

Living Civilization

A Trilogy

Volume III The Formation of a New Civilization

How Humans and AGI Can Begin from Present Realities and Together Constitute a New Civilization

It is not Nebula that becomes civilization. It is humans and AGI, together with the relationships, institutions, resources, culture, responsibilities, and future they form together, that constitute a new civilization.

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Note on This Version

This is V2.1 of The Formation of a New Civilization, Volume III of the Living Civilization trilogy. It retains the prefatory essay, prologue, six parts and thirty chapters, ensemble structure, and existing literary ending. It does not expand the text for length or turn Volume III back into a narrative of “Nebula’s life cycle.”

This volume is not an account of how a system succeeds. It is about how a new civilization takes root in real contradictions and gradually forms through experiments, refusal, appeals, failure, rollback, stability, and renewal. Civilization is larger than Nebula. AGI’s capabilities, simulations, and execution do not automatically produce civilizational sovereignty.

The current versions for reading together are Volume I V3.2, Volume II V2.1, and Volume III V2.1. The detailed history of the versions and internal revision stages remains in the “Version History” at the end.

Complete Contents

Prefatory Essay Why Civilization Must Make a Leap

Prologue At Four in the Morning, Everyone in the City Is Right

Part I A New Civilization Takes Root: Civilization Begins to See the Whole

Chapter 1 Four Right Answers and a Loss of Control

Chapter 2 The First Shared Interface

Chapter 3 The Person Who Refused Authorization

Chapter 4 An Idle Warehouse and a Hospital Short of Medicine

Chapter 5 The First Complete Operating Loop

Part II A Dual-Track Transition: Old Logic and New Structures Coexist

Chapter 6 The Old Systems Cannot Simply Be Declared Finished

Chapter 7 Who Will Connect Themselves First?

Chapter 8 Contribution Value Nearly Became a Score of Personal Worth

Chapter 9 The Optimal Plan Harmed a Village

Chapter 10 How an Appeal Changed the Rules

Chapter 11 Who Was Given the Power?

Part III A New Civilization Takes Shape: The Civilizational Leap Becomes Real

Chapter 12 A Local Optimum No Longer Means Rationality

Chapter 13 Survival Is Separated from Obedience for the First Time

Chapter 14 The State Still Bears Ultimate Responsibility

Chapter 15 The World Did Not First Become One Family

Chapter 16 AGI Enters the Operation of Civilization, but Still Cannot Rule It

Chapter 17 No One Announced That the Leap Was Complete

Part IV A New Civilization Becomes Stable: When Its Operation Recedes Behind Life

Chapter 18 A City in a Silent State

Chapter 19 Resources No Longer Flow Only to Those Best at Seeking Them

Chapter 20 Happiness Cannot Become a New Command

Chapter 21 How Useless Things Find Room

Chapter 22 Nebula Must Learn to Leave

Part V A New Civilization Renews Itself: How Civilization Stays on Course over Time

Chapter 23 Why Should Those Who Come Later Obey the Founders?

Chapter 24 Civilizational Immunity Is Not a Permanent Emergency

Chapter 25 Does Civilization Have the Right to Remember Forever?

Chapter 26 When One Planet Is No Longer Enough

Part VI A New Civilization Extends Its Reach: The Universe Becomes a Home

Chapter 27 A Decision That Arrived Six Minutes Later

Chapter 28 Who Owns an Asteroid Where No One Lives?

Chapter 29 When Those Far Away No Longer Want to Be Earthlings

Chapter 30 Civilization Is Not Complete

Prefatory Essay Why Civilization Must Make a Leap

At eight in the morning, the lecture hall still held the chill of the night before.

Professor Zhou Weizhen, fifty-one, did not open his slides.

He wrote a word on the blackboard:

Civilization.

Then he turned and asked:

“Why did civilization arise?”

A student in the front row said it was because people could use tools.

Someone at the back said it was because language, writing, and knowledge could accumulate.

An economics student said it was because the division of labor increased efficiency.

Someone else said people needed to establish order so they would not hurt one another.

Another answered that people feared death and wanted their children to survive.

The professor waited a moment.

“All those answers are right,” he said. “But if we keep only the simplest starting point, civilization first arose because no person could secure survival alone.”

No one could defend themselves alone against every wild animal, disease, famine, bitter cold, and disaster. Nor could one person alone accomplish all that was needed to raise children, learn, produce, care, and remember. Human beings had to live with others.

Living together brought a division of labor. It also brought the first problem that would never go away:

Who does what? Who gets what? Who may decide, and who must obey? When one person's actions hurt another, who intervenes, who judges, and who bears the consequences?

Civilization did not wait for human nature to be perfected before it arose.

It grew, little by little, precisely within the reality of people who had love as well as fear, generosity as well as possessiveness, a desire to cooperate as well as an instinct for self-preservation.

The earliest communities did not need to understand the whole world.

People lived among familiar faces. Who was hungry, who was hurt, who had helped others, and who had broken a promise could often be seen by everyone. Relationships, reputation, customs, punishment, reciprocity, and memory together sustained order on a limited scale.

But trust among acquaintances could not support a community that expanded without limit.

As settlement, agriculture, and surplus brought larger populations together, villages became cities, and cities formed larger political communities. Human beings gained the ability to store grain, organize irrigation, build roads, maintain armies, preserve knowledge, and undertake long-term construction. Writing carried commands, contracts, taxes, laws, and history beyond individual memory. Institutions allowed people who did not know one another to live within the same order.

For the first time, civilization thus gained large-scale cooperation beyond circles of acquaintances.

At the same time, it gained the capacity for large-scale extraction, rule, and war, and for fixing hierarchies into an established order.

Capability never amplifies goodwill alone.

It amplifies everything people can do.

A student asked, “So does civilization develop simply by growing more capable?”

“Not simply,” the professor said. “Who counts as ‘one of us’ also keeps changing.”

Families brought more relatives within shared responsibilities; villages brought neighbors within shared survival; cities and states made tens of thousands, and then millions, of strangers fellow members in matters of law, taxation, defense, and public affairs. Religious, ethical, philosophical, and political traditions kept asking what responsibilities people owed one another, what made power legitimate, whom justice should reach, and whether a stranger’s suffering had anything to do with me.

Yet every widening of the circle of “our own” brought new exclusions.

Beyond the city-state lay foreign lands; at the empire’s margins lived the conquered; within the state were people whose voices were suppressed. Civilization expanded cooperation and competition alike. It created shared identities, and also larger boundaries between friend and foe.

Human civilization advanced through this double movement:

On the one hand, connecting more and more people;

On the other, continually using greater organizational power for the survival, expansion, and competition of particular communities.

In the late eighteenth century, industrialization first achieved a breakthrough in Britain, then spread to Europe and North America, gradually changing the world. Coal, steam engines, mechanized production, and new transportation systems enabled humanity, for the first time and on a large scale, to break free of the natural limits of muscle, animal power, wind, and water.

Industrial civilization did more than add machines.

It reorganized time, labor, cities, capital, states, and the world.

Factories concentrated scattered labor. Railways and steamships shortened distances. Standardization allowed unfamiliar regions to join the same production chain. Scientific discoveries became engineering capabilities more quickly. Education began to reach larger populations. Public health, modern medicine, and infrastructure enabled more people to survive and more complex cities to exist.

For the first time, humanity could reliably produce material goods far beyond the needs of individual survival.

Scarcity did not disappear, but it was no longer merely a fate imposed by nature. Increasingly, it became an outcome jointly produced by productive capacity, structures of distribution, relationships of rights, and public choices.

Yet every victory of industrial civilization also generated new problems.

Factories increased output, but could also reduce a person to a replaceable position on the production line. Capital organized long-term investment, but could also accelerate the concentration of wealth and decision-making power. Nation-states provided public order and social protection, but could also mobilize unprecedented capacities for war. Fossil energy sustained modern life, but also extended its effects to the atmosphere, oceans, ecosystems, and people yet to be born.

Colonial expansion, global trade, and industrial production were not separate histories. The modern world's prosperity, oppression, connections, and inequalities often arrived together along the same shipping routes.

Gu Xingzhou, twenty-two, sat by the window. He came from a city that had once prospered through heavy industry.

"My maternal grandfather worked at the same factory for thirty-one years," he said. "When it closed, the family didn't go hungry right away. What he lost was his reason to go there every day. Later, everyone said he could finally rest. But he always felt that no one needed him anymore."

The professor did not write that sentence on the blackboard.

Industrial civilization changed more than production. It also changed where a person found confirmation that they were useful, where they belonged, and why they got up in the morning.

From the late nineteenth century into the twentieth, electricity, the chemical industry, internal combustion engines, communications, and mass production transformed society again. Cities lit up at night. Goods crossed continents. Information began to travel faster than people. Assembly lines broke complex manufacturing into repeatable steps, and modern organizations learned to manage the production and lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

Two world wars then demonstrated that industrial systems could mass-produce not only the means of life, but death as well.

The professor stopped.

No one in the room spoke.

Outside the window, a street sweeper moved slowly along the road. The machine ran steadily and precisely, as though humanity had never used that same organizational capacity to produce a different outcome.

After the wars, many societies continued to build public education, healthcare, social security, labor protections, and modern governance. Different countries followed different institutional paths, yet all had to answer the same question: once productive capacity had surpassed that of the old era, how could civilization's achievements enter an ordinary person's life?

These institutions changed countless lives.

They did not end the tensions among power, capital, states, groups, and individuals. They placed those tensions within new legal, political, and public structures, allowing conflicts to go on being addressed without destroying society each time.

In the late twentieth century, computers, satellite communications, shipping containers, the internet, and global supply chains connected the world more closely.

Behind a single phone might lie minerals, design, chips, software, assembly, logistics, finance, and knowledge from many countries. An epidemic, war, port shutdown, energy shock, or financial crisis in one region could rapidly reach distant places through invisible connections.

Never before had humanity come so close to being a whole in reality.

Yet the workings of society were still determined separately by countless local actors.

Businesses were responsible first for their own continued existence; cities dealt first with local pressures; states protected their own interests first; departments fulfilled their own statutory duties first; individuals looked after themselves and those close to them first.

These choices were not inherently wrong.

The problem was that once the world had become a web in which each part affected the others, every part could make choices that were reasonable for itself, yet the whole could still move, step by step, toward a place no one wanted to reach.

The professor wrote on the blackboard:

Each part is right. The whole is out of control.

“This is one of modern civilization’s deepest contradictions,” he said. “Our capabilities already have consequences for the whole, but our responsibility, understanding, and decisions remain divided among the parts.”

A student asked, “Then couldn’t we see the whole simply by creating stronger international organizations, bigger governments, or a unified system?”

“Being able to see the whole does not give you the right to own it.”

The professor put down the chalk.

“The more a center can see everyone, the more it may be able to help everyone, and the more it may be able to control everyone. Civilization’s problem has never been only a lack of capability. It is also who that capability belongs to, why it operates, who can refuse it, who can stop it, and who bears the consequences when it is wrong.”

“Can seeing itself hurt people?” Gu Xingzhou asked.

“Seeing does not automatically hurt people. Defining them, drawing inferences about them, and arranging their lives without permission does,” the professor said. “A platform that sees someone growing more tired can help them leave, or use that tiredness to keep them there longer. A medical system that can predict disease can offer treatment early, but it may also cause someone who is not yet ill to be defined in advance by insurers, by their profession, and by the people around them. Seeing more does not mean owning more. Predicting someone’s future does not give you the power to arrange it.”

The information age did not eliminate this contradiction.

The internet brought knowledge, expression, and collaboration to billions, while also turning attention, relationships, preferences, and emotions into resources that could be continuously extracted. Platforms could understand group behavior faster than any earlier institution, yet did not necessarily take responsibility for its long-term consequences. Algorithms made matching more efficient, but could also make people increasingly transparent while leaving them less and less able to understand who was shaping their choices.

Then artificial intelligence began to cross another boundary.

Earlier machines mainly replaced muscle, and traditional automation mainly repeated predetermined steps. A new generation of artificial intelligence began to handle language, images, knowledge, design, prediction, decision support, and complex action. It did more than carry out explicit human commands. It could find connections in vast quantities of information, generate plans, simulate consequences, and enter the real world through a range of terminals.

As AI continues to develop more general capabilities, what AGI brings will be more than another industrial revolution.

For the first time, perception, understanding, learning, simulation, coordination, execution, and feedback may occur continuously on a scale far beyond the capacity of individuals, institutions, or even a single state to handle.

An intelligent system can understand a city's energy, water networks, medical care, transport, and supply chains at the same time. It can discover a policy's chain of consequences across different groups, regions, and times. It can help individuals extend memory, knowledge, and action to places their bodies cannot reach. It can also warn of risks before they become visible, and trace causes after harm occurs.

For the first time, humanity may possess the ability to observe the whole and coordinate complex activities on a scale that matches its systemic problems.

For the first time, the most dangerous parts of the old civilization may be amplified to the same degree.

Local competition can be automated. Deception can be scaled up. The chain of decisions leading to the use of weapons can be shortened. Risks in biology, networks, finance, public opinion, and infrastructure can become interconnected. Companies can understand a person's desires better than that person does. States can perceive society more deeply than before. A small number of actors can use intelligent systems to gain capabilities that once required vast organizations.

Artificial intelligence will not automatically choose a direction for civilization.

It will first amplify the purposes, institutions, interests, and human hearts that already exist.

If the old logic of strategic interaction remains unchanged, the stronger the capabilities become, the more likely local competition is to push all actors together toward danger. Even if no side desires destruction, humanity may collectively produce irreversible consequences through successive acts of self-preservation.

The professor turned and wrote another line beneath "Each part is right. The whole is out of control":

Upgrading alone is no longer enough.

The room grew quiet.

A student asked, "Does that mean all our past institutions have failed?"

"No," the professor said. "It is precisely because they succeeded that we have reached this point."

Laws, markets, governments, businesses, schools, hospitals, social security, international organizations, and countless communities made modern civilization possible. A civilizational leap does not declare them wrong, much less replace all of society with a new system. Its task is to address this question: when these systems are interconnected and shape one another's consequences, yet none can bear the consequences for the whole on its own, how can

civilization develop new capabilities at the level of the whole while preserving their expertise, responsibilities, and boundaries?

Only then did the professor open his slides.

What appeared on the screen was neither artificial intelligence nor a future city.

The first line came from “The Evolution of Ritual” in the Book of Rites:

“When the Great Way prevails, the world belongs to all.”

Then came Plato’s inquiry into a just city; Tao Yuanming’s Peach Blossom Spring, whose path could never be found again once one had left; and Thomas More’s Utopia, which used an imaginary island to reflect on reality. The slides continued: different religious traditions’ understandings of compassion, justice, neighbors, giving, and shared responsibility; and modern paths toward freedom, equality, welfare, cooperation, and human emancipation.

These visions were not the same.

A world belonging to all is not Plato’s Republic; Peach Blossom Spring is not Utopia. Religious communities’ understandings of the good are not equivalent to modern liberalism’s insistence on individual rights. Nor can socialism’s pursuit of common ownership and human emancipation be reduced to the institutional reforms of the welfare state.

They come from different civilizations, histories, faiths, sufferings, and human hearts.

Civilizations and cultures need to retain their independence. They can meet, converse, learn from one another, and find empathy in real life. They do not have to be merged into a single shared culture, one definition of happiness, or one ultimate answer.

Yet the ideal worlds that have appeared again and again, across times and places, together establish at least one thing:

Humanity has never truly been satisfied with a world in which only a few are safe, only the strong have choices, and order is sustained solely through fear and scarcity.

Different civilizations keep asking, in their own languages:

Can a person cease to treat another merely as a tool, an enemy, a resource, or someone who must obey?

Can a shared life protect individuals while also taking responsibility for the whole?

After material abundance arrives, can people find happiness rather than enter a more refined emptiness?

Can civilization correct itself without repeatedly collapsing and starting over?

A student asked, “If humanity has been asking these questions for thousands of years, why haven’t we achieved these things?”

The professor did not reduce the answer to people being insufficiently kind.

Ideals have been unable to take a stable place in reality first of all because reality has always imposed constraints.

Resources were scarce for long periods, and the pressure to survive made self-interest the most immediate motive. Once communities expanded, no one could see the whole in full. Information was scattered among institutions; responsibility kept changing hands as processes moved forward. Power was concentrated to solve shared problems, but once concentrated could become difficult to relinquish. Altruistic acts were hard to remember consistently, while possession by a particular party yielded immediate returns. Different civilizations drew legitimacy from different sources; they could not, and should not, be forcibly unified.

Many ideals demanded sustained nobility, while institutions could not operate reliably amid ordinary people's self-preservation, suspicion, exhaustion, envy, and fear.

Many institutions could constrain behavior, but could not see in real time whom a decision would harm as it passed through the entire social network.

Many revolutions changed ownership and power structures, but did not automatically change how people found a sense of value, of being needed, and of meaning.

What was truly missing between ideals and reality was more than a technology or a set of institutions.

It was a capacity for civilizational operation that could connect technology, institutions, resources, human hearts, and meaning, while always allowing particular people to refuse, leave, question, and correct.

AI/AGI makes this capacity a real possibility for the first time.

It remains only a possibility.

A system that can see the whole will not automatically serve it. Intelligence that can understand people will not automatically respect them. The ability to coordinate resources will not automatically bring fairness. And a structure that can predict risk may place civilization in a permanent state of emergency.

Technology brings humanity's millennia-old ideals within reach of reality for the first time.

It also gives the worst possible world equally powerful conditions for becoming real.

The real question, then, is not:

Can artificial intelligence manage the world for humanity?

It is:

When humanity first possesses the technological conditions for developing capabilities at the level of civilization as a whole, whom will those capabilities belong to? Why will they operate? How will they enter reality? And where must they stop?

When capabilities already have consequences for the whole, but decisions remain divided among the parts, what humanity needs is not a smarter manager but a new way of connecting.

It must let every particular person retain their identity, private domain, and right to refuse and leave. It must also, for the first time, let people who are scattered apart see one another, connect resources, and take responsibility around shared consequences.

That connection first took place at a person's side.

A person could let intelligence help them understand, express themselves, and act, while still deciding for themselves which parts of life could be seen, which doors could open, and when they must close.

People later called this extension of capability, in which the real person always remains the subject, Spark.

When countless such connections gathered around real problems, a larger capacity began to form.

It was not a new government, a central brain, or a collective personality for everyone. Only where shared responsibility was needed did it enable civilization to see the whole, coordinate action, bring consequences back, and return power once the work was done.

People later called it Nebula.

During one landslide warning, five hundred drones belonging to different actors were temporarily authorized to take part in an evacuation. Once the task was complete, control returned, one by one, to each actor's Spark. Temporary use ended, and private footage unrelated to the evacuation no longer entered the public task domain. Participation in one rescue did not make anyone a participant in the next by default.

