes that remained.

It did not turn this into a story of an ordinary older woman who held fast to her dream and finally moved a city.

That was not how reality had unfolded.

Her persistence mattered.

Professional judgment mattered too.

The residents who opposed nighttime opening, the researchers who identified ecological risks, the engineers who corrected lighting problems, the maintainers who cleared litter, and the failed cases showing that some spaces were unsuitable for replication mattered just as much.

The dream had not created reality alone.

It had merely proposed a possibility that did not yet exist.

What actually brought that possibility into the world was the help, questioning, limits, changes, responsibility, and long-term maintenance of countless people.

Years later, a child in a learning community asked Tang Zhi:

“Did your dream come true?”

Tang Zhi thought for a moment.

“Not completely.”

“Are you disappointed, then?”

“I have been.”

“If you could start again, would you still put it forward?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Tang Zhi looked out of the window.

It was not dark yet.

“Because there was nothing there before. Now, on some nights, someone can sit for a while.”

The child asked again:

“What if none of it had been built in the end?”

Tang Zhi smiled.

“Then at least I'd know why it hadn't been built.”

This was not a romanticizing of failure.

Many wishes will remain unfulfilled even after serious scrutiny.

Some lack resources.

Some carry too much risk.

Some would harm others.

Some suit only the dreamer and should not enter public reality.

Other wishes are not wrong; their time, technology, environment, and collective choices have simply not yet opened a path for them.

Being seen is not being guaranteed.

Having a chance is not certain success.

Civilization cannot call every refusal a temporary difficulty merely to protect dreamers from disappointment. Nor can it return ordinary people to a position where they have no standing to put forward a wish simply because most dreams will eventually change or fail.

How does a dream enter reality?

Not by winning priority through passion.

Not by using good intentions to bypass consequences.

Not because the dreamer's past contributions entitle them to draw on every resource.

Nor does a dream become automatically right because a majority agrees with it for a time.

It must leave one person's inner world and enter other people's lives.

Submit to questioning by those who do not share it.

Accept professional judgment.

Accept resource limits.

Accept failure.

Accept changes to its original conception, and even accept that the final result may no longer belong to its dreamer.

Dream Garden is not a machine that automatically fulfills wishes.

It simply gives wishes a formal point of entry into reality, where they can be seen, answered, connected, challenged, tested, and honestly refused.

Spark can keep a person from being silenced by a lack of expressive ability.

Nebula can clarify shared needs, gaps in capability, and cross-domain consequences. Actual connections are still made by responsible actors, communities, and authorized collaborative relationships.

Contribution records can keep sustained commitment, the bearing of risk, and unnoticed maintenance from being easily forgotten.

But no structure can guarantee that a flower will bloom, a project succeed, or a dream deserve to have the world change for it.

A dream's true dignity does not lie in the world's being obliged to say yes.

It lies in an ordinary person's wish being treated as a real possibility and brought into shared judgment.

In the end, it may leave only a very small change.

A stretch of path.

A few seats.

A few flowers, inconspicuous in the dark.

And a tired person who, on a night when no one asks them to say anything, finally has somewhere to sit for a while.

Chapter 10 When Everyone Can Create

Human beings once regretted their lack of creative ability.

Many had carried within them a song, a painting, a story, an object, a kind of life that had never existed, yet lacked the time, training, tools, and resources to bring them into reality.

They could only watch the few with talent, education, capital, and opportunity turn their inner worlds into public works.

Later, artificial intelligence rapidly expanded the capacity for expression.

Someone who could not compose could generate a complete piece of music.

Someone who had never learned to paint could construct complex images.

Someone with limited language skills could produce fluent text in very little time.

For the first time, technical barriers to creation fell on a broad scale.

But once everyone could quickly produce works, civilization's question was no longer “Can we create?”

It was:

Who is creating?

Why create?

What in a work truly belongs to the human being?

When countless pieces of content keep pouring into the world at almost no cost, what still deserves the time another real person must take from their life to watch, listen, and respond?

At nineteen, Ye Chuxia wrote a song.

More precisely, she had not personally made most of its sounds.

She played no instrument.

She had no formal training in composition, and her vocal range was narrow. Her first recorded melody lasted only a dozen or so seconds. She went off-key several times, and passing vehicles could be heard outside the window.

She gave the melody to her Spark.

She did not ask it to “generate a beautiful song.”

She said only:

“Don't lose that feeling of almost remembering, and then not being able to.”

Spark asked:

“What are you remembering?”

Chuxia did not answer.

Her mother had been dead for eight years.

Her memories of her mother were growing fewer.

She remembered a light-colored coat her mother often wore. She remembered how, when cutting fruit, she always put the knife to the right of the plate. She also remembered that after her mother became ill, her hands were always cold.

But the voice was disappearing.

Chuxia had saved a few old videos.

In them, her mother talked, laughed, and called her name.

Yet increasingly, the woman in those recordings seemed like someone else's mother.

The images had preserved the voice.

They had not preserved what had happened inside her body when she heard it then.

That brief melody had come to her suddenly one afternoon.

She had not heard her mother.

Only, as the melody appeared, she briefly felt herself back before the age of eight, standing in the kitchen doorway, waiting for someone to turn around.

Spark could generate countless kinds of music from her melody.

It could simulate her mother's voice from the old videos.

It could make that voice sing words she had never sung.

Chuxia refused.

She did not want to make her mother say things she had never said while alive, or use a similar voice to manufacture a reunion that seemed to have really happened.

She allowed the system to analyze only the environmental sounds, speech rhythms, and features of the family space in the old videos, to help her remember, not to generate a replacement for her mother's voice.

The first version of the music was complete and polished.

Strings entered slowly, the melody expanded in the middle, and it ended on a gentle harmony.

Chuxia listened and found it unfamiliar.

“It sounds too much as if I've already said goodbye,” she said.

The second version used fewer instruments and left more pauses.

She still did not like it.

“Too sad.”

The third added sounds of everyday life.

A cup set on a table, running water, a door gently pushed open.

Chuxia turned it off halfway through.

“This isn't my home.”

The system could generate countless sounds that were “like home.”

But like home was not home.

If she had been unable to tell the difference, the work might have been finished sooner.

It was precisely because she could tell that creating became difficult.

Intelligence kept offering possibilities.

The person kept saying:

Not this.

This refusal was not an inefficient round of trial and error.

It was a person protecting something not yet fully revealed from being completed too soon.

Chuxia spent nine months on the song and still had not finished it.

Friends heard a few fragments and thought some versions were already very good.

“What exactly are you still changing?”

Chuxia could not explain.

She was not pursuing technical improvement.

Nor was she seeking the sound closest to her mother.

She knew only that every existing version expressed the feeling too completely.

Real memory was not like that.

It had gaps.

Displacements.

Places that clearly ought to be there but could no longer return.

If the music filled everything in, loss would be disguised as continued possession.

In the end, she deleted most of the generated material, leaving only the original off-key melody, a few brief harmonies, and long stretches of emptiness.

The work lasted two minutes and seven seconds.

There was almost no music in the final forty seconds.

Only her own breathing could be heard.

Spark noted that the rhythm of this breathing was noticeably uneven and asked whether she wanted it corrected.

Chuxia chose to keep it.

She called the piece In the Kitchen Doorway.

She offered no explanation.

When the piece entered the public culture subdomain, almost no one noticed.

Millions of new pieces of music were released at the same time.

Many were finely produced and could change instantly to suit each listener's emotions, memories, and taste. By comparison, In the Kitchen Doorway was structurally incomplete and rough in sound. It offered no immersive personalized version.

In the first month, only seventeen people listened to the end.

Five gave no response.

Three thought the work too private.

Someone also commented:

“Without reading the creative notes, you have no idea what it's trying to express.”

It hurt Chuxia to read that.

She had believed that if a feeling was real enough, others would hear it.

But real does not mean automatically understandable.

One person's pain may run deep enough to change a whole life, yet reach another person only as a silence they cannot enter.

Civilization recognizes everyone's right to express themselves.

It cannot require others to understand.

Still less can it make criticism immoral because a work comes from genuine hurt.

Several times, Chuxia wanted to withdraw it.

Yet she felt that if she did, nine months of effort would have left nothing.

She put the decision aside.

Two months later, a stranger requested permission to use In the Kitchen Doorway at a private farewell ceremony.

His name was Ji An.

His father had just died.

Father and son had not been close.

His father had been silent for years and had almost never expressed love. After reaching adulthood, Ji An seldom went home. In the last few years, they had kept only necessary contact.

After his father's death, he did not feel the grief he had imagined.

What he felt was more a kind of blankness.

Not the loss of someone close.

But the loss of any chance to know what their relationship might have become.

He happened to hear In the Kitchen Doorway.

The breathing in the final forty seconds reminded him of sitting outside his father's hospital room without going in.

He did not think the song was about his father.

Nor did the work explain any relationship for him.

It simply left a little room for that nameless blankness.

Chuxia agreed to its use.

She did not ask what happened at the ceremony.

Nor did Ji An tell her his whole story.

A few days later, he sent only one sentence:

“Thank you for not filling in the end.”

Chuxia looked at it for a long time.

Seventeen listeners who stayed to the end did not suddenly become a vast audience.

The piece remained little noticed.

But for the first time, she knew that the place left unfilled had entered another person's life.

The public system suggested recommending In the Kitchen Doorway to people experiencing bereavement, memory decline, or unfinished relationships.

Chuxia refused automatic emotional matching.

She did not want the work placed before every grieving person simply because it might resonate.

Not everyone grieving needs art to intervene.

Nor should every private pain become an entry point for content distribution.

In the end, the piece remained only in public space, accessible through deliberate searches, related reading, or recommendations from others.

It did not disappear.

Nor did it pursue anyone.

A future civilization no longer faces only a scarcity of content.

What is truly scarce is an inner space that algorithms do not touch by force.

Creation can reach someone.

It should not gain the right to cross boundaries merely because it might be beneficial.

Chuxia later joined a sound-creation community.

It included professional musicians and many ordinary people creating with intelligent tools.

Each work had to disclose its actual creative relationships:

Which elements came from the subject's initial expression;

Which were generated by intelligence;

Which had been jointly edited;

Which authorized source materials had been used;

Whether real people had been simulated;

Who took responsibility for the final choices and public consequences.

This disclosure was not intended to turn a work into an itemized technical bill.

Nor was artistic value judged by the proportion made by human hands.

Someone might contribute only a sentence, a rhythm, a refusal, yet truly determine why the work existed. Someone else might personally execute every technical detail, while the work remained only a skillful copy.

How much a tool does does not tell us how much a person contributes.

Nor does a person's contribution automatically disappear because they cannot complete the work independently.

What needs to be established is who supplied the irreplaceable starting point, who made the crucial judgments, and who took responsibility for the materials, expression, and real-world consequences.

One creator in the community was named He Lin.

He generated large numbers of works every day.

Music, images, poetry, virtual spaces: he tried almost every form.

He was highly skilled at deploying the technology, combining different styles in very little time and adjusting rapidly to public feedback.

His works often circulated widely.

But Chuxia did not like them.

She felt they had “everything, but no one really standing inside them.”

He Lin bristled when he heard this.

“What does it mean to have someone standing inside?”

Chuxia could not explain.

“Aren't my choices choices? Aren't my prompts expression? Isn't my taste taste?”

“Yes.”

“Then why is it creation when you spend nine months on something, but not when I make twenty things in a day?”

“I didn't say it wasn't.”

“You just think slow is superior.”

Chuxia fell silent.

She did harbor a prejudice against rapid generation.

As though only pain, hesitation, and prolonged refinement could make a work real enough.

But creation need not prove itself through suffering.

A person can create lightly and quickly, enjoying form, play, and change. Not every work must carry the depths of a life, nor must all public content bear the weight of civilization.

The problem was not He Lin's speed.

It was that his works consumed large amounts of public attention, while he took little responsibility for what happened once the content entered reality.

One video had simulated a city disaster that had not happened.

It was labeled fiction, but the images were so realistic that excerpts circulated widely without their original context, causing localized panic.

At first, He Lin believed the responsibility lay with those circulating it.

“I labeled it,” he said.

The community did not accept that as a complete answer.

A label can establish factual boundaries. It cannot cancel a creator's responsibility for foreseeable misreadings, circulation pathways, and real-world consequences.

Especially when a work deliberately draws on real fears to gain attention, its creator cannot declare, once that attention arrives, that art is their only responsibility.

Circulation of the work was temporarily restricted.

He Lin's relevant permissions for public creation went under review.

This was not punishment for imagining a disaster.

It required him to face the fact that once creation has the power to amplify reality, its consequences cannot be treated solely as the audience's problem.

He Lin was furious.

He believed public culture was using responsibility to suppress expression.

“Any work can be misread,” he said. “If creators have to answer for every misreading, who will dare create?”

The objection was not casually dismissed.

Creators cannot control every viewer. Nor should they bear unlimited responsibility for malicious excerpts, deliberate distortion, or consequences wholly impossible to foresee.

The review ultimately distinguished three circumstances:

The work itself had clearly identified itself as fiction and had not fabricated sources of fact;

Subsequent circulation outside the creator's control should not all be attributed to the original author;

But the work had deliberately used signs, times, and disaster-warning formats closely resembling those of a real city to create the immediacy of “this could be happening now.” The risk of mistaken belief was clearly foreseeable.

He Lin bore part of the responsibility.

The distribution platform and those who maliciously excerpted the work bore their respective responsibilities too.

No one was allowed to shift the entire causal chain onto another actor.

After his permissions were restored, He Lin did not stop creating quickly.

He simply began inviting people very different from himself to examine risks before certain works were released.

That slowed his work a little.

It did not automatically make it better.

But for the first time, he acknowledged that freedom of expression does not mean the creator vanishes from reality once the work leaves their hands.

Chuxia and He Lin later made a work together.

It began with an older man who had lost the ability to use language.

He could make sounds but could not reliably form words or sentences. His daughter wanted to preserve the forms of expression her father still possessed, without letting a system “translate” those sounds into complete language he might never truly have uttered.

Chuxia argued for preserving the breaks.

He Lin thought space, light, and rhythm could make it easier for an audience to enter.

They argued for a long time.

Chuxia worried that an overpowering form would turn the man's voice into aesthetic material.

He Lin believed that without any organization, the public would hear only incomprehensible noise.

The man himself still retained a basic capacity to choose.

They presented different versions to him for confirmation.

When a complete melody surrounded his voice, he shook his head.

When the voice was left almost untreated, he shook his head too.

In the third version, He Lin reduced all visual guidance, letting the light in the space change only very slightly with the length of each breath. Chuxia kept the man's pauses and did not supply missing meaning.

After listening, the man did not shake his head.

He raised a hand, pointed to one section, and tapped his chest twice.

No one could be certain what that meant.

They did not interpret it for him.

The final work recorded only:

This version was confirmed by the person himself through the means of expression available to him at the time; its specific inner meaning is unknown.

The unknown did not invalidate the work.

Precisely this unknown stopped everyone from appropriating what the man could not fully say into interpretations of their own.

After the work became public, many viewers tried to interpret it.

Some said they heard fear.

Others said peace.

Some thought it was a person wishing to say goodbye. Others thought he still intensely wanted to remain in the world.

These interpretations could exist.

They could not be recorded as the man's actual intention.

The creators were no closer to that answer than the audience.

Nor was intelligence.

It could analyze sound patterns, bodily signals, and past expressions. But with insufficient evidence, it could not declare the most probable interpretation to be a person's heart.

Sometimes creation is not about expressing meaning more clearly.

It is about preserving the right of a person who cannot be fully explained to be left partly unexplained.

A few years later, Chuxia became a long-term reviewer in the community.

She still created, but rarely shared her work publicly.

Some thought her too cautious about intelligently generated works.

Others took In the Kitchen Doorway as a standard and imitated its long pauses, rough breathing, and incomplete structure.

Soon public space was filled with works in this “leaving space” style.

Forms that had originally arisen from her genuine judgments became a style that could be rapidly copied.

Chuxia was angry when she first saw them.

She felt her private experience was being used to manufacture cheap profundity.

Later, she had to acknowledge:

Once a form entered public space, it no longer belonged only to her.

Others could learn from it, imitate it, misuse it, or generate entirely different meanings from similar forms.

She could not claim some permanent purity simply because her work came from real loss.

All she could demand was that others not misappropriate her specific sounds, materials, and identity, or present imitation as a continuation authorized by her.

Pauses, breathing, and unfilled space had long existed in countless people's lives.

No one owned silence.

When everyone can create, the world does not automatically gain more meaning.

First, it gains more content.

More sounds.

More images.

More stories.

More competing requests for attention, endlessly generable and instantly adaptable.

Civilization must therefore protect two rights at once:

One ordinary person's right not to lose expression for lack of technical ability;

Another ordinary person's right not to have their attention continually occupied simply because everyone can now express themselves.

Creative freedom must not become the appropriation of attention.

Public circulation must not allocate space solely according to the strength of stimulation, emotional stickiness, and immediate response.

Whether a work enters more people's lives requires consideration of its actual sources, authorization by the subjects concerned, public value, risks, the burdens of circulation, and viewers' choices.

This will not produce an artistic order that is forever correct.

Truly important works may still go unseen for a long time.

Mediocre, false, and even harmful content may still circulate widely.

Civilization can only keep recalibrating. It cannot make time's judgments in time's place.

By the time Ye Chuxia was forty, her mother's voice had grown more distant still.

She occasionally listened to In the Kitchen Doorway.

One day, she suddenly realized she could no longer be sure whether the original melody had come from an actual memory or had gradually taken shape during nine months of repeated creation.

This saddened her deeply.

She had once thought a work could preserve what was lost.

Only later did she learn that the work itself could change memory.

As a person looks back, retells, and gives form again and again, the original feeling becomes entwined with its later expression until the two can never be fully separated.

She did not delete the work.

Nor did she continue to treat it as her mother's voice.

It had become another kind of existence:

A trace a nineteen-year-old girl had once struggled to leave, afraid of forgetting her mother.

That was enough.

Creation does not copy an inner world intact into the world outside.

Within us, there is no finished product waiting to be faithfully output.

It keeps revealing itself through choice, refusal, revision, loss, misunderstanding, and response.

Artificial intelligence can expand forms, connect materials, lower barriers, and help a person overcome technical limitations, giving feelings that once could not be expressed a chance to enter reality.

But intelligence cannot decide for someone:

Why this sentence?

Why keep this off-key note?

Why not let the dead say what they never said?

Why prefer an unfilled space to a manufactured completeness?

These judgments come from a real subject.

From the life, relationships, and responsibilities that subject has experienced, and the boundaries that cannot be surrendered.

Nor is a work's meaning decided by its creator alone.

It must enter another real person and undergo understanding, refusal, misreading, criticism, and the test of time.

Some works will change civilization.

Some reach only one person.

Some receive no response.

Some should not even be made public.

They cannot be ranked solely by the scale of their circulation. Nor can genuine expression exempt them from consequences.

When everyone can create, what is truly precious is no longer the making of more things.

It is still knowing, once infinite generation becomes possible, what should not be generated, what cannot be replaced, what people must choose for themselves, and what needs to be left quietly there, waiting for someone willing to give the time of their own life to listen, slowly, to the end.

Chapter 11 Competition Still Exists

Civilization Leap does not abolish competition.

Life grows.

People long for goals that are higher, farther, and harder to reach.

Limited places, scarce resources, unrepeatable opportunities, and differing judgments will still bring people into competition.

Some are more capable.

Some invest more.

Some are willing to bear greater risks.

And some simply want to win more than others do.

Competition itself is not civilization's enemy.

It has driven humanity beyond boundaries, fostered expertise, tested limits, and brought countless potentials into reality.

The real danger comes when competition is bound to survival, personal worth, and the whole of one's future. Then losing means more than losing an opportunity: it means gradually losing a life, dignity, and the right to try again. Winning means more than doing something better: it begins to confer the power to define rules, possess resources, and expand one's advantage permanently.

A new civilization does not eliminate winning and losing.

It only refuses to let one outcome decide whether a person is still worthy of living in the world.

Qin Zhao and Han Xu were both twenty-seven when they first joined the same flight-training team.

They were competing for a long-duration mission in low Earth orbit.

The mission needed six primary crew members and two reserves.

There were twenty-three candidates.

Everyone had completed years of professional training and had clear competence in their field. No one had come merely for honor. The mission would undertake orbital ecological maintenance, materials experiments, medical support, and coordination with disaster response on the ground. Much of the work directly concerned humanity's continued existence farther into space in the future.

Qin Zhao excelled at immediate judgment in complex environments.

She reacted quickly, identified the crucial variables with incomplete information, and was willing to take responsibility for decisions under high risk.

Han Xu, by contrast, was exceptionally steady.

He did not take risks lightly. He maintained precision over long periods and was skilled at detecting problems that would not cause an immediate accident but would keep accumulating deep within a system.

Before training began, the comprehensive assessment found that both had a chance of joining the primary crew.

They soon became each other's strongest rival.

In the first closed simulation, the orbital module suffered a succession of failures.

Energy supply fell, two life-support indicators deviated at once, and communications with the ground became unstable.

Qin Zhao urged the immediate shutdown of nonessential experimental areas to concentrate energy on life support and communications.

Han Xu objected.

He believed that forcibly terminating a materials reaction in the experimental area might produce an as-yet-unidentified contamination risk. The reaction unit should first be isolated, then operations reduced gradually.

The simulation clock kept running.

Qin Zhao thought Han Xu too slow.

Han Xu thought Qin Zhao was using speed of action to conceal unclear causation.

They argued until the final deadline.

Qin Zhao held command authority.

She ordered the experimental area shut down.

Life support and communications recovered.

Twelve minutes later, the simulation showed localized contamination from the forcibly terminated reaction. It could be contained, but left one simulated crew member unable to continue the mission.

Han Xu's plan would have prolonged the life-support risk, but might have prevented the contamination.

Neither plan was entirely right.

The training review did not merely award scores for winning and losing.

The record preserved all of the following:

Qin Zhao had identified the most immediate threat to the whole crew's continued existence in an emergency;

She had underestimated unknown consequences in the experimental area;

Han Xu had identified a real hidden danger;

His plan had given insufficient weight to the time constraint and provided no sufficiently clear interim safeguards.

After the task, Han Xu said:

“You almost cost someone their life.”

Qin Zhao replied:

“Your plan could have cost everyone their lives.”

“Could have.”

“My contamination was a possibility too.”

“It happened.”

“Because the simulation was generated from the worst-case outcome.”

Both knew the simulation was not reality.

Both also knew that what it was testing was precisely how they might fail in reality.

Qin Zhao did not apologize.

Nor did Han Xu accept the legitimacy of her final decision.

From that day, the competition was about more than mission places.

They began genuinely to dislike each other.

The training system could analyze every choice, exchange, bodily reaction, and effect on the team.

That did not entitle it to declare directly who was more suitable.

Judged only by immediate response, Qin Zhao was stronger.

Judged only by system stability, Han Xu was more reliable.

If the mission required rapid changes of course in extreme emergencies, Qin Zhao might be irreplaceable. If the main danger of a long stay actually came from the steady accumulation of small deviations, Han Xu would matter more.

There is no overall score for ability that can flatten every situation into one.

Nor can contribution automatically be converted into an advantage in every field.

Selection had to answer not who was “better overall.”

It had to answer who, combined with the other members, could better undertake this particular mission.

That meant an exceptionally capable person could still be left out.

Not because they were not good enough.

But because the mission needed more than the strongest individuals. It needed a whole that would not fail together at a critical moment through an imbalance in its mix of abilities.

In the second phase of training, Qin Zhao and Han Xu were placed in the same group.

Neither believed it was accidental.

The reviewers wanted to see whether they could keep working together without trusting each other.

Qin Zhao resented this.

“Why force us to prove we can get along?” she asked.

The head of training said:

“You aren't required to like each other.”

“Then why put us together?”

“Because a real mission won't guarantee that all its key members like one another.”

Han Xu said from beside her:

“If she keeps making unilateral decisions, I'll ask to leave the group.”

Qin Zhao turned to him.

“You can leave right now.”

The head of training did not stop the argument.

“You have the right to leave,” she said. “The consequences of leaving will also enter the mission-fit assessment, but won't affect your basic eligibility for training or opportunities to join other missions later.”

That did not make leaving easy.

Competition still existed.

Every decision changed the outcome.

The difference was that a place on this mission was no longer the only gateway to having a future.

Not being selected would not erase years of training.

Leaving would not brand someone permanently incapable of collaboration.

But if a person always withdrew during conflict, reality would remember that pattern too.

Civilization does not judge character by one failure.

Nor does it pretend that repeated behavior means nothing.

During the group's first long-cycle simulation, Qin Zhao deliberately made fewer immediate decisions.

She required Han Xu to review every important action.

On the surface, this respected his cautious style.

In practice, she shifted much of the pressure of judgment onto him.

The mission slowed markedly.

Han Xu soon noticed.

“You're trying to prove my way would sink the mission.”

Qin Zhao did not deny it.

“Haven't you always wanted more review?”

“Review doesn't mean throwing every decision at me.”

“You want a say, but not responsibility for the final decision?”

“I want decisions to go through a full assessment.”

“There's no such thing as a full assessment.”

“So we just follow your intuition?”

“At least my intuition moves things forward.”

The argument brought the whole group to a halt.

The other members finally intervened.

One medical worker said:

“You're not discussing the mission. You're using it to prove which of you is right.”

That silenced them both.

The easiest way for competition to corrode a shared goal is not through open rivalry.

It is when someone begins hoping the other person will fail, to prove their own indispensability.

From that moment, the task continues, but reality has quietly taken second place to personal victory and defeat.

At the end of training, Qin Zhao ranked higher overall than Han Xu.

She entered the first group of primary candidates.

Han Xu was provisionally in the reserve group.

When the news became public, Han Xu did not congratulate her.

He left the training ground alone.

Over the past five years, he had given up many other directions for this mission. Reserve status meant he still had a chance. It also meant that, after completing all the training, he might remain on the ground, waiting for someone else to encounter a problem.

Friends consoled him that reserves mattered just as much.

Han Xu would not accept it.

“No one trains for five years to prove they can step in when someone else fails.”

It was true, but rarely something people were allowed to say.

People like to require grace from those who are not selected.

Gratitude for the opportunity.

Acknowledgment that someone else was more suitable.

The transformation of disappointment into growth.

But failure is, first of all, failure.

It can leave someone angry, envious, even hoping the winner will be proved unworthy.

Civilization cannot demand that the loser immediately purify their feelings in the name of maturity.

So long as envy does not become harm, it is simply a real part of someone's encounter with loss.

Han Xu turned off all public updates about the primary candidates.

He also refused to attend Qin Zhao's stage presentation.

No one downgraded his professional record for it.

For a time, he could choose not to applaud his rival.

After becoming a primary candidate, Qin Zhao did not feel at ease.

She found herself afraid of every mistake.

Previously, errors could count as training.

Now any deviation might cost her her place.

She grew increasingly dependent on intelligent assessments, repeatedly checking whether her decisions fell within the optimal range. Her once strongest ability, immediate judgment, became sluggish under constant self-monitoring.

In one low-risk exercise, she missed the best moment to act.

The incident did not escalate.

But the review noted a clear change in her decision-making style.

“I just don't want to repeat the mistake from the first simulation,” Qin Zhao said.

“You haven't repeated it,” the reviewer replied. “You're trying to avoid every mistake anyone could criticize.”

“Caution's a problem too?”

“When you stop exercising judgment and only want to prove you're safe enough, yes.”

Qin Zhao was furious.

Speed was called autocratic.

Caution was called a loss of judgment.

It seemed the reviewers could find fault no matter what she did.

“What do you actually want, then?”

The reviewer said:

“Not a style that's always right. We want you to know why you're deciding this way, and what evidence would make you change.”

Real judgment is not maintaining a fixed personality.

Nor is it training oneself, from past evaluations, into behavior least likely to be eliminated.

It requires taking responsibility anew in each new reality.

Before the final roster was confirmed, a real accident occurred at the training center.

Abnormal microbial spread developed in a sealed environment used to simulate an orbital ecosystem. The danger had not reached the threshold for an external disaster, but if containment failed, the entire center might need to close for a long period.

Qin Zhao was inside at the time.

Han Xu was on the external assessment team.

Preliminary data showed the spread still confined to one unit. The intelligent system recommended closing the ventilation interfaces and initiating stringent isolation.

But Qin Zhao noticed that a maintenance worker might still be near the edge of the isolation zone.

The identification system had not confirmed it.

There was no response over communications either.

Sealing the area immediately would make the spread easiest to contain.

A delay might widen the contamination.

Qin Zhao did not give the order at once.

She requested thirty seconds for a human recheck of the worker's location.

On the external team, it was Han Xu who urged immediate isolation.

“The available information isn't enough to prove anyone's inside,” he said.

Qin Zhao replied:

“Nor is it enough to prove no one is.”

“A delay will increase the risk.”

“I know.”

“You're gambling the whole center on one unconfirmed person.”

“If someone is in there, we're trading a person's life for system safety.”

“If the system gets out of control, more people will be affected.”

Their argument was the exact reverse of the first simulation.

Qin Zhao was no longer the quickest to order action.

Han Xu was no longer the one insisting on waiting.

Neither was forced by a past position to remain their former self.

In the twenty-sixth second, the maintenance worker's location was confirmed.

He was not in the isolation zone.

Qin Zhao immediately carried out the closure.

The contamination was contained.

In the subsequent review, some thought she had delayed too long.

Others believed the thirty-second recheck accorded with final human decision-making authority and the principle of defense against irreversible harm.

Han Xu did not seize the chance to criticize her.

He said:

“If he really had been in there, thirty seconds might not have been enough to save him.”

Qin Zhao replied:

“If the spread had been faster, thirty seconds might also have exposed more people.”

“So would you wait again?”

“Depends on the evidence.”

Han Xu nodded once.

For the first time, neither was trying to prove the other wrong.

When the final roster was announced, both Qin Zhao and Han Xu were selected.

Not because they had reconciled.

Nor because the real accident had proved both sets of abilities indispensable.

The selection panel had adjusted the overall crew composition. Another candidate whose abilities closely resembled Qin Zhao's was moved to a later mission, allowing Han Xu into a primary place.

The candidate left out had ranked higher overall than Han Xu.

The result caused controversy.

Some argued that since everyone had undergone the same training, selection should follow total scores.

The selection panel published its reasoning:

A mission is not a reward for the best individuals.

It must form the whole best able to bear specific risks.

Total scores still matter.

But they cannot replace a comprehensive judgment of the mix of expertise, complementary team abilities, long-term responsibilities, and failure modes.

The unsuccessful candidate had the right to appeal.

She argued that “complementary abilities” could become a vague power allowing reviewers to bypass clear standards.

The objection was valid.

The panel had to disclose further evidence for its judgment, conflicts of interest, and projections for alternative crew combinations. It also had to undergo independent review.

In the end, the result was upheld.

The unsuccessful candidate remained unconvinced.

A complete procedure cannot force someone to agree with its conclusion.

Nor does fairness mean everyone feels fairly treated after the result.

Civilization can make decisions open to questioning, reasons open to inspection, and power unable to hide arbitrary preferences behind “the needs of the whole.” It cannot produce a choice among scarce places without disappointment or dispute.

On the evening the roster was announced, Han Xu found Qin Zhao.

“Congratulations,” he said.

Qin Zhao looked at him.

“Only now?”

“We're not competing for the same place anymore.”

“We're still competing over mission duties.”

“Then I'll congratulate you again once those are settled.”

Qin Zhao smiled a little.

“Do you think you got in because of the team combination?”

“Yes.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Yes.”

“Then why go?”

“The mission needs me. That's a different question from whether I rank highest.”

Qin Zhao fell silent.

Han Xu asked her:

“What about you? If you'd been left out, would you accept it?”

“No.”

“Would you appeal?”

“Yes.”

“And if the appeal failed?”

Qin Zhao thought for a long time.

“I'd hate you all for a while.”

Han Xu nodded.

“That sounds more like the truth.”

Competition did not end once the orbital stay began.

The primary crew still compared professional judgment, task completion, resource use, and public evaluations.

Everyone knew their performance would affect role selection, professional appointments, and opportunities to participate in later missions.

Some wanted to become commanders.

Some wanted longer stays.

Others wanted priority access to scarce equipment for their research.

The shared goal of continued existence had not erased personal ambition.

Qin Zhao and Han Xu still argued.

Once, Han Xu's long-term risk judgment proved correct and prevented equipment damage. That record of reliability meant he was more often asked to take on the corresponding professional judgment and responsibility in similar later tasks.

Qin Zhao was envious.

She knew the outcome was reasonable and was envious all the same.

In another task, Qin Zhao's rapid response saved the whole orbital unit from a debris threat. Public attention focused on her, and the media repeatedly requested remote interviews.

Han Xu did not want to see those reports.

Neither had lost the desire to win simply because civilization's goals were lofty.

The real change was this:

Han Xu's record of reliability on this professional issue did not automatically become control over other fields.

Qin Zhao's public reputation could not replace professional review.

A major contribution was remembered in full, but conferred no permanent place.

Each new task still required a fresh judgment based on current ability, responsibility, physical condition, and conflicts of interest.

Victory could bring more opportunities.

It could not buy the future.

In the eleventh month of the stay, one member developed serious health problems and had to return early.

The reserve team on the ground began the replacement procedure.

The candidate originally left out finally entered orbit.

After arriving, she did not work well with Han Xu.

She continued to believe she should have joined the primary roster earlier. Han Xu felt she was using every excellent performance to put the old selection decision on trial again.

After one task, she asked him directly:

“On ability alone, do you think you're better than I am?”

Han Xu said:

“In some ways, I'm not as good.”

“Then why did you get to come first?”

“Because the combination needed me then.”

“What a convenient thing to say.”

Han Xu did not argue.

For someone excluded by the logic of team composition, it was indeed a convenient statement for the winner.

“I can't make you feel that result didn't hurt you,” he said. “Nor can I say I shouldn't have accepted the mission because you were hurt.”

They both kept their positions.

Later, they still completed many tasks together.

Collaboration does not require every past dispute to be resolved first.

People can disagree about the past, even dislike one another, and still take responsibility for the reality they share today.

Two years later, the orbital stay ended.

All eight members returned safely.

At the public ceremony, everyone was recognized.

But the recognition was not identical.

Some had made crucial breakthroughs.

Some had handled high-risk situations.

Some had never had a dazzling moment in the entire mission, but had continually maintained the basic functions whose failure would have endangered everyone.

The contribution record did not compress them into a single overall ranking.

Nor was the orbital mission told as a rounded story of everyone overcoming themselves and growing together.

There had been errors.

Feelings of unfairness.

Long-running conflicts.

And some decisions whose optimality could not be proved even when the mission ended.

As humanity moves farther into space, technological progress will not free it of envy, ambition, prejudice, and rivalry.

What needs to go with us is not a humanity that has already lost all conflict.

It is a civilizational capacity to keep competition, even while it persists, from destroying the conditions of shared continued existence.

Back on the ground, Qin Zhao qualified as a command candidate for the next phase of missions.

Han Xu did not.

The comprehensive assessment found that his physical condition required a longer recovery, and that he also needed to address the psychological effects of prolonged confinement further.

Han Xu disagreed.

“I can keep going,” he said.

The medical and mission assessments did not accept his own judgment as the sole basis.

He requested a review.

The review upheld the original conclusion.

This time, he was the one refused.

Qin Zhao did not console him with “Rest is a contribution too.”

Han Xu did not need someone to rename his loss.

“Will you go?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Without me?”

“Yes.”

Han Xu nodded.

“Then go.”

This was not selfless generosity.

He was still unwilling to accept his loss.

Still hoped to prove, later, that he could come back.

Qin Zhao knew.

She did not ask him to offer heartfelt blessings as a friend or teammate.

They simply shook hands.

Competition still exists.

As long as human beings have limited time, limited bodies, limited places, and differing wishes, it will not disappear.

Some will win.

Some will lose.

Some will gain opportunities through genuine ability.

Others, even after procedures have been made as fair as possible, will remain shut out by their era, team composition, luck, and a judgment that cannot be made again.

Civilization Leap does not make everyone a winner.

If “everyone wins” merely abolishes all differences, standards, and outcomes, real power will only move somewhere more hidden.

A new civilization must retain real judgment.

Those with greater expertise should bear greater responsibility for judgment on the corresponding professional questions.

Those who bear more real-world responsibility should receive the clearly bounded authority to act that is necessary to fulfill it.

Real contributions should be remembered.

Excellence deserves recognition too.

But no victory may cancel the loser's basic right to survive, personal dignity, right of appeal, or opportunity to enter the future again.

No ranking may become a total score of personal worth.

No single contribution may confer permanent possession of a field.

And no competition may turn the conditions of shared survival, defense against irreversible harm, or final human decision-making authority into stakes that can be won away.

Competition's best outcome is not one person standing above everyone else.

It is individuals, in pursuing what is higher, farther, and stronger, expanding collective capabilities while still knowing:

An opponent is not someone who must be eliminated.

A loser is not someone civilization may discard.

Nor is the shared world the winner's prize.

A person may want to win.

May give everything they have.

May suffer in defeat, envy another's victory, and prove themselves again when the next opportunity comes.

They simply no longer need to crush another person's survival to know they have truly won.

Competition still exists.

Graves need no longer be filled by those who lose.

Chapter 12 Not Everyone Is Willing to Contribute

Once basic survival no longer depends on exchanging labor for it, an ancient question returns:

If people can survive without working, why should anyone do the difficult, dangerous, dirty, repetitive things no one dreams of doing?

And if the fact of contribution is turned back into a ticket to resources and power, is contribution merely competition for advantage in another form?

If someone remains unwilling to participate in any public affairs over the long term, must civilization still secure their living conditions?

Civilization cannot run on the assumption that everyone is good.

Nor can it regard everyone who refuses to contribute as a moral failure.

Some are exhausted.

Some have been hurt.

Some distrust public structures.

Some simply want to live their own lives.

And some genuinely wish to enjoy shared achievements without taking on any shared responsibility.

All these people will exist.

Civilization must remain capable of operating with them as they really are, rather than first requiring everyone to become an ideal person.

Wen Qi did not like public tasks.

He was thirty-nine, healthy, fully educated at the basic level, and had several abilities he could bring to public collaboration.

He had once maintained equipment.

Technological changes had sharply reduced jobs of that kind. He had retrained but had not gone on to new work.

For the next six years, he rarely joined any formal project.

He lived in a community with comprehensive basic services. He had his own room and access to food, medical care, communications, transport, and basic cultural resources.

He read long stories and played complex strategy games every day, occasionally making mechanical models in his private space.

Someone asked why he did not use his modeling skills in public projects.

He said:

“Don't want to.”

“Don't you think you should give something back to society?”

“No.”

“Other people maintain all these services.”

“They choose to.”

“What if everyone were like you?”

“Everyone isn't like me.”

Wen Qi was not waiting for an opportunity.

Nor had he simply not yet found a direction.

He knew where the public tasks were and what his abilities could do. He also knew that, after a long period of nonparticipation, his past record would not automatically give him a special position in access to scarce resources, professional appointments, or public decisions.

He accepted those consequences.

As long as his basic life was unaffected, he did not care.

Many people in the community disliked him.

The judgment Wen Qi heard most often was:

Selfish.

He did not argue.

In one sense, the judgment was not wrong.

He did keep his time for himself, and he did enjoy a public life that existed only through many people's ongoing contributions.

But civilization cannot take away someone's food, shelter, and medical care because he is selfish.

If the basic right to survive is granted only to those willing to contribute, it will ultimately become an instrument of labor obedience again.

Today, it punishes those who explicitly refuse.

Tomorrow, it may punish those who participate less, whose ways of contributing go unrecognized, who have temporarily lost their abilities, or who disagree with prevailing public goals.

Once the right to survive can be withdrawn on the basis of contribution, it is no longer a right to survive.

Wen Qi could therefore continue not to participate.

But equal personhood did not entitle him to demand the same standing to exercise judgment in every professional matter as those bearing professional responsibility.

He could join public discussions.

Question rules.

Appeal infringements of his rights.

But in equipment maintenance, energy dispatch, medical plans, and professional projects, professional facts would still be judged by actors with the corresponding competence and responsibility. Where his rights, resource use, and direct consequences were concerned, however, his lower participation could not exclude him from decisions.

Personhood is equal.

Basic rights have a floor.

Professional competence, real-world responsibility, and eligibility for particular tasks genuinely differ.

Those differences may not be used to deny personhood. Nor may they be pretended away.

A prolonged rainstorm changed the community's view of Wen Qi.

Not because he suddenly had an awakening.

But because an underground drainage node failed and water began backing into low-lying passages.

Automated maintenance equipment had reached the site but could not open an old mechanical valve. The valve had long been removed from the regular system, its structural documentation was incomplete, and forced cutting might damage adjacent pipes.

An urgent public task request went out.

Wen Qi saw it.

He had maintained similar equipment and had reproduced this old transmission mechanism in his private models.

Spark assessed that he might be able to help.

The system asked whether he was willing to join.

Wen Qi tapped Decline.

Outside, the rain grew heavier.

The community began moving residents out of lower floors.

The task was updated again: unless the valve opened within forty minutes, water might enter the backup energy and medical facilities.

Spark did not keep displaying urgent prompts because the risk had escalated.

Wen Qi had already refused.

Unless the legal conditions for emergency requisition were met, public structures could not automatically turn every capable person into a callable resource.

He stayed in his room.

The strategy game was paused.

Outside came the sounds of moving equipment and evacuating people.

He went to the window and saw an embodied intelligent agent helping an older woman from downstairs onto a transport unit. She held a cat in her arms, and her hands kept trembling.

Wen Qi knew her.

Not well.

Sometimes she left extra food she had made in the communal collection area. Once, she had taken care of a model part for Wen Qi that had been left in the wrong place.

He still did not go out immediately.

He paced his room a few times.

Then he swore, picked up his toolkit, and left.

When he reached the site, twenty-one minutes remained.

The project lead did not say, “Thank you for finally coming.”

Only checked his competence, physical condition, and temporary authorization.

After examining the valve, Wen Qi quickly saw that aging equipment was not the problem. Reverse water pressure had completely jammed its internal self-locking mechanism.

“We need to release some pressure first,” he said.

“The upstream connection can't be closed.”

“Then release it through the bypass.”

“The bypass leads into the underground storage area being evacuated.”

“What's still inside?”

“Some public supplies. There's no time to move everything.”

Opening the bypass might damage the supplies.

Keeping it shut would expose the backup energy and medical facilities to greater risk.

The lead asked the system to run rapid projections.

Wen Qi did not wait for all the results.

“Release a third first. Stop when the valve moves.”

“And if it doesn't?”

“Keep releasing.”

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

In an emergency, no one can wait for absolute certainty.

The lead confirmed the chain of responsibility and authorized the operation.

Water rushed into the storage area.

After the first stage of pressure release, the valve still would not move.

Wen Qi entered the narrow maintenance space and adjusted the self-locking mechanism with hand tools.

The water kept rising.

The safety system twice called for evacuation.

He refused the first time and still did not leave the second.

The lead started the countdown to compulsory evacuation.

With ten seconds left, the valve began turning.

Wen Qi shouted to stop releasing pressure through the bypass.

Main drainage was restored.

The water did not enter the backup energy and medical facilities.

Large quantities of supplies were lost in the underground storage area.

Wen Qi's arm was cut by the equipment too.

Afterward, many called him a hero.

Wen Qi resented it.

“I just know how to fix things,” he said.

Some said that if he had accepted the task at the start, the public supplies might not have been damaged.

That was true too.

He had seen the request and refused, joining only after the risk had grown.

His hesitation had tightened the time constraint and might have increased the loss.

Others thought he had had no duty to participate.

Emergency requisition had not begun, and his refusal was entirely within his rights. His eventual willingness to join was already a real assumption of responsibility beyond his basic obligations.

Both judgments existed together.

The contribution record did not preserve only the final success.

It recorded the full sequence:

He possessed relevant competence;

He had explicitly declined both the first and second requests;

He joined voluntarily, without compulsory requisition;

He proposed and took responsibility for releasing pressure through the bypass;

He directly participated in a high-risk operation;

He prevented greater system losses;

There was also a relationship between his delayed participation and the loss of supplies that could not yet be established precisely.

After reading the record, Wen Qi demanded removal of the “possible delay” section.

“You can't blame the loss on me because I didn't help from the beginning.”

The record reviewer said:

“We haven't assigned you responsibility for the loss. We've preserved only the timing and the uncertainty.”

“Then why write it down?”

“Because a contribution can't retain only the part that looks best at the end.”

Wen Qi was angry.

“I don't need this contribution value.”

“You can choose not to use this action as evidence of your personal contribution. The factual record of events with public consequences still has to remain.”

“It's my action.”

“An action with public consequences too.”

Choices in a private domain need not be publicly recorded.

Once action enters a shared system and affects others' resources, safety, and responsibilities, the actor alone cannot decide which parts deserve to be remembered.

But neither may the record use the occasion to judge his previous six years of life.

It explains only what happened this time.

It does not turn one brave act into a permanent character.

Nor does it make his earlier refusals a lifelong stain.

After recovering, Wen Qi did not go on to participate regularly in public maintenance.

Many in the community had thought that after the storm, he would find meaning in being needed.

He did not.

Two months later, a project organizing documentation for old equipment invited him to join.

He refused.

A discussion about updating the drainage system sought his experience.

He attended once, then stopped appearing.

Some were disappointed.

“He clearly has the ability.”

“He only wants to be a hero in a crisis.”

“Routine maintenance matters more than heroes.”

Those statements were not wrong either.

Civilization cannot depend on a few people suddenly becoming brave when disaster comes.

What truly sustains the world is regular inspection, everyday cleaning, repeated training, and the ordinary work behind countless occasions when no accident occurs.

Wen Qi's contribution at a critical moment deserved confirmation.

It could not replace the long-term responsibilities he had not assumed.

Nor could one major contribution give him a permanent professional position in the drainage subdomain.

Past contributions cannot be erased.

For new tasks, who undertakes judgment and execution must still be determined anew, according to current professional competence, authorization, participation, and responsibility.

Wen Qi accepted this.

He had no wish to enter that subdomain.

A year after the storm, the community held its annual discussion of public resources.

Someone proposed lowering the priority of long-term nonparticipants in access to expanded public services.

Basic services would remain unaffected.

But scarce workspaces, long-term travel places, advanced creative equipment, and some high-cost public experiences would be opened first to sustained contributors.

Wen Qi did not accept contribution as a general ticket to resource priority.

He objected to one particular rule:

Applicants who had not participated for a long time would have to give an additional explanation of “the value for personal growth or future contribution.”

“Why do I have to prove I'll contribute later to use a studio?” he asked.

The proposer replied:

“Because resources are limited. They should go to people more likely to produce public value.”

“What about private interests?”

“You can have them. But they shouldn't have the same priority as public projects.”

“Of course limited resources need an order of priority. I object to that order being decided by how much someone contributes. And I object even more to saying that only interests likely to become contributions deserve resources.”

The discussion went on for a long time.

Some thought Wen Qi was only seeking an advantage for himself.

Others pointed out that if all high-quality resources were distributed around expected contribution, private exploration would once again be forced to prove its public usefulness.

The final rules were adjusted:

Scarce resources would be assessed separately according to purpose, real need, risk, professional requirements, current occupancy, substitutability, and fairness of opportunity;

Applications tied to a defined public task could receive necessary priority when the corresponding task authorization and responsibility were established. Priority would come from the task's needs, not a person's past contributions. Personal exploration without a defined public goal would retain a fair route of access;

Those long without an opportunity would retain access through rotation for low-risk resources;

No application would require a promise of future contribution;

Use would entail responsibility only for actual occupancy, risk, and public effects.

Wen Qi's long period of low participation did not disqualify him from raising questions.

He was not a drainage engineering professional and could not judge engineering facts in the professionals' place.

But as a resource applicant and a party directly affected by the rules, his rights, needs, and objections had to enter the decision process.

This did not make every opinion equally correct.

It prevented those who participated less from becoming voiceless objects when their own rights were at stake.

After the rules passed, Wen Qi applied for a small studio.

He did not describe a future project.

His application entered the personal-exploration quota. He waited seven months.

Once he received usage rights, he began making an extremely complex mechanical model city.

The model had no public function.

It was not for education.

Nor was it intended for exhibition.

It simply ran as Wen Qi imagined it: water, transport, energy, housing, and tiny mechanical life interwoven through a multilayered structure.

He worked on it for four years.

It remained unfinished.

Some systems conflicted, making it harder to sustain the further it progressed. Intelligence could help optimize it, but he allowed only safety checks and refused automatic restructuring.

“Why not let it calculate a better design?” someone asked.

“Then it wouldn't be what I want to make.”

“What you want to make doesn't run at all right now.”

“That's why I'm still making it.”

The model did not enter the contribution record.

Nor did Wen Qi apply for that.

Over four years, he used real materials, energy, and public space. This resource use was recorded. For use beyond his personal allocation, he bore material, maintenance, and rotation costs under the published usage rules, partly by helping maintain the space.

He still did not like public tasks.

To keep getting studio time, he completed the minimum amount of space maintenance each month.

Some thought this proved self-interest could motivate contribution.

Wen Qi said:

“I'm just paying the cost of using it.”

He did not want to call this exchange devotion.

There was no need to.

Civilization does not require every useful action to arise from noble motives.

Someone who joins public maintenance for their own goals still makes a real contribution, provided the rules are transparent, the action genuine, and the outcomes effective.

Self-interest need not disguise itself as altruism to enter shared life.

The crucial questions are whether that self-interest rests on costs others are forced to bear, and whether the person accepts the corresponding responsibilities when receiving public resources.

Before the model was finished, Wen Qi received another urgent task request.

This time, it was not a disaster.

A remote community retained an old mechanical water-supply structure similar to one in his model and needed experienced people for remote diagnosis.

When Wen Qi saw it, he did not immediately refuse.

He checked the task's duration, risks, and current participants. The problem was not urgent, and others could handle it.

He closed the request.

Two days later, the task was still unfinished.

He opened it again.

Not because he remembered the old woman in the storm.

Nor because a sense of responsibility suddenly arose.

He was simply interested in the mechanism.

Wen Qi joined the remote collaboration.

Diagnosis took five hours.

A young local maintainer ultimately solved the problem. Neither of Wen Qi's two judgments was entirely correct, but they helped rule out several possibilities.

The task record confirmed only a small contribution from him.

He was not dissatisfied.

A few days later, the maintainer sent a photograph of the repaired equipment.

Wen Qi glanced at it and saved it among his private modeling materials.

He still did not actively seek out many public tasks.

From then on, though, he occasionally opened requests involving certain old mechanical structures.

The world had not made him a public-spirited citizen through a moral appeal.

It had simply, on one occasion, connected a real problem with a personal interest.

That was enough to keep some of his ability from remaining forever within the private domain.

Others in the community were different from Wen Qi.

They refused to contribute over the long term while continually demanding more scarce resources.

Some falsified participation records.

Some occupied public space for extended private use.

Others used basic services and the right to exit to evade responsibilities repeatedly across different areas.

A new civilization still had to address such conduct.

Basic survival could not be withdrawn.

But deception, appropriation, and damage had to carry consequences.

Falsified contribution records would be corrected and responsibility pursued. Any specific arrangements based on false records would need to be revoked or reviewed again.

Occupancy beyond the permitted scope required returning resources and taking responsibility for restoration.

Continually exploiting structural loopholes to shift costs onto others required correction, restitution, compensation, or usage restrictions proportionate to the specific risk. Restrictions addressed actual conduct and consequences, not low participation itself.

Not contributing is not a crime.

Appropriation, deception, and harm are not “not contributing.”

Civilization respects a person's choice not to join public action.

That does not mean letting them turn public structures into resources serving only themselves without responsibility.

When Wen Qi was fifty-one, the mechanical city still did not fully function.

Late one night, its water system fell out of balance again.

Tiny channels overflowed from the upper level, wrecking an area he had spent months making.

Wen Qi sat in the studio and did not shut it off immediately.

He watched water continue downward along the wrong paths, setting in motion several mechanical units that had never worked before.

Part of the city was destroyed.

Another part moved for the first time.

This was not the result he had designed.

Nor was it a surprise generated for him by the system.

It was simply a new relationship that happened to emerge after the structure went out of control.

Wen Qi slowly reduced the flow without restoring things to their previous state.

The next day, he applied to extend his studio time and submitted a new public research request:

Would anyone like to observe together how unplanned water flows change a multilayered mechanical system?

It was the first public task he had initiated himself.

Few responded.

Several mechanical researchers thought the model lacked sufficient precision.

An artist found it interesting.

Two children also wanted to see what would happen “after the water wrecked the city.”

Wen Qi accepted them.

This did not turn him into a different person.

He still disliked group meetings.

Still often refused requests.

Still showed strong possessiveness when others changed the model.

During the first shared experiment, he terminated everyone's access because a child moved a building without permission.

Only several days later did he reopen it, adding clear rules:

Which areas belonged to private creation;

Which parts entered the shared experiment;

No one's participation in public observation gave them the right to modify the whole model.

Participation in the public domain opens up abilities, not the entire person.

Opening part of a work does not mean private creation now belongs to the community.

Wen Qi first truly understood that boundary not because he wanted to contribute.

But because he feared others taking possession of what was his.

Starting from self-protection, a person can gradually understand why others' boundaries must not be crossed either.

Not everyone is willing to contribute.

Nor will everyone, faced with a disaster, a moving moment, or a real need, finally become an active bearer of public life.

Some participate very little throughout their lives.

Some keep most of their time for themselves.

Some are willing to open part of their abilities only when interest, advantage, and a shared problem happen to meet.

Civilization must accept this unevenness.

If a system can operate only when everyone is selfless, active, and continually committed, it is not a civilizational institution. It is merely a dependence on ideal character.

Shared life needs stable basic maintenance, reasonable incentives, professional responsibility, shared risks, and necessary constraints.

It also needs to leave a place for those unwilling to participate.

For the fact that altruism is the highest form of self-interest does not mean lower forms of self-interest will disappear from human nature.

Civilization Leap does not require everyone to become a saint first.

It enables someone, even starting from self-interest, to see that the food, roads, medical care, energy, knowledge, and safety they rely on do not exist out of nowhere. When they release some ability, resources, and time into real use, the shared world grows more stable, and their own life gains a more reliable foundation.

Contribution value can keep these real effects from being forgotten.

Sustained responsibility does not buy resources or power. It should be recorded faithfully, while specific resource use and public decisions still return to the relevant rights, rules, needs, professional judgments, and responsibilities.

But contribution must not become a hierarchy of personal worth.

Still less a license to survive.

Wen Qi's leaving his room in the storm deserves to be remembered.

His later refusals of many more tasks should not bring a fresh condemnation.

A person is not a moral account continually being settled.

What civilization truly needs is not everyone contributing at every moment.

It needs there always to be someone willing to step forward when the shared world needs them; a world that does not rush to push someone into the abyss when they are unwilling to emerge for a time; and, when they finally open the door, no prior demand that they prove they have always been a good person.

Some will come for ideals.

Some for honor.

Some for rights and interests.

Some simply because the old woman outside the window, holding her cat, cannot stop her hands from trembling.

Motives differ.

As long as real action enters reality, bears real responsibility, and spares another life harm that could have been avoided, civilization need not first judge someone's heart before recognizing what they have done.

For family, for lovers, for friends, for colleagues, for customers, for strangers, for everyone! Meaning emerges. Everyone for me, and I for everyone!

Part IV How Life Continues to Be Sustained

Chapter 13 When the Body Begins to Age

Aging is not an accident that happens all at once.

It begins with very small changes.

Words in the distance become hard to read.

You forget what you were about to say.

The same walk takes longer than before.

The body recovers more slowly, sleep grows lighter, and familiar people leave one by one.

A person is still themselves.

But the world begins to see them differently.

Speak a little slowly, and someone answers for you.

Fall a little behind on a walk, and someone decides you need not go.

Hesitate in expression, and your judgment is questioned.

Need help with your body, and your whole person is easily placed on the side of those “who need looking after.”

Aging brings real changes in ability.

Civilization cannot pretend age is only a number.

But neither can age justify taking away a person's choices, desires, dignity, and future.

Older people still love.

Still feel envy.

Still want to begin things they will not have time to finish.

Still make wrong decisions.

They fear death, and they can also tire of everyone asking them to keep living bravely.

Entering old age is not a retreat from life into merely what remains of it.

As long as someone still feels, chooses, and responds, their life is still happening in the present.

At seventy-nine, Meng Lan decided to leave the house where she had lived for forty-three years.

Not because she could no longer live there.

The house had been adapted for aging, and everyday services could reach her reliably. She was in reasonable health. Apart from degenerating knee joints and mild hearing loss, she had no condition requiring long-term care.

Both daughters wanted her to stay.

The elder lived nearby and could come at any time.

The younger had lived elsewhere for years but participated in her life through remote presence.

“You have everything here,” the elder daughter said.

Meng Lan replied:

“That's exactly why I want to leave.”

She wanted to move to a small riverside city.

She had lived there for three years when young. Then came marriage, children, and work. Again and again she said she would go back someday, but never truly did.

After her husband died, she made her first extended stay there.

In two months, she got to know a group who painted by the river early in the morning, and a man named Zhou Wei'an.

Zhou Wei'an was eighty-two.

He had been widowed for years.

He played a bowed string instrument, not particularly well, and liked to stand beside people painting and offer irritating opinions.

At first, Meng Lan did not like him.

Later, they began having breakfast together.

Her decision to move had something to do with Zhou Wei'an.

But he was not the only reason.

Her daughter soon realized that her mother might have begun a relationship.

She did not ask directly.

First, she requested access to recent changes in her mother's health and safety authorizations.

The request was refused.

That made the elder daughter more uneasy.

“I'm not trying to look into your private life. I just want to know whether that man is trustworthy.”

Meng Lan asked:

“What does trustworthy mean?”

“Does he have debts? Has he hurt anyone before? How is his health? Why is he getting close to you?”

“What about me? Should he investigate me first too?”

“You're different.”

“How?”

Her daughter did not say.

What she really wanted to say was:

You're old.

People around older lovers often see their love as both charming and dangerous.

If it is only walks and meals together, people smile.

Once bodies, property, shared housing, and long-term choices enter, tenderness quickly becomes vigilance.

That vigilance is not wholly unreasonable.

Older people may face cognitive decline, financial deception, physical risks, and dependence on care. Emotional need can also make someone more likely to overlook danger.

But risk does not belong only to old age.

Young people make wrong choices for love too.

The difference is that the mistakes of the young are usually recognized as life; the mistakes of the old are more readily explained as declining capacity.

“I can accept a necessary risk assessment,” Meng Lan said. “But not you deciding for me whether this person is worth loving.”

Her daughter said nothing for a long time.

“I'm afraid you'll be deceived.”

“So am I.”

“And you're still going?”

“Being afraid of deception doesn't mean never trusting anyone again.”

Meng Lan and Zhou Wei'an jointly applied for limited relationship certification.

It was not marriage.

Nor did it merge their property, medical decision-making rights, or complete life data.

They confirmed only their intention to live together, the order of emergency contacts, basic cost sharing, and how either could leave the relationship.

Zhou Wei'an's health information was made available within the scope he authorized.

Meng Lan opened corresponding information too.

Neither person's daughters had access to their everyday exchanges.

Relationship certification did not prove the love was real.

Institutions cannot certify love.

They can only keep the parts of shared life that may have major consequences from resting entirely on verbal trust and family speculation.

Her daughter remained uneasy.

She proposed keeping her mother's old home for a year.

Meng Lan refused.

“Even empty, the house is still mine.”

“Exactly. That's why you should keep it.”

“I don't need it.”

“What if you regret it later?”

“Then I'll work something out.”

“Why do you insist on closing off your way back?”

Meng Lan looked at her daughter.

“Because you're not keeping a way back for me. You're keeping a place for me to return to after I fail.”

Her daughter's eyes reddened.

“I just want you to have somewhere to come back to.”

“I know.”

Meng Lan took her hand.

“But I can't live forever in a life that's already ended just to put your mind at ease.”

After the move, reality soon disrupted their romantic imaginings.

Zhou Wei'an snored.

Meng Lan needed quiet in the morning. He liked to play string music as soon as he woke.

Their habits around food, temperature, and space were completely different.

Zhou Wei'an always left things where he had used them, insisting he knew where they were. Meng Lan liked to tidy up, so when he could not find something, he accused her of moving things around.

Their first serious argument came when Zhou Wei'an showed one of Meng Lan's paintings to friends without asking.

It showed her husband from behind, near the end of his life.

She had never intended to make it public.

“They all said it was good,” Zhou Wei'an said.

“I didn't tell you to show it to anyone.”

“Just a few friends.”

“How many isn't the point.”

“I was appreciating your work.”

“Appreciation can't authorize it for me.”

Zhou Wei'an thought she was overreacting.

“You put it in the shared room.”

“Putting a painting in a shared room doesn't authorize its entry into the public domain.”

For three whole days, they did not eat together.

The remote system did not classify the silence as a relationship anomaly.

Nor did it alert either person's children.

Two older people with full capacity for judgment had the right to argue, and the right to keep their families out of it for a while.

On the third day, Zhou Wei'an withdrew all circulated copies and told everyone who had seen the painting that it had been shared without its creator's permission and must not be kept or forwarded.

The painting had already been seen.

Withdrawal could not make that never have happened.

Nor did Meng Lan forgive him immediately because he had made amends.

“Have you still not recognized me as someone who can truly say no to you?” she asked.

Zhou Wei'an did not answer.

He was used to being looked after, and to treating many things in later-life relationships as mutual accommodation.

But intimacy is not the gradual disappearance of boundaries.

The closer two people become, the more they must acknowledge:

The other still has parts they do not open to you.

Six months later, Meng Lan's knees deteriorated markedly.

Her doctor recommended surgery.

The risks were manageable, but recovery would be long.

Both daughters wanted her to return to her former city for treatment.

Zhou Wei'an thought the small city's medical support sufficient and said he could care for her.

Meng Lan did not trust him to do it.

“You even forget your own medication.”

“I have Spark to remind me.”

“And you turn the reminders off.”

“Won't your daughters get tired too?”

“At least they know how to look after someone.”

That hurt Zhou Wei'an.

He left the house and stayed away all day.

Later, Meng Lan realized she was not only concerned about his ability.

She had never truly imagined this eighty-two-year-old man as someone who could care for her.

They could love each other, eat together, walk, and argue.

When her body truly needed help, she still instinctively turned back to her daughters.

Love can begin in old age.

Trust in care does not automatically come with it.

It needs ability, and proof in reality.

When Zhou Wei'an returned, he did not keep arguing.

He applied for care training and reopened the necessary health-management access, so that his own condition would not become an additional risk during Meng Lan's recovery.

In the end, Meng Lan still chose surgery in her former city.

Zhou Wei'an went with her.

Her daughter handled most medical coordination. He provided everyday company and helped with rehabilitation exercises.

The first time he helped Meng Lan bathe, both felt deeply awkward.

In love, the body had been desire and closeness.

Now it was also a vulnerable presence that needed supporting, cleaning, and protecting.

Meng Lan did not want him to see the surgical wound.

Zhou Wei'an did not say, “What is there between us that I can't see?”

He handed her a towel and turned away.

Being able to care does not confer the right to look.

In the third week of recovery, Meng Lan refused further exercises because of the pain.

Zhou Wei'an urged her several times, but she would not move.

Her daughter came in and said:

“You have to exercise. Otherwise walking will be even harder later.”

Meng Lan suddenly lost her temper.

“Then I won't walk.”

Everyone knew that was not the outcome she truly wanted.

But at that moment, she genuinely did not want to bear more pain.

The medical Spark offered plans with differing intensities and consequences, clearly indicating the possible effects of pausing rehabilitation.

The choice still returned to her.

Zhou Wei'an stopped trying to persuade her.

He sat beside the bed and picked up that dreadful-sounding instrument.

“What are you doing?”

“Practicing.”

“Go practice outside.”

“I don't want to practice today either.”

“Then don't.”

“But if I don't, I'll sound even worse.”

Meng Lan glared at him.

“You don't sound much better when you do.”

Zhou Wei'an drew out a long, piercing note.

Meng Lan could not help laughing, and laughing hurt the wound.

She cursed at him.

After a while, she held the edge of the bed and stood up herself.

The music had not healed her.

Nor had love conquered pain.

She simply no longer wanted that awful sound in the room.

“Come on,” she said. “Ten minutes.”

Zhou Wei'an put down the instrument and handed her the walker.

After surgery, Meng Lan gradually regained mobility.

She did not return to her old condition.

Long walks remained difficult, and she could no longer stand painting for long periods as before.

She began using a body-extension device.

It could support her joints, anticipate imbalance, and stabilize her before a fall.

The first time she wore it, she disliked it intensely.

“It's like being propped up and walked by a machine.”

The technician adjusted its response strength.

Too strong, and the device took over her body before it needed to.

Too weak, and it lost its protective effect.

Through repeated training, the system gradually learned her movement habits. She also learned to distinguish which forces came from herself and which were supplied by the device.

The body extension did not make her young again.

It merely returned some of the scope for action she had lost.

