

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

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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.

Read On | From Real Life Back to How Civilization Forms

This volume has brought readers into the real life of a civilization. Now the question should move from the outcomes of life back to the process of formation: how can such a life grow from today's imperfect reality, rather than be directly arranged by a system?

Volume II does not prove that this is necessarily how people will live in the future. It proposes a test at the level of life: if a civilization is worth building, it must ultimately return to real people.

Begin with Volume III: How Could Such a Life Actually Emerge from Today?

This volume has taken readers through a person's life from birth to departure. The most natural next question is no longer "What else will happen in the future?" It is how a civilization that does not readily abandon people can gradually form from today's imperfect institutions, technologies, interests, human hearts, failures, and conflicts. Volume III, *The Formation of a New Civilization*, addresses this question specifically.

If You Want to Look Back at the Operating Structures Behind These Lives

Return to Volume I, *Principles for the Operation of a Future Civilization*. The families, work, medical care, cities, public life, AI collaboration, and farewells in Volume II are not isolated scenes. Volume I further explains how Spark, Nebula, resources, contribution, governance, systems receding into the background, and subjects' boundaries connect without swallowing one another.

If You Ask Why This Kind of Life Deserves to Become a Direction for Civilization

Turn to the five-volume *Civilization Leap*. It places Volume II's insistence that people must not be swallowed by structural scarcity, indifference, control, and a single scale of value within a fuller account of civilizational cause and consequence. It explains why civilization's goals cannot be reduced to efficiency, order, or not dying out, but must continue toward freedom from survival insecurity, a happy life, and a more meaningful life.

If You Want to Know Why the Real World Is Approaching This Choice

Read the Public Thought Edition of *Humanity's Civilizational Choice in the Age of AGI and The Only Path*. The former approaches these questions through AI's entry into work, agents, public power, the military, and competition between blocs; the latter through real tensions between national security and shared continued existence. They explain why these questions of life are no longer imaginings of a distant future.

If You Want to Take These Scenes of Life into Real-World Research

Continue exploring Spark, Nebula, contribution value, and the related institutions and experiments. On the side of individuals and relationships, Spark investigates how abilities, care, and responsibility extend. On the side of public operation, Nebula and the institutional texts investigate how shared facts, resources, authorization, governance, and correction enter reality. They do not copy Volume II into a product; they turn relationships open to research into interfaces that can be verified.

If You Find Volume II Too Idealized

Volume III provides the most direct stress test. It must explain how these lives pass through real contradictions, experiments, failure, opposition, rollback, and generational renewal. If the process of formation cannot hold, Volume II cannot substitute literary power for theoretical justification and real-world validation. The questions must return to Volume I, the five-volume work, and the institutional level for reconsideration.

A Common Access Point and Version Discipline

The common public access point is www.civitas.top/en/. Specific versions of specialist texts and engineering assets continue to be updated; the printed book does not freeze version numbers that may change. Where a stable topic-page URL has not been confirmed, this volume does not invent a link.

A Guide to Your Next Reading

This is not a list of “related reading,” but a way to pursue the next question raised by this text.

Volume II has brought civilization into real lives. Next, move from the outcomes of life into the process of formation, look back at the operating structures, and ask why this kind of life deserves to become a direction for civilization.

Toward Formation

[Living Civilization · Volume III: The Formation of a New Civilization](#)

Move from the outcomes of life into the process of formation.

Toward Principles

[Living Civilization · Volume I: Principles for the Operation of a Future Civilization](#)

Look back at the operating structures behind these lives.

Toward Theory

[Civilization Leap: The Path of Civilization in the AGI Era \(All Five Volumes\)](#)

Ask why this kind of life deserves to become a direction for civilization.

Questions, Counterexamples, and Revision

New facts, counterexamples, failed tests, new capabilities, new attack surfaces, or changes in stage conditions should all prompt renewed review within the relevant family of texts. Further reading must not be used to preserve existing conclusions.

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