Nebula develops capabilities at the level of the whole, but cannot own any particular person.

It must ensure that help that truly occurred is not erased. It must also ensure that someone who has not helped, cannot help, or does not want to help still has survival, care, education, and dignity.

This cannot happen overnight.

Disease will not disappear. Loved ones will still die. Judgments will still be wrong, dreams may still fail, and states will still compete. Nor will people cease to be selfish, envious, cowardly, or controlling simply because they enter better institutions.

Nebula cannot turn every loss into meaning, much less offset a particular person's suffering with happiness for the whole.

What it can change is something more fundamental:

When someone is hurt, refuses, fails, falls silent, or leaves, civilization no longer readily treats them as noise in its operation. When different systems are each right but together

cause harm, there is no longer a permanent absence of anyone responsible for the overall consequences. As technology grows stronger, people do not have to become less substantial. As civilization becomes able to live longer and reach farther, those who come later can still ask: why must we go on living this way?

Without continued existence, all happiness and meaning lose their grounding in reality.

But a world that is forever safe, extremely efficient, and rich in resources, yet has no freedom, relationships, pleasure, creativity, or meaning, is merely an enormous cage that is hard to bring down.

Civilization must first safeguard the conditions for real lives and the shared world to continue to exist, and bring AGI, as an important intelligent constituent, into its operation through relationships that allow constraints, correction, and responsibility. It must then allow real life to unfold happily, and ultimately enable life and civilization to keep forming relationships, creations, responsibilities, and directions that did not exist before.

Nebula's formation, expansion, and continued openness are not a technological upgrade outside civilization. But Nebula is not civilization itself, either.

What truly changes is that humans, AGI, institutions, resources, relationships, rights, and responsibilities begin to enter the same new structure of shared life. Nebula is only one civilizational operating entity within it: one that makes shared facts visible, allows cross-domain consequences to be coordinated, and makes future effects visible.

Such a civilization will not descend from a complete blueprint.

It can only grow, little by little, through the cracks in reality.

Beginning when a system first admits that it cannot see everything.

Beginning when a power first learns where it should stop.

Beginning when a person's "no" can reach public structures accurately, without that person being punished for it.

And beginning in a city's early hours.

At this point, the sound of rain in the lecture hall faded away.

Elsewhere, another torrential rain had already been falling for seven hours.

The hospital needed power. The river needed floodwater released. The cold-storage facility needed to maintain its temperature. The rail system needed to evacuate passengers.

Every system was doing its duty.

Together, the entire city was losing control.

Prologue At Four in the Morning, Everyone in the City Is Right

At 3:57 in the morning, the backup power supply at Haijia City First People's Hospital made a faint switching sound.

It sounded like someone coughing behind a wall.

He Lan, thirty-seven, looked up toward the end of the corridor. The ceiling lights dimmed for half a second, then came back on. The electronic clock above the nurses' station kept running, its green digits changing from 03:57 to 03:58 without a pause.

She lowered her head and went on adjusting the oxygen flow for the old man in the bed.

His surname was Feng. He was seventy-six, had chronic lung disease, and had been admitted with an infection before the rainstorm. Since evening, he had been asking the same question over and over:

"Hasn't the rain stopped?"

"No."

"Will the river overflow?"

"The hospital is on high ground."

He Lan gave him the same answer every time. She did not say that although the hospital stood on high ground, its underground power distribution room was less than two meters above the warning level for the nearby river. Nor did she say that the main grid had first suffered a voltage drop forty minutes earlier, and some noncritical loads had already been disconnected.

The old man closed his eyes. Oxygen hissed softly through the clear tube.

The terminal on He Lan's wrist vibrated.

Her Spark had compressed several scattered messages into a very brief alert:

Main grid load continuing to rise. Hospital now under Level Two power protection.

Underground parking drainage pumps remain operational. Estimated backup energy supply for critical wards: four hours, twelve minutes.

Below the alert was a line in small gray type:

Status of city drainage system unavailable.

He Lan looked at that line and paused for two seconds.

She opened the hospital operations interface. Oxygen, negative pressure, monitoring, drug refrigeration, operating rooms, intensive care wards, drainage pumps: every item was displayed clearly. She could find out how much longer the battery in a particular ventilator on the twelfth floor would last, or see that the temperature in pharmacy refrigerator number three was rising.

She did not know where the water outside the hospital was going.

At 3:59, the municipal flood-control dispatch center decided to raise the southeast drainage pumping station to maximum power.

It was the right decision.

Rainfall in the Old Port District had already surpassed the record for that time of year. Water was rising rapidly in three underpasses, and low-lying neighborhoods housing thousands of residents faced backflow. Unless the pumping station could lower the water by 4:20, seawater backing up against the outflow and water coming down from upstream would arrive together.

The flood-control system's conclusion was beyond dispute:

Increase power immediately.

At 4:01, the city grid's automatic dispatch system denied the request.

This, too, was the right decision.

Two transmission lines in the east had been cut by a landslide, and the remaining grid was already near its safety threshold. Starting the drainage pumping station at full load now could trigger a wider outage. The grid system gave first priority to hospitals, communications, emergency lighting, and drinking-water facilities. It required the pumping station to wait eleven minutes.

For the grid, eleven minutes was a necessary buffer against a citywide blackout.

For the Old Port District, where water was already coming in, eleven minutes was enough for it to rise over another step.

At 4:03, the rail transit control center requested restoration of two traction power feeds on the South Loop Line.

The request was equally right.

Two evacuation trains were stranded on an elevated section of track, carrying more than thirteen hundred people between them. One train's ventilation system was already operating at reduced capacity. The passengers had been trapped since evening, and temperatures inside the carriages kept rising. Seven minutes of restored power would be enough to bring the trains into safe stations.

The grid system refused again.

At 4:04, the cold-chain logistics park in the west of the city issued a red alert.

Qiao Mu, forty-six, stood in the middle of a warehouse, watching a row of temperature indicators turn from green to yellow.

He had been in the cold-chain business for twenty-seven years. He knew what yellow meant. Most people thought a cold store would warm up as soon as the power went out. It did not. The walls, racks, and goods themselves all retained the cold. The real dangers were repeated

outages, refrigeration units restarting over and over, and not knowing when the next supply of power would come.

Warehouse Four held a shipment of raw materials for insulin, specialized nutritional preparations for two hospitals, and a large quantity of perishable food. Under its contracts, the park was a key site for ensuring essential supplies. Under the grid's current priority tiers, it came after hospitals and water supply.

His Spark had already worked out three plans:

Shut down the food stores and concentrate energy on protecting medical supplies;

Start the backup diesel generators;

Move some of the goods to warehouses in the northern district.

The first plan would sacrifice more than a third of the inventory. The second had only enough fuel for five hours, and with roads around the park flooded, resupply could not be guaranteed. The third required roads and vehicles, and the transport system had not responded.

Qiao Mu sent the municipal emergency center a request at the highest priority.

“Warehouse Four must stay on.”

At 4:06, Liang Shen, forty-two, saw all these requests in the municipal emergency coordination hall.

Strictly speaking, he did not see them in the same place.

The flood-control system occupied the large screen on the left, its blue river network flashing ceaselessly. Grid load appeared at the upper right, a red line approaching the threshold. Rail transit information came from a separate terminal that required a dedicated operator to log in. Hospital power use appeared only as aggregate figures, with no individual wards visible. The cold-chain park's request was seventeenth on the emergency action list.

Each system had its own colors, terminology, timestamps, and priorities.

“Submit the pumping station request again,” Liang Shen said.

“The grid has denied it.”

“Manual override.”

“That needs confirmation from the duty chief at the Energy Bureau.”

“Contact him.”

“We're trying.”

“What about those two trains?”

“The South Loop Line is requesting seven minutes of power.”

“Can we stagger that with the pumping station?”

“The two systems use different time windows.”

“Put the times on the same basis.”

“Flood control triggers on water levels, rail transit on train status, the grid on load forecasts.”

Liang Shen looked up at the big screen.

He had worked in the city’s public systems for eighteen years, first in traffic dispatch and later in the city operations center. He had seen typhoons, fires, infectious disease, power outages, and supply-chain disruptions. He knew it was not that the systems were unconnected. Every year they added interfaces. After every crisis they established new coordination mechanisms.

But every interface had been built for the last crisis.

Road data went to flood control to help dispatch rescue vehicles; medical data went to transport to clear routes for emergency care; grid data went to hospitals so they could switch to backup energy in advance. They were like doors cut into a house, one after another, allowing people to pass from one room to the next, while no one really knew what strain the whole house was under at that moment.

At 4:08, water entered the first power distribution box in the Old Port District.

At 4:09, a passenger on one of the trains fainted.

At 4:10, the temperature in pharmacy refrigerator number three at First People’s Hospital crossed the warning line.

At 4:11, a manual override was authorized for the drainage pumping station.

At 4:11:32, the station started up.

Grid load surged.

Alarms rang out across the hall at once.

“Frequency falling in the eastern district!”

“South Loop traction power has automatically disconnected!”

“Hospital switching to backup!”

“Two groups of communications base stations are down!”

The city on the screen did not go black.

It merely developed a few irregular patches of gray.

When He Lan heard the second switching sound, the corridor lights did not come straight back on.

Emergency lighting started two seconds later. Someone at the nurses’ station shouted, “Bed Twelve’s monitor is offline!”

He Lan put her hand on Mr. Feng’s shoulder.

“Stay still.”

The old man opened his eyes. He could not make her out in the darkness. He could only feel a hand.

“Power’s out?”

“It’s switching to backup.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying.”

When she finished speaking, the ventilator started working again and the monitor lit up. Someone ran past the end of the corridor pushing a spare oxygen cylinder. Its wheels rolled over the floor with a hurried, hollow sound.

There was no new information on her terminal.

Spark knew what had happened inside the hospital. It did not know whether this switchover had been caused by drainage, rail transit, a line fault, or some decision that had never entered the hospital’s system. It advised moving two non-emergency wards to a lower level of power use.

He Lan did not act on it.

She needed to know how long the outage would last.

No one knew.

At 4:13, Qiao Mu’s diesel generators failed to start.

Water from the downpour had entered the air intake.

He told the workers to troubleshoot manually while shutting down Food Stores One and Two. Once the refrigeration stopped, the warehouse fell into an unnerving quiet. In the darkness, the racks stood like rows of walls with no end in sight.

“Protect Warehouse Four first,” he said.

The duty manager asked, “What about Three?”

Warehouse Three held meat and dairy products. If it stayed off too long, the losses would be heavy.

Qiao Mu did not answer.

His Spark had already listed the losses under each plan. The figures were clear and precise, even accounting for breach-of-contract compensation and subsequent effects on supply. But the figures did not know whether two small supermarkets in the northern district would still be able to open tomorrow. Nor did they know whether any hospital was waiting, at that very moment, for the medical supplies in Warehouse Four.

“Protect Four first,” he repeated.

At 4:16, the flood-control system reported that water levels in the Old Port District were beginning to fall.

In the same minute, voltage fluctuations briefly stopped the drainage pumps in the hospital's underground parking garage.

Water came down the ramp and over the first flood barrier.

At 4:18, Liang Shen finally reached the duty chief at the Energy Bureau.

The voice on the other end was full of interference.

"The pumping station has to reduce power."

"How much?"

"At least twenty percent."

"Flood control won't agree."

"If it doesn't, the whole eastern district could separate from the grid."

"The hospital is entirely on backup now, and people are still trapped on the South Loop Line."

"All the more reason to reduce it."

"There are medical supplies in the cold-chain park."

The other end of the line went quiet for a second.

"Cold-chain facilities aren't in the highest protection tier."

"I know."

"Then follow the tiers."

"What if the hospitals need those supplies tonight?"

"They're not in the system."

Liang Shen looked up at the action list. Qiao Mu's request was still seventeenth.

"It's not that they aren't there," he said. "It's that we can't see them."

At 4:22, the flooding alarm went off in the hospital's underground parking garage.

At 4:23, He Lan's ward received instructions to transfer some patients.

At 4:25, power was restored to the first train on the South Loop Line.

At 4:27, the drainage pumping station reduced power.

At 4:31, diesel generators took over Warehouse Four in the cold-chain park.

At 4:40, the city grid's frequency stabilized.

At 5:06, water levels in the Old Port District began to rise again.

The crisis did not end after any one decision.

It simply kept reappearing somewhere else, moving along the gaps between systems.

By daybreak, Haijia City had avoided a citywide blackout. Both evacuation trains had reached stations. First People's Hospital had kept power in its critical wards. Most residents

of the Old Port District had been evacuated before the water rose further. The medical supplies in Cold Store Four had also been saved.

Judged by the overall outcome, the response could be called a success.

But more than four hundred homes in the Old Port District had flooded, and goods in seventeen small shops had been submerged. Two sets of pumps in the hospital's underground garage were damaged, and a batch of medicines in refrigerator number three would have to be discarded. Temperatures in two food stores at the cold-chain park had exceeded their limits. One passenger from the stranded trains remained in critical condition after being taken to hospital.

Every system had accomplished its most important task.

No system had seen the full cost.

At nine that morning, the rain finally eased.

People in the emergency coordination hall began to sit down, one after another. Some fell asleep with their heads on their desks. Others were still on the phone checking losses. The red alerts on the big screen disappeared one by one, and the city returned to a color that made it look manageable.

Liang Shen did not leave.

He laid a sheet of white paper on the desk and drew four circles.

The power grid.

Flood control.

Healthcare.

Transport and supply.

He had meant to draw a larger circle around them.

His pen hovered for a long time.

If they simply built an even bigger system and put the four systems inside it, things might become worse. The larger system would see more, and possess more. It might be faster, yet still not know where its power ought to stop.

In the end, Liang Shen did not draw a fifth circle.

He drew only the first line between the four.

Part I A New Civilization Takes Root: Civilization Begins to See the Whole

A new civilization does not descend from a grand blueprint.

It takes root in the cracks where real-world systems are cut off from one another, where every part may be right and the whole still suffers. Nebula grows from here as well: not as civilization itself, but as an operating entity through which civilization begins to see shared facts and coordinate consequences across domains.

Chapter 1 Four Right Answers and a Loss of Control

On the third day after the rainstorm ended, Haijia City held its first review of the incident.

The meeting room had no windows.

The air circulation unit on the wall gave a steady low hum, like a machine unwilling to join the argument. Twenty-seven people sat on either side of the long table, representing flood control, the power grid, healthcare, transport, emergency management, communications, logistics, the Old Port District's subdistrict office, and the cold-chain park.

There was no water on the table.

Before the meeting, someone had said that several streets in the Old Port District still lacked a reliable water supply, so there was no need for the meeting room to pretend everything was normal. The decision was not in the agenda, but it made everyone feel thirsty from the moment they sat down.

Zhou Yi, deputy director of the municipal emergency committee, chaired the review.

He began by reading out the results:

No large-scale casualties.

No citywide blackout.

Major transport routes restored within six hours.

Critical hospital systems remained operational.

"By current standards," he said, "the response was effective overall."

Chen Qi, head of the Old Port subdistrict office, looked up.

"More than four hundred homes in my area flooded."

"I know."

"Seventeen shops. Seven had no disaster insurance."

"Relief is being arranged."

"And that still counts as effective overall?"

Zhou Yi did not answer at once.

The head of grid dispatch pushed a report into the middle of the table.

“If the drainage pumping station had started at full load three minutes earlier, there would have been a forty-seven percent chance of cascading separation in the eastern grid. That would have affected more than four hundred households.”

The head of flood control said, “If it had started eleven minutes later, more than two thousand homes in the Old Port District might have flooded.”

“That’s why we used a manual override.”

“Your override nearly brought down the grid.”

“Without it, the water would have entered people’s homes.”

The rail transit representative added, “Both trains had already met the criteria for a Level One evacuation. There were older people, children, and people with chronic illnesses aboard. Seven minutes of restored power was the minimum requirement.”

The hospital operations chief said, “When the hospital switched to backup, the underground drainage pumps and refrigerator number three were both downgraded. We received no advance warning that the pumping station was increasing power.”

Qiao Mu sat at the far end of the table.

He waited until everyone had finished before speaking.

“Why was my request about medical supplies seventeenth on the list?”

The emergency center duty officer leafed through the records.

“Your park is registered as a Level Two essential-supply site.”

“There were hospital supplies in Warehouse Four.”

“The directory didn’t identify an urgent use.”

“The shipment was transferred in at short notice the day before the storm.”

“Then the directory should have been updated.”

“Updated for whom? The logistics system, the drug regulation system, the hospital procurement system, the grid protection system, or your emergency system?”

The duty officer did not answer.

Qiao Mu looked at Liang Shen.

“That day you asked, what if hospitals were waiting for that shipment? We checked afterward. Two hospitals in the southern district were waiting. It wasn’t immediately a matter of saving lives, but they needed it the next day. You saved my Warehouse Four by luck. If the diesel generator had started ten minutes later, we’d be discussing more than a few flooded shops today.”

The room fell quiet.

Four stacks of reports lay in front of Liang Shen.

He had read them twice.

Every report was complete, clear, and internally consistent. The grid system had operated according to its safety thresholds; flood control according to water levels and tides; rail transit according to passenger safety; the hospital according to the protection of critical wards; the cold-chain park according to contracts and risks to goods.

Not one report admitted to having done anything wrong.

Not one was lying, either.

Zhou Yi asked, "Let's establish one thing first. Were there any clear violations of procedure?"

A member of the legal team answered, "None identified so far."

"Was any information withheld?"

"There is no evidence of that."

"Were there system failures?"

"Water entering the diesel generator constitutes an equipment failure. All other systems operated within their design parameters."

"Then where does responsibility lie?"

No one spoke.

Chen Qi put a hand on the table.

"Don't tell me that because no one was wrong, no one is responsible for the water getting into people's homes."

"That isn't what we mean," Zhou Yi said.

"Then what do you mean?"

Liang Shen spoke for the first time.

"Responsibility isn't missing. It's been cut into pieces."

Everyone turned to him.

"The grid answers for the grid, flood control for water levels, hospitals for patients, transport for passengers, businesses for goods and contracts. Every piece of responsibility is there. No one answers for what happens when they overlap."

The head of grid dispatch frowned.

"Isn't the city emergency center responsible for the whole?"

"We're responsible for coordination."

"Isn't coordination the whole?"

"No," Liang Shen said. "What we receive are the results you send after each of you has made your own decisions. You tell us how much power you need, when you need it, what you

cannot afford to lose. Then we make calls, set priorities, find the people in charge. But when all those requests change at once, there is no structure that sends the new consequences back to everyone in real time.”

He opened the record of the night of the storm.

Four timelines appeared on the screen.

3:59, flood control increases power.

4:01, grid refuses.