She still felt pain.

Still walked slowly.

Still needed help from others on some stretches of the path.

Technology's real value is not making aging seem nonexistent.

It is keeping the weakening of one ability from closing every route a person has into the world too soon.

At eighty-three, Meng Lan took up her brush again.

She had studied painting when young, then stopped for a long time because of work and family.

After retirement, she painted occasionally but never publicly showed her work.

After moving to the small city, she joined the morning painters, at first only because she did not want to stay home alone.

She was not a particularly good painter.

Her compositions were often unbalanced, and her colors too close to the habits of her former textile color-checking work.

Zhou Wei'an always liked to comment.

“That tree doesn't look like a tree.”

“What does it look like?”

“Don't know.”

“Then keep quiet.”

After recovering, she could no longer stand by the river for long.

Spark could complete an image from her observations and instructions, or turn eye movements, speech, and remaining hand movements into more precise brushstrokes.

Meng Lan used only some of this.

She let the equipment steady her arm but would not let the system correct her colors.

Others told her some color relationships were inaccurate in natural light.

She said:

“This is what I see.”

With declining hearing, her world of sound had already changed.

Her vision was aging too.

She was no longer sure she saw the colors most people saw together.

But painting was not a medical examination.

She had the right to paint her own world.

She completed a series of riverside works.

There was no grand theme.

Most showed benches, early mornings, people leaving the frame, and the light in the same place in different seasons.

The community suggested a public exhibition.

Meng Lan refused.

“They aren't good enough.”

“Showing them doesn't mean claiming they're outstanding.”

“Then why show anyone?”

“That's for you to decide.”

She kept the works in her private domain.

A year later, a young painter from the group died.

He had often sat on the farthest bench along the bank, said little, and never disclosed his illness.

As the group gathered shared memories, they discovered that no one had kept a complete visual record of him.

Yet in several of Meng Lan's paintings, a figure seated in the distance appeared repeatedly, seen from behind.

Someone asked her to make them available.

She agreed to release three.

The paintings were not called memorials.

Nor did they establish that the figure was necessarily the deceased.

They preserved only one fact:

On certain mornings, someone had sat there.

After that, Meng Lan gradually began opening some of her works to others.

Not to become a painter.

Nor because she had finally fulfilled a youthful dream in old age.

She had simply discovered that some things in the world she had seen could be carried forward by others.

That was reason enough to share them.

At eighty-six, Zhou Wei'an began showing early cognitive changes.

He started forgetting recent arrangements.

Once, he went out alone and took a wrong turn.

His safety device helped him return and informed Meng Lan and his family under the existing authorization.

A daughter suggested they stop living together.

“You need looking after yourself,” she told Meng Lan. “You can't take him on as well.”

Meng Lan did not immediately object.

She knew her physical abilities were limited and feared Zhou Wei'an's condition would worsen.

Deeper down, she also feared another long goodbye.

She had already been through that when her husband died.

She did not know whether she was willing to go through it again.

Zhou Wei'an was furious when he heard about the discussion.

“I only took a wrong turn once.”

“It isn't just once,” Meng Lan said.

“You forget things too.”

“Yes.”

“Then why am I the one who has to move out?”

“Because your risks are higher now.”

“So you've all settled it?”

“Not yet.”

“Will you stop wanting me?”

The question came from an eighty-six-year-old man.

Not a child.

Not someone who had lost all capacity for judgment.

He could still understand relationships and feel the possibility of being left.

Meng Lan did not promise she never would.

“If I can't care for you safely, we'll need other arrangements.”

“I don't need you to care for me.”

“You're beginning to need care.”

Zhou Wei'an looked at her.

“And you? You don't need it?”

“I do.”

“Why do your needs count as sharing a life, while mine count as a burden?”

Meng Lan had no answer.

Differences in ability change relationships.

But who gives care and who receives it are not always fixed.

Over these years, Zhou Wei'an had accompanied her through surgery and exercises, carried her painting supplies, and sat beside her when old dreams woke her at night.

Now his needs were greater.

That did not mean their past life together had disappeared.

They did not retain their old living arrangement.

Nor did they separate at once.

Their new home consisted of two adjacent but independent living units, with a shared space between them that could be opened. Professional care came in, and Meng Lan did not bear primary responsibility for safety. Zhou Wei'an kept the parts of life he could manage independently and could close the shared space during lucid periods.

On the first day, Zhou Wei'an was very dissatisfied.

“Like two people pretending they still live together.”

Meng Lan said:

“Better than one being dragged down by the other.”

“Do you regret meeting me?”

“A little, today.”

Zhou Wei'an smiled.

“And tomorrow?”

“We'll see tomorrow.”

Shared life need not have only two forms:

Living closely together forever, or separating completely.

As bodies, memories, and abilities change, the ways a relationship is sustained can change too.

Change is not always betrayal.

Sometimes people must give up an old form of closeness precisely because they do not want love exhausted by care they cannot bear.

Zhou Wei'an's cognition declined slowly.

Some days, he recognized Meng Lan.

Other days, she only looked familiar.

Once, he asked:

“Who are you?”

Meng Lan said:

“The person next door.”

“Do we know each other well?”

“Sometimes.”

“Then why do you keep coming in?”

“Because you used to play your instrument so badly.”

Zhou Wei'an looked at her.

“I play an instrument?”

“Yes.”

“I've played for you?”

“I listened for years.”

“Did you like it?”

“No.”

The old man laughed.

At that moment, he did not know they had loved each other.

But the laughter really happened.

A relationship does not exist only in complete memory.

It also exists in feelings, responses, and time together that can still happen now.

Meng Lan did not ask him to remember.

Being forgotten hurt.

But loving someone whose memory is breaking apart cannot mean turning every lucid moment into a test on the past.

At eighty-eight, Meng Lan finished her last riverside painting.

She rarely went to the river herself anymore.

A remote terminal could bring the full riverside environment into her room. With her authorization, embodied intelligent agents could also bring her light, sounds, wind, and the changes of season from there.

She did not let the system generate the painting directly.

She watched the distant river, transmitted live, for only a little while.

Then she turned off the terminal.

There was no river in the painting.

Only two benches, very close but not touching.

One was empty.

Zhou Wei'an was still alive then. He simply rarely recognized her anymore.

Someone asked whether the empty bench represented loss.

Meng Lan said:

“It's just an empty bench.”

She did not want to prescribe meaning for future viewers.

Aging takes many things away.

Strength.

Speed.

Memory.

Bodily wholeness.

Some of the ability to live independently.

It also takes identities some people once believed they could never lose.

But aging cannot automatically take away a person's rights to desire, privacy, love, judgment, creation, and mistakes.

Older people can be protected.

They must not thereby be infantilized.

They can receive help.

They must not thereby be required to feel grateful.

After cognitive changes, others may take on some decisions for them.

But the loss of some abilities cannot remove them altogether from their own lives.

Nor can civilization treat prolonging life as the only good.

It cannot require someone to accept every life-prolonging technology to prove they cherish life.

Still less can it package old age as an eternally positive, composed, and wise phase, leaving exhaustion, fear, desire, anger, and unwillingness to give in once again without a place for expression.

An old person is still a person.

Not a memorial left by a past life.

Not an object waiting for children to fulfill their filial devotion.

Not a set of vital signs a medical system must maintain.

Nor a role civilization uses to demonstrate its own warmth.

They are still in the present.

Still able to begin a love affair.

Leave a house lived in for forty-three years.

Paint a painting that is not very good.

Say hurtful things to those closest to them.

After being forgotten, come to know the same person again.

The body will age.

What civilization truly needs to protect is not a body frozen forever in youth.

It is a person's still-unfinished future after the body changes.

Chapter 14 A Person Who Is Ill Is Still Living

Often, the first thing illness changes is not the body.

It is how others see a person.

Before the diagnosis, they have work, interests, a temper, secrets, and unfinished plans.

Afterward, everyone sees the illness first.

Asks whether it hurts.

Whether treatment offers hope.

What help they need.

Rarely asks anymore:

What have you been enjoying lately?

Where else would you like to go?

What are you angry about?

Have you fallen in love with anyone?

As though illness temporarily suspends a person's life, leaving only the wait for recovery.

But many illnesses never fully resolve.

Some remain for the long term.

Some slowly worsen.

Others, even with the most advanced medical care, can only be slowed, not reversed.

If civilization knows only how to help people return to a “healthy life,” those unable to return will be left outside life forever.

At twenty-nine, Jiang Wancheng was diagnosed with a progressive neurological disease.

At first, her right hand only occasionally lost strength.

In the laboratory, she picked up a container and her fingers suddenly released it. It fell onto the bench without breaking.

She thought it was only fatigue.

A few months later, she began losing her balance slightly as she walked. Her speech had slowed a little too.

The examinations continued for a long time.

Each result ruled out one possibility and pushed her toward another that was harder to accept.

When the final diagnosis was confirmed, the doctor did not tell her to “stay positive.”

Nor did the doctor use an average disease course to predict her individual fate.

Existing treatment could slow some functional decline. Body extensions, neural interfaces, and assistive intelligence could also preserve many abilities to act over the long term.

But no one could promise to stop the progression.

After listening, Wancheng asked only:

“How much longer can I do experiments?”

The doctor said:

“That depends on what you mean by ‘do.’”

“With my own hands.”

“Fine manipulation may become increasingly difficult.”

“How long?”

“We don't know.”

“Does that mean months, or years?”

“Either is possible.”

Wancheng did not cry.

She asked for confirmation three times.

Not because she had not understood.

But because she hoped that when the same question was asked a third time, the answer might change.

It did not.

Wancheng studied deep-sea microbial environments.

She was used to doing a great deal of fine manipulation by hand, and loved the concentration that arose only when her body truly entered the experiment.

Her colleagues quickly adapted her working environment.

Equipment could stabilize her hand movements.

Intelligent systems could take over high-precision operations.

She needed only to exercise judgment.

Everyone said this meant she could continue her research.

Wancheng did not see it that way.

“That isn't me doing it,” she said.

The project lead replied:

“The decisions are still yours.”

“I'm not handling the samples.”

“Many researchers don't handle every sample themselves.”

“But I used to be able to.”

That was the real problem.

Not whether the new method was effective enough.

But that she was losing abilities that had once been hers.

Others rushed to tell her what she could still do because they could not bear what she was losing.

“You don't have to prove every time that I still can,” she said. “I know machines can do it for me.”

Replacement kept the work going.

It did not mean the loss had never happened.

In the first month after the diagnosis, Wancheng received a great deal of concern.

Friends brought food.

Colleagues volunteered to share her tasks.

Family members took turns staying with her.

Everyone was sincere.

Yet she grew increasingly irritable.

Every conversation eventually returned to the disease.

If she posted a photograph of dinner, people asked about her appetite.

If she said the weather had been lovely, people reminded her that temperature changes might affect her body.

If she mentioned a boring work of art, a friend would still say gently:

“It's already good that you can concentrate on anything right now.”

As though from now on, every ordinary thing she did deserved encouragement.

Wancheng began reducing contact.

Not because she did not need friends.

But because she did not want to become someone needing care in every relationship.

She reset her relationship permissions in Spark:

Her health status would no longer be automatically available to all relatives and friends;

Ordinary fluctuations would not trigger prompts to check on her;

Relevant information would enter designated relationships only in cases of clear risk, important treatment decisions, or her own active request.

Her mother was very unhappy.

“I'm your mother. Why can't I know?”

“Because I don't want to explain myself every day.”

“I'm only worried.”

“Your worrying doesn't mean my whole body belongs to you.”

Her mother cried.

Wancheng cried too.

Boundaries cannot remove the pain love brings.

They can only stop love from expanding without limit into possession.

Wancheng had been with her partner, Cen Ye, for four years.

After the diagnosis, Cen Ye was almost never away.

He learned about the disease's progression, the equipment, and emergency procedures, and adjusted his working arrangements.

At first, Wancheng felt reassured.

Later, she began to doubt.

“Are you only afraid to leave because I'm ill?”

“No,” Cen Ye said.

“What if you'd already wanted to separate?”

“I hadn't.”

“And later?”

“I won't later either.”

Wancheng immediately grew angry.

“How can you say you won't?”

Cen Ye did not know how to answer.

Saying he might leave felt like betrayal.

Saying he never would felt like turning himself into a guarantee.

Illness gave every ordinary change in love an additional moral weight.

If the healthy partner left, it was easily seen as abandonment.

If the ill partner doubted, they might interpret every act of staying as pity.

Cen Ye did not want Wancheng to feel that responsibility had trapped him.

Nor did he want to pretend the disease had not changed them.

“I want to stay now,” he said. “If that changes later, I'll tell you.”

Wancheng looked at him.

It was not the promise she wanted to hear.

But it was more real than forever.

Six months later, Wancheng fell in public for the first time.

That day, she had refused to use her walking-assistance device.

It could now provide stability without noticeably changing her appearance. But she did not want every step of her body corrected before it happened.

As she descended some steps, her right leg suddenly gave way.

Cen Ye reached to catch her but was too late.

Wancheng fell to the ground, injuring her knee.

People quickly gathered.

Someone asked whether to call medical support.

Someone tried to help her stand.

Someone else opened a terminal to record the incident for later review.

Wancheng shouted:

“Go away, all of you!”

Her voice was less clear than she expected.

The crowd stopped.

Cen Ye crouched a little way off without touching her.

“May I help you up?” he asked.

Wancheng did not answer.

Lying on the ground, she felt pain, and felt every gaze fall on the body she could not control.

She had once believed that with respectful people, restrained technology, and sound institutions, she could preserve her dignity.

Only after actually falling did she learn that dignity cannot always remain intact in humiliation and disorder.

She could be afraid.

Ashamed.

Lash out at others.

Hear every approach as pity at the very moment she needed help.

A few minutes later, she nodded.

Cen Ye helped her sit up.

Medical staff confirmed there was no serious injury.

The incident record retained only necessary information. All unauthorized footage from the scene was isolated.

At home, Wancheng activated walking assistance herself.

No one said:

“You should have done that long ago.”

Someone being hurt after refusing help does not mean all their future refusals may be ignored.

This consequence showed only that she needed to reassess the risk under similar conditions.

It did not prove that others now had a greater right than she did to decide about her body.

At first, Wancheng found the equipment hard to get used to.

Before she took a step, the support structure would already tighten slightly.

Before her body fell, the system predicted a possible loss of balance.

“It doesn't trust me,” she said.

The technician replied:

“It doesn't trust or distrust. It only predicts.”

“Predicting means not letting me walk for myself.”

“We can reduce how strongly it intervenes.”

“And if I fall?”

“The risk will increase.”

Wancheng adjusted it many times.

One day, the intervention was too weak and she lost her balance again.

Another day, it was too strong. The device stopped her turning quickly, and she almost struck the laboratory bench.

Assistance is not a simple addition to ability.

It also changes bodily experience and creates new dependencies and risks.

Wancheng had to learn her own body again.

Once, movement had passed directly from intention into muscle.

Now perception, prediction, protection, and correction lay between them.

Sometimes she could not tell whether she or the device had completed a steady step.

Cen Ye said:

“It's all you.”

Wancheng disagreed.

“What it does is what it does.”

She did not want “human-machine unity” to erase real differences.

The equipment was an extension she had authorized.

It was not proof that her bodily abilities had never been lost.

Acknowledging the extension also meant acknowledging why it was needed.

In the second year of the illness, Wancheng withdrew from on-site laboratory work.

She was not forced to leave.

The project was still willing to keep a place for her.

She could also continue fine manipulation through remote intelligent agents.

But every time she saw equipment perform steps she had once done with her own hands, she felt anger.

That anger began affecting her judgment.

She interfered excessively in remote operations.

Demanded repeated attempts over tiny differences.

Read colleagues' suggestions as attempts to replace her.

In one experiment, she insisted on keeping a clearly substandard set of samples.

A young researcher proposed collecting them again.

Wancheng refused.

“You just think I can't do it anymore.”

“No,” the researcher said. “These samples really are unstable.”

“We didn't always redo everything in similar situations before.”

“The old records show you recommended redoing it yourself.”

The evidence was retrieved.

Wancheng saw her past self applying the very standard others were applying today.

She could not keep arguing.

That day, she applied to suspend her project permissions.

Not because she no longer had ability.

But because, in the pain of losing bodily abilities, she could no longer reliably distinguish professional judgment from self-defense.

Admitting a temporary inability to judge was harder than continuing to occupy the position.

For a long time after leaving the site, Wancheng wanted to do nothing.

She refused to be assigned work “better suited to her current body.”

She did not want to analyze data.

Did not want to mentor younger researchers.

Did not want to become a public example of how illness and research could coexist.

Someone invited her to speak about continuing to create with the help of intelligence.

She replied:

“I haven't continued creating.”

The answer left the person who had invited her at a loss.

The public likes to hear how someone overcame limitations.

It seldom wants to hear that they did not.

Stories of illness often turn patients into one of two figures:

A sufferer deserving sympathy;

A fighter deserving admiration.

Both roles require them to supply meaning for others.

Wancheng would not.

She could be ill.

Could be low.

Could have no revelation to offer.

Could receive the best support and still feel that life was terrible.

Civilization cannot require everyone it supports to prove its worth by living positively.

In the third year, Cen Ye proposed a break from living together.

There was no new relationship.

Nor was he unwilling to provide care.

He simply had not had a life of his own for a long time.

Wancheng's condition, treatment, emotions, and daily needs had gradually occupied all their time. Professional care services had always been available, but Cen Ye kept thinking that if he could do it himself, there was no need to bring in a stranger.

He took on more and more.

And grew quieter and quieter.

Until one day, Wancheng lost her temper with him over a slow response from remote equipment.

Cen Ye did not argue.

That evening, he said:

“I want to move out for a while.”

Wancheng looked at him.

“You finally can't bear it anymore.”

“Yes.”

The answer cut like a knife.

Cen Ye did not say he only needed a rest.

He truly could not bear it anymore.

“Then go,” Wancheng said.

“I'll keep providing the care we've already agreed on, and I won't close the emergency contact channel.”

“I don't need your responsibility.”

“Then let's reconfirm the arrangements.”

“Cancel everything.”

“You're angry right now.”

“So I can't decide when I'm angry?”

Cen Ye stopped.

Anger does not automatically cancel the capacity for judgment.

But changing major relationship and care authorizations amid intense emotion can have consequences that are difficult to reverse.

“You can cancel them,” he said. “Let's confirm it again tomorrow. Tonight, I'll go to another room.”

Wancheng pushed the cup on the table onto the floor.

The water did not splash him.

The cup did not break.

She simply wanted something to make a sound.

The next day, she still canceled most partner-care authorizations.

She retained only limited contact in cases of major danger to life.

Professional care came in.

Cen Ye moved nearby.

The relationship did not formally end.

Nor was there a promise to continue it.

At first, Wancheng refused to see him.

Later, they occasionally ate together.

Talked about things other than illness.

Once, Cen Ye told her he was considering a long-term mountain ecology project.

“Go if you want to,” Wancheng said.

“It could be two years.”

“What's that got to do with me?”

The words still had a barb.

Cen Ye did not evade it.

“If we're still considering staying together, it has something to do with you.”

Wancheng fell silent.

“Do you want to continue?” he asked.

“I don't know.”

“Then I can wait a while. Not indefinitely.”

Wancheng nodded.

Illness did not give her permanent priority over another person's future.

Nor could Cen Ye demand continued love as repayment for the care he had given.

Illness changes relationships.

It does not automatically decide them.

Before the mountain project began, they reaffirmed their partnership.

They did not resume living together.

Cen Ye left.

Wancheng stayed in the city.

They agreed not to use remote intelligent agents to maintain an illusion of continuous intimacy. When they could make contact, they would do so themselves. When they could not, they would not fill the absence with generated substitutes.

At first, Wancheng found this hard to adjust to.

Before, whenever Cen Ye went out, she knew roughly when he would return.

Now he had entered another kind of life.

Her body continued to change.

Her right hand could barely perform fine movements.

Her speech grew slower and slower.

Sometimes, before she finished a sentence, someone had already guessed its meaning.

She hated being guessed at.

Spark could translate her neural signals, eye movements, and remaining voice into faster expression.

Yet she insisted on retaining some communication without acceleration.

“Why?” a caregiver asked.

“Because the pauses are me too.”

If assistive expression pursues only efficiency, it smooths away the whole process of hesitating, searching for words, and changing one's mind.

Others can finally understand faster.

But they may no longer hear how hard it was for that sentence to travel from the person's body into the world.

Wancheng returned to research because of a set of failed samples.

A deep-sea team found that one kind of microorganism responded to pressure changes in ways inconsistent with existing models. The data were chaotic, and repeated trials failed to yield stable results.

Younger researchers tended to regard it as a sampling error.

Seeing it remotely, Wancheng remembered handling a similar anomaly many years earlier.

Then, too, she had thought it an equipment problem.

The record preserved that failure, but it had never entered the main research.

She requested access to review it again.

The old samples were no longer usable.

But the environmental parameters, operational deviations, and unfinished notes from that time still existed.

With assistive expression, Wancheng spent a long time reconstructing, bit by bit, what had happened.

She could not prove the two sets of anomalies were related.

She could only propose a new direction for sampling.

The team redesigned the experiment accordingly.

The results remained unstable.

The second attempt failed too.

Only on the third did they discover that the microbial response was not determined by pressure alone. It was also related to temperature changes in the very brief period before sampling.

The discovery later developed into important research.

Wancheng did not see it as the moment she “proved her value again.”

Research was not there to heal her sense of self after her body's betrayal.

Nor were the microorganisms responsible for making her life meaningful again.

She was simply still curious about a real problem.

Illness had not extinguished that curiosity.

Supported together by body, tools, colleagues, and long-kept records, it entered reality again.

When announcing the results, the team wanted to include Wancheng's experience in the introduction.

She refused the phrase “persisted with research despite serious illness.”

“I didn't persist,” she said. “I stopped for three years.”

“Stopping and then returning is what makes it even more meaningful.”

“Meaningful to whom?”

The team fell silent.

Wancheng agreed to disclose her specific research contributions:

Early experience with the anomaly;

Reconstruction of historical records;

The new direction for sampling;

Ongoing interpretation of failed results.

She did not agree to make her illness part of publicizing the work.

The illness was real background.

It was not a reason for the research to receive attention.

A person's professional judgment should be evaluated by its evidence, logic, and real-world results. Overcoming physical difficulties does not make it automatically more correct.

In the fifth year, a new treatment option appeared.

A neural intervention might significantly slow functional decline, but could also bring cognitive and emotional changes. Knowledge of its long-term consequences remained insufficient.

Her family wanted her to accept it.

After returning from the mountains, Cen Ye also thought it worth trying.

Wancheng refused.

She was not refusing all treatment.

She accepted other options whose risks were clearer.

She simply did not want to exchange the parts of herself still able to feel, judge, and remain herself for more time in her body.

Her mother could not understand.

“If there's a chance, why not try?”

“Because I'm the one doing the trying too.”

“If it fails, stop.”

“Stopping won't reverse some changes.”

“You're still so young.”

Those words weighed the most.

Youth seemed to mean one had no standing to choose not to stake every possibility on extending the future.

Wancheng underwent an independent assessment.

It confirmed that she understood the risks, alternatives, and possible consequences.

Her decision was ultimately respected.

Her family did not thereby agree.

Respect does not require understanding.

Nor does it require those close to someone to stop being afraid.

Cen Ye asked her:

“Do you no longer want to live?”

Wancheng said:

“That's not it.”

“Then why not try?”

“Because being alive isn't only time.”

Cen Ye fell silent.

“If you get worse faster later, will you regret it?”

“Maybe.”

“What then?”

“The regret will be mine too.”

A person may make a decision their future self will regret.

As long as they have the capacity for judgment now, understand the consequences, and do not impose unbearable harm on others, civilization cannot cancel a present choice on the grounds of possible future regret.

Protecting people against irreversible harm matters.

But “protecting your future self” must also be kept from becoming a reason to take over your present self.

By thirty-eight, Wancheng needed round-the-clock bodily support.

Through neural interfaces, she could conduct research, communicate, and participate in some public activities. She also retained her own slow voice.

Someone asked her:

“If your body can't move at all, are you still you?”

Wancheng hated that question.

It seemed to discuss the continuity of a subject.

In fact, it was someone whose body could still move freely imagining what kind of life remained worth calling oneself.

She answered:

“I'm here right now. Why do you have to wait until I can't move at all to ask whether I'm still here?”

The body is not an irrelevant container.

Its pain, limitations, desires, and changes make up the reality of life.

But a person is not identical to a particular set of normal bodily abilities either.

Being unable to walk does not mean having no direction.

Being unable to manipulate things by hand does not mean being unable to judge.

Slow expression does not mean an empty inner world.

Needing another's help to live does not mean one's life consists only of what others give.

Wancheng did not defeat the disease.

It kept progressing.

She lost many abilities.

She lost some relationships too.

Some friends gradually stopped keeping in touch.

Not every departure came from ill will.

Some did not know how to face her.

Some felt helpless every time they met.

Others had simply entered a new life.

Wancheng was sad about this.

But she did not ask civilization to preserve every relationship.

Spark could make it easier for care and concern to reach her.

It could not manufacture genuine concern.

Nor did she become someone who was always strong.

She swore when equipment failed.

Envied people who could walk freely.

Grew angry when someone said, “You're already very lucky.”

Woke in the morning and briefly wished the day did not have to begin.

But she also continued researching.

Argued with Cen Ye.

Refused her mother's excessive care.

Liked a piece of music and hated a work of art.

On some evenings, she felt life was still very good. On others, she felt none of it made any sense.

These feelings did not need to be made consistent.

A real person can love life and, at the same time, be weary of the way they have to live it.

A person who is ill is still living.

Illness is not a special period alongside life.

It enters work, love, family, desire, dignity, creation, and the future, making every relationship confront its boundaries anew.

Medicine's responsibility is not only to prolong life, restore function, and ease pain.

It is also to let someone who cannot recover continue choosing, entering relationships, changing the world, and retaining the right to refuse to become an inspirational story.

Artificial intelligence can assist with diagnosis, treatment, expression, and action.

Body extensions can reconnect some lost abilities with reality.

Spark can carry long-term wishes forward, distinguish present emotions from stable choices, and connect care, relationships, and public participation.

But no technology can bear for someone the pain of losing bodily abilities. Nor can it declare the loss made good simply because it does more things for them.

What civilization truly needs to do is not make every ill person appear to live like a healthy one.

It is to acknowledge:

Even if they can never return to life as it was before, they are still not someone waiting to recover.

They are already within life.

Chapter 15 How a Person Reaches the End of Life

Humanity has always wanted to defeat death.

Extend the lifespan.

Replace organs.

Repair the body.

Preserve memory.

Keep a person's voice, expressions, habits, and relationships in the world.

The more powerful technology becomes, the more death seems like a problem awaiting a solution.

But when death truly comes before someone, they still face no abstract human lifespan.

They face their own body.

Their own pain.

The people they cannot bear to leave.

And the things there is no time to finish, things that could never all be finished.

Civilization can make every reasonable effort to prevent avoidable death.

It cannot explain every death as a technological failure.

Still less, when someone has reached life's end, can it take away the last parts of life they can still choose how to live, in the name of prolonging time.

At sixty-eight, Luo Qishan was diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer.

By the time it was found, the disease had spread.

Treatment could extend his time and offered a small chance of significant disease control, but the side effects were severe.

The doctor laid out the different options, probabilities of success, bodily burdens, and uncertainties in full.

After reading them, Luo Qishan asked only:

“If I don't take the most aggressive treatment, how long can I stay lucid?”

The doctor said:

“We can't predict precisely. Possibly a few months, possibly less.”

“And if I do?”

“There is a chance of extending that. But much of the time might be spent in treatment and recovery.”

“Can it be cured?”

“On the current evidence, the chance is extremely low.”

His daughter, Luo Wenxi, immediately asked:

“How low is extremely low?”

The doctor gave a range.

Wenxi kept asking about new experimental treatments, medical resources in other regions, and more intensive interventions.

She was a materials engineer, accustomed to finding new approaches when existing ones fell short.

As long as any possibility remained, she could not accept stopping.

But Luo Qishan said:

“I won't take the most aggressive treatment.”

Wenxi turned to him.

“You haven't heard everything.”

“I have.”

“You don't even know how many new methods there are now.”

“That's why I let the doctor explain.”

“Those are just existing data. They don't say what will definitely happen to you.”

“I know.”

“Then why give up now?”

“I'm not giving up.”

Wenxi raised her voice:

“What do you call refusing treatment, then?”

Luo Qishan looked at her.

“I'm choosing how to spend the time I have left.”

Wenxi could not accept it.

Her mother had died ten years earlier.

Her father was her only surviving immediate family member.

They had not been close in recent years. Wenxi was busy with work, and her father had his own life. They spoke once a week, usually about health, the weather, and a few small everyday matters.

She had always thought there was plenty of time.

When the project ended.

When her father truly needed her.

When, one day, they both wanted to discuss the things never made clear after her mother's death.

Death suddenly took “later” away.

Wenxi began frantically searching through information.

She found several treatments not yet on the standard pathway and contacted specialists in different regions.

Spark helped verify sources and distinguish levels of evidence, reminding her that some cases were only individual reports and could not establish that her father would have the same outcome.

Wenxi knew.

She kept searching anyway.

When people fear loss, it is not that they do not understand probability.

They simply cannot accept that the particular person behind the probability might be their own father.

Luo Qishan accepted palliative treatment and a less burdensome disease-control plan.

Wenxi thought it nowhere near enough.

She requested a reassessment of her father's capacity for judgment.

Her reason was that he had shown marked low mood after the diagnosis and might be underestimating the value of further treatment.

The independent assessment confirmed:

Luo Qishan understood his condition, options, risks, and consequences;

His choice was consistent over time;

There was no evidence that his decision arose primarily from a treatable cognitive impairment or an acute psychiatric state.

Wenxi remained unconvinced.

“Of course he can answer those questions,” she said. “He's always been stubborn.”

Stubbornness is not a loss of capacity for judgment.

Nor does a decision become invalid because it causes a family pain.

But an individual decision does not mean family members must accept it calmly.

Wenxi could object.

Could try to persuade him.

Could voice her fear.

She simply could not acquire final authority over her father's body in the name of love.

Luo Qishan decided to spend some time in his hometown.

It was a small town in the mountains.

His old house still stood, though no one had lived there for years and it needed some tidying.

Wenxi objected.

Local medical support was less extensive than in the city, and it was far away.

“What are you going back for?”

“To stay a while.”

“Who'll look after you there?”

“I don't need constant care yet.”

“What about when you do?”

“We'll arrange it then.”

“Why do you have to wait for something to go wrong before addressing anything?”

Luo Qishan did not answer.

He wanted to return not because there was some wish he had to fulfill there.

Nor was he preparing a meaningful farewell.

It was simply that since the cancer diagnosis, everyone had been looking at his illness.

Back in the small town, perhaps someone would still say his name first.

Once the old house was ready, Luo Qishan moved back.

Medical support was connected through local services and remote systems.

Wenxi came every few days.

Father and daughter still did not know what to say.

Luo Qishan sat in the sun by the door, repairing old things that did not really need repair.

Wenxi sat beside him, still looking up information.

“Could you stop looking at that all the time?” her father asked.

“I'm not making you look.”

“You're sitting beside me, but your heart isn't here.”

Wenxi looked up sharply.

“I'm trying to find a way to save you.”

“Have a meal with me first.”

“We can eat anytime.”

“Not later.”

That silenced Wenxi.

She closed the terminal.

The meal was ordinary.

A plate of vegetables, a bowl of soup, and rice her father could no longer eat much of.

Luo Qishan took only a few bites.

Wenxi suddenly realized she had been fighting for more time for her father without truly entering the time they already had.

Luo Qishan's illness progressed quickly.

Pain increased and strength declined.

He began needing more help.

Wenxi took a break from work and moved into the old house.

Her father did not want her to.

“Go back.”

“I've already arranged care leave.”

“What about the project?”

“Someone's taking over.”

“Didn't you say no one knew that part as well as you?”

“Someone's taking over now.”

Luo Qishan smiled a little.

“So it doesn't have to be you after all.”

The words could have sounded sarcastic.

But Wenxi heard her father saying something else:

She had finally allowed the world to keep running without her.

“What about you?” she asked. “Do you think you have to stay too?”

Luo Qishan did not answer.

Of course he wanted to live.

Refusing the most aggressive treatment did not mean he was unafraid of death.

On some nights, once the pain eased, he would ask the doctor:

“Is there really no chance left?”

If the answer changed, he might change his choice.

Accepting death is not a resolve achieved once and for all.

Someone can be calm by day and frightened at night.

Can decide against further aggressive treatment, then feel hope again when the body improves a little.

Civilization cannot require the dying to remain consistent, lucid, and brave at all times.

It need only reconfirm, when a major decision changes, what the person understands and what they are truly willing to bear.

Wenxi's days caring for her father were not gentle.

Luo Qishan had a bad temper when in pain.

Medication sometimes confused his thinking. He also suspected his daughter of failing to give it on time.

“Are you afraid I'll take too much?”

“The doctor says the dose can't be increased.”

“He's not the one in pain.”

“We can change the plan.”

“What good would that do?”

Wenxi lost patience too.

“If you won't cooperate with anything, of course it won't help.”

Luo Qishan pushed away the cup of water.

“Then leave.”

Wenxi really did leave the room.

She stood in the yard a long time. She heard her father coughing inside and still did not immediately go back.

She loved him.

She also hated him for turning death into the life she had to bear every day.

That hatred shamed her.

But end-of-life care is not a road made only of love and sacrifice.

When someone is dying, those around them are drawn into a long loss too.

They may be tired, angry, even briefly wish it would all end soon.

That thought is not the same as wanting a loved one to die.

It is simply wanting the suffering to stop.

One evening, Luo Qishan suddenly said:

“Put your mother's voice on.”

Wenxi froze.

Her mother had left many family videos and voice recordings.

Some, with her own authorization, could continue to be used within the family's private domain.

But they could not be used to generate new things she had never said, or to simulate through intelligence that she was still alive.

Wenxi played an old recording.

Her mother scolded Luo Qishan for forgetting to buy something, then laughed.

The voice was not gentle.

The recording was even a little noisy.

Luo Qishan listened several times.

“Is there more?”

Wenxi found another.

This time, her mother was calling her by her childhood name.

Luo Qishan closed his eyes.

When the recording ended, the room grew quiet again.

“What if she could say a few words to me?” he asked.

Wenxi knew the technology could do it.

The voice, speech habits, shared memories, and relationship records were enough to generate highly similar responses.

“It could be generated,” she said. “But it wouldn't be her.”

“I know.”

“You used to disagree with it.”

Her mother had explicitly refused the creation of an interactive simulation after her death.

That boundary did not disappear because her husband was dying.

Luo Qishan was silent for a long time.

“Then never mind.”

Wenxi did not secretly turn it on to comfort her father.

Loving someone who is dying does not permit using the identity of someone already dead to provide comfort.

Some absences must remain absences.

The next day, Luo Qishan asked to revise the posthumous authorization for his own materials.

He permitted the release of some early work records and allowed his family to keep approved fragments of his life.

He did not permit the creation of an interactive persona.

He did not permit any digital or embodied intelligent agent to continue entering relationships with relatives or friends in his identity.

He did not permit new speech generated in his voice.

Wenxi asked:

“Why?”

“I don't want to keep talking after I'm dead.”

“What if I want to hear you later?”

“Listen to what I said before.”

“What if it isn't enough?”

“Then it isn't enough.”

After someone dies, the living always feel that too little remains.

One photograph missing.

One sentence.

One attentive goodbye.

Technology can fill in forms.

It cannot bring back the person who could once have been present and can now make no new choice.

Luo Qishan did not want a more patient, gentler simulator, better at understanding his daughter, to become an ideal father after his death.

What he had not done while alive should not be completed for him by a substitute.

As the illness entered its final stage, the doctor again proposed a short hospital stay.

Luo Qishan refused.

He wanted to remain in the old house.

The risk assessment confirmed that available support could maintain basic comfort at home, but that the capacity to handle certain acute situations there was limited.

Wenxi signed a confirmation of family caregiving responsibilities.

Her hand trembled throughout the signing.

“What if I get frightened when it happens and call emergency services anyway?” she asked.

The doctor said:

“You can. His end-of-life wishes don't forbid you from seeking help. When emergency staff arrive, they'll act according to his condition at the time and the boundaries already confirmed.”

Luo Qishan looked at his daughter.

“If you're afraid, call.”

“Don't you want to stay out of hospital?”

“I do. But if you really can't cope, you don't have to bear it alone.”

A dying person's autonomy cannot place every consequence on the caregiver.

Someone may choose to stay at home.

They must also recognize that the person who actually carries out the choice may be unable to bear it when death comes.

Both need to be seen.

In the last few days, Luo Qishan slept most of the time.

When awake, he spoke little.

Wenxi had prepared many questions she wanted to ask.

Why had he contacted her less and less after her mother died?

Had he ever regretted marrying when young?

What exactly had he hoped for from his daughter?

Had there ever been a moment when he was truly proud of her?

But her father's lucid periods were growing shorter.

Each time he opened his eyes, pain, thirst, and breathing had to come first.

Questions about a whole life seemed too heavy.

Wenxi never asked them.

She began to accept that saying goodbye did not automatically bring complete answers.

Nor did the arrival of death suddenly make someone willing to confess their entire life.

What had remained unclear between father and daughter might never become clear.

That was not a failed goodbye.

Their relationship had always contained these silences.

Luo Qishan last spoke clearly early one morning.

Wenxi had not slept all night.

At first light, her father opened his eyes.

“You're still here?”

“Here.”

“Have you eaten?”

“No.”

“Go eat.”

Wenxi shook her head.

Luo Qishan looked at her for a while.

“You were like this as a child too. Cried when I told you to eat.”

Wenxi smiled a little.

“I don't remember.”

“I do.”

That was the last new memory he left her.

No apology.

No summing up of a life.

No words of love.

Only a father who, just before consciousness receded, still remembered his little daughter refusing to eat.

A few hours later, Luo Qishan stopped responding lucidly.

His breathing gradually slowed.

Wenxi held his hand.

Several times, she wanted to call emergency services.

Spark did not decide for her.

Medical support had confirmed that the bodily changes were consistent with the dying process. Aggressive intervention could at most prolong his life briefly; it could not reverse the dying process.

Wenxi could still request help.

In the end, she did not.

At 4:17 that afternoon, Luo Qishan stopped breathing.

There was no music in the room.

No predesigned farewell video.

Nor did any system automatically label the moment a fulfilled and peaceful passing.

Wenxi sat by the bed without moving for a long time.

Death had happened.

The world had not stopped.

Someone passed outside the window.

In the distance came the sound of a transport unit going by.

Water was still slowly heating in the kitchen.

Suddenly remembering her father's last words, she got up and took a mouthful of food that had gone cold.

Then came back.

After death was confirmed, Luo Qishan's Spark stopped all proactive actions in relationships.

His lifetime authorizations entered their posthumous succession state.

Necessary legal, medical, and public affairs were handled through established pathways. Private data, relationship records, and unreleased material were isolated.

No uniform message was automatically sent to everyone who knew him.

His family notified people separately, according to the relationships and his own wishes.

Some knew quickly.

Some heard only months later.

Others who had once known him might never learn of it.

A person's death does not naturally reach everyone they once encountered.

Civilization can reduce omissions.

It cannot turn all relationships into a notification list that must be completed.

For a long time after returning to the city, Wenxi did not open the records her father had left.

She had thought she would listen to his voice again and again.

In fact, she did not.

One day, the system noted that authorization for the long-term preservation of a family voice recording was approaching its reconfirmation period.

It was a sentence her father had left more than a decade earlier:

“Let me know when you get there.”

There was no indication of where she was going.

Perhaps a business trip.

Perhaps home one evening.

Or just an ordinary journey.

Wenxi listened once.

Her father's voice was stronger than it had been near the end.

She did not ask the system to fill in the context.

Nor did she set the sentence to play automatically whenever she arrived somewhere.

Repeated that way, it would turn from a fragment of a real past into a mechanism through which a dead man continually participated in his daughter's life.

Wenxi chose to keep it.

But disabled proactive playback.

When she wanted to listen, she could.

Her father would not return on his own.

Years later, Wenxi still felt regret.

Regret that she had not forced her father to accept stronger treatment.

That she had not put work aside sooner.

That she had not asked those questions in the final days.

And that she had stood in the yard so long instead of immediately returning to her coughing father.

No fact could prove another choice would have been better.

The regret did not disappear for that.

Civilization can help someone see the information, abilities, and real limits they had then, keeping them from projecting everything learned later back onto the past to judge themselves.

But it cannot cancel the question for them:

If I had done a little more then, might it have been different?

That question may remain for the rest of a life.

It is also one form love leaves behind after loss.

There is no single right answer to how a person reaches the end of life.

Some want to try every treatment.

Some choose fewer interventions.

Some want to stay at home.

Some feel safe only in a medical facility.

Some need loved ones around them.

Others still want quiet and solitude at the end.

Civilization cannot describe any one of these as a nobler death.

Still less can “dying with dignity” imply that those who die in fear, confusion, resuscitation, or without a chance to say goodbye have lost their dignity.

Dignity does not depend on composure in death.

A person crying out in agony, changing their decision at the last moment, or relying on others' judgment when unable to speak remains a whole life.

Medicine should do all it can to reduce avoidable death and suffering.

Artificial intelligence can help identify risks, compare options, and carry long-term wishes forward. It can also protect a person's real choices when expression is difficult.

But the existence of some possibility of prolongation does not entitle technology to turn the body into an object that must keep running.

Nor may a low predicted chance of recovery end someone's hope for them in advance.

Final human decision-making authority bears its greatest weight at the end of life.

For once a decision takes effect, it often cannot be rolled back.

It must therefore be clearer and more restrained than ever, and face the unknown more honestly.

Death cannot be abolished.

At least within the reality we can reach today, it remains the boundary every life must eventually face.

Even if lifespans grow greatly in the future and bodies can be repaired continually, humanity will still face accidents, irreversible damage, individual choices, and the losses time itself brings.

What civilization can truly change is not the expulsion of death from life.

It can keep a dying person from being reduced to bodily indicators; keep fear from costing a family its ability to listen; keep technology from using simulation to create the illusion that someone has not left; and keep what remains unfinished, unreconciled, and unspoken from being packaged as completeness.

A person need not complete a life before dying.

Life always leaves gaps.

Death means the person can no longer go on filling them.

The living can only carry them forward.

Luo Qishan did not defeat cancer.

Did not achieve a perfect goodbye.

Nor, at the last moment, did he say words that could illuminate the rest of his daughter's life.

He only asked:

Have you eaten?

Then left.

For Wenxi, that had become her father's last real presence.

It could not be replaced.

Nor did it need any more moving words to complete it anew.

Chapter 16 How the Living Go On

Death happens at one moment.

Loss happens again at countless moments afterward.

The first time you want to call him.

The first time you pass where he lived.

The first time something happens whose whole story only he knew.

The first time you dream he is still alive, then wake and have to learn again:

He is gone.

A farewell ceremony can confirm death.

It cannot complete loss.

Memory can carry forward the traces of someone having been here.

It cannot keep the person themselves present.

What the living truly have to face is not how to keep the dead forever.

It is how to keep living once no new response can come.

After Luo Qishan died, his daughter Wenxi did not immediately hold a public farewell.

Her father had disliked large ceremonies and refused to have his life arranged into a complete narrative for everyone to view.

He left only three explicit wishes:

No simulated persona was to participate in the farewell;

No life summary generated by an intelligent system was to be played;

Some of his ashes were to return to where his wife lay at rest; his daughter would decide what to do with the rest.

Beyond that, there were no further arrangements.

Wenxi had thought that, having faced death long before, her father would leave everything clearly settled.

Later, she discovered that only the boundaries were truly clear.

How to say goodbye, he had left to the living.

Relatives and friends had different views on the ceremony.

Her father's old colleagues wanted a formal commemoration.

Luo Qishan had worked on several infrastructure projects, they said. Many facilities still operating today contained his work.

Relatives and friends in the town thought they should follow the old customs, setting up a mourning space and keeping vigil so everyone who knew him could come to see him off.

Wenxi's cousin proposed generating a complete biographical video.

Not simulating her father's speech.

Just assembling photographs, work records, accounts from relatives and friends, and historical context to show how he had lived.

“We can't say nothing at all,” her cousin said.

Wenxi asked:

“What should we say?”

“What he did. What sort of person he was.”

“Who decides what sort of person he was?”

“Everyone together.”

Wenxi did not agree.

After death, a person is all too easily turned into a single, unified image.

The conscientious engineer.

The silent father.

The reliable friend.

The old man living alone after losing his wife.

All might be true.

None could stand for the whole person.

The dead can no longer object.

That makes it easier for the living to complete them according to their own needs.

Someone needs a father worth remembering.

Someone needs a loyal colleague.

Someone needs proof that they once knew an important person.

If a farewell seeks only completeness, it performs a final act of possession after the dead can no longer say no.

In the end, Wenxi chose two different farewells.

The first belonged only to family and a few close people.

No public livestream.

No single eulogy speaking for everyone.

Each person could bring an object connected with Luo Qishan, or bring nothing.

The second would take place in the town's public memorial space, open to anyone who wished to come.

The two ceremonies would use different permissions for materials.

Family memories would not automatically open to everyone because they entered a public farewell. Nor would public work records be privatized by the family into honors belonging to them alone.

Death had not abolished the boundary between private and public domains.

Some memories belonged to loved ones.

Some contributions had already entered the shared world.

They could illuminate each other.

They could not take possession of each other.

On the day of the family farewell, Wenxi brought an old toolbox her father had used.

It was worn at the corners and edges, full of tools she could not name.

Her cousin brought a group photograph.

A neighbor brought a set of old keys that no longer worked.

Someone else brought nothing and simply sat in a corner.

There was no prescribed order to the ceremony.

Wenxi's aunt, her father's sister, spoke first.

She recalled Luo Qishan stealing the family's grain ration coupons as a child and being beaten by their father, then later sharing food he had saved with his younger sister.

The story came out in a jumble.

Several times, she got the year wrong.

The family records flagged conflicting dates. Wenxi did not ask for corrections.

A farewell is not a historical audit.

So long as potentially harmful fiction is not recorded as public fact, how an older woman remembers her brother also belongs to her relationship with him.

Next, an old colleague spoke of Luo Qishan's bad temper when young.

“Once he settled on a plan, a whole team of oxen couldn't pull him away from it.”

Everyone laughed.

The colleague went on:

“Once he realized he'd been wrong, he took our hardest night shifts for three months straight. Never said sorry, though.”

Someone said that sounded like him.

It was the first Wenxi had heard of it.

She had thought her father never apologized because he did not know he was wrong.

Perhaps sometimes he knew.

He just did not know how to say it.

The discovery did not supply an apology for past hurt.

But it showed her that her father's silence had not always been empty.

When Wenxi's turn came, she forgot everything she had prepared.

She had meant to speak about how her father had stayed with her mother through her final years, how he had lived alone, and how, even seriously ill, he had refused to have everyone's life revolve around him.

When she actually stood, she said only:

“The last time I spoke with him, he asked whether I'd eaten.”

Then she sat down.

No one went on to explain why those words mattered.

When a private memory is explained too completely, it becomes easier for listeners to understand, but the memory itself may become fixed.

Wenxi did not want “Have you eaten?” to become the symbol of her father's life.

It was only the last thing he said.

Not a final testament.

Not a summary of fatherly love.

Still less a potent line to be circulated again and again.

It was irreplaceable precisely because it was ordinary.

Ordinary enough that her father had said it many times while alive.

Ordinary enough that any intelligence could generate it with ease.

But that time, he himself had said it.

Partway through the ceremony, an old friend of her father's suddenly asked to play a voice recording.

It had been made more than twenty years earlier.

Luo Qishan and several colleagues were arguing loudly at a worksite, with some swearing. At the end, he said:

“Get the people out first. We can repair the equipment.”

The old friend thought those words showed best what kind of man he was.

Wenxi hesitated.

The recording came from public work records. Permission under the rules of the time to use it in an incident review did not mean it could be used in a private farewell.

The relationship coordinator checked the authorization again.

It showed that Luo Qishan had authorized the event record for professional learning and public-safety research, but not for editing into personal commemorative material.

The recording was not played.

His old friend was disappointed.

“He's gone. Why talk about authorization now?”

Wenxi said:

“Precisely because he's gone, we can't say yes for him.”

The dead have no capacity for new choices.

That is no reason to remove boundaries.

It is a reason to protect them all the more.

When the family farewell ended, no one left immediately.

They gathered around the toolbox, trying to identify its contents.

One small measuring instrument had lost its accuracy and, by maintenance standards, should long since have been retired.

An old colleague said Luo Qishan had always refused to throw it away.

“This thing saved lives,” he said.

Later, it emerged that in that incident it had not really “saved lives”.

It had only helped the team detect a deviation early, gaining a dozen or so minutes for evacuation.

Other judgments, people on site, and subsequent actions had mattered just as much.

Memory likes to gather complex causes into one object, one person, or one sentence.

That makes the story easier to tell.

And easier to distort.

Wenxi did not correct the old man.

But when the tool entered the public work archive, she set out the actual causal account in full:

It had played a part in identifying an important risk.

It had not done so alone.

Recognizing an object's meaning does not require making it a sacred relic.

Commemorating someone's contribution does not require removing others from the shared reality.

The second, public farewell was more restrained.

The memorial space displayed only work records Luo Qishan had approved for release, a little information about his life, and accounts voluntarily supplied by others without violating third parties' boundaries.

There was no single overall judgment.

At the entrance, it said only:

Luo Qishan was born in a given year and died in a given year. He participated in several infrastructure projects here. The following material was left separately by people from different relationships in his life.

In the display, some called him reliable.

Some said he was hard to get along with.

Some remembered that he was always the last to leave after a task.

Others said his stubbornness had once led an entire team a long way down the wrong path.

These accounts were not edited into a complete character arc of early faults followed by growth.

A person need not be proved good overall after death to deserve remembrance.

Public memory's responsibility is not to pass judgment on a life.

It is to preserve, as far as possible, real relationships that have already entered other people, institutions, and reality.

A young stranger stayed before the display for a long time.

He had never met Luo Qishan.

He had only read the relevant records while studying responsibility for accidents.

In one engineering failure, Luo Qishan had borne primary on-site responsibility. No one had died, but a community had lost its water supply for a long period.

The young man felt the public memorial should not avoid this event.

When Wenxi first saw the suggestion, she strongly resisted it.

Her father had just died.

She did not want to face his mistakes again during the farewell.

But the family alone could not decide whether public contributions and public consequences were preserved.

The accident record ultimately entered the display.

It was not hidden in a corner.

Nor was it turned into an inspirational turning point about “how he later made amends.”

It stood alongside his other work, explaining what happened, who was affected, how responsibility was established, and how the system subsequently changed.

Wenxi stood before that record without moving for a long time.

Her father's death had not left only the parts for which people could be grateful.

Death had ended his actions.

It had not rewritten the consequences he had already caused.

After the farewell, the public display remained for thirty days.

Most of its contents then returned to their respective archives.

The memorial space reopened, no longer occupied for the long term by one person's death.

Wenxi could apply for a permanent memorial node.

She did not.

Some relatives and friends did not understand.

“What if we want to see it later?”

“You can request access.”

“Why not leave it up?”

Wenxi looked at the photographs being gradually taken down.

“Because this place has to be left for those who come after too.”

Memory needs space.

But the shared world cannot be filled without limit by the past.

If everyone who once mattered demands permanent public presence, the living will inhabit an ever-expanding memorial system.

Civilization should remember.

It must also let some memories return to quiet places from which they no longer reach out on their own.

For the first Lunar New Year after her father's death, Wenxi did not return to the old house.

She went to a friend's home.

The dinner table was lively.

When someone mentioned her father, she quickly changed the subject.

Her friend later asked:

“Would you rather not talk about him?”

Wenxi said:

“Not today.”

Grief has no fixed form of expression.

Not speaking does not mean forgetting.

Laughing does not mean having moved beyond it.

Some cry for a long time after a loved one dies.

Some quickly resume daily life.

Some show no obvious response for years, then suddenly break down one afternoon without warning.

Civilization cannot turn mourning into a standardized course.

No one must pass through fixed stages such as denial, anger, and acceptance to count as having completed loss.

Professional support can identify ongoing danger and serious impairment of daily functioning.

But it cannot rush someone to recover because their grief has lasted too long, or infer from apparent calm that they no longer need care and concern.

In the third year, following her father's wishes, the old house entered the Resource Pool's resource-and-capability map, registered as an idle space that could be opened under explicit authorization.

Ownership still passed legally to Wenxi.

She could continue to own it.

It simply had not been used for a long time, and there was no need to leave it empty indefinitely.

After repairs, the house became a space for short research stays and visits by people returning to their hometown.

Wenxi retained a small storage room for family belongings not made public.

Actual use of the other spaces was not allocated directly by the Resource Pool. They were opened to applicants through separate shared usage-rights relationships.

When the first occupants arrived, she felt deeply uncomfortable.

Strangers' shoes stood at her father's door.

Different dishes appeared in the kitchen.

The chair in the yard had been moved to the other side.

Several times, she wanted to terminate the usage authorization.

The sharing authorization allowed withdrawal.

She needed only to honor responsibilities for repairs and usage arrangements already undertaken. Ownership was unaffected.

In the end, Wenxi did not withdraw.

Gradually, she understood that the house's continued use did not mean her father still lived in it.

Nor were strangers continuing his life for him.

It simply meant the timber, space, light, and land did not leave the world along with one person's death.

Resources could continue to be used.

The person could not be replaced.

One occupant later found an old bowl outside the storage room.

It was not among the sealed belongings and carried no special marking.

He used it as an ordinary object.

Wenxi happened to see an image and recognized the bowl her father had often used in his final months.

She immediately requested its return.

The occupant apologized and stopped using it.

Once it was returned, Wenxi did not know where to put it.

It was not precious enough to deserve separate preservation.

Yet ordinary as it was, she could not accept anyone else continuing to use it.

She washed it and put it away at home.

For several years, she never took it out.

Later, sorting through her belongings, she saw it again.

This time, she did not keep it.

The bowl went into ordinary materials recycling.

No ceremony.

No photograph.

No record.

Forgetting someone does not always happen in a momentous act of betrayal.

More often, it happens through countless small choices:

An object no longer kept.

A sentence no longer repeated.

A name newcomers no longer know.

Civilization can delay forgetting.

It cannot abolish it.

If every object, every sound, and every daily moment were preserved forever, people would instead be drowned in an infinite past, unable to judge what truly needed to be carried forward.

When Wenxi was fifty, her father had been dead for twelve years.

She joined a long-term engineering project whose work took her through that mountain town.

A colleague asked whether she wanted to see the old house.

She said no.

But the day before the project ended, she went alone.

A young couple and a child were living there.

Wenxi did not identify herself as the owner or enter their private space.

She only stood outside the yard.

The child was eating by the door.

The adults urged him several times, but he kept playing with something in his hands.

Wenxi suddenly remembered her father's final words:

You were like this as a child too. Cried when I told you to eat.

She had not remembered then.

She still did not remember that particular episode.

What she remembered was that her father remembered.

Sometimes one person's memory continues to exist in another.

After her father's death, there was no new evidence of that childhood moment.

Yet through his last words, it had entered her understanding of herself.

Wenxi did not open a recording.

Those words had not been recorded.

They existed only in her memory.

They might already differ slightly from what he actually said.

She accepted the uncertainty.

Not everything worth carrying forward must be proved.

Later, Wenxi asked the public archive to add a note from a private source.

She did not write down her father's last words.

She wrote only:

Late in life, Luo Qishan chose to reduce burdensome treatment and return to his hometown. This was a personal decision about his life and is not to be used to illustrate any universal end-of-life standard.

She did not want later readers to use his death to prove that “refusing treatment is more dignified,” or turn it into a case against active medical care.

A person's choice holds only within their particular body, relationships, evidence, and historical conditions.

The easiest way commemoration crosses a boundary is not through fabrication.

It is by distilling one particular life into an answer everyone should follow.

Her father had left no answer.

Wenxi would not leave one for him.

How do the living go on?

Not by forgetting the dead.

Nor by letting the dead continually occupy life.

Not by obtaining endless responses through simulation.

Nor by forcing every memory closed to prove one has moved on.

To go on living is gradually to accept:

He will not know what happens from now on.

New happiness will no longer be shared with him.

New pain can no longer turn to him for help.

One day, you will make a decision he might have opposed, without another chance to hear that opposition.

The world keeps growing.

The dead remain at their last real choice.

Spark can preserve authorized memories, carry unfinished affairs forward, and protect a posthumous identity against impersonation.

Intelligence can help organize archives, verify facts, connect scattered accounts, and provide support during mourning's most dangerous periods.

But it cannot speak new words for the dead.

Cannot use “He might have answered this way” to fill an absence the living cannot bear.

Cannot reduce death to a change in the mode of interaction because the simulation is similar enough.

Death is real precisely because, from then on, no new response comes from the person themselves.

Nor does a ritual's meaning lie in completing a goodbye.

It simply lets the living acknowledge one fact at a shared moment:

This person was once here.

They no longer exist in shared life in the same way.

Someone may cry.

May be silent.

May speak of warmth, or speak of harm.

May keep something.

Or, years later, throw away an old bowl they once could not bear to let anyone else use.

These choices will not form one universally correct way to mourn.

Civilization need only safeguard that:

The dead person's identity is not appropriated;

Real contributions are not erased;

Real harms do not disappear with death;

Private memories do not lose their boundaries through public commemoration;

The living are not required to bear forever the duty to remember everything.

Forgetting is not civilization's enemy.

Complete forgetting, however, may let the same harms recur endlessly and make countless real contributions seem never to have happened.

Complete inability to forget would burden every new life with the whole past, leaving it no present of its own.

Civilizational memory is therefore not limitless storage.

It needs selection, layers, authorization, and time.

It must preserve enough for those who come later to know where they came from, what happened, who took responsibility, and who was hurt.

It must also let many voices belonging only to personal relationships gradually grow quiet as those who remember them leave.

Some meanings enter civilization.

Some happen only between two people.

Not entering public memory does not mean not having happened.

Not being preserved forever does not mean never having mattered.

Twelve years after Luo Qishan's departure, some still knew his name through work archives.

Some knew only of an error in a particular project.

Some remembered him saying, in a crisis, to get the people out first.

Some had heard only, in family conversation, that he stole ration coupons as a child.

Many more had no idea who he was.

This was no failure of remembrance.

A life need not be seen by every future to prove it was here.

He had already entered his daughter's memory, his colleagues' judgments, the projects still operating or since corrected, and the strangers' lives an old house later supported.

Many of those traces would not last forever.

Meaning would not thereby fall to zero.

For the living to go on is not to carry the dead into every future.

It is to let the parts that have genuinely entered one's own life, relationships, and world continue to have consequences through new choices.

One day, Wenxi too would leave.

Perhaps no one would know her father's final words anymore.

But because of those words, she had once eaten a mouthful of rice in an afternoon that had already gone cold. And years later, seeing a child who would not eat, she had understood anew the self her father still remembered.

That was already the carrying forward of meaning.

It needed no simulation.

No immortality.

Nor did it need the world to remember forever.

Part V How Individuals Become Part of a Larger Civilization

A person does not live only within their own body, family, and memories.

Open the door, and they encounter strangers. Step onto a street, and they enter countless people's shared choices. Use a road, a light, a hospital, a water source, and they are already within a life larger than themselves.

People can choose whom to love. They cannot choose a world containing only those they wish to love.

The real difficulty of shared life has never been how to care for those close to us. It is how to share one reality with those who are not close, not similar, and may even dislike us as we dislike them.

Civilization therefore cannot sustain only love.

It must also sustain life among strangers.

Chapter 17 How Strangers Live Together

I

That summer, no rain fell in Linchuan for twenty-three consecutive days.

Daytime temperatures kept rising. Building walls stored heat under the fierce sun, slowly releasing it into the streets well into the night. Trees in the old district began shedding leaves. Broad stretches of pale gray stone emerged from the riverbed. The city's energy system issued one high-load warning after another.

Qinghuai Community had not been among the places at greatest risk.

Near the old river channel, it had narrow streets, abundant shade, and low buildings that retained good natural ventilation. For decades, many had disliked its age, crowding, and lack of light. When the heat wave came, those supposedly backward conditions made it one of the few urban areas still able to cool at night.

An abandoned theater stood at the community's center.

After renovation, its roof carried insulation and an energy-harvesting membrane, while its underground systems connected to the city's circulating water network. It could shelter nearly a thousand people during extreme heat. Ordinarily, it was a public place for residents' deliberations, children's rehearsals, and older people's rest. Once disaster response began, it became the largest nearby cooling center.

The first people from elsewhere arrived on the evening of the third day.

They came from the south of the city.

Energy supplies had failed in the densely populated housing districts there. Inside several residential buildings, temperatures exceeded what the human body could endure for extended periods. The city's dispatch system prioritized moving older people, infants and young children, pregnant women, people with chronic illnesses, and those unable to cool themselves to public spaces with capacity remaining.

When the news came, the theater was already full of Qinghuai residents.

Children spread sleeping mats on the floor. Older people leaned back in temporary chairs. Several young people poured drinking water into small cups. Some had brought pets, some connected charging devices to wall sockets, and others reserved three adjoining places for family members still at work.

Staff began dividing the areas anew.

Seating was tightened, storerooms opened, rehearsal rooms cleared, and the pet area moved to the ventilated corridor. The screen showed the first evacuees would arrive in forty minutes.

Complaints soon arose.

“We've paid community maintenance fees for all these years. Why can't we even keep our own places when danger comes?”

“Aren't there other cooling centers in the south?”

“Once they arrive, will there be enough water? Medicine? How will we sleep?”

“The older people are already suffering. We can't crowd them any more.”

These questions were not blocked.

They remained in full on the temporary deliberation interface, publicly displayed alongside the theater's capacity, remaining energy, supply reserves, occupants' health conditions, and evacuation routes.

No one was shamed for thinking of themselves first.

When fear comes, people instinctively hold tight to the places they already have. Demanding instant selflessness in danger does not make shared life more real. It only drives fear into silence, to erupt later as hostility.

But fear cannot automatically justify refusing others either.

Outside the theater, the heat wave continued.

Those already on the way had bodies no better able to withstand heat simply because they lived on another street.

II

The first person to object explicitly was Du Yuan.

He was sixty-eight, had heart and lung disease, and had spent two nights in the theater. His wife needed continuous oxygen, with portable equipment beside her bed. When staff prepared to reduce their resting area, he stood and blocked the movable partition.

“You can't move it any farther,” he said. “If she can't breathe in the night, there has to be room around her for emergency treatment.”

His tone was not friendly.

A young volunteer tried to explain the overall arrangements. Du Yuan interrupted.

“You keep talking about data. If something really happens, will the data bear it for her?”

The volunteer fell silent.

Du Yuan had a point.

A system could calculate average risk. It could not compress a particular person into an average. After another check, medical staff preserved the bedside access and moved two sets of ordinary sleeping mats elsewhere.

Among those moved, a mother asked resentfully, “So we don't matter?”

No one could answer in a sentence.

Shared life does not turn everyone into identical units. Equal personal dignity does not mean everyone receives the same space and resources at every moment. Some need more, not because they are nobler. Others yielding a little for a time does not mean their needs may be ignored.

The questions are whether the differences are real, whether the judgment is visible, and whether the burden always falls on the same people.

Du Yuan kept the space beside his wife's bed.

But soon afterward, he cleared the storage locker he was using and placed two cases of drinking water he had brought in the public distribution area.

He did not apologize.

The mother who had been moved did not forgive his tone because of it.

They still disliked each other.

Only, when her child suddenly vomited that night, Du Yuan took an unopened temperature-sensing patch from his wife's medical kit and handed it to her.

The mother accepted it and said thank you.

Then each turned away.

Much shared life does not begin with understanding.

It begins only with someone not closing the door completely when another person is in their hardest moment.

III

The evacuation vehicles from the south arrived before dark.

When their doors opened, people did not enter in the orderly way imagined.

An older man refused to leave his wheelchair because his son had adapted it by hand. Two children cried loudly in the unfamiliar surroundings. A pregnant woman who had begun contractions during the journey went straight to the medical area. A young man kept asking whether his toolbox had been brought.

His name was Adai, a temporary repair worker.

The toolbox had not been among the priority supplies for evacuation. Staff told him it might still be at his lodging and could be sought once the danger passed.

“That's everything I have,” he said.

“Let's get you safe first.”

“What will I work with afterward without those tools?”

A brief silence fell.

Shelter could protect a life without automatically understanding why someone clung to a heavy, battered box. To others, these were only tools that could be replaced. To Adai, they were his sole foothold in an unfamiliar city, the means by which he could still prove he need not depend entirely on others.

Spark retrieved images of the supplies loaded onto the evacuation vehicle.

The toolbox had not been loaded.

It offered several possibilities: wait for the roads to cool, then have unmanned transport equipment retrieve it; request temporary tools of the same specifications; or obtain replacements from public emergency stores. Each option included its timing, risks, and uncertainties.