4:03, rail transit requests restoration.

4:04, cold-chain red alert.

4:11, manual override.

4:12, hospital switches to backup.

“We pieced these timelines together afterward,” Liang Shen said. “But at 4:11, they weren’t together. Each system knew only its own decision. It didn’t know at the same time how the other systems would respond.”

The head of flood control asked, “You want to build a master control system?”

“No.”

“Then how can you possibly see the whole?”

“I don’t know.”

A few people raised their eyes when Liang Shen said this.

In a meeting like this, “I don’t know” usually meant inadequate preparation. Someone responsible for systems was supposed to arrive with a plan, preferably a timetable, a budget, and measurable targets as well.

Liang Shen had none of those.

He had only the sheet of paper with four circles and a line.

“All I know is that we must not build a fifth system that contains all the others,” he said. “If it acquires all the data, all dispatch authority, and all the capacity to execute, we may make decisions faster. But once it gets something wrong, the whole city will be left with just one kind of error. What we need is not a bigger center. We need these systems, when necessary, to see the same thing and know who is bearing what.”

“Easy to say,” the head of grid dispatch said. “Once we share data, who answers for a leak? If bad data leads to a dispatch error, whose fault is it? You use our forecasting model but won’t accept our safety thresholds, and in the end the grid takes the blame.”

Qiao Mu said, “Why should businesses let you see their inventory?”

The head of flood control said, “In an emergency, do we act first or wait for everyone’s authorization?”

He Lan sat near the door.

She was not a hospital administrator and had not originally been on the attendance list. She had been invited at short notice to represent frontline medical staff, and had not spoken since coming in.

Zhou Yi asked her, “What does the hospital’s frontline think?”

He Lan thought for a moment.

“That night my Spark knew how much longer every piece of equipment on the twelfth floor would work,” she said. “It didn’t know why the drainage pumping station had started, or how many people were trapped on the tracks. To me, the city wasn’t a whole. It was a succession of changes no one could explain.”

“What if we gave your Spark all the city’s information?”

“That would be worse.”

Someone laughed, then quickly stopped.

He Lan went on. “I don’t need to know everyone’s location, inventory, or electricity use. I only need to know how long this outage will last, why it happened, and what I can do. If the hospital needs to lower its load by another level, I need to know whom that will buy time for. Someone also needs to know what risks we are leaving with our patients as a result.”

She paused.

“Knowing everything doesn’t mean being able to answer for everything.”

The meeting continued until noon without producing a plan.

In the end, Zhou Yi decided to form a small group first, with thirty days to propose a minimal coordination trial.

“No overarching platform,” he said. “No wholesale collection of data. No change to existing statutory responsibilities. Answer one thing first: if the same rainstorm comes again, can we let the four systems see what one another is doing before 4:11?”

As the meeting broke up, Chen Qi stopped Liang Shen.

“You said responsibility had been cut into pieces.”

“Yes.”

“Once you join it back together, no one gets hurt?”

Liang Shen shook his head.

“People still will.”

“Then what good is joining it up?”

“At least before the harm happens, we’ll know what we’re choosing. And afterward, we won’t be able to say it was another system’s doing.”

Chen Qi looked at him.

“People in the Old Port District don’t care how many systems you have.”

“I know.”

“They only care whether the water will come in next time.”

“I know that too.”

“No, you don’t.”

With that, Chen Qi pushed open the door and left.

That afternoon, Liang Shen went to the Old Port District.

The water had receded. Sodden furniture, cardboard boxes, and appliances were piled along both sides of the streets. Shopkeepers were carrying soaked stock to the roadside, the colors of its packaging bleached by water. The air smelled of mud, disinfectant, and rotting food mixed together.

Outside a shoe repair shop, an old man was picking shoes out of the mud, pair by pair.

Liang Shen recognized it as the ninth shop on the loss list.

“Can they still be used?” he asked.

The old man did not look up.

“We’ll see when they’re dry.”

“Have you registered for relief?”

“The subdistrict office has been here.”

“The pumping station started late that night.”

The old man tipped the water out of a shoe.

“Have you come to explain?”

“No.”

“Then what have you come for?”

Liang Shen stood there, suddenly unable to answer.

He had thought he was coming to see the costs the systems had not seen. But to the old man, he was still just another person who would look and leave.

The old man glanced up at him.

“Young man, the water didn’t come through the system. It came through the gap under the door.”

Liang Shen followed his gaze to the shop door.

The wood along the bottom had swollen. The door would not close.

He crouched down and helped the old man lift it a little. They found a piece of scrap wood and wedged it beneath the hinge. The door was still crooked, but at least it could just about close.

Before he left, the old man asked what he did for work.

“City systems,” Liang Shen said.

“Then next time, count the gap under the door too.”

Liang Shen nodded.

That night, he reopened the incident record.

This time, he did not begin his proposal with “build a unified platform.”

The first line was:

No shared coordination may require participants to surrender everything first.

The second line was:

Every system call must make clear why it has been granted this information and who bears responsibility after action is taken.

He stopped halfway through the third line.

Outside the window, the city after the rain was gradually regaining its lights. Hospitals, power grid, pumping stations, transport, warehouses, apartment buildings: each was lit, each still separate from the others.

He took out the sheet of white paper.

There was only one line between the four circles.

Liang Shen added no new circles.

Along the line, he wrote four words in very small letters:

Identity.

Task.

Responsibility.

Return.

At first, Nebula was not a cloud.

It was only a line, not yet knowing whether it could bear the weight of reality.

Chapter 2 The First Shared Interface

Thirty days later, the proposal Liang Shen presented was just eleven pages long.

Zhou Yi turned to the end, then back to the first page.

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“No system architecture diagram?”

“In the appendix.”

“No unified data center?”

“No.”

“No new command body?”

“No.”

“Then what are you planning to build?”

“A shared interface,” Liang Shen said.

There were more people in the meeting room than last time.

Alongside the city’s public systems were two energy companies, three logistics companies, a hospital consortium, telecommunications operators, insurers, community representatives, and the Data Protection Committee. Everyone had the same proposal in front of them: few pages, many annotations.

The first page contained a single sentence:

Without changing existing statutory powers, asset ownership, or ultimate responsibility, enable different actors working on a defined task to share the minimum facts necessary for coordination.

Qiao Mu frowned as soon as he read the word “share.”

“Who decides what’s minimum?”

“The party requesting access explains it,” Liang Shen said. “The party supplying the information confirms it. High-risk tasks undergo independent review.”

“And in an emergency?”

“Access through an emergency interface under statutory authority, with mandatory review afterward.”

“Once information goes out, how do you take it back?”

“When the task ends, the interface closes. Unnecessary data is deleted; necessary accountability records are retained.”

“Who guarantees deletion?”

“Technical verification, third-party audits, and legal liability together. None is enough on its own.”

Qiao Mu leaned back in his chair.

“It still sounds as though I have to trust you.”

“Yes,” Liang Shen said. “Institutions can’t make trust unnecessary. They can only let you know what you’re trusting, and whom to turn to when something goes wrong.”

Someone looked up at Liang Shen.

It was not the sort of answer usually heard in the defense of a technical proposal.

An energy company representative asked, “What if our system refuses access?”

“Then it stays closed.”

“What if the city’s task fails as a result?”

“If the law grants no power to compel access, the importance of a task cannot become a reason to acquire data. We can only change the plan or seek authorization again.”

“Then what use is this interface?”

“To let the parts that agree to connect produce results first.”

Song Cheng of the Data Protection Committee sat to Zhou Yi’s right. She had been writing in the margins of the proposal since the meeting began. Now she put down her pen.

“I support a minimal interface, but there’s something missing from the proposal.”

“What?” Liang Shen asked.

“What we don’t know.”

Some people in the room thought they had misheard.

“Each system must submit not just known facts,” Song Cheng said, “but also mark what is unknown, delayed, or uncertain. Otherwise, once the interface is in place, people will instinctively assume that what isn’t displayed doesn’t exist.”

She turned to Qiao Mu.

“On the night of the storm, the medical supplies in Warehouse Four weren’t in the city directory. What the system showed was not ‘there are no medical supplies’ but ‘we don’t know whether there are any.’ Those two things must look different on the interface.”

“They can look different and still end the same way,” Qiao Mu said.

“At least decision-makers won’t be able to treat not knowing as absence.”

“Can knowing you don’t know save a shipment?”

“No,” Song Cheng said. “But it can stop someone from saying afterward that the system provided all the facts.”

The proposal gained another page.

In the end, the minimal shared interface standardized only seven categories of information:

Who the actor is.

What task is being handled.

What is needed.

What can be provided.

Where the authority comes from.

Who bears responsibility for the action.

Which facts remain unknown.

It did not copy all the data in each system, or keep a record of a person’s entire life. Hospitals did not have to open every medical record to the grid, only specify their critical loads, scope for reduced operation, and time windows for a particular task. Businesses did not have to disclose their entire inventories, only indicate whether a certain kind of resource existed, whether it could be called upon, and what compensation and safety conditions were required. A personal Spark did not have to hand its owner’s location, relationships, and habits to public systems. Only with the owner’s authorization would it submit needs, capabilities, or risks relevant to the task.

The technical team gave the interface a very long name:

Haijia City Cross-Domain Task Minimal Coordination Layer.

No one liked it.

Some shortened it to “the coordination layer.” Others called it “that line.” The word “Nebula” had already appeared in research manuscripts, but it was not part of the project’s official name. Zhou Yi thought it too grand, like raising civilization’s banner over an unfinished city trial before its time.

Liang Shen agreed.

“It isn’t Nebula yet,” he said.

The first joint test was scheduled for a Tuesday with no urgent risks.

It was a small task: three community hospitals in the north of the city needed to move a batch of medicines requiring cold storage temporarily while equipment was serviced. Two cold-chain companies would provide space, the transport system would arrange vehicles, and the grid system would confirm reliable power at the temporary storage sites.

This could have been done before, too.

Hospitals would call suppliers, who would then find warehouses and vehicles. If anything changed at any stage, the person responsible for that stage would contact everyone else again. The shared interface was not meant to prove that people had been incapable of cooperating before. It was meant to test whether, when changes happened simultaneously, the facts could automatically reach those who actually had to bear responsibility.

At nine in the morning, the task entered aggregation.

The three hospitals each submitted medicine types, volumes, temperature ranges, and the latest permissible transfer times. The submissions contained no patient names or specific prescriptions. The two cold-chain companies opened access to their available storage spaces. Qiao Mu opened only a small area of Warehouse Four.

The system reported:

Sufficient space at the northern warehouse.

Power supply reliability meets requirements.

Estimated road travel time: forty-six minutes.

The plan appeared viable.

Cheng Yan, head of the technical team, was thirty-two. For two weeks he had slept only four hours a night. When all the indicators turned green, he finally smiled.

“Ahead of schedule.”

Liang Shen did not respond.

He was watching the lower-right corner of the interface.

There was still a gray patch.

Loading and unloading capacity: unknown.

“The warehouse has permanent staff,” Cheng Yan said.

“The directory doesn’t say so.”

“Mr. Qiao’s system can call on them.”

“This is a shared task now. We can’t rely on our knowing that he ought to have people there.”

Qiao Mu was out of town when the confirmation request reached him.

“There are people at Warehouse Four,” he said.

“How many can handle pharmaceutical loading and unloading?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

“Today?”

“Today.”

“Two. The others are doing equipment maintenance.”

“Two isn’t enough.”

“Then this afternoon.”

The hospitals’ latest permissible transfer time was noon.

After all the main conditions had turned green, the first plan failed because of one gray patch of the unknown.

Cheng Yan’s smile vanished.

“We can get people through a labor platform.”

“What about qualifications for handling pharmaceuticals?” Song Cheng asked.

“We’ll screen for them.”

“Who verifies them?”

“The platform.”

“Can the platform’s qualification data enter this task?”

“It isn’t connected yet.”

Liang Shen checked the time.

Previously, the hospitals or the cold-chain companies would have been left to solve this themselves. Now the shared interface had exposed the problem earlier, but still lacked the capacity to solve it.

“Make the delay information available to the two hospitals,” he said. “Ask whether they can split the shipments. Check with the southern warehouse at the same time.”

“The southern warehouse isn’t connected.”

“Call them.”

Cheng Yan was reluctant to concede.

“Doesn’t that put us back to doing it manually?”

“The interface isn’t here to eliminate phone calls.”

“But we’re supposed to be testing the system.”

“We’re testing the task, not saving the system’s face.”

Ten minutes later, one hospital confirmed that it could wait two more hours. The other two had to move on time. The southern warehouse agreed to receive one shipment, but an extra transport run would be needed at short notice. The transport system recalculated the routes, the grid system verified the power supply, and the insurer confirmed responsibility for the transfer.

At 12:07, the last vehicle arrived.

The task was complete.

All medicines had stayed within their temperature ranges. There had been no incident, and no one felt this was an achievement worth celebrating.

At the afternoon review, Cheng Yan said, “Without that gray patch, the original plan would have gone straight into execution.”

“What would have happened then?” Qiao Mu asked.

“The vehicles would have arrived at the warehouse before anyone discovered there was no one to unload them.”

“A little late, at worst.”

The hospital representative said, “One of those batches had a permitted transit time of only ninety minutes after leaving the backup refrigerator.”

Qiao Mu said no more.

Song Cheng projected the task interface onto the wall.

“The most valuable thing today wasn’t that we completed the transfer.”

She pointed to the gray patch.

“It was that the system didn’t fill in an answer on reality’s behalf.”

“If we keep this many unknowns in the long run, the interface will look terrible,” Cheng Yan said.

“Reality doesn’t look good either.”

“Users will think the system is unreliable.”

“If it doesn’t know, but looks perfectly reliable, that’s what makes it truly unreliable.”

After the first joint test, the shared interface added three markers: “source of uncertainty,” “last verified,” and “human confirmation required.” Cheng Yan insisted on displaying unknowns in gray rather than red.

“Red looks like an error,” he said. “Not knowing isn’t an error.”

“Hiding what you don’t know is,” Song Cheng added.

Over the following month, the trial expanded to seven kinds of ordinary task:

Community medicine transfers, temporary cooling spaces, shared use of public vehicles, redistribution of school cafeteria surpluses, support during minor outages, roadwork detours, and extreme-weather visits to older people living alone.

None of the tasks was grand.

Every one exposed new gaps.

Communities knew where older residents lived, but not which ones had already been picked up by relatives. The transport system knew a road was closed, but not that wheelchair users could not use the temporary footbridge. Schools knew their cafeterias had a surplus, but not who would bear food-safety responsibility once the food was donated. Hospitals knew someone needed medicine, but could not assume permission to give that person's health information to the community.

With every new connection, what people first saw was not the capability of the whole. It was how much had always been taken for granted and left to someone's phone calls, experience, and goodwill in the moment.

Spark began to serve as the entry point through which individuals joined tasks.

An older person living alone could have their Spark confirm their status to the community only during heat alerts. A volunteer could make one afternoon and a vehicle available without disclosing a complete schedule. A nurse could connect professional skills to emergency tasks while explicitly refusing routine calls on days off.

The system could not extend a single consent into long-term permission.

Nor could it assume that someone who had always been willing to help before was willing this time too.

By the end of the first month, the shared interface connected twelve public systems, six businesses, and nine communities.

The technical team installed a new screen in the hall.

It did not display all the city's data.

Only tasks currently running.

Large blank spaces remained between the tasks.

Some came from systems not yet connected, some from information that could not be verified, some belonged to private domains for which no authorization had been given. Others existed simply because, for the moment, no one knew the reality there.

Visitors often asked:

"Why don't you fill in these areas?"

At first, Cheng Yan would explain data standards, progress on interfaces, and authorization limits. Later, he simply said:

"Because they aren't ours."

One evening, standing in front of the screen, Liang Shen watched a visit to an older person living alone come to an end.

Participants withdrew, the vehicle was returned, and temporarily shared health-status information was closed off. The community retained only the completion record and a corridor-lighting problem that needed a later repair.

The task disappeared from the screen.

The blank space closed over it again.

Liang Shen suddenly understood that what the first shared interface truly connected was not just systems.

It connected limited needs, limited capabilities, and limited responsibilities.

It was precisely because they were limited that connection had not become possession.

Large blank spaces remained on the screen.

No one regarded them as failures anymore.

They were life for which authorization had not yet been given, life not yet understood, and life that civilization did not need to know in its entirety.

Chapter 3 The Person Who Refused Authorization

The first time Du Weihe saw the authorization page, she spent seventeen minutes reading it.

The community worker sitting across from her grew uneasy as he waited.

“Ms. Du, it’s mainly to check that you’re safe during extreme weather,” the young man said.

“We won’t disturb you at other times.”

“It says ‘health-risk identification’ here.”

“Yes. During heat waves or cold snaps, for example, the system can determine whether you need to be contacted first.”

“On what basis?”

“Age, medical history, living conditions, and travel status.”

“Where does the travel status come from?”

“Your Spark can provide it if you authorize it.”

“And if I don’t?”

“That’s fine too.”

“Will basic services be affected if I don’t authorize it?”

“No.”

“Then why does it say ‘may affect personalized responses’ here?”

The young man glanced down.

“It just means the system may not be able to know in advance what you need.”

“Then write that it doesn’t know.”

“It means more or less the same thing.”

“It doesn’t.”

Du Weihe was sixty-six. Before retiring, she had worked at the municipal archives. She spoke slowly and without aggression. She was simply in the habit of reading, word for word, everything she was asked to agree to.

The young man was Fang Shu, a new community coordinator in the Old Port District. Over the past two weeks, he had helped more than a hundred older residents authorize extreme-weather care. Most asked only whether it cost anything, or whether their children could receive notifications too.

Du Weihe was the first to ask where every item of data would go.

“How long will family-contact records be kept?”

“Unnecessary data is deleted when the task ends.”

“What counts as unnecessary?”

“The system decides.”

“Who gave it permission to decide?”

Fang Shu hesitated.

“It’s the standard rule.”

“Who set it?”

“The project team.”

“May I see it?”

At the edge of Fang Shu’s field of view, his Spark prompted him: Public version of the Extreme-Weather Care Task Data Rules available.

He sent Du Weihe the document.

She read for another twelve minutes.

Then she selected “Refuse.”

“Ms. Du,” Fang Shu said, “you have chronic lung disease and live alone. You’d be safer taking part.”

“I know.”

“Then why won’t you?”

“I haven’t refused to let you knock on my door during a heat wave.”

“Without data, we don’t know when we should knock on your door first.”

“You can go by age.”

“That won’t be accurate enough.”

“Then it won’t be accurate enough.”

Fang Shu looked at her.

“Are you worried about a privacy breach?”

“A breach isn’t what worries me.”

“What does?”

Du Weihe put the terminal back on the table.