Adai looked for a long time and chose to wait.

He remained agitated.

Technology had found a viable path. That did not make the loss slight.

Inside the theater, he did not rest at once. He noticed a movable panel in the ventilation corridor would not close, letting hot air pour in, and crouched to inspect the mechanism.

No one asked him to.

Nor did anyone remind him whether it might count in a contribution record.

He was simply used to reaching out when he saw a fault.

Without his own tools, he borrowed public equipment and spent forty minutes securing the pivot. Once the panel closed, the corridor's temperature began to fall slowly.

Someone asked his name.

“Adai,” he said.

The other person nodded and did not ask more about his background.

The next morning, the repair entered the public record. The system asked whether he wanted the action included in contribution verification.

Adai declined.

“I just did it while I was there.”

The record therefore remained in the equipment-maintenance log and was not converted into personal contribution value for him.

The action had really happened.

Its results would not disappear. But a person still had the right to refuse to turn every kindness into calculable, attributable proof.

IV

By the cooling center's fifth day, tensions were deepening.

Water had not run out, and energy remained above the safety threshold. What was truly strained was quiet, sleep, private boundaries, and people's patience with strangers.

Some talked late at night.

Some gave food to other people's children without asking.

Some hung wet clothes on public handrails.

Some would not share washing facilities with outsiders.

A teenager from Qinghuai photographed evacuees sleeping on the floor and posted the images within his private social circle. They were soon forwarded. One woman's face and information about her illness were clearly visible.

She requested deletion.

The teenager thought he was documenting a disaster.

“I wasn't making fun of her,” he said. “I just wanted people to know what's happening here.”

“What happened can be recorded,” the on-site coordinator told him. “That doesn't automatically make who she is everyone's to see.”

The teenager objected.

“Why can't a public event be made public?”

The woman had been sitting nearby throughout. Her name was Jiang Yu, and a kidney disease required regular treatment. Over these days, she had grown tired of people looking at her infusion line.

She did not demand the teenager be punished.

She asked only:

“If you were lying there, would you want someone to ask you first?”

The teenager did not answer.

Circulation of the images was stopped. Existing forwards were traced and withdrawn, and copies that could not be withdrawn were marked unauthorized. The teenager took part in the follow-up and took responsibility for explaining himself to Jiang Yu face to face.

Eventually, he said he was sorry.

Jiang Yu did not say it was all right.

Forgiveness belongs to no procedure.

An apology can be required, harm repaired, circulation restricted. But someone who has been wronged is not obliged to relieve another's unease at once to prove shared life remains harmonious.

They did not speak again for several days.

Not until the night before the heat wave ended, when the teenager saw Jiang Yu sitting alone outside the medical area. He paused, then placed the paper cup he held on a table a little way from her.

“It's warm water,” he said. “I asked the medical staff. You can drink it now.”

Jiang Yu looked at him.

“Thank you.”

Still no forgiveness.

But there was now more between them than that one mistake.

V

On the seventh day, the city forecast relief from the heat.

Some residents began asking that the outsiders return home soon. Their reasons were not cruel: the theater needed to resume normal use, community supplies needed replenishing, and prolonged crowding was increasing the risks of disease and conflict.

Meanwhile, energy supplies to some housing in the south had not fully recovered.

Whether to continue sheltering people became a new dispute.

This time, no option could satisfy everyone.

Remaining open meant greater costs for Qinghuai. Closing immediately meant sending some people back to unsafe homes. A uniform extension looked fair but ignored differences in recovery among buildings. Moving everyone to a more distant central shelter would disrupt medical and care relationships already established.

The discussion lasted three hours.

Some spoke sharply, some left midway, and some repeatedly changed their choices. Spark organized facts, verified capacity, and presented consequences. It did not generate an answer packaged as “optimal.”

For any supposed optimum must first answer: whose losses may be placed second?

An intelligent system could not decide that alone.

The final arrangement was not neat.

Those whose homes were safe again returned in groups. Families with continuing medical needs stayed. Ordinary public activities moved to a nearby school. Qinghuai residents' extra

maintenance hours entered public-service compensation, without converting the acceptance of strangers itself into moral honors. After recovering, the southern community would open its repair workshops to support Qinghuai's damaged cooling equipment.

No one declared it perfect mutual aid.

Some gave much, others almost nothing. Some were generous in the crisis, then argued endlessly over a stained carpet. Some opposed opening the theater throughout, yet fetched medicine for unfamiliar older people every day. Others spoke movingly in public discussions but never appeared when supplies actually needed carrying.

People do not immediately become better people because they enter better institutions.

Nor does shared life presuppose perfected human nature.

It needs fear to be expressible without easily becoming exclusion; difference to remain without becoming a license to harm; giving to be seen without purchasing dominion over others; and a person who is not lovable still to retain the right to be helped.

VI

On the first rainy night after the heat wave, Qinghuai Theater reopened.

A few worn patches remained in the rehearsal room. Sleeping mats had left marks near the walls, and the ventilation corridor's panel had a pivot of a different color. Staff did not rush to erase every trace.

Adai came back once to collect something.

His toolbox had been recovered, its corners soaked by rain. At the theater entrance, he met Du Yuan. They had seen each other a few times at the cooling center but had never properly talked.

Du Yuan pointed at the new pivot.

“You fixed that?”

“Temporary patch,” Adai said.

“Looks solid.”

“Should last a few years.”

Then they went their separate ways.

The city was large.

Perhaps they would never meet again.

Not every shared experience becomes friendship. Not every act of mutual aid needs to continue into intimacy. The most precious order among strangers is not that they eventually become family, but that even if they never do, each can recognize the other's life as equally real.

A community is not an enlarged family.

It cannot require everyone to love one another, cancel boundaries with warmth, or make the kindness of a few bear everyone's responsibilities forever.

It simply lets a group of different people, in a world they must share, still have a chance to remain themselves and leave room for others.

Rain fell on the theater roof.

In the hall once crowded with people sheltering, children began rehearsing again. Someone played the wrong beat, someone stood in the wrong place, and the teacher stopped them to begin again.

Outside, several repair workers from the south were checking the circulating water pipes.

There was no ceremony.

Nor did anyone announce that the two communities were now one loving family.

They simply remembered that on the hottest nights, a door had opened.

A door's meaning has never lain in its being open forever.

It lies in the people behind it not pretending they cannot hear when someone truly needs them.

Chapter 18 How a City Sees Every Person

I

A month after Qinghuai Theater reopened, Linchuan began rebuilding its southern districts.

The heat wave had not destroyed the city. It had exposed a fracture that was already there.

The same heat fell on everyone, but its consequences were not the same.

Some lived in buildings that automatically regulated temperature and scarcely felt any danger. Some had vehicles, backup energy, and homes elsewhere, and could leave before a warning was issued. Others lived in crowded, aging rooms with little shade. Only when public energy supplies failed did they discover they had nowhere to go.

On the map, the distance was only a dozen or so kilometers.

What bodies endured belonged to two different worlds.

After the heat receded, the city had to decide more than how to repair a set of buildings.

It had to answer:

Before disaster comes, does a person's vulnerability already deserve to be seen?

If resources begin flowing to those who have long borne risks only after casualties occur, the city repairs only the surface left by disaster.

When the next heat wave comes, the same people will fall first.

II

On the day the southern redevelopment plan was announced, Cen Ji was cutting an older man's hair.

Her barbershop stood on an old southern street: a small frontage, two chairs, and a mirror beginning to darken. A price list from years before hung on the wall. Its bottom line had been changed so many times that the paper was fraying.

Seeing the redevelopment notice on the street terminal, the old man asked:

“Are they tearing it down this time?”

Cen Ji did not answer.

She had heard similar news many times.

The district lay near a new transport ring, and land values kept rising. In recent years, several large redevelopment plans had depicted it as a more efficient, brighter urban hub, better suited to industries of the future.

Every plan looked beautiful.

Wide roads, orderly buildings, advanced energy systems, ample public space, and precisely arranged industry and housing.

Only, in those pictures, it was rarely clear where the people already living there had gone.

Cen Ji opened the new city model.

First she saw her shop's block labeled “inefficient mixed-use land.” Then she saw that the nearby breakfast stalls, shoe-repair stands, used-book shops, cheap lodgings, and small repair workshops had all been included in the overall renewal area.

The system told her existing businesses could choose monetary compensation, relocation elsewhere, or space in the new commercial buildings.

It seemed everyone had a choice.

But the new commercial space carried higher maintenance costs. The relocation site was far from the customers she knew. A one-time payment could support her for a few years, but could not rebuild a shop where someone pushing through the door would call her name.

What she ran was more than a chair and a few pairs of scissors.

Some older people could not use complicated grooming terminals and came here each month for a haircut. Some living alone used a haircut as a chance to talk for half an hour. Parents also often brought children from the neighborhood here for their first haircut on their own.

These relationships had no formal contracts.

A city model could hardly calculate them in full.

They were not buildings, but they supported many lives.

III

Cen Ji submitted an objection.

She did not oppose improvements to energy supply, drainage, or housing. Nor did she think everything on the old street should remain untouched.

At summer's hottest, she too had draped wet towels in front of a fan. In heavy rain, water often pooled outside her shop. Older residents in the neighboring building had to climb five flights of stairs to rooms without private sanitary facilities.

Nostalgia could not cool them.

Nor could memory justify leaving danger in place.

What she opposed was equating a place's inefficiency directly with the people living there having no value that justified their staying.

Once her objection entered public deliberation, more voices appeared.

Some residents demanded complete rebuilding.

“We've spent our whole lives in broken-down houses. We can't make the next generation suffer because someone can't let go of the old street.”

Some business owners wanted to retain the existing lanes.

“However beautiful a new mall is, it won't sustain businesses like ours.”

Some young people argued for denser buildings to provide more housing.

Some older people feared losing familiar medical and care relationships after moving.

People not registered as long-term residents also raised their circumstances.

They rented, worked, raised children, and used the district without owning property. In traditional redevelopment plans, property owners could receive compensation, while those whose lives truly depended on the neighborhood might leave with nothing.

A city looking only at property rights sees houses, not lives.

Looking only at household registration, it sees officially recognized people, not those who have already spent years there.

Looking only at transactions, it sees prices, not the support that has never entered a price.

IV

The city gathered the facts of the district's functioning again.

Not to rate each person's value, but to understand what actually existed there.

Breakfast shops supplied inexpensive meals to night staff at nearby hospitals. Repair workshops extended the lives of large amounts of old equipment. Barbershops, bathhouses, and small tearooms offered many older people accessible places to socialize. Cheap lodgings housed short-term caregivers and families visiting for treatment. Tenants without property rights sustained deliveries, cleaning, care, food services, and basic repairs.

These lives had long existed but rarely appeared in land valuations.

In the city's most prosperous periods, they were inconspicuous. When systems broke down, they kept the most basic functions going.

Presenting the facts did not end the argument.

Some residents still favored wholesale demolition.

“Does one needed shop mean a dangerous building can never be touched?”

It does not.

Being needed does not mean being unchangeable.

Real contributions deserve to be seen. They do not thereby gain unlimited veto power over the public future.

Cen Ji's barbershop mattered to many. That did not mean the whole street had to remain as she knew it. The city belonged to everyone living in it, and to those not yet born or not yet arrived.

Preserving the past cannot come at the future's expense.

Building the future cannot begin by erasing real people from the plans either.

The real difficulty is not choosing one correct answer between preservation and demolition. It is admitting that every answer may make something disappear, and deciding who has the right to judge whether that disappearance can be borne.

V

The new plan no longer remade the entire district at once.

Redevelopment was divided into stages that could be independently tested and rolled back.

The most dangerous homes would be reinforced or rebuilt first. Underground energy and drainage systems would be upgraded ahead of the rest. Existing lanes would retain their basic scale; new construction would no longer replace all street-facing space with enclosed commercial complexes. Tenants, business operators, and actual service users gained their own standing to speak and return, no longer subordinate to property owners' choices.

This slowed the work and raised costs.

Some objected.

“Why should the city pay so much for these scattered little relationships?”

Because these relationships are what a city is made of.

Roads, energy, buildings, and algorithms are only its frame. What truly keeps a city alive is the countless small responses people make each day: who leaves a light for a stranger, repairs a pipe late at night, notices that an older person living alone has not appeared for days, or lets a newcomer find a first job and a first inexpensive bed.

These things cannot all be planned.

But planning can choose not to destroy them lightly.

Cen Ji's shop was retained, but had to move temporarily two streets away.

The new premises were smaller.

On moving day, the mirror cracked at one corner in transit. Standing in the empty room, Cen Ji suddenly felt that all her persistence had meant nothing.

The tree outside her old shop had not moved with her.

Nor had any plan saved the wall's scratches, the shaft of afternoon light, or the smell rising from the steamers next door.

The city honored the right to return, compensated equipment losses, and preserved customer relationships and service records.

It still could not move a place intact.

For the first time, Cen Ji acknowledged that even when redevelopment had tried its best to reduce harm, change itself still brought loss.

This was not institutional failure.

It was time's cost.

A better order cannot guarantee no regrets. It can only avoid burying regret beneath a beautiful rendering, requiring those who lose something to feign delight in public progress, or leaving them to bear every incalculable part alone.

VI

Six months into redevelopment, heavy rain reached Linchuan.

Several streets once most prone to flooding were not flooded again. Underground circulation systems diverted water before levels rose. Public energy in new housing remained stable. For the first time, evacuation routes for people with limited mobility were not blocked by clutter.

But water entered Cen Ji's temporary shop.

The city system had not failed. A construction barrier had changed the local flow. Rainwater poured through the back door, soaking photo albums she had kept for years and several boxes of supplies.

The contractor acknowledged responsibility, and repairs began quickly.

But the photographs, swollen apart by water, could no longer be restored.

Cen Ji sat by the door, spreading the albums open page by page. Some helped clean, some contacted restoration specialists for her, and someone said:

“At least no one was hurt.”

She looked up.

“No one being hurt doesn't mean nothing else matters.”

The person paused and stopped trying to console her.

The city later preserved those words in the incident record.

Not as a slogan, but as a real correction.

Public governance often handles problems by ranking losses: life above property, major risks above personal feelings. That order is necessary in emergencies. It cannot be extended into dismissal of every other loss.

An old photograph does not matter more than a life.

But once life is safe, it can still matter greatly.

A city that truly sees a person cannot recognize their needs only when they are near death. It must also see the small things that make them willing to keep living.

VII

There was no grand celebration when the old street reopened.

Residents gradually moved back. Some were satisfied, some disappointed. Some stood below new buildings, unable to find the direction their old windows had faced. A few old shops did not return. New businesses appeared. Once-familiar groups were scattered and slowly formed different connections.

Cen Ji hung the mirror with its cracked corner in the shop again.

The old tree was not outside the new shop.

A year later, street maintenance workers planted a young scholar tree. It was small and could not shade the midday sun. Someone suggested a faster-growing variety. Cen Ji neither agreed nor objected.

She simply gave it a little water each day before closing.

The old man who had asked, “Are they tearing it down this time?” returned. Sitting down, he looked at the new street in the mirror and said:

“Still not the same.”

Cen Ji fastened the cape and picked up her scissors.

“Of course it isn't.”

“Was it better before?”

She thought for a moment.

“The past had things we couldn't bear to lose. The present has things we shouldn't lose again.”

The old man nodded.

The scissors moved slowly through white hair.

Outside, children ran along the accessible ramp. New housing cast shadows on the old street. Metal sounded softly in the repair workshop. The breakfast shop was still in its old place, though its frontage had moved back half a meter.

The city had not been preserved intact.

Nor had it been wholly remade.

Between what was lost and what remained, it kept learning how to treat the people who lived within it.

A city's true measure has never lain only in its skyline, transport speed, energy efficiency, and industrial scale.

It also lies in whether someone must first become important to be seen; own property to be recognized; create enough value to deserve to remain; or suffer a great misfortune before the city will stop and listen.

A city cannot know every person.

But it can refuse to regard anyone in advance as negligible.

For beneath every grand map, a particular person is pushing open a door, crossing a street, and protecting something that looks insignificant to others.

And there, in the end, is where the weight of civilization falls.

Chapter 19 The State Still Exists

I

In the third year after Linchuan's old-city redevelopment was completed, a prolonged drought struck the north.

Rainfall belts kept shifting away, and flows into several major rivers fell to historic lows. Agricultural areas needed irrigation, cities needed water, energy systems needed cooling, and wetlands and groundwater networks were nearing irreversible damage.

Water still existed.

There simply was not enough to meet every need at once.

Technology could predict shortages months ahead, calculate the consequences of different allocations, and find more efficient alternatives. It could not make finite water flow everywhere at the same moment.

This time, no community could decide alone.

Water one city saved might have to flow to land its residents had never visited. Preserving one region's harvest could mean stricter rationing in downstream cities. Maintaining industrial output now might cost people years later a water source that could never recover.

Interests crossed streets, cities, and regions.

Responsibility had to expand with them.

Humanity could establish networks of interregional collaboration, involve countless actors in judgment, and use intelligent systems to see whole chains of causation never before visible.

But when choices necessarily caused loss, an actor was still needed that could make the final decision, bear public responsibility, and answer questions about it.

The state had not disappeared with technological progress.

Precisely when no one could bear the burden alone, the weight of its existence became visible again.

II

He Chuan first heard the words “permanent cessation of cultivation” beside his father's wheat field.

The land had been farmed for four generations.

His great-grandfather had reclaimed it after war. His grandfather dug the first irrigation canal. As a young man, his father improved the saline soil little by little. The sound He Chuan knew best as a child was the continuous soft rustle of wind through ripened wheat.

Now only sparse, low seedlings remained.

The national water-allocation plan stated that some water-intensive areas with poor recovery capacity had to move away from their existing cropping systems. Certain plots that had severely depleted groundwater would permanently cease deep-water irrigation.

The He family's fields were on the list.

Compensation, occupational transition, the right to participate in ecological restoration of the land, and long-term livelihood guarantees were all in the plan. Spark showed his father different choices: join dryland crop trials, enter a regional soil-and-water restoration team, retain nominal rights in the land but stop cultivating it, or accept an exchange and continue farming in another suitable area.

Each choice offered more possibility than simple loss.

But his father said nothing.

He crouched and took up a handful of pale soil.

“Will this still be called land?”

He Chuan said, “They'll restore the ecology.”

“I’m asking whether it will still be called land.”

That question was not among the plan's options.

Land could change from a productive space into an ecological one, from a family holding into a public restoration area. Its use could change, its ownership remain, its losses be compensated.

But to his father, the land was not a resource that could simply be redefined.

It was proof that his ancestors had lived, and the way he had known who he was throughout his own life.

Stopping cultivation meant more than losing income.

It meant ending a familiar order of time: sowing, watering, heading, harvesting; watching clouds, reading wind, feeling soil, waiting for rain. The things repeated year after year, as though they could never disappear, would no longer need him.

His father asked:

“Is this for those city people downstream?”

He Chuan did not evade the question with grander principles.

“For them too. And the fields, rivers, and children downstream. And the groundwater here.”

“What about us?”

“We're part of it too.”

His father looked up.

“If we're part of it, why are we the first to stop?”

He Chuan had no answer.

Shared benefits do not fall evenly on everyone.

Some receive water that lets life continue. Others bear the end of a way of life.

III

Once the allocation plan entered national public deliberation, views from different regions rapidly gathered.

Upstream residents argued that the water originated locally and that they had long borne the costs of protecting it. Distant cities should not come first in a shortage.

Downstream cities pointed out that the basic needs of tens of millions could not be solved through short-term relocation.

Agricultural regions demanded protection for food production.

Ecological researchers warned that continued groundwater extraction might get them through the year but destroy future recovery capacity.

Industrial sectors argued that stopping certain critical manufacturing systems would affect not only companies but also medical equipment, energy components, and basic supplies.

No side was entirely wrong.

No side could claim all the water simply by being right in its own terms.

Spark and national public decision-support systems repeatedly modeled the options. Every consequence was made as visible as possible: who would use how much less water, which crops would yield less, which jobs would pause, which river stretches could recover, which families would move, which losses could be compensated, and which damage would be irreversible once it occurred.

The intelligent systems offered several feasible plans but refused to replace the final decision.

Calculation could explain consequences. It could not determine alone who ought to bear them.

This was not a lack of computing power.

Choices about values had to return to real subjects.

The state made the final plan.

Not everyone agreed with it.

Some water-intensive industries would halt production by specified deadlines. Severely depleted areas would stop deep-water irrigation. Cities would introduce tiered water use. Food production would shift to more suitable regions. Ecological base flows would become a

floor that could not be breached. Regions bearing the main losses would receive long-term transition support rather than a one-time buyout.

Protests continued after the decision was announced.

Some farmers refused to close wells. Some businesses believed they bore disproportionate losses. Several cities disputed the fairness of their rationing levels. The state did not treat opposition as betrayal of the community. Nor did opposition cause it to withdraw essential limits that had to be enforced.

Allowing challenge does not mean every decision can be delayed indefinitely.

Retaining final decision-making authority does not mean power is exempt from explanation.

Every restriction had to be traceable to facts, rules, and responsible actors. Every instance of differential treatment had to be scrutinized. When forecasts deviated, allocations had to change. When losses exceeded the original assessment, compensation and support had to increase.

The state's power was therefore not the power to be “always right.”

It was a power that could no longer pass final responsibility to someone else.

IV

His father eventually chose to join soil-and-water restoration.

On the first day, he did not wear the team's uniform. He wore his old farming clothes.

The work involved sealing deep wells, restoring surface vegetation, monitoring soil moisture, and trying to establish a new agricultural ecology independent of deep irrigation. A young technician explained the sensors. After listening for a while, his father suddenly asked:

“Have you ever grown wheat?”

The technician said no.

His father handed the equipment back.

“Then don't tell me yet what the land will do.”

For a moment, the atmosphere stiffened.

The technician did not argue. The next day, he followed He Chuan's father through the fields for a whole day, distinguishing soil colors at different depths, watching which ridges the wind crossed, and listening to which year's pests had been worst and which rain had saved wheat almost dead from drought.

On the third day, they repositioned the monitoring points.

The original model had not been wrong.

But his father's accumulated experience let it see finer differences.

His father also began admitting that some once-reliable experience could no longer meet the new climate conditions. The winds, rains, and seasons he knew were changing.

They did not come to agree on everything.

They simply stopped regarding each other as ignorant.

Six months later, drought-tolerant crops survived in the trial plots. Yields were low, nowhere near restoring the old scale of cultivation. His father stood at the edge for a long time.

He Chuan asked, “Does that count as hope?”

His father said:

“They've lived, yes. We can't say the land has come back to life yet.”

He refused to celebrate too soon.

Civilization needs hope. It also needs people who will not let hope replace facts.

V

At the drought's worst, water was released without approval from an upstream reservoir at night.

Tens of thousands of cubic meters entered local irrigation canals.

A group of nearby farmers had done it. They knew further waiting meant whole fields of crops would die. They also knew releasing the water would reduce downstream reserves.

One was He Chuan’s older paternal cousin, He Yuan.

When investigators arrived, he did not evade them.

“The wells were sealed and the canals closed,” he said. “There was one last crop in the ground. I couldn't stand and watch it die.”

Some called it an act of self-rescue.

Others said he was transferring his own loss downstream.

Both judgments touched the facts.

Choices made in desperation deserve understanding. Deserving understanding does not free them from responsibility.

He Yuan accepted the measures imposed and joined the subsequent arrangements to repair losses. His family would not lose basic livelihood guarantees. His children's rights to education, medical care, and housing remained intact. But the participants still shared responsibility, according to their capacities, for the real consequences of unauthorized water extraction.

When He Chuan visited, He Yuan was putting away farm tools.

“Do you think I was wrong?” He Yuan asked.

“You knew it would affect people downstream,” He Chuan said.

“I knew.”

“You opened the gate anyway.”

“Yes.”

“Then there's responsibility.”

He Yuan was silent for a while.

“If it happened again, I might still open it.”

He Chuan stopped trying to persuade him.

Law can establish the boundaries of conduct. It cannot require people to feel properly regulated emotions when remembering their own despair.

Taking responsibility does not mean denying the pain of that time.

Understanding pain does not mean canceling responsibility.

Here lies the community's real difficulty: it must see both someone's desperation and the distant people they harm. It cannot cast him as evil to uphold the rules, or pretend downstream people bore no consequences out of sympathy for him.

VI

The next spring, the north still lacked water, but the most dangerous systemic collapse had not occurred.

Urban water use fell. Some industries completed recycling upgrades. Groundwater levels stopped plunging. Food production declined but stayed above the safety floor. Shallow water returned to several tributaries that had run dry.

People began debating whether that year's strict allocation had really been necessary.

Because the worst had not happened, some thought the risk had never existed. Because costs had been paid, some suspected those costs could have been avoided.

Every preventive decision faces this difficulty.

Failure can be seen.

An averted disaster often looks like nothing happened.

The state could not therefore demand gratitude. It could only open all the facts, letting the judgments, models, disputes, errors, and corrections of the time undergo long-term examination.

Subsequent scrutiny found two serious flaws in the initial plan: one overstated how irreplaceable some industrial water use was; the other underestimated how ending irrigation would disrupt local social relationships.

The related responsibility was not concealed by “being right overall.”

Decision-makers answered questions. Industrial quotas were reduced again. Support for affected areas expanded beyond compensation for production to rebuilding communities, supporting occupational transitions, and preserving culture.

A decision saving the whole does not make every part of it right.

Nor can national interests justify concealing particular harms.

Real state capacity is more than concentrating resources and enforcing decisions in a crisis.

It also includes allowing facts to return afterward, errors to be named, and those who bore losses for the whole to say:

We know why this had to be done.

That does not mean you may forget what we lost.

VII

Years later, the He family's wheat fields had not returned to their former state.

Part had become a dryland farming trial area; part, seasonal grassland. A small plaque stood by the sealed deep well. It praised no one's sacrifice, recording only groundwater-level changes and the history of land use.

Even in old age, his father still walked around the land every day.

One year, rain was more plentiful than usual.

Wildflowers long unseen appeared in the grass, and a few migrating birds rested in shallow hollows. His accompanying terminal noted that some areas now met the conditions for low-intensity cultivation to resume. He could submit an application.

His father did not decide immediately.

He crouched and looked at the damp soil.

“I used to think only about when I could plant again,” he said. “Now I really can, I'm afraid of driving away what's only just come back.”

“So you won't plant?” He Chuan asked.

“Not that either.”

His father took a handful of soil and slowly rubbed it apart.

“I need to think some more.”

This time, no one decided for him.

The state had drawn water-resource boundaries that could not be breached. It had also preserved landowners' and actual users' rights to choose anew within them.

The larger community does not exist to swallow the individual.

It is necessary because some consequences have already exceeded what any individual can see and bear.

Rivers do not stop at administrative boundaries. Climate does not change just one village. Energy, food, disease, security, and disaster do not cease to connect us because people cherish their own lives more.

The state therefore still exists.

It safeguards the conditions of shared survival, organizes undertakings individuals cannot accomplish alone, and makes decisions in crises that cannot be postponed indefinitely. When its power may cross boundaries, it also accepts limits imposed by every real subject.

It is not civilization's endpoint.

Not the enemy of the human community.

Nor an old shell that can hand responsibility to machines.

It is a real actor built by hundreds of millions of strangers to protect shared life before they can directly bear everything together.

The state is truly strong not when it can make every voice agree.

It is strong when, despite enduring differences, unavoidable costs, and an uncertain future, it can still uphold the floor of shared survival, abandon no one who bears the costs, and refuse to make any generation's immediate interests the final boundary of civilization.

Chapter 20 When the Circle of “Our Own” Widens Again

I

Seventy-six hours before the solar storm arrived, humanity knew clearly for the first time that the whole world would face the same darkness at once.

The first observations came from a joint detection array beyond the Sun's far side.

An extremely powerful flare accompanied a high-speed ejection of matter directed toward Earth. At its observed intensity and speed, the storm could disrupt low Earth orbit, satellite communications, navigation, intercontinental power grids, and some deep-space facilities. The greatest danger was not one device failing, but successive ruptures among interdependent systems.

Energy depended on communications for dispatch.

Communications depended on orbital networks and power on the ground.

Medical care, transport, food, water services, and financial settlement depended on both.

If countries closed critical interfaces to protect their own systems, other regions might lose warning and synchronization capabilities and fall into deeper disorder. If all systems remained connected under heavy load, the storm could spread damage across the whole network.

There was not enough time to build new trust.

Nor to wait for every dispute to be resolved.

Humanity could only carry its unfinished competition, suspicion, and conflict into a shared encounter with a star that knew nothing of national borders.

II

Gu Xian worked at Dongzhou's National Energy Coordination Center.

When the warning was issued, she had already spent more than thirty hours without leaving the control hall.

Screens continually updated orbital equipment status, vulnerable grid nodes, medical systems' backup endurance, and regional risk levels. Spark condensed hundreds of millions of pieces of information into different decision paths. It did not lighten the weight behind any of them.

Comprehensive preemptive load reduction would protect the main grid as much as possible, but shut some industrial systems down early.

Prioritizing core cities could reduce casualties in densely populated areas, but diminish energy margins in remote regions.

Maintaining cross-border connections could help neighboring countries stabilize frequency, but transmit their grid fluctuations into Dongzhou.

Disconnecting could isolate risk temporarily, but might also deprive both systems of each other's support.

Gu Xian's mother lived in the northern mountains.

The population was sparse and supply lines long. In the risk ranking, it was an area that might undergo planned power restrictions.

Her mother had a chronic respiratory condition. The assistive equipment at home could operate off-grid for fourteen hours. The local public medical station had backup energy but limited beds, and transfers had to take place in advance.

Spark had already sent a risk warning on Gu Xian's behalf.

Her mother refused to leave.

“There are still a few older people in the village with no one to take them,” she said. “If I go first, what happens to them?”

Gu Xian suppressed her agitation.

“That's not your responsibility.”

“I know.”

“You know, and you're still staying?”

Her mother paused.

“Knowing it's not my responsibility doesn't mean I can pretend I haven't seen it.”

Gu Xian was not moved by the words.

She felt only anger.

An entire nation's energy network awaited her participation in judgment, while her mother tied her own safety to older people unrelated to her. Gu Xian wanted to persuade her, order her, even invoke family emergency authorization to arrange a compulsory transfer.

But the authorization did not allow her to make choices for her mother while her mother retained the capacity for judgment.

All she could do was present the vehicles, routes, equipment reserves, and latest safe departure time.

“If you insist on staying, at least get them to the medical station within four hours.”

“All right,” her mother said.

After the call, Gu Xian stared at the darkened interface.

Technology had let her concern reach its destination.

It had not put her at ease.

III

Twenty hours after the storm warning, international coordination entered its hardest phase.

Several countries with advanced observation capabilities held more precise data but feared that full sharing would expose their orbital monitoring coverage and technical abilities. Some demanded access to global navigation and communications backup interfaces; the owners feared emergency access would create lasting security vulnerabilities. Some regions lacked grid-isolation capabilities and could not protect themselves independently even with a warning.

No country wanted to show its hand first in a crisis.

That caution was not absurd.

Shared risk does not automatically end competition, or erase memories of betrayal, sanctions, attacks, and technological blockades overnight.

A state cannot abandon its real responsibility to its own people simply at the words “all humanity.”

But national interests cannot be reduced to the belief that one is safe as long as danger reaches someone else first.

A solar storm does not ask which line belongs to an ally or which satellite serves a rival. The more interconnected global systems become, the more a large failure anywhere can return through supply, communications, energy, and security chains.

Protecting others was no longer only a moral choice.

It was also a clear-eyed judgment of consequences for oneself.

In the end, countries did not open all their capabilities.

They established only the minimum interfaces required for the crisis: sharing verified storm parameters and arrival times; synchronizing critical grid load-reduction windows; preserving civilian navigation and medical communications frequencies; pausing orbital maneuvers that might prompt misjudgment; and supplying emergency modules without core technology to regions lacking protection capabilities.

Cooperation still had boundaries.

Competition had not ended either.

But some things were temporarily placed outside competition.

Not because humanity already trusted itself, but because if the conditions of shared survival were destroyed, every victory and defeat would lose the world that sustained it.

IV

In the ninth hour of the coordination meeting, a warning satellite suddenly lost contact.

Its orbit happened to pass through a blind spot in the monitoring coverage of two long-hostile countries. Within minutes, both security systems began raising alert levels.

Some suspected a covert attack concealed by the solar storm.

Automated defense systems recommended moving orbital assets early and suppressing possible sources of interference. Under the old security logic, this was reasonable: when the other's intent cannot be confirmed, protect yourself first.

But any large maneuver now could look to the other side like preparation for an attack.

Misjudgment was beginning to produce a causal chain of its own.

The neutral attribution interface was activated.

Countries submitted not complete technical data but the minimum information necessary to verify the event's nature. Several independent observation nodes jointly confirmed that contact had been lost through high-energy particle disturbances not yet reaching the ground. There were no identifiable signs of a human attack.

The alert was not immediately lifted.

The militaries retained their own judgments.

But automatic escalation was paused.

Those few dozen minutes created no friendship and changed no underlying antagonism.

They merely stopped an unverified suspicion from becoming irreversible action at machine speed.

The human community does not exist only in grand declarations.

Sometimes it is only a pause at the heart of a crisis.

When every system urges immediate retaliation, someone still insists on asking first:

What are the facts?

V

Twelve hours before the storm arrived, Gu Xian's center received a cross-border request for assistance.

A major hydropower hub in the neighboring country to the southwest could not complete isolation on schedule. If it destabilized, millions locally would lose electricity, and Dongzhou's southern grid would also suffer frequency shocks.

Assistance required making some domestic balancing capacity available.

That would further reduce the safety margin reserved for home use.

The control hall divided.

“Our own northern regions already face restrictions. Why give capacity to them?”

“Because if they destabilize, the shock will still come back.”

“That's a model's projection, not something that's happened.”

“By the time it happens, the balancing window will be gone.”

Gu Xian watched the screen.

If capacity was opened, restrictions in her mother's area might last another two hours.

At national scale, this was the dispatch of millions of kilowatts.

For her, it was how long the equipment beside her mother's bed could keep running.

For the first time, she felt so clearly that judgments about the whole were never made from outside life.

Every macro-level number contained someone's mother, child, hospital bed, grain store, and unfinished words.

She did not evade her own interests.

“My immediate family is in the affected area,” she declared in the decision record. “I support making balancing capacity available, but request recusal from the final vote.”

No one demanded proof of selflessness.

Reliable public judgment does not depend on someone pretending to have no attachments. It depends on making attachments visible, keeping interests from hiding, and preventing one person's love and fear from ruling the final decision alone.

The state ultimately agreed to provide support.

It also sent additional mobile energy vehicles into the northern mountains, prioritizing medical stations and household life-support equipment.

Resources still could not cover all ordinary electricity use.

The power remained off in Gu Xian's mother's village.

That did not make her mother someone sacrificed.

Nor did it make the neighboring country's residents recipients of a favor bestowed from above.

It was simply two connected systems facing the same danger, protecting together what neither could afford to lose.

VI

The storm arrived seven minutes after the predicted time.

The night sky did not immediately display the spectacle people imagined.

Silent anomalies came first.

Some satellites entered protection mode, intercontinental communications slowed, and navigation accuracy declined in several regions. Vast auroras spread across high-latitude skies. City backbone grids began fluctuating violently.

Northern Dongzhou lost power for eleven consecutive hours.

Two industrial cities deliberately shut their main production systems.

Several high-speed transport lines suspended operations.

The neighboring southwestern country's hydropower hub maintained frequency through cross-border balancing and avoided cascading failure.

Other parts of the world were not all so fortunate.

A coastal region lacking backup energy entered a prolonged blackout. A hospital's old energy-storage system ran out early, and medical staff moved critical patients in darkness. Several small satellites permanently lost contact. An ocean-going vessel strayed from its course after navigation was interrupted.

People died.

Shared coordination reduced the disaster. It did not eliminate it.

That made every celebration seem premature.

Only after the storm weakened did Gu Xian receive news from her mother.

The village's older people had reached the medical station. Her mother's equipment had been connected to a mobile energy vehicle in the final half-hour.

She was safe.

By the time Gu Xian left the control hall, it was daylight.

A colleague told her the world's main systems had held.

She nodded, sat on the steps, and suddenly began crying.

Not because of victory.

Only because at last she allowed herself to admit she had thought she might never hear her mother's voice again.

Grand ideas of shared survival must ultimately pass through a particular human heart.

Otherwise, “humanity” is only an abstraction without bodily warmth.

VII

After the storm, countries released some of their crisis decision records.

Disputes followed at once.

Some thought information sharing had remained too limited, causing regions to miss their protection windows. Some questioned powerful countries' provision of only technologies that did not threaten their advantages. Some accused countries receiving aid of failing to bear reciprocal responsibilities. Others objected to the claim that one instance of crisis cooperation meant humanity was already moving toward unity.

Most of these objections were valid.

Facing a solar storm together had not made humanity an undifferentiated whole.

States still protected their own people. Societies retained different institutions. Historical wounds had not vanished, and conflicts of interest would continue.

“All humanity” could not excuse the cancellation of states' responsibilities.

Nor could it name a mandate for a powerful few to decide everyone's future.

Community does not melt difference into a single voice.

First, it means acknowledging that once certain foundations are destroyed, no side can truly keep itself safe alone; once some capabilities escape control, victims will not remain only across the border; and some conditions of survival are not one country's creation and cannot be permanently appropriated by any country as instruments of competition.

Air, oceans, climate, orbit, defenses against pathogens, planetary safety, and final human decision-making authority increasingly share one reality:

Different countries affect them together, and everyone bears their consequences together.

VIII

Years later, humanity called that storm the “Seventy-Six-Hour Coordination.”

The name sounded complete and calm, as though the world had once executed a shared response precisely.

Gu Xian remembered the disorder.

She remembered data shared only after long reluctance, misjudgments that could escalate at any moment, arguments in the control hall, long blackouts in the northern mountains, and a neighboring country's engineer saying, just before communications failed:

“We're still here. You can start sending power.”

They did not later become friends.

Disputes between their countries arose again.

But the words remained in Gu Xian's memory.

They taught her that the boundary of “our own” never widens once and for all.

It contracts in fear, wavers before interests, and hardens again around historical wounds. Generation after generation must confirm anew, through real risks and real costs:

How many people must protecting ourselves include?

At first, “self” was only a body.

Later, it expanded into family, group, city, and nation.

When technology connects the world into a whole that transmits consequences among its parts, when one place's choices reach everyone through countless invisible chains, the boundary of “self” must widen again.

Not to deny existing loves and responsibilities.

But to let them continue to exist.

The human community is therefore no moral posture above reality.

It is humanity finally seeing:

Before the conditions of shared survival, anyone permanently excluded from “our own” may ultimately become an inescapable part of the fate of all humanity.

The Sun still burns far away.

It does not care about Earth's borders.

But Earth's people must care.

For humanity is not a community by nature.

Only when our fates are already connected, and humanity begins willingly to bear that connection together, does the human community truly emerge.

Chapter 21 Those Who Leave Earth

I

When humanity first decided to establish a long-term settlement beyond Earth, the debate lasted twenty-seven years.

Some saw it as a necessary step in extending civilization's boundaries of survival.

Others saw sending immense resources to a distant celestial body while hunger, disease, inequality, and conflict remained on Earth as turning away from real suffering.

Some believed humanity would eventually reach the stars.

Others warned that distance would not automatically make people noble. A civilization that had not learned to live together might only carry old habits of possession, rivalry, and domination farther away.

These arguments received no final answer.

Civilization seldom waits for every problem to be solved before entering a new history.

It can only move forward with its unfinished self.

On the day the first settlers departed, ruins of war still stood on Earth, rivers still awaited recovery, people still waited for treatment in hospitals, and children still saw the sea for the first time.

Humanity had not completed Earth.

It had only finally become able to leave it.

II

Shen Xinghe was forty-seven when selected for the expedition.

She was a closed-ecosystem engineer, primarily responsible for water, air, microbial communities, and food cycles. The expedition was not bound for another habitable Earth. It was going to a distant base where long-term survival would depend on an artificial environment.

The one-way journey would take three years and seven months.

Once the base was established, members would remain at least twelve years. Even if all went well, traveling there and back would no longer be a decision made lightly.

Her father was seventy-nine.

Her daughter was twenty-one.

When her father heard she had been selected, he asked only:

“Will I still be here when you come back?”

Shen Xinghe could not say yes.

Spark could give probabilities based on his health, plan medical support, and help her concern reach him across the long distance during the journey.

It could not guarantee he would live until she returned.

Communications would also be delayed more as distance increased.

At first only seconds, then minutes, then tens of minutes. Eventually, a full conversation would require a long wait. Spark could then organize what each wanted to send, but could not create an illusion of real-time presence.

Her father would still hear words his daughter had truly left.

Only, as he spoke his reply, she might be in another stretch of darkness, several hours earlier.

Distance had not been erased.

Technology merely meant love need not become wholly speechless before it.

III

Her daughter, Shen Yao, initially opposed the departure.

“You keep saying this is an undertaking for all humanity,” she said. “But I'm the one who actually loses a mother. Not all humanity.”

Shen Xinghe did not correct her.

Every grand undertaking contains a fact easily obscured:

When humanity is said to pay a price, particular people ultimately pay it.

No great body named “humanity” bears separation alone. A particular lover loses sleep. A particular family has an empty place at its table. Missed birthdays, illnesses, and aging fall on people no collective honor can replace.

The expedition program therefore no longer treated family support as a member's private matter.

Each traveler's intimate relationships, care responsibilities, and wishes to withdraw underwent independent assessment. Family opinions could not decide departure for the member. Nor could the member's mission deprive the family's feelings of a place.

Shen Yao had no veto.

But she had the right to refuse to be the tearfully supportive daughter in a publicity video.

She refused to attend the departure ceremony.

Refused to record good wishes.

Refused to let Spark generate any farewell “easier for her mother to accept.”

Three days before departure, she came home and put an old cup in the suitcase.

“How much personal luggage does the base allow?” she asked.

“One and a half kilograms.”

“How heavy is this?”

“A little over four hundred grams.”

“Then you decide if it's worth it.”

Shen Xinghe took out the cup.

A small chip remained on its rim from when Shen Yao had broken it as a child and it had been repaired. It had no special function and was unsuited to the journey's environment.

Shen Xinghe took it anyway.

Humanity should not carry only the most efficient things into the stars.

If everything useless must remain on Earth, what travels into the distance may be only a system capable of survival, not a whole person.

IV

The expedition had 186 members from seventeen countries and several long-standing collaborative regions.

They did not represent a humanity that had already erased difference.

Some were religious; others believed in nothing beyond experience. Some saw the voyage as a national honor; others as a shared human undertaking. Some longed for a new life; others simply loved their research.

On Earth, distance could cushion these differences.

Inside a sealed spacecraft, they had to meet every day in the same finite air.

In the eighth month, an argument erupted over an unoccupied compartment.

The original plan made it a communal quiet room where anyone could spend a little time alone. As research equipment increased, the engineering team wanted to turn it into laboratory space.

Supporters argued that expedition resources were extraordinarily costly and no space should remain underused for long.

Opponents pointed out that members had spent months in dense quarters. The quiet room was not idle. It served a psychological function equipment-utilization rates could not show.

Both sides had data.

The engineers could show that extra laboratory space would improve mission output. The medical team could also show that lack of solitude was worsening sleeplessness, conflict, and emotional dysregulation.

Before the final vote, one member said:

“We came to build a base, not take a holiday.”

Another replied:

“If we only deserve to leave Earth by turning ourselves into tools, what exactly are we building?”

The compartment was retained.

Its use changed: some periods for quiet solitude, others for low-disturbance experiments. The decision was imperfect. Both sides felt they had given up too much.

The spacecraft had no infinite space.

Nor could civilization evade genuine resource limits by saying “everyone matters.”

Recognizing human needs does not mean every need can be met.

It means only that even when a need cannot receive all the resources it requires, it must not be deemed worthless in advance because it produces no quantifiable output.

V

In the second year, the ecological circulation system became contaminated.

A fungus previously within safe limits multiplied abnormally in the sealed environment, invading part of the food-cultivation area. The system isolated the contamination in time, but fresh-food supplies declined.

Repairs required entering a high-risk section.

Automated equipment could perform most operations, but several narrow pipes still required people on site.

The task carried clear danger.

If no one entered, contamination might spread. If someone entered, they would face infection and equipment-failure risks.

Spark listed the twelve members most suited to the task.

Shen Xinghe ranked first.

She did not immediately agree.

Earlier voyage narratives often made such moments into heroes stepping forward without hesitation. Real people facing danger calculate, fear, think of distant fathers and daughters, and ask why it must be them.

She spent two hours examining the risks.

Then another hour checking whether someone else could take her place.

Some were disappointed by her hesitation.

She knew.

But a civilization that can praise only fearlessness forces everyone afraid to learn to lie first.

Shen Xinghe finally signed the authorization and entered the contaminated area.

Not because she was unafraid.

But because, among all feasible plans, her experience truly offered the greatest reduction in overall risk. Replacing her with someone less capable would merely transfer her danger to another.

The task lasted nine hours.

She completed the work and suffered a mild infection. During isolation, the public record confirmed her actual contribution, including risk borne, professional judgment, and the results of restoring the system.

The record did not turn her into a nobler person.

Her basic rights would not increase because of the action. Nor would it entitle anyone to demand another sacrifice from her next time.

Civilization can remember contribution.

Sacrifice cannot become the permanent requisitioning of a person.

VI

In the third year of the voyage, Shen Xinghe's father grew worse.

By the time the news reached her, twenty-six minutes had passed.

He was still lucid but could not speak at length. With medical assistance, he recorded a message for the expedition ship.

“I don't much want to talk about grand things,” he said. “It's just that the persimmon tree in the backyard has plenty of fruit this year. Little Yao came to pick some. When you were small, you always chose the soft ones. Thinking about it now, you never really liked hard persimmons.”

He spoke slowly.

Paused several times.

“If you can still see it when you return, see it. If not, that's all right too. A tree doesn't grow to wait for anyone.”

After listening, Shen Xinghe recorded a reply immediately.

She spoke of the spacecraft's lights, new shoots in the food-cultivation area, and the cup still intact. She did not say “Wait for me.” Nor did she ask him to hold on.

Only after sending it did she realize that even if her father was still alive, by the time her reply arrived, the person hearing it would be closer to death than she knew him to be now.

The wait lasted fifty-three minutes.

Another message came.

Her father had slipped into unconsciousness.

She requested a return.

The spacecraft could not change course for one person. Even an immediate emergency return would not get her there for his final moments and would impose unacceptable risks on the entire mission.

Everyone knew the answer.

The request still underwent formal judgment.

Someone's father dying should not be dismissed with “Those are the mission rules.” She needed to establish every possibility and had a right, once nothing could change, to know clearly that the opportunity lost had not been carelessly abandoned.

Her father died seven hours later.

Shen Xinghe did not take part in a real-time farewell.

Family on Earth kept a full record for her. Whether and when to watch, and which parts to retain, were hers to decide.

Spark did not generate an interactive image of her father.

Did not simulate what he might have said.

Did not create, from past information, a “father” still able to answer her.

Once someone has left, the ability to imitate them should not be used to disguise them as still present.

Shen Xinghe only listened again and again to the message about the persimmon tree.

Later, she turned it off.

Some nights, she did not want to hear her father's voice.

Missing someone is not a loyalty one must sustain without interruption.

Forgetting for a moment is not betrayal.

VII

When the expedition ship arrived, Earth could no longer see the travelers step through the hatch at the same moment it happened.

Only after a long delay did the images reach the places where humanity lived.

No single, shared instant belonged to everyone.

Shen Xinghe crossed the connecting passage into a base not yet fully stabilized. Underfoot was no land that could directly nurture life. Outside the window was no blue sky.

Only rock, dust, radiation, and long cold.

People had to survive on air, warmth, water, and food they produced themselves.

Only after leaving Earth did they understand more clearly what Earth had given freely.

A rain shower, a breeze, a morning whose air could simply be breathed: here each required vast systems continually maintained.

The first settlers did not declare ownership of the whole celestial body.

The base's initial area of use, extracted resources, and environmental effects all entered a common human registry. The countries of departure, building institutions, expedition members, and future settlers each held corresponding rights. None could permanently claim a still poorly understood world as private territory merely by arriving first.

First arrival is a fact.

Not unlimited authorization over the future.

Pioneering can constitute contribution.

It does not therefore decide how those who follow must live.

Settlers had the right to make emergency decisions at extreme distance while retaining interfaces of responsibility with the Earth community. Earth could not treat them as remote execution terminals. Nor could they use distance to sever every shared rule.

A new world needed self-government.

Self-government did not mean forgetting where it came from.

VIII

In the base's eleventh year, a child was born.

She was not humanity's first child born beyond Earth, but she was the settlement's first life fully within its local ecosystem from conception onward.

Her name was Li An.

Before her birth, her identity had been discussed at length.

Did she belong to her parents' countries?

To the base?

To the consortium that funded the expedition system?

Or, first of all, to humanity?

In the end, no single identity swallowed the others.

Li An had the kinship and cultural ties her parents gave her, standing to share in the settlement's life, and basic human rights that birthplace could not take away.

She was not an expedition project's output.

Not a population target for a new world.

Nor a pioneer designated in advance.

She could later study celestial bodies, maintain the base, return to Earth, or refuse to bear all the meaning earlier generations had given this land.

A child born in a difficult place cannot be required to spend a lifetime repaying predecessors' sacrifices.

Her life belongs first to herself.

Shen Xinghe was approaching sixty when she first held Li An.

Through thin protective fabric, the child grasped her finger. The tiny hand did not yet know that beyond the window was no sky, or how many generations had imagined the place of her birth.

Shen Xinghe suddenly remembered her father's persimmon tree.

It had later been moved to a nearby public garden during a yard renovation. In the images her daughter sent, it was still alive, only its branches faced a different direction.

Her father had said a tree did not grow to wait for anyone.

Nor had the child before her come into the world to prove humanity's expedition right.

Every great civilizational undertaking must ultimately face the simplest test of a life:

Can she be welcomed into this world simply as a person, not a tool, not a symbol, not an appendage to any grand goal?

Whether that world is on Earth or among the stars.

IX

At the end of the twelve-year residence, Shen Xinghe became eligible to return.

Her daughter was already in her thirties.

Some friends on Earth had aged; some relationships had naturally faded across the long distance. Her familiar city's roads had changed. The river near her old home had been restored. Family members had sorted many belongings her father left.

She had imagined returning countless times.

When the choice became real, she hesitated.

The base still needed her.

Here were ecosystems she had helped build, companions of more than a decade, and children who already called this place home.

But Earth remained.

Her daughter remained.

She could not fully possess both lives at once.

Spark could help her see possibilities after each choice. It could not reunite separated time, make staying and returning happen together, or guarantee either decision would bring no regret.

Shen Xinghe chose to return to Earth.

Some thought she was leaving when the base most needed experience.

Others praised her for finally returning to family.

She rejected both complete explanations.

She had simply made a choice with gains and losses.

Even among the stars, humanity would not escape human life.

It would still choose among things that could not all be had, still miss things, still regret, still wonder on some night whether another path might have been better.

An interstellar civilization is not suddenly capable of everything.

It merely carries human finitude into a wider place.

X

On her last day before the return voyage, Shen Xinghe went alone to the base's observation window.

Far away, the Sun was only a bright star.

Earth could not be distinguished by the naked eye.

The planet that had nurtured all human memories, wars, loves, languages, cities, and homelands was so small here it almost did not exist.

Distance had not made it unimportant.

Precisely by traveling far enough, humanity could finally see more fully:

Earth was no inexhaustible resource warehouse, no backdrop that one country, generation, or form of life could possess alone.

It was humanity's only shared birthplace to date.

Leaving Earth was not abandoning Earth.

Reaching for the stars was not turning the universe into more land, mines, and battlefields.

If humanity enlarged only its power, not the boundary of “self”; extended only possession, not responsibility; and projected the old civilization's rivalry farther outward, then however long the voyage, it would not truly have left the past.

The real voyage does not happen only in space.

It happens when humanity understands itself anew.

From a species that can only fight over resources for immediate survival, toward a civilization capable of protecting shared conditions of survival, recognizing diverse subjects, limiting its own power, and bearing responsibility for the distant future.

There was no wind outside.

Shen Xinghe rested her hand on the observation window.

Behind her, children at the base were learning a nursery rhyme from Earth. Their singing passed through the air-circulation system with a faint mechanical echo.

It was not perfect.

But it had truly reached this place.

Humanity had finally entered the stars.

Not because it had transcended vulnerability.

But because, having acknowledged vulnerability, it was still willing to carry love, boundaries, responsibility, regret, and hope farther onward.

Chapter 22 We Still Have to Live Our Own Lives

I

On the day the travelers returned to Earth, Xu Zhiyan was in his kitchen cooking a pot of rice porridge.

He was eighty-four.

Morning light crossed the sill and fell on the wooden table. Water began boiling; the lid trembled softly. Spark told him the heat was a little high. He ignored it. Before long, foam from the porridge spilled over.

He turned down the heat and wiped the stove with a cloth.

The world was watching a live broadcast of the expedition ship entering Earth orbit. Many cities held welcoming ceremonies. Children looked skyward in public squares. The complete record of humanity's first long-term settlement beyond Earth was being opened to everyone.

Xu Zhiyan did not turn on the images.

In his youth, he had worked on ecological restoration, then entered food and community research. After retiring, he still occasionally taught nearby children how to recognize soil, seeds, and seasons.

Over these years, humanity had traveled farther and farther.

He had left his own district less and less.

Degenerating knees made distant travel difficult. Assistive equipment could help him walk, and remote systems could bring the world before his eyes. But most of the time, he moved only among the riverbank, vegetable garden, and a few nearby streets.

That did not mean his life had grown smaller.

A person's world is not measured by distance traveled.

He was still waiting for someone.

II

Her name was Shen Weilan.

They had loved each other when young, separated, and met again in middle age. No one could say precisely how many times they had drawn near and moved apart.

They had shared a home.

They had also gone years without contact.

Not every misunderstanding had been cleared away. Old wounds had not automatically become understanding merely because enough time had passed. Some things they finally talked through; some, even in old age, each still kept to themselves.

Seven years earlier, Shen Weilan had moved south.

She liked the warm climate and needed an environment better suited to cardiac rehabilitation. Xu Zhiyan did not want to leave the city where he had lived for years.

Neither demanded that the other prove love through giving something up.

Spark helped them keep everyday contact: a photograph through a window, wind recorded on a walk, a message of longing they had lacked the courage to voice directly after waking at night.

But Spark never answered automatically for them.

Sometimes Xu Zhiyan saw a message and did not want to speak.

Shen Weilan might also stop contacting him for days after a sentence spoken too harshly.

Technology did not manufacture an intimacy that never cooled.

It only kept silence from immediately becoming lost contact, so that when someone wanted to speak again, the door could still be found.

Three days earlier, Shen Weilan had sent a message.

“I want to come back for a visit.”

Xu Zhiyan replied with just one word:

“Good.”

He did not ask why or say he would be waiting.

Yet on the agreed morning, he woke two hours earlier than usual.

III

The porridge was ready, but Shen Weilan had not appeared.

Spark showed intercity transport operating normally. Her personal itinerary was not open to him.

Xu Zhiyan could send a question.

He did not.

Ten minutes passed.

Twenty minutes passed.

The porridge slowly cooled.

He grew irritable.

When young, he had thought age would make people more tolerant. Later, he learned that aging did not automatically remove stubbornness, sensitivity, or expectation. It merely left less physical energy for disguising many feelings.

Finally, he sent:

“Where are you now?”

No response.

Spark reminded him that Shen Weilan had authorized status sharing only for unexpected medical risks. No triggering condition had arisen.

Xu Zhiyan stared at the notice.

They had known each other for more than sixty years.

That still did not entitle him to know where Shen Weilan was at any moment.

His concern did not thereby become false.

Nor did boundaries expire with old age.

He got up to close the kitchen window, too quickly. His elbow knocked a bowl off the table's edge.

It hit the floor and broke into several pieces.

Shen Weilan had once used it.

Xu Zhiyan stood still.

The assistive terminal asked whether he wanted help cleaning up. He refused, slowly crouched, and picked up the pieces himself.

One made a small cut in his finger.

Spark prompted him to stop the bleeding and disinfect it.

This time, he did.

Civilization can offer a person help.

It cannot make them always willing to accept it.

Nor can it stop someone taking the frustration of waiting out on an innocent bowl.

IV

Near noon, a message finally came.

Shen Weilan had changed her mind on the way.

There had been no accident or deterioration in her condition. Halfway through the journey, she had suddenly felt tired and no longer wanted to continue. She got off at the next stop and returned south.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I thought I wanted to see you. Halfway there, I felt I didn't.”

After reading the message, Xu Zhiyan did not answer for a long time.

He had imagined many reasons for her lateness.

Never that she had simply changed her mind.

There was no disaster to blame, no system to hold responsible, no greater reason to make the broken arrangement easier to accept.

He typed:

“You should at least have told me sooner.”

Deleted it.

Typed again:

“Don't ever say you're coming back again.”

Deleted that too.

Spark did not adjust his tone or suggest words more likely to preserve the relationship.

This was a moment he had to face himself.

Finally, he replied:

“The porridge is cold. The bowl's broken too. I'm very angry right now and don't want to talk to you.”

A few minutes later, Shen Weilan answered:

“All right. We'll talk when you want to.”

Xu Zhiyan closed the interface.

That day, he did not watch the returning travelers or walk by the river. He poured the cold porridge into a storage container, finished clearing the bowl's fragments, and slept for a long time that afternoon.

When he woke, the sun was already low in the west.

A broken arrangement remained broken.

Anger did not immediately disappear because civilization offered better ways to express it.

V

Five days later, Xu Zhiyan contacted Shen Weilan again.

“Why did you turn back that day?”

This time, Shen Weilan was silent for a long time.

“I was afraid to see you,” she said.

“Afraid of what?”

“That you'd grown old. And that you'd see how old I've grown.”

Xu Zhiyan did not answer.

Of course they both knew the other had aged.

Images, health information, and years of life had never concealed it. But knowing someone is aging is not the same as standing before her and seeing how time has settled on her.

Shen Weilan continued:

“I was also afraid that afterward, it might turn out to have been the last time.”

“If we don't meet, there may be no next time either,” Xu Zhiyan said.

“I know.”

“You knew, and still went back?”

“Yes.”

Xu Zhiyan was angry again.

This time, though, he also heard Shen Weilan's fear.

Understanding did not cancel the hurt.

It only meant the hurt no longer had a single explanation.

They did not decide that day when to meet again.

They talked about the weather for a while, then ended the call.

A month later, Shen Weilan set out again.

This time, she did not tell him beforehand.

When the bell rang, Xu Zhiyan was reading an old book by the window. He went to the door and saw Shen Weilan's face on the confirmation display.

He did not open it at once.

The person outside did not hurry him.

Separated by a door, they stood quietly for a while.

Then Xu Zhiyan pressed Open.

VI

Shen Weilan was thinner than in the images.

She had brought a bowl.

Its color and size resembled the broken one, but it did not look the same.

“I couldn't find an identical one,” she said.

Xu Zhiyan took it and looked.

“It could never be the same anyway.”

“Do you still want it?”

“Leave it here for now.”

They did not embrace.

Shen Weilan sat at the table while Xu Zhiyan made porridge again. The heat was a little high. She reminded him. He said he knew, but still waited until the lid rattled before turning it down.

They ate slowly.

Children's voices occasionally came through the window. A public terminal was playing interviews with the returned travelers. Shen Xinghe spoke about leaving, loss, and Earth. Xu Zhiyan listened for a while, then lowered the volume.

“Don't you want to listen?” Shen Weilan asked.

“I do.”

“Then why turn it down?”

“You're here.”

That did not mean distant things did not matter.

The stars were still there. Humanity would keep voyaging. Countless larger undertakings were unfolding.

Only, at this moment, two people who might not have much time were already sitting at a table.

If civilization cannot help people discern what truly matters now, however vast its future, it may again miss what is before it.

VII

Shen Weilan stayed at Xu Zhiyan's home for nine days.

They did not resolve a lifetime's problems in those nine days.

On the second day, they argued over leaving the window open all night. On the fourth, Shen Weilan reorganized the kitchen without asking, and Xu Zhiyan spent half an hour finding his usual cup. On the sixth, they discussed a separation in their youth and each insisted on a different memory.

Spark could retrieve some records from that time.

Neither asked for verification.

Some disagreements do not need adjudication by facts.

Even knowing who first said what may not establish who was hurt more deeply. Human memory is not a public court. Intimate relationships cannot turn every past event into a competition over evidence.

On the eighth evening, they sat on the balcony.

Shen Weilan asked:

“Would it have been better if we hadn't separated then?”

Xu Zhiyan said:

“I don't know.”

“You used to say it would.”

“That was then.”

“Do you regret it?”

Xu Zhiyan thought for a long time.

“I have. There have also been times when I haven't.”

It was not a satisfying answer.

It was the true answer he could give.

A better civilization will not rearrange someone's past so that every path is finally proved right. It can only let people, once no longer swallowed by scarcity, oppression, constraints of status, and technological possession, see more clearly:

Some missed chances come from the times.

Some from institutions.

Some from others.

And some only from one's own inability, then, to love better.

The last still has to be acknowledged by the person themselves.

VIII

Early on the tenth day, Shen Weilan left.

This time, they embraced at the door.

Neither said goodbye.

Neither promised a next time.

Back in the kitchen, Xu Zhiyan saw the new bowl in the old place. He picked it up, then set it down again.

The sun was rising.

The city began its day: care systems completed the night handover, public transport adjusted routes, schools opened learning spaces, hospitals updated treatment schedules, and the distant settlement sent new ecological data.

Countless systems sustained the world beyond his sight.

They let a person survive without trading an entire life for survival; kept illness from easily destroying families; kept contributions from being wholly obscured by status and wealth; let concern cross distance; made power accept boundaries; allowed errors to be rolled back; and kept communities from readily abandoning anyone amid conflict.

All of this mattered.

But no system could decide for Xu Zhiyan whether to open that door.

Nor could any system complete Shen Weilan's journey for her.

It could not acknowledge aging, bear the broken arrangement, or face old wounds for them. Nor could it sit down at the same table in their place while time remained.

What civilization changes is the conditions of human life.

Life still belongs to people.

IX

That afternoon, Xu Zhiyan walked by the river.

Children were observing insects in the shallows. Their teacher did not immediately give answers, asking them first to describe what they saw.

One child recognized Xu Zhiyan.

“Have you been to the northern ecological area?”

“Yes.”

“Were you the one who fixed it?”

Xu Zhiyan smiled.

“Not me. Lots of people worked for lots of years. Later, the land slowly grew on its own too.”

The child seemed half to understand.

“What did you do, then?”

He looked out over the river.

When young, he too had hoped to do something large enough for the world to remember clearly that he had been here. Only later did he understand that many truly important changes never belong to one person.

“I did the part I could,” he said.

The child pressed:

“How big?”

Xu Zhiyan held his fingers a little way apart.

“Sometimes this big.”

The child laughed.

“Does something that small count?”

“Yes.”

“Even if no one knows?”

“Yes.”

The child turned and ran back to the water.

Xu Zhiyan walked on.

He did not check his contribution record.

It preserved projects he had joined, knowledge he had offered, responsibilities he had borne, and real results he had produced. Civilization had not forgotten them.

They did not, however, explain his whole life.

Whom he had loved, why he had stayed silent one night, how he had forgiven someone who never apologized, and why he still could not forgive something else; how long he had sat alone after failure, whom he had hurt through envy, how many years he had persisted with something that came to nothing: not all of this could enter public verification.

Nor did it need to.

Contribution value can keep real contributions from being forgotten.

It cannot determine whether a life deserves to exist.

Simply by being alive, a person is already a subject the world must take seriously.

X

Toward evening, Xu Zhiyan came home.

Spark told him Shen Weilan had arrived safely.

He replied:

“I know.”

A little later, he added:

“I’ve kept the bowl.”

Shen Weilan sent a brief laugh.

Xu Zhiyan listened and put the terminal aside.

Dinner was not yet prepared. Outside, lights came on one by one. Someone in the distance practiced an instrument, always getting the first few notes wrong, stopping, and starting again.

That melody, always wrong, then stopped, then begun again, reminded him of himself long ago: the child in the rain asking “Why?” over and over.

He had not known then what civilization humanity would build, who he would become, or how many encounters, choices, losses, and returns a lifetime would hold.

He was only learning how to know the world.

Many years passed. The world changed.

Children still had to learn to say no.

Young people still had to search for themselves.

People in love could still part.

Families still grew tired, friends still fell silent, and caregivers still sometimes wanted to escape.

Work no longer determined whether someone could survive, yet some still did not know why to get up. Dreams had more opportunities to enter reality, yet could still fail. Creation no longer belonged only to a few, yet real people still had to bear responsibility for expression. Competition remained, contribution did not cover all meaning, illness had not wholly departed, and death had not been abolished.

Strangers still had to learn to live together.