“Once something enters a system, it gradually becomes something else. It starts with checking whether I’m all right in hot weather. Later it may become deciding whether I’m fit to live alone. Later still, recommending that I move to a care center. Every step can be said to be for my own good.”

“The system won’t decide for you.”

“Not today.”

“It will still need your authorization in the future.”

“Then let me authorize it anew each time.”

When Fang Shu left, his courtesy was intact, but inwardly he was irritated.

He did not think Du Weihe was a bad person, or unreasonable. It was precisely because everything she said made sense that the encounter was so tiring.

The community had 376 residents aged sixty-five and over who lived alone all or part of the time. During extreme weather, staff could not reach every home at once. The more complete the data, the more accurate the priorities. The more accurate the priorities, the more likely their limited staff would reach those in real danger first.

One person’s refusal would not destroy the system.

But what if many people refused?

Back at the community office, Fang Shu marked the case:

Not authorized. Personal discussion recommended.

His Spark asked whether to arrange a second discussion.

Fang Shu selected “Yes.”

That afternoon, Du Weihe received a notification:

The community would like to explain the purposes of authorization again. Would you accept?

She refused again.

The following day, another notification arrived, this time worded more gently:

To help us better protect you during extreme weather, would you be willing to learn about a minimal authorization option?

Du Weihe stared at the sentence.

She did not select “Refuse.”

She called Fang Shu.

“Who sent this?”

“The system is offering an alternative based on your circumstances.”

“I’ve already refused twice.”

“It’s only asking whether you’re willing to learn about it.”

“If I have to keep refusing after I’ve refused, what kind of refusal is that?”

Fang Shu suddenly saw the problem.

“I’ll cancel it.”

“It isn’t for you to cancel on my behalf.”

“Then you can turn off further contact in settings.”

“Where?”

Fang Shu guided her through four levels of menus.

After turning it off, Du Weihe said, “You put agreement on the first page and hide a final refusal on the fourth.”

When the call ended, Fang Shu submitted that sentence as task feedback.

The system classified it as a “usability suggestion.”

He hesitated, then changed it to “authorization-boundary risk.”

Three days later, a heat wave arrived.

By ten in the morning, the temperature in Haijia City had passed thirty-eight degrees Celsius. The Old Port District was packed with old buildings, many without adequate temperature control. The Nebula coordination layer entered a heat-response task, and communities arranged visits according to age, health risk, indoor temperature, and family-contact status.

Du Weihe’s name was not on the priority list.

She appeared only on the basic list as a “resident aged sixty-five or over living alone,” without health risks, indoor conditions, or real-time travel information.

At eleven, Fang Shu called her.

No answer.

At 11:15, he called again.

Still no answer.

His Spark reminded him that Du Weihe had not authorized access to her location or activity status. They could not be accessed.

Fang Shu looked at the task list.

Two other older residents showed excessively high indoor temperatures. Another could not reach a family contact. One more had actively requested help. The community had only three teams.

He placed Du Weihe in the second round of in-person visits.

At 12:20, the first round ended.

At 12:47, Fang Shu reached Du Weihe’s door.

He knocked. No response.

He knocked again.

A faint bump came from inside.

Fang Shu called for community medical staff and contacted property management. Three minutes later, the door opened from within.

Du Weihe stood behind it, her face pale.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You haven’t been answering the phone.”

“The terminal ran out of power.”

The apartment was hotter than the corridor. The windows were open, but there was no breeze outside. A glass of water stood untouched on the table.

“May the medical staff come in?” Fang Shu asked.

Holding the doorframe, Du Weihe nodded.

When the community doctor arrived, the assessment was mild heat exhaustion and respiratory discomfort. She needed cooling, fluids, and observation. Had the system known about her chronic lung disease, she would have been on the first-round list. Someone would have arrived at least an hour earlier.

Fang Shu did not say, “I told you so.”

But the words were plainly there between them.

Du Weihe sat at the temporary cooling station, waiting for her breathing to steady. He Lan was helping in the community that day and checked her blood oxygen again.

“The community says you haven’t made your health information available.”

“That’s right.”

“Would you now be willing to give temporary access to the records needed for this treatment?”

“For how long?” Du Weihe asked.

“Until this task ends. Necessary medical records will go to the hospital. Your location and family-contact status won’t be retained.”

“Can I share just my lung condition and medication?”

“Yes.”

“Without my past movements?”

“We don’t need them.”

“Can you guarantee that?”

“I can only guarantee this request I’m initiating,” He Lan said. “The system’s rules and logs can prevent others from quietly expanding it. No one can guarantee the whole future for you.”

Du Weihe looked at her.

A few seconds later, she selected “Agree.”

Her Spark made two items of information available:

Chronic lung disease.

Current medication.

Nothing more.

He Lan adjusted the care accordingly and confirmed that Du Weihe did not need hospitalization. She went home that evening. When the task ended, the temporary authorization was automatically withdrawn.

The following day, the project team received two conflicting reports.

The first came from the community:

Missing data prevented timely identification of a high-risk resident.

The second came from Du Weihe:

After an explicit refusal, the system continued steering me toward authorization, and the refusal option was buried too deep. If refusal means having to endure repeated persuasion, so-called voluntariness merely prolongs the pressure.

The technical team’s first proposed solution was tiered authorization.

Users could choose full authorization, minimal authorization, or emergency-only authorization.

After reading it, Song Cheng said, “It still isn’t enough.”

“What’s missing?” Cheng Yan asked.

“A service option without data.”

“How do you provide services without data?”

“People, basic age-based lists, publicly known risks, requests for help, voluntary contact among neighbors. It will be less efficient. But civilization cannot pretend not to see someone because they refuse authorization.”

“What if that causes a delay?”

“That’s one of the real costs of refusal. But basic services still have to be there. We cannot withdraw services to force someone to agree.”

Fang Shu sat beside them.

“I put her in the second round that day. A little later, and something serious might really have happened.”

“Do you think it should be compulsory?” Song Cheng asked.

“I don’t know.”

“It’s good that you don’t know.”

“What’s good about it?”

“It shows that this isn’t a responsibility rules can remove for you. The system can give a clearer account of the risks, help her understand the costs, and arrange a basic safety net. In the end, someone may still refuse. Someone may still judge wrongly.”

“Then what’s the point of building all this?”

Song Cheng looked at him.

“It isn’t to keep everyone safe forever. It’s so we don’t have to possess a person before we can protect them.”

After the heat-response review, the authorization interface was redesigned.

“Agree,” “Minimal authorization,” “This task only,” and “Refuse” appeared at the same level.

After a refusal, the system no longer automatically initiated another attempt at persuasion. Any renewed contact had to come from a specific person who explained the reason, first letting the other person decide whether they wished to listen.

Basic services could not be canceled for lack of authorization.

Task prioritization had to be clearly marked:

Unknown does not mean low risk.

A month later, Du Weihe saw Fang Shu again.

He had come to check the corridor lighting.

“Have you seen the new heat-response authorization?”

“I have.”

“Still not taking part?”

“I’ve enabled authorization for this emergency only.”

Fang Shu was a little surprised.

“What changed your mind?”

“Refusal looks more like refusal now.”

“You really did wait an extra hour last time.”

“I know.”

“Aren’t you afraid?”

“I am.”

“Then why not give full access?”

Du Weihe smiled a little.

“Fear isn’t a reason to open every door.”

Later, the first complete record of an authorization withdrawal became a boundary case for the Haijia City coordination layer.

The public version contained none of Du Weihe’s health, address, or family information. Only one fact remained that could not be omitted:

A resident refused a public task’s request to access data. The system continued trying to persuade her on grounds of goodwill. Her refusal was thus shown to be incomplete. The rules were subsequently changed.

Many years later, new cities, new communities, and remote nodes would still read that record.

They knew that someone had once said no.

They did not know how she lived afterward.

Civilization remembered the boundary.

It did not possess the person behind it.

Chapter 4 An Idle Warehouse and a Hospital Short of Medicine

Two months after the rainstorm, Haijia City's medical supply chain had still not fully recovered.

The real shortage was not that the warehouses held nothing.

It was that no one knew which things could be used by whom.

Two hospitals in the southern district needed a batch of filter components to maintain aging dialysis equipment. An upstream material disruption had delayed the original supplier's factory by six weeks. New components had been manufactured but were stuck at a logistics hub in another city. The hospitals could buy replacement equipment, at five times the original price, and installation would also require retraining.

After an interhospital consultation, He Lan heard someone from the equipment department complain:

"There must be some in the city."

"Some what?"

"Components of the same model. Several clinics retired a batch of machines before. Company warehouses might have spares too."

"Then why can't we find them?"

"Who would make their whole inventory public?"

He Lan thought of Qiao Mu.

After the storm, his Warehouse Four had become one of the first business nodes connected to the shared interface. But the connection covered only emergency cold-chain capacity, not everything in his warehouses.

Through the task interface, she submitted a need:

Dialysis equipment filter components, model and compatibility range specified. Twelve sets needed within seven days.

The system searched public procurement records, hospital inventories, and connected company directories. No results.

The status read:

Known supply: zero.

Potential supply in undisclosed inventories: unknown.

He Lan passed the task to the resource coordination trial group.

What was called the Resource Pool did not, at that time, contain an actual "pool."

It was more like a set of doors that could be opened by choice. States, cities, businesses, institutions, and individuals still owned their resources. Only when a resource entered actual

use under explicit conditions did it become visible within a shared task. Ownership did not transfer, nor did registration automatically create usage rights.

The design sounded cautious. It was also slow to take hold.

A resource owner's first thought was often not what idle resources might make possible, but why someone else wanted to know how much they owned.

When Qiao Mu received the request, he was taking stock of the food damaged in the storm. His Spark indicated that compatible components might be in the old-equipment area of Warehouse Six.

He had acquired the stock seven years earlier when buying a medical logistics company. The equipment had never been used again. Its parts sat in sealed boxes on two rows of racks at the very back of the warehouse. Their book value was close to zero, but Qiao Mu had never disposed of them.

"Don't respond," he said.

Spark confirmed:

Withholding resource information does not affect existing public services or business eligibility.

Qiao Mu dismissed the alert.

That afternoon, he went to Warehouse Six.

It took the warehouse keeper half an hour to find the boxes. Their outer packaging was covered in dust, but the labels were still clear. Inside were twenty-six sets of filter components, along with some valves, seals, and sensors.

"Still usable?" Qiao Mu asked.

"They'd need testing."

"What's the market price?"

The warehouse keeper checked.

"New ones aren't expensive. They're out of stock now. Hard to value secondhand."

Qiao Mu crouched beside the boxes.

If they stayed there, they were no use to him. Give them to the hospitals, and they might solve the immediate shortage. It seemed simple enough.

But after decades in business, he knew that "no use" and "no value" were different things. Stock useless today could become expensive tomorrow because of a shortage. Open it up once today for public needs, and tomorrow someone might ask why the other warehouses could not be opened too.

What truly frightened people was not losing a few parts.

It was losing the right to decide how their own things were used.

Qiao Mu did not respond at once.

The next day, people from the resource coordination trial group came to see him.

They were Song Cheng and a resource engineer.

“You know I have them?” Qiao Mu asked.

“We don’t,” Song Cheng said. “The system only indicated that you used to operate in a related business, so you might.”

“That’s still analyzing me.”

“It used public business records. It did not access your internal inventory.”

“What if I say I don’t have any?”

“We record ‘not provided.’ The task keeps looking.”

“You won’t investigate?”

“There are no statutory grounds for an investigation.”

Qiao Mu stared at her.

“The hospitals need them.”

“Yes.”

“If I don’t bring them out, what happens to the patients?”

“The hospitals will seek alternatives. The city can also make an emergency purchase.”

“You don’t plan to tell the public that some businesses would rather let things rot in their warehouses?”

Song Cheng shook her head.

“If the Resource Pool gets started by shaming owners, all anyone will learn in the end is how to hide things.”

The resource engineer opened a proposed usage plan.

Qiao Mu could choose a sale, a short-term loan, custodial dispatch, or provision without charge. Testing, transport, wear and loss, insurance, and return conditions were listed separately. If the components passed inspection and entered hospital use, the system would record the actual contribution made by releasing the resources. If they failed, only cooperation in testing would be recorded, without exaggerating the result.

“What can contribution value do?” Qiao Mu asked.

“It operates alongside money during the initial phase,” the engineer said. “It can’t be traded, and it isn’t an honor score. It records contributions that have actually occurred and been verified. That does not buy the next scarce resource, access to a public project, or eligibility to make decisions.”

“One consideration among others?”

“Contribution cannot replace professional judgment, statutory rights, actual responsibilities, or the rights of affected parties.”

“If I provide twenty-six sets today, do I get priority for twenty-six sets of something else tomorrow?”

“There is no mechanical exchange.”

“Then this isn’t a business deal.”

“It can be just a business deal,” Song Cheng said. “Sell at the market price, with no contribution recorded beyond the ordinary transaction.”

Qiao Mu laughed.

“You finally admit money is useful.”

“It always has been.”

“Then why have contribution value at all?”

“Because some real effort and sacrifice can’t be expressed by price alone. And because some expensive transactions make no public contribution.”

“Who decides?”

“Real consequences.”

“Reality can’t speak.”

“Which is why we need verification and appeals. And judgments will still be wrong sometimes.”

Qiao Mu stopped smiling.

“Do you tell people that every time? That the system will get things wrong?”

“It will get things wrong whether we say so or not.”

He told the warehouse keeper to send the boxes for testing.

Of the twenty-six sets, nineteen were in good condition, four needed new seals, and three could not be used for medical purposes because their storage conditions were uncertain. The hospitals ultimately accepted twelve sets. The remaining qualified components entered the directory of available resources.

Qiao Mu chose paid custodial use.

Ownership remained with the company. The hospitals paid for use, the city covered testing and the first delivery, and subsequent maintenance was governed by the Resource Pool agreement. Qiao Mu could withdraw after fulfilling tasks already accepted, and did not have to open the rest of Warehouse Six’s inventory.

On the day the task entered execution, however, the transport vehicle was late.

Neither the road nor the driver was to blame.

The insurance system considered the components' liability status unclear and refused automatic coverage. They were not new goods and had no current warranty from the original manufacturer. Nor were they ordinary secondhand goods. They were being put into medical use after retesting as part of a public task.

He Lan waited at the hospital for two hours.

She called Liang Shen. "Has another system decided it's doing the right thing?"

"This time it's insurance," Liang Shen said.

"Is it wrong?"

"No."

He Lan was silent for a moment.

"That answer is getting really irritating."

In the end, the municipal public risk fund provided temporary coverage. The hospital equipment department took responsibility for installation verification. Qiao Mu was responsible only for the storage conditions he had truthfully disclosed. Responsibility was taken apart again, then joined back together.

At dusk, the truck drove out of Warehouse Six.

Qiao Mu stood at the entrance, watching it pass along roads still not fully repaired after the flooding.

"Those things sat here for seven years," the warehouse keeper asked. "Does that really count as a contribution?"

"Not while they're sitting here."

"Once they're sold?"

"Once they're used."

"Then all that warehouse space was wasted."

"The warehouse is mine," Qiao Mu said. "I can waste it if I want."

The warehouse keeper laughed.

"What made you willing to part with them now?"

Qiao Mu did not answer.

It was not that he had suddenly become noble.

The new plan did not force him to choose between ownership and public need. It let him see that leaving the stock idle preserved an uncertain future opportunity, while releasing it for use brought actual returns, defined responsibilities, verifiable contribution, and a record of cooperation that had really happened.

He was still acting from his own interests.

Only this time, his interests did not have to depend on resources remaining useless.

Three days after the components were installed, the hospital equipment returned to normal operation.

Qiao Mu received the final record.

There was no medal, no title of “caring enterprise,” no exaggeration of twelve sets of components into a count of lives saved.

The record listed only:

Resource origin, test results, actual use, duration, fees, wear and loss, responsibility, and task feedback.

In the feedback field, He Lan confirmed:

Twelve sets of components have been used in equipment maintenance, preventing delays to two groups of dialysis sessions.

Qiao Mu looked at it for a long time.

For the first time, he felt that an object did not truly leave a warehouse because its doors had opened.

It left because it had made a difference in someone else’s life.

When the first vehicle left, he had acquired no greater personal worth and lost no control over his other warehouses.

He had received only a record so clear it was almost dispassionate:

What had been used.

Whom it had helped.

Before closing the record, Qiao Mu checked the return, wear and loss, fees, logs, and withdrawal status once more.

No inventory outside Warehouse Six had been scanned. No further access had been automatically authorized.

He removed the mechanical key from the door lock and put it back in his pocket.

The key still opened only his warehouse.

How much wear and loss there had been.

Who was responsible for it.

Chapter 5 The First Complete Operating Loop

Haijia City decided to conduct its first complete coordination test in midsummer.

The announcement met with more opposition than expected.

Some thought it too risky to use a city to test an immature system. Others thought the pilot merely gave a new name to existing emergency coordination. Still others asked why they could not wait until the technology was more stable and the law more complete.

At the public briefing, Zhou Yi answered only one point:

“The trial does not hand the city over to a new system. Quite the opposite. We are testing where it must not take over, whether it can roll back after failure, and whether it can leave when a task ends.”

The test was limited to public cooling facilities and energy coordination during hot weather.

Weather models predicted five consecutive days of extreme heat in Haijia City in late July. Electricity demand, hospital emergency departments, indoor temperatures in older neighborhoods, public transport, and essential cold-chain supply would all come under strain at once. Every system already had contingency plans. This time, the shared interface would bring them into the same closed task loop.

No one put the eight task process states on the city’s big screen.

For ordinary people, the heat simply drew closer day by day in the weather forecast.

The task initially remained silent.

The system maintained only basic interfaces. It did not enter people’s private lives. Without risk or a shared task, there was no reason to keep asking where people were, how their health was, or whether they were willing to give their time.

Three days later, the weather risk crossed the threshold.

The Nebula coordination layer entered sensing.

The grid submitted peak-demand forecasts; hospitals, emergency capacity and loads that could be reduced; communities, public spaces and basic population structure; the transport system, carrying capacity. Businesses voluntarily made cold stores, vehicles, and temperature-controlled premises available. Personal Sparks confirmed needs and capabilities only within existing authorizations.

The interface showed a great deal of uncertainty.

Actual indoor temperatures in older buildings were incompletely known.

Some older residents living alone had refused health-data authorization.

Commercial venues had promised to open, but had not confirmed overnight staffing.

Long-term reliability of backup energy lacked real-world testing.

Liang Shen required every unknown to remain visible.

“The public will think we haven’t prepared anything,” Cheng Yan said.

“We haven’t prepared everything.”

“We could at least estimate with models.”

“We can estimate. We can’t display estimates as facts.”

The next day, the task entered aggregation.