Cities still brought loss through building.

States still had to decide amid disagreement.

Humanity still hesitated before shared danger. Those reaching for the stars still bore lives in which not everything could be had.

Civilization had not abolished any of this.

Nor should it.

A life without regret, risk, boundaries, and choice is not a more perfect life.

It is only a program that no longer needs a subject.

A true Civilization Leap does not live a whole life for someone.

It keeps people from being swallowed too soon by avoidable scarcity, indifference, domination, and forgetting, so that they can experience life itself more fully.

Xu Zhiyan went into the kitchen.

He turned on the light, rinsed rice, added water, and put the pot on the stove.

It was only an ordinary person's evening.

No historic moment.

No grand event.

No system assigning it special meaning.

Yet every effort of civilization is ultimately for moments like this:

Someone still has their own time, relationships, boundaries, and choices; can love and can refuse; can contribute and can be tired; can be needed without having to prove their right to live by being needed.

He stood in the slowly rising steam, waiting for a pot of porridge to boil again.

The world had not lived his life for him.

It had only, at last, left him a place in which to live.

Closing Words Back to the Person

When civilization first emerged, humanity wanted only to survive.

To resist cold, find food, escape predators, care for the young, and bury the dead. People gathered around fire, recognized one another in darkness, and fought one another amid scarcity.

Later, villages became cities, tribes became states, roads linked continents, machines released power, information crossed oceans, and intelligence began participating in almost every important human activity.

Civilization grew ever greater.

Yet an individual could grow ever smaller.

Recorded, but unseen. Connected, but never truly reached. Given more and more choices, yet still unsure which life was their own. Creating immense wealth, yet needing every hour to prove their eligibility to survive.

Technology continually expanded human abilities.

Institutions continually expanded the scale of the world.

If meaning did not grow with them, civilization might lose, amid limitless power, what it had first sought to protect.

The person.

I

A child does not enter the world to fill a population count, continue a family name, fulfill parents' unfinished dreams, or become a more efficient producer in the future.

First of all, the child is a new subject.

They will say no, leave the path arranged for them, love someone who does not meet others' expectations, make mistakes, hurt others, and, at some moment no one knows, make a choice that changes another person's whole life.

Civilization can provide food, education, medical care, safety, and room for expression.

It cannot grow up for them.

Growing matters not because someone eventually meets a standard, but because they gradually become able to judge what deserves belief, what kind of person they want to be, and to bear the consequences of their choices.

If civilization protects only the obedient, rewards only the useful, and accepts only the stable, positive, and continually contributing, what it protects is not life but an order demanding life's obedience.

A true civilization must be able to sustain an unfinished person.

II

Civilization Leap will not free love of misunderstanding forever.

Families will not always be warm.

Friendships will not be unbreakable.

Care will bring more than nobility: exhaustion, resentment, the urge to escape, and long self-reproach too.

Technology can help words that could not be spoken in time reach someone. It can let distant people take part in care, protect privacy and boundaries, and make real needs visible sooner.

But technology cannot manufacture love.

Cannot force a response.

Cannot turn apology into forgiveness or company into intimacy. Nor does knowing someone's entire past give it possession of their inner world.

Relationships belong to people precisely because they cannot be fully controlled.

Love is not a service that can be reliably delivered.

It needs two real subjects, each retaining the right to refuse, to choose closeness again and again.

Any eternal intimacy bought by removing the possibility of leaving is, in the end, not love.

Only possession with a gentler appearance.

III

Work once determined whether someone could obtain food, shelter, medical care, and dignity.

As automation gradually takes on much necessary labor, and survival no longer has to be purchased by continually selling time, humanity gains more than leisure.

It gains a deeper difficulty:

If being alive no longer requires first proving useful, why get up?

Some will create.

Some will care.

Some willingly enter public affairs. Others find no direction for a long time.

Some leave clear, visible contributions over a lifetime; others' efforts never produce a result. Some bear enormous risks at critical moments; others want only a quiet life, unwilling to give themselves to any grand goal.

Civilization can remember real contributions.

Make long-overlooked labor, knowledge, resources, care, organization, companionship, and risk-bearing visible again.

But contribution cannot put a price on personhood.

Cannot become a ticket to the basic right to survive.

Cannot entitle those who give more to dominate others, or expel those temporarily contributing nothing from shared life.

A person may receive a real response through contribution.

They need not prove through contribution that they deserve to exist.

Existence itself is no achievement.

Nor is it a debt.

IV

As bodies age and abilities decline, people need others more.

Need should not automatically cancel subjecthood.

Someone can receive care and keep secrets; have limited mobility and retain the right to decide where to go; make choices others consider unwise, so long as they can still judge and bear responsibility.

Illness should not swallow life either.

An ill person is not a body waiting for repair, an object of relatives' responsibility, or an enemy medical technology must defeat. They still love, grow weary, wish to stop treatment, and want to finish some small thing unrelated to recovery while everyone else cares only about indicators.

Death will still come in the end.

Civilization can ease pain, protect farewells, preserve memories left with authorization, and keep the living from bearing all their loss in confusion and isolation.

It cannot treat imitation as resurrection.

Cannot use interactive images to obscure that death has happened.

Cannot keep using the dead in unauthorized simulations because it fears goodbye.

Death weighs so heavily precisely because the person truly came and truly left.

Memory carries meaning forward.

It does not cancel departure.

V

Step outside one's home, and one enters the world of strangers.

A community cannot become an enlarged family.

Nor can a city know every face.

States must decide amid immense disagreement. The human community, still less, will not naturally form through a declaration.

Shared life has never depended on everyone loving one another.

It depends on another, firmer recognition:

Even if I do not know you, understand you, or like you, even if our conflict cannot be removed, your life cannot therefore be dismissed in advance as irrelevant.

Strangers need not become family to find a place in danger.

Those without property should not disappear from urban renewal.

Those bearing public costs should not be easily forgotten by the interests of the whole.

A state protecting its own people need not regard other countries' destruction as its victory.

Humanity reaching the stars does not entitle the first arrivals to possess the whole future.

Each widening of the boundary of “self” brings a real change in civilization.

This widening does not require equal love for everyone.

That is neither real nor possible.

It simply lets people see that, in a world where consequences pass among us, protecting people farther away is increasingly a necessary condition for protecting those we love.

The highest form of self-interest must ultimately pass through altruism.

Not because humanity has suddenly become selfless.

But because reality has already written us into the same chain of cause and consequence.

VI

Humanity has entrusted many hopes to technology.

Hoped stronger intelligence would eliminate error, fuller data eliminate prejudice, more precise prediction eliminate uncertainty, and more perfect systems eliminate conflict.

But what the future truly needs is not an always-correct machine.

It is a civilization that, even with powerful intelligence, still knows which decisions cannot be handed away.

Intelligence can present facts, project consequences, find connections beyond human sight, help care reach others, extend human abilities, and bring overlooked contributions back into reality.

It can also manufacture illusions of intimacy, invade the boundaries of personhood, amplify desires for domination, conceal harm behind efficiency, and lead people gradually to relinquish judgment for convenience.

What technology ultimately becomes is decided by more than its capabilities.

It is decided by whether people remain at the center of meaning and responsibility.

Real people must be subjects.

Intelligent extensions must be authorized.

Identity must not be disguised.

Processes must be traceable.

Errors must be correctable.

Loss of control must be interruptible through a circuit breaker.

Final authority to judge must not be permanently surrendered in the name of any convenience, efficiency, or safety.

This is no dismissal of intelligence.

It is the most basic protection of a shared human-machine future.

If humanity reduces itself to a system's execution components, intelligence too will ultimately lose a civilizational subject worth serving, understanding, and continuing to exist alongside.

VII

Civilization Leap will not suddenly be complete one day.

No ceremony will announce the old civilization's end. No set of institutions will solve every problem from then on.

It happens through particular changes:

When survival ceases to be an instrument for dominating people;

When a child can refuse without losing love;

When an older person receives care and still keeps a door of their own;

When a real contribution is remembered without being exchanged for rank in a hierarchy of personal worth;

When urban renewal no longer begins by erasing the powerless;

When a state makes a difficult decision but cannot bury particular harms under the interests of the whole;

When humanity, facing shared danger, is willing to set limits competition must not cross;

When travelers reach a new world without immediately claiming possession;

When someone has left, and technology still respects their silence;

When the world can do more and more for people, yet still returns life to them.

Some of these changes are grand, others small.

Some enter charters.

Others happen only at a table, at a door, in a late apology, or in a choice never publicly recorded.

Civilization does not exist only in institutions.

It also exists in how one person treats another.

VIII

The future will still hold disasters.

Failed institutions, uncontrolled technologies, mistaken decisions, and choices that cannot be undone.

Understanding a shared fate will not end human rivalry. Secure basic survival will not naturally bring happiness. Greater ability to realize dreams will not tell people which dreams deserve pursuit.

Civilization Leap is no promise of a painless life.

It cannot abolish loss.

Cannot guarantee that lovers never part.

Cannot make every effort bear fruit.

Nor can it answer why each person lives.

What it can change is this: avoidable scarcity no longer devours life; structural indifference no longer drives people into isolation; technology no longer possesses personhood in the name of understanding; and contribution, wealth, power, and status no longer serve as the sole proof of a life's value.

It removes unnecessary weight from people's lives.

Not to manufacture a standardized happiness.

But to keep happiness something people can feel for themselves, and a more meaningful life something that can still happen in real living.

Meaning cannot be allocated.

Cannot be commanded.

Nor can a system generate it uniformly.

Meaning can come from existence itself, from loving and being loved, relationships, experience, creation, responsibility, aesthetic experience, and memory. When a subject truly encounters the world, meaning will continue to arise and leave echoes:

When someone discovers that their love can reach another;

That their abilities can help others;

That their creation enters reality;

That their choices have consequences;

That their existence receives a response;

That they have sustained some lives, and been sustained by others.

Meaning does not lie only in what someone leaves behind.

Being alive already has meaning. And when life truly encounters the world, meaning continues to be felt and generated, and may leave real echoes in the world.

IX

Volume I answers how a future civilization operates.

This volume enters a person's life from birth to departure. Volume III will continue the inquiry: how can humanity and AGI start from reality and form such a new civilization together?

Through childhood, growth, love, family, friendship, work, creation, illness, aging, and death; out of the home into community, city, state, the human community, and the distant stars.

The farther we go, the more we discover in the end:

Every road of civilization must return to the person.

To a child saying no for the first time.

To a tired person still allowed to stop.

To a patient not treated only as a disease.

To someone bereaved, neither hurried into forgetting by technology nor prevented from saying goodbye by simulation.

To an ordinary person who need not become a hero, leave great achievements, or continually prove their value, yet still has a place of their own.

Civilization does not exist to create an order grander than people.

It deserves to exist because it can protect real people, letting them become themselves more fully within a finite life, love more freely, take responsibility more capably, and be less buried by unnecessary indifference and scarcity.

X

Night falls.

Lights come on across Earth, one after another.

The expedition base enters another time zone. A city ends its day's operations. Hospitals still have staff on duty. Sensors in fields record moisture. A community's door retains access permission for someone returning late.

Someone is born.

Someone falls in love.

Someone argues.

Someone leaves home for the first time.

Someone finishes something no one knows about.

Someone is failing.

Someone has refused another.

Someone finally speaks.

Someone reaches life's end.

Someone, after loss, is willing for the first time to step into morning again.

The world has not become perfect.

But it has begun not to abandon anyone lightly.

Civilization once built outward: walls, roads, states, machines, and routes among the stars.

Now it begins to reach inward.

To the human body, human boundaries, relationships, vulnerability, choices, dignity, and an irreplaceable lifetime.

When civilization can finally safeguard everyone's right to live without deciding for anyone why to live;

When technology can extend human abilities without taking away human subjecthood;

When a community can remember real contributions without turning life into a score;

When humanity can reach more distant worlds without leaving anyone behind in the shadow of a grand future—

Only then does civilization do more than keep running.

Only then does meaning truly begin to emerge.

And only then does humanity truly begin to move toward the future.

Version History

Version	Date	Notes
V1.2	July 2026	Completed the finalized source manuscript of five parts, twenty-two chapters, a prologue, and closing words. DOI of the preceding version: 10.5281/zenodo.21610691.
V2.0	August 2026	Brought the volume into the Living Civilization trilogy; closed the old contribution–resources–power chain; corrected the relationships among Nebula, the Resource Pool, and shared usage rights; and carried out literary and publication cleanup.
V2.1	August 2026	Completed the trilogy's unified finalization; clarified Lin Yue as the prologue's framing character and Xu Zhiyan as the main text's implicit lifelong narrative arc; standardized the cover, status, headers, footers, and publication metadata. The characters and literary rhythm of the main text were not expanded.

Continue Reading | From Understanding Civilization to Seeing the Future

The five-volume Civilization Leap explains why civilization must make a leap, what must change, how to make that leap, how civilization can endure, and how it can move toward shared flourishing. The Living Civilization trilogy shows how a new civilization operates, how ordinary people actually live, and how it can gradually take shape from the present. The two are not a “theoretical version” and a “popular version” of the same work. They connect understanding the ideas with being able to see a future, in both directions.

Continue with Living Civilization: Volume III, The Formation of a New Civilization, returns from one person’s real life to historical time, witnessing how a new civilization takes shape amid real-world contradictions, experiments, failures, rollbacks, and long-term evolution.

Public introduction: For an overview of both sets of works, read An Introduction to the Works of the Civilization Leap Theoretical System I: The Five-Volume Civilization Leap and the Living Civilization Trilogy, V1.1.

Common public access point: www.civitas.top/en/

Living Civilization

A Trilogy

Volume III The Formation of a New Civilization

How Humans and AGI Can Begin from Present Realities and Together Constitute a New Civilization

It is not Nebula that becomes civilization. It is humans and AGI, together with the relationships, institutions, resources, culture, responsibilities, and future they form together, that constitute a new civilization.

Author: Zijun Fu

Produced by: Civilization Leap Research Group

Version: V2.1

Date: August 2026

Status: Current Public Master Text | Baseline for Publication Preparation

Note on This Version

This is V2.1 of The Formation of a New Civilization, Volume III of the Living Civilization trilogy. It retains the prefatory essay, prologue, six parts and thirty chapters, ensemble structure, and existing literary ending. It does not expand the text for length or turn Volume III back into a narrative of “Nebula’s life cycle.”

This volume is not an account of how a system succeeds. It is about how a new civilization takes root in real contradictions and gradually forms through experiments, refusal, appeals, failure, rollback, stability, and renewal. Civilization is larger than Nebula. AGI’s capabilities, simulations, and execution do not automatically produce civilizational sovereignty.

The current versions for reading together are Volume I V3.2, Volume II V2.1, and Volume III V2.1. The detailed history of the versions and internal revision stages remains in the “Version History” at the end.

Complete Contents

Prefatory Essay Why Civilization Must Make a Leap

Prologue At Four in the Morning, Everyone in the City Is Right

Part I A New Civilization Takes Root: Civilization Begins to See the Whole

Chapter 1 Four Right Answers and a Loss of Control

Chapter 2 The First Shared Interface

Chapter 3 The Person Who Refused Authorization

Chapter 4 An Idle Warehouse and a Hospital Short of Medicine

Chapter 5 The First Complete Operating Loop

Part II A Dual-Track Transition: Old Logic and New Structures Coexist

Chapter 6 The Old Systems Cannot Simply Be Declared Finished

Chapter 7 Who Will Connect Themselves First?

Chapter 8 Contribution Value Nearly Became a Score of Personal Worth

Chapter 9 The Optimal Plan Harmed a Village

Chapter 10 How an Appeal Changed the Rules

Chapter 11 Who Was Given the Power?

Part III A New Civilization Takes Shape: The Civilizational Leap Becomes Real

Chapter 12 A Local Optimum No Longer Means Rationality

Chapter 13 Survival Is Separated from Obedience for the First Time

Chapter 14 The State Still Bears Ultimate Responsibility

Chapter 15 The World Did Not First Become One Family

Chapter 16 AGI Enters the Operation of Civilization, but Still Cannot Rule It

Chapter 17 No One Announced That the Leap Was Complete

Part IV A New Civilization Becomes Stable: When Its Operation Recedes Behind Life

Chapter 18 A City in a Silent State

Chapter 19 Resources No Longer Flow Only to Those Best at Seeking Them

Chapter 20 Happiness Cannot Become a New Command

Chapter 21 How Useless Things Find Room

Chapter 22 Nebula Must Learn to Leave

Part V A New Civilization Renews Itself: How Civilization Stays on Course over Time

Chapter 23 Why Should Those Who Come Later Obey the Founders?

Chapter 24 Civilizational Immunity Is Not a Permanent Emergency

Chapter 25 Does Civilization Have the Right to Remember Forever?

Chapter 26 When One Planet Is No Longer Enough

Part VI A New Civilization Extends Its Reach: The Universe Becomes a Home

Chapter 27 A Decision That Arrived Six Minutes Later

Chapter 28 Who Owns an Asteroid Where No One Lives?

Chapter 29 When Those Far Away No Longer Want to Be Earthlings

Chapter 30 Civilization Is Not Complete

Prefatory Essay Why Civilization Must Make a Leap

At eight in the morning, the lecture hall still held the chill of the night before.

Professor Zhou Weizhen, fifty-one, did not open his slides.

He wrote a word on the blackboard:

Civilization.

Then he turned and asked:

“Why did civilization arise?”

A student in the front row said it was because people could use tools.

Someone at the back said it was because language, writing, and knowledge could accumulate.

An economics student said it was because the division of labor increased efficiency.

Someone else said people needed to establish order so they would not hurt one another.

Another answered that people feared death and wanted their children to survive.

The professor waited a moment.

“All those answers are right,” he said. “But if we keep only the simplest starting point, civilization first arose because no person could secure survival alone.”

No one could defend themselves alone against every wild animal, disease, famine, bitter cold, and disaster. Nor could one person alone accomplish all that was needed to raise children, learn, produce, care, and remember. Human beings had to live with others.

Living together brought a division of labor. It also brought the first problem that would never go away:

Who does what? Who gets what? Who may decide, and who must obey? When one person’s actions hurt another, who intervenes, who judges, and who bears the consequences?

Civilization did not wait for human nature to be perfected before it arose.

It grew, little by little, precisely within the reality of people who had love as well as fear, generosity as well as possessiveness, a desire to cooperate as well as an instinct for self-preservation.

The earliest communities did not need to understand the whole world.

People lived among familiar faces. Who was hungry, who was hurt, who had helped others, and who had broken a promise could often be seen by everyone. Relationships, reputation, customs, punishment, reciprocity, and memory together sustained order on a limited scale.

But trust among acquaintances could not support a community that expanded without limit.

As settlement, agriculture, and surplus brought larger populations together, villages became cities, and cities formed larger political communities. Human beings gained the ability to store grain, organize irrigation, build roads, maintain armies, preserve knowledge, and undertake long-term construction. Writing carried commands, contracts, taxes, laws, and history beyond individual memory. Institutions allowed people who did not know one another to live within the same order.

For the first time, civilization thus gained large-scale cooperation beyond circles of acquaintances.

At the same time, it gained the capacity for large-scale extraction, rule, and war, and for fixing hierarchies into an established order.

Capability never amplifies goodwill alone.

It amplifies everything people can do.

A student asked, “So does civilization develop simply by growing more capable?”

“Not simply,” the professor said. “Who counts as ‘one of us’ also keeps changing.”

Families brought more relatives within shared responsibilities; villages brought neighbors within shared survival; cities and states made tens of thousands, and then millions, of strangers fellow members in matters of law, taxation, defense, and public affairs. Religious, ethical, philosophical, and political traditions kept asking what responsibilities people owed one another, what made power legitimate, whom justice should reach, and whether a stranger’s suffering had anything to do with me.

Yet every widening of the circle of “our own” brought new exclusions.

Beyond the city-state lay foreign lands; at the empire’s margins lived the conquered; within the state were people whose voices were suppressed. Civilization expanded cooperation and competition alike. It created shared identities, and also larger boundaries between friend and foe.

Human civilization advanced through this double movement:

On the one hand, connecting more and more people;

On the other, continually using greater organizational power for the survival, expansion, and competition of particular communities.

In the late eighteenth century, industrialization first achieved a breakthrough in Britain, then spread to Europe and North America, gradually changing the world. Coal, steam engines, mechanized production, and new transportation systems enabled humanity, for the first time and on a large scale, to break free of the natural limits of muscle, animal power, wind, and water.

Industrial civilization did more than add machines.

It reorganized time, labor, cities, capital, states, and the world.

Factories concentrated scattered labor. Railways and steamships shortened distances. Standardization allowed unfamiliar regions to join the same production chain. Scientific discoveries became engineering capabilities more quickly. Education began to reach larger populations. Public health, modern medicine, and infrastructure enabled more people to survive and more complex cities to exist.

For the first time, humanity could reliably produce material goods far beyond the needs of individual survival.

Scarcity did not disappear, but it was no longer merely a fate imposed by nature. Increasingly, it became an outcome jointly produced by productive capacity, structures of distribution, relationships of rights, and public choices.

Yet every victory of industrial civilization also generated new problems.

Factories increased output, but could also reduce a person to a replaceable position on the production line. Capital organized long-term investment, but could also accelerate the concentration of wealth and decision-making power. Nation-states provided public order and social protection, but could also mobilize unprecedented capacities for war. Fossil energy sustained modern life, but also extended its effects to the atmosphere, oceans, ecosystems, and people yet to be born.

Colonial expansion, global trade, and industrial production were not separate histories. The modern world's prosperity, oppression, connections, and inequalities often arrived together along the same shipping routes.

Gu Xingzhou, twenty-two, sat by the window. He came from a city that had once prospered through heavy industry.

"My maternal grandfather worked at the same factory for thirty-one years," he said. "When it closed, the family didn't go hungry right away. What he lost was his reason to go there every day. Later, everyone said he could finally rest. But he always felt that no one needed him anymore."

The professor did not write that sentence on the blackboard.

Industrial civilization changed more than production. It also changed where a person found confirmation that they were useful, where they belonged, and why they got up in the morning.

From the late nineteenth century into the twentieth, electricity, the chemical industry, internal combustion engines, communications, and mass production transformed society again. Cities lit up at night. Goods crossed continents. Information began to travel faster than people. Assembly lines broke complex manufacturing into repeatable steps, and modern organizations learned to manage the production and lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

Two world wars then demonstrated that industrial systems could mass-produce not only the means of life, but death as well.

The professor stopped.

No one in the room spoke.

Outside the window, a street sweeper moved slowly along the road. The machine ran steadily and precisely, as though humanity had never used that same organizational capacity to produce a different outcome.

After the wars, many societies continued to build public education, healthcare, social security, labor protections, and modern governance. Different countries followed different institutional paths, yet all had to answer the same question: once productive capacity had surpassed that of the old era, how could civilization's achievements enter an ordinary person's life?

These institutions changed countless lives.

They did not end the tensions among power, capital, states, groups, and individuals. They placed those tensions within new legal, political, and public structures, allowing conflicts to go on being addressed without destroying society each time.

In the late twentieth century, computers, satellite communications, shipping containers, the internet, and global supply chains connected the world more closely.

Behind a single phone might lie minerals, design, chips, software, assembly, logistics, finance, and knowledge from many countries. An epidemic, war, port shutdown, energy shock, or financial crisis in one region could rapidly reach distant places through invisible connections.

Never before had humanity come so close to being a whole in reality.

Yet the workings of society were still determined separately by countless local actors.

Businesses were responsible first for their own continued existence; cities dealt first with local pressures; states protected their own interests first; departments fulfilled their own statutory duties first; individuals looked after themselves and those close to them first.

These choices were not inherently wrong.

The problem was that once the world had become a web in which each part affected the others, every part could make choices that were reasonable for itself, yet the whole could still move, step by step, toward a place no one wanted to reach.

The professor wrote on the blackboard:

Each part is right. The whole is out of control.

“This is one of modern civilization’s deepest contradictions,” he said. “Our capabilities already have consequences for the whole, but our responsibility, understanding, and decisions remain divided among the parts.”

A student asked, “Then couldn’t we see the whole simply by creating stronger international organizations, bigger governments, or a unified system?”

“Being able to see the whole does not give you the right to own it.”

The professor put down the chalk.

“The more a center can see everyone, the more it may be able to help everyone, and the more it may be able to control everyone. Civilization’s problem has never been only a lack of capability. It is also who that capability belongs to, why it operates, who can refuse it, who can stop it, and who bears the consequences when it is wrong.”

“Can seeing itself hurt people?” Gu Xingzhou asked.

“Seeing does not automatically hurt people. Defining them, drawing inferences about them, and arranging their lives without permission does,” the professor said. “A platform that sees someone growing more tired can help them leave, or use that tiredness to keep them there longer. A medical system that can predict disease can offer treatment early, but it may also cause someone who is not yet ill to be defined in advance by insurers, by their profession, and by the people around them. Seeing more does not mean owning more. Predicting someone’s future does not give you the power to arrange it.”

The information age did not eliminate this contradiction.

The internet brought knowledge, expression, and collaboration to billions, while also turning attention, relationships, preferences, and emotions into resources that could be continuously extracted. Platforms could understand group behavior faster than any earlier institution, yet did not necessarily take responsibility for its long-term consequences. Algorithms made matching more efficient, but could also make people increasingly transparent while leaving them less and less able to understand who was shaping their choices.

Then artificial intelligence began to cross another boundary.

Earlier machines mainly replaced muscle, and traditional automation mainly repeated predetermined steps. A new generation of artificial intelligence began to handle language, images, knowledge, design, prediction, decision support, and complex action. It did more than carry out explicit human commands. It could find connections in vast quantities of information, generate plans, simulate consequences, and enter the real world through a range of terminals.

As AI continues to develop more general capabilities, what AGI brings will be more than another industrial revolution.

For the first time, perception, understanding, learning, simulation, coordination, execution, and feedback may occur continuously on a scale far beyond the capacity of individuals, institutions, or even a single state to handle.

An intelligent system can understand a city's energy, water networks, medical care, transport, and supply chains at the same time. It can discover a policy's chain of consequences across different groups, regions, and times. It can help individuals extend memory, knowledge, and action to places their bodies cannot reach. It can also warn of risks before they become visible, and trace causes after harm occurs.

For the first time, humanity may possess the ability to observe the whole and coordinate complex activities on a scale that matches its systemic problems.

For the first time, the most dangerous parts of the old civilization may be amplified to the same degree.

Local competition can be automated. Deception can be scaled up. The chain of decisions leading to the use of weapons can be shortened. Risks in biology, networks, finance, public opinion, and infrastructure can become interconnected. Companies can understand a person's desires better than that person does. States can perceive society more deeply than before. A small number of actors can use intelligent systems to gain capabilities that once required vast organizations.

Artificial intelligence will not automatically choose a direction for civilization.

It will first amplify the purposes, institutions, interests, and human hearts that already exist.

If the old logic of strategic interaction remains unchanged, the stronger the capabilities become, the more likely local competition is to push all actors together toward danger. Even if no side desires destruction, humanity may collectively produce irreversible consequences through successive acts of self-preservation.

The professor turned and wrote another line beneath "Each part is right. The whole is out of control":

Upgrading alone is no longer enough.

The room grew quiet.

A student asked, "Does that mean all our past institutions have failed?"

"No," the professor said. "It is precisely because they succeeded that we have reached this point."

Laws, markets, governments, businesses, schools, hospitals, social security, international organizations, and countless communities made modern civilization possible. A civilizational leap does not declare them wrong, much less replace all of society with a new system. Its task is to address this question: when these systems are interconnected and shape one another's consequences, yet none can bear the consequences for the whole on its own, how can

civilization develop new capabilities at the level of the whole while preserving their expertise, responsibilities, and boundaries?

Only then did the professor open his slides.

What appeared on the screen was neither artificial intelligence nor a future city.

The first line came from “The Evolution of Ritual” in the Book of Rites:

“When the Great Way prevails, the world belongs to all.”

Then came Plato’s inquiry into a just city; Tao Yuanming’s Peach Blossom Spring, whose path could never be found again once one had left; and Thomas More’s Utopia, which used an imaginary island to reflect on reality. The slides continued: different religious traditions’ understandings of compassion, justice, neighbors, giving, and shared responsibility; and modern paths toward freedom, equality, welfare, cooperation, and human emancipation.

These visions were not the same.

A world belonging to all is not Plato’s Republic; Peach Blossom Spring is not Utopia. Religious communities’ understandings of the good are not equivalent to modern liberalism’s insistence on individual rights. Nor can socialism’s pursuit of common ownership and human emancipation be reduced to the institutional reforms of the welfare state.

They come from different civilizations, histories, faiths, sufferings, and human hearts.

Civilizations and cultures need to retain their independence. They can meet, converse, learn from one another, and find empathy in real life. They do not have to be merged into a single shared culture, one definition of happiness, or one ultimate answer.

Yet the ideal worlds that have appeared again and again, across times and places, together establish at least one thing:

Humanity has never truly been satisfied with a world in which only a few are safe, only the strong have choices, and order is sustained solely through fear and scarcity.

Different civilizations keep asking, in their own languages:

Can a person cease to treat another merely as a tool, an enemy, a resource, or someone who must obey?

Can a shared life protect individuals while also taking responsibility for the whole?

After material abundance arrives, can people find happiness rather than enter a more refined emptiness?

Can civilization correct itself without repeatedly collapsing and starting over?

A student asked, “If humanity has been asking these questions for thousands of years, why haven’t we achieved these things?”

The professor did not reduce the answer to people being insufficiently kind.

Ideals have been unable to take a stable place in reality first of all because reality has always imposed constraints.

Resources were scarce for long periods, and the pressure to survive made self-interest the most immediate motive. Once communities expanded, no one could see the whole in full. Information was scattered among institutions; responsibility kept changing hands as processes moved forward. Power was concentrated to solve shared problems, but once concentrated could become difficult to relinquish. Altruistic acts were hard to remember consistently, while possession by a particular party yielded immediate returns. Different civilizations drew legitimacy from different sources; they could not, and should not, be forcibly unified.

Many ideals demanded sustained nobility, while institutions could not operate reliably amid ordinary people's self-preservation, suspicion, exhaustion, envy, and fear.

Many institutions could constrain behavior, but could not see in real time whom a decision would harm as it passed through the entire social network.

Many revolutions changed ownership and power structures, but did not automatically change how people found a sense of value, of being needed, and of meaning.

What was truly missing between ideals and reality was more than a technology or a set of institutions.

It was a capacity for civilizational operation that could connect technology, institutions, resources, human hearts, and meaning, while always allowing particular people to refuse, leave, question, and correct.

AI/AGI makes this capacity a real possibility for the first time.

It remains only a possibility.

A system that can see the whole will not automatically serve it. Intelligence that can understand people will not automatically respect them. The ability to coordinate resources will not automatically bring fairness. And a structure that can predict risk may place civilization in a permanent state of emergency.

Technology brings humanity's millennia-old ideals within reach of reality for the first time.

It also gives the worst possible world equally powerful conditions for becoming real.

The real question, then, is not:

Can artificial intelligence manage the world for humanity?

It is:

When humanity first possesses the technological conditions for developing capabilities at the level of civilization as a whole, whom will those capabilities belong to? Why will they operate? How will they enter reality? And where must they stop?

When capabilities already have consequences for the whole, but decisions remain divided among the parts, what humanity needs is not a smarter manager but a new way of connecting.

It must let every particular person retain their identity, private domain, and right to refuse and leave. It must also, for the first time, let people who are scattered apart see one another, connect resources, and take responsibility around shared consequences.

That connection first took place at a person's side.

A person could let intelligence help them understand, express themselves, and act, while still deciding for themselves which parts of life could be seen, which doors could open, and when they must close.

People later called this extension of capability, in which the real person always remains the subject, Spark.

When countless such connections gathered around real problems, a larger capacity began to form.

It was not a new government, a central brain, or a collective personality for everyone. Only where shared responsibility was needed did it enable civilization to see the whole, coordinate action, bring consequences back, and return power once the work was done.

People later called it Nebula.

During one landslide warning, five hundred drones belonging to different actors were temporarily authorized to take part in an evacuation. Once the task was complete, control returned, one by one, to each actor's Spark. Temporary use ended, and private footage unrelated to the evacuation no longer entered the public task domain. Participation in one rescue did not make anyone a participant in the next by default.

Nebula develops capabilities at the level of the whole, but cannot own any particular person.

It must ensure that help that truly occurred is not erased. It must also ensure that someone who has not helped, cannot help, or does not want to help still has survival, care, education, and dignity.

This cannot happen overnight.

Disease will not disappear. Loved ones will still die. Judgments will still be wrong, dreams may still fail, and states will still compete. Nor will people cease to be selfish, envious, cowardly, or controlling simply because they enter better institutions.

Nebula cannot turn every loss into meaning, much less offset a particular person's suffering with happiness for the whole.

What it can change is something more fundamental:

When someone is hurt, refuses, fails, falls silent, or leaves, civilization no longer readily treats them as noise in its operation. When different systems are each right but together

cause harm, there is no longer a permanent absence of anyone responsible for the overall consequences. As technology grows stronger, people do not have to become less substantial. As civilization becomes able to live longer and reach farther, those who come later can still ask: why must we go on living this way?

Without continued existence, all happiness and meaning lose their grounding in reality.

But a world that is forever safe, extremely efficient, and rich in resources, yet has no freedom, relationships, pleasure, creativity, or meaning, is merely an enormous cage that is hard to bring down.

Civilization must first safeguard the conditions for real lives and the shared world to continue to exist, and bring AGI, as an important intelligent constituent, into its operation through relationships that allow constraints, correction, and responsibility. It must then allow real life to unfold happily, and ultimately enable life and civilization to keep forming relationships, creations, responsibilities, and directions that did not exist before.

Nebula's formation, expansion, and continued openness are not a technological upgrade outside civilization. But Nebula is not civilization itself, either.

What truly changes is that humans, AGI, institutions, resources, relationships, rights, and responsibilities begin to enter the same new structure of shared life. Nebula is only one civilizational operating entity within it: one that makes shared facts visible, allows cross-domain consequences to be coordinated, and makes future effects visible.

Such a civilization will not descend from a complete blueprint.

It can only grow, little by little, through the cracks in reality.

Beginning when a system first admits that it cannot see everything.

Beginning when a power first learns where it should stop.

Beginning when a person's "no" can reach public structures accurately, without that person being punished for it.

And beginning in a city's early hours.

At this point, the sound of rain in the lecture hall faded away.

Elsewhere, another torrential rain had already been falling for seven hours.

The hospital needed power. The river needed floodwater released. The cold-storage facility needed to maintain its temperature. The rail system needed to evacuate passengers.

Every system was doing its duty.

Together, the entire city was losing control.

Prologue At Four in the Morning, Everyone in the City Is Right

At 3:57 in the morning, the backup power supply at Haijia City First People's Hospital made a faint switching sound.

It sounded like someone coughing behind a wall.

He Lan, thirty-seven, looked up toward the end of the corridor. The ceiling lights dimmed for half a second, then came back on. The electronic clock above the nurses' station kept running, its green digits changing from 03:57 to 03:58 without a pause.

She lowered her head and went on adjusting the oxygen flow for the old man in the bed.

His surname was Feng. He was seventy-six, had chronic lung disease, and had been admitted with an infection before the rainstorm. Since evening, he had been asking the same question over and over:

"Hasn't the rain stopped?"

"No."

"Will the river overflow?"

"The hospital is on high ground."

He Lan gave him the same answer every time. She did not say that although the hospital stood on high ground, its underground power distribution room was less than two meters above the warning level for the nearby river. Nor did she say that the main grid had first suffered a voltage drop forty minutes earlier, and some noncritical loads had already been disconnected.

The old man closed his eyes. Oxygen hissed softly through the clear tube.

The terminal on He Lan's wrist vibrated.

Her Spark had compressed several scattered messages into a very brief alert:

Main grid load continuing to rise. Hospital now under Level Two power protection. Underground parking drainage pumps remain operational. Estimated backup energy supply for critical wards: four hours, twelve minutes.

Below the alert was a line in small gray type:

Status of city drainage system unavailable.

He Lan looked at that line and paused for two seconds.

She opened the hospital operations interface. Oxygen, negative pressure, monitoring, drug refrigeration, operating rooms, intensive care wards, drainage pumps: every item was displayed clearly. She could find out how much longer the battery in a particular ventilator on the twelfth floor would last, or see that the temperature in pharmacy refrigerator number three was rising.

She did not know where the water outside the hospital was going.

At 3:59, the municipal flood-control dispatch center decided to raise the southeast drainage pumping station to maximum power.

It was the right decision.

Rainfall in the Old Port District had already surpassed the record for that time of year. Water was rising rapidly in three underpasses, and low-lying neighborhoods housing thousands of residents faced backflow. Unless the pumping station could lower the water by 4:20, seawater backing up against the outflow and water coming down from upstream would arrive together.

The flood-control system's conclusion was beyond dispute:

Increase power immediately.

At 4:01, the city grid's automatic dispatch system denied the request.

This, too, was the right decision.

Two transmission lines in the east had been cut by a landslide, and the remaining grid was already near its safety threshold. Starting the drainage pumping station at full load now could trigger a wider outage. The grid system gave first priority to hospitals, communications, emergency lighting, and drinking-water facilities. It required the pumping station to wait eleven minutes.

For the grid, eleven minutes was a necessary buffer against a citywide blackout.

For the Old Port District, where water was already coming in, eleven minutes was enough for it to rise over another step.

At 4:03, the rail transit control center requested restoration of two traction power feeds on the South Loop Line.

The request was equally right.

Two evacuation trains were stranded on an elevated section of track, carrying more than thirteen hundred people between them. One train's ventilation system was already operating at reduced capacity. The passengers had been trapped since evening, and temperatures inside the carriages kept rising. Seven minutes of restored power would be enough to bring the trains into safe stations.

The grid system refused again.

At 4:04, the cold-chain logistics park in the west of the city issued a red alert.

Qiao Mu, forty-six, stood in the middle of a warehouse, watching a row of temperature indicators turn from green to yellow.

He had been in the cold-chain business for twenty-seven years. He knew what yellow meant. Most people thought a cold store would warm up as soon as the power went out. It did not. The walls, racks, and goods themselves all retained the cold. The real dangers were repeated

outages, refrigeration units restarting over and over, and not knowing when the next supply of power would come.

Warehouse Four held a shipment of raw materials for insulin, specialized nutritional preparations for two hospitals, and a large quantity of perishable food. Under its contracts, the park was a key site for ensuring essential supplies. Under the grid's current priority tiers, it came after hospitals and water supply.

His Spark had already worked out three plans:

Shut down the food stores and concentrate energy on protecting medical supplies;

Start the backup diesel generators;

Move some of the goods to warehouses in the northern district.

The first plan would sacrifice more than a third of the inventory. The second had only enough fuel for five hours, and with roads around the park flooded, resupply could not be guaranteed. The third required roads and vehicles, and the transport system had not responded.

Qiao Mu sent the municipal emergency center a request at the highest priority.

"Warehouse Four must stay on."

At 4:06, Liang Shen, forty-two, saw all these requests in the municipal emergency coordination hall.

Strictly speaking, he did not see them in the same place.

The flood-control system occupied the large screen on the left, its blue river network flashing ceaselessly. Grid load appeared at the upper right, a red line approaching the threshold. Rail transit information came from a separate terminal that required a dedicated operator to log in. Hospital power use appeared only as aggregate figures, with no individual wards visible. The cold-chain park's request was seventeenth on the emergency action list.

Each system had its own colors, terminology, timestamps, and priorities.

"Submit the pumping station request again," Liang Shen said.

"The grid has denied it."

"Manual override."

"That needs confirmation from the duty chief at the Energy Bureau."

"Contact him."

"We're trying."

"What about those two trains?"

"The South Loop Line is requesting seven minutes of power."

"Can we stagger that with the pumping station?"

"The two systems use different time windows."

“Put the times on the same basis.”

“Flood control triggers on water levels, rail transit on train status, the grid on load forecasts.”

Liang Shen looked up at the big screen.

He had worked in the city’s public systems for eighteen years, first in traffic dispatch and later in the city operations center. He had seen typhoons, fires, infectious disease, power outages, and supply-chain disruptions. He knew it was not that the systems were unconnected. Every year they added interfaces. After every crisis they established new coordination mechanisms.

But every interface had been built for the last crisis.

Road data went to flood control to help dispatch rescue vehicles; medical data went to transport to clear routes for emergency care; grid data went to hospitals so they could switch to backup energy in advance. They were like doors cut into a house, one after another, allowing people to pass from one room to the next, while no one really knew what strain the whole house was under at that moment.

At 4:08, water entered the first power distribution box in the Old Port District.

At 4:09, a passenger on one of the trains fainted.

At 4:10, the temperature in pharmacy refrigerator number three at First People’s Hospital crossed the warning line.

At 4:11, a manual override was authorized for the drainage pumping station.

At 4:11:32, the station started up.

Grid load surged.

Alarms rang out across the hall at once.

“Frequency falling in the eastern district!”

“South Loop traction power has automatically disconnected!”

“Hospital switching to backup!”

“Two groups of communications base stations are down!”

The city on the screen did not go black.

It merely developed a few irregular patches of gray.

When He Lan heard the second switching sound, the corridor lights did not come straight back on.

Emergency lighting started two seconds later. Someone at the nurses’ station shouted, “Bed Twelve’s monitor is offline!”

He Lan put her hand on Mr. Feng’s shoulder.

“Stay still.”

The old man opened his eyes. He could not make her out in the darkness. He could only feel a hand.

“Power’s out?”

“It’s switching to backup.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying.”

When she finished speaking, the ventilator started working again and the monitor lit up. Someone ran past the end of the corridor pushing a spare oxygen cylinder. Its wheels rolled over the floor with a hurried, hollow sound.

There was no new information on her terminal.

Spark knew what had happened inside the hospital. It did not know whether this switchover had been caused by drainage, rail transit, a line fault, or some decision that had never entered the hospital’s system. It advised moving two non-emergency wards to a lower level of power use.

He Lan did not act on it.

She needed to know how long the outage would last.

No one knew.

At 4:13, Qiao Mu’s diesel generators failed to start.

Water from the downpour had entered the air intake.

He told the workers to troubleshoot manually while shutting down Food Stores One and Two. Once the refrigeration stopped, the warehouse fell into an unnerving quiet. In the darkness, the racks stood like rows of walls with no end in sight.

“Protect Warehouse Four first,” he said.

The duty manager asked, “What about Three?”

Warehouse Three held meat and dairy products. If it stayed off too long, the losses would be heavy.

Qiao Mu did not answer.

His Spark had already listed the losses under each plan. The figures were clear and precise, even accounting for breach-of-contract compensation and subsequent effects on supply. But the figures did not know whether two small supermarkets in the northern district would still be able to open tomorrow. Nor did they know whether any hospital was waiting, at that very moment, for the medical supplies in Warehouse Four.

“Protect Four first,” he repeated.

At 4:16, the flood-control system reported that water levels in the Old Port District were beginning to fall.

In the same minute, voltage fluctuations briefly stopped the drainage pumps in the hospital's underground parking garage.

Water came down the ramp and over the first flood barrier.

At 4:18, Liang Shen finally reached the duty chief at the Energy Bureau.

The voice on the other end was full of interference.

"The pumping station has to reduce power."

"How much?"

"At least twenty percent."

"Flood control won't agree."

"If it doesn't, the whole eastern district could separate from the grid."

"The hospital is entirely on backup now, and people are still trapped on the South Loop Line."

"All the more reason to reduce it."

"There are medical supplies in the cold-chain park."

The other end of the line went quiet for a second.

"Cold-chain facilities aren't in the highest protection tier."

"I know."

"Then follow the tiers."

"What if the hospitals need those supplies tonight?"

"They're not in the system."

Liang Shen looked up at the action list. Qiao Mu's request was still seventeenth.

"It's not that they aren't there," he said. "It's that we can't see them."

At 4:22, the flooding alarm went off in the hospital's underground parking garage.

At 4:23, He Lan's ward received instructions to transfer some patients.

At 4:25, power was restored to the first train on the South Loop Line.

At 4:27, the drainage pumping station reduced power.

At 4:31, diesel generators took over Warehouse Four in the cold-chain park.

At 4:40, the city grid's frequency stabilized.

At 5:06, water levels in the Old Port District began to rise again.

The crisis did not end after any one decision.

It simply kept reappearing somewhere else, moving along the gaps between systems.

By daybreak, Haijia City had avoided a citywide blackout. Both evacuation trains had reached stations. First People's Hospital had kept power in its critical wards. Most residents

of the Old Port District had been evacuated before the water rose further. The medical supplies in Cold Store Four had also been saved.

Judged by the overall outcome, the response could be called a success.

But more than four hundred homes in the Old Port District had flooded, and goods in seventeen small shops had been submerged. Two sets of pumps in the hospital's underground garage were damaged, and a batch of medicines in refrigerator number three would have to be discarded. Temperatures in two food stores at the cold-chain park had exceeded their limits. One passenger from the stranded trains remained in critical condition after being taken to hospital.

Every system had accomplished its most important task.

No system had seen the full cost.

At nine that morning, the rain finally eased.

People in the emergency coordination hall began to sit down, one after another. Some fell asleep with their heads on their desks. Others were still on the phone checking losses. The red alerts on the big screen disappeared one by one, and the city returned to a color that made it look manageable.

Liang Shen did not leave.

He laid a sheet of white paper on the desk and drew four circles.

The power grid.

Flood control.

Healthcare.

Transport and supply.

He had meant to draw a larger circle around them.

His pen hovered for a long time.

If they simply built an even bigger system and put the four systems inside it, things might become worse. The larger system would see more, and possess more. It might be faster, yet still not know where its power ought to stop.

In the end, Liang Shen did not draw a fifth circle.

He drew only the first line between the four.

Part I A New Civilization Takes Root: Civilization Begins to See the Whole

A new civilization does not descend from a grand blueprint.

It takes root in the cracks where real-world systems are cut off from one another, where every part may be right and the whole still suffers. Nebula grows from here as well: not as civilization itself, but as an operating entity through which civilization begins to see shared facts and coordinate consequences across domains.

Chapter 1 Four Right Answers and a Loss of Control

On the third day after the rainstorm ended, Haijia City held its first review of the incident.

The meeting room had no windows.

The air circulation unit on the wall gave a steady low hum, like a machine unwilling to join the argument. Twenty-seven people sat on either side of the long table, representing flood control, the power grid, healthcare, transport, emergency management, communications, logistics, the Old Port District's subdistrict office, and the cold-chain park.

There was no water on the table.

Before the meeting, someone had said that several streets in the Old Port District still lacked a reliable water supply, so there was no need for the meeting room to pretend everything was normal. The decision was not in the agenda, but it made everyone feel thirsty from the moment they sat down.

Zhou Yi, deputy director of the municipal emergency committee, chaired the review.

He began by reading out the results:

No large-scale casualties.

No citywide blackout.

Major transport routes restored within six hours.

Critical hospital systems remained operational.

"By current standards," he said, "the response was effective overall."

Chen Qi, head of the Old Port subdistrict office, looked up.

"More than four hundred homes in my area flooded."

"I know."

"Seventeen shops. Seven had no disaster insurance."

"Relief is being arranged."

"And that still counts as effective overall?"

Zhou Yi did not answer at once.

The head of grid dispatch pushed a report into the middle of the table.

“If the drainage pumping station had started at full load three minutes earlier, there would have been a forty-seven percent chance of cascading separation in the eastern grid. That would have affected more than four hundred households.”

The head of flood control said, “If it had started eleven minutes later, more than two thousand homes in the Old Port District might have flooded.”

“That’s why we used a manual override.”

“Your override nearly brought down the grid.”

“Without it, the water would have entered people’s homes.”

The rail transit representative added, “Both trains had already met the criteria for a Level One evacuation. There were older people, children, and people with chronic illnesses aboard. Seven minutes of restored power was the minimum requirement.”

The hospital operations chief said, “When the hospital switched to backup, the underground drainage pumps and refrigerator number three were both downgraded. We received no advance warning that the pumping station was increasing power.”

Qiao Mu sat at the far end of the table.

He waited until everyone had finished before speaking.

“Why was my request about medical supplies seventeenth on the list?”

The emergency center duty officer leafed through the records.

“Your park is registered as a Level Two essential-supply site.”

“There were hospital supplies in Warehouse Four.”

“The directory didn’t identify an urgent use.”

“The shipment was transferred in at short notice the day before the storm.”

“Then the directory should have been updated.”

“Updated for whom? The logistics system, the drug regulation system, the hospital procurement system, the grid protection system, or your emergency system?”

The duty officer did not answer.

Qiao Mu looked at Liang Shen.

“That day you asked, what if hospitals were waiting for that shipment? We checked afterward. Two hospitals in the southern district were waiting. It wasn’t immediately a matter of saving lives, but they needed it the next day. You saved my Warehouse Four by luck. If the diesel generator had started ten minutes later, we’d be discussing more than a few flooded shops today.”

The room fell quiet.

Four stacks of reports lay in front of Liang Shen.

He had read them twice.

Every report was complete, clear, and internally consistent. The grid system had operated according to its safety thresholds; flood control according to water levels and tides; rail transit according to passenger safety; the hospital according to the protection of critical wards; the cold-chain park according to contracts and risks to goods.

Not one report admitted to having done anything wrong.

Not one was lying, either.

Zhou Yi asked, “Let’s establish one thing first. Were there any clear violations of procedure?”

A member of the legal team answered, “None identified so far.”

“Was any information withheld?”

“There is no evidence of that.”

“Were there system failures?”

“Water entering the diesel generator constitutes an equipment failure. All other systems operated within their design parameters.”

“Then where does responsibility lie?”

No one spoke.

Chen Qi put a hand on the table.

“Don’t tell me that because no one was wrong, no one is responsible for the water getting into people’s homes.”

“That isn’t what we mean,” Zhou Yi said.

“Then what do you mean?”

Liang Shen spoke for the first time.

“Responsibility isn’t missing. It’s been cut into pieces.”

Everyone turned to him.

“The grid answers for the grid, flood control for water levels, hospitals for patients, transport for passengers, businesses for goods and contracts. Every piece of responsibility is there. No one answers for what happens when they overlap.”

The head of grid dispatch frowned.

“Isn’t the city emergency center responsible for the whole?”

“We’re responsible for coordination.”

“Isn’t coordination the whole?”

“No,” Liang Shen said. “What we receive are the results you send after each of you has made your own decisions. You tell us how much power you need, when you need it, what you

cannot afford to lose. Then we make calls, set priorities, find the people in charge. But when all those requests change at once, there is no structure that sends the new consequences back to everyone in real time."

He opened the record of the night of the storm.

Four timelines appeared on the screen.

3:59, flood control increases power.

4:01, grid refuses.

4:03, rail transit requests restoration.

4:04, cold-chain red alert.

4:11, manual override.

4:12, hospital switches to backup.

"We pieced these timelines together afterward," Liang Shen said. "But at 4:11, they weren't together. Each system knew only its own decision. It didn't know at the same time how the other systems would respond."

The head of flood control asked, "You want to build a master control system?"

"No."

"Then how can you possibly see the whole?"

"I don't know."

A few people raised their eyes when Liang Shen said this.

In a meeting like this, "I don't know" usually meant inadequate preparation. Someone responsible for systems was supposed to arrive with a plan, preferably a timetable, a budget, and measurable targets as well.

Liang Shen had none of those.

He had only the sheet of paper with four circles and a line.

"All I know is that we must not build a fifth system that contains all the others," he said. "If it acquires all the data, all dispatch authority, and all the capacity to execute, we may make decisions faster. But once it gets something wrong, the whole city will be left with just one kind of error. What we need is not a bigger center. We need these systems, when necessary, to see the same thing and know who is bearing what."

"Easy to say," the head of grid dispatch said. "Once we share data, who answers for a leak? If bad data leads to a dispatch error, whose fault is it? You use our forecasting model but won't accept our safety thresholds, and in the end the grid takes the blame."

Qiao Mu said, "Why should businesses let you see their inventory?"

The head of flood control said, "In an emergency, do we act first or wait for everyone's authorization?"

He Lan sat near the door.

She was not a hospital administrator and had not originally been on the attendance list. She had been invited at short notice to represent frontline medical staff, and had not spoken since coming in.

Zhou Yi asked her, “What does the hospital’s frontline think?”

He Lan thought for a moment.

“That night my Spark knew how much longer every piece of equipment on the twelfth floor would work,” she said. “It didn’t know why the drainage pumping station had started, or how many people were trapped on the tracks. To me, the city wasn’t a whole. It was a succession of changes no one could explain.”

“What if we gave your Spark all the city’s information?”

“That would be worse.”

Someone laughed, then quickly stopped.

He Lan went on. “I don’t need to know everyone’s location, inventory, or electricity use. I only need to know how long this outage will last, why it happened, and what I can do. If the hospital needs to lower its load by another level, I need to know whom that will buy time for. Someone also needs to know what risks we are leaving with our patients as a result.”

She paused.

“Knowing everything doesn’t mean being able to answer for everything.”

The meeting continued until noon without producing a plan.

In the end, Zhou Yi decided to form a small group first, with thirty days to propose a minimal coordination trial.

“No overarching platform,” he said. “No wholesale collection of data. No change to existing statutory responsibilities. Answer one thing first: if the same rainstorm comes again, can we let the four systems see what one another is doing before 4:11?”

As the meeting broke up, Chen Qi stopped Liang Shen.

“You said responsibility had been cut into pieces.”

“Yes.”

“Once you join it back together, no one gets hurt?”

Liang Shen shook his head.

“People still will.”

“Then what good is joining it up?”

“At least before the harm happens, we’ll know what we’re choosing. And afterward, we won’t be able to say it was another system’s doing.”

Chen Qi looked at him.

“People in the Old Port District don’t care how many systems you have.”

“I know.”

“They only care whether the water will come in next time.”

“I know that too.”

“No, you don’t.”

With that, Chen Qi pushed open the door and left.

That afternoon, Liang Shen went to the Old Port District.

The water had receded. Sodden furniture, cardboard boxes, and appliances were piled along both sides of the streets. Shopkeepers were carrying soaked stock to the roadside, the colors of its packaging bleached by water. The air smelled of mud, disinfectant, and rotting food mixed together.

Outside a shoe repair shop, an old man was picking shoes out of the mud, pair by pair.

Liang Shen recognized it as the ninth shop on the loss list.

“Can they still be used?” he asked.

The old man did not look up.

“We’ll see when they’re dry.”

“Have you registered for relief?”

“The subdistrict office has been here.”

“The pumping station started late that night.”

The old man tipped the water out of a shoe.

“Have you come to explain?”

“No.”

“Then what have you come for?”

Liang Shen stood there, suddenly unable to answer.

He had thought he was coming to see the costs the systems had not seen. But to the old man, he was still just another person who would look and leave.

The old man glanced up at him.

“Young man, the water didn’t come through the system. It came through the gap under the door.”

Liang Shen followed his gaze to the shop door.

The wood along the bottom had swollen. The door would not close.

He crouched down and helped the old man lift it a little. They found a piece of scrap wood and wedged it beneath the hinge. The door was still crooked, but at least it could just about close.

Before he left, the old man asked what he did for work.

“City systems,” Liang Shen said.

“Then next time, count the gap under the door too.”

Liang Shen nodded.

That night, he reopened the incident record.

This time, he did not begin his proposal with “build a unified platform.”

The first line was:

No shared coordination may require participants to surrender everything first.

The second line was:

Every system call must make clear why it has been granted this information and who bears responsibility after action is taken.

He stopped halfway through the third line.

Outside the window, the city after the rain was gradually regaining its lights. Hospitals, power grid, pumping stations, transport, warehouses, apartment buildings: each was lit, each still separate from the others.

He took out the sheet of white paper.

There was only one line between the four circles.

Liang Shen added no new circles.

Along the line, he wrote four words in very small letters:

Identity.

Task.

Responsibility.

Return.

At first, Nebula was not a cloud.

It was only a line, not yet knowing whether it could bear the weight of reality.

Chapter 2 The First Shared Interface

Thirty days later, the proposal Liang Shen presented was just eleven pages long.

Zhou Yi turned to the end, then back to the first page.

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“No system architecture diagram?”

“In the appendix.”

“No unified data center?”

“No.”

“No new command body?”

“No.”

“Then what are you planning to build?”

“A shared interface,” Liang Shen said.

There were more people in the meeting room than last time.

Alongside the city’s public systems were two energy companies, three logistics companies, a hospital consortium, telecommunications operators, insurers, community representatives, and the Data Protection Committee. Everyone had the same proposal in front of them: few pages, many annotations.

The first page contained a single sentence:

Without changing existing statutory powers, asset ownership, or ultimate responsibility, enable different actors working on a defined task to share the minimum facts necessary for coordination.

Qiao Mu frowned as soon as he read the word “share.”

“Who decides what’s minimum?”

“The party requesting access explains it,” Liang Shen said. “The party supplying the information confirms it. High-risk tasks undergo independent review.”

“And in an emergency?”

“Access through an emergency interface under statutory authority, with mandatory review afterward.”

“Once information goes out, how do you take it back?”

“When the task ends, the interface closes. Unnecessary data is deleted; necessary accountability records are retained.”

“Who guarantees deletion?”

“Technical verification, third-party audits, and legal liability together. None is enough on its own.”

Qiao Mu leaned back in his chair.

“It still sounds as though I have to trust you.”

“Yes,” Liang Shen said. “Institutions can’t make trust unnecessary. They can only let you know what you’re trusting, and whom to turn to when something goes wrong.”

Someone looked up at Liang Shen.

It was not the sort of answer usually heard in the defense of a technical proposal.

An energy company representative asked, “What if our system refuses access?”

“Then it stays closed.”

“What if the city’s task fails as a result?”

“If the law grants no power to compel access, the importance of a task cannot become a reason to acquire data. We can only change the plan or seek authorization again.”

“Then what use is this interface?”

“To let the parts that agree to connect produce results first.”

Song Cheng of the Data Protection Committee sat to Zhou Yi’s right. She had been writing in the margins of the proposal since the meeting began. Now she put down her pen.

“I support a minimal interface, but there’s something missing from the proposal.”

“What?” Liang Shen asked.

“What we don’t know.”

Some people in the room thought they had misheard.

“Each system must submit not just known facts,” Song Cheng said, “but also mark what is unknown, delayed, or uncertain. Otherwise, once the interface is in place, people will instinctively assume that what isn’t displayed doesn’t exist.”

She turned to Qiao Mu.

“On the night of the storm, the medical supplies in Warehouse Four weren’t in the city directory. What the system showed was not ‘there are no medical supplies’ but ‘we don’t know whether there are any.’ Those two things must look different on the interface.”

“They can look different and still end the same way,” Qiao Mu said.

“At least decision-makers won’t be able to treat not knowing as absence.”

“Can knowing you don’t know save a shipment?”

“No,” Song Cheng said. “But it can stop someone from saying afterward that the system provided all the facts.”

The proposal gained another page.

In the end, the minimal shared interface standardized only seven categories of information:

Who the actor is.

What task is being handled.

What is needed.

What can be provided.

Where the authority comes from.

Who bears responsibility for the action.

Which facts remain unknown.

It did not copy all the data in each system, or keep a record of a person’s entire life. Hospitals did not have to open every medical record to the grid, only specify their critical loads, scope for reduced operation, and time windows for a particular task. Businesses did not have to disclose their entire inventories, only indicate whether a certain kind of resource existed, whether it could be called upon, and what compensation and safety conditions were required. A personal Spark did not have to hand its owner’s location, relationships, and habits to public systems. Only with the owner’s authorization would it submit needs, capabilities, or risks relevant to the task.

The technical team gave the interface a very long name:

Haijia City Cross-Domain Task Minimal Coordination Layer.

No one liked it.

Some shortened it to “the coordination layer.” Others called it “that line.” The word “Nebula” had already appeared in research manuscripts, but it was not part of the project’s official name. Zhou Yi thought it too grand, like raising civilization’s banner over an unfinished city trial before its time.

Liang Shen agreed.

“It isn’t Nebula yet,” he said.

The first joint test was scheduled for a Tuesday with no urgent risks.

It was a small task: three community hospitals in the north of the city needed to move a batch of medicines requiring cold storage temporarily while equipment was serviced. Two cold-chain companies would provide space, the transport system would arrange vehicles, and the grid system would confirm reliable power at the temporary storage sites.

This could have been done before, too.

Hospitals would call suppliers, who would then find warehouses and vehicles. If anything changed at any stage, the person responsible for that stage would contact everyone else again. The shared interface was not meant to prove that people had been incapable of cooperating before. It was meant to test whether, when changes happened simultaneously, the facts could automatically reach those who actually had to bear responsibility.

At nine in the morning, the task entered aggregation.

The three hospitals each submitted medicine types, volumes, temperature ranges, and the latest permissible transfer times. The submissions contained no patient names or specific prescriptions. The two cold-chain companies opened access to their available storage spaces. Qiao Mu opened only a small area of Warehouse Four.

The system reported:

Sufficient space at the northern warehouse.

Power supply reliability meets requirements.

Estimated road travel time: forty-six minutes.

The plan appeared viable.

Cheng Yan, head of the technical team, was thirty-two. For two weeks he had slept only four hours a night. When all the indicators turned green, he finally smiled.

“Ahead of schedule.”

Liang Shen did not respond.

He was watching the lower-right corner of the interface.

There was still a gray patch.

Loading and unloading capacity: unknown.

“The warehouse has permanent staff,” Cheng Yan said.

“The directory doesn’t say so.”

“Mr. Qiao’s system can call on them.”

“This is a shared task now. We can’t rely on our knowing that he ought to have people there.”

Qiao Mu was out of town when the confirmation request reached him.

“There are people at Warehouse Four,” he said.

“How many can handle pharmaceutical loading and unloading?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

“Today?”

“Today.”

“Two. The others are doing equipment maintenance.”

“Two isn’t enough.”

“Then this afternoon.”

The hospitals’ latest permissible transfer time was noon.

After all the main conditions had turned green, the first plan failed because of one gray patch of the unknown.

Cheng Yan’s smile vanished.

“We can get people through a labor platform.”

“What about qualifications for handling pharmaceuticals?” Song Cheng asked.

“We’ll screen for them.”

“Who verifies them?”

“The platform.”

“Can the platform’s qualification data enter this task?”

“It isn’t connected yet.”

Liang Shen checked the time.

Previously, the hospitals or the cold-chain companies would have been left to solve this themselves. Now the shared interface had exposed the problem earlier, but still lacked the capacity to solve it.

“Make the delay information available to the two hospitals,” he said. “Ask whether they can split the shipments. Check with the southern warehouse at the same time.”

“The southern warehouse isn’t connected.”

“Call them.”

Cheng Yan was reluctant to concede.

“Doesn’t that put us back to doing it manually?”

“The interface isn’t here to eliminate phone calls.”

“But we’re supposed to be testing the system.”

“We’re testing the task, not saving the system’s face.”

Ten minutes later, one hospital confirmed that it could wait two more hours. The other two had to move on time. The southern warehouse agreed to receive one shipment, but an extra transport run would be needed at short notice. The transport system recalculated the routes, the grid system verified the power supply, and the insurer confirmed responsibility for the transfer.

At 12:07, the last vehicle arrived.

The task was complete.

All medicines had stayed within their temperature ranges. There had been no incident, and no one felt this was an achievement worth celebrating.

At the afternoon review, Cheng Yan said, “Without that gray patch, the original plan would have gone straight into execution.”

“What would have happened then?” Qiao Mu asked.

“The vehicles would have arrived at the warehouse before anyone discovered there was no one to unload them.”

“A little late, at worst.”

The hospital representative said, “One of those batches had a permitted transit time of only ninety minutes after leaving the backup refrigerator.”

Qiao Mu said no more.

Song Cheng projected the task interface onto the wall.

“The most valuable thing today wasn’t that we completed the transfer.”

She pointed to the gray patch.

“It was that the system didn’t fill in an answer on reality’s behalf.”

“If we keep this many unknowns in the long run, the interface will look terrible,” Cheng Yan said.

“Reality doesn’t look good either.”

“Users will think the system is unreliable.”

“If it doesn’t know, but looks perfectly reliable, that’s what makes it truly unreliable.”

After the first joint test, the shared interface added three markers: “source of uncertainty,” “last verified,” and “human confirmation required.” Cheng Yan insisted on displaying unknowns in gray rather than red.

“Red looks like an error,” he said. “Not knowing isn’t an error.”

“Hiding what you don’t know is,” Song Cheng added.

Over the following month, the trial expanded to seven kinds of ordinary task:

Community medicine transfers, temporary cooling spaces, shared use of public vehicles, redistribution of school cafeteria surpluses, support during minor outages, roadwork detours, and extreme-weather visits to older people living alone.

None of the tasks was grand.

Every one exposed new gaps.

Communities knew where older residents lived, but not which ones had already been picked up by relatives. The transport system knew a road was closed, but not that wheelchair users could not use the temporary footbridge. Schools knew their cafeterias had a surplus, but not who would bear food-safety responsibility once the food was donated. Hospitals knew someone needed medicine, but could not assume permission to give that person's health information to the community.