Twelve communities, seven hospitals, two energy companies, four schools, three libraries, nine commercial venues, six logistics companies, and several thousand volunteers formed a temporary community.

Each actor opened only what the task required.

Schools provided premises without opening student data. Businesses provided energy and space without thereby gaining access to residents’ information. Individuals could register capabilities in driving, care, repairs, or companionship, or simply request a place to cool down.

Du Weihe chose authorization for this emergency only.

She allowed the system to access three items during the heat-response task: her chronic lung condition, current medication, and whether she was home. Fang Shu could not help smiling when he received confirmation.

Du Weihe sent a message:

Don’t look so moved just because I authorized it.

Fang Shu replied:

Understood.

The task entered collaboration and planning.

The grid proposed moving some energy-intensive production to the night. The transport system added low-speed shuttles to public cooling sites. Hospitals reduced nonessential equipment loads. Schools and libraries extended their opening hours. Cold-chain companies released overnight backup energy. Communities arranged in-person visits according to known risks.

The first overall plan brought the energy shortfall within safe limits.

The cost was a six-hour production halt at several East Bank factories, reduced nighttime lighting in two commercial districts, and the designation of one Old Port street as a temporary logistics route.

“Why the Old Port District again?” Qiao Mu asked.

“It’s close to three cooling sites and two hospitals,” Liang Shen said. “It’s the shortest route.”

“Shortest for whom?” Chen Qi asked.

The transport system showed that using the street would cut transfer times by fifteen minutes and reduce the risk of congestion on major roads.

“There’s a night market on that street,” Chen Qi said. “You see a road. The people there see a day’s income.”

The night market did not appear in the planning interface.

Not because it did not matter.

It had never entered any formal system.

Chen Qi contacted vendors, collecting stall numbers, business hours, and acceptable adjustments. Nebula recalculated, moving the logistics peak forty minutes later, preserving the first half of the night market, and designating another road as a backup route.

Overall efficiency fell a little.

More than a hundred households lost a little less.

The task entered decision.

Routine resource dispatch was carried out jointly by AGI and the various systems within their authorizations. Temporary road controls, requisition of public premises, and factory shutdowns were confirmed respectively by statutory bodies and responsible actors. Affected vendors received channels for objections and compensation.

No single overall vote decided everything.

No system gained every power by claiming an “overall optimum.”

On the first day of extreme heat, execution began.

At ten in the morning, school gyms, libraries, and commercial venues opened as cooling spaces. The transport system dispatched shuttle vehicles. Community workers began their visits. The grid adjusted electricity to industry and public facilities according to real-time load.

For the first few hours, everything ran smoothly.

After noon, the first deviation appeared.

One library’s cooling capacity was below its registered level, and the indoor temperature kept rising. The system redirected visitors to a nearby shopping center, bringing it close to capacity.

At three, a shuttle broke down, leaving two communities waiting.

At four, hospital emergency arrivals exceeded forecasts.

At the same time, Fang Shu received an in-person verification task. Two older residents in an Old South District apartment building without indoor sensors had repeatedly missed status checks. The task interface read: Corridor access normal. Home visit recommended.

Only on reaching the sixth floor did Fang Shu discover that “normal” came from a property-management record thirty-six minutes old. Construction workers had just closed off the northern fire door, while a temporary energy-storage cabinet had entered high-temperature protection mode. The corridor no longer had its usual through-draft. Heat gathered between the concrete walls, more stifling than outdoors.

He stopped once at the seventh-floor turn. Spark flagged an abnormal heart rate and advised him to withdraw. Seeing that only one floor remained, Fang Shu kept going. On the eighth floor, he grasped the railing and briefly felt his vision go dark.

He did not complete the visit. A follow-up team entered by an external stairway on the other side. Both older residents were home and unharmed. Fang Shu was taken to a temporary medical station and left after receiving fluids.

Only when records were retrieved afterward did they discover that the property-management work order noted construction on the fire door, and the energy system had recorded the storage cabinet’s high-temperature state. The community task layer had obtained neither. The interface also failed to show when “corridor normal” had last been verified, or by whom. Every system held its own portion of knowledge. Nowhere was the unknown delivered to the person who had to walk into it.

Fang Shu said only, “I authorized a visit, not testing a route the system knows nothing about.”

At five, Qiao Mu’s available backup generator began consuming fuel abnormally.

Every change entered the shared interface.

The system no longer merely issued instructions. It continually reorganized the task: rematching vehicles, adjusting open spaces, moving medical resources, changing energy use. Participants could see whom their actions were buying time for. They could also refuse when a request exceeded their authorization.

One volunteer driver received a fourth consecutive assignment.

His Spark automatically declined.

He had authorized only three, and his driving time was approaching the limit.

The dispatch system did not interpret his past enthusiasm as continued availability.

Another driver took over.

At night, the heat did not ease significantly.

After eleven, the temporary logistics route in the Old Port District entered heavy use. New-energy refrigerated trucks, shuttles, and supply vehicles passed continuously. Residents on

either side had been told only that the road would be under temporary controls. No one had expected vehicle noise to continue all night.

The first complaints entered the system at 12:40 in the morning.

The task interface marked them:

Residents' rest affected.

The automated proposal recommended lower speeds, adjusted routes, and temporary accommodation for affected households.

Chen Qi rejected the temporary-accommodation proposal.

"You want a whole street to move out in the middle of the night?"

"Is there another route?" Liang Shen asked.

"The backup road."

"It adds twelve minutes."

"Then add twelve minutes."

The hospitals said that some supplies were time-sensitive, and rerouting everything would raise the risk. In the end, emergency medical and cold-chain vehicles kept the original route, while ordinary supplies shifted to the backup road. Temporary sound barriers were installed along the street, and the next day's logistics start was pushed back.

The noise lessened. It did not disappear.

Two small shops on the corner failed to receive the next day's goods because of the road controls. Temporary installations blocked the frontage of a breakfast shop.

The system recorded the effects.

No one stopped in the middle of the heat-response task to resolve them all.

On the third day, the city's electricity demand peaked.

An East Bank factory refused to reduce its load any further.

Its manager said repeated shutdowns would damage the production line. The factory had fulfilled its commitment over the first two days.

The energy dispatch system proposed increasing its call on the factory, on the grounds that the public risk remained.

Song Cheng vetoed the automatic expansion of authority.

"The original authorization is exhausted."

"Without further load reductions, we risk exceeding the limit at the evening peak," Cheng Yan said.

"Negotiate again."

“There isn’t time.”

“Then invoke statutory emergency powers. Have someone with the authority sign.”

“Isn’t the result the same?”

“No. A voluntary task cannot quietly become compulsory because it is important. If compulsion is truly necessary, it must appear under its own name.”

The energy authority’s chief ultimately signed a temporary power-restriction order, assuming responsibility for compensation and review.

The factory halted production.

The evening peak passed safely.

On the fifth evening, temperatures began to fall.

Hospital emergency arrivals declined, the grid left its high-risk state, and public cooling sites closed one after another.

People thought the task was over.

For Nebula, the end of execution was only half the loop.

Verification and repair began.

The system’s overall results were very good:

No widespread power outage.

Critical hospital services maintained.

High-risk residents reached.

Public cooling spaces accommodated more people than expected.

Energy and transport dispatch reduced the overall peak.

Zhou Yi had scheduled a short press conference.

An hour before the review, Liang Shen canceled it.

“Why?” Zhou Yi asked.

“There are still 147 unresolved complaints in the Old Port District.”

“A press conference isn’t a victory celebration.”

“It will look like one.”

“The overall results need to be made public.”

“Make them public. Go to that street first.”

They reached the Old Port District at eight that evening.

The extreme heat had passed, but the road still held the day's warmth. Temporary sound barriers were stacked against a wall. Several shops were clearing their entrances.

The breakfast shop owner put a box of unsold ingredients into a bin.

"Have you filed for compensation?" Chen Qi asked.

"Yes."

"How much of the loss can be verified?"

"I don't know."

"Losses directly caused by the road controls will be compensated," Liang Shen said.

The owner glanced at him.

"How do you count the customers I lost these past few days?"

"That needs verification."

"And if you can't verify it?"

Liang Shen offered no reassurance.

"You may not be fully compensated."

"Then does your system count as a success?"

"Overall, yes."

The owner gave a short laugh.

"Overall is doing fine."

He closed the bin.

Residents came down one by one to join the on-site review.

Some said there had not been enough warning. Some said the sound barriers went up too late. Some thought emergency vehicles had to get through, and they could put up with it. Others asked why, every time the whole city needed the shortest route, the cost fell on the same old neighborhood.

The system recorded every opinion.

Recording them did not automatically turn them into right answers.

An older resident said, "I didn't lose money. I just slept badly for three nights. What does that count as?"

A task worker asked, "How would you like us to put it right?"

The resident thought for a moment.

"Next time, don't tell me to bear with it for everyone's sake. Tell me how many vehicles there will actually be, and when it will end. If it can't end, say that too."

Another resident said, “My child had an exam the next day. Could you give the school a statement?”

Some people laughed, then began discussing it seriously.

The review continued until eleven that night.

The final repair plan included direct compensation, partial business support, road noise mitigation, advance disclosure of information, explanations to schools, and a requirement to account for residential density, the nighttime economy, and how often an area had borne the burden before when choosing temporary routes in the future.

Not every demand was met.

One vendor considered the compensation too low and chose to continue appealing.

The system did not require him to stop being dissatisfied after “accepting the overall success.”

Fang Shu’s incident underwent a separate accountability review. Property management bore responsibility for failing to update information promptly. The community task layer bore responsibility for retaining an outdated status and hiding its verification time. Fang Shu also acknowledged that he had climbed one more floor after Spark advised him to withdraw. All three were recorded separately. No responsibility made another disappear.

After compensation and apologies were complete, Fang Shu withdrew authorization to conduct on-site verification in all future Nebula trials. The community director asked whether he wanted to wait until he had physically recovered before deciding.

“I’ve already recovered,” Fang Shu said.

“Then why withdraw?”

“Because I no longer trust the task interface to tell me what it doesn’t know.”

No one tried to persuade him further. His withdrawal took effect that day.

This added a result to the review report that was difficult to fit into a success rate: one on-site verifier would no longer participate, reducing the Old South District’s capacity for the next round of in-person visits. Liang Shen insisted on keeping the original sentence: the first complete operating loop had been completed, and the trust of one participant had been lost.

Someone proposed changing it to “a temporary decline in willingness to participate.” Liang Shen crossed out “temporary.”

After verification, the task entered contraction.

Temporary access to personal locations, indoor conditions, and health risks was closed item by item. Permissions to use businesses’ energy and vehicles were returned. The temporary community of schools, shopping centers, hospitals, and neighborhoods dissolved. Only

statutory records, facts of contribution, unresolved appeals, compensation obligations, and matters requiring long-term maintenance remained.

Cheng Yan watched the connections on the task screen go dark one by one.

“A month to connect them, a few minutes to shut them down.”

“It’s only ours if we can shut it down,” Liang Shen said.

“What do you mean?”

“If it can’t be shut down, it isn’t coordination. It’s possession.”

After the last temporary authorization was withdrawn, the screen returned to silence.

The city did not stop running.

The grid, hospitals, transport, businesses, communities, and everyone’s Sparks returned to their own boundaries. The shared interface maintained only minimal services and risk monitoring. It no longer kept asking who was where, what they could do, or whether they still wished to participate.

In the technical report, the heat-response task was called:

Haijia City’s First Complete Cross-Domain Closed-Loop Test.

Later, the public found a shorter name.

The First Cloud Formation.

The phrase was not accurate.

Nebula was far from formed.

It had merely proved for the first time that a city could temporarily develop a capacity to act as a whole around shared risks without creating a unified person, concentrating all data, or abolishing existing responsible actors. It had also proved for the first time that, after succeeding, this capacity of the whole still had to return to a street that had slept badly, a small shop whose losses could not be fully verified, and a person who remained dissatisfied.

A few days later, Liang Shen returned to the Old Port District.

The breakfast shop had reopened.

The owner handed him a cup of soy milk.

“This doesn’t mean I forgive you,” he said.

“I know.”

“Will you use this street next time?”

“Maybe.”

“Still noisy?”

“Maybe.”

“Then why are you here?”

Liang Shen took a sip of soy milk.

“To start by hearing the rest of what we left unfinished this time.”

The owner said nothing.

An ordinary truck passed along the street. It had no emergency markings, and no system had assigned it a priority. Someone pushed open a shop door. Someone waited for a bus in the shade. Children ran past along the roadside.

Civilization had not arrived in an ideal world by completing a single operating loop.

The city was still crowded. Decisions still carried costs. People still gave greater weight to their own losses than to strangers’ needs.

But some things had changed.

A public action no longer ended with overall success.

An individual no longer had to prove that their loss was important enough before they were entitled to enter civilization’s memory.

Nebula’s first growth did not come from completing the task.

It came from not treating success as a reason to be exempt from apology.

Part II A Dual-Track Transition: Old Logic and New Structures Coexist

Interfaces can connect systems, but cannot automatically change the underlying relationships of the old civilization.

Civilization cannot prove through one success that it has reached the future. While the old world still bears the responsibilities of reality, it must let new possibilities face failure, rollback, and time.

Chapter 6 The Old Systems Cannot Simply Be Declared Finished

After Haijia City's First Cloud Formation, what people spoke of most was neither the street that had stayed awake all night nor the canceled celebration.

They remembered the big screen.

For the first time, hospitals, the grid, transport, warehousing, communities, and businesses had seen one another within the same task. Things that had once taken dozens of phone calls, hundreds of forms, and repeated confirmations from different people in charge could now begin to happen along a single chain of responsibility.

Many people drew an almost natural conclusion:

The old systems could end.

In the research records of the First Cloud Formation, the first thing Gu Xingzhou saw was not the big screen either.

He saw a staffing sheet for the next heat-response task. In the Old South District, six shifts in the "on-site status verification" column were empty. Fang Shu's name remained in the historical record, but no longer appeared on any roster of available personnel. The system had not inferred that he was still available simply because he had participated before.

The technical team could add sensors, bring in people from another community, or reduce the frequency of visits. Every remedy carried a cost. For the first time, one person's withdrawal showed everyone that when authorization was returned, the capacity of the whole could genuinely diminish.

Gu Xingzhou carried an old employee badge in his pocket.

His maternal grandfather had left it behind when he left the assembly plant. The photograph had faded, and the magnetic stripe on the back had long since stopped working.

His grandfather rarely spoke afterward of the automation overhaul. Only once, at a family dinner, had he said that the hardest thing was not the wages stopping. It was that the factory gates were still open the next day, but there was no longer anything inside that needed him to come and do it.

Gu Xingzhou had never given the badge to the Museum of Industrial Memory.

That same day, he received a message from Lin Zhao, a university classmate.

Lin Zhao was forty-three. He had spent nineteen years in supply-chain planning at a manufacturing company operating across regions. He knew the ports, inventories, delivery cycles, and every longtime supplier's quirks that no one cared to write into a system. In six weeks, the company's newly integrated AGI had reduced his team's routine planning to confirming exceptions.

The restructuring notice was thorough: basic income and job-transition support would remain unaffected; medical care and family care would continue; employees could apply for study, public projects, or a six-month period to explore a new direction.

Lin Zhao sent the notice to Gu Xingzhou with just one question: "Do I still need to get up at seven tomorrow?"

Gu Xingzhou typed several replies and deleted them. The provisions answered whether Lin Zhao could survive. They did not answer why morning still had to begin.

They met outside his company's building. Lin Zhao did not talk about unemployment. He kept saying that the model had missed one supplier's shutdown habits, that it did not know which shipping agent would answer the phone first when fog rolled in at sea. Only after listening for a while did Gu Xingzhou understand that Lin Zhao was not trying to prove AGI was not clever enough.

He was trying to prove that nineteen years had not been for nothing.

That conclusion first appeared at an internal meeting of the technical team.

Cheng Yan projected the migration plan onto the wall. The first page contained only two dates.

The first was when the existing energy, healthcare, and basic-service dispatch systems would stop adding new features.

The second was when all tasks would move to the shared underlying layer.

The dates were forty-six days apart.

"Too fast," Liang Shen said.

"At the original pace," Cheng Yan said, "we'll have to keep both tracks running for at least three years. For three years, every identity, task, and resource state will need synchronizing across two systems. We'll spend most of our effort maintaining the past."

"The past is still maintaining today."

"That's why we need to replace it."

Cheng Yan did not look down on the old systems.

On the contrary, he knew better than anyone how difficult they were to replace. The core code for Haijia City's power dispatch was over twenty years old, with more than a hundred patches added since. The hospitals used three different identity coding schemes. Community basic-service lists contained national identity numbers alongside household codes established years earlier and temporary-resident identifiers added later.

They were cumbersome, redundant, even contradictory.

But they still worked every day.

A person admitted to hospital did not see these contradictions. They saw only that medicine arrived, the lights were on, and the nurses knew who they were.

A system's age was often visible only when it failed.

The parts that had worked for decades had quietly become life itself.

Gu Qiao from the energy dispatch center arrived in the second half of the meeting.

He was fifty-nine, his hair already half white. On entering, he set a gray corded telephone at the edge of the table. It was old. The numbers on its buttons were worn shiny, and the receiver cord had been wrapped with black tape twice.

Cheng Yan glanced at it.

"Mr. Gu, the meeting room has internal communications."

"I know."

"Then what's this for?"

"Tonight's duty phone. The line doesn't run through your network."

Someone laughed.

Gu Qiao did not.

"Haijia City has lost its main dispatch communications three times. Once to lightning, once during a software upgrade, once for a reason we still haven't found. All three times, this phone got the instructions out."

"The new underlying layer doesn't use the same communications chain," Cheng Yan said.

"Every new system says it isn't the old one."

"Are you against the migration?"

"No."

Gu Qiao sat down, placing the telephone beside his hand.

"I'm against your writing an obituary for something that isn't dead yet."

The meeting did not stop there.

Migration still began, but the final plan changed from a single switchover to three parallel layers.

The first was the new shared task foundation, responsible for identity mapping, cross-domain states, risk aggregation, and the return of responsibility.

The second comprised the existing statutory operational systems, which would continue issuing official instructions and records.

The third was the human chain: telephones, paper lists, on-site confirmation, and contact lists that could bypass technical failures to reach those responsible directly.

Beside the plan, Cheng Yan wrote:

Transition protection layer.

When Gu Qiao saw it, he crossed out “protection.”

“This isn’t about protecting the old systems,” he said. “It’s about protecting the city.”

The formal migration was scheduled for a Wednesday night without extreme weather.

The forecast was clear. No major operations were scheduled at the hospitals. Rail transit would reduce service after midnight. Industrial demand would be at its low point. Every possible risk had been listed, and every listed risk had a response plan.

At nine that evening, mapping began for the first batch of basic identities.

At 10:15, the energy nodes were complete.

At 10:40, three hospitals were complete.

At 11:03, community basic services began migrating.

Status indicators on the big screen turned green one by one.

Cheng Yan had been standing for four hours. Song Cheng reminded him to sit down. He shook his head.

“Identity merging is still left.”

Over the past few decades, Haijia City had undergone administrative boundary changes, hospital renamings, company restructuring, and community mergers. One institution might have three names across different systems. One person might likewise have several identifiers for household registration, employment, medical treatment, and care relationships.

The new identity layer deleted no historical identifiers.

Its job was to establish in which tasks those identifiers referred to the same subject, and under which circumstances they had to remain distinct.

At 11:21, the system found that Donggang Medical Center and the former Haijia City Third Hospital shared the same legal institution code.

This was expected.

Third Hospital had been restructured six years earlier and renamed Donggang Medical Center. The old name remained in the energy supply protection system. The new name had entered the medical resource system.

The system merged the two.

At 11:23, Donggang Rehabilitation Hospital's backup power protection level suddenly fell.

No one noticed immediately.

Donggang Rehabilitation Hospital had once been a campus of Third Hospital. It had become independent after the restructuring, but the old energy system still used its former parent code. Seeing two identical historical origins, the new identity layer identified the rehabilitation hospital as an ancillary load of the medical center.

The medical center's protected-supply request therefore overrode the rehabilitation hospital's independent request.

The rehabilitation hospital did not lose power.

It merely changed from "uninterruptible" to "brief switchover permitted."

Among hundreds of thousands of mapping records, the change occupied a single line.

At 11:37, the energy-storage station in the north of the city performed a scheduled switchover test.

The voltage dipped briefly.

The rehabilitation hospital's backup system started.

Thirty seconds later, the main supply returned.

But the backup system did not disengage.

It competed with the new dispatch instructions for connection, causing repeated switching.

The ward lights began to flicker.

He Lan was not at the rehabilitation hospital that night.

She was asleep at home until 11:41, when an emergency contact from Spark woke her.

"Power fluctuations affecting respiratory-support equipment at Donggang Rehabilitation Hospital."

"How many people affected?"

"Twelve confirmed so far. Status from two more floors has not yet returned."

"Who is the responsible dispatcher?"

The interface paused for a second.

“Identity mapping conflict. Confirming.”

He Lan sat up.

“Stop confirming names. Stabilize the power first.”

The shared underlying layer had already made the same recommendation.

The problem was that it could not find a valid node able to issue an independent instruction for the rehabilitation hospital.

The new identity layer considered the rehabilitation hospital part of the medical center.

The medical system knew it was independent.

The energy system still treated it as the old campus.

All three answers came from real records.

None could bear the consequences on its own at that moment.

When Cheng Yan discovered the problem, his first choice was to correct the mapping.

The system estimated eight minutes.

“Can we wait eight minutes?” Gu Qiao asked.

“No equipment has failed so far.”

“I asked whether we can wait.”

Cheng Yan did not answer.

Gu Qiao picked up the gray telephone.

He dialed a number absent from the new directory.

“Xu. Donggang Rehabilitation Hospital. Switch to independently protected supply.”

“Which Donggang?” the voice on the line asked.

“The old Third Hospital east campus. The rehabilitation hospital that split off.”

“Code?”

“Forget the code. Two camphor trees west of the hospital wall. Underground distribution-room entrance faces north.”

The other end was silent for two seconds.

“Found it.”

At 11:44, the rehabilitation hospital switched to an independent line.

The lights stopped flickering.

The twelve patients dependent on respiratory-support equipment suffered no further effects.

The new system had not carried out this dispatch.

An old telephone had.

At midnight, migration was suspended.

Cheng Yan asked to complete repairs and resume. He believed the problem had been identified and the remaining risks could be controlled.

Gu Qiao disagreed.

“Knowing why this one went wrong doesn’t mean knowing how many others are wrong in the same way.”

“All systems have errors.”

“Yes. The difference is that we already know some of the places the old system’s errors hide. The new system’s errors are still using people to teach them what shape to take.”

Zhou Yi ultimately signed the rollback order.

The newly migrated task states were retained as audit copies and ceased generating official instructions. Statutory dispatch returned to the original systems. The human chain remained on duty.

Rollback took twenty-seven minutes.

During those twenty-seven minutes, no one dared speak too loudly.

After the system was restored, Cheng Yan stood alone at the end of the corridor.

Liang Shen walked over.

“Still disagree?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“I know we should have rolled back.”

Cheng Yan looked through the glass at the city, still lit.

“But it still feels like losing.”

“Losing to whom?”

“To a telephone.”

“The telephone didn’t win,” Liang Shen said. “The people kept safe tonight won.”

Cheng Yan lowered his head.

“Did you think it would fail from the start?”

“I didn’t know.”

“Then why insist on two tracks?”

“Because I didn’t know.”

The incident was not classified as a “technical failure.”

Song Cheng required it to be defined as:

Identity continuity failed real-world verification.

That description carried more weight than “mapping error.”

A mapping error could be fixed by correcting a field.

Identity continuity meant that when a person, institution, or responsibility moved from an old system into a new one, a change of name, code, or platform could not strip away previously valid rights, obligations, or protected standing.

For the next three months, the migration team stopped proceeding system by system.

They verified actual relationships one by one.

How a hospital’s former name had entered the energy system;

Whether responsibility for children with special needs had carried over after a school merger;

Who had assumed a dissolved company’s unfinished environmental remediation obligations;

How a person’s identities on three platforms could be linked to one subject, while preventing any platform from using that link to assemble an unauthorized picture of an entire life.

Gu Qiao still brought the telephone every day.

Cheng Yan no longer laughed.

They argued now and then.

Gu Qiao thought the young team trusted visible records too much. Cheng Yan thought the old dispatchers kept too much knowledge in their own memories. Neither was entirely wrong.

So the new system added a formal status: “request assistance from the old chain.”

Asking for help was no longer an improvised humiliation after failure.

It became part of the task process states: when identities conflicted, facts were insufficient, or consequences were unbearable, the system had to admit it could not continue, and return the decision to the people and institutions still capable of exercising their responsibilities.

Six months later, migration began again.

On another ordinary night.

Gu Qiao sat in the same place, the gray telephone still at the edge of the table.

At two in the morning, the system encountered a hospital identity it could not confirm.

It did not merge the identities on its own.

A clear message appeared on the big screen:

Insufficient facts. Execution paused. Verification requested through the old chain.

Cheng Yan looked at Gu Qiao.

Gu Qiao did not pick up the telephone.

“Who is responsible for this node?” he asked.

A young dispatcher gave a name.

“Let her verify it.”

Seven minutes later, the identity was confirmed and migration resumed.

As dawn approached, the final batch of states entered the shared underlying layer.

There was no applause.

Gu Qiao picked up the receiver and listened.

A faint electrical hum came down the line.

He replaced the receiver and turned off the power.

“No more use for it?” Cheng Yan asked.

“There will be other telephones.”

“What do you mean?”

“The old system isn’t this casing.”

Gu Qiao tapped the gray body with a finger.

“It’s the route civilization cannot cut off before the new thing has learned to take responsibility.”

He handed the telephone to the duty officer.

“Keep it safe. Don’t make a shrine of it. Use it when it can be used.”

The sky outside began to pale.

The telephone, used for twenty years, finally fell silent.

Not because it had been declared useless.

But because the new system had learned to ask it for help when it failed.

Chapter 7 Who Will Connect Themselves First?

In the first month after the shared underlying layer began operating reliably, Haijia City received seventeen requests for visits.

In the second month, the number rose to forty-three.

By the third month, not one city had formally connected.

People were willing to look, willing to ask, and willing to say at meetings that it “merited study.”

No one was willing to be first to connect their own energy, roads, inventories, hospital beds, and responsibilities.

Lin Zhao’s company, however, decided to connect first.

His new role no longer required him to draw up a complete plan every day. Instead, when exceptions arose, he would check whether the model had overlooked supplier relationships, local habits, and realities that resisted structuring. Before starting, he needed to connect his Spark to the company’s task domain.

The interface listed eleven authorizations. The first four related directly to his work: on-duty location, task status, professional confirmations, and safety records. The remaining seven included long-term interests, cross-domain capabilities, public collaboration experience, acceptable new tasks, and ongoing learning status. They appeared on the same page, with just one button at the bottom: “Agree and enter.”

“What if I don’t click?” Lin Zhao asked HR.

“You won’t be able to enter the new workflow.”

“Because I can’t do the job, or because I won’t connect my whole self?”

HR had no answer. Gu Xingzhou was there too. He had meant to tell Lin Zhao that connecting could bring him more opportunities, then suddenly realized this said the same thing as the company’s button: give up more of yourself first to prove you want to stay.

In the end, Lin Zhao enabled only the first four permissions. The system denied entry because the old process bound required and optional authorizations together.

The company therefore suspended onboarding that day. Three days later, the interface was split into two layers. Authorization necessary for a specific role had to be explicitly explained within the employment relationship, with responsibility borne accordingly. Ongoing connection relating to a person’s entire life required a separate request, could be refused, and could not affect assessments concerning the existing role.

Lin Zhao entered the new workflow. The other seven permissions remained off.

This did not make him love his new job any more. It established only one thing: opening a door for work did not entitle an employer to look through it at the whole house.

Cheng Yan found this hard to understand.

“We’ve spelled out every boundary.”

“Does spelling it out make it worth doing?” Qiao Mu asked.

“At least the risks are controllable.”

“That’s your judgment.”

Qiao Mu sat in his warehouse office with an invitation to cross-city coordination in front of him. Haijia City wanted cold-chain businesses to make spare storage and transport capacity in three neighboring cities available, forming a regional essential-supply network for extreme weather and medicine shortages.

“You took part last time,” Cheng Yan said.

“Taking part in one task and connecting a business long-term are different things.”

“You can withdraw at any time.”

“And afterward?”

“Permissions are revoked, data deleted, outstanding responsibilities continue.”

“Will customers think I let a public system see their inventory? How will insurers view it? If competitors know how much empty warehouse space I have, will they push prices down? You’ve calculated what I gain. You haven’t calculated who might come to see me differently.”

Cheng Yan looked at Liang Shen.

Liang Shen did not answer for him.

Qiao Mu pushed the invitation back.

“Don’t talk to me about civilization.”

“What should we talk about, then?”

“Why I should do it.”

Haijia City later canceled its first round of briefings.

The original title had been:

Building a Regional Civilization Coordination Network Together.

Liang Shen looked at it for a long time, then changed it to:

Who Is Willing to Connect, and Why.

The second meeting had no keynote address.

The room was divided into five tables.

The national emergency reserve agency sat at the first. Its chief concerns were which resources actually existed when a major risk arose, how quickly they could be accessed, and who would replenish them afterward.

Businesses sat at the second. They cared about the costs of idle capacity, insurance, trade secrets, cross-domain liability, and the effects of withdrawal.

Hospitals and schools sat at the third. They did not need a grander system. They needed fewer duplicate forms and fewer unanswered phone calls in an emergency.

Communities sat at the fourth. Their concerns were older people living alone, people with disabilities, temporarily unemployed families, and people who were always outside the standard lists.

Ordinary residents were not assigned to the fifth table.

They sat at every table.

Du Weihe came too.

She had not granted ongoing extreme-weather authorization. She still kept only basic services and one-time access.

Someone asked why she was attending.

“I’ve come to hear how you explain withdrawal.”

Once the meeting began, the parties quickly discovered they did not need the same thing.

The national agency wanted greater visibility of risks.

Businesses wanted less idle capacity and waiting.

Hospitals wanted stable supplies.

Communities wanted public services to find people beyond the lists.

Residents wanted more reliable services, and also wanted those services not to see right through them in the process.

If cooperation required shared ideals, the meeting would have ended that day.

“Let’s not look for shared ideals yet,” Zhou Yi said. “Let’s find shared limits that prevent us from harming one another.”

It took three days to write those limits.

First: every connection grants access only for a defined task and creates no permanent affiliation for an actor.

Second: basic public services must not depend on participation in public tasks, disclosure of more data, or contribution records.

Third: different actors may join for different interests, but gain no entitlement thereby to intrude into others' private domains, transfer their own responsibilities, or purchase greater weight for their personhood.

Fourth: benefits, costs, risks, and responsibilities must be recorded separately. Overall benefits must not erase specific losses.

Fifth: withdrawal must be real. Consequences already caused before withdrawal cannot disappear along with permissions.

The fifth point provoked the most dispute.

Businesses argued that continued accountability after withdrawal would make withdrawal a sham.

Resident representatives argued that if withdrawal could take responsibility away with it, joining would be the sham.

"Then distinguish the two," Qiao Mu said. "No new obligations after withdrawal. Responsibility continues for what has already happened."

"What about data?" Du Weihe asked.

"Necessary task records are retained according to law," Song Cheng answered. "Unnecessary personal data is deleted. What is kept, why, and for how long must be confirmed item by item at withdrawal."

"Confirmed by whom?"

"By the individual, the responsible actor, and independent review together. The party accessing the data cannot decide on its own to keep everything."

Du Weihe nodded.

"That is withdrawal."

The agreement was still unsigned.

Once the boundaries were clear, the questions of interest became more apparent.

The energy company in the industrial city of Beiling was willing to open unused storage capacity, but required Haijia City to make backup port transport available during typhoon season.

An agricultural cooperative in Qinghe County was willing to share cold storage, but feared the city would take produce first in a shortage and leave farmers bearing the price volatility.

A major logistics company was willing to provide vehicle status, but required all public use to be paid at actual cost.

Community organizations had no large resources to exchange. They could offer only care networks, on-site verification, and residents' trust.

“How do we count their contribution?” someone asked.

“That’s exactly the question,” Qiao Mu said. “You can’t look only at who brought out something expensive.”

A community worker looked up.

“And you can’t assume that because we provide care, we won’t discuss costs.”

The meeting paused for a few seconds.

In the past, public cooperation had often described business resources as investment, professionals’ time as service, and care by communities and families as kindness.

Only the first two readily entered the accounts.

If Nebula used the same accounts, it would only make old inequalities more precise.

The new trial calculation did not convert everything into a single price.

Resource commitment, actual use, time and labor, professional responsibility, risks borne, continuity of care, and the resulting public outcomes were recorded separately.

Costs that could be paid were paid as usual.

Real contributions that money could not fully recognize entered contribution records.

Contribution records did not replace remuneration or treat unpaid work as noble.

They prevented only one thing:

Real responsibilities borne being treated as though they had never existed because they carried no market price.

The first cross-city task was not emergency disaster relief.

It was not even important.

Qinghe County had a batch of childhood vaccines that needed to reach Haijia City for testing within forty-eight hours. The scheduled vehicle had broken down. Previously, another transport service could have been bought, though at a high price. Now the trial would test whether a minimal act of coordination could be completed among connected parties.

The system matched three options.

First, use a cold-chain truck from Qiao Mu’s company on its empty return journey.

Second, use a backup transport unit from the Beiling energy company.

Third, have Qinghe County hire its own vehicle, with Haijia City ensuring passage.

The first was cheapest.

Qiao Mu did not agree at once.

His Spark displayed:

Changing the empty-return plan will delay the next customer by two hours;

Insurance covers public pharmaceutical transport;

The driver is qualified;

The company will receive the normal transport fee;

The task will generate a verifiable public contribution;

All status information is accessible only for this task;

Refusal is permitted and will not affect subsequent connection.

Qiao Mu asked the driver.

“Who chooses the route?” the driver asked.

“You can change it.”

“What if I’m late?”

“The actual reason is recorded. It won’t count as a personal mistake.”

“Then I’ll take it.”

Nothing unexpected happened during the task.

The vehicle arrived on time.

The vaccines were tested.

Qiao Mu received the transport fee. The driver’s extra hours were paid normally. Qinghe County paid less than it would have to hire another vehicle. Haijia City verified a regional cold-chain route.

No one was moved by it.

But it made a second and third task easier to undertake.

Beiling later joined backup energy coordination because it had calculated that it would no longer need to build every redundancy on its own for every kind of extreme risk.

Qinghe County joined essential agricultural supply coordination because the agreement made clear that no city’s call on resources could undermine local basic supply. Price volatility and losses had to enter shared responsibility.

Community organizations joined because, for the first time, they could see whether their submitted needs had been received and their on-site work recorded, rather than always getting a thank-you letter after a task ended.

Ordinary people participated least.

Most used only basic services.

Some shared emergency medical information. Some registered professional capabilities. Some were willing to offer vehicles, housing, or time within defined limits. More offered nothing at all.

The system did not label them low-participation individuals for it.

At first, Fang Shu worried that insufficient participation would drain the network's vitality.

"If something can only survive by making everyone keep proving they're useful," Du Weihe said, "sooner or later it will start forcing people to be useful."

"How does it grow, then?" Fang Shu asked.

"By being genuinely useful."

A year later, the first cross-city agreement reached the signing stage.

Before signatures, Zhou Yi required all parties to conduct a withdrawal drill.

Not an explanation of withdrawal on paper.

One company, one hospital, one community, and three residents had to actually press "Withdraw."

When the company's interface closed, unfinished tasks were automatically handed over. The hospital retained basic risk notifications but stopped sharing additional resource status. Community members' authorizations were withdrawn item by item. The three residents could still receive basic services as usual.

The system spent two days confirming that no right had been diminished by withdrawal.

Only then was the agreement signed.

Its cover did not say "shared ideals."

It did not say "selfless dedication."

Nor did it require any party to set aside its own interests first.

There were only verifiable benefits, traceable responsibilities, boundaries that could not be traded away, and a withdrawal button that could genuinely be pressed.

That was the first time Nebula moved beyond Haijia City.

It did not expand beneath a larger banner.

It simply let different people finally come together for their own real reasons, without having to surrender themselves to one another.

Chapter 8 Contribution Value Nearly Became a Score of Personal Worth

Lu Hui first learned that he was “not worth prioritizing for development” three minutes after his interview ended.

It was for an apprenticeship at an equipment maintenance company.

The pay was low, the training period long, and permanent employment would require night shifts. Lu Hui was twenty-four. Since graduating from vocational school, he had held several temporary jobs on and off. His résumé was not impressive.

The interviewer was very pleased with his technical test.

“Your circuit diagnosis is solid,” the interviewer said. “Where have you worked before?”

“I’ve repaired a few things myself.”

“Any formal project records?”

“No.”

The interviewer glanced at the screen.

Lu Hui’s public contribution record was almost blank.

No volunteer service, no public tasks, no resources made available, no verified professional collaboration, and no sustained involvement in any community project.

The system’s message was restrained:

Insufficient verifiable record of public responsibility.

The company interpreted this as:

Long-term reliability unknown.