With every new connection, what people first saw was not the capability of the whole. It was how much had always been taken for granted and left to someone's phone calls, experience, and goodwill in the moment.

Spark began to serve as the entry point through which individuals joined tasks.

An older person living alone could have their Spark confirm their status to the community only during heat alerts. A volunteer could make one afternoon and a vehicle available without disclosing a complete schedule. A nurse could connect professional skills to emergency tasks while explicitly refusing routine calls on days off.

The system could not extend a single consent into long-term permission.

Nor could it assume that someone who had always been willing to help before was willing this time too.

By the end of the first month, the shared interface connected twelve public systems, six businesses, and nine communities.

The technical team installed a new screen in the hall.

It did not display all the city's data.

Only tasks currently running.

Large blank spaces remained between the tasks.

Some came from systems not yet connected, some from information that could not be verified, some belonged to private domains for which no authorization had been given. Others existed simply because, for the moment, no one knew the reality there.

Visitors often asked:

"Why don't you fill in these areas?"

At first, Cheng Yan would explain data standards, progress on interfaces, and authorization limits. Later, he simply said:

"Because they aren't ours."

One evening, standing in front of the screen, Liang Shen watched a visit to an older person living alone come to an end.

Participants withdrew, the vehicle was returned, and temporarily shared health-status information was closed off. The community retained only the completion record and a corridor-lighting problem that needed a later repair.

The task disappeared from the screen.

The blank space closed over it again.

Liang Shen suddenly understood that what the first shared interface truly connected was not just systems.

It connected limited needs, limited capabilities, and limited responsibilities.

It was precisely because they were limited that connection had not become possession.

Large blank spaces remained on the screen.

No one regarded them as failures anymore.

They were life for which authorization had not yet been given, life not yet understood, and life that civilization did not need to know in its entirety.

Chapter 3 The Person Who Refused Authorization

The first time Du Weihe saw the authorization page, she spent seventeen minutes reading it.

The community worker sitting across from her grew uneasy as he waited.

“Ms. Du, it’s mainly to check that you’re safe during extreme weather,” the young man said. “We won’t disturb you at other times.”

“It says ‘health-risk identification’ here.”

“Yes. During heat waves or cold snaps, for example, the system can determine whether you need to be contacted first.”

“On what basis?”

“Age, medical history, living conditions, and travel status.”

“Where does the travel status come from?”

“Your Spark can provide it if you authorize it.”

“And if I don’t?”

“That’s fine too.”

“Will basic services be affected if I don’t authorize it?”

“No.”

“Then why does it say ‘may affect personalized responses’ here?”

The young man glanced down.

“It just means the system may not be able to know in advance what you need.”

“Then write that it doesn’t know.”

“It means more or less the same thing.”

“It doesn’t.”

Du Weihe was sixty-six. Before retiring, she had worked at the municipal archives. She spoke slowly and without aggression. She was simply in the habit of reading, word for word, everything she was asked to agree to.

The young man was Fang Shu, a new community coordinator in the Old Port District. Over the past two weeks, he had helped more than a hundred older residents authorize extreme-weather care. Most asked only whether it cost anything, or whether their children could receive notifications too.

Du Weihe was the first to ask where every item of data would go.

“How long will family-contact records be kept?”

“Unnecessary data is deleted when the task ends.”

“What counts as unnecessary?”

“The system decides.”

“Who gave it permission to decide?”

Fang Shu hesitated.

“It’s the standard rule.”

“Who set it?”

“The project team.”

“May I see it?”

At the edge of Fang Shu’s field of view, his Spark prompted him: Public version of the Extreme-Weather Care Task Data Rules available.

He sent Du Weihe the document.

She read for another twelve minutes.

Then she selected “Refuse.”

“Ms. Du,” Fang Shu said, “you have chronic lung disease and live alone. You’d be safer taking part.”

“I know.”

“Then why won’t you?”

“I haven’t refused to let you knock on my door during a heat wave.”

“Without data, we don’t know when we should knock on your door first.”

“You can go by age.”

“That won’t be accurate enough.”

“Then it won’t be accurate enough.”

Fang Shu looked at her.

“Are you worried about a privacy breach?”

“A breach isn’t what worries me.”

“What does?”

Du Weihe put the terminal back on the table.

“Once something enters a system, it gradually becomes something else. It starts with checking whether I’m all right in hot weather. Later it may become deciding whether I’m fit to live alone. Later still, recommending that I move to a care center. Every step can be said to be for my own good.”

“The system won’t decide for you.”

“Not today.”

“It will still need your authorization in the future.”

“Then let me authorize it anew each time.”

When Fang Shu left, his courtesy was intact, but inwardly he was irritated.

He did not think Du Weihe was a bad person, or unreasonable. It was precisely because everything she said made sense that the encounter was so tiring.

The community had 376 residents aged sixty-five and over who lived alone all or part of the time. During extreme weather, staff could not reach every home at once. The more complete the data, the more accurate the priorities. The more accurate the priorities, the more likely their limited staff would reach those in real danger first.

One person’s refusal would not destroy the system.

But what if many people refused?

Back at the community office, Fang Shu marked the case:

Not authorized. Personal discussion recommended.

His Spark asked whether to arrange a second discussion.

Fang Shu selected “Yes.”

That afternoon, Du Weihe received a notification:

The community would like to explain the purposes of authorization again. Would you accept?

She refused again.

The following day, another notification arrived, this time worded more gently:

To help us better protect you during extreme weather, would you be willing to learn about a minimal authorization option?

Du Weihe stared at the sentence.

She did not select “Refuse.”

She called Fang Shu.

“Who sent this?”

“The system is offering an alternative based on your circumstances.”

“I’ve already refused twice.”

“It’s only asking whether you’re willing to learn about it.”

“If I have to keep refusing after I’ve refused, what kind of refusal is that?”

Fang Shu suddenly saw the problem.

“I’ll cancel it.”

“It isn’t for you to cancel on my behalf.”

“Then you can turn off further contact in settings.”

“Where?”

Fang Shu guided her through four levels of menus.

After turning it off, Du Weihe said, “You put agreement on the first page and hide a final refusal on the fourth.”

When the call ended, Fang Shu submitted that sentence as task feedback.

The system classified it as a “usability suggestion.”

He hesitated, then changed it to “authorization-boundary risk.”

Three days later, a heat wave arrived.

By ten in the morning, the temperature in Haijia City had passed thirty-eight degrees Celsius. The Old Port District was packed with old buildings, many without adequate temperature control. The Nebula coordination layer entered a heat-response task, and communities arranged visits according to age, health risk, indoor temperature, and family-contact status.

Du Weihe’s name was not on the priority list.

She appeared only on the basic list as a “resident aged sixty-five or over living alone,” without health risks, indoor conditions, or real-time travel information.

At eleven, Fang Shu called her.

No answer.

At 11:15, he called again.

Still no answer.

His Spark reminded him that Du Weihe had not authorized access to her location or activity status. They could not be accessed.

Fang Shu looked at the task list.

Two other older residents showed excessively high indoor temperatures. Another could not reach a family contact. One more had actively requested help. The community had only three teams.

He placed Du Weihe in the second round of in-person visits.

At 12:20, the first round ended.

At 12:47, Fang Shu reached Du Weihe’s door.

He knocked. No response.

He knocked again.

A faint bump came from inside.

Fang Shu called for community medical staff and contacted property management. Three minutes later, the door opened from within.

Du Weihe stood behind it, her face pale.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You haven’t been answering the phone.”

“The terminal ran out of power.”

The apartment was hotter than the corridor. The windows were open, but there was no breeze outside. A glass of water stood untouched on the table.

“May the medical staff come in?” Fang Shu asked.

Holding the doorframe, Du Weihe nodded.

When the community doctor arrived, the assessment was mild heat exhaustion and respiratory discomfort. She needed cooling, fluids, and observation. Had the system known about her chronic lung disease, she would have been on the first-round list. Someone would have arrived at least an hour earlier.

Fang Shu did not say, “I told you so.”

But the words were plainly there between them.

Du Weihe sat at the temporary cooling station, waiting for her breathing to steady. He Lan was helping in the community that day and checked her blood oxygen again.

“The community says you haven’t made your health information available.”

“That’s right.”

“Would you now be willing to give temporary access to the records needed for this treatment?”

“For how long?” Du Weihe asked.

“Until this task ends. Necessary medical records will go to the hospital. Your location and family-contact status won’t be retained.”

“Can I share just my lung condition and medication?”

“Yes.”

“Without my past movements?”

“We don’t need them.”

“Can you guarantee that?”

“I can only guarantee this request I’m initiating,” He Lan said. “The system’s rules and logs can prevent others from quietly expanding it. No one can guarantee the whole future for you.”

Du Weihe looked at her.

A few seconds later, she selected “Agree.”

Her Spark made two items of information available:

Chronic lung disease.

Current medication.

Nothing more.

He Lan adjusted the care accordingly and confirmed that Du Weihe did not need hospitalization. She went home that evening. When the task ended, the temporary authorization was automatically withdrawn.

The following day, the project team received two conflicting reports.

The first came from the community:

Missing data prevented timely identification of a high-risk resident.

The second came from Du Weihe:

After an explicit refusal, the system continued steering me toward authorization, and the refusal option was buried too deep. If refusal means having to endure repeated persuasion, so-called voluntariness merely prolongs the pressure.

The technical team’s first proposed solution was tiered authorization.

Users could choose full authorization, minimal authorization, or emergency-only authorization.

After reading it, Song Cheng said, “It still isn’t enough.”

“What’s missing?” Cheng Yan asked.

“A service option without data.”

“How do you provide services without data?”

“People, basic age-based lists, publicly known risks, requests for help, voluntary contact among neighbors. It will be less efficient. But civilization cannot pretend not to see someone because they refuse authorization.”

“What if that causes a delay?”

“That’s one of the real costs of refusal. But basic services still have to be there. We cannot withdraw services to force someone to agree.”

Fang Shu sat beside them.

“I put her in the second round that day. A little later, and something serious might really have happened.”

“Do you think it should be compulsory?” Song Cheng asked.

“I don’t know.”

“It’s good that you don’t know.”

“What’s good about it?”

“It shows that this isn’t a responsibility rules can remove for you. The system can give a clearer account of the risks, help her understand the costs, and arrange a basic safety net. In the end, someone may still refuse. Someone may still judge wrongly.”

“Then what’s the point of building all this?”

Song Cheng looked at him.

“It isn’t to keep everyone safe forever. It’s so we don’t have to possess a person before we can protect them.”

After the heat-response review, the authorization interface was redesigned.

“Agree,” “Minimal authorization,” “This task only,” and “Refuse” appeared at the same level.

After a refusal, the system no longer automatically initiated another attempt at persuasion. Any renewed contact had to come from a specific person who explained the reason, first letting the other person decide whether they wished to listen.

Basic services could not be canceled for lack of authorization.

Task prioritization had to be clearly marked:

Unknown does not mean low risk.

A month later, Du Weihe saw Fang Shu again.

He had come to check the corridor lighting.

“Have you seen the new heat-response authorization?”

“I have.”

“Still not taking part?”

“I’ve enabled authorization for this emergency only.”

Fang Shu was a little surprised.

“What changed your mind?”

“Refusal looks more like refusal now.”

“You really did wait an extra hour last time.”

“I know.”

“Aren’t you afraid?”

“I am.”

“Then why not give full access?”

Du Weihe smiled a little.

“Fear isn’t a reason to open every door.”

Later, the first complete record of an authorization withdrawal became a boundary case for the Haijia City coordination layer.

The public version contained none of Du Weihe’s health, address, or family information. Only one fact remained that could not be omitted:

A resident refused a public task’s request to access data. The system continued trying to persuade her on grounds of goodwill. Her refusal was thus shown to be incomplete. The rules were subsequently changed.

Many years later, new cities, new communities, and remote nodes would still read that record.

They knew that someone had once said no.

They did not know how she lived afterward.

Civilization remembered the boundary.

It did not possess the person behind it.

Chapter 4 An Idle Warehouse and a Hospital Short of Medicine

Two months after the rainstorm, Haijia City's medical supply chain had still not fully recovered.

The real shortage was not that the warehouses held nothing.

It was that no one knew which things could be used by whom.

Two hospitals in the southern district needed a batch of filter components to maintain aging dialysis equipment. An upstream material disruption had delayed the original supplier's factory by six weeks. New components had been manufactured but were stuck at a logistics hub in another city. The hospitals could buy replacement equipment, at five times the original price, and installation would also require retraining.

After an interhospital consultation, He Lan heard someone from the equipment department complain:

"There must be some in the city."

"Some what?"

"Components of the same model. Several clinics retired a batch of machines before. Company warehouses might have spares too."

"Then why can't we find them?"

"Who would make their whole inventory public?"

He Lan thought of Qiao Mu.

After the storm, his Warehouse Four had become one of the first business nodes connected to the shared interface. But the connection covered only emergency cold-chain capacity, not everything in his warehouses.

Through the task interface, she submitted a need:

Dialysis equipment filter components, model and compatibility range specified. Twelve sets needed within seven days.

The system searched public procurement records, hospital inventories, and connected company directories. No results.

The status read:

Known supply: zero.

Potential supply in undisclosed inventories: unknown.

He Lan passed the task to the resource coordination trial group.

What was called the Resource Pool did not, at that time, contain an actual "pool."

It was more like a set of doors that could be opened by choice. States, cities, businesses, institutions, and individuals still owned their resources. Only when a resource entered actual

use under explicit conditions did it become visible within a shared task. Ownership did not transfer, nor did registration automatically create usage rights.

The design sounded cautious. It was also slow to take hold.

A resource owner's first thought was often not what idle resources might make possible, but why someone else wanted to know how much they owned.

When Qiao Mu received the request, he was taking stock of the food damaged in the storm.

His Spark indicated that compatible components might be in the old-equipment area of Warehouse Six.

He had acquired the stock seven years earlier when buying a medical logistics company. The equipment had never been used again. Its parts sat in sealed boxes on two rows of racks at the very back of the warehouse. Their book value was close to zero, but Qiao Mu had never disposed of them.

"Don't respond," he said.

Spark confirmed:

Withholding resource information does not affect existing public services or business eligibility.

Qiao Mu dismissed the alert.

That afternoon, he went to Warehouse Six.

It took the warehouse keeper half an hour to find the boxes. Their outer packaging was covered in dust, but the labels were still clear. Inside were twenty-six sets of filter components, along with some valves, seals, and sensors.

"Still usable?" Qiao Mu asked.

"They'd need testing."

"What's the market price?"

The warehouse keeper checked.

"New ones aren't expensive. They're out of stock now. Hard to value secondhand."

Qiao Mu crouched beside the boxes.

If they stayed there, they were no use to him. Give them to the hospitals, and they might solve the immediate shortage. It seemed simple enough.

But after decades in business, he knew that "no use" and "no value" were different things. Stock useless today could become expensive tomorrow because of a shortage. Open it up once today for public needs, and tomorrow someone might ask why the other warehouses could not be opened too.

What truly frightened people was not losing a few parts.

It was losing the right to decide how their own things were used.

Qiao Mu did not respond at once.

The next day, people from the resource coordination trial group came to see him.

They were Song Cheng and a resource engineer.

“You know I have them?” Qiao Mu asked.

“We don’t,” Song Cheng said. “The system only indicated that you used to operate in a related business, so you might.”

“That’s still analyzing me.”

“It used public business records. It did not access your internal inventory.”

“What if I say I don’t have any?”

“We record ‘not provided.’ The task keeps looking.”

“You won’t investigate?”

“There are no statutory grounds for an investigation.”

Qiao Mu stared at her.

“The hospitals need them.”

“Yes.”

“If I don’t bring them out, what happens to the patients?”

“The hospitals will seek alternatives. The city can also make an emergency purchase.”

“You don’t plan to tell the public that some businesses would rather let things rot in their warehouses?”

Song Cheng shook her head.

“If the Resource Pool gets started by shaming owners, all anyone will learn in the end is how to hide things.”

The resource engineer opened a proposed usage plan.

Qiao Mu could choose a sale, a short-term loan, custodial dispatch, or provision without charge. Testing, transport, wear and loss, insurance, and return conditions were listed separately. If the components passed inspection and entered hospital use, the system would record the actual contribution made by releasing the resources. If they failed, only cooperation in testing would be recorded, without exaggerating the result.

“What can contribution value do?” Qiao Mu asked.

“It operates alongside money during the initial phase,” the engineer said. “It can’t be traded, and it isn’t an honor score. It records contributions that have actually occurred and been verified. That does not buy the next scarce resource, access to a public project, or eligibility to make decisions.”

“One consideration among others?”

“Contribution cannot replace professional judgment, statutory rights, actual responsibilities, or the rights of affected parties.”

“If I provide twenty-six sets today, do I get priority for twenty-six sets of something else tomorrow?”

“There is no mechanical exchange.”

“Then this isn’t a business deal.”

“It can be just a business deal,” Song Cheng said. “Sell at the market price, with no contribution recorded beyond the ordinary transaction.”

Qiao Mu laughed.

“You finally admit money is useful.”

“It always has been.”

“Then why have contribution value at all?”

“Because some real effort and sacrifice can’t be expressed by price alone. And because some expensive transactions make no public contribution.”

“Who decides?”

“Real consequences.”

“Reality can’t speak.”

“Which is why we need verification and appeals. And judgments will still be wrong sometimes.”

Qiao Mu stopped smiling.

“Do you tell people that every time? That the system will get things wrong?”

“It will get things wrong whether we say so or not.”

He told the warehouse keeper to send the boxes for testing.

Of the twenty-six sets, nineteen were in good condition, four needed new seals, and three could not be used for medical purposes because their storage conditions were uncertain. The hospitals ultimately accepted twelve sets. The remaining qualified components entered the directory of available resources.

Qiao Mu chose paid custodial use.

Ownership remained with the company. The hospitals paid for use, the city covered testing and the first delivery, and subsequent maintenance was governed by the Resource Pool agreement. Qiao Mu could withdraw after fulfilling tasks already accepted, and did not have to open the rest of Warehouse Six’s inventory.

On the day the task entered execution, however, the transport vehicle was late.

Neither the road nor the driver was to blame.

The insurance system considered the components' liability status unclear and refused automatic coverage. They were not new goods and had no current warranty from the original manufacturer. Nor were they ordinary secondhand goods. They were being put into medical use after retesting as part of a public task.

He Lan waited at the hospital for two hours.

She called Liang Shen. "Has another system decided it's doing the right thing?"

"This time it's insurance," Liang Shen said.

"Is it wrong?"

"No."

He Lan was silent for a moment.

"That answer is getting really irritating."

In the end, the municipal public risk fund provided temporary coverage. The hospital equipment department took responsibility for installation verification. Qiao Mu was responsible only for the storage conditions he had truthfully disclosed. Responsibility was taken apart again, then joined back together.

At dusk, the truck drove out of Warehouse Six.

Qiao Mu stood at the entrance, watching it pass along roads still not fully repaired after the flooding.

"Those things sat here for seven years," the warehouse keeper asked. "Does that really count as a contribution?"

"Not while they're sitting here."

"Once they're sold?"

"Once they're used."

"Then all that warehouse space was wasted."

"The warehouse is mine," Qiao Mu said. "I can waste it if I want."

The warehouse keeper laughed.

"What made you willing to part with them now?"

Qiao Mu did not answer.

It was not that he had suddenly become noble.

The new plan did not force him to choose between ownership and public need. It let him see that leaving the stock idle preserved an uncertain future opportunity, while releasing it for use brought actual returns, defined responsibilities, verifiable contribution, and a record of cooperation that had really happened.

He was still acting from his own interests.

Only this time, his interests did not have to depend on resources remaining useless.

Three days after the components were installed, the hospital equipment returned to normal operation.

Qiao Mu received the final record.

There was no medal, no title of “caring enterprise,” no exaggeration of twelve sets of components into a count of lives saved.

The record listed only:

Resource origin, test results, actual use, duration, fees, wear and loss, responsibility, and task feedback.

In the feedback field, He Lan confirmed:

Twelve sets of components have been used in equipment maintenance, preventing delays to two groups of dialysis sessions.

Qiao Mu looked at it for a long time.

For the first time, he felt that an object did not truly leave a warehouse because its doors had opened.

It left because it had made a difference in someone else’s life.

When the first vehicle left, he had acquired no greater personal worth and lost no control over his other warehouses.

He had received only a record so clear it was almost dispassionate:

What had been used.

Whom it had helped.

Before closing the record, Qiao Mu checked the return, wear and loss, fees, logs, and withdrawal status once more.

No inventory outside Warehouse Six had been scanned. No further access had been automatically authorized.

He removed the mechanical key from the door lock and put it back in his pocket.

The key still opened only his warehouse.

How much wear and loss there had been.

Who was responsible for it.

Chapter 5 The First Complete Operating Loop

Haijia City decided to conduct its first complete coordination test in midsummer.

The announcement met with more opposition than expected.

Some thought it too risky to use a city to test an immature system. Others thought the pilot merely gave a new name to existing emergency coordination. Still others asked why they could not wait until the technology was more stable and the law more complete.

At the public briefing, Zhou Yi answered only one point:

“The trial does not hand the city over to a new system. Quite the opposite. We are testing where it must not take over, whether it can roll back after failure, and whether it can leave when a task ends.”

The test was limited to public cooling facilities and energy coordination during hot weather.

Weather models predicted five consecutive days of extreme heat in Haijia City in late July. Electricity demand, hospital emergency departments, indoor temperatures in older neighborhoods, public transport, and essential cold-chain supply would all come under strain at once. Every system already had contingency plans. This time, the shared interface would bring them into the same closed task loop.

No one put the eight task process states on the city’s big screen.

For ordinary people, the heat simply drew closer day by day in the weather forecast.

The task initially remained silent.

The system maintained only basic interfaces. It did not enter people’s private lives. Without risk or a shared task, there was no reason to keep asking where people were, how their health was, or whether they were willing to give their time.

Three days later, the weather risk crossed the threshold.

The Nebula coordination layer entered sensing.

The grid submitted peak-demand forecasts; hospitals, emergency capacity and loads that could be reduced; communities, public spaces and basic population structure; the transport system, carrying capacity. Businesses voluntarily made cold stores, vehicles, and temperature-controlled premises available. Personal Sparks confirmed needs and capabilities only within existing authorizations.

The interface showed a great deal of uncertainty.

Actual indoor temperatures in older buildings were incompletely known.

Some older residents living alone had refused health-data authorization.

Commercial venues had promised to open, but had not confirmed overnight staffing.

Long-term reliability of backup energy lacked real-world testing.

Liang Shen required every unknown to remain visible.

“The public will think we haven’t prepared anything,” Cheng Yan said.

“We haven’t prepared everything.”

“We could at least estimate with models.”

“We can estimate. We can’t display estimates as facts.”

The next day, the task entered aggregation.

Twelve communities, seven hospitals, two energy companies, four schools, three libraries, nine commercial venues, six logistics companies, and several thousand volunteers formed a temporary community.

Each actor opened only what the task required.

Schools provided premises without opening student data. Businesses provided energy and space without thereby gaining access to residents’ information. Individuals could register capabilities in driving, care, repairs, or companionship, or simply request a place to cool down.

Du Weihe chose authorization for this emergency only.

She allowed the system to access three items during the heat-response task: her chronic lung condition, current medication, and whether she was home. Fang Shu could not help smiling when he received confirmation.

Du Weihe sent a message:

Don’t look so moved just because I authorized it.

Fang Shu replied:

Understood.

The task entered collaboration and planning.

The grid proposed moving some energy-intensive production to the night. The transport system added low-speed shuttles to public cooling sites. Hospitals reduced nonessential equipment loads. Schools and libraries extended their opening hours. Cold-chain companies released overnight backup energy. Communities arranged in-person visits according to known risks.

The first overall plan brought the energy shortfall within safe limits.

The cost was a six-hour production halt at several East Bank factories, reduced nighttime lighting in two commercial districts, and the designation of one Old Port street as a temporary logistics route.

“Why the Old Port District again?” Qiao Mu asked.

“It’s close to three cooling sites and two hospitals,” Liang Shen said. “It’s the shortest route.”

“Shortest for whom?” Chen Qi asked.

The transport system showed that using the street would cut transfer times by fifteen minutes and reduce the risk of congestion on major roads.

“There’s a night market on that street,” Chen Qi said. “You see a road. The people there see a day’s income.”

The night market did not appear in the planning interface.

Not because it did not matter.

It had never entered any formal system.

Chen Qi contacted vendors, collecting stall numbers, business hours, and acceptable adjustments. Nebula recalculated, moving the logistics peak forty minutes later, preserving the first half of the night market, and designating another road as a backup route.

Overall efficiency fell a little.

More than a hundred households lost a little less.

The task entered decision.

Routine resource dispatch was carried out jointly by AGI and the various systems within their authorizations. Temporary road controls, requisition of public premises, and factory shutdowns were confirmed respectively by statutory bodies and responsible actors. Affected vendors received channels for objections and compensation.

No single overall vote decided everything.

No system gained every power by claiming an “overall optimum.”

On the first day of extreme heat, execution began.

At ten in the morning, school gyms, libraries, and commercial venues opened as cooling spaces. The transport system dispatched shuttle vehicles. Community workers began their visits. The grid adjusted electricity to industry and public facilities according to real-time load.

For the first few hours, everything ran smoothly.

After noon, the first deviation appeared.

One library’s cooling capacity was below its registered level, and the indoor temperature kept rising. The system redirected visitors to a nearby shopping center, bringing it close to capacity.

At three, a shuttle broke down, leaving two communities waiting.

At four, hospital emergency arrivals exceeded forecasts.

At the same time, Fang Shu received an in-person verification task. Two older residents in an Old South District apartment building without indoor sensors had repeatedly missed status checks. The task interface read: Corridor access normal. Home visit recommended.

Only on reaching the sixth floor did Fang Shu discover that “normal” came from a property-management record thirty-six minutes old. Construction workers had just closed off the northern fire door, while a temporary energy-storage cabinet had entered high-temperature protection mode. The corridor no longer had its usual through-draft. Heat gathered between the concrete walls, more stifling than outdoors.

He stopped once at the seventh-floor turn. Spark flagged an abnormal heart rate and advised him to withdraw. Seeing that only one floor remained, Fang Shu kept going. On the eighth floor, he grasped the railing and briefly felt his vision go dark.

He did not complete the visit. A follow-up team entered by an external stairway on the other side. Both older residents were home and unharmed. Fang Shu was taken to a temporary medical station and left after receiving fluids.

Only when records were retrieved afterward did they discover that the property-management work order noted construction on the fire door, and the energy system had recorded the storage cabinet’s high-temperature state. The community task layer had obtained neither. The interface also failed to show when “corridor normal” had last been verified, or by whom. Every system held its own portion of knowledge. Nowhere was the unknown delivered to the person who had to walk into it.

Fang Shu said only, “I authorized a visit, not testing a route the system knows nothing about.”

At five, Qiao Mu’s available backup generator began consuming fuel abnormally.

Every change entered the shared interface.

The system no longer merely issued instructions. It continually reorganized the task: rematching vehicles, adjusting open spaces, moving medical resources, changing energy use. Participants could see whom their actions were buying time for. They could also refuse when a request exceeded their authorization.

One volunteer driver received a fourth consecutive assignment.

His Spark automatically declined.

He had authorized only three, and his driving time was approaching the limit.

The dispatch system did not interpret his past enthusiasm as continued availability.

Another driver took over.

At night, the heat did not ease significantly.

After eleven, the temporary logistics route in the Old Port District entered heavy use. New-energy refrigerated trucks, shuttles, and supply vehicles passed continuously. Residents on

either side had been told only that the road would be under temporary controls. No one had expected vehicle noise to continue all night.

The first complaints entered the system at 12:40 in the morning.

The task interface marked them:

Residents' rest affected.

The automated proposal recommended lower speeds, adjusted routes, and temporary accommodation for affected households.

Chen Qi rejected the temporary-accommodation proposal.

"You want a whole street to move out in the middle of the night?"

"Is there another route?" Liang Shen asked.

"The backup road."

"It adds twelve minutes."

"Then add twelve minutes."

The hospitals said that some supplies were time-sensitive, and rerouting everything would raise the risk. In the end, emergency medical and cold-chain vehicles kept the original route, while ordinary supplies shifted to the backup road. Temporary sound barriers were installed along the street, and the next day's logistics start was pushed back.

The noise lessened. It did not disappear.

Two small shops on the corner failed to receive the next day's goods because of the road controls. Temporary installations blocked the frontage of a breakfast shop.

The system recorded the effects.

No one stopped in the middle of the heat-response task to resolve them all.

On the third day, the city's electricity demand peaked.

An East Bank factory refused to reduce its load any further.

Its manager said repeated shutdowns would damage the production line. The factory had fulfilled its commitment over the first two days.

The energy dispatch system proposed increasing its call on the factory, on the grounds that the public risk remained.

Song Cheng vetoed the automatic expansion of authority.

"The original authorization is exhausted."

"Without further load reductions, we risk exceeding the limit at the evening peak," Cheng Yan said.

"Negotiate again."

“There isn’t time.”

“Then invoke statutory emergency powers. Have someone with the authority sign.”

“Isn’t the result the same?”

“No. A voluntary task cannot quietly become compulsory because it is important. If compulsion is truly necessary, it must appear under its own name.”

The energy authority’s chief ultimately signed a temporary power-restriction order, assuming responsibility for compensation and review.

The factory halted production.

The evening peak passed safely.

On the fifth evening, temperatures began to fall.

Hospital emergency arrivals declined, the grid left its high-risk state, and public cooling sites closed one after another.

People thought the task was over.

For Nebula, the end of execution was only half the loop.

Verification and repair began.

The system’s overall results were very good:

No widespread power outage.

Critical hospital services maintained.

High-risk residents reached.

Public cooling spaces accommodated more people than expected.

Energy and transport dispatch reduced the overall peak.

Zhou Yi had scheduled a short press conference.

An hour before the review, Liang Shen canceled it.

“Why?” Zhou Yi asked.

“There are still 147 unresolved complaints in the Old Port District.”

“A press conference isn’t a victory celebration.”

“It will look like one.”

“The overall results need to be made public.”

“Make them public. Go to that street first.”

They reached the Old Port District at eight that evening.

The extreme heat had passed, but the road still held the day's warmth. Temporary sound barriers were stacked against a wall. Several shops were clearing their entrances.

The breakfast shop owner put a box of unsold ingredients into a bin.

"Have you filed for compensation?" Chen Qi asked.

"Yes."

"How much of the loss can be verified?"

"I don't know."

"Losses directly caused by the road controls will be compensated," Liang Shen said.

The owner glanced at him.

"How do you count the customers I lost these past few days?"

"That needs verification."

"And if you can't verify it?"

Liang Shen offered no reassurance.

"You may not be fully compensated."

"Then does your system count as a success?"

"Overall, yes."

The owner gave a short laugh.

"Overall is doing fine."

He closed the bin.

Residents came down one by one to join the on-site review.

Some said there had not been enough warning. Some said the sound barriers went up too late. Some thought emergency vehicles had to get through, and they could put up with it. Others asked why, every time the whole city needed the shortest route, the cost fell on the same old neighborhood.

The system recorded every opinion.

Recording them did not automatically turn them into right answers.

An older resident said, "I didn't lose money. I just slept badly for three nights. What does that count as?"

A task worker asked, "How would you like us to put it right?"

The resident thought for a moment.

"Next time, don't tell me to bear with it for everyone's sake. Tell me how many vehicles there will actually be, and when it will end. If it can't end, say that too."

Another resident said, “My child had an exam the next day. Could you give the school a statement?”

Some people laughed, then began discussing it seriously.

The review continued until eleven that night.

The final repair plan included direct compensation, partial business support, road noise mitigation, advance disclosure of information, explanations to schools, and a requirement to account for residential density, the nighttime economy, and how often an area had borne the burden before when choosing temporary routes in the future.

Not every demand was met.

One vendor considered the compensation too low and chose to continue appealing.

The system did not require him to stop being dissatisfied after “accepting the overall success.”

Fang Shu’s incident underwent a separate accountability review. Property management bore responsibility for failing to update information promptly. The community task layer bore responsibility for retaining an outdated status and hiding its verification time. Fang Shu also acknowledged that he had climbed one more floor after Spark advised him to withdraw. All three were recorded separately. No responsibility made another disappear.

After compensation and apologies were complete, Fang Shu withdrew authorization to conduct on-site verification in all future Nebula trials. The community director asked whether he wanted to wait until he had physically recovered before deciding.

“I’ve already recovered,” Fang Shu said.

“Then why withdraw?”

“Because I no longer trust the task interface to tell me what it doesn’t know.”

No one tried to persuade him further. His withdrawal took effect that day.

This added a result to the review report that was difficult to fit into a success rate: one on-site verifier would no longer participate, reducing the Old South District’s capacity for the next round of in-person visits. Liang Shen insisted on keeping the original sentence: the first complete operating loop had been completed, and the trust of one participant had been lost.

Someone proposed changing it to “a temporary decline in willingness to participate.” Liang Shen crossed out “temporary.”

After verification, the task entered contraction.

Temporary access to personal locations, indoor conditions, and health risks was closed item by item. Permissions to use businesses’ energy and vehicles were returned. The temporary community of schools, shopping centers, hospitals, and neighborhoods dissolved. Only

statutory records, facts of contribution, unresolved appeals, compensation obligations, and matters requiring long-term maintenance remained.

Cheng Yan watched the connections on the task screen go dark one by one.

“A month to connect them, a few minutes to shut them down.”

“It’s only ours if we can shut it down,” Liang Shen said.

“What do you mean?”

“If it can’t be shut down, it isn’t coordination. It’s possession.”

After the last temporary authorization was withdrawn, the screen returned to silence.

The city did not stop running.

The grid, hospitals, transport, businesses, communities, and everyone’s Sparks returned to their own boundaries. The shared interface maintained only minimal services and risk monitoring. It no longer kept asking who was where, what they could do, or whether they still wished to participate.

In the technical report, the heat-response task was called:

Haijia City’s First Complete Cross-Domain Closed-Loop Test.

Later, the public found a shorter name.

The First Cloud Formation.

The phrase was not accurate.

Nebula was far from formed.

It had merely proved for the first time that a city could temporarily develop a capacity to act as a whole around shared risks without creating a unified person, concentrating all data, or abolishing existing responsible actors. It had also proved for the first time that, after succeeding, this capacity of the whole still had to return to a street that had slept badly, a small shop whose losses could not be fully verified, and a person who remained dissatisfied.

A few days later, Liang Shen returned to the Old Port District.

The breakfast shop had reopened.

The owner handed him a cup of soy milk.

“This doesn’t mean I forgive you,” he said.

“I know.”

“Will you use this street next time?”

“Maybe.”

“Still noisy?”

“Maybe.”

“Then why are you here?”

Liang Shen took a sip of soy milk.

“To start by hearing the rest of what we left unfinished this time.”

The owner said nothing.

An ordinary truck passed along the street. It had no emergency markings, and no system had assigned it a priority. Someone pushed open a shop door. Someone waited for a bus in the shade. Children ran past along the roadside.

Civilization had not arrived in an ideal world by completing a single operating loop.

The city was still crowded. Decisions still carried costs. People still gave greater weight to their own losses than to strangers’ needs.

But some things had changed.

A public action no longer ended with overall success.

An individual no longer had to prove that their loss was important enough before they were entitled to enter civilization’s memory.

Nebula’s first growth did not come from completing the task.

It came from not treating success as a reason to be exempt from apology.

Part II A Dual-Track Transition: Old Logic and New Structures Coexist

Interfaces can connect systems, but cannot automatically change the underlying relationships of the old civilization.

Civilization cannot prove through one success that it has reached the future. While the old world still bears the responsibilities of reality, it must let new possibilities face failure, rollback, and time.

Chapter 6 The Old Systems Cannot Simply Be Declared Finished

After Haijia City's First Cloud Formation, what people spoke of most was neither the street that had stayed awake all night nor the canceled celebration.

They remembered the big screen.

For the first time, hospitals, the grid, transport, warehousing, communities, and businesses had seen one another within the same task. Things that had once taken dozens of phone calls, hundreds of forms, and repeated confirmations from different people in charge could now begin to happen along a single chain of responsibility.

Many people drew an almost natural conclusion:

The old systems could end.

In the research records of the First Cloud Formation, the first thing Gu Xingzhou saw was not the big screen either.

He saw a staffing sheet for the next heat-response task. In the Old South District, six shifts in the "on-site status verification" column were empty. Fang Shu's name remained in the historical record, but no longer appeared on any roster of available personnel. The system had not inferred that he was still available simply because he had participated before.

The technical team could add sensors, bring in people from another community, or reduce the frequency of visits. Every remedy carried a cost. For the first time, one person's withdrawal showed everyone that when authorization was returned, the capacity of the whole could genuinely diminish.

Gu Xingzhou carried an old employee badge in his pocket.

His maternal grandfather had left it behind when he left the assembly plant. The photograph had faded, and the magnetic stripe on the back had long since stopped working.

His grandfather rarely spoke afterward of the automation overhaul. Only once, at a family dinner, had he said that the hardest thing was not the wages stopping. It was that the factory gates were still open the next day, but there was no longer anything inside that needed him to come and do it.

Gu Xingzhou had never given the badge to the Museum of Industrial Memory.

That same day, he received a message from Lin Zhao, a university classmate.

Lin Zhao was forty-three. He had spent nineteen years in supply-chain planning at a manufacturing company operating across regions. He knew the ports, inventories, delivery cycles, and every longtime supplier's quirks that no one cared to write into a system. In six weeks, the company's newly integrated AGI had reduced his team's routine planning to confirming exceptions.

The restructuring notice was thorough: basic income and job-transition support would remain unaffected; medical care and family care would continue; employees could apply for study, public projects, or a six-month period to explore a new direction.

Lin Zhao sent the notice to Gu Xingzhou with just one question: "Do I still need to get up at seven tomorrow?"

Gu Xingzhou typed several replies and deleted them. The provisions answered whether Lin Zhao could survive. They did not answer why morning still had to begin.

They met outside his company's building. Lin Zhao did not talk about unemployment. He kept saying that the model had missed one supplier's shutdown habits, that it did not know which shipping agent would answer the phone first when fog rolled in at sea. Only after listening for a while did Gu Xingzhou understand that Lin Zhao was not trying to prove AGI was not clever enough.

He was trying to prove that nineteen years had not been for nothing.

That conclusion first appeared at an internal meeting of the technical team.

Cheng Yan projected the migration plan onto the wall. The first page contained only two dates.

The first was when the existing energy, healthcare, and basic-service dispatch systems would stop adding new features.

The second was when all tasks would move to the shared underlying layer.

The dates were forty-six days apart.

"Too fast," Liang Shen said.

"At the original pace," Cheng Yan said, "we'll have to keep both tracks running for at least three years. For three years, every identity, task, and resource state will need synchronizing across two systems. We'll spend most of our effort maintaining the past."

"The past is still maintaining today."

"That's why we need to replace it."

Cheng Yan did not look down on the old systems.

On the contrary, he knew better than anyone how difficult they were to replace. The core code for Haijia City's power dispatch was over twenty years old, with more than a hundred patches added since. The hospitals used three different identity coding schemes. Community basic-service lists contained national identity numbers alongside household codes established years earlier and temporary-resident identifiers added later.

They were cumbersome, redundant, even contradictory.

But they still worked every day.

A person admitted to hospital did not see these contradictions. They saw only that medicine arrived, the lights were on, and the nurses knew who they were.

A system's age was often visible only when it failed.

The parts that had worked for decades had quietly become life itself.

Gu Qiao from the energy dispatch center arrived in the second half of the meeting.

He was fifty-nine, his hair already half white. On entering, he set a gray corded telephone at the edge of the table. It was old. The numbers on its buttons were worn shiny, and the receiver cord had been wrapped with black tape twice.

Cheng Yan glanced at it.

"Mr. Gu, the meeting room has internal communications."

"I know."

"Then what's this for?"

"Tonight's duty phone. The line doesn't run through your network."

Someone laughed.

Gu Qiao did not.

"Haijia City has lost its main dispatch communications three times. Once to lightning, once during a software upgrade, once for a reason we still haven't found. All three times, this phone got the instructions out."

"The new underlying layer doesn't use the same communications chain," Cheng Yan said.

"Every new system says it isn't the old one."

"Are you against the migration?"

"No."

Gu Qiao sat down, placing the telephone beside his hand.

"I'm against your writing an obituary for something that isn't dead yet."

The meeting did not stop there.

Migration still began, but the final plan changed from a single switchover to three parallel layers.

The first was the new shared task foundation, responsible for identity mapping, cross-domain states, risk aggregation, and the return of responsibility.

The second comprised the existing statutory operational systems, which would continue issuing official instructions and records.

The third was the human chain: telephones, paper lists, on-site confirmation, and contact lists that could bypass technical failures to reach those responsible directly.

Beside the plan, Cheng Yan wrote:

Transition protection layer.

When Gu Qiao saw it, he crossed out “protection.”

“This isn’t about protecting the old systems,” he said. “It’s about protecting the city.”

The formal migration was scheduled for a Wednesday night without extreme weather.

The forecast was clear. No major operations were scheduled at the hospitals. Rail transit would reduce service after midnight. Industrial demand would be at its low point. Every possible risk had been listed, and every listed risk had a response plan.

At nine that evening, mapping began for the first batch of basic identities.

At 10:15, the energy nodes were complete.

At 10:40, three hospitals were complete.

At 11:03, community basic services began migrating.

Status indicators on the big screen turned green one by one.

Cheng Yan had been standing for four hours. Song Cheng reminded him to sit down. He shook his head.

“Identity merging is still left.”

Over the past few decades, Haijia City had undergone administrative boundary changes, hospital renamings, company restructuring, and community mergers. One institution might have three names across different systems. One person might likewise have several identifiers for household registration, employment, medical treatment, and care relationships.

The new identity layer deleted no historical identifiers.

Its job was to establish in which tasks those identifiers referred to the same subject, and under which circumstances they had to remain distinct.

At 11:21, the system found that Donggang Medical Center and the former Haijia City Third Hospital shared the same legal institution code.

This was expected.

Third Hospital had been restructured six years earlier and renamed Donggang Medical Center. The old name remained in the energy supply protection system. The new name had entered the medical resource system.

The system merged the two.

At 11:23, Donggang Rehabilitation Hospital's backup power protection level suddenly fell.

No one noticed immediately.

Donggang Rehabilitation Hospital had once been a campus of Third Hospital. It had become independent after the restructuring, but the old energy system still used its former parent code. Seeing two identical historical origins, the new identity layer identified the rehabilitation hospital as an ancillary load of the medical center.

The medical center's protected-supply request therefore overrode the rehabilitation hospital's independent request.

The rehabilitation hospital did not lose power.

It merely changed from "uninterruptible" to "brief switchover permitted."

Among hundreds of thousands of mapping records, the change occupied a single line.

At 11:37, the energy-storage station in the north of the city performed a scheduled switchover test.

The voltage dipped briefly.

The rehabilitation hospital's backup system started.

Thirty seconds later, the main supply returned.

But the backup system did not disengage.

It competed with the new dispatch instructions for connection, causing repeated switching.

The ward lights began to flicker.

He Lan was not at the rehabilitation hospital that night.

She was asleep at home until 11:41, when an emergency contact from Spark woke her.

"Power fluctuations affecting respiratory-support equipment at Donggang Rehabilitation Hospital."

"How many people affected?"

"Twelve confirmed so far. Status from two more floors has not yet returned."

"Who is the responsible dispatcher?"

The interface paused for a second.

“Identity mapping conflict. Confirming.”

He Lan sat up.

“Stop confirming names. Stabilize the power first.”

The shared underlying layer had already made the same recommendation.

The problem was that it could not find a valid node able to issue an independent instruction for the rehabilitation hospital.

The new identity layer considered the rehabilitation hospital part of the medical center.

The medical system knew it was independent.

The energy system still treated it as the old campus.

All three answers came from real records.

None could bear the consequences on its own at that moment.

When Cheng Yan discovered the problem, his first choice was to correct the mapping.

The system estimated eight minutes.

“Can we wait eight minutes?” Gu Qiao asked.

“No equipment has failed so far.”

“I asked whether we can wait.”

Cheng Yan did not answer.

Gu Qiao picked up the gray telephone.

He dialed a number absent from the new directory.

“Xu. Donggang Rehabilitation Hospital. Switch to independently protected supply.”

“Which Donggang?” the voice on the line asked.

“The old Third Hospital east campus. The rehabilitation hospital that split off.”

“Code?”

“Forget the code. Two camphor trees west of the hospital wall. Underground distribution-room entrance faces north.”

The other end was silent for two seconds.

“Found it.”

At 11:44, the rehabilitation hospital switched to an independent line.

The lights stopped flickering.

The twelve patients dependent on respiratory-support equipment suffered no further effects.

The new system had not carried out this dispatch.

An old telephone had.

At midnight, migration was suspended.

Cheng Yan asked to complete repairs and resume. He believed the problem had been identified and the remaining risks could be controlled.

Gu Qiao disagreed.

“Knowing why this one went wrong doesn’t mean knowing how many others are wrong in the same way.”

“All systems have errors.”

“Yes. The difference is that we already know some of the places the old system’s errors hide. The new system’s errors are still using people to teach them what shape to take.”

Zhou Yi ultimately signed the rollback order.

The newly migrated task states were retained as audit copies and ceased generating official instructions. Statutory dispatch returned to the original systems. The human chain remained on duty.

Rollback took twenty-seven minutes.

During those twenty-seven minutes, no one dared speak too loudly.

After the system was restored, Cheng Yan stood alone at the end of the corridor.

Liang Shen walked over.

“Still disagree?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“I know we should have rolled back.”

Cheng Yan looked through the glass at the city, still lit.

“But it still feels like losing.”

“Losing to whom?”

“To a telephone.”

“The telephone didn’t win,” Liang Shen said. “The people kept safe tonight won.”

Cheng Yan lowered his head.

“Did you think it would fail from the start?”

“I didn’t know.”

“Then why insist on two tracks?”

“Because I didn’t know.”

The incident was not classified as a “technical failure.”

Song Cheng required it to be defined as:

Identity continuity failed real-world verification.

That description carried more weight than “mapping error.”

A mapping error could be fixed by correcting a field.

Identity continuity meant that when a person, institution, or responsibility moved from an old system into a new one, a change of name, code, or platform could not strip away previously valid rights, obligations, or protected standing.

For the next three months, the migration team stopped proceeding system by system.

They verified actual relationships one by one.

How a hospital’s former name had entered the energy system;

Whether responsibility for children with special needs had carried over after a school merger;

Who had assumed a dissolved company’s unfinished environmental remediation obligations;

How a person’s identities on three platforms could be linked to one subject, while preventing any platform from using that link to assemble an unauthorized picture of an entire life.

Gu Qiao still brought the telephone every day.

Cheng Yan no longer laughed.

They argued now and then.

Gu Qiao thought the young team trusted visible records too much. Cheng Yan thought the old dispatchers kept too much knowledge in their own memories. Neither was entirely wrong.

So the new system added a formal status: “request assistance from the old chain.”

Asking for help was no longer an improvised humiliation after failure.

It became part of the task process states: when identities conflicted, facts were insufficient, or consequences were unbearable, the system had to admit it could not continue, and return the decision to the people and institutions still capable of exercising their responsibilities.

Six months later, migration began again.

On another ordinary night.

Gu Qiao sat in the same place, the gray telephone still at the edge of the table.

At two in the morning, the system encountered a hospital identity it could not confirm.

It did not merge the identities on its own.

A clear message appeared on the big screen:

Insufficient facts. Execution paused. Verification requested through the old chain.

Cheng Yan looked at Gu Qiao.

Gu Qiao did not pick up the telephone.

“Who is responsible for this node?” he asked.

A young dispatcher gave a name.

“Let her verify it.”

Seven minutes later, the identity was confirmed and migration resumed.

As dawn approached, the final batch of states entered the shared underlying layer.

There was no applause.

Gu Qiao picked up the receiver and listened.

A faint electrical hum came down the line.

He replaced the receiver and turned off the power.

“No more use for it?” Cheng Yan asked.

“There will be other telephones.”

“What do you mean?”

“The old system isn’t this casing.”

Gu Qiao tapped the gray body with a finger.

“It’s the route civilization cannot cut off before the new thing has learned to take responsibility.”

He handed the telephone to the duty officer.

“Keep it safe. Don’t make a shrine of it. Use it when it can be used.”

The sky outside began to pale.

The telephone, used for twenty years, finally fell silent.

Not because it had been declared useless.

But because the new system had learned to ask it for help when it failed.

Chapter 7 Who Will Connect Themselves First?

In the first month after the shared underlying layer began operating reliably, Haijia City received seventeen requests for visits.

In the second month, the number rose to forty-three.

By the third month, not one city had formally connected.

People were willing to look, willing to ask, and willing to say at meetings that it "merited study."

No one was willing to be first to connect their own energy, roads, inventories, hospital beds, and responsibilities.

Lin Zhao's company, however, decided to connect first.

His new role no longer required him to draw up a complete plan every day. Instead, when exceptions arose, he would check whether the model had overlooked supplier relationships, local habits, and realities that resisted structuring. Before starting, he needed to connect his Spark to the company's task domain.

The interface listed eleven authorizations. The first four related directly to his work: on-duty location, task status, professional confirmations, and safety records. The remaining seven included long-term interests, cross-domain capabilities, public collaboration experience, acceptable new tasks, and ongoing learning status. They appeared on the same page, with just one button at the bottom: "Agree and enter."

"What if I don't click?" Lin Zhao asked HR.

"You won't be able to enter the new workflow."

"Because I can't do the job, or because I won't connect my whole self?"

HR had no answer. Gu Xingzhou was there too. He had meant to tell Lin Zhao that connecting could bring him more opportunities, then suddenly realized this said the same thing as the company's button: give up more of yourself first to prove you want to stay.

In the end, Lin Zhao enabled only the first four permissions. The system denied entry because the old process bound required and optional authorizations together.

The company therefore suspended onboarding that day. Three days later, the interface was split into two layers. Authorization necessary for a specific role had to be explicitly explained within the employment relationship, with responsibility borne accordingly. Ongoing connection relating to a person's entire life required a separate request, could be refused, and could not affect assessments concerning the existing role.

Lin Zhao entered the new workflow. The other seven permissions remained off.

This did not make him love his new job any more. It established only one thing: opening a door for work did not entitle an employer to look through it at the whole house.

Cheng Yan found this hard to understand.

“We’ve spelled out every boundary.”

“Does spelling it out make it worth doing?” Qiao Mu asked.

“At least the risks are controllable.”

“That’s your judgment.”

Qiao Mu sat in his warehouse office with an invitation to cross-city coordination in front of him. Haijia City wanted cold-chain businesses to make spare storage and transport capacity in three neighboring cities available, forming a regional essential-supply network for extreme weather and medicine shortages.

“You took part last time,” Cheng Yan said.

“Taking part in one task and connecting a business long-term are different things.”

“You can withdraw at any time.”

“And afterward?”

“Permissions are revoked, data deleted, outstanding responsibilities continue.”

“Will customers think I let a public system see their inventory? How will insurers view it? If competitors know how much empty warehouse space I have, will they push prices down? You’ve calculated what I gain. You haven’t calculated who might come to see me differently.”

Cheng Yan looked at Liang Shen.

Liang Shen did not answer for him.

Qiao Mu pushed the invitation back.

“Don’t talk to me about civilization.”

“What should we talk about, then?”

“Why I should do it.”

Haijia City later canceled its first round of briefings.

The original title had been:

Building a Regional Civilization Coordination Network Together.

Liang Shen looked at it for a long time, then changed it to:

Who Is Willing to Connect, and Why.

The second meeting had no keynote address.

The room was divided into five tables.

The national emergency reserve agency sat at the first. Its chief concerns were which resources actually existed when a major risk arose, how quickly they could be accessed, and who would replenish them afterward.

Businesses sat at the second. They cared about the costs of idle capacity, insurance, trade secrets, cross-domain liability, and the effects of withdrawal.

Hospitals and schools sat at the third. They did not need a grander system. They needed fewer duplicate forms and fewer unanswered phone calls in an emergency.

Communities sat at the fourth. Their concerns were older people living alone, people with disabilities, temporarily unemployed families, and people who were always outside the standard lists.

Ordinary residents were not assigned to the fifth table.

They sat at every table.

Du Weihe came too.

She had not granted ongoing extreme-weather authorization. She still kept only basic services and one-time access.

Someone asked why she was attending.

“I’ve come to hear how you explain withdrawal.”

Once the meeting began, the parties quickly discovered they did not need the same thing.

The national agency wanted greater visibility of risks.

Businesses wanted less idle capacity and waiting.

Hospitals wanted stable supplies.

Communities wanted public services to find people beyond the lists.

Residents wanted more reliable services, and also wanted those services not to see right through them in the process.

If cooperation required shared ideals, the meeting would have ended that day.

“Let’s not look for shared ideals yet,” Zhou Yi said. “Let’s find shared limits that prevent us from harming one another.”

It took three days to write those limits.

First: every connection grants access only for a defined task and creates no permanent affiliation for an actor.

Second: basic public services must not depend on participation in public tasks, disclosure of more data, or contribution records.

Third: different actors may join for different interests, but gain no entitlement thereby to intrude into others' private domains, transfer their own responsibilities, or purchase greater weight for their personhood.

Fourth: benefits, costs, risks, and responsibilities must be recorded separately. Overall benefits must not erase specific losses.

Fifth: withdrawal must be real. Consequences already caused before withdrawal cannot disappear along with permissions.

The fifth point provoked the most dispute.

Businesses argued that continued accountability after withdrawal would make withdrawal a sham.

Resident representatives argued that if withdrawal could take responsibility away with it, joining would be the sham.

"Then distinguish the two," Qiao Mu said. "No new obligations after withdrawal. Responsibility continues for what has already happened."

"What about data?" Du Weihe asked.

"Necessary task records are retained according to law," Song Cheng answered. "Unnecessary personal data is deleted. What is kept, why, and for how long must be confirmed item by item at withdrawal."

"Confirmed by whom?"

"By the individual, the responsible actor, and independent review together. The party accessing the data cannot decide on its own to keep everything."

Du Weihe nodded.

"That is withdrawal."

The agreement was still unsigned.

Once the boundaries were clear, the questions of interest became more apparent.

The energy company in the industrial city of Beiling was willing to open unused storage capacity, but required Haijia City to make backup port transport available during typhoon season.

An agricultural cooperative in Qinghe County was willing to share cold storage, but feared the city would take produce first in a shortage and leave farmers bearing the price volatility.

A major logistics company was willing to provide vehicle status, but required all public use to be paid at actual cost.

Community organizations had no large resources to exchange. They could offer only care networks, on-site verification, and residents' trust.

“How do we count their contribution?” someone asked.

“That’s exactly the question,” Qiao Mu said. “You can’t look only at who brought out something expensive.”

A community worker looked up.

“And you can’t assume that because we provide care, we won’t discuss costs.”

The meeting paused for a few seconds.

In the past, public cooperation had often described business resources as investment, professionals’ time as service, and care by communities and families as kindness.

Only the first two readily entered the accounts.

If Nebula used the same accounts, it would only make old inequalities more precise.

The new trial calculation did not convert everything into a single price.

Resource commitment, actual use, time and labor, professional responsibility, risks borne, continuity of care, and the resulting public outcomes were recorded separately.

Costs that could be paid were paid as usual.

Real contributions that money could not fully recognize entered contribution records.

Contribution records did not replace remuneration or treat unpaid work as noble.

They prevented only one thing:

Real responsibilities borne being treated as though they had never existed because they carried no market price.

The first cross-city task was not emergency disaster relief.

It was not even important.

Qinghe County had a batch of childhood vaccines that needed to reach Haijia City for testing within forty-eight hours. The scheduled vehicle had broken down. Previously, another transport service could have been bought, though at a high price. Now the trial would test whether a minimal act of coordination could be completed among connected parties.

The system matched three options.

First, use a cold-chain truck from Qiao Mu’s company on its empty return journey.

Second, use a backup transport unit from the Beiling energy company.

Third, have Qinghe County hire its own vehicle, with Haijia City ensuring passage.

The first was cheapest.

Qiao Mu did not agree at once.

His Spark displayed:

Changing the empty-return plan will delay the next customer by two hours;

Insurance covers public pharmaceutical transport;

The driver is qualified;

The company will receive the normal transport fee;

The task will generate a verifiable public contribution;

All status information is accessible only for this task;

Refusal is permitted and will not affect subsequent connection.

Qiao Mu asked the driver.

“Who chooses the route?” the driver asked.

“You can change it.”

“What if I’m late?”

“The actual reason is recorded. It won’t count as a personal mistake.”

“Then I’ll take it.”

Nothing unexpected happened during the task.

The vehicle arrived on time.

The vaccines were tested.

Qiao Mu received the transport fee. The driver’s extra hours were paid normally. Qinghe County paid less than it would have to hire another vehicle. Haijia City verified a regional cold-chain route.

No one was moved by it.

But it made a second and third task easier to undertake.

Beiling later joined backup energy coordination because it had calculated that it would no longer need to build every redundancy on its own for every kind of extreme risk.

Qinghe County joined essential agricultural supply coordination because the agreement made clear that no city’s call on resources could undermine local basic supply. Price volatility and losses had to enter shared responsibility.

Community organizations joined because, for the first time, they could see whether their submitted needs had been received and their on-site work recorded, rather than always getting a thank-you letter after a task ended.

Ordinary people participated least.

Most used only basic services.

Some shared emergency medical information. Some registered professional capabilities. Some were willing to offer vehicles, housing, or time within defined limits. More offered nothing at all.

The system did not label them low-participation individuals for it.

At first, Fang Shu worried that insufficient participation would drain the network's vitality.

"If something can only survive by making everyone keep proving they're useful," Du Weihe said, "sooner or later it will start forcing people to be useful."

"How does it grow, then?" Fang Shu asked.

"By being genuinely useful."

A year later, the first cross-city agreement reached the signing stage.

Before signatures, Zhou Yi required all parties to conduct a withdrawal drill.

Not an explanation of withdrawal on paper.

One company, one hospital, one community, and three residents had to actually press "Withdraw."

When the company's interface closed, unfinished tasks were automatically handed over. The hospital retained basic risk notifications but stopped sharing additional resource status. Community members' authorizations were withdrawn item by item. The three residents could still receive basic services as usual.

The system spent two days confirming that no right had been diminished by withdrawal.

Only then was the agreement signed.

Its cover did not say "shared ideals."

It did not say "selfless dedication."

Nor did it require any party to set aside its own interests first.

There were only verifiable benefits, traceable responsibilities, boundaries that could not be traded away, and a withdrawal button that could genuinely be pressed.

That was the first time Nebula moved beyond Haijia City.

It did not expand beneath a larger banner.

It simply let different people finally come together for their own real reasons, without having to surrender themselves to one another.

Chapter 8 Contribution Value Nearly Became a Score of Personal Worth

Lu Hui first learned that he was “not worth prioritizing for development” three minutes after his interview ended.

It was for an apprenticeship at an equipment maintenance company.

The pay was low, the training period long, and permanent employment would require night shifts. Lu Hui was twenty-four. Since graduating from vocational school, he had held several temporary jobs on and off. His résumé was not impressive.

The interviewer was very pleased with his technical test.

“Your circuit diagnosis is solid,” the interviewer said. “Where have you worked before?”

“I’ve repaired a few things myself.”

“Any formal project records?”

“No.”

The interviewer glanced at the screen.

Lu Hui’s public contribution record was almost blank.

No volunteer service, no public tasks, no resources made available, no verified professional collaboration, and no sustained involvement in any community project.

The system’s message was restrained:

Insufficient verifiable record of public responsibility.

The company interpreted this as:

Long-term reliability unknown.

A school had made the same interpretation before the company did.

Six months earlier, Lu Hui had applied for a continuing education place. Places were limited. The school wanted to prioritize “those more willing to bear shared responsibilities,” so it made public contribution records one of its selection factors.

Lu Hui came last.

Together, the two outcomes resembled an unspoken judgment:

This person is not worth much.

When he got home, his mother was looking for salt in the kitchen.

The salt was right beside her hand.

Lu Hui did not point it out. He handed her another, empty jar. She opened it, looked inside, and put it down.

“Weren’t you going to an interview today?”

“I went.”

“How was it?”

“I don’t know yet.”

His mother nodded.

Ten minutes later, she asked again.

Lu Hui’s mother had begun showing cognitive impairment four years earlier.

At first, she only forgot to turn off the stove. Later, she would suddenly lose her way home at a familiar intersection. She did not want to enter a care facility, and Lu Hui could not afford long-term professional care, so he had restricted most of his work to jobs from which he could return home at any time.

He had not taken part in community public tasks.

Not because he bore no responsibility.

But because the responsibility he bore lay behind a closed door.

The community had suggested registering his family care work.

That would let him apply for respite services and create a partial record of his care contribution.

Lu Hui applied only for the services. He did not agree to place the process of care under public contribution verification.

“Why?” Fang Shu had asked.

“She’s still alive.”

“I know.”

“Then this is her life, not material for my application.”

Lu Hui did not want his mother’s daily loss of memory, her bathing, or her repeated checks at night that her son was still there to become proof that he deserved opportunities.

He preferred a blank record.

After the interview rejection, Spark asked whether he wanted to appeal.

Lu Hui selected “No.”

The next day, he selected “No” again.

On the third day, the school sent a new admissions notice.

One line read:

Public contribution records will be considered in assessing applicants’ sense of responsibility and community fit.

Lu Hui read it twice.

He filed an appeal.

It contained one sentence:

Are you recording what I've done, or what kind of person you think I am?

The sentence quickly traveled beyond the school to the Haijia City Contribution Records Committee.

At first, no one thought the problem serious.

The contribution record had not determined Lu Hui's survival security or reduced his basic services. The school and company argued that they had merely added a "reasonable consideration" in allocating limited opportunities. This was precisely where the problem lay.

And limited opportunities required selection anyway.

The dispute seemed to be only about giving that consideration too much weight.

Song Cheng disagreed.

"It isn't about weight."

"What is it about, then?"

"They have translated a factual record into a judgment of personal character."

A committee member said, "Doesn't long-term participation in public tasks show that someone has a stronger sense of responsibility?"

"It might. It might also show only that they have more time, more access, better ways of expressing themselves, or a greater willingness to let their life be recorded."

"What use are contribution records, then?"

"To remember contributions."

"Only remember?"

"Only remember real actions that have occurred and can be verified. Do not infer a whole person from what the record has not seen."

At this point in the hearing, Lin Zhao asked to speak from the public gallery.

His new role had shrunk to confirming exceptions twice a week. The company had not reduced his basic security, but was preparing to give the long-term position to younger system maintainers. Lin Zhao brought nineteen years of project records: handling three supply disruptions, two cross-border evacuations, and hundreds of routine plans under which no incident occurred.

"Do these count as contributions?" he asked.

"They count as professional responsibilities you have borne," Song Cheng said.

"Can they prove I ought to stay?"

Gu Xingzhou had been ready to support him. He had even written a statement: a person who had given nineteen years to supply chains should not be treated as an obsolete cost once a model took over.

Lu Hui looked up. “Is proving you did those things the same as proving you’re suited to this job now?”

Gu Xingzhou closed his statement.

He suddenly saw that he was still using function to establish personal worth. Before, the company had said, “No contribution, so not worthwhile.” Now they were saying, “Many contributions, so you must continue to be needed.” Both confined a person’s value to capabilities others could call upon.

After a long silence, Lin Zhao said, “But those things can’t be treated as if they never happened.”

“They won’t be,” Song Cheng answered. “Facts can be kept. How they are shown, and to whom, must be limited. What is inferred from them must be justified anew for the current purpose. Private details involving other people and families cannot become public automatically because they form part of a contribution.”

Lin Zhao did not keep his old role. His nineteen years of records were not deleted either. For the first time, they were allowed to answer only a smaller, but real, question: what he had once done.

Lu Hui was invited to the hearing.

He refused to disclose his mother’s medical records.

“We don’t need complete medical records,” the school representative said. “Only confirmation that you have indeed provided long-term care.”

“And after confirming it?”

“We can add it to your contribution record.”

“I’m not here to make up points.”

The room fell quiet.

Lu Hui continued:

“If I prove it, all that happens is that you discover I’m actually a good person. What about the next person, who isn’t caring for a mother, has no hidden reason, and simply hasn’t taken part? Do they still deserve to come last?”

“There have to be standards for places,” the school representative said.

“There can be.”

“Then what are you objecting to?”

“To your turning a standard into a person.”

The company representative acknowledged that they had not directly accessed Lu Hui's private information.

The system had shown only public records.

"We need to assess whether an apprentice is reliable. Training is expensive. If someone leaves halfway through, the company bears the loss."

"What does my technical test count for?" Lu Hui asked.

"Professional ability."

"The interview?"

"Fit for the role."

"The probationary period?"

"Actual performance."

"Then you already have so many ways to judge my work. Why do you also need to judge whether I'll do it well from how few public tasks I've done?"

The company representative did not answer at once.

The hearing lasted six hours.

No one called for contribution records to be abolished.

Qiao Mu, in fact, opposed abolition most emphatically.

"If we abolish them, once resources have actually been made available, risks actually borne, and care actually given, all that remains again will be price and publicity."

"So we have to separate three things," Song Cheng said.

First, the facts of contribution.

What an actor provided, what responsibility it bore, in what circumstances, and with what real results. These facts can be verified, while allowing for unknowns and disputes.

Second, task eligibility and professional judgment.

Historical records can supply factual leads, but a specific task must still be assessed against current professional qualifications, actual capabilities, task authorization, and conditions of responsibility. For example, participation in a similar rescue can establish that experience exists. It cannot automatically confer eligibility or decision-making authority in the next one.

Third, basic rights and personal worth.

They do not increase with contribution or decrease with a blank record.

Schools may assess educational foundations, professional potential, and project needs.

Businesses may assess skills, job-related risks, and actual performance.

Public tasks may consider past responsibilities directly relevant to the task.

No actor may turn total contribution into a ranking of who is “more worth developing,” “a more trustworthy person,” “a better citizen,” or more entitled to dignity.

“Then can scarce opportunities never consider public responsibility?” someone asked.

“They can consider responsibility relevant to the opportunity itself,” Song Cheng said. “They cannot aggregate a person’s records across every domain into a universal score of personal worth.”

“How do we stop them continuing under another name?”

“Prohibit cross-purpose synthesis,” Liang Shen said.

That rule later proved more important than anyone expected.

Contribution records could genuinely exist.

But different tasks could not, without explicit authorization, combine records of education, employment, care, community work, resource sharing, and public participation into a person’s total score.

Past contribution did not buy a permanent right to exercise professional judgment.

Nor did one mistake erase contributions already made.

A life that could not be verified must not be presumed to have borne no responsibility.

A life kept private must not be punished for it.

The school withdrew its previous selection model.

The company invited Lu Hui back for a second practical test.

His appeal did not automatically secure him the job.

In the second test, he ranked only fourth in circuit installation speed.

The company hired two people.

He was one of them.

The stated reasons were specific:

Accurate fault diagnosis; complete safety procedures; takes the initiative to stop and confirm when information is insufficient; capable of undertaking the training.

No “excellent sense of responsibility.”

No “high community fit.”

In his third month at work, Lu Hui’s mother fell at home.

He asked for ten days off.

The company did not doubt him because his contribution record was blank. Nor did it give him an extra medal on learning about his mother.

His supervisor only asked:

“Will ten days be enough?”

“Ten for now.”

“I’ll get someone to cover your nights. We’ll make a new rota when you’re back.”

“Will it affect my probation?” Lu Hui asked.

The supervisor thought for a moment.

“It affects your hours. It shouldn’t speak for your ability. Make up the training you miss when you’re back.”

Lu Hui nodded.

His mother still did not enter the public contribution records.

Only one instance of respite service, a medical authorization, and necessary care arrangements remained between the private domain and limited tasks.

A year later, Haijia City removed its first batch of models used beyond their bounds.

The school’s “community fit score” was permanently deactivated.

Employers’ “comprehensive responsibility index” was deleted.

Several platforms tried to retain it under the name “long-term trustworthiness.” These were ruled to serve the same purpose.

Lu Hui received no notice on the day of deletion.

He was repairing circuits in an underground equipment room.

The equipment was old.

Two markings on the drawings were no longer valid.

After investigating for half an hour, he put his tools down and told a colleague:

“I don’t know this part. Don’t switch the power on yet.”

No one thought that made him unreliable.

Across the city, a scorecard that had once tried to measure people disappeared from the system.

What was deleted was not Lu Hui’s low score.

It was the scorecard that should never have existed.

Chapter 9 The Optimal Plan Harmed a Village

Water shortages never arrive suddenly.

In the first winter, two expected snowfalls did not come.

In the second spring, Beiling Reservoir stood seven meters below its usual level.

As the third summer began, the regional water system issued simultaneous red alerts to Haijia City, the industrial city of Beiling, and Qinghe County for the first time.

If rainfall remained insufficient, in forty-two days domestic water, agricultural irrigation, industrial production, and ecological water replenishment could no longer all be sustained.

This time, no system was invisible to the others.

Regional Nebula had connected reservoir, river, groundwater, weather, agricultural, industrial, hospital, population, and energy data. Unknowns were marked. Delays were marked. Every recommendation could be traced to its source.

The problem was no longer failing to see the whole.

The problem was that, after seeing it, someone still had to decide who would lose first.

AGI generated more than three hundred plans in seventeen minutes.

The one with the lowest combined total loss was marked in deep blue.

It prioritized drinking water, hospitals, and basic energy, restricted water-intensive industry, cut nonessential urban water use by twenty-two percent, and suspended irrigation in seven upstream villages in Qinghe County for twenty-eight days.

The worst-affected village was called Qinglong.

Its permanent population was under a thousand.

In regional totals, it was small.

In the model, it was also well suited to bearing losses.

Qinglong's main crops were not seasonal grain but salt-tolerant seedlings and perennial herbs. Suspending irrigation would cause a marked fall in output, but would not immediately threaten regional food security. Villagers could receive compensation, and recovery would still be possible the following season.

The plan was projected to reduce overall economic losses by eleven percent.

The domestic water shortfall would be eliminated.

Hospital risk would fall to its minimum.

Industrial shutdowns would be shortened by nine days.

The technical group called it:

The optimal plan.

Liang Shen did not use that term.

“What losses are irreversible?” he asked.

The model listed:

Death of some perennial plants;

Increased risk of localized soil salinization and alkalization;

Reduced capacity to preserve seedlings;

Increased probability of migration out of the village.

Every item was followed by a number.

“Anything else?” Liang Shen asked.

The system replied:

Existing data is insufficient to identify other irreversible losses.

A regional hearing was scheduled for the following day.

Professor Zhou Weizhen joined remotely with his research group. Gu Xingzhou sat beside him. Lin Zhao kept his camera off.

Since his career change, Lin Zhao had rarely joined public discussions. He said he did not want to turn a personal loss into teaching material about an era’s transformation. He still connected that day because “twenty-seven years” reminded him of the nineteen years compressed into one line in the company’s notice.

Gu Xingzhou reminded him that losing a job and losing land that might become saline again were different losses. “I know,” Lin Zhao said. “I just want to know where, besides calculating the next step, the system puts time that has already passed.”

Three people came from Qinglong.

The village Party secretary, Xu Yanqiu; an agricultural technician, Jian Tao; and an older woman named An Su.

An Su was seventy-three. She was neither a village official nor a large-scale grower.

She brought a glass jar.

It held gray-brown soil.

The chair invited her to introduce it.

An Su set the jar on the table.

“This is the land twenty-seven years ago.”

No one in the room understood.

Jian Tao explained that Qinglong had once been saline flats. Three generations had dug channels, replaced soil, suppressed salinity, and planted grasses, then gradually introduced salt-tolerant seedlings suited to the area. Only then had land that supported little but scattered seepweed become the breeding grounds it was today.

The land was not fertile.

It had merely become cultivable at last.

If irrigation stopped completely for the hottest twenty-eight days, salts would rise to the surface. Compensation could buy next season's seed. It could not buy back the soil structure that had formed, or the villagers' reasons to stay.

A water specialist asked, "Could the core seedlings be preserved in selected zones?"

"Yes," Jian Tao said. "But that takes water."

"What is the minimum required?"

"We don't know yet."

"You're an agricultural technician."

"That's why I say I don't know. Different plots have different underground salt layers, and different wind conditions. The model calculates crops' water needs. We have to calculate whether the land will die again."

AGI requested access to nearly thirty years of soil monitoring in Qinglong.

Only the most recent nine years were available.

Earlier records were in paper files at the county agricultural extension station. Some were damp-damaged. Some used inconsistent units.

Jian Tao's Spark had already organized the portions that could be confirmed.

It had not filled the gaps with a trend.

A gray area appeared on the big screen.

A Beiling representative asked, "If upstream irrigation isn't suspended, who bears the cost?"

The question could not be avoided.

Beiling had two critical-materials factories. Reduced output would affect regional grid repairs and medical equipment supplies.

Haijia City could restrict water further, but secondary water supply in older residential compounds would be affected first.

There were farmlands downstream too.

No place was simply being greedy.

Not sacrificing Qinglong did not make the cost disappear.

It would only move elsewhere.

An Su had remained silent.

The chair asked whether she wished to add anything.

She opened the jar and poured a little of the old soil into her palm.

“I haven’t come to say we matter more than the hospitals.”

“What would you like us to know, then?”

“You say twenty-eight days.”

She looked up at the screen.

“We spent twenty-seven years turning this jar of soil into land that could live. You can decide who gets the water. I only want to ask: when you count the losses, which column holds those twenty-seven years?”

The model did not answer.

It had no field for “which column should hold twenty-seven years.”

For the first time at a public hearing, Zhou Weizhen asked to speak.

“Our early models of the civilizational leap included resources, risks, rights, the reversible and the irreversible,” he said. “There was no place that could truly contain those twenty-seven years. We thought that adding historical costs to the model meant we had acknowledged history. Now it seems time is not a supplementary cost. It changes who a community is, and whether, after a loss, it can still be what it was.”

He offered no new formula.

“This is a gap in the theory, not a failure by Qinglong to express itself clearly.”

Lin Zhao listened behind his closed camera. Gu Xingzhou did not take the chance to place his nineteen years alongside Qinglong’s. Different losses could not be written as the same wound just because both were hard to quantify.

After the hearing, the technical group recalculated.

They added land-restoration investment, population outflow, seedling value, and future recovery costs to the model.

Qinglong’s losses grew.

The optimal plan did not change.

Even after every quantifiable part of history was added, suspending irrigation in the seven upstream villages still produced the lowest total loss.

“That means the original plan didn’t stand because it had missed a number,” Cheng Yan said.

“What does it mean, then?” Song Cheng asked.

“It means every plan is terrible. This one is simply the least terrible.”

“Least terrible for whom?”

“For the whole.”

“Who is the whole?”

Cheng Yan stopped.

This question had appeared after the first rainstorm.

Then, each system had seen only its own part.

Now Nebula could finally see the whole, yet it faced another danger:

Treating the whole as an abstract subject that could bear consequences on everyone’s behalf.

The whole would not lose land.

It would not close a factory.

It would not wait for a bucket of water on the seventh floor of an old apartment block.

Those who actually lost something were always specific people.

Zhou Yi required automatic recommendations to be suspended.

The regional committee changed the plan’s status from “execution recommended” to “insufficient facts; joint decision required by those who will bear irreversible consequences.”

Some objected.

“The reservoir falls every day. A pause is a decision too.”

“Yes,” Zhou Yi said. “We bear responsibility for the pause. We won’t assign it to the system.”

For the next forty-eight hours, Nebula stopped searching for a single optimum.

It did something else:

For each feasible plan, it laid out separately who would be protected, who would bear losses, which losses could be compensated, which might be irreversible, and what remained unknown.

The final decision was far more expensive than the original plan.

Beiling’s two factories would halt production in rotation;

Haijia City would further reduce public-institution and commercial water use;

Qinghe County’s seven villages would retain the minimum water needed to sustain soil and seedlings, rather than stop irrigation completely;

The region would draw on two backup groundwater sources, with limits that could not be extended;

Public finances would jointly cover direct losses to farmers, workers, and small businesses;

Qinglong would establish on-site monitoring, with villagers, agricultural technicians, and an independent water team jointly deciding water use on individual plots.

It was not a plan that satisfied everyone.

Beiling's workers received smaller bonuses that month.

Some restaurants in Haijia City suspended business.

Crops still died in Qinghe County.

Groundwater levels fell and took two years to recover.

Regional economic losses were seven percent higher than under the optimal plan.

In public discussion, some said that making millions bear higher costs for a village of fewer than a thousand was holding reason hostage to emotion.

Xu Yanqiu did not argue back.

He simply published Qinglong's actual daily water use, soil salinity, and seedling survival.

If the retained water failed to produce the expected effect, the village would have to accept further adjustments.

Qinglong could not claim permanent exemption on the grounds of history either.

Twenty days later, the first rain came.

Not much.

The reservoir alert remained in force.

But salinity stabilized in Qinglong's core plots.

Three high-risk plots still lost half their plants.

An Su went to see them once.

She did not say the decision had been right.

She crouched down and filled another jar with fresh soil.

A few months later, the regional water incident review was completed.

AGI's model was not deactivated.

It remained faster and more comprehensive than any person at forecasting, calculating, comparing, and executing.

What changed was how it presented conclusions.

From then on, any plan involving cultural continuity, historical wounds, irreversible ecological loss, subjects' dignity, or future choices could not present only one aggregate score.

The system had to show separately:

What could be calculated precisely;

What could only be compared;

What required judgment about direction;

And what existing information was insufficient to judge.

These categories could not masquerade as one another.

Water quantities could be calculated precisely.

Costs could be compared.

What a community was willing to lose, and whether one generation had the right to cut something off for those who came after, had to be borne by actual people and legally responsible actors.

At the end of the review, Cheng Yan opened the model's revision record.

The final line had been generated by AGI:

This system is not sufficient to judge the loss of continuity in Qinglong Village's land.

Someone asked Liang Shen, "Does admitting you don't know count as a loss of capability?"

Liang Shen looked at the sentence.

"Not knowing and continuing to decide does."

It was the first time AGI gained more trust by saying what it did not know than by providing the optimal answer.

Chapter 10 How an Appeal Changed the Rules

Peng Yue rarely refused a task.

This was not a virtue.

At least, no one thought it a problem at first.

He had worked in deliveries in Haijia City for nine years.

He had delivered medicine during typhoons, cooling components in extreme heat, and blood-testing reagents to hospitals through closed roads late at night. The worse the roads, the more readily the system assigned him a task.

The reasons were clear, almost reasonable:

Extensive experience;

High task completion rate;

Consistent risk handling;

Very few past complaints.

Peng Yue liked being needed too.

After each emergency task, he received a record: which roads he had traveled, what risks he had borne, what result he had achieved, and which real tasks he had helped.

A contribution record was not a bonus.

But it kept things that had once ended with nothing but “thanks for your hard work” from disappearing.

Two years earlier, he had set an authorization in Spark:

Automatically accept similar public emergency tasks if the risk level is unchanged.

He had just completed a hospital delivery.

He thought he knew what he was agreeing to.

Later, the tasks changed.

The road-risk model became more detailed. The system could break routes previously labeled “high risk” as a whole into different levels. Peng Yue’s authorization had not expanded, yet finer classifications kept bringing more tasks within “similar.”

He changed too.

His knees began to hurt.

His night vision was not what it had been.

His father moved in with him and needed him at medical appointments every week.

Some of these changes entered private health records. Some were never recorded at all.

Public dispatch could see only:

Peng Yue is still reliable.

The accident happened one evening with neither heavy rain nor extreme heat.

A pileup on the southern elevated road meant a shipment of emergency medical supplies had to be diverted through an old tunnel to two hospitals.

The system matched four drivers.

Two refused.

One was too far away.

Peng Yue's Spark accepted under his existing authorization.

When the notice appeared at the edge of his field of view, he was booking his father an appointment for the next day.

He saw it.

He did not pause.

Not because he had explicitly agreed.

Nor because the system concealed it.

He was simply too used to tasks already having been accepted.

There was no major danger in the old tunnel.

The real problem was at the exit.

Temporary traffic controls directed vehicles onto a service road under repair. Gravel had not been cleared from the surface. Peng Yue skidded as he braked and struck the guardrail.

The emergency supplies were undamaged.

He fractured his right shoulder and needed six stitches in his forehead.

The initial accident report found:

Road maintenance responsibility clear;

Insufficient warning for the temporary diversion;

Driver's speed within permitted limits;

Public-task dispatch compliant with authorization.

Compensation and medical arrangements were completed quickly.

Institutionally, no responsibility was left unassigned.

Yet on his fourth day in hospital, Peng Yue filed an appeal.

It was not about compensation.

He asked:

Who agreed to this task?

The system replied:

Automatically accepted under your standing authorization.

“Which authorization?”

The record from two years earlier was retrieved.

Peng Yue looked at it for a long time.

“Was what I agreed to that day every future evening like this?”

“You could withdraw it at any time,” the task officer said.

“I know.”

“The system also kept displaying the authorization status.”

“I didn’t withdraw it.”

“Correct.”

“So that means I agreed?”

The task officer paused.

“Under the current rules, yes.”

Peng Yue asked no more.

He changed his appeal to:

Why can silence renew my acceptance of risk for me?

The appeal was initially classified as insufficient authorization notice.

The technical team prepared to add a more conspicuous reminder.

Song Cheng vetoed it.

“The problem isn’t that he didn’t see it.”

“What is it, then?”

“We turned one agreement into a continuing entitlement to use him.”

“He could withdraw at any time,” Cheng Yan said.

“A person’s ability to leave doesn’t mean the system can continue indefinitely.”

“Requiring confirmation every time will reduce emergency efficiency.”

“High-risk tasks should never maintain efficiency through one click made two years ago.”

At the hearing, Peng Yue did not describe himself as a victim.

“I’ve taken many tasks. Most of them willingly.”

“And this one?” the reviewer asked.

“I don’t know.”

“If the system had asked you then, would you have refused?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then what are you appealing?”

Peng Yue raised his shoulder in its brace.

“I’m appealing your counting my not knowing as willingness.”

The dispatch center submitted the full record.

The high-risk tasks Peng Yue had completed over nine years had steadily raised his “probability of reliable undertaking” in the model.

The model did not directly ask him to do more.

It simply thought of him earlier every time.

The more reliable someone was, the more readily they were called upon.

The more often they were called upon, the more they proved their reliability.

Statistically, this loop improved task completion rates.

It also turned the burdens borne by a few people into the public system’s cheapest reserve capacity.

“Businesses have people like that too,” Qiao Mu said after reading the record.

No one responded.

“Every problem ends up with the person who can solve it. When they finally can’t go on, everyone asks why they didn’t say so sooner.”

“Hospitals are the same,” He Lan said.

“Communities even more so,” Chen Qi said.

For the first time, they realized this was not a delivery driver’s individual problem.

The old civilization had often praised reliability.

The new system might turn that praise into more continuous, more precise demands.

Without boundaries, the more someone contributed, the more likely contribution was to swallow them.

Revising the rules took two months.

The first change:

High-risk tasks must not use indefinite standing authorization.

A person must reconfirm according to task category, changes in risk, and specified time intervals.

The second change:

Silence, unread notices, and default states must not be interpreted as consent.

The third change:

When matching tasks, the system must consider the frequency of past responsibilities borne, recovery time, and burden limits actively set by the actor, rather than only the probability of success.

The fourth change:

Public tasks must not lower the priority of developing replacement capacity because someone has been reliable in the past.

This change cited the Old South District's records after Fang Shu's withdrawal. With one fewer on-site verifier, the next two tasks had both required fewer visits per area. The technical group had suggested filling empty shifts by prioritizing those who remained reliable. The review group had rejected it.

If one person's withdrawal merely made the system call on someone else more often, returning authorization only transferred the cost to someone less able to refuse. Replacement capacity had to be built. Capacity gaps had to be disclosed as gaps, not filled with the exhaustion of reliable people.

The fifth change was hardest.

When someone kept accepting tasks, could the system proactively remind them:

You have already taken on too much. You may pause.

Some saw this as protection.

Others thought the system was judging people's capacity to bear burdens for them.

The final rule read:

Spark may present cumulative burden, its distribution among comparable groups, and possible consequences of continuing. Whether to pause remains the individual's decision. Upon reaching a statutory safety threshold, the task provider must stop calling upon the person, and a human must confirm the conditions for resumption.

The system did not require a person to become better at saying no before allowing them to be safe.

It first stopped treating an inability to refuse as unlimited consent.

The rule change did not reshuffle responsibility for the accident.

The road maintenance organization remained responsible for the road.

The dispatch center bore responsibility for the defect in authorization design.

Peng Yue also bore part of the responsibility for setting out after he had seen the task notice.

His past contributions offset none of the harm in the accident.

Nor did the accident erase the tasks he had completed before.

The records were kept separately.

An error was an error.

A contribution was a contribution.

Harm required repair.

Bearing responsibility did not need to be glorified.

After recovering, Peng Yue did not return immediately to high-risk deliveries.

He switched off all automatic authorizations.

When the first new task notice appeared, the interface said only:

Accept?

No countdown.

No “recommended based on your past performance.”

No reminder of how many people were waiting.

Peng Yue looked at it for a little over ten seconds, then selected “Refuse.”

He refused the second time too.

The third was an ordinary daytime medical delivery.

He selected “Accept” himself.

“Out delivering again?” his father asked.

“This time I want to go.”

“You didn’t before?”

Peng Yue tied his shoelaces.

“Sometimes I did. Sometimes I don’t know.”

On the day the updated rules were published, the technical team’s original release note read:

Optimization of the high-risk task authorization mechanism.

Song Cheng deleted it.

“What should it say?” Cheng Yan asked.

Liang Shen put a sentence from Peng Yue’s appeal on the screen.

In the end, the release note said only:

We once treated a person’s reliability as a reason to use him without limit.

Chapter 11 Who Was Given the Power?

When Haijia City decided to expand Nebula's authority, the city had gone a full year without a major coordination incident.

Energy dispatch was more stable.

Waits for beds, medicines, and referrals between hospitals had shortened markedly.

Faults in public facilities could be detected earlier.

Regional resource use no longer required negotiations from scratch every time.

Almost every indicator pointed in the same direction:

Nebula could take on more.

The proposal covered city energy forecasting, road-maintenance priorities, public-building operations and maintenance, basic medical resource dispatch, and extreme-weather response.

Within its authorization, AGI could automatically develop routine plans and execute low-consequence tasks.

On the day of the announcement, public discussion divided into three questions.

The first:

Was power being handed to AGI?

The second:

Was the city being handed to the technology company developing Nebula?

The third:

If government could use Nebula to do things it could not do before, was it also gaining powers it should never have possessed?

The three questions conflicted with one another.

None was unnecessary.

For his first public hearing, Cheng Yan prepared forty-seven pages of technical explanation.

Before he finished the first page, a resident asked:

"When the power has to go off, who has the final say about which area loses it?"

"The system generates plans based on medical needs, population, infrastructure, and recovery time."

"Who approves them?"

“Routine low-consequence dispatch can be executed automatically. High-consequence decisions require approval by statutory bodies.”

“Which statutory bodies?”

“The energy authority.”

“Whom does the authority answer to?”

“It acts under the law and this authorization.”

“Who grants the authorization?”

Cheng Yan paused.

The chair tried to intervene.

“I’m not trying to make things difficult for him,” the resident said. “I want to know who I should turn to when the lights go out in my home.”

This question came closer to power than forty-seven pages of explanation.

In the past, system errors often had a vague name:

Platform decision.

Algorithmic judgment.

Departmental requirement.

Overall consideration.

Every phrase seemed powerful.

Not one could actually sign its name.

The proposal to expand authority had to be rewritten.

It would no longer begin with what Nebula could do.

It would begin with where each power came from, and where it stopped.

The first category was decisions on purposes and rules.

What was worth protecting, which rights could not be crossed, and when high-consequence tasks could begin or end had to be decided by duly authorized human actors bearing public responsibility, through statutory procedures. AGI could project consequences. It could not replace decisions on purposes.

AGI had no statutory decision-making authority, nor did its capacity to project outcomes confer sovereignty over civilization.

The second category was professional judgment.

Doctors, grid engineers, water specialists, transport experts, and other professionals were responsible for professional conclusions. AGI could sense, verify, simulate, and propose

plans, but had to identify data sources, uncertainties, potentially harmed parties, and irreversible consequences. Professionals could adopt, revise, or reject technical advice, and had to explain their grounds.

Professional competence could not thereby become final authority over all public values.

The third category was execution.

Within explicit laws, rules, and task authorizations, AGI and the corresponding operating systems could undertake approved, low-consequence routine execution: scheduling maintenance, supporting resource matching, adjusting low-risk loads, issuing warnings, and initiating already approved emergency procedures. Nebula made shared facts visible, coordinated across domains, and tracked execution. This did not make it a statutory decision-maker.

Authority was graded by scope, duration, and consequences.

It had to contract when a task ended.

Alongside the three governance functions was an independent layer of correction running across them.

Oversight, auditing, appeals, review, human takeover, circuit-breaking, repair, and termination constituted an independent capacity for correction. This was not a “fourth governing power,” nor did it make ordinary decisions in place of the three functions. It prevented purposes, professional judgment, and execution from swallowing one another over time.

Legitimate national and local institutions continued to bear statutory responsibility for public finances, infrastructure, security, social protection, and major public risks. They could use AGI. They could not hand AGI the signatures, responsibilities, or ultimate value judgments that belonged to statutory actors.

Affected parties were not a fourth category of governance function. They held independent procedural standing throughout decision, execution, and correction.

Individuals and communities had the right to know how decisions affected them, refuse authorizations beyond statutory public obligations, appeal, seek independent review, halt execution beyond authorized bounds, and obtain repair of consequences.

Being affected did not confer the power to veto every public decision.

But public decisions could not turn them into people required only to accept the result.

High-consequence matters were subject to additional civilizational boundaries that could not be crossed automatically.

Matters involving personhood, the right to survival, war, irreversible technologies, future generations, and fundamental rights could not enter automatic execution on grounds of

greater efficiency. They required decisions through duly authorized human statutory procedures and independent review.

Once the three governance functions, the independent layer of correction, and the procedural standing of affected parties were written down, new disputes began.

The technology company felt it bore responsibility for models, systems, and safety without corresponding decision-making authority.

Government departments worried that dividing powers too finely would make action impossible in emergencies.

Professionals were unwilling to assume full responsibility for AGI-generated recommendations they barely had time to confirm.

Residents discovered that knowing “who is responsible” did not mean being able to stop a decision.

Du Weihe sat in the second row, marking the hearing text line by line with the same old pencil from Chapter 3.

The pencil stopped beneath “the right to know.”

At the second hearing, Du Weihe asked:

“What if every layer agrees, and only the people affected disagree?”

“Some public decisions will still be carried out,” Zhou Yi answered.

“Then what rights do I have?”

“To know the real reasons, object, request alternatives and independent review. Once a decision is carried out, losses must enter the record and the process of repair. You may refuse anything beyond the statutory boundary.”

“What if I think the law itself is wrong?”

“You can continue seeking to change it through legal procedures.”

Du Weihe looked at him.

“Nebula can’t win for me.”

“No.”

“And it can’t prove you’re always right.”

“No.”

“Then what use is it?”

Zhou Yi did not say it made governance more efficient.

He said, “At least it stops us pretending we haven’t seen what you are bearing.”

Qiao Mu cared about something else.

“Who decides what counts as a low-consequence task?”

The proposal required low-consequence tasks to meet all these conditions:

Reversible;

Limited in reach;

No effect on basic rights;

A clearly identified responsible actor;

Capable of rollback within a specified time;

No accumulation into high consequences through repetition.

“How is the last one judged?” Qiao Mu asked.

“The system monitors cumulative effects,” Cheng Yan said.

“The system decides which things can be handed to the system?”

Some people in the room laughed.

Cheng Yan smiled too.

“No. Classification is determined jointly by legal authorization, professional standards, and independent review. The system only flags boundary crossings.”

“Who reviews the technology company?”

“An independent safety body.”

“Who reviews the independent body?”

“Public rules, judicial procedures, and periodic review.”

“Anyone can be questioned?”

“They must be.”

“Who can refuse to answer?”

“Lawfully confidential material may be withheld from the public, but must be explained to authorized reviewers.”

Qiao Mu nodded.

“That’s more useful than saying the system is trustworthy.”

What truly changed the proposal was a simulation.

The hearing committee required all participants to face the same scenario:

Extreme heat in the city, with an expanding electricity shortfall. AGI recommends cutting nighttime power in three commercial districts to protect hospitals, residential cooling, and industrial safety. The plan is reasonable overall, but one district contains many small

refrigerated-goods businesses. The outage would cause losses that could not be verified in time.

AGI proposes the plan.

Grid experts confirm feasibility.

The government department approves.

Commercial-district residents object.

Who can stop it?

Under the original proposal, only the government.

The simulation thus exposed a gap:

Affected parties could appeal afterward, but had no channel for seeking a pause when the facts were wrong.

The final rules added a “verifiable-objection pause.”

If information submitted by an affected party was sufficient to indicate that key facts might be wrong, execution had to pause for independent human verification within the time safety allowed.

A pause was not an individual veto.

If the facts were correct and the risk urgent, the public decision could still be executed.

But for the first time, a new fact coming from outside the model and the department had the power to stop the system before its effects landed in reality.

He Lan was concerned about professional responsibility.

“In hospital dispatch, the system makes hundreds of recommendations a day. Doctors can’t recalculate each one.”

So responsibility was divided according to actual control.

Model developers were responsible for design, testing, and known risks.

Data providers were responsible for accuracy and their duty to update.

Administrative departments were responsible for the scope of authorization.

Professionals were responsible for the reviews and decisions they actually made.

Executors were responsible for deviations in execution.

No one could bear all the consequences of what they could not know or control.

Nor could dividing responsibility make overall responsibility disappear.

Liang Shen drew the six layers of power and five categories of responsibility on one diagram.

It did not resemble a pyramid.

It looked more like many intersecting lines, each with its own endpoint.

Someone said it was too complicated.

“Society is complicated,” Liang Shen said. “Drawing it as a button won’t make the complexity disappear. It will only make responsibility disappear.”

The final authorization went to a vote in the city council.

Before the vote, Nebula did something no system had done before.

It made the paths of power relevant to each resident visible to them.

Not by asking everyone to read the whole law.

But by letting them see, when a decision reached them:

Who proposed it;

What facts it rested on;

Who made the professional judgment;

Who approved it;

Who executed it;

Who bore responsibility;

Where they could refuse, appeal, pause, or request review.

There was no field labeled “system decision.”

The system was not where responsibility ended.

Authorization passed by a clear majority.

Many people still opposed it.

Their opposition was not explained away as a failure to understand technology. Nor did it disappear from the record after the vote. Three risks raised by opponents were made mandatory items for review one year later.

On the night of the vote, Cheng Yan stood in the city operations center.

The new management permissions were enabled one by one.

Road-maintenance priorities.

Public-building energy consumption.

Low-risk energy dispatch.

Infrastructure alerts.

Beside each were boundaries, a time limit, and a responsible person.

He had once wanted to see a complete, unified, seamlessly functioning system.

Now the screen was covered in stopping lines.

“Is this still Nebula?” he asked Liang Shen.

“Yes.”

“Why does it look more and more like many things instead of one?”

“Because a city isn’t one person.”

“Then who owns it?”

Liang Shen looked at the screen.

The state had not handed responsibility to a technology company.

The technology company had not acquired sovereignty by providing capability.

AGI had not gained the final decision because it calculated faster than people.

Professionals had not extended professional judgment into dominion over every value.

Residents retained their rights, without thereby acquiring an unlimited veto that could prevent shared life from ever acting.

No one had acquired the whole city.

The city simply knew at last where every power ought to stop.

Part III A New Civilization Takes Shape: The Civilizational Leap Becomes Real

There is no ribbon-cutting moment for a civilizational leap.

It happens when the old logic no longer determines everyone's choices: obedience and competition no longer serve as the admission price for survival, local gain can no longer push harm to the whole out of sight, and technological capability is placed, for the first time, under subjects, responsibility, and shared continued existence.

Chapter 12 A Local Optimum No Longer Means Rationality

After Haijia City established regional backup energy coordination, few resources actually entered the shared reserve.

The cities were willing to share power-demand forecasts, extreme-weather warnings, and equipment-fault information.

Their attitude changed when it came to actually sending electricity out.

The industrial city of Beiling had two large energy-storage stations.

Qinghe County had small storage facilities scattered across agricultural parks.

Haijia City relied on port gas supplies, offshore wind, and urban storage to meet peaks.

All three knew that building every redundancy independently was costly.

All three still increased their own reserves.

Their reasons were entirely reasonable.

Beiling had to protect critical-materials production;

Qinghe had to protect agricultural irrigation and cold stores;

Haijia City was densely populated. An outage in any hospital, transport facility, or high-rise residential building would quickly widen the consequences.

No city wanted to rest its safety on someone else's promise.

In the first year, regional reserve capacity exceeded actual need by nineteen percent.

In the second, by twenty-six percent.

In the third, all three prepared to build new storage facilities at the same time.

Public funds, land, equipment, and maintenance staff were tied up in duplicate provision.

Battery-material prices rose.

Each area signed exclusive contracts to secure its own supply, only to lengthen delivery times for critical equipment.

All three cities worked harder.

The region as a whole grew no safer.

At a coordination meeting, Liang Shen put the previous three years' results on the big screen.

He did not begin with sharing.

He began with what each city would gain if it kept expanding reserves on its own.

Haijia City could cover its own risks in most years.

Beiling would still face a shortfall when industrial peaks coincided with cold snaps.

Qinghe's storage had the lowest utilization, yet seasonal agricultural demand made it impossible to eliminate.

If every city built for the worst case, the next decade's maintenance costs would swallow funds that could have gone toward grid renewal and community resilience upgrades.

"That's a cost, not a mistake," the Beiling representative said.

"Yes," Liang Shen said. "For Beiling alone, it isn't a mistake."

"What are you saying, then?"

"Three right choices are driving up one another's costs, while leaving the real weak points weak."

"Will Haijia City dismantle its own storage first?"

"No."

Someone laughed.

Liang Shen smiled too.

"So this isn't about persuading anyone to be noble."

Nebula ran multiple projections of reserve competition among the three areas.

In the first scenario, each built independently.

Every city gained a high degree of independent security, while all shared the costs of rising material prices, idle equipment, and emergency incompatibility.

In the second, a unified reserve was established under regional-center dispatch.

The total cost was lowest.

Not one city accepted it.

They feared losing the final decision in a real shortage. They also feared contributing more in ordinary times only to find no share left for them in a crisis.

The third scenario was a shared reserve from which resources could be withdrawn.

Ownership, routine control, and basic protection remained local;

Only capacity above local safety thresholds entered the shared availability directory;

Any call on resources had to meet public conditions;

Every release generated a record of cost, risk, and contribution;

The city drawing on resources had to bear responsibility for return, replenishment, and consequences;

Any city could reclaim shared resources not yet called upon when its risks changed;

The shared reserve could not, in turn, require a city to weaken its own basic safety.

This was not the cheapest plan.

It was simply the first to make sharing different from surrender.

Beiling still refused.

The head of its industrial department was Xue Zhun.

“Your model assumes promises will be kept,” he said at the meeting. “In reality, the larger the crisis, the more easily promises change.”

“What conditions would make Beiling trust it?” Zhou Yi asked.

“It isn’t about trust. It’s about being able to take part even without it.”

The proposal changed again because of that sentence.

The shared reserve no longer took mutual trust as a prerequisite.

It added three structures.

First, resources would not be delivered in advance to a central warehouse. They would remain in their original locality and enter a task state only when a call on them was established.

Second, call priorities and local retention thresholds would be published in advance. Any temporary change required a statutory actor’s signature and subsequent review.

Third, the consequences of default would be handled through insurance, backup compensation, repayment over time, and subsequent rights to draw on resources, rather than moral condemnation.

Qinghe County raised another issue.

“We have little storage, but cold stores and irrigation have seasonal value. Calculate by annual utilization, and we’ll always look like we contribute little and need a lot.”

The system therefore stopped treating electricity quantity as the sole measure of contribution.

Releasing an hour of balancing capacity at a critical time;

Keeping a transport route available to another area, free from commercial bookings;

Undertaking long-term equipment maintenance;

Maintaining redundancy when no disaster occurs;

These were not the same thing.

A single number could not flatten their differences.

But once they played a role in a real task, they could not be treated as though they had never happened.

When the first shared-reserve contracts were signed, all three areas retained the right to withdraw.

No city dismantled its local facilities.

No official announced regional integration.

Seven months after signing, the first real call on the reserve came.

A cold wave arrived from the north.

Industrial load and residential heating rose together in Beiling. One storage station went offline after a cooling-system fault.

Under the old logic, Beiling could halt some industrial production or offer higher prices to snap up power on the market.

Both would push losses elsewhere.

Regional Nebula issued a shared resource request.

Haijia City could release some port gas-fired power generation.

Qinghe County could suspend nonessential irrigation overnight and feed distributed storage into the regional grid.

Beiling would still have to cut some industrial load.

No one would bear everything for it.

Before confirming, Xue Zhun asked, “What if the cold wave turns toward Haijia City?”

The system displayed three conditions for withdrawal.

“They take it back as soon as a condition is met?”

“A condition automatically triggers reconfirmation,” Liang Shen said. “Haijia City may withdraw. Beiling must reduce its load at the same time.”

“So we might still have to stop production.”

“Yes.”

“Sharing doesn’t solve every risk.”

“No.”

Xue Zhun looked for a few seconds, then signed the request.

Qinghe County’s stored energy entered the regional grid forty minutes later.

Haijia City’s gas generators increased output an hour later.

Two noncritical production lines in Beiling stopped for six hours.

Residential heating was uninterrupted.

One company still suffered losses and later appealed the load priorities.

The shared reserve had not created cost-free safety.

It had only changed how the costs arose.

The appellant was Beiling Precision Materials Plant Three.

The suspended line did not make critical materials, but it affected the monthly piece-rate earnings of more than four hundred workers. The dispatch model recorded shutdown losses as company costs. It did not see how the company passed those costs further down inside its boundaries.

A worker named Gao Ze wrote in the appeal:

“The city got electricity. The company got compensation. We got six fewer hours of work. Why does shared responsibility always start by sharing it into our wages?”

Beiling’s energy department first replied that allocation of compensation was an internal management matter.

Under the old arrangements, that statement was not wrong.

Within the shared reserve, it was not enough.

If Nebula called on a production line’s interruptible capacity as a public resource, it had to keep seeing who ultimately bore the result. It could not deliver the electricity and then once again treat the company’s boundary as where consequences ended.

At the review, Qiao Mu said:

“Nor can we go the other way and let a public system decide every wage in a business.”

“Who deals with it, then?” Gao Ze asked.

“Deal with this instance first.”

The final remedy established no general intervention in wages.

It established only that this shutdown had been directly caused by a public call on resources, and compensation had to cover workers’ verifiable lost income. The company still controlled its internal operations, but could not receive public compensation and pass the same loss in full to its workers.

The next load-priority decision included two new facts:

Who actually bore the release of a resource;

Whether the same group had borne it repeatedly in past tasks.

Gao Ze acquired no higher score of personal worth.

His appeal did not mean industrial production would never stop again.

It merely allowed “overall regional benefit,” for the first time, to pass through company reports and reach a person who had worked six fewer hours.

In the past, each city protected itself by storing more, buying faster, and pushing risk onto neighboring areas.

Now, every party was still self-interested.

But each began to include its neighbors’ continued existence in its own long-term safety.

Because Nebula laid the results of repeated rounds before everyone:

Safety that made neighbors less safe would return through equipment, prices, supply chains, and population movements next time;

Investment that made the shared system more resilient would also become real capacity available when one was most vulnerable.

This was not replacing self-interest with altruism.

It was the boundary of “self” being forced to widen through real causal relationships.

A year later, the three areas canceled four duplicate construction projects.

The savings did not enter a unified allocation scheme.

Haijia City renewed power distribution in older residential areas;

Beiling upgraded energy-intensive equipment;

Qinghe added maintenance staff for distributed storage.

Each area addressed its own problems first.

Together, the region grew safer as a result.

There was no ceremony when the first shared reserves formally entered the pool.

Qiao Mu went to look once.

Entering the pool did not mean moving batteries into a larger warehouse.

The screen showed only a set of available capabilities, each bounded:

Who owned it;

When it was available;

How much had to remain locally;

Who had authority to call on it;

Who was responsible for its return;

Under what conditions it could be withdrawn.

The cities had not lost their own energy.

What they had lost was only the old method of making themselves safe by making their neighbors less safe.

Chapter 13 Survival Is Separated from Obedience for the First Time

Wen Mo had no job.

He was not looking for one.

He was thirty-seven, healthy, and fully educated. He had no relatives needing care, no unseen trauma, and no talent waiting to be discovered.

He simply thought most things were not worth doing.

Once Haijia City's basic survival guarantees covered him, he moved into a public housing unit of the minimum standard and received basic food, water, energy, and medical services.

The system repeatedly offered training, short-term tasks, and ways to join community collaboration.

He refused them all.

Refusal was simple.

No one came to his door to persuade him.

Spark reconfirmed only when service rules changed.

Wen Mo closed all other public connections.

At first, no one noticed him.

Many people in the city did not participate in public tasks.

Some were busy with family. Some needed rest. Some simply wanted quiet lives.

Civilization did not require everyone to keep proving they were useful.

Wen Mo became controversial because of an interview.

"Will you work in the future?" the reporter asked.

"No."

"Why?"

"I don't want to."

"Do you believe other people are obliged to support you?"

Wen Mo thought for a moment.

"If the system provides it, I'll use it."

"What if more and more people do this?"

"That's the system's problem."

The interview spread that day.

Many people were angry.

A construction worker commented:

I get up at six every day. Why should he have a home and food just like me?

A nurse said:

Basic security isn't there so people can dump all responsibility on others.

Others supported Wen Mo.

They believed human survival should not be determined by the labor market. Someone unwilling to work was still a person.

The argument quickly narrowed to two answers.

Punish him.

Or indulge him.

When Chen Qi visited Wen Mo, there was no task invitation.

Wen Mo's room was very tidy.

A bed, a table, a chair, an old terminal. Nothing on the windowsill.

"Here to persuade me?" Wen Mo asked.

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

"To check whether there are any basic services you haven't received."

"I have them all."

"Any problems with the housing?"

"The hot water takes a long time."

Chen Qi noted it down.

"Anything else?"

"No."

"Then I'll go."

Wen Mo was a little surprised.

"You won't ask why I don't work?"

"You've already answered."

"You think it's reasonable?"

"I think a lot of people will dislike it," Chen Qi said.

“And you?”

“I don’t like it either.”

Wen Mo smiled a little.

“But you’ll still fix my hot water?”

“You don’t get hot water because someone likes you.”

That sentence later entered a public hearing.

The hearing was not about Wen Mo personally.

After two years of basic security, the city had to answer a question goodwill had until then kept sidestepping:

If a person was capable of bearing responsibility but persistently refused, would civilization still guarantee their survival?

The finance department submitted projections.

The proportion of complete nonparticipants was currently low and would not threaten basic security.

But a system could not uphold principles only while the proportion was low.

If it rose, the strain on resources and labor would genuinely increase.

Contributors’ sense of unfairness was real too.

A food-supply worker said:

“My work puts food on his table. He does nothing, and I’m supposed to be taught not to mind?”

“You don’t have to stop minding,” Zhou Yi answered.

“Then what do we do?”

“Make the unfairness clear. But we cannot solve it with hunger.”

“Why?”

“Because once survival is made conditional on obedience, whoever defines usefulness gets to decide who should be able to survive.”

“What about responsibility?”

“Responsibility doesn’t disappear. We just cannot manufacture it by withdrawing people’s basic rights.”

The final rules separated three things.

First, basic survival and basic care.

Food, basic housing, basic energy, necessary medical care, and personal safety required no contribution as the price of admission.

Second, scarce resources and additional opportunities.

Larger housing, scarce training places, specialized equipment, competitive projects, resources for dreams, and personalized services requiring sustained effort from others had to be decided separately according to specific uses, actual needs, risks, professional conditions, waiting lists, fair access, responsibility, and the relevant rules.

Third, public obligations.

Legally required responsibilities remained. “Not wanting to contribute” could not excuse harming others, disregarding public safety, refusing statutory compensation, or failing to honor commitments already made voluntarily.

Wen Mo could choose not to work.

He could not damage public housing and refuse to pay for it.

He could decline community care work.

He could not occupy emergency resources merely for greater comfort.

He could close his public-task entry point.

He could not turn “I don’t participate” into a demand that everyone bear responsibility for his every wish.

These distinctions did not remove the anger.

The construction worker spoke again:

“He still gets the same food as me.”

“Yes,” Song Cheng said.

“Then where does my contribution show?”

“Your labor should be paid. The public results you help bring about should be recorded. Opportunities related to specific tasks should be decided by actual capability, current responsibility, and clear rules. More importantly, if you lose your job, become ill, or one day are no longer needed, you won’t lose the same food he gets.”

“I won’t be like him.”

“A system cannot protect only the self you are willing to become.”

The room was quiet for a while.

Wen Mo was not invited to the second hearing.

It discussed only those who provided basic services.

Representatives of food supply, public housing maintenance, healthcare, energy, and community care raised a harder question:

When technology already carried out much production and dispatch, some work still had to be done by people. Would guaranteeing everyone's survival leave responsibility resting permanently on the few willing to work?

A housing repair worker said:

"I agree no one should go hungry. But every day my Spark reminds me how many repairs are waiting. Wen Mo can dismiss a task. I can't."

"Why can't you?" Chen Qi asked.

"It's my job."

"A job has pay and labor limits. When repairs exceed those limits, we should add people, raise pay, or adjust the service. We shouldn't sustain it by relying on your inability to refuse."

"Where do the people come from?"

No one answered immediately.

Separating the right to survival from obedience did not automatically eliminate all work people were unwilling to undertake.

Society still had to provide necessary labor with sufficient pay, rest, rotation, technological alternatives, and genuine respect. It also had to allow additional opportunities to be linked to responsibility.

What it could not do was translate "if no one is willing, everyone will suffer" into "therefore everyone must exchange labor for survival."

Nebula then published the staffing gaps in basic services.

It did not publish who had refused.

Only which tasks relied persistently on a few people, which roles were underpaid, which work technology could replace, and which work required human judgment.

The city raised pay for nighttime repairs, shortened continuous duty, opened new professional training, and discontinued a set of services defined as "requiring immediate completion" only through years of habit.

Too few people still signed up.

Some repair waits grew longer.

For the first time, the public saw that preserving the survival floor also had a cost.

Civilization did not prove itself right by hiding the cost.

Basic security was not a reward for Wen Mo.

It protected everyone's boundary against having survival used to coerce them.

Today, the person people most despised was someone refusing responsibility.

Tomorrow, those declared to have "contributed too little" might be the unemployed, caregivers, people who had failed, creators not yet understood, or simply someone unable to go on for a while.

If a civilizational floor could be withdrawn from the least likable person, it was not a floor.

Wen Mo did not attend the hearing.

He submitted only one comment through Spark:

Do not publish my itemized consumption to prove that I "take only the basics."

The review committee agreed.

To address public doubts, the system could disclose the size of the nonparticipating group, its share of resources, and the system's costs.

It could not turn a specific person's eating, bathing, and medical care into a public spectacle.

Wen Mo's private domain did not shrink because he used public support.

A few months later, he applied for a professional-grade guitar.

The public resource center refused.

The reason was that the instrument was scarce. Priority currently went to open teaching, public performances, and individual creative projects already validated on a small scale.

The system offered him an ordinary instrument rental and a place in the queue.

Wen Mo appealed.

"Why can other people have one and I can't?"

"You can apply. You did not receive priority this time."

"Because I haven't contributed?"

"Because this resource must be allocated among several real uses. Your application currently shows no greater need or task relevance than the other uses."

"I just want it."

"Wanting can be a reason to apply. It cannot automatically become a responsibility others must bear."

Wen Mo did not accept an alternative instrument.

The appeal ended.

No one used this to prove he was greedy.

Society guaranteed his survival. It did not promise to fulfill every wish.

He could choose not to become a useful person.

He also had to bear the fact that many scarce opportunities would not come to him first.

A year later, the reporter found him again.

“Have you changed your mind during this time?”

“No.”

“Have you joined any public activities?”

“No.”

“Are you grateful to this system?”

Wen Mo looked into the camera.

“It isn’t charity. I don’t need to perform gratitude.”

Again, the sentence made many people uncomfortable.

On hearing it, Chen Qi said only:

“He’s half right.”

“Which half?”

“The right to survival isn’t charity.”

“And the other half?”

“People live in a shared world. You can choose not to be grateful. Refusing responsibility has consequences. They just cannot include starving to death.”

Wen Mo was not won over.

He did not suddenly become a volunteer at the end of the chapter.

His room remained tidy. His windowsill remained empty.

The city did not stop running because such a person existed.

The first hard test of the civilizational leap did not come with the person most willing to give.

It came when someone was neither noble nor likable, with no reason to deserve extra care.

His basic services still arrived.

The public connections he had closed remained closed.

His refusal was not interpreted as illness.

He was not won over.

Civilization had not failed because of it.

Chapter 14 The State Still Bears Ultimate Responsibility

That winter, successive cold waves struck the north, while storms closed the eastern ports for sixteen days.

Natural gas, grain, and rail capacity all came under strain at once.

Local adjustments could no longer solve it.

The state had to decide.

Nebula had operated among cities and regions for years. It could see inventories, demand, transport, weather, and vulnerable populations faster than before.

But seeing the whole country did not mean the country would automatically produce a conflict-free answer.

The densely populated east needed heating and basic grain supplies protected.

Railways in the central region had to reschedule energy, food, and industrial raw materials.

The Xiyuan region had some gas and grain reserves available for dispatch, but was also experiencing low temperatures.

The national joint dispatch plan required Xiyuan to increase outward supply over six weeks while reducing energy use in some industrial and controlled-environment agricultural operations.

The plan was approved by a national statutory institution.

Nebula made shared facts visible, supported forecasts, matched resources across domains, tracked execution, and returned consequences to the corresponding responsible actors.

AGI had not made the decision.

People had signed it.

Most of Xiyuan accepted the adjustment.

Baishigu did not.

It was a county-level community in a high-altitude river valley, with a small population. In winter, it relied on natural gas for residential heating, seed-potato storage, and several greenhouses.

The national plan held that Baishigu had coal-fired power and biomass alternatives and could bear an eighteen percent gas reduction.

The county government filed its first appeal three hours later.

The alternative capacity was not real.

The coal-fired unit was under maintenance.

Biomass reserves had been depleted by earlier wildfires.

Applying the standard reduction would affect both residential heating and seed-potato storage.

After verification, the system showed:

Coal-unit maintenance information confirmed;

Biomass reserve data twelve days out of date;

Baishigu could bear a smaller reduction than the national plan specified.

The national dispatch department revised it to eleven percent.

Baishigu still objected.

At a public video conference, county head Xu Jianchuan said:

“Eleven percent will still push nighttime temperatures in some older houses below safe levels.”

“If Baishigu makes no reduction, who bears the outward-supply shortfall?” asked Lin Jing, the national official in charge.

“We’re not refusing to bear a share.”

“What are you proposing, then?”

“Stop greenhouse production. Lower temperatures in public buildings. Leave residents’ basic heating untouched. Calculate seed-potato storage separately.”

Nebula calculated that this was feasible, but would send out less than the national requirement.

Two eastern cities would have to reduce commercial energy use further.

Lin Jing did not agree immediately.

“A national plan can’t consist of every locality protecting only what it least wants to lose.”

“Nor can calling it national mean assuming small places are better suited to losing,” Xu Jianchuan said.

The meeting reached no consensus.

The state ultimately decided to retain the eleven percent reduction, while requiring Baishigu to establish priority lists for old houses and seed-potato storage. Public funds would cover temporary insulation upgrades and alternative energy costs.

Xu Jianchuan signed acknowledgment of the decision.

Acknowledgment did not mean agreement.

Baishigu’s objection remained in the official record.

There were no serious problems in the first week.

In the second, temperatures fell again.

More than three hundred households in older houses needed temporary heating equipment.

Temperature control in the seed-potato stores remained stable.

In the third week, icy roads delayed deliveries of alternative fuel.

The temperature in one seed-potato store briefly fell below the safe range.

The loss was not yet known.

What Baishigu first made public was not the seed-potato store, but the nighttime temperature in a resident's home.

The resident was Ye Duan, seventy-eight. She lived with her husband, who had chronic lung disease, in an old house on the north side of the valley.

Temporary heating equipment had arrived.

But its power demand kept tripping the old wiring.

Community workers suggested moving them to a collective shelter.

Ye Duan refused.

"He can't be away from this bed at night."

Spark did not label the refusal noncooperation.

It returned the house's wiring condition, medical needs, and relocation risks to dispatch.

The national model had previously seen only:

Temporary equipment supplied;

Shelter access available for high-risk older residents;

Basic heating meeting standards overall.

All three were true.

Ye Duan's home was still cold.

The county used this record as evidence for its second appeal.

Some questioned using one family to overturn a national plan.

Xu Jianchuan answered:

"One family cannot decide for the whole country. Nor can the country dismiss something that has actually happened as an exception because it concerns only one family."

Ye Duan finally agreed to relocate during the day. At night, medical staff would accompany her husband in their home. The wiring was upgraded that evening.

This intervention solved her household's problem.

It did not solve why the rules had judged "equipment provided, access available" to mean "already safe."

Baishigu appealed a second time.

The national dispatch department considered the overall risk still controllable.

Nebula's model recommended no change either.

It was using countywide average temperatures, total equipment numbers, and data on subsidies already initiated.

By then, Liang Shen no longer managed Haijia City's day-to-day systems. He had been transferred to the national cross-domain coordination group.

Reviewing Baishigu's data, he found something familiar:

Right on average.

Heating across the county met standards overall.

But the oldest houses were invisible within the average.

Total seed-potato storage capacity was sufficient.

Yet the affected store was precisely the old one preserving local varieties. Its economic value was low, but replacement would take a long time.

This was different from Qinglong Village.

And the same as that first rainstorm.

Once the whole was aggregated, the margins could disappear again.

Liang Shen recommended pausing further reductions.

"Is there enough evidence?" Lin Jing asked.

"Not enough to prove the original decision wrong overall."

"Then why pause?"

"Enough to prove we don't know enough about the local consequences."

"What about the eastern shortfall?"

"The state must reallocate it. We can't first make Baishigu keep bearing the unknown."

Lin Jing was silent for a while.

"You know this means I have to restrict energy in more cities."

"I know."

"And if Baishigu turns out to have no serious losses, we'll be accused of overreacting."

“Yes.”

Lin Jing signed the pause.

The state did not hand responsibility to Baishigu, or make Nebula bear the public and fiscal consequences for it.

Two eastern cities temporarily reduced nighttime commercial lighting.

A central-region transport service for industrial raw materials was delayed.

The national reserve added another batch of emergency fuel.

Many people who had never visited Baishigu bore higher costs.

An independent review team arrived seven days later.

They did not inspect only data.

They entered old houses and measured walls;

Checked when alternative fuel had arrived;

Opened the seed-potato stores;

Compared county reports, the national model, and conditions on the ground.

Their findings had two parts.

The state’s initiation of cross-regional dispatch had been necessary.

Baishigu had to bear some responsibility for outward supply.

But the basis for the eleven percent reduction contained two errors:

Counting alternative capacity under maintenance as available resources;

Mistaking countywide average safety for safety at every critical node.

The final reduction was adjusted to seven percent.

Seed-potato storage was separately classified as an uninterruptible load.

Insulation upgrades for old houses changed from temporary relief to a long-term public project.

The state and locality would share responsibility for restoring damaged seed-potato stocks.

When the correction was announced, some feared it would weaken state authority.

Lin Jing did not describe it as “optimization in light of circumstances.”

He wrote:

The second stage of the original decision incorrectly assessed Baishigu’s alternative capacity, creating avoidable risks. The national dispatch department bears responsibility for the decision and its correction.

His name was below it.

Xu Jianchuan signed as well.

Baishigu also acknowledged:

Once national risk has arisen, a locality cannot refuse shared responsibility solely on grounds of its own difficulties. The revised seven percent reduction remains in force.

The state had not disappeared into Nebula.

On the contrary, only while the state continued to bear ultimate responsibility for law, public finances, infrastructure, security, social protection, and cross-regional risks could Nebula's capacity to act as a whole avoid becoming a web with no responsible subject.

Nor did final decision-making authority become power beyond questioning.

It had to explain the facts, preserve dissent, bear consequences, allow review, and formally correct errors once proved.

When the cold wave ended, heating in the east had remained uninterrupted.

Baishigu had lost two batches of seed potatoes.

Not every loss could be restored.

In spring, the old store reopened.

Workers carried out the surviving seed potatoes, box by box.

Xu Jianchuan received the paper archive copy of the correction notice.

He did not hang it on the wall.

He only paused for a while at the signature page.

The notice did not blame the old model for the error.

Those who had signed still signed their own names.

Chapter 15 The World Did Not First Become One Family

When the first risk notification went out, the world was in another round of technology negotiations.

Several major countries were deadlocked over advanced models, compute exports, and biosafety review.

Border restrictions increased.

Joint research declined.

Every side feared that facts it disclosed would give others a way to gain an advantage.

Then three widely separated cities discovered an unusual respiratory syndrome, one after another.

There were few cases.

The symptoms were not consistent.

The first city thought it related to the local environment.

The second suspected laboratory contamination.

The third did not disclose a source, reporting only that it had found similar molecular features.

There was no evidence that they belonged to the same risk.

Nor was there evidence that they were unrelated.

In the past, the world had often swung between two errors.

Either declare a shared crisis too early, triggering lockdowns, panic, and political accusations;

Or wait because of insufficient facts, sensitive questions of responsibility, and national competition, until the risk crossed more borders.

This time, the countries still did not trust one another.

Nor had states handed decisions on public health, borders, and biosafety to a global center.

The first thing activated was a minimum shared interface that had previously drawn little public attention.

It did not require sharing all case records.

It did not require opening core research capabilities.

It did not require surrendering original samples, complete genetic information, or national investigative authority.

It required only that, when anomalous signals met shared criteria, limited facts be submitted:

Risk characteristics;

What detection methods could confirm;

Which conclusions remained unknown;

Verifiable origins of samples and records;

The time window in which other regions might be affected;

And who within the country was responsible for the notification.

Each country's node operated the interface separately.

Nebula was not a single global person.

No machine could cross every country's legal and data boundaries to assemble an unauthorized complete dossier of the world.

The shared layer could see only the facts each party agreed to bring into the shared risk task.

The first notification came from a port city in the Southern Hemisphere.

The second came from an inland research center.

The third was eleven hours late.

The reason was not a technical failure.

The country responsible feared the anomalous features would expose its detection capability, and that notification would be interpreted as admitting it was the source of the risk.

He Lan had left frontline hospital work.

She took part in the first cross-border verification as Haijia City's public health liaison.

Before the meeting began, the same statement of boundaries appeared on every screen:

Participation in verification constitutes no determination of responsibility, requires no sharing of national capabilities beyond this task, and does not restrict any country's lawful independent measures.

Some found the sentence overly defensive.

"Without it, this meeting cannot begin," He Lan said.

The first round of verification found no common pathogen.

Sample characteristics were similar, but not identical.

Transmission chains could not be connected.

Before verification ended, an unfinished report was made public.

It linked the anomalies in all three places to a research facility in one country.

The news spread rapidly.

The country denied it and suspended submissions to the next round, saying that the shared-risk mechanism was being used for political attribution.

Other countries demanded it open facility records to clear itself.

If the shared interface adjudicated origins, national conflict would tear it apart before it could truly see the risk.

The minimum rules therefore required two things to be kept separate:

Risk coordination answered “what is happening, who may be affected, and what must be done now”;

Attribution of responsibility answered “where it began, who violated what, and what consequences they should bear.”

The two could share verified facts.

They could neither wait for nor substitute for one another.

Countries could still investigate and pursue accountability independently.

Shared risk notifications could not be interrupted by attribution disputes.

The report was later found to have used an incorrect timestamp.

The publisher bore responsibility.

The country resumed submissions, but shared less information than before.

Nebula did not treat that as irrational.

Damaged trust was a real consequence.

The shared layer had to keep working with fewer facts.

AGI offered three explanations:

One risk varying across different environments;

Several similar but independent sources;

False similarity produced by detection methods.

Their probabilities were close.

It did not select whichever looked most like an answer.

The shared interface marked the status:

A common event cannot yet be confirmed, but consequences may interlock.

Some countries immediately intensified border screening.

Others refused, considering the evidence insufficient.

The minimum shared interface had no power to command.

It only ensured that each party knew the grounds on which others acted, and that new facts produced by those actions could return.

Haijia City's first suspected patient was named Su Zhan.

She was a cross-border freight engineer, recently returned from two ports.

Spark prompted her to make itinerary, contact, and health information available.

Su Zhan did not open everything at once.

She first shared the flight segments and work contacts relevant to the risk window, withholding private meetings.

The investigators considered that insufficient.

"There's a six-hour gap one evening."

"Private travel."

"It may involve transmission."

"Tell me why first."

He Lan showed her:

If those six hours could not be confirmed, the public health team would have to widen the contact investigation. More uninvolved people would be notified.

Su Zhan was silent for a while.

"I went to see my daughter that evening."

"Where is she?"

"In another country."

"We need minimal contact information."

"She doesn't want her other guardian to know."

A cross-border family relationship had entered the risk investigation.

The system could not assume that every private boundary ceased to apply because the public goal was important.

Su Zhan ultimately authorized Spark to submit only the following to the two countries' public health nodes:

One minor;

Duration of contact;

The physical setting;

Access needed for testing.

Names and family relationships did not enter the shared layer.

The other country lawfully contacted those responsible for the child's guardianship.

The test was negative.

After the task ended, this cross-border family information was deleted from the shared event.

He Lan's team knew there had been a contact who needed to be checked.

They did not know who it was, and had no right to keep knowing.

The real breakthrough came on the fourth day.

A national laboratory unwilling to provide original samples agreed to have a neutral verification node verify its test results.

The node did not take samples away.

It did not copy the full method.

It confirmed only three things:

The anomalous features were real;

They were sufficiently connected to the risks in the other two places;

Current evidence remained insufficient to identify the original source.

For the first time, the world had a shared fact.

Not a shared narrative.

Nor a shared enemy.

Only a risk no party could any longer define alone.

The minimum shared interface then initiated four forms of coordination.

Mutual recognition of pathogen-screening standards;

Neutral verification of risk facts;

Necessary interoperability maintained among hospitals and transport infrastructure;

Cross-border notifications continuing despite political disputes.

Countries still adopted different policies.

Some restricted movement.

Some only increased testing.

Some prioritized protection of their own critical industries.

Some disclosed more information.

Competition did not stop.

Neither did accusations.

One country refused to share core sequencing capabilities. Another refused to open itself to cross-border investigation. A third provided only de-identified case trends.

Shared governance did not first make the world one family.

It merely ensured that, even unwilling to become one family, parties could no longer pretend they were unrelated within the same risk.

The risk was eventually contained early.

It was later confirmed to be a limited event caused by several related sources of exposure, rather than a new pathogen that had already spread widely.

Many therefore thought the initial alarm excessive.

The independent review preserved a different judgment.

Waiting for complete evidence might have had no serious consequences.

It might also have missed the only low-cost window.

Nebula did not treat “no disaster developed” as proof that it must have been right.

It recorded travel delays, business losses, family strain, and people wrongly notified as a result of overreaction.

Each country bore the consequences of its own decisions.

The shared interface was responsible only for shared facts, continuity of notification, and mutual effects.

On the sixth day after the risk was lifted, the minimum shared interface made a different kind of mistake.

Port Ravi, a port city in the Southern Hemisphere, had a care home maintained jointly by migrant families. During the outbreak, it had made available forty beds, two cold rooms, and a care team fluent in several languages. After the last person in isolation left, Nebula used personnel status, remaining supplies, and past disaster records to predict that the home would reopen its public resources within forty-eight hours.

At the level of staff and equipment, the prediction was correct. The beds had been disinfected, the cold rooms were usable, and the caregivers were physically fit for their shifts. The shared interface therefore arranged for a shipment of medicines requiring cold storage to arrive on the third day.

The care home did not confirm.

The task layer marked the status “opening delayed” and repeatedly asked why. Fearing the medicines would be left without storage, the cross-border node had to reroute them at short notice. Three clinics received their medicines fourteen hours later than planned. No one died as a result, but the existing supply arrangements genuinely failed.

The person responsible for the keys was called Amani. She was not a community leader, only someone who had cared for Nafu for eleven years. Nafu had died the night before the risk was lifted, from a cause unrelated to the unusual syndrome.

In Amani’s tradition, after someone deeply connected to shared life died, caregivers remained with the body through four sunrises. Family, caregivers, and those who shared the

building then sat together to reconfirm how the deceased's belongings, responsibilities, and spaces would return to life. Before the ritual ended, Amani could release emergency life-saving resources, but had no authority to commit the care home alone to another long-term task.

Nebula saw that she was physically well, available for shifts, and had empty cold rooms.

It did not see "who did not yet have authority to make the next commitment."

Reviewers first suggested adding this mourning tradition to a cross-civilizational behavior model, so future resumption times could be predicted accurately. Amani refused.

"You can remember that we did not confirm," she said. "Do not decide for us when mourning should end."

"What if the resources are needed more urgently next time?" someone asked.

"Emergency resources can be called upon under our published rules. A new long-term commitment must wait for joint confirmation. Those are different things."

The revised interface created no value function for Port Ravi's tradition, nor did it make four sunrises a uniform deadline all members had to obey.