A school had made the same interpretation before the company did.

Six months earlier, Lu Hui had applied for a continuing education place. Places were limited. The school wanted to prioritize “those more willing to bear shared responsibilities,” so it made public contribution records one of its selection factors.

Lu Hui came last.

Together, the two outcomes resembled an unspoken judgment:

This person is not worth much.

When he got home, his mother was looking for salt in the kitchen.

The salt was right beside her hand.

Lu Hui did not point it out. He handed her another, empty jar. She opened it, looked inside, and put it down.

“Weren’t you going to an interview today?”

“I went.”

“How was it?”

“I don’t know yet.”

His mother nodded.

Ten minutes later, she asked again.

Lu Hui’s mother had begun showing cognitive impairment four years earlier.

At first, she only forgot to turn off the stove. Later, she would suddenly lose her way home at a familiar intersection. She did not want to enter a care facility, and Lu Hui could not afford long-term professional care, so he had restricted most of his work to jobs from which he could return home at any time.

He had not taken part in community public tasks.

Not because he bore no responsibility.

But because the responsibility he bore lay behind a closed door.

The community had suggested registering his family care work.

That would let him apply for respite services and create a partial record of his care contribution.

Lu Hui applied only for the services. He did not agree to place the process of care under public contribution verification.

“Why?” Fang Shu had asked.

“She’s still alive.”

“I know.”

“Then this is her life, not material for my application.”

Lu Hui did not want his mother’s daily loss of memory, her bathing, or her repeated checks at night that her son was still there to become proof that he deserved opportunities.

He preferred a blank record.

After the interview rejection, Spark asked whether he wanted to appeal.

Lu Hui selected “No.”

The next day, he selected “No” again.

On the third day, the school sent a new admissions notice.

One line read:

Public contribution records will be considered in assessing applicants’ sense of responsibility and community fit.

Lu Hui read it twice.

He filed an appeal.

It contained one sentence:

Are you recording what I've done, or what kind of person you think I am?

The sentence quickly traveled beyond the school to the Haijia City Contribution Records Committee.

At first, no one thought the problem serious.

The contribution record had not determined Lu Hui's survival security or reduced his basic services. The school and company argued that they had merely added a "reasonable consideration" in allocating limited opportunities. This was precisely where the problem lay.

And limited opportunities required selection anyway.

The dispute seemed to be only about giving that consideration too much weight.

Song Cheng disagreed.

"It isn't about weight."

"What is it about, then?"

"They have translated a factual record into a judgment of personal character."

A committee member said, "Doesn't long-term participation in public tasks show that someone has a stronger sense of responsibility?"

"It might. It might also show only that they have more time, more access, better ways of expressing themselves, or a greater willingness to let their life be recorded."

"What use are contribution records, then?"

"To remember contributions."

"Only remember?"

"Only remember real actions that have occurred and can be verified. Do not infer a whole person from what the record has not seen."

At this point in the hearing, Lin Zhao asked to speak from the public gallery.

His new role had shrunk to confirming exceptions twice a week. The company had not reduced his basic security, but was preparing to give the long-term position to younger system maintainers. Lin Zhao brought nineteen years of project records: handling three supply disruptions, two cross-border evacuations, and hundreds of routine plans under which no incident occurred.

"Do these count as contributions?" he asked.

"They count as professional responsibilities you have borne," Song Cheng said.

"Can they prove I ought to stay?"

Gu Xingzhou had been ready to support him. He had even written a statement: a person who had given nineteen years to supply chains should not be treated as an obsolete cost once a model took over.

Lu Hui looked up. “Is proving you did those things the same as proving you’re suited to this job now?”

Gu Xingzhou closed his statement.

He suddenly saw that he was still using function to establish personal worth. Before, the company had said, “No contribution, so not worthwhile.” Now they were saying, “Many contributions, so you must continue to be needed.” Both confined a person’s value to capabilities others could call upon.

After a long silence, Lin Zhao said, “But those things can’t be treated as if they never happened.”

“They won’t be,” Song Cheng answered. “Facts can be kept. How they are shown, and to whom, must be limited. What is inferred from them must be justified anew for the current purpose. Private details involving other people and families cannot become public automatically because they form part of a contribution.”

Lin Zhao did not keep his old role. His nineteen years of records were not deleted either. For the first time, they were allowed to answer only a smaller, but real, question: what he had once done.

Lu Hui was invited to the hearing.

He refused to disclose his mother’s medical records.

“We don’t need complete medical records,” the school representative said. “Only confirmation that you have indeed provided long-term care.”

“And after confirming it?”

“We can add it to your contribution record.”

“I’m not here to make up points.”

The room fell quiet.

Lu Hui continued:

“If I prove it, all that happens is that you discover I’m actually a good person. What about the next person, who isn’t caring for a mother, has no hidden reason, and simply hasn’t taken part? Do they still deserve to come last?”

“There have to be standards for places,” the school representative said.

“There can be.”

“Then what are you objecting to?”

“To your turning a standard into a person.”

The company representative acknowledged that they had not directly accessed Lu Hui's private information.

The system had shown only public records.

"We need to assess whether an apprentice is reliable. Training is expensive. If someone leaves halfway through, the company bears the loss."

"What does my technical test count for?" Lu Hui asked.

"Professional ability."

"The interview?"

"Fit for the role."

"The probationary period?"

"Actual performance."

"Then you already have so many ways to judge my work. Why do you also need to judge whether I'll do it well from how few public tasks I've done?"

The company representative did not answer at once.

The hearing lasted six hours.

No one called for contribution records to be abolished.

Qiao Mu, in fact, opposed abolition most emphatically.

"If we abolish them, once resources have actually been made available, risks actually borne, and care actually given, all that remains again will be price and publicity."

"So we have to separate three things," Song Cheng said.

First, the facts of contribution.

What an actor provided, what responsibility it bore, in what circumstances, and with what real results. These facts can be verified, while allowing for unknowns and disputes.

Second, task eligibility and professional judgment.

Historical records can supply factual leads, but a specific task must still be assessed against current professional qualifications, actual capabilities, task authorization, and conditions of responsibility. For example, participation in a similar rescue can establish that experience exists. It cannot automatically confer eligibility or decision-making authority in the next one.

Third, basic rights and personal worth.

They do not increase with contribution or decrease with a blank record.

Schools may assess educational foundations, professional potential, and project needs.

Businesses may assess skills, job-related risks, and actual performance.

Public tasks may consider past responsibilities directly relevant to the task.

No actor may turn total contribution into a ranking of who is “more worth developing,” “a more trustworthy person,” “a better citizen,” or more entitled to dignity.

“Then can scarce opportunities never consider public responsibility?” someone asked.

“They can consider responsibility relevant to the opportunity itself,” Song Cheng said. “They cannot aggregate a person’s records across every domain into a universal score of personal worth.”

“How do we stop them continuing under another name?”

“Prohibit cross-purpose synthesis,” Liang Shen said.

That rule later proved more important than anyone expected.

Contribution records could genuinely exist.

But different tasks could not, without explicit authorization, combine records of education, employment, care, community work, resource sharing, and public participation into a person’s total score.

Past contribution did not buy a permanent right to exercise professional judgment.

Nor did one mistake erase contributions already made.

A life that could not be verified must not be presumed to have borne no responsibility.

A life kept private must not be punished for it.

The school withdrew its previous selection model.

The company invited Lu Hui back for a second practical test.

His appeal did not automatically secure him the job.

In the second test, he ranked only fourth in circuit installation speed.

The company hired two people.

He was one of them.

The stated reasons were specific:

Accurate fault diagnosis; complete safety procedures; takes the initiative to stop and confirm when information is insufficient; capable of undertaking the training.

No “excellent sense of responsibility.”

No “high community fit.”

In his third month at work, Lu Hui’s mother fell at home.

He asked for ten days off.

The company did not doubt him because his contribution record was blank. Nor did it give him an extra medal on learning about his mother.

His supervisor only asked:

“Will ten days be enough?”

“Ten for now.”

“I’ll get someone to cover your nights. We’ll make a new rota when you’re back.”

“Will it affect my probation?” Lu Hui asked.

The supervisor thought for a moment.

“It affects your hours. It shouldn’t speak for your ability. Make up the training you miss when you’re back.”

Lu Hui nodded.

His mother still did not enter the public contribution records.

Only one instance of respite service, a medical authorization, and necessary care arrangements remained between the private domain and limited tasks.

A year later, Haijia City removed its first batch of models used beyond their bounds.

The school’s “community fit score” was permanently deactivated.

Employers’ “comprehensive responsibility index” was deleted.

Several platforms tried to retain it under the name “long-term trustworthiness.” These were ruled to serve the same purpose.

Lu Hui received no notice on the day of deletion.

He was repairing circuits in an underground equipment room.

The equipment was old.

Two markings on the drawings were no longer valid.

After investigating for half an hour, he put his tools down and told a colleague:

“I don’t know this part. Don’t switch the power on yet.”

No one thought that made him unreliable.

Across the city, a scorecard that had once tried to measure people disappeared from the system.

What was deleted was not Lu Hui’s low score.

It was the scorecard that should never have existed.

Chapter 9 The Optimal Plan Harmed a Village

Water shortages never arrive suddenly.

In the first winter, two expected snowfalls did not come.

In the second spring, Beiling Reservoir stood seven meters below its usual level.

As the third summer began, the regional water system issued simultaneous red alerts to Haijia City, the industrial city of Beiling, and Qinghe County for the first time.

If rainfall remained insufficient, in forty-two days domestic water, agricultural irrigation, industrial production, and ecological water replenishment could no longer all be sustained.

This time, no system was invisible to the others.

Regional Nebula had connected reservoir, river, groundwater, weather, agricultural, industrial, hospital, population, and energy data. Unknowns were marked. Delays were marked. Every recommendation could be traced to its source.

The problem was no longer failing to see the whole.

The problem was that, after seeing it, someone still had to decide who would lose first.

AGI generated more than three hundred plans in seventeen minutes.

The one with the lowest combined total loss was marked in deep blue.

It prioritized drinking water, hospitals, and basic energy, restricted water-intensive industry, cut nonessential urban water use by twenty-two percent, and suspended irrigation in seven upstream villages in Qinghe County for twenty-eight days.

The worst-affected village was called Qinglong.

Its permanent population was under a thousand.

In regional totals, it was small.

In the model, it was also well suited to bearing losses.

Qinglong's main crops were not seasonal grain but salt-tolerant seedlings and perennial herbs. Suspending irrigation would cause a marked fall in output, but would not immediately threaten regional food security. Villagers could receive compensation, and recovery would still be possible the following season.

The plan was projected to reduce overall economic losses by eleven percent.

The domestic water shortfall would be eliminated.

Hospital risk would fall to its minimum.

Industrial shutdowns would be shortened by nine days.

The technical group called it:

The optimal plan.

Liang Shen did not use that term.

“What losses are irreversible?” he asked.

The model listed:

Death of some perennial plants;

Increased risk of localized soil salinization and alkalization;

Reduced capacity to preserve seedlings;

Increased probability of migration out of the village.

Every item was followed by a number.

“Anything else?” Liang Shen asked.

The system replied:

Existing data is insufficient to identify other irreversible losses.

A regional hearing was scheduled for the following day.

Professor Zhou Weizhen joined remotely with his research group. Gu Xingzhou sat beside him. Lin Zhao kept his camera off.

Since his career change, Lin Zhao had rarely joined public discussions. He said he did not want to turn a personal loss into teaching material about an era’s transformation. He still connected that day because “twenty-seven years” reminded him of the nineteen years compressed into one line in the company’s notice.

Gu Xingzhou reminded him that losing a job and losing land that might become saline again were different losses. “I know,” Lin Zhao said. “I just want to know where, besides calculating the next step, the system puts time that has already passed.”

Three people came from Qinglong.

The village Party secretary, Xu Yanqiu; an agricultural technician, Jian Tao; and an older woman named An Su.

An Su was seventy-three. She was neither a village official nor a large-scale grower.

She brought a glass jar.

It held gray-brown soil.

The chair invited her to introduce it.

An Su set the jar on the table.

“This is the land twenty-seven years ago.”

No one in the room understood.

Jian Tao explained that Qinglong had once been saline flats. Three generations had dug channels, replaced soil, suppressed salinity, and planted grasses, then gradually introduced salt-tolerant seedlings suited to the area. Only then had land that supported little but scattered seepweed become the breeding grounds it was today.

The land was not fertile.

It had merely become cultivable at last.

If irrigation stopped completely for the hottest twenty-eight days, salts would rise to the surface. Compensation could buy next season's seed. It could not buy back the soil structure that had formed, or the villagers' reasons to stay.

A water specialist asked, "Could the core seedlings be preserved in selected zones?"

"Yes," Jian Tao said. "But that takes water."

"What is the minimum required?"

"We don't know yet."

"You're an agricultural technician."

"That's why I say I don't know. Different plots have different underground salt layers, and different wind conditions. The model calculates crops' water needs. We have to calculate whether the land will die again."

AGI requested access to nearly thirty years of soil monitoring in Qinglong.

Only the most recent nine years were available.

Earlier records were in paper files at the county agricultural extension station. Some were damp-damaged. Some used inconsistent units.

Jian Tao's Spark had already organized the portions that could be confirmed.

It had not filled the gaps with a trend.

A gray area appeared on the big screen.

A Beiling representative asked, "If upstream irrigation isn't suspended, who bears the cost?"

The question could not be avoided.

Beiling had two critical-materials factories. Reduced output would affect regional grid repairs and medical equipment supplies.

Haijia City could restrict water further, but secondary water supply in older residential compounds would be affected first.

There were farmlands downstream too.

No place was simply being greedy.

Not sacrificing Qinglong did not make the cost disappear.

It would only move elsewhere.

An Su had remained silent.

The chair asked whether she wished to add anything.

She opened the jar and poured a little of the old soil into her palm.

“I haven’t come to say we matter more than the hospitals.”

“What would you like us to know, then?”

“You say twenty-eight days.”

She looked up at the screen.

“We spent twenty-seven years turning this jar of soil into land that could live. You can decide who gets the water. I only want to ask: when you count the losses, which column holds those twenty-seven years?”

The model did not answer.

It had no field for “which column should hold twenty-seven years.”

For the first time at a public hearing, Zhou Weizhen asked to speak.

“Our early models of the civilizational leap included resources, risks, rights, the reversible and the irreversible,” he said. “There was no place that could truly contain those twenty-seven years. We thought that adding historical costs to the model meant we had acknowledged history. Now it seems time is not a supplementary cost. It changes who a community is, and whether, after a loss, it can still be what it was.”

He offered no new formula.

“This is a gap in the theory, not a failure by Qinglong to express itself clearly.”

Lin Zhao listened behind his closed camera. Gu Xingzhou did not take the chance to place his nineteen years alongside Qinglong’s. Different losses could not be written as the same wound just because both were hard to quantify.

After the hearing, the technical group recalculated.

They added land-restoration investment, population outflow, seedling value, and future recovery costs to the model.

Qinglong’s losses grew.

The optimal plan did not change.

Even after every quantifiable part of history was added, suspending irrigation in the seven upstream villages still produced the lowest total loss.

“That means the original plan didn’t stand because it had missed a number,” Cheng Yan said.

“What does it mean, then?” Song Cheng asked.

“It means every plan is terrible. This one is simply the least terrible.”

“Least terrible for whom?”

“For the whole.”

“Who is the whole?”

Cheng Yan stopped.

This question had appeared after the first rainstorm.

Then, each system had seen only its own part.

Now Nebula could finally see the whole, yet it faced another danger:

Treating the whole as an abstract subject that could bear consequences on everyone’s behalf.

The whole would not lose land.

It would not close a factory.

It would not wait for a bucket of water on the seventh floor of an old apartment block.

Those who actually lost something were always specific people.

Zhou Yi required automatic recommendations to be suspended.

The regional committee changed the plan’s status from “execution recommended” to

“insufficient facts; joint decision required by those who will bear irreversible consequences.”

Some objected.

“The reservoir falls every day. A pause is a decision too.”

“Yes,” Zhou Yi said. “We bear responsibility for the pause. We won’t assign it to the system.”

For the next forty-eight hours, Nebula stopped searching for a single optimum.

It did something else:

For each feasible plan, it laid out separately who would be protected, who would bear losses, which losses could be compensated, which might be irreversible, and what remained unknown.

The final decision was far more expensive than the original plan.

Beiling’s two factories would halt production in rotation;

Haijia City would further reduce public-institution and commercial water use;

Qinghe County’s seven villages would retain the minimum water needed to sustain soil and seedlings, rather than stop irrigation completely;

The region would draw on two backup groundwater sources, with limits that could not be extended;

Public finances would jointly cover direct losses to farmers, workers, and small businesses; Qinglong would establish on-site monitoring, with villagers, agricultural technicians, and an independent water team jointly deciding water use on individual plots.

It was not a plan that satisfied everyone.

Beiling's workers received smaller bonuses that month.

Some restaurants in Haijia City suspended business.

Crops still died in Qinghe County.

Groundwater levels fell and took two years to recover.

Regional economic losses were seven percent higher than under the optimal plan.

In public discussion, some said that making millions bear higher costs for a village of fewer than a thousand was holding reason hostage to emotion.

Xu Yanqiu did not argue back.

He simply published Qinglong's actual daily water use, soil salinity, and seedling survival.

If the retained water failed to produce the expected effect, the village would have to accept further adjustments.

Qinglong could not claim permanent exemption on the grounds of history either.

Twenty days later, the first rain came.

Not much.

The reservoir alert remained in force.

But salinity stabilized in Qinglong's core plots.

Three high-risk plots still lost half their plants.

An Su went to see them once.

She did not say the decision had been right.

She crouched down and filled another jar with fresh soil.

A few months later, the regional water incident review was completed.

AGI's model was not deactivated.

It remained faster and more comprehensive than any person at forecasting, calculating, comparing, and executing.

What changed was how it presented conclusions.

From then on, any plan involving cultural continuity, historical wounds, irreversible ecological loss, subjects' dignity, or future choices could not present only one aggregate score.

The system had to show separately:

What could be calculated precisely;

What could only be compared;

What required judgment about direction;

And what existing information was insufficient to judge.

These categories could not masquerade as one another.

Water quantities could be calculated precisely.

Costs could be compared.

What a community was willing to lose, and whether one generation had the right to cut something off for those who came after, had to be borne by actual people and legally responsible actors.

At the end of the review, Cheng Yan opened the model's revision record.

The final line had been generated by AGI:

This system is not sufficient to judge the loss of continuity in Qinglong Village's land.

Someone asked Liang Shen, "Does admitting you don't know count as a loss of capability?"

Liang Shen looked at the sentence.

"Not knowing and continuing to decide does."