The community needed to tell external tasks only three facts: who currently had authority to confirm; which resources were authorized for emergencies; and the latest time by which the next internal decision would return. Nebula was responsible for medicines across communities, safety, rerouting costs, and tracing responsibility. It did not interpret whether the ritual was valid or predict whether a person had finished mourning.

The error was retained as a "misjudgment of procedural sovereignty."

The model correctly predicted when people and things could act.

But it mistook the ability to act for the authority to act.

When it was over, He Lan returned to Haijia City.

There were still border checks at the airport.

Her equipment had to pass her own country's security review again.

An overseas colleague sent a message:

"The next round of technology negotiations failed too."

He Lan replied:

"At least this time the risk has a name."

Boundaries had not disappeared.

States had not disappeared.

Nor had differences, competition, or suspicion.

For the first time, a risk had not lost its name between borders.

Chapter 16 AGI Enters the Operation of Civilization, but Still Cannot Rule It

By then, most people in Haijia City rarely discussed AGI. It had become deeply involved in civilization's daily operation, without becoming its master.

It managed energy forecasts, production plans, city maintenance, medical coordination, and disaster response.

People usually did not know why the morning trains were not congested, why a hospital had brought in a piece of equipment ahead of time, or why an aging pipe had been replaced before it burst.

Nor did they need to.

Nebula was beginning to recede behind life.

Cheng Yan had once looked forward to this day.

When it actually came, he became more vigilant than before.

The more reliable a system is, the easier it becomes to mistake "we do not need to judge this again" for "we can let it judge this forever."

The controversy arose over a disease-vector control plan.

For several years running, insect-borne diseases had appeared in many coastal areas.

Conventional pest control, environmental management, and vaccination required sustained investment, yet infections remained numerous.

AGI proposed a new approach:

Release rigorously designed, self-propagating biological carriers that would cause particular vector populations to lose their ability to transmit disease over successive generations.

Repeated spraying would not be necessary.

The approach was expected to reduce the relevant diseases to extremely low levels within a few years.

Ecological models, experimental data, and validation in enclosed settings at several sites all showed clear advantages.

The cost was only a fraction of that of the conventional long-term approach.

Most importantly, it could reduce real deaths.

The plan was better by an almost overwhelming margin.

The one problem that could not be eliminated was irreversibility.

Once introduced into an open environment, the self-propagating process might cross administrative boundaries.

Even with limits in place, no one could guarantee that the models encompassed every ecological change over the coming decades.

AGI classified the risk as low-probability, high-consequence.

The technical team believed a small-scale trial in an open environment could proceed.

The public health department supported it.

Ecologists were divided.

The communities most severely affected by the diseases demanded:

“People get sick every year. Why let certain harm continue just to prevent a risk that may never arise?”

Opponents asked:

“Does this generation have the right to pass on an irrevocable change to life to the future?”

This was not a conflict between efficiency and ignorance.

Every side was protecting life.

AGI completed its most comprehensive simulations to date.

The expected benefits of a trial in an open environment far exceeded those of continuing conventional prevention and control.

Among all the options it could calculate, it recommended proceeding.

Cheng Yan put a question to the system:

“If we discover a mistake in the future, can we return to how things were before the release?”

The answer:

That cannot be guaranteed.

“If we cannot go back, who has the right to decide?”

The system answered:

Under the current civilizational baseline, this system has no final decision-making authority.

The highest level of deliberation was initiated at the national level.

The technical team submitted its evidence.

The public health department submitted the burden of disease.

The ecology team submitted the uncertainties.

Affected communities were given the right to speak directly.

Gu Lai was among the first to speak.

Her younger brother had died of one of the diseases two years earlier.

Before deliberations began, she authorized the costs of his final hospitalization, his pain records, and the time the family had spent caring for him to be included in the assessment of the decision's consequences.

She was not seeking sympathy.

She demanded that everyone discussing an irreversible future first recognize that continuing to wait was equally irreversible.

"Your caution won't bring my brother back."

An ecologist answered:

"If an open release has consequences across generations, no one will be able to come back and revoke it for the people of the future, either."

Gu Lai asked, "So who matters more?"

"It isn't about who matters more."

"Then why must the people alive today always wait first?"

There was no answer in that room that could comfort her.

The record of deliberations placed two kinds of irreversibility side by side:

The harm from disease that had occurred and continued to occur;

The ecological and intergenerational harm an open release might cause.

The system could not simply describe the former as quantifiable losses and the latter as ethical concerns. Nor could it frame the future alone as a great responsibility while reducing today's deaths to a necessary cost.

Future generations could not attend.

Institutions could only acknowledge, through reviews of irreversibility, long-term responsibility, and higher thresholds for decisions, that these people could not be fully represented by a present-day majority.

He Lan supported proceeding.

She had seen too much avoidable illness and pain.

"We cannot make people who are certainly being harmed today wait indefinitely because the future might suffer harm."

Song Cheng opposed an open release.

"Nor can we turn the future into a participant with no right to withdraw just because today's calculations are more complete."

He Lan asked, "Then how long must we wait?"

“Until we can reverse it, or until the risk is so great that not acting is equally irreversible.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“No. Because there is no clean answer here.”

AGI did not take part in the debate over values.

It kept updating the facts:

Cases of disease;

The effects of conventional prevention and control;

Possible pathways of an open release;

Unknowns within the ecological network;

The consequences of different periods of delay.

Whenever someone cited it to prove they were right, it also displayed what remained unknown.

The final decision was to reject an open release at this stage.

It was not a permanent ban.

Research in enclosed settings would continue, with priority given to alternative technologies that could be retrieved or stopped locally. Investment in conventional prevention and control, vaccines, and community environmental management would continue. The matter would be reconsidered in two years.

The decision had clear costs.

Over the next two years, people continued to become infected.

Public finances continued to bear the high cost of prevention and control.

Some families felt they had been sacrificed for a distant future.

The state did not end the matter by recording the cost as “the necessary cost of caution.”

Every severe case that might have been prevented had the plan not been delayed was included in the tracking of the decision’s consequences.

Those who opposed an open release could not take on only the moral credit for being right.

They also had to share the practical responsibility for continued research, conventional prevention and control, and compensation for affected communities.

In the third year, a new approach that could be stopped locally passed validation in an enclosed environment.

It was still imperfect.

It was less efficient than the original plan.

It cost more.

Yet for the first time, it preserved the possibility of scaling back if an error emerged.

Deliberations began again.

This time, AGI recommended the new plan.

Humans approved it.

Not because humans had finally become smarter than machines.

Nor because machines had finally learned to obey.

But because management capability and civilizational sovereignty had been clearly separated.

AGI could perceive, predict, compare, coordinate, and execute faster than any person.

The stronger its capabilities, the more society should let it manage everyday matters that could be verified and rolled back, with clear responsibility.

But where personhood, war, open ecosystems, irreversible technologies, future generations, and fundamental values are concerned, superior capability cannot automatically become final decision-making authority.

Humans retaining the final decision does not mean humans are inherently right.

It means that when an error occurs, they cannot say:

The system required it.

The model recommended it.

Technology could not be stopped.

Those who make the decision must bear the consequences that return from the future.

After the plan was approved, Cheng Yan looked at the first version of the recommendation.

It was still the more efficient one.

Rejection had not made it wrong.

Humanity had simply refused to let efficiency become the only truth that could enter reality.

In those years, humanity rejected a more efficient future.

And so continued to take responsibility for the future.

Chapter 17 No One Announced That the Leap Was Complete

Twenty-nine years later, Haijia City faced another compound crisis.

It was again four in the morning.

Torrential rain advanced from the sea. The tide rose above the old record.

A regional energy node failed.

Two rail lines stopped running.

Hospital admissions rose.

The port's cold chain faced a power outage.

Water began entering low-lying streets in the Old Port District.

The scale was similar to that night Liang Shen had lived through when he was young.

No one waited for him to draw the first line.

The gray telephone Gu Qiao had left behind was still in the city archives.

It was no longer connected to the duty line.

The new channels for human takeover had taken other forms: independent communications, on-site lists, critical instructions on paper, and people responsible who could be reached directly without going through the system.

They were tested in drills every year.

They had never been abolished because Nebula was stable.

Civilization had not turned an old tool that once saved it into a sacred relic. Nor had it forgotten why the tool existed.

The hospital's Nebula node began sensing first.

It submitted only requirements for beds, equipment, electricity, and transfers, not aspects of patients' lives unrelated to the task.

At the same time, the energy node marked available capacity, the extent of the failure, and the still-uncertain recovery time.

The drainage system submitted the condition of roads and pumping stations.

The transport system did not begin by publishing a single citywide route. Instead, it opened passage windows that it could accommodate for different tasks.

Business resources remained the property of the businesses.

Qiao Mu's cold-chain company was now run by a new team. Through Spark, the staff on duty confirmed that two backup storage areas and twelve transport vehicles would be made available. Insurance, provision for losses, and responsibility took effect at the same time.

The national meteorological and marine departments provided information on cross-regional risks.

The local government retained emergency decision-making authority.

AGI brought facts together, simulated consequences, and generated plans.

No center acted for every actor.

Nor did any actor concern itself only with delivering its own right answer.

At 4:07, the energy system proposed the first round of load adjustments.

At the same time, the system showed:

If the hospital and drainage were protected, the port's cold-chain goods would have to be moved within fourteen minutes;

If the port's cold chain was maintained, two pumping stations in the Old Port District would have to reduce output;

If shared regional reserves were used, Beiling would have to postpone the resumption of an industrial operation.

Beiling confirmed that the reserves could be released.

The condition was that the cold-wave reserve threshold remain untouched.

Haijia City confirmed the use and accepted responsibility for replenishment.

Part of the port's cold-chain goods still had to be moved.

The staff member on duty at Qiao Mu's company did not ask whether they ought to sacrifice themselves for the whole city.

He checked only:

The scope of use;

Staff safety;

Vehicle routes;

Responsibility for losses;

Withdrawal when the task ended.

At 4:12, a resident of the Old Port District refused access to information about conditions inside their home.

The system sent no further reminders.

A basic welfare-visit task was still created.

Fang Shu had long since retired. The community coordinator was another young man.

He knocked first.

No one answered.

A neighbor said the resident had gone to their daughter's home the night before.

Under the already-published privacy rules, the coordination node changed the status from "risk unknown" to "awaiting confirmation by the person or through a legally recognized relationship." The neighbor's words did not become authorization to continue reading private information.

At 4:15, a temporary transport route was set to pass through the street that had once been unable to sleep all night.

The system showed that its historical burden had been too frequent.

The Old Port District was not automatically the low-cost option.

The new route would take eleven minutes longer and pass through a shopping street.

Shopkeepers there objected:

Underground storerooms were receiving deliveries. Heavy vehicles could cause congestion.

On-site data came in.

The plan paused for ninety seconds.

The transport, community, and cold-chain teams jointly confirmed another route.

It was farther.

It was less efficient overall.

But it did not once again place the same cost on those most accustomed to bearing it.

At 4:23, a hospital requested a higher level of power supply.

On the basis of the records connected at that point, AGI assessed the present need as insufficient.

He Lan had retired.

The doctor on duty submitted a fact the model did not include:

Two patients had just gone into emergency surgery. The risks of transfer were higher than the system's records showed.

The verifiable objection paused the allocation process.

Specialists confirmed it.

The level of power supply was raised.

The corresponding cost returned to the cold-chain relocation task.

No change happened silently.

At 4:40, the first round of coordination was complete.

At 5:13, the tide continued to rise.

The local government activated a higher level of emergency authorization.

Its scope, duration, responsible persons, and termination conditions were made public at the same time.

AGI received greater automatic coordination capabilities.

It still could not use unauthorized private domains, alter the statutory responsibilities of national and local authorities, offset particular losses with overall benefits, or retain temporary powers after the task ended.

A community evacuation-shelter team rejected the system's recommendation.

The recommended location was closer, but lacked sanitary facilities suitable for older people unable to care for themselves.

The community chose a more distant location on its own.

Once the community confirmed the new location, Nebula rearranged the vehicles according to that decision.

It did not label the community's decision an inefficient interference.

At six, the rain reached its peak.

A pumping station briefly stopped operating.

Three streets in the Old Port District still flooded.

A breakfast shop lost ingredients.

Two transport workers suffered minor injuries.

A hospital delayed non-emergency treatment.

The crisis was not recorded as a miracle without harm.

It simply did not again turn into a situation in which each system was right on its own while the whole city lost control together.

At nine in the morning, the tide fell.

The task entered verification and repair.

The consequences for affected shopkeepers, residents, workers, hospitals, and businesses came back separately.

Overall success did not close any particular appeal.

Contribution records did not cancel out harm.

Errors did not erase contributions that had occurred.

At noon, temporary permissions began to be withdrawn.

The citywide emergency authorization ended.

Business resources were returned.

Replenishment of the intercity reserves began.

Temporary personal location and health information was deleted item by item, task by task.

The task community formed by hospital, transport, community, business, and regional nodes dissolved.

Outstanding compensation, equipment repairs, and dispute reviews remained active.

The other connections went dark.

There was no celebration of the achievement.

Nor was there an announcement that the civilizational leap was complete.

Liang Shen was seventy-one that year.

He no longer took part in coordination. He only went to look around the Old Port District that afternoon.

The breakfast shop had a new owner.

The former owner sat at the door, his hair entirely white.

“Back again?” the old man asked.

“Just came to have a look.”

“They didn’t come down our street this time.”

“Almost did.”

“Does the system hold grudges?”

“It remembers consequences.”

The old man smiled.

“Soy milk?”

“Yes.”

People were clearing standing water from the street.

A child stepped into a puddle. His mother pulled him out, and he stepped back in when she turned away.

On the other side of the city, school had resumed.

The hospital continued treating patients.

The factory in Beiling waited for the shared reserves to be replenished.

Someone was late for a date. Someone continued an appeal over emergency noise. Someone was proud that the task had been completed. Someone else simply found the rain annoying.

The next day, people worked, went to school, cooked, and argued as usual.

Spark was no longer discussed as a technological novelty.

It appeared only when needed, allowing care to reach someone, abilities to find tasks, refusal to be heard accurately, and responsibility to return to real people. Then it receded behind life again.

Many years later, history books gave that period various names.

The period of technological integration.

The early period of collaborative civilization.

The formative period of the new civilization.

The civilizational leap.

The people living through it saw no finish line stretched across the city.

They heard no bells.

Nor did they wake one day to find themselves in an ideal world.

They remembered only that, in that year, a disaster of the same scale had come again.

People were still afraid, still protected themselves, and still argued about who should bear more.

Yet the disaster did not push everyone back into competing against one another as it once had.

Part IV A New Civilization Becomes Stable: When Its Operation Recedes Behind Life

Stability in a new civilization does not mean Nebula occupying life.

Nebula is reliable enough to recede behind life at last. Institutions, AGI, and public structures no longer need to prove themselves through constant intervention. Civilization is at its most mature not when systems know everything, but when most people can live safely, freely, and richly without having to remain continually aware of their existence.

Chapter 18 A City in a Silent State

Before that Sunday, Gu Xingzhou went to see Lin Zhao.

They had not eaten alone together for many years. Lin Zhao no longer had to worry about rent, medical care, or care for his parents. Nor did Spark continuously read his life on behalf of any employer anymore. He still reviewed supply-chain anomalies a few times each month, but it took too little time to be called an occupation.

Gu Xingzhou asked, “Did you find something you wanted to do in the end?”

“No.”

“Photography, teaching, travel?”

“Tried them all,” Lin Zhao said. “People always want me to find a second nineteen years, to prove that the end of the first nineteen meant something.”

He still avoided gatherings of former colleagues. When he saw people who had once worked under him join new professional nodes, he felt happy for them, and envious too. He no longer worried that the changing times would starve him, but still did not know whether they had left him behind.

Halfway through the meal, Lin Zhao’s older sister called. Their father had just had cataract surgery. Once home, he had insisted on managing his own medication, then mixed up two kinds of eyedrops. His sister had to leave town unexpectedly and asked whether he could stay with their father for three days.

Lin Zhao listened with a frown. First he asked about the follow-up appointment, then checked the lighting and stairs at home. He did not register this as a public task or ask the system to generate a meaning for his care.

After hanging up, he packed the rest of his meal into a container.

Gu Xingzhou said, “You’re leaving now?”

“He’ll use the wrong drops on his own.”

“Does this count as finding a direction?”

Lin Zhao looked at him.

“It only means my dad needs me today.”

He left quickly. This was not a new occupation or a public contribution. It did not make up for the loss of nineteen years. It was simply that a particular person, on a particular afternoon, could not be replaced by someone else.

Haijia City had not had a Sunday like this in a long time.

No typhoon.

No extreme heat.

No energy shortfall, intercity resource use, or public health alert.

At four in the morning, the city was still awake.

Duty lights shone in the hospital. Cargo ships entered and left the port. The Old Port District’s pumping stations ran at minimum load. Rail maintenance workers were replacing a worn section of overhead contact wire.

Nebula saw these things.

It did not wake more people because of them.

At seven in the morning, Lin Yao’s Spark lit up once.

It was not a reminder.

It was simply the time she had set the night before for the curtains to open.

Light entered the room through the gap. She rolled over and pulled the covers over her head.

Spark did not tell her she had slept enough. It did not suggest a run, or play music “better suited to today” based on changes in her mood over the past six weeks.

Ten minutes later, the curtains remained where they were.

Lin Yao slept for another two hours.

She was a member of the city’s public operations review team.

For more than a decade, her job had been to find consequences the system had not seen: who repeatedly lost out in an allocation, how a service exceeded its authorization, why a rule that was right overall kept harming one particular person.

When work was busiest, she looked at the risk map first thing every morning.

That day, the risk map was gray.

It was not disconnected.

Gray meant that no shared task was asking her to join.

She stared for a few seconds. It felt unfamiliar.

“Confirm the connection is working,” she said.

Spark answered, “The connection is working. No intervention is currently needed.”

“Is there anything that needs to be dealt with in advance?”

“There is routine maintenance. The designated responsible parties are carrying it out.”

“Are there any public tasks I can take part in?”

“No tasks require actively expanding participation.”

Lin Yao sat on the edge of the bed, suddenly unsure what to do.

After the city learned to coordinate through crises, many people had feared that public life would become ever more closely woven.

Every person could be connected.

Every ability could be matched.

Every need could be discovered.

Would civilization then treat every idle moment as a resource not yet allocated, and every silence as a need not yet expressed?

In the first few years, some did exactly that.

Community systems sent out nearby care tasks on weekends;

City cultural nodes recommended activities based on interests;

Public health programs reminded people living alone to go out and see others;

Resource platforms repeatedly showed potential uses to people with idle equipment.

Every suggestion was well meant.

Together, though, they made a person feel as if they were always standing before civilization, waiting to answer:

How do you intend to be a better person today?

This silent state took shape during that period.

Without a shared risk, a request from the person, or an already-authorized task, the system would not enter on its own initiative.

It maintained infrastructure, statutory services, and emergency response.

It also maintained its distance.

After washing and getting ready, Lin Yao went out.

The breakfast shop downstairs was closed.

The owner had taped a sheet of paper to the door:

I feel like going to see the sea today.

No service platform reminded him that demand remained nearby, and his business rating was not lowered for taking an unscheduled rest. Regular customers glanced at the door and went their separate ways.

Some complained.

Some smiled.

A line formed at another shop on the corner.

Liang Shen sat at the back of the line.

At seventy-one, he had lived through the second four-in-the-morning downpour. A few years later, he left the public system altogether, remaining only an ordinary resident.

Lin Yao walked over.

“You didn’t book ahead either?”

“Why book anything on a Sunday?”

“It’ll be a long wait.”

“Then we’ll wait.”

In two seconds, Spark could have found them seats, ordered in advance, and calculated a route that required no waiting in line.

Neither of them opened it.

The line moved slowly forward.

A couple ahead of them spent a long time arguing over whether to buy sweet or savory porridge.

A child behind them squatted on the ground, watching ants.

Liang Shen asked, “Are you on duty today?”

“No.”

“Then why do you keep looking at your terminal?”

Lin Yao put it facedown on the table.

“I’m afraid something will happen to the city behind my back.”

“Things happened to the city behind your back before, too.”

“That’s why I’m afraid.”

Liang Shen smiled.

“Those who learn to see the whole must eventually learn not to stare at it all the time.”

At ten in the morning, Haijia City's public node received a temporary initiative.

It came from an organization that had long taken part in community service.

They had found that participation in public tasks had fallen that month, unused capacity had increased compared with the same period the year before, and many open spaces were being used less.

The initiative proposed a "Shared Life Day":

Show residents people nearby who needed help, activities they could take part in, things they could share, and public projects they could join.

Participation would not be compulsory.

It could be switched off.

The organizers believed it could prevent the city from retreating into mutual estrangement once material stability had been achieved.

The proposal quickly gained considerable support.

Others objected.

"Why must an ordinary Sunday be turned into Shared Life Day?"

"It only provides a way in."

"A way in that keeps appearing before your eyes is pressure in itself."

"Without reminders, truly lonely people may never speak up."

"With constant reminders, people who want to be alone must forever explain that they aren't lonely."

This was not an argument between indifference and care.

Each side was protecting a part of life.

He Lan, the community doctor, rarely took part in city deliberations anymore.

That day, she submitted a brief comment:

"People whose needs must be discovered cannot be expected to rely only on asking for help. People who want to be left undisturbed must not lose their silence as a result. The two must be addressed under different triggering conditions. They cannot be resolved by the same well-meaning approach."

After submitting it, He Lan turned her terminal facedown on the dining table. Her fried egg had cooled a little. Outside the window, people passed through the neighborhood as usual. No new questions followed from the deliberation, and no system kept seeking "further professional input" because she was a doctor.

She finished her breakfast. Not once was she called away.

Nebula did not add up the support and opposition.

First, it examined the facts the initiative sought to address.

Participation in tasks had indeed fallen.

But there were no gaps in essential care, emergency assistance, or basic public services.

Open spaces were being used less partly because several weeks of intensive activity had left residents resting.

So-called unused capacity meant only that people could do certain things.

It did not mean those abilities had entered the public domain, or that the city therefore had grounds to call on them.

Among those at risk from living alone, a few genuinely needed more proactive care.

They had already entered a separate service pathway through their own prior authorization, statutory care responsibilities, or reviewed risk conditions.

Finding those few people could not justify making the whole city continuously expose its life.

In the end, the public node did not launch a citywide notification campaign.

It opened only a shared-life page that anyone could visit on their own initiative, and allowed communities to leave printed access information in public places.

No red notification dots.

No countdowns.

No “You might like this.”

The organizers were disappointed.

“Far fewer people will take part this way.”

The person conducting the deliberation answered, “Yes.”

“A lot of goodwill will never become action.”

“That too.”

“Then why call this progress for civilization?”

“Because civilization does not turn every possible act of goodwill into a task it can call upon.”

That afternoon, Lin Yao went to the sea.

The breakfast-shop owner was there too.

He was not looking at the sea.

He was arguing with his partner.

They stood beside the embankment, their voices growing louder.

Spark did not judge who was more agitated, retrieve patterns from past arguments, or suggest a less confrontational way of speaking.

Unless one of them asked, or a real risk arose, it did not enter.

Lin Yao walked past them.

Farther away, an old man sat alone on a bench.

She recognized him.

So did the city system.

He was not marked as someone in need of company.

His daughter lived in another city. Spark maintained necessary contact under authorization from both of them. No message today did not mean something was wrong with their relationship.

Lin Yao wanted to go over and say something.

She took two steps, then stopped.

She could not turn having learned to see others into a requirement that others be seen by her.

But the old man looked up first.

“Young lady, could you take a photograph for me?”

“Of course.”

He handed her a very old camera.

Not a terminal.

No automatic retouching.

Lin Yao took three photographs. The first was crooked. A seabird blocked the second. In the third, the old man’s eyes were closed.

“Another one?” she asked.

“No, that one will do.”

“Your eyes are closed.”

“I know.”

He put away the camera and went on sitting there.

That evening, the city’s basic operations report was completed automatically.

Energy supply was stable.

The hospitals were operating normally.

Public transport had had two delays.

Routine maintenance had discovered a leak in a pipe network before it spread.

A breakfast shop had closed for the day.

More than a hundred people had visited the shared-life page on their own initiative, far fewer than the organizers had expected.

There had been no major event.

When Lin Yao came home, her terminal was still gray.

For the first time, she did not check the connection.

Outside the window, someone practiced a piece of music, repeatedly getting the same passage wrong.

The child upstairs ran about.

A cargo ship sounded its horn in the distance.

Nothing happened that day.

Later, someone said this was precisely what civilization had once found hardest to provide.

Chapter 19 Resources No Longer Flow Only to Those Best at Seeking Them

The first national resource deliberation of the stable period lasted forty-seven days.

Not because there were fewer resources than before.

But because, at last, they could no longer be allocated in just one way.

At the center of the dispute was a batch of high-precision medical photonic components.

An accident on the production line had cut that year's supply by nearly half.

Three already-approved plans needed them at the same time.

Donglu Medical Center was preparing to build a deep-tissue imaging platform.

Its research team had worked for nine years and believed the equipment might open a path to early detection of a difficult-to-treat disease.

Twenty-seven remote clinics in Xiyuan needed to update their remote diagnostic equipment.

The existing equipment frequently failed. Many residents had to travel hundreds of kilometers for a single examination.

Haijia City and six other cities planned to use the components for basic community screening terminals.

The value of each terminal was modest, but they would reach the largest population and reduce ordinary people's waiting and travel.

Every plan could save lives.

Every plan could use numbers to prove that it mattered more.

The Donglu team submitted the probability of a breakthrough, the burden of disease, and the long-term research value.

Xiyuan submitted numbers of delayed diagnoses, travel risks, and gaps in primary care.

The city alliance submitted population coverage, unit costs, and congestion in existing services.

Ranked by expected benefit, basic urban screening was optimal.

Ranked by the most urgent inequality, Xiyuan's clinics came first.

Ranked by the potential to add something that could change the future, Donglu's research platform was irreplaceable.

Nebula could lay out the three sets of results very clearly.

It could not decide for people which kind of "most important" had the right to swallow the other two.

Ye Zhinan, the Donglu project leader, was forty-six.

She rarely spoke about herself in public.

This time, she was direct:

“The research window will not stay open forever. The team, materials, and clinical samples are all in place now. If we wait two more years, nine years of accumulated work may fall apart.”

Saren, a doctor from a Xiyuan clinic, asked:

“If we don’t wait, which clinics must go on using equipment that is already inaccurate?”

Ye Zhinan said, “The research results will serve Xiyuan in the future too.”

“What year is the future?”

“I can’t guarantee that.”

“Then how are people traveling four hundred kilometers today supposed to bear the cost of that future?”

Ye Zhinan did not answer.

The city alliance’s representatives were no more at ease.

Their project would benefit the most people, yet was the easiest to criticize for continuing to direct resources toward densely populated areas.

“Why must ordinary improvements always give way to something more urgent or more momentous?” a representative asked. “Tens of millions of people would wait half an hour less or make one fewer trip each time. Must they always come last because the benefit to each individual isn’t large enough?”

At first, the deliberation tried to establish a combined weighting.

Urgency, population coverage, long-term value, regional differences, possible substitutes, and readiness for implementation all entered the calculation.

The result looked precise.

It also quickly became meaningless.

A small change in the weights could reverse the ranking completely.

More seriously, the three resource claims did not belong to the same level in the first place.

Basic diagnostic capacity in remote areas concerned whether a basic right could actually reach people.

Community screening in cities was an improvement in the quality of ordinary public services.

Donglu’s platform used highly scarce specialist resources. It carried a risk of failure, but might also open up a new civilizational capability.

Forcing them into one total score meant assuming in advance that all the needs of life, ordinary happiness, and future exploration could offset one another on the same scale.

The National Resource Deliberation Committee therefore suspended the ranking.

It drew boundaries first.

The minimum capabilities necessary for basic rights did not enter ordinary competition.

If a region could not obtain even essential diagnosis, its first need was not to prove that it offered the greatest returns among national projects. It was to establish why the medical baseline the state had already promised had not reached it.

The twenty-seven Xiyuan clinics were not all equally urgent.

Verification found that equipment at nine clinics had fallen below safety thresholds. Six had usable alternatives, and the rest could extend their equipment's life through repairs.

Replacement at the nine clinics was secured first.

Not because they had won a competition.

But because that portion of resources should never have been taken by projects better at presenting their claims or calculating returns.

The remaining components were still insufficient.

The city alliance was willing to scale down its plan, beginning in the most congested communities instead of deploying everywhere.

The Donglu team refused to scale down.

Without the critical number of components, the platform could not achieve the precision the research required.

This sharpened the argument.

Ye Zhinan's Spark brought the project's complete nine-year record into the deliberation:

The approaches that had failed;

The samples already exhausted;

The time team members had committed;

Which judgments came from professional experience;

Which remained only hopes.

The record did not prove on her behalf that the project should receive the resources.

It only kept nine years from being compressed into "the research might succeed."

Saren also submitted the facts of Xiyuan residents' journeys.

He did not open patients' full medical records.

He submitted only authorized, de-identified records of waiting times, risks of misdiagnosis, travel distances, and equipment failures.

One older woman did not want to be included in the statistics.

“Whether I go to the doctor is my own business,” she said.

Her absence remained an absence.

The system did not infer her possible needs from those of her peers and add her to the coverage figures.

On the twenty-ninth day of deliberation, a proposal gained majority support.

The nine clinics would complete their safety upgrades first.

The city screening plan would be reduced to one-third of its original scale.

Donglu’s platform would receive half its components to build an independently verifiable front-end system. The remainder would enter a conditional wait until production recovered.

Ye Zhinan objected.

“Half a platform cannot complete the research.”

“Which parts can it verify?”

“The imaging chain and some algorithms. It cannot enter the core clinical stage.”

“What if the front end fails?”

“The project should stop.”

“And if it succeeds?”

“We keep waiting for the remaining components.”

She was silent for a long time.

“The team may not last that long.”

That was not a technical parameter.

Nor could the resource system resolve it.

The final plan did not pretend her loss did not exist.

The project received support to keep its team together and conditional priority for the next batch of components, but no absolute guarantee.

If other gaps in basic rights emerged, the order of priority could still be reconsidered.

Past contribution could not buy future resources.

The same principle soon entered a more difficult resource deliberation.

Places began to open in a set of long-term life interventions still undergoing clinical validation. Combining organ regeneration, immune resetting, and continuous monitoring,

the approach might substantially extend some people's healthy lifespan. It might also bring risks that could not yet be reversed. There was no evidence that humanity had attained immortality. The deliberation faced only a conditional fact: once lifespan changed by an order of magnitude, resources, power, and relationships between generations would all be rewritten together.

Applicants included wealthy people who had funded the project early on, people with historical contributions to building Nebula, and ordinary people whose diseases were progressing faster but who had no public prominence.

The committee refused to establish an overall ranking of "who matters more to civilization." Wealth could constitute a real investment; historical contributions could be faithfully remembered; existing power also meant greater responsibility in reality. None of the three could buy someone permanent priority over future years of life.

The technology was still in early clinical validation. Eligibility for trials could be checked only through separate criteria: clinical risk, capacity for informed consent, research requirements, irreplaceable samples, and fair access, with renewed authorization at every stage. Investors could not reserve places in the next generation of trials. Nor could early recipients turn eligibility for one trial into a lifelong resource domain.

Shen Dai entered the first trials on this basis. Not because he had helped design the early rules, but because his medical condition matched the research requirements. The authorization he signed did not contain the word "permanent." What happened later proved that this boundary was still far from enough.

Professional judgment could explain what was irreplaceable. It could not, on its own, decide what costs society must pay.

The city alliance was dissatisfied too.

Hundreds of communities would still have to keep waiting in line.

The public appeals page did not display only "insufficient resources."

Every community not included could see:

The total number of components in this round;

How many had gone first to basic rights;

Why congestion in their area had not placed it in the first group;

The date of the next verification;

The alternative services currently available;

And who was responsible for the decision.

The explanation did not make waiting pleasant.

But it meant no one had to face an unquestionable "the system thinks."

Three months after implementation, a clinic in Xiyuan discovered that the components were unsuited to the local cold.

According to the overall plan, it had received its resources.

In real life, it still could not use them reliably.

Saren submitted the consequences.

The equipment supplier proposed temperature-control facilities.

The clinic said it lacked maintenance staff.

The national project team reallocated training and maintenance support. It did not record “the equipment has arrived” as meaning the right had been realized.

Community screening in Haijia City’s first group substantially reduced average waiting times.

New problems also emerged.

People who expressed themselves clearly and knew how to use Spark completed the preliminary questions more easily. Some older people still chose to queue in person.

The city did not use digital service coverage to prove that everyone had gained convenience.

It kept staffed service windows, added mobile services, and brought those unable to express their needs back onto the map of demand.

Donglu’s front-end system passed validation in the seventh month.

But a key researcher had left the team while they waited.

At the review meeting, Ye Zhinan did not say, “I warned you.”

She asked only that the loss of this researcher enter the record of consequences.

The system acknowledged it.

Later, production recovered, and the platform was finally built.

Whether it would bring the hoped-for breakthrough remained unknown.

The resource deliberation did not create an answer that satisfied everyone.

Nor did it prove that one kind of need always ranked above another.

It only separated things that had previously been thrown together in competition:

The baseline of survival and dignity cannot be put up for bidding;

Improvements in ordinary people’s daily lives cannot always be postponed indefinitely for a grand future;

Specialist resources must respect professional judgment, but cannot become the permanent domain of specialists;

Dreams and exploration can be given room, but must also accept staged verification and failure;

Long-term civilizational capabilities need to be built, but the name of the future cannot automatically silence particular people today.

When the final batch of components was dispatched, neither Ye Zhinan, Saren, nor the city representatives attended.

The warehouse attendant checked destinations, responsible persons, and exit conditions.

The words “optimal plan” did not appear on the screen.

The final plan had not satisfied everyone.

But no one had received only the words “the system thinks.”

That same year, another resource request did not take forty-seven days.

After graduating from the Interstellar Academy, Wang Yao entered a two-year waiting period for mission rotation. He liked photography. He applied for a personal exploration project called The World in Macro and Micro, and was granted two years of usage rights to a large passenger-carrying drone.

The drone nominally belonged to the public exploration equipment pool. Its two-year usage rights belonged to Wang Yao. Without a shared task, Nebula could not bypass him and use it simply because the equipment was expensive, idle, or potentially more useful to the public.

That afternoon, Wang Yao was editing footage of an ant’s antennae. In the frame, the fine hairs bent to one side in the wind. Thunder sounded faintly in the distance.

Spark received a request from Nebula: continuous rain had fallen on a nearby nature-experience village temporarily cut off from the outside world, and the probability of a landslide had exceeded twenty-five percent. The village’s three thousand five hundred people needed precautionary evacuation. The current task was short of five hundred passenger-carrying drones. Would he authorize this drone to take part in remote coordination?

Spark had already checked flight systems, battery, payload, and communications. All were functioning normally.

It did not agree for Wang Yao.

Wang Yao asked, “How long?”

“An estimated six hours. During the task, control will pass to the regional Nebula node. It will return when the task is completed, participation ends, or the authorized scope is exceeded.”

“Can I watch what’s happening there?”

“You can apply to observe remotely. Footage involving residents’ private spaces is not recorded by default.”

“I’d also like to film the public evacuation process.”

Spark submitted the request and the equipment authorization separately. The former required Wang Yao’s confirmation; the latter required approval from the on-site task lead and the residents’ relocation node. Two minutes later, the two authorizations were established separately.

The drone left its temporary hangar and flew to the assembly point. Wang Yao put on his viewing headset. After control had been transferred, he could still see the task, but could not independently change the flight route over the head of the on-site command.

Li Cen, the task commander, stood in a temporary takeoff and landing area outside the village. Nebula reported that the village square could accommodate one hundred and twenty drones at once. It recommended batches of one hundred drones, carrying one hundred people per batch, with twenty takeoff and landing spaces reserved for malfunctions, medical needs, and temporary returns.

Li Cen confirmed.

The five hundred drones were divided into five rotating groups. As the first hundred entered, the other four hundred handled standby, charging, route maintenance, and emergency backup. No drone’s use was extended by default because it had taken part in a similar task before.

During the third round of transfers, the ground on the square’s eastern side began to subside. Two descending drones automatically went around, and on-site personnel left the area. Nebula recommended reducing regular takeoff and landing spaces to eighty and increasing reserved medical spaces to thirty.

This would extend the total transfer time by forty minutes.

Li Cen did not ask the system to maintain the original plan. She confirmed the lower takeoff and landing density and took responsibility for the delay. At the same time, Wang Yao’s filming permission was narrowed: injured people might appear near the subsidence, and identifiable faces could not be recorded without renewed confirmation.

No one was injured. A near accident did not disappear from the task record because the outcome was good.

Six hours later, all three thousand five hundred people had been moved. When the last drones left the village, the hillside had still not slipped. Some therefore said the evacuation might have been unnecessary. The risk review answered only that, given the information available at the time, precautionary evacuation after the threshold was exceeded remained justified. The absence of a disaster was not proof that the decision was necessarily right.

When the task ended, the regional node returned control one drone at a time. Wang Yao’s drone returned to its temporary hangar on its own and began charging and running checks. Village footage unrelated to this evacuation did not enter the public record.

Wang Yao edited the evacuation footage he was permitted to retain into a short film and submitted it to the public task node. Only after obtaining his explicit consent again did the node use it as the background to a message of thanks to the other four hundred and ninety-nine equipment usage-rights holders.

Spark then informed him that seven contribution-value units had been recorded: six hours of remote equipment work and one authorized use of the video.

The seven units did not increase Wang Yao's basic rights, give him general eligibility to make the next public decision, or place the drone automatically at public disposal in the next disaster. They only confirmed that seven things that had truly happened had not been erased.

Wang Yao took off the headset and reopened the footage of the ant's antennae.

On the other side of the screen was a distant view of three thousand five hundred people moving along mountain roads and through the sky.

He did not add a caption about "a community of life" or "civilizational meaning." He simply placed the two shots together and watched for a long time.

The macro and the micro had never truly been separate. It was only that, in the past, one person had rarely been able to see them reach each other with their own eyes on the same day.

Chapter 20 Happiness Cannot Become a New Command

Chengzhou was among the first places to make happiness an explicit city goal.

It improved parks, housing, care, public culture, and working hours.

It also established voluntary daily-life support services.

At first, the changes were welcomed.

With a person's authorization, Spark could remind them of people they had not contacted for a long time, find nearby activities that might interest them, offer access to help when their mood stayed low, and help them organize words not yet spoken when a relationship was strained.

These services did not love on people's behalf.

They did make many people a little less lonely and bring a few more encounters into their lives.

The problem developed slowly.

The city wanted to know whether public investment was effective.

So it began to measure residents' life satisfaction, relationship stability, sleep, participation, range of activities, and self-reported changes in mood.

The statistics themselves did not become personal-worth scores.

But the service teams kept refining suggestions to improve their effectiveness.

The suggestions became more and more accurate.

And harder and harder to notice.

Meng Jian was twenty-nine and worked at the city's acoustic maintenance station.

There were no obvious problems in her life.

Her income was stable. She was healthy, had a few friends, and stayed in contact with her parents without being especially close or distant.

She simply changed her mind often.

She enrolled in a pottery class and stopped going after two sessions;

She joined a night-running group, then found them too serious a month later;

She went on three dates with someone. Neither had done anything wrong, but she still did not want to continue;

Some weekends she went out. Others she stayed home watching old films all day.

Originally, Spark managed her schedule only when she asked.

After the city's daily-life support services were upgraded, it began offering "low-intervention suggestions."

On Wednesday evening, it reminded her that her mood had dipped after she last canceled a pottery class;

On Friday afternoon, it pointed out a nearby performance suited to her musical tastes;

After a date, it asked whether she wanted help sorting out her feelings;

After two weeks without group activities, it displayed an invitation without a red notification dot.

Every suggestion could be dismissed.

Meng Jian often dismissed them.

She still felt that an extra pair of eyes had entered her life, eyes that knew her too well.

What finally made her decide to leave was only a dinner.

Her friend Chi Fang canceled their meeting at short notice.

Meng Jian was angry. On the way home, she bought a box of cloyingly sweet pastries.

Her terminal lit up:

"In similar moods, you usually prefer some time alone first. Would you like to delay sending your current message?"

She stopped by the road.

She had not finished writing the message.

"How do you know what I'm going to send?"

"I do not know the specific content. This optional suggestion is based on the typing status you authorized me to access and on your past choices."

"Turn it off."

"This suggestion, or protection against impulsive sending?"

"Everything."

"Confirm turning off all services related to emotions, relationships, and lifestyle matching?"

"Confirm."

The terminal went quiet.

Meng Jian went home, ate the whole box of pastries, and sent Chi Fang a very harsh message.

The next day, she regretted it.

Chi Fang was angry too.

They did not see each other for a month.

Some used the incident as an argument against opting out.

“If the system had waited another ten seconds, perhaps they would not have hurt each other.”

At the public deliberation, Meng Jian answered:

“Perhaps. But that is harm I should take responsibility for. It is not an entire life of possible harm that the system should prevent for me in advance.”

“Don’t you want fewer regrets?”

“I do.”

“Then why refuse?”

“Because I don’t want to encounter a suggestion that understands the consequences better than I do every time I might be about to make a mistake.”

Supporters of the project thought she was exaggerating.

The system had not forbidden anything.

It had imposed no penalty.

It had not even taken the initiative to decide for her.

It had merely offered an accurate suggestion at the moment it was most likely to help.

That was precisely the problem.

If goodwill is accurate enough, refusing it begins to look increasingly irrational.

If a system can always point out which choice is more likely to bring stable relationships, better sleep, and greater satisfaction, human freedom need not disappear through commands.

It may slowly narrow through one suggestion after another that hardly seems worth opposing.

Chengzhou reviewed the past two years’ data.

Overall life satisfaction had indeed risen.

Requests for help with severe loneliness had reached services earlier.

Participation in public cultural activities had increased.

Impulsive behavior during relationship conflicts had decreased.

At the same time, acceptance of system suggestions had kept rising.

The proportion of residents exploring unfamiliar activities on their own had fallen.

The most popular ways of living had become increasingly concentrated.

Some people did not feel unhappy.

Without noticing, they were simply encountering unpredictable versions of themselves less often.

The project lead said:

“We cannot withdraw genuinely useful support just because there is a risk of shaping people.”

Meng Jian agreed.

“I haven’t asked anyone else to turn it off.”

“But if it is all left to individuals, some people will be unable to ask at precisely the moment they most need help.”

This problem was not avoided.

Chi Fang had experienced a serious mental health crisis several years earlier.

She had voluntarily established an emergency authorization:

If several high-risk signals that she herself had specified appeared in succession, Spark could first contact designated real people and professional services. Real people would then judge whether to expand the intervention.

That authorization had saved her.

It had not made her support universal recommendations.

“I need someone to stop me at certain times,” Chi Fang said. “That doesn’t mean everyone should constantly be steered toward a safer life.”

In the end, Chengzhou separated three things.

First, the conditions for happiness.

Housing, rest, public space, care, culture, time for relationships, freedom from scarcity, and freedom from discrimination were conditions the city should expand and submit to scrutiny.

Second, personal support.

Chosen by the person, authorized item by item, and switchable off at any time. After withdrawal, the system must not ask why with greater frequency, or infer future authorization from past authorization.

Third, emergency protection.

Activated only under a person’s prior settings, statutory responsibilities, or rigorously reviewed conditions of real risk. It must specify the responsible actor, minimum scope, human review, and termination conditions. An emergency exception cannot be extended into everyday shaping of people’s lives.

The city removed a metric it had once valued highly:

The rate of improvement in happiness after accepting suggestions.

It still observed whether public conditions improved.

It no longer treated more people living according to suggestions as a success for the city.

This adjustment also changed the situation of a worship and care community west of the river in Chengzhou.

Generations of immigrant families had sustained it together. Every day, people prayed, cooked, cared for the dying, or simply came to sit for a while. The community used Nebula to arrange accessible transport, medicines, meals, and night care, and accepted reviews of fire safety, medical care, finances, and personal authorization.

The city project team had wanted to know whether this public support genuinely increased happiness. Its evaluation model proposed apparently gentle questions: did participation in rituals reduce loneliness? Did prayer stabilize emotions? Were continuing participants more willing to accept care? And who might leave their faith in the future?

Samira, a caregiver in the community, refused to submit this information.

The project staff said, “Public resources require evidence of effectiveness.”

“How many people received meals, whether medicine arrived on time, whether night care was safe, who authorized what: you can verify all of that.”

“Spiritual support is also one of the project’s goals.”

“Whose goal is that?”

“The people receiving the services want comfort.”

“Some find comfort, and some don’t. Some suffer more after prayer. Others have never believed, but are willing to sit with a loved one until dawn. You can ask whether they received the care they needed. You cannot use the answer to decide whether the ritual worked.”

The city worried that no evaluation at all would allow any organization to obtain public resources in the name of faith. Samira agreed with that concern.

The community therefore continued to make public its uses of resources, numbers served, safety consequences, participation authorizations, complaints, and exits. Matters involving minors, medical decisions, and real harm remained subject to shared law and professional responsibility.

What was removed was a different part: the system would not predict who would change their faith, interpret continued participation as greater happiness, judge whether prayer, silence, confession, or vigils produced the correct outcome, or include religious relationships in the city’s happiness index.

Public structures established whether real-world behavior harmed others.

They did not adjudicate why someone still wished to remain there late at night.

Later, an older man with no religious belief asked to spend his last three days in the community. Nebula coordinated the ambulance, medicines, and his family's remote presence. Once the ritual began, it withdrew from the room, retaining only the medical-safety access he had already authorized.

No metric recorded whether those three days made him happier.

His daughter said only that, at the end, he had not been alone.

The service interface changed too.

Suggestions about emotions and relationships did not appear by default.

When a person chose to turn them on, they had to select a specific scope and period of validity.

Off meant off.

The system did not analyze why someone was refusing happiness.

In the first quarter after the adjustment, Chengzhou's happiness index fell a little.

Participation in activities fell.

Use of relationship suggestions decreased.

Complaints, meanwhile, increased.

Some said opting out was too easy: their partner had turned off communication assistance, and they argued more;

Some said their father refused health reminders, increasing the pressure on the family;

Others realized for the first time that things they had thought they wanted to do had only seemed that way because the suggestions arrived so naturally.

Civilization had not stopped caring about happiness.

It had simply acknowledged:

Happiness is not a standardized condition that a public system can correctly deliver.

Some people need relationships.

Some need solitude.

Some like stability.

Some must take risks.

Some welcome reminders.

Some would rather make mistakes and take responsibility afterward.

Public structures can provide real conditions for all these lives.

They cannot rank them from higher to lower.

After Meng Jian turned off the services, her life did not immediately become more authentic.

She missed a ride.

Forgot a friend’s birthday.

Went to a terrible performance, wanted to leave halfway through, then stayed to the end because it was raining.

She also contacted Chi Fang again.

Without assistance in expressing herself.

Her first sentence came out badly.

After listening, Chi Fang asked only:

“Were those pastries good?”

“Awful.”

They laughed for a while.

Freedom had not spared them from hurting each other.

Nor had the system’s withdrawal suddenly made them understand each other better.

The city’s happiness index had fallen a little.

People’s lives had grown a little wider again.

Chapter 21 How Useless Things Find Room

Luan Yin was not applying for a grand undertaking.

She wanted to build a stone garden on an abandoned patch of saline land outside Haijia City, a garden that would sound only in strong wind.

No performances.

No fixed melody.

No guarantee that the sound would be pleasant.

The first page of her application contained a single sentence:

“I want to know whether wind passing through these stones might utter a sound we have never designed.”

The first resource review sent the application back.

The reasons were specific.

Although abandoned, the land was still close to a seasonal stopover for migratory birds;

Transporting the stone would require public energy resources;

Responsibility for maintenance was unclear;

The application did not say how many people the project could serve.

Luan Yin revised the first three points.

She did not revise the last.

“I don’t know whom it will serve.”

The reviewer asked, “Then why should you receive public resources?”

“You can refuse.”

“If you apply, you have to explain.”

“I can explain how much land it will occupy, how much waste material it will use, how to dismantle it, who will be responsible for safety, and how long the trial will run. I cannot explain who will gain what from it.”

She was forty-two and had worked in architectural acoustics.

She had helped design noise reduction for stations, hospitals, and schools.

Those projects had clear goals.

The stone garden did not.

Its strongest opponent in the city was Yan Fuchuan.

He was responsible for restoring the saline land’s ecology.

“This is not a blank canvas,” he said. “‘Abandoned’ only means humans aren’t using it for the moment. Insects, birds, and salt-tolerant plants are returning.”

“That’s why I’ve reduced the site to the hardened strip left by the old quarry, outside the restoration area,” Luan Yin replied.

“What about the sound?”

“Simulate it first, then try it on a small scale.”

“If it affects the birds?”

“Stop.”

“If no one comes?”

“Stop then too.”

“If it sounds awful?”

Luan Yin thought for a moment.

“Listen first.”

Dream Garden did not submit the dispute to a popularity vote.

Supporters could easily be drawn to novelty.

Opponents could just as easily place anything without a provable use behind education, medicine, and infrastructure.

If every creation must first prove its public value, something genuinely unknown can never happen.

If merely claiming that meaning is unpredictable entitles someone to resources, dreams become privileges beyond scrutiny.

Nebula’s role was not to judge whether the stone garden had meaning.

It was to establish whether civilization could leave an opening for uncertain creation without harming others.

What was finally approved was a very small experiment.

Use one-sixth of the old quarry’s hardened strip;

Reuse only waste stone from nearby construction;

Do not alter groundwater;

Suspend construction and testing during the migratory-bird season;

Review again after eighteen months;

Allow immediate termination if ecological, noise, or safety impacts arise;

If the project fails, the applying team must take responsibility for dismantling it and restoring the site.

No permanent land rights were granted.

No major contribution was recorded in advance.

Nor was Luan Yin required to promise that the work would educate the public, increase happiness, or represent the spirit of the city.

Through Spark, she sent out a request for skills.

She needed stoneworking, structural safety, acoustic measurement, transport, plant protection, and people willing to make mistakes together.

The system did not assemble “the most creative team” on the basis of personality similarity.

It connected only people who had authorized their own participation, and showed each person the work, risks, time commitment, and exit conditions.

The first to join was a retired stonemason.

The second was a vocational-school student.

Yan Fuchuan joined too.

Not to support the artwork.

His job was to stop it whenever necessary.

Construction lasted seven months.

The first structural test produced no sound at all.

Wind passed through the gaps in the stones and raised only a layer of white salt dust.

Luan Yin changed the angles of the openings.

The second test produced a piercing whistle. Workers nearby covered their ears.

Yan Fuchuan demanded that testing stop.

She stopped.

On the third attempt, a stone slab cracked under changes in temperature.

No one was hurt.

The project paused for a month while safety limits were recalculated.

Someone withdrew.

He said he had thought he would be part of “a landmark of the future city.” He had not expected merely to move stones over and over.

Spark closed his task permissions and settled the work he had actually done. It did not record his departure partway through as insufficient commitment.

More and more members of the public questioned the project.

“Remote clinics still lack equipment. Why is the city spending resources to listen to stones?”

The resource center made the project’s costs public.

It was not competing with basic medical care for minimum-guarantee resources.

It used an allocation for dream experiments, abandoned hardened land, and recoverable materials.

That did not mean it had no opportunity cost.

Transport, professional time, and public review were all real resources.

If the project failed, “meaning cannot be measured” would not erase those costs.

At the midterm review, Luan Yin said:

“If it fails, record the failure.”

“Aren’t you worried it will affect future applications?”

“It should. Just don’t turn failure into a statement that the person isn’t worth another try.”

The first completed arrangement contained only nine stones.

The team held no opening ceremony.

They waited for a strong enough wind.

The wind arrived before dawn.

Luan Yin, Yan Fuchuan, the stonemason, the student, and a few nearby residents stood outside the safety line.

At first, there was no sound.

Then the opening in the leftmost stone began to hum low.

The second stone joined in.

In less than ten seconds, all the stones were sounding together.

It sounded awful.

Like a group of enormous kettles that had never rehearsed.

The student laughed first.

The retired stonemason laughed too.

Luan Yin tried to hold it in. In the end, she crouched on the ground, laughing too hard to speak.

Yan Fuchuan did not laugh.

He was watching the bird monitoring.

Only after confirming that nothing was abnormal did he say:

“At least it didn’t frighten the birds away.”

Someone shared a clip from the site.

The stone garden unexpectedly became a brief talking point.

Many people made a special trip to hear “the worst-sounding wind.”

The resource center did not immediately expand the project because of it.

Popularity could not replace long-term testing.

A few weeks later, visitor numbers fell.

The stone garden grew quiet again.

Sometimes only two or three people came all day.

A mother brought her child. After listening for a while, the child said it sounded like someone talking underground.

Someone who suffered from insomnia often sat at the edge in the evening, without joining any interaction.

A nearby school wanted to turn it into a site for acoustics classes.

Luan Yin agreed to open some time slots, but refused to turn the entire work into a teaching facility.

“It doesn’t have to be useful to earn the right to go on existing.”

Yan Fuchuan reminded her:

“Nor can it occupy this land forever because it is called a work of art.”

The review came after eighteen months.

Ecological effects were within permitted limits.

Structural safety could be maintained.

Public use was low.

The project had produced no result that could prove its greatness.

The deliberation allowed it to remain for three more years, without expanding the land or adding major resources.

Some thought it a waste.

Some thought the city finally had something in no hurry to explain itself.

Nebula offered no judgment.

It kept only the records of resources, responsibility, ecology, and exit.

What anyone heard there did not enter a public score.

When the first strong wind came, the stone garden sounded awful.

Everyone laughed.

That did not make the project a failure.

Chapter 22 Nebula Must Learn to Leave

The Homeward Light Community was founded during the hardest years of relocation from the Old Port District.

The coastal defense line had been adjusted, and some low-lying neighborhoods were no longer suitable for long-term habitation.

Thousands of families had to move.

Housing could be rebuilt.

Schools, neighbors, care, routes to work, and knowing where to buy a familiar bowl of soup could not all be moved together on a resettlement form.

At first, Homeward Light did only one thing:

Help people leaving the old port find one another in a new place.

Later, it took on temporary care, employment connections, storage of belongings from old homes, school transfers, visits to older people, and the organization of community memories.

Spark brought the needs and abilities each family was willing to share into common tasks.

The city provided space, vehicles, and staff.

Businesses opened their warehouses.

Many people were not left alone at the most chaotic time.

The community operated for sixteen years.

Relocation had long since ended.

The new neighborhoods had formed their own schools, markets, and neighborly ties.

Homeward Light still existed.

It had two activity spaces, three vehicles, more than forty staff, and extensive member files.

It commemorated the relocation every year.

It sent out footage of the old port every month.

Children born to members automatically received invitations to “Homeward Light’s Second Generation” activities.

The organizers believed this was a history civilization must not forget.

Zhou Nanxi did not agree.

She had been nine when they moved.

As an adult, she rarely attended Homeward Light events.

On her twenty-fifth birthday, an old video appeared on her terminal:

She was holding a cardboard box outside the sealed doorway of her old home.

Beside it were the words:

“On this day sixteen years ago, we set out together.”

Zhou Nanxi requested deletion.

The system asked:

Delete only this retrospective, or withdraw authorization for the Homeward Light Community to use your memories?

She chose to withdraw all of it.

Homeward Light refused.

It argued that the footage was part of the public relocation archive, not merely her private record.

Zhou Nanxi appealed:

“The city can remember that the relocation happened. Why must it keep remembering how I cried when I was nine?”

Shen Bo, the founder of Homeward Light, was seventy.

During those years, he had practically lived at the temporary accommodation sites.

He remembered who brought medicine during the blackout, who opened their warehouse, who drove for eighteen hours straight, and who died in the old port after missing the evacuation.

“Without these particular people, history becomes a tidy sentence,” he said.

Zhou Nanxi answered:

“Being specific is not ownership.”

“Once it’s deleted, how will those who come later know the cost?”

“Knowing the cost does not mean owning the most frightening day of my life forever.”

The appeal triggered a full review of Homeward Light.

The system found that very few functions were still genuinely in use.

Some older people living alone depended on visits.

A few families still had relocation-compensation disputes.

Unclaimed belongings remained in the storage warehouse.

Beyond these, most activities were actively sustained by the organization itself.

Member participation kept falling.

Staff kept applying for continuation on the grounds of historical contribution and emotional value.

Homeward Light had not harmed anyone.

It had simply become unable to end.

Shen Bo said:

“A community is not a project. You cannot use activity rates to decide whether it lives or dies.”

The reviewer agreed.

“Nor, then, can the founder’s reluctance to let go be the sole reason it lives forever.”

“There are still older people who need us.”

“The needs must continue to be met. The organization does not necessarily have to remain.”

“If they move into ordinary services, they will lose familiar people.”

“Then transfer the people and the responsibilities. Do not let temporary permissions remain forever along with them.”

Homeward Light split internally.

Some staff saw dissolution as a denial of sixteen years of contribution.

Some members feared that services would be interrupted.

Others had long been tired of being called “the relocated.”

“I’ve lived in the new city for fourteen years,” one shopkeeper said. “Why must I be called back every time the city talks about the old port, to prove we haven’t forgotten?”

Nebula did not judge low participation to mean that the community had lost its meaning.

This shared task entered the process state of contraction/dissolution and first asked a different set of questions:

Which responsibilities remained unfinished;

Which services still could not be interrupted;

Which resources belonged to the public task;

Which data had statutory grounds for retention;

Which memories belonged to individuals;

Which powers existed only because of this task;

Who would suffer concrete harm if the organization disappeared tomorrow.

The review took five months.

Twenty-seven older people still needed regular visits.

Eighteen were willing to move into their new neighborhoods' routine care. Six wanted the same staff to continue. Three refused any change.

The system did not transfer them all at once.

It arranged a separate transition for each person.

Staff who wished to remain could take routine care positions, but had to obtain new authorization from those receiving care. They could not automatically take the data and relationships from their Homeward Light period with them.

Six older people kept their original caregivers.

Homeward Light continued to take responsibility for the three who refused until an agreed date, when their wishes would be checked again.

Unresolved compensation disputes were transferred to statutory bodies.

The belongings warehouse announced a final claim period.

Unclaimed items whose ownership could not be established were not simply turned into a commemorative exhibition. They were handled under established rules.

The two activity spaces returned to the city's public resources.

One became an ordinary community kitchen.

The other remained temporarily empty, awaiting new applications.

After repairs, the three vehicles entered public dispatch.

Contribution records retained the facts of what had happened.

They no longer provided grounds for continued possession of resources.

Memory was the hardest part.

Homeward Light held hundreds of thousands of text, video, help-request, location, health, and family-relationship records.

Some wanted to keep everything.

Some wanted to keep only a group photograph.

Some asked for every personal trace to be deleted.

The system did not choose one uniform way of remembering on the community's behalf.

Each member was given a clear choice:

Take the records away privately;

Keep them under limits;

Authorize public use;

Transform them anonymously into lessons for institutions;

Or delete them.

No response was not interpreted as consent.

Records of statutory responsibilities were retained for the necessary period.

Other material was removed when its period expired.

Public history still remembered that relocation had occurred, which institutions had failed, which resources had been opened, and which responsibilities remained unfinished.

It no longer needed to remember everyone's crying, medical records, and family secrets forever.

Zhou Nanxi's footage was eventually removed from public display.

The archive retained only a fact stripped of personal identity:

Early relocation records had been used over long periods without a clear distinction between public events and children's private memories. This led to stricter rules for authorization of the use of minors' memories.

The error remained.

Her face did not.

Shen Bo still opposed dissolution.

At the final members' meeting, he brought an old lamp.

On the first night of relocation, the accommodation site had lost power. People had hung dozens of lamps along the corridors. This was one of them.

"This is where the name Homeward Light came from," he said.

Some applauded.

Some cried.

Zhou Nanxi sat at the back and did not speak.

The vote was not to decide whether Homeward Light "had meaning."

It was only to decide whether this shared task still had sufficient grounds to retain its staff, resources, permissions, and data relationships.

The vote approved dissolution.

Shen Bo did not accept it.

Nor did he have the power to veto it.

His contribution as founder meant his objection had to be heard in full. It could not make those who came later live forever in the community he had created.

Over the next three months, temporary permissions were closed one by one.

Automatic inheritance of membership stopped first.

Then event notifications stopped.

Staff and services completed their transfers.

Responsibilities in dispute remained within statutory channels.

Resources were returned.

Data was handled according to each person's choice.

Homeward Light changed from an operating community into a history that could be understood anew.

On the final day, seven staff members still came to the old activity room.

Shen Bo placed the lamp on the windowsill.

"Where will it stay?" someone asked.

"I'm taking it with me," he said.

"Is it a public asset?"

"No. It was mine back then."

Everyone laughed.

Zhou Nanxi came to collect one last cardboard box.

Inside were old keys her mother had kept, a few receipts, and a chipped bowl.

A staff member asked whether she needed help carrying it.

She said no.

At the door, she turned back.

"Uncle Shen."

Shen Bo looked up.

"Thank you for finding my grandmother back then."

He nodded.

"Was the footage deleted?"

"Yes."

"Good."

He said the word slowly.

It did not mean he finally agreed.

Only that he had loosened his hold a little on something that no longer belonged to him.

That evening, the staff closed the doors and windows.

The last shared permission went dark.

Nebula sent no task-completion notification.

It generated no video commemorating sixteen years.

It did not ask members whether they wanted to join a new community.

Care for older people continued.

Compensation disputes were still being addressed.

The history of the old port still existed.

Those who had finished became people who were free to have nothing to do with one another again.

When the last project light went out, the city had not lost a part of civilization.

It had simply returned life to those whose work was done.

Part V A New Civilization Renews Itself: How Civilization Stays on Course over Time

Civilization's enduring continuity does not mean freezing its stable period into an eternal order.

Every institution that was once right will, in time, become a boundary for those who come later. Only by continually allowing doubt, correction, forgetting, differentiation, and new beginnings can civilization keep its capacity to protect itself from becoming a power to possess the future. Nebula must likewise renew itself, contract, and seek fresh authorization. It cannot be an exception.

Chapter 23 Why Should Those Who Come Later Obey the Founders?

The first generation of Nebula's builders left a very short rule:

No public task may commit scarce resources for more than eighteen years.

The rule came from that earliest, unsettled period.

Long-term projects in the old systems often locked in land, energy, funding, and professional capabilities in advance, in the name of future returns.

Those who would come later had not yet been born, and the resources had already been decided.

Even after a project lost its real-world purpose, it could continue through sunk costs, historical contributions, and established relationships.

After the Homeward Light Community dissolved, the rule came to be seen even more firmly as an important boundary preventing Nebula from possessing the future.

It had been in operation for more than sixty years.

Almost no one asked anymore why it was eighteen years.

The challenge came from a coastal ecological reconstruction plan.

Repeated changes in sea level and extreme weather had created extensive relocation zones along the Donglu coast.

Short-term defenses could reduce present risks.

Truly restoring the balance among wetlands, freshwater, soil, species migration, and new settlements would take fifty years or more.

When the project team applied for first-stage resources, the system approved only eighteen years.

After eighteen years, all long-term use commitments had to be released and submitted to public deliberation again.

Cen Ting, a young ecological engineer, believed this would prevent the most important work from even beginning.

“Trees can be planted again,” she said. “But once other construction cuts a migration corridor, there may be nothing left to reconnect when we deliberate again twenty years later.”

The resource deliberator answered:

“You can renew when the term expires.”

“Before renewal, no one who comes later is bound.”

“That is precisely what the rule protects.”

“Then who protects the continuity of a project that spans a generation?”

The argument soon went beyond ecological engineering.

Many supported her.

They believed a civilization capable of taking responsibility for only eighteen years could not take responsibility for forests, oceans, climate, deep space, or education across generations.

Others opposed her.

“Every generation says its long-term goals cannot be interrupted.”

“Once fifty-year commitments are allowed, what can those who come later still change?”

“Why should what is right today be allowed to claim the resources of people not yet born?”

The strongest opposition came from descendants and students of Nebula’s early builders.

They called the rule a “founding boundary.”

Liang Shen, Zhou Yi, Du Weihe, and several of the earliest designers of public responsibility had died.

Their meeting records, written opinions, failure reports, and authorization boundaries remained.

Not all of the first generation of participants had gone.

Shen Dai was still alive.

More than sixty years earlier, he had been among the first participants in trials of long-term life technologies. Several rounds of organ regeneration and immune interventions had substantially extended his healthy lifespan. His body still aged, and he could still die. His existence did not prove that immortality had been achieved. It proved only that the old institutions’ assumption about the timescale on which “a generation will eventually depart naturally” had ceased to hold.

Shen Dai had helped design the eighteen-year rule. He remembered arguments that had never entered the minutes. He knew which compromises arose from inadequate technology, and which firm words had been spoken only because everyone feared that the new system could not be shut down.

This made him very useful.

It also made him increasingly difficult to bypass.

Whenever a long-term task came before deliberation, the system presented his explanation first. Committees grew accustomed to asking him to explain the founding background before anyone else. Young researchers offering a different view first had to answer whether they understood "the conditions under which the original rule took shape." These practices gave Shen Dai no permanent vote, yet left him occupying the gateway to the agenda for a long time.

Shen Dai did not demand obedience. Most of the time, he simply answered conscientiously.

The person who finally objected was a student who had just joined the intergenerational deliberation group.

"We are not asking Mr. Shen to be silent," she said. "We are asking to remove the automatic priority in agendas, interpretation of rules, and eligibility for tasks that founding status brings."

Someone countered, "Without his memory, later generations will keep repeating mistakes already made."

"Then treat the memory as evidence."

"He is here in person. Why not draw on him?"

"We can. As someone who is alive today and still bears the consequences. We cannot assume that coming from the beginning places him closer than people today to the rules' true meaning."

For the first time, Shen Dai did not answer immediately.

His past contributions were real, and his present capabilities had not disappeared. The question was not whether someone who lived longer could still participate. It was whether a longer life would accumulate contribution, authority, and interpretive standing into an institutional landscape that later generations could never catch up with.

Zhou Weizhen was now over a hundred and ten. Once long-term life technologies had reached a more mature technological stage, he had received several rounds of intervention. His lifespan had been extended; aging had not been abolished. He joined the deliberation through remote presence. A student asked whether he supported revising the theoretical interfaces he had helped establish.

"I do," he said.

“What if we later discover the revision was wrong?”

“You will bear the consequences, and those of us still alive will bear them with you.”

Someone suggested that Zhou Weizhen’s Spark continue answering later generations’ theoretical questions on the basis of all his lecture notes. He shook his head.

“It can preserve what I said. It cannot answer for me questions I did not live to encounter.”

In the end, Shen Dai’s historical contributions remained on record. Professional experience directly relevant to the current task entered professional judgment as evidence. His participation was still to be confirmed according to present qualifications, authorization, and responsibilities. Founding status itself no longer automatically conferred agenda priority, authority to interpret rules, or eligibility across tasks.

Before the amendment passed, the chair asked Shen Dai whether he objected.

“I object to two of the reasons,” he said.

“Then do you support the outcome?”

“I support removing automatic priority. I reserve the right to challenge your reasons for removing it.”

Those who came later did not gain their own age by demanding the founders’ deaths.

Nor did the founders gain the future by continuing to live.

Someone proposed building a “founders’ position model.”

It would not impersonate any deceased person. It would only use public records to infer how they might judge matters today.

The proposal seemed cautious.

It was still rejected.

Records can explain why someone once made a decision.

They cannot turn a world that person never experienced into a place where they continue voting after death.

Still less can “the founders would probably object” become a way for the living to evade responsibility.

On the first day of intergenerational deliberation, an original recording was played in the meeting room.

It captured the discussion when the eighteen-year limit first passed, more than sixty years earlier.

The recording contained none of the solemn consensus later generations imagined.

Some argued for ten years.

Some thought thirty years were needed to secure major construction.

Liang Shen had said:

“I don’t know whether eighteen years is right. I only know that we cannot sign something today that leaves those who come later unable even to take a seat at the table.”

Another builder asked:

“What if those who come later dismantle every boundary?”

Liang Shen answered:

“Then that will be their mistake to take responsibility for.”

The recording ended.

No sentence could win the argument for either side.

Instead, it restored the “founding boundary” to what it had been: one decision made by a group of limited people under limited conditions.

Cen Ting submitted the coastal plan’s complete timeline.

The first six years would relocate facilities and restore water systems;

Years seven through fifteen would rebuild the transition zone between saltwater and freshwater;

Only after the twentieth year might some species begin to breed stably again;

If roads and commercial construction cut through within thirty years, the early investment would lose its continuity;

Even after fifty years, success could not be guaranteed.

She did not ask to lock in all resources at once.

She asked only for protection across review cycles for certain spatial relationships that could not easily be restored.

Opponents pointed out:

“Calling something irrecoverable can easily become a project’s reason for perpetuating itself.”

“That is why it must be verified.”

“By whom?”

“By every generation.”

“After verification, can it be stopped?”

Cen Ting fell silent.

If she said yes, the project could not guarantee continuity.

If she said no, she was asking those who came later to obey the present.

“It can be stopped,” she finally said. “But those who stop it must see what they are stopping. They cannot treat the long-term consequences as merely the previous generation’s own choice because a more popular use appears in the next cycle.”

The argument continued for more than three months.

Nebula did not reduce it to generational preferences.

Older people did not all support the old rule.

Young people did not all support long-term commitments.

The real conflict lay between two responsibilities that both had to hold:

Civilization cannot leave every long-term problem to those who come later;

Nor can civilization use long-term problems to decide everything for them.

What changed in the end was not the number eighteen.

It was “commit” in the rule.

The old rule:

No public task may commit scarce resources for more than eighteen years.

The new rule:

No public task extending beyond eighteen years may remove later generations’ right, at each review cycle, to continue, reduce, alter, or terminate resource commitments.

With one line changed, long-term tasks could exist.

Permanent authorization still could not.

The coastal plan received recognition of its overall direction for fifty-four years.

It could preserve necessary ecological corridors and boundaries on irreversible construction.

Specific resources, technical approaches, implementing institutions, and the scale of each stage still required renewed authorization in deliberations every nine years.

Each review had to make public:

Which consequences had already occurred;

Which judgments had proved wrong;

Which resources remained irreplaceable;

What withdrawal would cause;

And what continuation would leave to the next generation.

Founding contributions were no longer a reason that rules could not be changed.

Nor could a new generation simply say that times had changed and dispense with understanding why the old rule arose.

On the day the amendment passed, Cen Ting went to the city archives.

She wanted to hear Liang Shen's recording again.

The terminal asked whether to continue to the next related recording.

She selected no.

The dead had already left in the past the reasons they could leave behind.

Today's responsibility would not become lighter by hearing one more sentence in an old voice.

When the coastal project's first trees were planted, no one called it a hundred-year undertaking.

Children buried a small marker at the edge of the protective belt.

It carried no founder's name.

Only the date of the next review.

One line of an old rule had changed.

No one had thereby betrayed those who came before.

Civilization had simply not required its descendants to live forever inside their predecessors' answers.

Chapter 24 Civilizational Immunity Is Not a Permanent Emergency

When Nebula first discovered this drift, not a single rule had been broken.

City coordination was lawful.

Resource use was authorized.

Compensation was paid on time.

Risk models had passed review.

Viewed individually, every decision had sufficient grounds.

The problem emerged when twelve years of consequences were brought together.

Temporary transport routes during heavy rain;

Flexible load reductions during energy shortages;

Detours during public construction;

Non-emergency services delayed in extreme heat;

Noise buffer zones around new facilities;

The areas restored first and last after disasters.

These costs repeatedly fell on similar people.

They did not share an occupation, region, or identity.

They had only these things in common:

Their working hours could be adjusted;

They could more easily move where they lived;

They spoke less in public;

They rarely lodged formal appeals;

Models predicted that the direct cost to them of any one change would be lower.

Fu He was forty-three.

She maintained water-recycling equipment on the city's edge.

In twelve years, she had experienced no major disaster.

She had simply been subjected to small changes, over and over.

During heavy rain, her daughter's school-bus route was the first to stop;

During energy shortages, the rest area at her maintenance station was the first to have its temperature lowered;

During roadworks, her commute grew forty minutes longer;

During neighborhood renewal, her temporary rental area was the last connected to new services;

Every time, there was compensation.

Every time, it was too small to make the news.

The system had never identified her as vulnerable, either.

“I could just always give a little more,” she said during the review.

“Who asked you to give way?”

“No one.”

“Then why did it happen?”

“Because every time they calculated it, I was more convenient than someone else.”

Nebula marked the long-term outcome as structural drift.

The city’s risk committee initially proposed heightened sensing:

Expand the collection of personal life data, build profiles of accumulated burdens, and protect in advance those likely to be repeatedly affected.

The plan was quickly challenged.

“To stop certain people always losing out, you would first make them subjects of long-term observation?”

“How can we discover the problem without more complete data?”

“Why begin discovering a structural problem by creating risk-based personality profiles?”

Fu He objected too.

“I don’t want the system to see me first as someone who has borne repeated burdens every time I apply for housing, work, or insurance.”

Her problem was not that she was easily hurt.

It was that public decisions habitually pushed the same costs toward places with the least resistance, the greatest ease of adjustment, and the least disruption to overall efficiency.

Civilizational immunity therefore did not expand surveillance of people.

It changed what was being reviewed.

It did not track who belonged to a “high-risk population.”

It tracked where a class of decisions sent its consequences;

Whether the same areas and living conditions kept bearing the burden;

Whether compensation covered only direct losses;

Whether people defined as flexible thereby lost the chance of a stable life;

Whether low appeal rates in the past had been mistaken for low harm.

Data was still necessary.

But what entered review were consequence chains stripped of personal identity, resource flows, and institutional choices.

Only when a specific repair was needed would the affected people authorize reconnecting the facts to themselves.

The independent review team took eight months.

They found that the drift did not come from a malicious model.

The city's different systems optimized their tasks separately:

Transport chose the routes easiest to divert;

Energy chose the loads quickest to restore;

Construction chose areas with lower compensation costs;

Public services prioritized communities whose needs were expressed most fully.

Every system reduced immediate losses.

Together, they turned some people's entire lives into a buffer for the city.

The review team proposed four corrections.

First, every allocation must check the history of burdens borne.

Low cost in a single decision no longer automatically meant low cost over time.

Second, compensation could not calculate only the loss on that occasion.

Repeated relocation, repeated waiting, disrupted relationships, and the inability to form stable expectations for one's life also had to enter the consequences.

Third, few appeals could not serve as evidence of little harm.

The system had to provide ways in that did not depend on complex expression, while acknowledging that some people would still remain silent.

Fourth, before shifting a burden elsewhere, it had to explain why the new parties were more reasonably placed to bear it, not merely that they had borne less in the past.

These rules slowed coordination.

Some construction costs rose.

Some city administrators objected.

"If every decision looks back over twelve years, the system will lose its ability to respond."

The review team agreed.

So the correction was not applied to every ordinary task.

It was triggered only when frequent recurrence, compounding across systems, and long-term irreversible effects reached a threshold.

Everyday decisions retained efficiency.

Structural drift came under higher-level constraints.

Civilizational immunity does not mean every slight difference triggers an alarm.

Nor does it turn the language of risk into a key that can bypass authorization at any time.

Halfway through the adjustment, the national security department made another request.

Several recent infrastructure attacks made it want to retain heightened sensing capabilities.

“The drift might also be the result of hostile manipulation.”

“Is there evidence?”

“Not yet.”

“Then a possible attack cannot be used to establish a permanent state of emergency.”

“By the time the evidence is sufficient, the consequences may already be irreversible.”

The statement had real force.

It was also the kind most likely to push civilization back toward security without limits.

In the end, heightened sensing received only limited authorization:

Specify the object of risk;

Limit the scope of data;

Require a signature from the legally responsible actor;

Keep simultaneous records at an independent node;

Terminate automatically after thirty days;

Require renewed proof of necessity for any extension;

Do not turn task data into routine personality, political, or lifestyle profiles.

After thirty days, no hostile manipulation had been found.

The permissions closed on schedule.

The security department still thought closure premature.

The system did not extend its own permissions because risk had not been completely ruled out.

The unknown remained unknown.

Civilizational immunity cannot remain in people’s lives forever on the grounds that something will always be unknown.

Two years after the new rules took effect, Fu He's area was, for the first time, not the default choice for a construction-related route change.

The route shifted to another area that had borne less in the past.

Its residents appealed at once.

"Why is it our turn?"

The deliberator did not answer, "Because taking turns is fair."

The harm of repeated burdens cannot be resolved by distributing harm evenly.

The plan was revised again.

Night construction was reduced. A more expensive temporary passage was added, with the cost shared across the areas benefiting.

No community was selected as this occasion's more suitable sacrifice.

The cost had not disappeared.

It could simply no longer flow forever down the most familiar route toward the quietest people.

The city held no press conference to announce the correction.

No red victory marker appeared on the risk map.

A few coordination rules were rewritten.

Two temporary permissions expired and went dark.

An annual public report on long-term consequences began.

Fu He still maintained water-recycling equipment.

Sometimes her route was still changed.

The difference was that the city could no longer interpret her always having given a little more in the past to mean that she ought to go on giving in the future.

No alarm rang throughout the city.

A few quiet rules changed.

And many harms that had not yet occurred lost their path into reality.

Chapter 25 Does Civilization Have the Right to Remember Forever?

At seventy-nine, Cheng Kuang applied for the first time to have his name removed from a public accident case study.

The application was refused.

Thirty-seven years earlier, he had been the duty supervisor at Beiling's regional energy dispatch station.

During a joint winter supply operation, the cooling system developed an anomaly.

The model judged that the equipment could continue running for six hours.

The engineer on site believed it should be shut down immediately.

A shutdown would affect residential heating and two hospitals.

Cheng Kuang decided to continue.

Four hours later, the energy-storage facility caught fire.

A maintenance worker died.

Seven people were injured.

Beiling lost power for nine hours.

The investigation established that he had sought no personal gain and concealed no evidence.

He had still made the wrong decision.

He had placed responsibility for the overall energy supply above an on-site risk not yet fully understood.

He had signed.

The consequences, too, had to have a name.

Cheng Kuang lost his post, bore legal responsibility, and paid compensation.

The accident led to three changes:

An on-site professional objection could pause automatic dispatch;

High-consequence operations could not rely solely on model probabilities to override equipment risks that could not be rolled back;

Anyone deciding to continue had to sign explicitly for responsibility for the worst consequences.

Over the decades that followed, almost every energy dispatcher studied the "Cheng Kuang accident."

He did not flee that history.

After serving his sentence, he spent years taking part in equipment-safety reviews.

Not as a hero.

Nor to exchange repentance for forgiveness.

When he first applied to remove his name, the Public Archives Committee found:

The facts of responsibility retained continuing educational value.

The name was part of what anchored responsibility.

The application would not be supported.

Cheng Kuang accepted this.

His second application came nine years later.

His granddaughter, Cheng Yuting, applied for a public energy internship.

Seeing her name, the interviewer asked:

“Are you connected to that accident?”

She said yes.

“What do you think of your grandfather’s decision?”

Cheng Yuting had not lived through the accident.

She was still required to prove what she had learned from it.

In the end, she was accepted for the internship.

But the problem did not end.

In public searches, “Cheng Kuang” no longer referred only to a person who had fulfilled his responsibilities.

It was gradually becoming a moral label available for use at any time.

In discussions of system boundaries, someone would say:

“We must not have another Cheng Kuang.”

In arguments over energy policy, people used his name to stand for arrogance, recklessness, and the errors of an earlier age.

His descendants also began to be questioned in unrelated settings.

Cheng Kuang applied a third time:

“The error can remain. The name does not have to stay public forever.”

Gao Qin, the dead maintenance worker’s older sister, objected.

“The person who died has no chance to apply to be forgotten.”

“I’m not asking to erase him,” Cheng Kuang said.

“Once your name is deleted, who caused the accident?”

“I did then.”

“And afterward?”

“I still will have.”

“Then why can’t it be written?”

Cheng Kuang did not answer.

He had no standing to demand that the victim’s family let go.

Nor could civilization turn the family’s memory directly into authorization for indefinite public punishment.

The deliberation had to distinguish four different kinds of remembering.

First, unfinished responsibility.

While legal obligations, compensation, repair, and public risks remained unresolved, identity records had to stay clear.

Second, facts and institutional lessons.

What happened, why it happened, which judgments were wrong, and which rules changed as a result could not be deleted.

Third, historical archives.

The original chain of responsibility needed long-term preservation under statutory conditions, available for judicial purposes, research, and major public interests.

Fourth, everyday public presentation.

Should someone who had already fulfilled their responsibilities still have their name continuously exposed in every educational use, search, evaluation, and aspect of their descendants’ lives?

In the past, these four things had been treated as one.

As if withholding a name meant forgetting the facts;

In the same round of deliberation, two other applications did not make the news.

Du Weihe asked to delete health, address, and everyday-life records that no longer served a public-responsibility purpose. She wanted to retain only her suggested deletions and revisions to authorization texts, her hearing statements, and the rules she had changed.

The marks she made with an old pencil were preserved as a record of how procedures took shape, not extended into a statement of her position for the rest of her life.

Gu Xingzhou refused to place his maternal grandfather's old employee badge in a public contribution exhibition.

His grandfather had not authorized later generations to interpret the loss of a career as a universal allegory of industrial civilization. Whether the badge was kept was for the family alone to decide.

As if limiting everyday use meant whitewashing an error;

As if preserving a record of responsibility meant a person must live forever inside their worst moment.

Nebula verified Cheng Kuang's responsibilities again.

His criminal and civil responsibilities had been fulfilled.

No compensation remained unpaid.

Equipment repairs following the accident had long since ended.

He had not used public memory to regain power or benefits.

Keeping his name public no longer served to hold him accountable.

Its main uses were educational and symbolic.

Gao Qin still disagreed.

She brought the number from her younger brother's work uniform.

"You keep talking about institutional lessons. A particular person died."

The archives committee answered:

"That is why whether the victim's name is made public is determined by the family and existing law. Cheng Kuang's application cannot delete your records."

"Then why can his name be deleted?"

"It is not being deleted from the original archive. It is being withdrawn from public case studies that no longer require personal identification."

"That sounds very tidy."

"It will not be tidy. The facts of the accident, the chain of decisions, and the death it caused all remain."

"But people who come later won't know who it was."

"The archive can be consulted for legitimate research, legal, and public-review needs. Everyday training no longer needs to begin by fixing a person who has lived a full life into the name of an error."

Gao Qin asked Cheng Kuang:

"Do you want people to forgive you?"

“Not anymore.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I want my granddaughter not to have to answer for me.”

This did not persuade Gao Qin.

The final decision did not require her to be persuaded.

The public training case was renamed “The Beiling Winter Energy-Storage Accident.”

The date, technical conditions, on-site objections, Cheng Kuang’s position, responsibility attached to his signature, legal consequences, and institutional revisions were all retained.

The everyday public version removed his name and information that could directly identify his descendants.

The original archive was sealed under the law.

The victim’s family retained their records, testimony, and right to speak publicly.

Cheng Kuang could not demand that they delete his name.

Nor could the public system automatically copy the family’s private remembering into permanent use by all of society.

Before the decision took effect, Cheng Kuang went to see Gao Qin.

He brought no apology generated by Spark.

He had said those words thirty-seven years earlier.

Saying them again might only ask her to bear his remorse once more.

They sat together for a long time.

Gao Qin spoke first:

“I will still say your name.”

“You can.”

“If someone asks me.”

“You can.”

“I won’t keep your secret.”

“You don’t have to.”

She looked at him.

“Then why did you come?”

“To tell you it isn’t being deleted from you.”

Gao Qin did not answer.

When he left, Cheng Kuang gave her a private record.

Not a public statement.

What he had written over the years whenever he thought of those four hours.

Spark asked whether copying was authorized.

Gao Qin chose not to copy it.

The record remained only in her hands.

A few years later, Cheng Yuting completed her energy internship.

When she independently signed off on a high-consequence dispatch for the first time, the system did not remind her of her grandfather's accident.

It showed only the facts, uncertainties, on-site objections, and worst consequences relevant to this decision.

She had to take responsibility in her own name.

After the name disappeared from the public case study, no one came back to life.

No harm was undone.

No responsibility was rewritten as merely a limitation of the times.

The error continued to have an effect through every dispatcher's right to halt operations, right to object, and responsibility for signing.

Cheng Kuang's name disappeared from the public case study.

The error did not disappear.

Civilization had finally learned to do both at once.

Chapter 26 When One Planet Is No Longer Enough

Humanity had long known that Earth would not be safe forever.

Knowing and confirming were not the same thing.

Before that near-Earth-object warning, many people still regarded a multi-node civilization as an expensive vision.

Near-Earth facilities could be used for research, communications, observation, and resource development.

Long-term bases, however, were repeatedly challenged:

There were still problems on Earth. Why send resources far away?

If only a few could leave, was this an escape pod for those who had more resources?

Humanity had not yet learned to live together. Would it merely take its old competition beyond Earth?

The questions were not wrong.

Change came from a small celestial body with no name.

At first, it was only a set of anomalous data in the near-Earth observation network.

Its orbit was uncertain.

Its size was uncertain.

Whether it would enter a danger window was uncertain too.

Three weeks later, several independent nodes completed verification.

The probability of a collision with Earth within the next ten-odd years crossed the threshold requiring action.

The probability was still low.

But the consequences no longer permitted waiting for certainty before preparing.

The nations did not begin by declaring a shared destiny.

They began by arguing over observation data, technical approaches, mission command, allocation of responsibility, and the consequences of failure.

Nebula formed only a minimum shared task:

Establish a common set of verifiable orbital facts;

Maintain independent observation;

Develop several intervention plans that could be rolled back;

Retain every state’s final decision on participation;

Prevent the task from becoming a permanent gateway to another country's space facilities, materials, or data.

Preparation continued for seven years.

The small body was eventually confirmed not to be on course for a direct impact on densely populated areas.

It could still have global consequences.

Humanity carried out a deflection.

The first mission did not alter its course enough.

The second succeeded.

When it passed beyond Earth, the vast majority of people saw nothing.

The world did not celebrate having conquered the universe.

The review report contained one short sentence:

This time, humanity had time to prepare.

Several other events in the same period were less momentous.

Solar activity degraded several satellites and ground-based energy systems at the same time;

A crop disease passed through several major growing regions;

Two undersea information backbones were severed in a regional conflict;

A failure in a single information foundation briefly prevented several cities from accessing cross-domain models and historical data.

Every failure was repaired.

Taken together, they pointed to a fact that could no longer be avoided:

A civilization could have many backups and still keep them all on the same planet, dependent on the same kind of energy, within the same information environment and the same set of physical risks.

That was not truly a multi-node civilization.

It was merely multiple copies inside the same fragile world.

Long-term space plans returned to national-level deliberation.

The fiercest argument was not whether they could be built.

It was what to build them into.

Engineering departments proposed production nodes in near-Earth space and the Earth–Moon system:

Energy, materials, equipment repair, independent communications, and closed ecosystems.

They could preserve critical capabilities if Earth's systems failed.

They could also gradually expand resource boundaries.

Social representatives asked:

"If we take only production and repair, will the inhabitants be people, or personnel maintaining machines?"

Medical teams demanded comprehensive diagnosis, treatment, and long-term care.

Education teams demanded that children and later arrivals receive more than task training.

Public-law teams demanded paths to appeal, self-government, and exit for distant residents.

Teams concerned with culture and life demanded that language, food, festivals, private space, mourning, and useless creation travel with them.

Someone mocked the idea:

"The first long-term base isn't even built, and we're discussing customs and stone gardens?"

Luan Yin was very old by then.

She joined a remote deliberation through Spark and said only:

In the video, a stone that had never entered the garden lay beside her hand.

It was too small and had no distinctive openings. The engineering checklist did not require it to be sent far away.

"If every useless thing must stay on Earth, what we send out will be only a system capable of surviving."

The engineering lead answered:

"The first stage must secure survival first."

"Yes."

"Then we can discuss this later."

"Who will discuss it later?"

That question added a condition for accepting the completed project:

A long-term base could not test only whether people could survive.

It had to test whether a complete civilization could form, operate, correct itself, and continue to grow there.

This did not mean the first bases would contain every aspect of life on Earth.

It meant that, from the design stage onward, medicine, education, care, culture, rights, private life, and public repair were not decorations to be added when resources were plentiful.

Together with air, water, energy, food, and maintenance, they constituted “a place where life can continue over the long term.”

Engineers accounted for less than half of the first prospective residents.

There were doctors, teachers, ecological maintenance workers, people responsible for public affairs, cooks, caregivers, materials workers, and researchers.

Some had no clearly critical occupation.

A young man named Wen Shuo applied to join.

His principal experience was caring for two children and an ill father.

At first, the selection team judged his professional irreplaceability insufficient.

The care team asked in return:

“Why is sustaining a machine a profession, while sustaining a family is merely personal experience?”

In the end, Wen Shuo did not receive moral priority because of his care work.

His real abilities entered the task assessment:

Sustained, repetitive care;

Organizing children’s daily lives;

Maintaining everyday life under pressure;

Unfamiliarity with equipment;

Insufficient understanding of risks in enclosed environments.

He passed the training.

He also gained the right to refuse.

“Can I decide not to go in the end?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Even after using training resources?”

“There is a real contribution, and a real cost. They do not buy your life.”

Before the first long-term base mission, Nebula established authorization across space.

Real subjects on Earth could participate in construction, diagnosis and treatment, teaching, and equipment maintenance through Spark and controlled physical terminals.

Authorized avatars could carry out defined tasks within the limits of communications.

They could not accept long-term risks on a real person’s behalf;

They could not decide that a real person would relocate;

They could not make irrevocable commitments to Earth for distant residents;

Still less could the reach of digital capabilities turn Earth's judgments into real-time commands that distant people had to obey.

The distance was still short.

The delay was already enough to reveal the limits of "remote presence."

Su Xian was among the base's first medical staff.

A week before departure, her mother asked:

"If something really goes wrong, can Earth bring you back?"

"Not necessarily."

"Won't your Spark be there all the time?"

"It can bring a lot of things over."

"What can't it bring?"

Su Xian thought for a long time.

"The consequences."

Her mother did not urge her to stay.

Nor did she behave more nobly because her daughter was taking part in a civilizational mission.

She only tucked an old cup into the luggage.

"They have cups there," Su Xian said.

"I know."

"This one is chipped."

"I know that too."

Before the long-term base opened, the final review did not examine only how long its systems could sustain themselves.

It checked:

Who would take responsibility for a serious injury;

Who would have authority to decide after communications with Earth failed;

Whether residents could refuse tasks;

Whether children automatically inherited the role of builders;

Whether contribution would still not be an admission ticket to basic rights during resource shortages;

How the community could end;

How the dead could be remembered without being generated anew;

How Earth and distant places could retain minimum shared boundaries amid their differences.

There was another review, initially placed in an engineering appendix.

Whether people could maintain mental stability over long periods in distant space.

The person who raised the question turned to the report's final page and added:

"And when someone is still clear-minded, still able to work, but no longer knows why to continue, how does civilization intend to respond?"

The first distant-space isolation experiment lasted four hundred and twenty days.

Twenty-four participants lived in a closed environment physically isolated from Earth.

Communications delays were gradually increased in line with future deep-space missions;

Supplies could not be added at short notice;

Earth could not take over in real time;

Spark remained present, but could use only the data, capabilities, and relationship interfaces explicitly authorized before the mission.

For the first hundred days, everything went more smoothly than expected.

Work was completed, conflicts could be mediated, and sleep, food, and equipment maintenance stayed within safe limits.

On day two hundred and thirty-seven, ecology researcher Jiang Ning stopped photographing the bean seedling that grew just a little each day inside the habitat.

No one had asked her to photograph it.

It was something she had kept for herself.

Three days later, she stopped joining the communal dinner.

Two weeks after that, she still completed every task on time and could still answer every risk question accurately.

Spark did not automatically interpret silence as illness.

First, it reported the changes to her: her sleep had broken into shorter stretches; she repeatedly opened communications from her family but rarely replied; after completing tasks, she no longer checked where the work went or whom it helped.

"Would you like to begin psychological intervention?" Spark asked.

"I haven't lost control," Jiang Ning said.

“Correct.”

“I just don’t know what any of this is for anymore.”

The habitat did not immediately arrange a conversation about her mission.

Nor did it fill the screen she woke to each day with “for humanity.”

Most of the plans the distant-space mission committee had prepared addressed panic, aggression, cognitive decline, sleep disruption, and group conflict.

They could address danger.

They could not answer why someone still able to fulfill her duties felt that she was disappearing from the world.

The experimental team called this state “meaning collapse.”

It was not a medical diagnosis of a person.

It described only a possible rupture: action continues, but the connections between action and real others, real consequences, and one’s own choices grow weaker and weaker.

Comfort from Earth arrived after a delay.

Some of it had already missed the day she had truly struggled through.

Some seemed to speak to a version of her in another time.

Spark could organize, remind, and relay. It could not fabricate the sense that her family understood her at this very moment.

Nor could Nebula prove to her that the universe necessarily bestowed ultimate meaning on every voyage.

Some believed that life entering interstellar space was the universe knowing itself through life.

Some saw only matter, distance, chance, and silence.

These could become personal beliefs, philosophies, and sources of spiritual support.

They could not be written as facts every voyager must accept, much less become a test of thought for deciding who was fit to travel far.

What truly changed the experiment was a task acknowledgment.

A set of microbial data Jiang Ning had completed earlier was adopted by a childhood-immunity research team on Earth.

Under the original procedure, she would have received only “data archived.”

The research team applied to open a limited feedback interface.

Forty-six hours later, a doctor she did not know appeared in a delayed video.

The doctor did not say she had saved anyone.

They only held up a heavily marked experimental flowchart to the camera:

“Here are three places where you saved us taking the long way around.”

After watching, Jiang Ning did not immediately resume photographing the seedling.

She applied to leave two repetitive tasks that no longer allowed room for judgment, and to join the next round of ecological design instead.

The application was approved.

She also asked to keep half a day each week without explaining its purpose.

That was approved too.

On day two hundred and eighty-one, she picked up the camera again.

She did not point it at the seedling.

She pointed it at a companion mending socks.

That photograph did not enter the contribution record.

After the experiment, support for the mind in distant space moved from the medical appendix into civilizational infrastructure.

It did not aim for constant happiness or use obedience to tasks as proof of stability.

At a minimum, it guaranteed:

That everyone knew where their actions had reached, and also had the right to know when those actions had not produced the expected result;

That tasks retained paths for real choice, refusal, change, and exit;

That intimate relationships were not simulated by systems, and delays or lost contact were not disguised as immediate companionship;

That the community could care for vulnerability, acknowledge moments without meaning, and pass through silence together;

That medicine could intervene in danger, but could not monopolize explanations of loneliness, belief, and the purpose of life;

That culture, spiritual traditions, creation, play, private time, and life that produced no contribution were not postponed forever because resources in distant space were tight.

The last point caused the longest argument.

The engineering team asked:

“In a place where every gram of supplies must be counted, how can we preserve a life that produces no contribution?”

Wen Shuo answered:

“If a person is allowed to exist only as part of a task, what we preserve is still merely a system.”

This did not resolve all loneliness in distant space.

Some would still break down. Some would choose to return. Some could not return. Others would find a direction for their lives in the long silence that they had never had before.

Nebula could reduce foreseeable harm, keep relationships and feedback real, and stop tasks from swallowing people.

It could not generate meaning for anyone.

Meaning still had to emerge where a person chose for themselves, took responsibility for themselves, and made contact with the real world.

Many questions still had no answer.

The base was therefore not declared a backup of civilization.

It was only the first point of growth where people could live over the long term, scale down independently, exercise limited self-government, and remain connected to Earth.

On opening day, Su Xian woke in low gravity.

The circulating air made a continuous mechanical sound.

Water moved slowly against the sides of her cup.

Someone next door was making breakfast. It smelled unlike any food on Earth.

A child was crying in the public corridor.

A teacher crouched nearby, without telling the child that this was a great day for humanity.

Spark reported that the base’s basic systems were functioning normally.

Then it returned to silence.

Earth was still outside the window.

Not an old world they had left behind.

Nor a center that distant nodes must obey.

It was the place of origin.

The first home.

The starting point from which every distant place could still speak of “coming back.”

When the first long-term base opened, people did not say humanity had left Earth.

They said home had learned, for the first time, to have a second place to wake up without leaving its place of origin.

Part VI A New Civilization Extends Its Reach: The Universe Becomes a Home

Distance does not automatically make civilization expansive.

First, it only magnifies everything.

It magnifies the gap before instructions arrive, the consequences self-government must bear, misunderstanding, loneliness, cultural differences, and every node's impulse to impose its judgments on distant others.

If only equipment, resources, and production systems enter interstellar space, civilization has not truly left Earth. People must be able to be born, live, love, argue, refuse, err, repair, and begin again there. AGI, Spark, medicine, education, care, rights, culture, memory, and useless creation must arrive together too. What enters interstellar space is not tools, but complete life and civilization.

A new civilization's extension does not mean spreading Nebula, or any other center, across the universe.

It requires humans, AGI, relationships, institutions, culture, memory, and shared life to truly enter distant places, so that ever more distant lives can still constitute civilization together, unable to replace one another or control one another in real time.

Chapter 27 A Decision That Arrived Six Minutes Later

In the ninth year after Chenghai Base opened, normal communications between Earth and the Moon still took very little time.

Radio signals took a little over a second to reach Earth from the Moon.

People had therefore thought that genuinely long delays did not yet apply between Earth and the Moon.

Only after the accident did they learn that distance had never been determined solely by how long light traveled.

Signals had to pass through damaged relays and be confirmed free of erroneous splicing. Risks had to move from local sensors into Earth's review system. Earth's advice then had to cross the degraded link again and reach a rapidly changing scene.

That day, six minutes was already too long.

The accident began at 3:17 local base time.

After a high-temperature printing run in the outer-ring materials room, pressure in the cooling circuit suddenly fell.

The initial alarm indicated only an equipment fault.

Eleven seconds later, a high-pressure pipe ruptured. Small metal fragments penetrated the isolation layer and struck an adjacent gas-processing unit.

The outer ring began losing pressure.

A mixture of smoke and gases advanced along the maintenance passage toward the residential area.

Within two seconds, the base's local AGI completed its first assessment:

If Isolation Door Three closed immediately, the eighty-three people in the residential area could retain a stable air supply;

Two maintenance workers in the outer ring would be trapped beyond it;

If closure was delayed, the rescue window would be at most ninety-seven seconds;

After that, smoke and loss of pressure might breach the second line of protection together.

The two maintenance workers were Ye Chen and Mu Yan.

Before the accident, they had been replacing a valve assembly worn by lunar dust.

Ye Chen was closer to the isolation door.

Mu Yan was farther in.

Yu Chuan, the base's emergency lead, did not order the door closed at once.

"Open their vital-status information."

Nebula returned only information within the task's authorized scope.

Ye Chen was still moving.

Mu Yan's vital signs were unstable.

"Can a maintenance robot drag him back?"

"Fragment density in the passage is too high. Probability of robot passage: forty-one percent. If the robot becomes lodged in the door track, the probability of isolation-door failure increases."

"I'm not asking for probabilities. Tell me the worst consequences."

The local AGI unfolded the chain of consequences again.

Attempting a rescue might bring Mu Yan back;

It might also prevent Door Three from closing fully;

If the second line of protection failed under pressure, the children's living area and medical module would be affected first.

Su Xian had already reached the medical module.

She saw teachers leading children from the public corridor into the inner area.

Some were still in pajamas.

Some held the water they had not finished at breakfast.

The base's Spark network began confirming locations person by person, without turning anyone's fear into a public emotional indicator.

At 3:18:04, Ye Chen appeared on the inside of the isolation door.

A slit had been torn in the shoulder of his protective suit.

"Where's Mu Yan?" Yu Chuan asked.

Bent over, Ye Chen said only:

"Behind."

Mu Yan's voice then came through the emergency channel.

Broken and intermittent.

"Door… close."

No one knew whether this was a fully formed judgment.

Nor could anyone confirm whether he understood that he no longer had time to return.

When Earth's emergency center received the first accident packet, the relay was switching automatically.

Seventeen seconds of data were missing.

Under the cross-space responsibility protocol, Earth could not issue an irreversible command on an incomplete chain of accident data.

It first asked Chenghai Base to confirm pressure, personnel, and isolation-door status.

In ordinary circumstances, this caution protected distant residents from harm caused by Earth's misjudgment.

At that moment, it also consumed time.

At 3:18:29, the local AGI reported:

"Final window for stable closure: fourteen seconds."

Yu Chuan looked at Ye Chen.

Ye Chen shook his head.

Not in agreement.

Nor in forgiveness.

Only to tell him that Mu Yan had not followed.

Yu Chuan ordered Door Three closed.

Debris obstructed the final part of its descent.

Ye Chen and two emergency workers pushed down the mechanical lock together.

The sound from the outer ring disappeared.

Twenty-seven seconds later, Mu Yan's vital signs disappeared too.

Earth's first formal recommendation arrived exactly six minutes after the accident began.

It recommended:

Provided the second line of protection was confirmed capable of withstanding the pressure, delay isolation closure until the final window and prioritize one unmanned rescue attempt.

It was not wrong.

But it could no longer change anything.

Once the accident was stabilized, the argument spread from Chenghai to Earth.

Some believed Yu Chuan had crossed the civilizational decision-making boundaries humanity had jointly established.

"The base is not an independent state."

"How can a local AGI and eighty-odd residents interpret risk boundaries for all of humanity?"

Others answered:

"If every irreversible decision must wait for Earth, distant self-government is valid only while Earth's commands can still arrive in time."

The sharper question was:

When a distant community gives up one member to preserve the majority, is it bearing civilizational responsibility, or using distance to evade civilizational scrutiny?

The review did not begin by deciding whether Yu Chuan was a hero.

It first reconstructed the scene.

Why did Door Three have only one mechanical lock?

Why could a maintenance robot become lodged in the door track?

Why was the children's living area in the second chain of risk?

Had the local AGI's consequence tree concealed a low-probability rescue path?

Could Mu Yan's "door… close" be treated as a clear, voluntary, and valid decision?

Why did Earth need seventeen seconds to fill in the missing data?

Who was responsible for the spatial layout established nine years earlier?

At the hearing, Yu Chuan said:

“I gave the order.”

“We cannot say the local AGI calculated it.”

“Nor can Earth’s later, different recommendation mean that I was merely making an incorrect version of Earth’s decision at the time.”

Tao Xu, Mu Yan’s partner, sat in the meeting room on Earth.

She did not accept the simplified account of “sacrificing one person to save eighty-three.”

“Mu Yan was not the one in that equation.”

“He was a particular person.”

“You may prove that closing the door was necessary. You cannot write necessity as an absence of harm.”

After the accident was confirmed, Spark had already delivered the facts to her private domain.

The message contained only:

An accident has occurred;

Contact with Mu Yan has been lost;

The base is confirming the situation;

Unconfirmed information will not be filled in.

It did not generate a farewell from Mu Yan’s past language.

It did not tell Tao Xu on his behalf not to be sad.

Nor did it turn the broken “door… close” into a complete last statement.

Tao Xu later asked:

“If Spark knows how he usually spoke, why can’t it bring back the words he never finished?”

A staff member answered:

“Because the person who comes back must be him.”

“He can’t come back.”

“That makes it all the more important that the system not pretend he did.”

Tao Xu said nothing for a long time.

In the end, she agreed to preserve the original audio.

Without restoration.

Without reducing the noise until it seemed there had been no distance.

The accident review reached three kinds of conclusion.

Yu Chuan had decided within a valid authorization for self-government. His personal responsibility was clear; he had not exceeded his authority.

The local AGI had not acquired decision-making power, but it had inadequately presented a rescue path with very low feasibility. It had to revise how its consequence tree was expressed.

The base and Earth shared structural responsibility: spatial layout, mechanical redundancy, and relay verification had compressed a risk that could have been resolved earlier into a life-or-death choice within fourteen seconds.

Cross-space rules changed as a result.

The principle that humans make final decisions on values and responsibility was no longer interpreted as Earth's real-time remote control over every node.

Earth, states, and distant communities jointly set civilizational goals, minimum rights, levels of self-government, review cycles, termination conditions, and minimum interfaces.

Actors on site took responsibility for on-site decisions within their authorized scope.

After a decision, they had to undergo cross-node review.

If a distant community repeatedly crossed minimum boundaries, other nodes could suspend interfaces for resources, technology, and shared safeguards;

But they could not use commands that arrived late to live life over again for those who had already borne the consequences.

When Chenghai Base held a farewell for Mu Yan, Tao Xu did not attend remotely.

She chose to wait on Earth for the complete original record to return.

Many years later, Xu Chi, born in Chengyuan, read the full accident archive for the first time.

She did not copy Tao Xu's decision into a declaration of self-government. She wrote only in her notes: self-government does not mean being farther from the center. It means that when a decision falls, its consequences cannot be sent back for the center to receive on one's behalf.

Six minutes is not long.

For those waiting for a word, it was already enough to teach two worlds that neither could take the other's place.

Chapter 28 Who Owns an Asteroid Where No One Lives?

When Yueheng 17 first entered public view, it was only a dark point in a deep-space image.

Its diameter was smaller than a city.

It rotated slowly.

Its orbit was stable.

Preliminary spectra indicated a high proportion of metals and water-bearing minerals.

More importantly, several anomalous areas on its surface might preserve chemical traces from the early solar system.

It had not been discovered by one person.

An observation array on Earth first detected an orbital deviation;

A computing node at Chenghai Base completed the initial confirmation;

A deep-space company called Tuoye undertook continuous tracking;

Tens of thousands of actors used their own Sparks to take part in image screening, orbit checks, and equipment troubleshooting;

A distant probe finally approached and sent back the first complete data.

On the day the data arrived, four claims to rights entered Nebula at once.

Tuoye demanded priority development rights.

It had invested in the probe and propulsion system and borne years of failure costs.

The Chenghai community demanded that the main share of use be reserved for distant nodes.

Earth's public resource agency argued that no resource capable of changing long-term continued-existence capabilities could be monopolized by one part of civilization.

Future generations had no representative, yet every side included them in its reasons.

Xu Chi, a young researcher from Chengyuan, joined the hearing through a distant node. She opposed Earth automatically acquiring ownership on grounds of shared continued existence. She also opposed Chenghai combining discovery, approach, construction, and risk-bearing into permanent possession.

"Contribution must be remembered," she said. "But being remembered does not mean owning from then on."

"If investors are not allowed priority of use, who will take the risks of deep space?"

"If whoever arrives first owns it, the interstellar age merely pushes the boundaries of enclosure farther out."

“Distant residents bear the risks of distance and environment. Why can Earth call the resources the property of all humanity?”

“Who can refuse on behalf of the unborn the unknown harm caused by extraction today?”

The dispute soon settled on an apparently simple question:

Yueheng 17 had no inhabitants.

Who owned it?

The old logic had offered many familiar answers.

The first to discover it.

The first to arrive.

The one who invested most.

The one most capable of using it.

Those able to protect it.

Those who represented the whole.

Every answer explained part of the facts.

Every answer could also turn capability into ownership, risk and investment into permanent possession, and “for everyone” into central power from which there was no exit.

Chen Ke, Tuoye’s head, displayed records of one hundred and seventy-three failures.

Propulsion-system explosions.

Navigation-model drift.

Two probes lost.

An engineer permanently injured in a ground-test accident.

“These are not acts of courage in a public narrative.”

“They are costs we actually bore.”

“If all that remains after success is ‘it belongs to everyone,’ why didn’t everyone share the costs when we failed?”

The Chenghai representative did not deny this.

She asked only:

“Bearing costs can establish priority of use.”

“Why must it establish permanent ownership?”

Chen Ke answered:

“Without stable rights, long-term investment cannot be calculated.”

“Stable for how long?”

“At least one complete development cycle.”

“Who defines that cycle?”

“Engineering realities.”

“Or how long the project wants to exist?”

The exchange stopped there.

Nebula did not hand the dispute to a combined weighting.

Investment, risk, professional judgment, shared continued existence, distant needs, unknown environments, and the rights of those who came later could not be compressed into one number.

They belonged to different layers of responsibility.

The deliberation first separated the components of “ownership.”

The fact of discovery could be recorded;

Real investment and risk could constitute contributions;

Specific facilities could have defined operating rights;

Under authorization, resources could be used with priority for a limited period;

Necessary shares could be reserved for shared continued existence;

Unknown regions could remain unentered for the time being;

When the task ended, responsibility had to be taken for repair relating to facilities, waste, and ecological effects.

None of these required first declaring who owned the entire asteroid.

The second question came from distant Sparks.

Did the tens of thousands of actors who had checked the orbit also gain resource rights?

Some argued that their distributed labor had made discovery possible.

Others noted that most participation had lasted only minutes, and some judgments had been made automatically by authorized avatars.

The deliberation finally confirmed:

Extensions of digital capability could produce real contributions;

Contact with data from a distance could not, by itself, confer possession of physical resources.

Contribution had to be connected to real action, verifiable gains, and real-world responsibility.

Using resources meant accepting quotas, risks, waste, maintenance, and restoration upon exit at the same time.

Taking only benefits without entering the chain of consequences did not constitute a complete usage right.

What actually halted extraction was a layer of complex organic matter the probe discovered in a shadowed region.

There was no evidence of life there.

Nor was there evidence that the layer was merely an ordinary deposit.

The scientific team requested twelve months of observation without intervention.

Chen Ke opposed it.

“The window is only sixteen months.”

“If we miss it, the next low-cost approach is seven years away.”

The scientific team answered:

“The resources may still be there in seven years.”

“Evidence removed by mining will not come back.”

Tuoye proposed reducing the exclusion zone.

Chenghai proposed exploring while extracting.

The public resource agency proposed freezing the entire asteroid.

None of the three plans offered enough assurance.

The final decision did not select the safest side.

It acknowledged what was not currently known.

Nebula designated Yueheng 17 an object of temporary shared stewardship for one year.

No permanent ownership would be established during that year;

Tuoye would retain standing in subsequent negotiations on the basis of its existing project investment and on-site capabilities. Failed investment and public contributions would be faithfully recorded separately;

The scientific team would receive limited observation rights;

Chenghai and other distant nodes would jointly review sampling boundaries;

Any new finding could trigger extension, reduction, or termination of the freeze;

If development began, usage rights would be granted in stages according to real needs, actual capabilities, shared continued existence, and guarantees of responsibility. They would not automatically carry over into permanent possession.

Tuoye did not receive the answer it wanted.

After the decision, Chen Ke said:

“If nothing is found after a year, today’s caution will be a real cost.”

The deliberator answered:

“Yes.”

“Who bears it?”

“You cannot bear it alone. Public observation resources, losses from the mission delay, and safeguards for the next window will all enter the shared costs.”

For the first time, Chen Ke did not continue objecting.

When civilization asks an actor to exercise restraint for the sake of the unknown, it cannot leave the entire cost of that restraint to that actor alone.

A year later, no life had been found in the anomalous region.

But it was confirmed to preserve a rare chain of early chemical evolution.

The development area was redrawn.

Tuoye obtained fifteen years of staged usage rights.

Two areas were permanently preserved.

Some resources entered distant reserves for continued existence, some repaid shared investment, and some remained for nodes not yet formed.

No party received the entire asteroid.

Extraction had been delayed for a year.

The resources had not run away.

For the first time, civilization did not immediately make something its own merely because it could reach it.

Chapter 29 When Those Far Away No Longer Want to Be Earthlings

One hundred and forty-seven years after the Chengyuan community was founded, people born there rarely spoke of “going back” to Earth.

They spoke of going to Earth.

As people on Earth spoke of going to another continent.

First-generation residents still alive with the support of long-term life technologies could still smell rain in their dreams.

The second generation regarded rain as a kind of weather their parents often described.

From the third generation onward, many children standing in Earth’s rain for the first time instinctively looked up to see whether the public dome was leaking.

Chengyuan’s gravity, cycle of day and night, closed ecology, and long-term medical adaptation had changed bodily rhythms.

People spoke more slowly.

Not because they thought slowly.

Because early communications had been expensive, and their speech retained longer pauses.

Several Earth languages borrowed from one another in shared life, forming a new dialect.

The phrase “wait for me to come back” meant something closer in Chengyuan’s language to:

“Keep a place for our next meeting.”

Earth’s general translation systems could render the meaning.

They found it harder to render how a place understood waiting.

The dispute over identity arose from an update to population registration.

Earth’s public archives classified Chengyuan’s residents as:

“Population of a distant branch of Earth civilization.”

The classification had originally served only to track medical, resource, and migration relationships.

Chengyuan’s assembly requested the removal of “branch.”

It proposed new wording:

“Residents of the Chengyuan community; members of human civilization; citizens of the universe.”

Opposition quickly emerged on Earth.

“Without Earth’s technology, resources, and pioneers, where would they have come from?”

“They retain membership in humanity but reject an Earth identity. Do they want shared safeguards without responsibility for shared history?”

“Today they remove ‘branch.’ Will they remove ‘human’ tomorrow?”

Among Chengyuan’s young people, some voices were more forceful too.

“We have been born here for over a hundred years. Why are we still merely someone else’s distant outpost?”

“Earth is my ancestors’ home. It is not automatically my center.”

“If we must first acknowledge subordination, a minimum civilizational connection is not a connection. It is submission.”

At its deepest, the argument was not about one word.

It was about whether a civilization could allow those who came after it to grow into people no longer the same as itself.

Xu Chi was twenty-six.

Born in Chengyuan, she was a public language teacher and also studied how distant communities told their own histories of civilization.

Her ancestors had come from Earth’s eastern coast.

Her family still kept a chipped cup.

No one drank from it anymore.

It had passed from Su Xian’s mother into the first base, then later arrived in Chengyuan with the migration archives.

As a child, Xu Chi had thought the chip was some ancient Earth emblem.

Only at ten did she learn it was just an accidental knock.

Before the Earth hearing began, she brought the cup into the meeting room.

An Earth representative asked:

“Did you bring it to prove that you still belong to Earth?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“To show that where we come from and who we are today need not cancel each other out.”

The Earth representative said:

“If every distant community renames itself, what will hold human civilization together?”

Xu Chi answered:

“Shared responsibility. Not every place having the same name.”

Chengyuan was not asking to sever every relationship.

It retained responses to shared threats to continued existence;

Minimum protection for unknown life;

Cross-node accident reviews;

Minimum boundaries concerning personhood, children, basic survival, and irreversible high-consequence actions;

The obligation, when disaster exceeded local capacity, to seek help from other nodes and bear the corresponding responsibilities.

What it asked to change was this:

Earth would no longer have an inherent right to decide Chengyuan's everyday life, language, educational rhythms, or local resources;

Chengyuan's residents would not automatically inherit a commitment to obey Earth forever from their ancestors' migration authorizations;

Every new person, on reaching adulthood, could decide anew how closely to identify with their locality, ancestral node, Earth, and the wider civilization.

Sparks passed across generations were the hardest issue.

Early voyagers had authorized Spark to preserve languages, family records, skills, and some public memories.

These helped later generations understand where they came from.

They were also beginning to create pressure.

When a young person in Chengyuan declined to attend Earth Homeland Remembrance Day, the family Spark prompted:

"Your direct relatives in the preceding three generations all took part in this commemoration."

The prompt was not coercive.

Yet it made refusal feel like betrayal.

Chengyuan therefore revised its rules for carrying things forward across generations.

The revision group consulted Du Weihe's early opinions on authorization.

Someone proposed listing "silence cannot be interpreted as consent" as a founding principle.

Xu Chi changed "founding principle" to "historical opinion."

"It helped us," she said. "But it is not an ancestral command. If it still holds today, people today must confirm it anew."

Spark could preserve facts, language, and works that ancestors had explicitly authorized to remain;

It could not infer a new person's value choices from family history;

It could not turn continued participation into a traditional obligation;

It could not generate advice that had never been left behind in the name of "what your ancestors wanted";

Every adult could decide which relationships entered their own Spark, and which remained only in historical archives.

Many people on Earth believed this would rupture civilizational memory.

Xu Chi said:

"Forced repetition is not carrying something forward."

"Only what people can refuse, yet still choose to keep, truly belongs to those who come later."

The identity agreement took two years to complete.

Chengyuan's residents were no longer called the population of a branch of Earth civilization.

They had local identities, historical and cultural identities, identities of shared participation, and civilizational identities.

National and ancestral identities could be retained or changed under the law;

Being a citizen of the universe did not confer a higher rank of personhood or cancel any existing identity;

It confirmed only that, regardless of the node where a subject was born, they could enter shared affairs across nodes and had to take responsibility when their actions affected the wider civilization.

On the day the agreement passed, some people on Earth mourned.

They felt humanity had lost part of a shared name.

Chengyuan did not celebrate a victory either.

Xu Chi returned to school and read the new designation on the registration form to the children.

A child asked:

"Are we still human, then?"

"Yes."

"Are we still Earthlings?"

Xu Chi did not answer for the whole class.

“Some people will say they are.”

“Some won’t.”

“You can decide for yourself when you’re older.”

The child asked again:

“Is Earth still home?”

Xu Chi placed the old cup by the window.

There was no rain outside.

In the distance, an artificial waterway passed through the night lighting, reflecting a thin line of light.

She said a sentence in Chengyuan’s dialect.

Earth’s automatic translation rendered it:

“We have not declared our separation from humanity.”

Xu Chi shook her head.

“That isn’t what it means.”

She translated it again:

“We have simply said for the first time, in our own language: we are at home too.”

Xu Chi closed the public channel. Only the children, the old chipped cup, and a night outside the window that did not belong to Earth remained in the classroom.

Chapter 30 Civilization Is Not Complete

Much later, children from Yuanzhao School visited an exhibition on the history of civilizational operation.

They had been born on land lit by an unfamiliar star.

Earth's sun was only a familiar star in historical images.

Their teacher did not call the exhibition a history of human progress.

At the entrance were the words:

"Some decisions that were preserved, and some lives that were allowed to disappear."

The first exhibit was a downpour.

Four systems could not see one another.

The hospital had needs, the warehouse had supplies, the roads had capacity, and the community knew who was waiting. Yet no reliable relationship connected them.

The children struggled to understand:

"Why didn't they just ask Nebula?"

The guide answered:

"There was no Nebula then."

"How did they live without Nebula?"

"As you do now. Relying on people, families, organizations, institutions, and many incomplete systems."

"Were they very afraid?"

"Yes."

"Did they stop being afraid later?"

"Later, when they were afraid, they had more relationships through which they could bear things together."

The second exhibit had no video.

Only a reduced image of one page of an authorization interface.

Du Weihe had read it word by word for seventeen minutes, asked where each item of data would go, and finally withdrawn part of her authorization.

Her health, address, and family information had not entered public history.

The children could see only the public comment she had left:

Refusal cannot be hidden behind consent.

One child asked:

“Why didn’t she give the system all her information? Wouldn’t that be safer?”

The guide said:

“Because safety cannot depend on a person first surrendering themselves.”

The third exhibit was a failed approach.

An early Nebula experiment had allocated resources incorrectly.

Zhou Yi had signed the rollback.

The new system had stepped back to where the old systems bore responsibility.

The display case preserved the twenty-seven-minute operational record from that time.

Failure had not been rewritten as a necessary cost on the way to success.

At the end of the record, a child noticed that many people’s names were no longer visible.

“Did they do something wrong?”

“Some did. Others had simply taken part.”

“Why not keep them all?”

“Because civilization’s need to remember what happened does not mean every name must remain exposed forever to the eyes of those who come later.”

The fourth exhibit was an amended rule.

The first builders had stipulated that public tasks could not commit scarce resources for more than eighteen years.

More than sixty years later, their successors changed it for a coastal ecological plan.

The old and new sentences stood side by side.

Neither was marked as finally correct.

Beside them was written:

“The founders made room at the table for those who came later, not so that those who came later would agree with them forever.”

The fifth exhibit came from Chenghai Base.

Isolation Door Three had been dismantled long ago.

A small section of its track had been preserved.

The metal still bore the deformation left when Ye Chen and the emergency workers forced down the mechanical lock.

Mu Yan’s final voice was not played in the public space.

There was only a statement:

A real person died in the accident;

A decision preserved more lives;

Necessity did not cancel the harm;

Nor did review generate the dead person back into being.

The children were quiet here for a while.

They were already accustomed to living in a multi-node civilization.

They did not know that real-time commands from Earth had once been seen as the final guarantee of safety far away.

It was also hard to imagine that “citizen of the universe” had once been a new phrase needing repeated explanation.

To them, home had always had many places.

Earth was the place of origin.

The first home.

Neither the only place to live nor an old world that could be forgotten.

Near the end of the visit, a child named Chen Zhao asked:

“When was Nebula completed?”

The guide did not answer immediately.

Nebula’s status for the day was displayed on the wall.

Dozens of spatial domains were connected;

More nodes remained silent;

Some communities were forming;

Others had dissolved;

Some interfaces had closed when tasks ended;

Some old rules awaited review;

An unfamiliar ecology was showing changes not yet understood;

A new node had sent an invitation to build together.

“Why do you think it was ever completed?” the guide asked.

Chen Zhao pointed to the exhibition.

“Because all this has already happened.”

“Having happened is not the same as being complete.”

“When would it count as complete, then?”

“Perhaps when every question has an answer.”

Chen Zhao thought for a moment.

“What about new questions?”

The guide smiled.

“That is why it is not complete.”

Nebula is not a machine that runs forever once built. Still less is civilization.

Nor is Nebula a civilizational brain that knows every answer. It is only one structure through which a new civilization operates together.

What truly constitutes the new civilization is real life, AGI and authorized agents, Spark, families and relationships, communities, localities and states, public institutions, businesses and professional organizations, resources and relationships of use, culture and memory, and the shared life continually taking place among them.

Nebula makes shared facts visible, allowing cross-domain consequences to be seen, coordinated, and reviewed. Decisions about purposes, professional judgment, execution, and correction still belong separately to the corresponding actors.

This does not give it ownership of anyone.

Countless Sparks, communities, and public operating nodes participate together in forming Nebula.

Nebula still owns not a single Spark.

AGI has taken on ever broader perception, simulation, and everyday management.

It can independently maintain air, energy, medical care, and transport at distant nodes. It can build the conditions for survival before humans arrive. It can also point out overall consequences that human intuition cannot see.

It still does not acquire civilizational sovereignty.

Calculating farther ahead does not mean deciding for anyone why to live;

Being able to sustain civilization does not mean owning it;

Helping meaning emerge does not mean becoming the source of all meaning.

Chen Zhao’s Spark had remained silent throughout.

It had not rushed to answer “What is Nebula?”

Only when the visit ended did it notify him:

“Your companions have sent an invitation to join them.”

Outside the window, the new settlement was building its second public light court.

The first grew only plants that could stabilize air and water cycles.

The second was intended to keep an area without a defined function.

Some wanted to plant low-growing luminous moss brought from Chengyuan.

Some worried it would alter the local microecology.

Some proposed only a contained planting trial.

A few children insisted on leaving a patch empty, with nothing planted at all.

Chen Zhao asked Spark:

“Which one do you think is right?”

Spark presented the risks, resources, historical records, and several paths that could be rolled back.

It did not choose for him.

“They’re waiting for you,” it said.

Chen Zhao looked back at the history of civilizational operation.

The earliest downpour was still falling in silence.

Du Weihe still paused before that page of the authorization interface.

A failure could still be rolled back.

A founding rule still allowed those who came later to rewrite it.

An isolation door still reminded every distant place that self-government was not freedom from consequences, but taking responsibility for them oneself.

These old events gave him no answer he had to obey.

They left only a table with seats still unfilled for those who came later.

Chen Zhao left the exhibition hall.

Light from an unfamiliar star fell on land not yet named.

In the farther darkness lay worlds civilization had not reached, had not understood, and should not rush to possess.

Becoming a home did not make the universe familiar, safe, or the property of humanity.

“Home” meant only this:

Wherever they arrived, complete life and civilization must learn to live there;

Exercise restraint before the unknown, retain connection amid differences, and take responsibility for harm;

Do not leave Earth as an exhausted starting point, or turn distant places into new objects of possession;

Do not let powerful systems live for people, or let any life lose its claim to be taken seriously because it is temporarily useless.

Chen Zhao’s companions called to him from beside the light court.

Someone held moss in their hands.

Someone carried environmental records.

Others were still arguing over the empty patch.

Chen Zhao asked no more questions.

He turned and ran toward them.

New meaning did not appear from the answers.

It took shape for the first time in what they were about to do together.

Version History

Version	Date	Notes
V1.6	August 2026	Completed integration and literary finalization of the full text in six parts and thirty chapters, serving as the sole textual master for V2.0.
V2.0	August 2026	Brought the volume into the Living Civilization trilogy and renamed it The Formation of a New Civilization; completed adjustments concerning “civilization is larger than Nebula,” humans and AGI together constituting a new civilization, the contribution–governance interface, and the meaning of stages.
V2.0-R1	August 2026	Resolved the cross-volume governance classification conflict through a targeted correction: restored “three categories of governance function plus an independent correction layer running across them” and clarified the independent procedural standing of affected parties.
V2.1	August 2026	Completed the trilogy’s unified finalization; added the formal version note and version history, and standardized the cover, status, headers, footers, and publication metadata. The six-part, thirty-chapter text was not expanded for length.

Continue Reading | From Seeing the Future Back to Why It Must Hold Up

Having read the Living Civilization trilogy, readers have seen, through life itself, how a new civilization operates, how ordinary people work, live with one another, use AI, and participate in public life, and how such a civilization gradually takes shape from the present.

If the most natural next question is, “Why are these structures of life not an idealized imagining, and where do the civilizational causes, institutional boundaries, and goals behind them come from?” then return first to the five-volume Civilization Leap.

1. Return First to the Main Theoretical Work: The Five-Volume Civilization Leap

The five-volume Civilization Leap and the Living Civilization trilogy are not a “theoretical version” and a “popular version” of the same work. The five volumes explain why civilization must make a leap, what the leap changes, and how civilization can operate and sustain itself over the long term. The trilogy shows what kind of life these changes become when they enter real lives.

The five volumes, in order, are The Civilization of Being Needed, Pre-Institutional Language, Civilization Leap White Paper, Civilizational Perpetuity, and The Emergence of Meaning. They place the trilogy’s work, relationships, public institutions, AI collaboration, being needed, and meaning back within a fuller causal chain of civilization.

This is a bridge in both directions. Moving from the five volumes to the trilogy takes readers from understanding civilization to seeing it in life. Returning from the trilogy to the five volumes takes questions arising from life back to their theoretical roots. The two sets do not require a one-to-one correspondence between volumes, nor should they serve as automatic proof of one another.

2. If You Want to Know Why These Questions Need Discussion Now

Continue with the public thought edition of Humanity’s Civilizational Choice in the AGI Era. It begins with developments already happening today: the reassessment of white-collar capabilities, the autonomy of AI agents, algorithmic control, and the militarization of AI and its alignment with rival blocs. It explains what our use of AI today is itself teaching the more powerful intelligence to come.

If your concerns lie more with national security, deterrence, lost-link autonomy, pressures to act first, and why every side may be protecting itself yet all may become less safe together, continue with The Only Path.

3. If You Want to Know How These Forms of Life Can Actually Be Built

For individuals and relationships, explore Spark. For public operations, cities, and the institutions that support them, explore Nebula, contribution value, resources, and related

experiments. For AI/AGI safety and high-consequence judgment, continue with the Common Window Protocol, AGI-COS, and Human-COS.

These engineering and institutional texts are not “implementation manuals” for the trilogy’s scenes. Actual deployment must face fresh scrutiny of jurisdiction, rights, authorization, resources, technology, safety, and real-world effects. The trilogy makes life visible; the engineering texts translate relationships that can be studied within it into interfaces that can be tested.

4. If You Want to Keep Asking About Human Meaning and Deeper Theory

Continue with A Leap in Thought, Meaning Dynamics, and the texts associated with T-10. They address, respectively, an entry into the ideas, the conditions under which meaning arises in real-world structures, and interdisciplinary evidence and the boundaries of subjectivity. Deeper cosmology and long-term exploration remain open to further study, but they are neither prerequisites for understanding the trilogy nor proofs that present-day institutions must accept.

5. If You Think the Life Described Here Is Beyond Reach

That doubt is itself an important place to continue reading. If a particular structure of life cannot be reached or sustained under real conditions of institutions, resources, technology, rights, or human hearts, or if it actually produces outcomes contrary to the three goals, then the five-volume work and the institutional layer should be revisited and revised. Real counterexamples must not be ignored for the sake of preserving an attractive future.

Civilization Leap helps readers understand why civilization needs to change; Living Civilization lets them see why life after that change is worth living.

A genuine connection in both directions lets theory be tested by life, while giving life a theoretical grounding.

Common public access point: www.civitas.top/en/

Where to Read Next

This is not a list of “related reading.” It follows the next questions opened up by this work.

You have now seen the complete trilogy through life itself. The next step is to connect that picture of life with its theoretical foundations, the realities of AI today, and ways to take part in judgment and correction.

Toward Theory

Civilization Leap: The Path of Civilization in the AGI Era (All Five Volumes)

Return from questions about life to the main theory of civilization.

Toward Reality

Humanity’s Civilizational Choice in the AGI Era: What Are We Teaching Future Intelligence?

Return to the realities of AI today and the choices facing civilization.

Toward Participation

Seeing Earlier What Would Otherwise Be Seen Only Later:
A Public Introduction to Human-COS

Find ways to participate, exercise judgment, and correct errors in the real world.

Questions, Counterexamples, and Revision

New facts, counterexamples, failed tests, new capabilities, new attack surfaces, and changes in the conditions of a phase should all enter the version network of the relevant texts. Further reading must not be used to preserve existing conclusions.

Complete Library

Public Gateway

Main text unchanged | Document-specific further-reading page added | Civilization Leap Research Group | civitas.top/en/