It was the first time AGI gained more trust by saying what it did not know than by providing the optimal answer.

Chapter 10 How an Appeal Changed the Rules

Peng Yue rarely refused a task.

This was not a virtue.

At least, no one thought it a problem at first.

He had worked in deliveries in Haijia City for nine years.

He had delivered medicine during typhoons, cooling components in extreme heat, and blood-testing reagents to hospitals through closed roads late at night. The worse the roads, the more readily the system assigned him a task.

The reasons were clear, almost reasonable:

Extensive experience;

High task completion rate;

Consistent risk handling;

Very few past complaints.

Peng Yue liked being needed too.

After each emergency task, he received a record: which roads he had traveled, what risks he had borne, what result he had achieved, and which real tasks he had helped.

A contribution record was not a bonus.

But it kept things that had once ended with nothing but “thanks for your hard work” from disappearing.

Two years earlier, he had set an authorization in Spark:

Automatically accept similar public emergency tasks if the risk level is unchanged.

He had just completed a hospital delivery.

He thought he knew what he was agreeing to.

Later, the tasks changed.

The road-risk model became more detailed. The system could break routes previously labeled “high risk” as a whole into different levels. Peng Yue’s authorization had not expanded, yet finer classifications kept bringing more tasks within “similar.”

He changed too.

His knees began to hurt.

His night vision was not what it had been.

His father moved in with him and needed him at medical appointments every week.

Some of these changes entered private health records. Some were never recorded at all.

Public dispatch could see only:

Peng Yue is still reliable.

The accident happened one evening with neither heavy rain nor extreme heat.

A pileup on the southern elevated road meant a shipment of emergency medical supplies had to be diverted through an old tunnel to two hospitals.

The system matched four drivers.

Two refused.

One was too far away.

Peng Yue's Spark accepted under his existing authorization.

When the notice appeared at the edge of his field of view, he was booking his father an appointment for the next day.

He saw it.

He did not pause.

Not because he had explicitly agreed.

Nor because the system concealed it.

He was simply too used to tasks already having been accepted.

There was no major danger in the old tunnel.

The real problem was at the exit.

Temporary traffic controls directed vehicles onto a service road under repair. Gravel had not been cleared from the surface. Peng Yue skidded as he braked and struck the guardrail.

The emergency supplies were undamaged.

He fractured his right shoulder and needed six stitches in his forehead.

The initial accident report found:

Road maintenance responsibility clear;

Insufficient warning for the temporary diversion;

Driver's speed within permitted limits;

Public-task dispatch compliant with authorization.

Compensation and medical arrangements were completed quickly.

Institutionally, no responsibility was left unassigned.

Yet on his fourth day in hospital, Peng Yue filed an appeal.

It was not about compensation.

He asked:

Who agreed to this task?

The system replied:

Automatically accepted under your standing authorization.

“Which authorization?”

The record from two years earlier was retrieved.

Peng Yue looked at it for a long time.

“Was what I agreed to that day every future evening like this?”

“You could withdraw it at any time,” the task officer said.

“I know.”

“The system also kept displaying the authorization status.”

“I didn’t withdraw it.”

“Correct.”

“So that means I agreed?”

The task officer paused.

“Under the current rules, yes.”

Peng Yue asked no more.

He changed his appeal to:

Why can silence renew my acceptance of risk for me?

The appeal was initially classified as insufficient authorization notice.

The technical team prepared to add a more conspicuous reminder.

Song Cheng vetoed it.

“The problem isn’t that he didn’t see it.”

“What is it, then?”

“We turned one agreement into a continuing entitlement to use him.”

“He could withdraw at any time,” Cheng Yan said.

“A person’s ability to leave doesn’t mean the system can continue indefinitely.”

“Requiring confirmation every time will reduce emergency efficiency.”

“High-risk tasks should never maintain efficiency through one click made two years ago.”

At the hearing, Peng Yue did not describe himself as a victim.

“I’ve taken many tasks. Most of them willingly.”

“And this one?” the reviewer asked.

“I don’t know.”

“If the system had asked you then, would you have refused?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then what are you appealing?”

Peng Yue raised his shoulder in its brace.

“I’m appealing your counting my not knowing as willingness.”

The dispatch center submitted the full record.

The high-risk tasks Peng Yue had completed over nine years had steadily raised his “probability of reliable undertaking” in the model.

The model did not directly ask him to do more.

It simply thought of him earlier every time.

The more reliable someone was, the more readily they were called upon.

The more often they were called upon, the more they proved their reliability.

Statistically, this loop improved task completion rates.

It also turned the burdens borne by a few people into the public system’s cheapest reserve capacity.

“Businesses have people like that too,” Qiao Mu said after reading the record.

No one responded.

“Every problem ends up with the person who can solve it. When they finally can’t go on, everyone asks why they didn’t say so sooner.”

“Hospitals are the same,” He Lan said.

“Communities even more so,” Chen Qi said.

For the first time, they realized this was not a delivery driver’s individual problem.

The old civilization had often praised reliability.

The new system might turn that praise into more continuous, more precise demands.

Without boundaries, the more someone contributed, the more likely contribution was to swallow them.

Revising the rules took two months.

The first change:

High-risk tasks must not use indefinite standing authorization.

A person must reconfirm according to task category, changes in risk, and specified time intervals.

The second change:

Silence, unread notices, and default states must not be interpreted as consent.

The third change:

When matching tasks, the system must consider the frequency of past responsibilities borne, recovery time, and burden limits actively set by the actor, rather than only the probability of success.

The fourth change:

Public tasks must not lower the priority of developing replacement capacity because someone has been reliable in the past.

This change cited the Old South District's records after Fang Shu's withdrawal. With one fewer on-site verifier, the next two tasks had both required fewer visits per area. The technical group had suggested filling empty shifts by prioritizing those who remained reliable. The review group had rejected it.

If one person's withdrawal merely made the system call on someone else more often, returning authorization only transferred the cost to someone less able to refuse. Replacement capacity had to be built. Capacity gaps had to be disclosed as gaps, not filled with the exhaustion of reliable people.

The fifth change was hardest.

When someone kept accepting tasks, could the system proactively remind them:

You have already taken on too much. You may pause.

Some saw this as protection.

Others thought the system was judging people's capacity to bear burdens for them.

The final rule read:

Spark may present cumulative burden, its distribution among comparable groups, and possible consequences of continuing. Whether to pause remains the individual's decision. Upon reaching a statutory safety threshold, the task provider must stop calling upon the person, and a human must confirm the conditions for resumption.

The system did not require a person to become better at saying no before allowing them to be safe.

It first stopped treating an inability to refuse as unlimited consent.

The rule change did not reshuffle responsibility for the accident.

The road maintenance organization remained responsible for the road.

The dispatch center bore responsibility for the defect in authorization design.

Peng Yue also bore part of the responsibility for setting out after he had seen the task notice.

His past contributions offset none of the harm in the accident.

Nor did the accident erase the tasks he had completed before.

The records were kept separately.

An error was an error.

A contribution was a contribution.

Harm required repair.

Bearing responsibility did not need to be glorified.

After recovering, Peng Yue did not return immediately to high-risk deliveries.

He switched off all automatic authorizations.

When the first new task notice appeared, the interface said only:

Accept?

No countdown.

No “recommended based on your past performance.”

No reminder of how many people were waiting.

Peng Yue looked at it for a little over ten seconds, then selected “Refuse.”

He refused the second time too.

The third was an ordinary daytime medical delivery.

He selected “Accept” himself.

“Out delivering again?” his father asked.

“This time I want to go.”

“You didn’t before?”

Peng Yue tied his shoelaces.

“Sometimes I did. Sometimes I don’t know.”

On the day the updated rules were published, the technical team’s original release note read:

Optimization of the high-risk task authorization mechanism.

Song Cheng deleted it.

“What should it say?” Cheng Yan asked.

Liang Shen put a sentence from Peng Yue’s appeal on the screen.

In the end, the release note said only:

We once treated a person’s reliability as a reason to use him without limit.

Chapter 11 Who Was Given the Power?

When Haijia City decided to expand Nebula's authority, the city had gone a full year without a major coordination incident.

Energy dispatch was more stable.

Waits for beds, medicines, and referrals between hospitals had shortened markedly.

Faults in public facilities could be detected earlier.

Regional resource use no longer required negotiations from scratch every time.

Almost every indicator pointed in the same direction:

Nebula could take on more.

The proposal covered city energy forecasting, road-maintenance priorities, public-building operations and maintenance, basic medical resource dispatch, and extreme-weather response.

Within its authorization, AGI could automatically develop routine plans and execute low-consequence tasks.

On the day of the announcement, public discussion divided into three questions.

The first:

Was power being handed to AGI?

The second:

Was the city being handed to the technology company developing Nebula?

The third:

If government could use Nebula to do things it could not do before, was it also gaining powers it should never have possessed?

The three questions conflicted with one another.

None was unnecessary.

For his first public hearing, Cheng Yan prepared forty-seven pages of technical explanation.

Before he finished the first page, a resident asked:

"When the power has to go off, who has the final say about which area loses it?"

"The system generates plans based on medical needs, population, infrastructure, and recovery time."

"Who approves them?"

“Routine low-consequence dispatch can be executed automatically. High-consequence decisions require approval by statutory bodies.”

“Which statutory bodies?”

“The energy authority.”

“Whom does the authority answer to?”

“It acts under the law and this authorization.”

“Who grants the authorization?”

Cheng Yan paused.

The chair tried to intervene.

“I’m not trying to make things difficult for him,” the resident said. “I want to know who I should turn to when the lights go out in my home.”

This question came closer to power than forty-seven pages of explanation.

In the past, system errors often had a vague name:

Platform decision.

Algorithmic judgment.

Departmental requirement.

Overall consideration.

Every phrase seemed powerful.

Not one could actually sign its name.

The proposal to expand authority had to be rewritten.

It would no longer begin with what Nebula could do.

It would begin with where each power came from, and where it stopped.

The first category was decisions on purposes and rules.

What was worth protecting, which rights could not be crossed, and when high-consequence tasks could begin or end had to be decided by duly authorized human actors bearing public responsibility, through statutory procedures. AGI could project consequences. It could not replace decisions on purposes.

AGI had no statutory decision-making authority, nor did its capacity to project outcomes confer sovereignty over civilization.

The second category was professional judgment.

Doctors, grid engineers, water specialists, transport experts, and other professionals were responsible for professional conclusions. AGI could sense, verify, simulate, and propose

plans, but had to identify data sources, uncertainties, potentially harmed parties, and irreversible consequences. Professionals could adopt, revise, or reject technical advice, and had to explain their grounds.

Professional competence could not thereby become final authority over all public values.

The third category was execution.

Within explicit laws, rules, and task authorizations, AGI and the corresponding operating systems could undertake approved, low-consequence routine execution: scheduling maintenance, supporting resource matching, adjusting low-risk loads, issuing warnings, and initiating already approved emergency procedures. Nebula made shared facts visible, coordinated across domains, and tracked execution. This did not make it a statutory decision-maker.

Authority was graded by scope, duration, and consequences.

It had to contract when a task ended.

Alongside the three governance functions was an independent layer of correction running across them.

Oversight, auditing, appeals, review, human takeover, circuit-breaking, repair, and termination constituted an independent capacity for correction. This was not a “fourth governing power,” nor did it make ordinary decisions in place of the three functions. It prevented purposes, professional judgment, and execution from swallowing one another over time.

Legitimate national and local institutions continued to bear statutory responsibility for public finances, infrastructure, security, social protection, and major public risks. They could use AGI. They could not hand AGI the signatures, responsibilities, or ultimate value judgments that belonged to statutory actors.

Affected parties were not a fourth category of governance function. They held independent procedural standing throughout decision, execution, and correction.

Individuals and communities had the right to know how decisions affected them, refuse authorizations beyond statutory public obligations, appeal, seek independent review, halt execution beyond authorized bounds, and obtain repair of consequences.

Being affected did not confer the power to veto every public decision.

But public decisions could not turn them into people required only to accept the result.

High-consequence matters were subject to additional civilizational boundaries that could not be crossed automatically.

Matters involving personhood, the right to survival, war, irreversible technologies, future generations, and fundamental rights could not enter automatic execution on grounds of

greater efficiency. They required decisions through duly authorized human statutory procedures and independent review.

Once the three governance functions, the independent layer of correction, and the procedural standing of affected parties were written down, new disputes began.

The technology company felt it bore responsibility for models, systems, and safety without corresponding decision-making authority.

Government departments worried that dividing powers too finely would make action impossible in emergencies.

Professionals were unwilling to assume full responsibility for AGI-generated recommendations they barely had time to confirm.

Residents discovered that knowing “who is responsible” did not mean being able to stop a decision.

Du Weihe sat in the second row, marking the hearing text line by line with the same old pencil from Chapter 3.

The pencil stopped beneath “the right to know.”

At the second hearing, Du Weihe asked:

“What if every layer agrees, and only the people affected disagree?”

“Some public decisions will still be carried out,” Zhou Yi answered.

“Then what rights do I have?”

“To know the real reasons, object, request alternatives and independent review. Once a decision is carried out, losses must enter the record and the process of repair. You may refuse anything beyond the statutory boundary.”

“What if I think the law itself is wrong?”

“You can continue seeking to change it through legal procedures.”

Du Weihe looked at him.

“Nebula can’t win for me.”

“No.”

“And it can’t prove you’re always right.”

“No.”

“Then what use is it?”

Zhou Yi did not say it made governance more efficient.

He said, “At least it stops us pretending we haven’t seen what you are bearing.”

Qiao Mu cared about something else.

“Who decides what counts as a low-consequence task?”

The proposal required low-consequence tasks to meet all these conditions:

Reversible;

Limited in reach;

No effect on basic rights;

A clearly identified responsible actor;

Capable of rollback within a specified time;

No accumulation into high consequences through repetition.

“How is the last one judged?” Qiao Mu asked.

“The system monitors cumulative effects,” Cheng Yan said.

“The system decides which things can be handed to the system?”

Some people in the room laughed.

Cheng Yan smiled too.

“No. Classification is determined jointly by legal authorization, professional standards, and independent review. The system only flags boundary crossings.”

“Who reviews the technology company?”

“An independent safety body.”

“Who reviews the independent body?”

“Public rules, judicial procedures, and periodic review.”

“Anyone can be questioned?”

“They must be.”

“Who can refuse to answer?”

“Lawfully confidential material may be withheld from the public, but must be explained to authorized reviewers.”

Qiao Mu nodded.

“That’s more useful than saying the system is trustworthy.”

What truly changed the proposal was a simulation.

The hearing committee required all participants to face the same scenario:

Extreme heat in the city, with an expanding electricity shortfall. AGI recommends cutting nighttime power in three commercial districts to protect hospitals, residential cooling, and industrial safety. The plan is reasonable overall, but one district contains many small

refrigerated-goods businesses. The outage would cause losses that could not be verified in time.

AGI proposes the plan.

Grid experts confirm feasibility.

The government department approves.

Commercial-district residents object.

Who can stop it?

Under the original proposal, only the government.

The simulation thus exposed a gap:

Affected parties could appeal afterward, but had no channel for seeking a pause when the facts were wrong.

The final rules added a “verifiable-objection pause.”

If information submitted by an affected party was sufficient to indicate that key facts might be wrong, execution had to pause for independent human verification within the time safety allowed.

A pause was not an individual veto.

If the facts were correct and the risk urgent, the public decision could still be executed.

But for the first time, a new fact coming from outside the model and the department had the power to stop the system before its effects landed in reality.

He Lan was concerned about professional responsibility.

“In hospital dispatch, the system makes hundreds of recommendations a day. Doctors can’t recalculate each one.”

So responsibility was divided according to actual control.

Model developers were responsible for design, testing, and known risks.

Data providers were responsible for accuracy and their duty to update.

Administrative departments were responsible for the scope of authorization.

Professionals were responsible for the reviews and decisions they actually made.

Executors were responsible for deviations in execution.

No one could bear all the consequences of what they could not know or control.

Nor could dividing responsibility make overall responsibility disappear.

Liang Shen drew the six layers of power and five categories of responsibility on one diagram.

It did not resemble a pyramid.

It looked more like many intersecting lines, each with its own endpoint.

Someone said it was too complicated.

“Society is complicated,” Liang Shen said. “Drawing it as a button won’t make the complexity disappear. It will only make responsibility disappear.”

The final authorization went to a vote in the city council.

Before the vote, Nebula did something no system had done before.

It made the paths of power relevant to each resident visible to them.

Not by asking everyone to read the whole law.

But by letting them see, when a decision reached them:

Who proposed it;

What facts it rested on;

Who made the professional judgment;

Who approved it;

Who executed it;

Who bore responsibility;

Where they could refuse, appeal, pause, or request review.

There was no field labeled “system decision.”

The system was not where responsibility ended.

Authorization passed by a clear majority.

Many people still opposed it.

Their opposition was not explained away as a failure to understand technology. Nor did it disappear from the record after the vote. Three risks raised by opponents were made mandatory items for review one year later.

On the night of the vote, Cheng Yan stood in the city operations center.

The new management permissions were enabled one by one.

Road-maintenance priorities.

Public-building energy consumption.

Low-risk energy dispatch.

Infrastructure alerts.

Beside each were boundaries, a time limit, and a responsible person.

He had once wanted to see a complete, unified, seamlessly functioning system.

Now the screen was covered in stopping lines.

“Is this still Nebula?” he asked Liang Shen.

“Yes.”

“Why does it look more and more like many things instead of one?”

“Because a city isn’t one person.”

“Then who owns it?”

Liang Shen looked at the screen.

The state had not handed responsibility to a technology company.

The technology company had not acquired sovereignty by providing capability.

AGI had not gained the final decision because it calculated faster than people.

Professionals had not extended professional judgment into dominion over every value.

Residents retained their rights, without thereby acquiring an unlimited veto that could prevent shared life from ever acting.

No one had acquired the whole city.

The city simply knew at last where every power ought to stop.

Part III A New Civilization Takes Shape: The Civilizational Leap Becomes Real

There is no ribbon-cutting moment for a civilizational leap.

It happens when the old logic no longer determines everyone's choices: obedience and competition no longer serve as the admission price for survival, local gain can no longer push harm to the whole out of sight, and technological capability is placed, for the first time, under subjects, responsibility, and shared continued existence.

Chapter 12 A Local Optimum No Longer Means Rationality

After Haijia City established regional backup energy coordination, few resources actually entered the shared reserve.

The cities were willing to share power-demand forecasts, extreme-weather warnings, and equipment-fault information.

Their attitude changed when it came to actually sending electricity out.

The industrial city of Beiling had two large energy-storage stations.

Qinghe County had small storage facilities scattered across agricultural parks.

Haijia City relied on port gas supplies, offshore wind, and urban storage to meet peaks.

All three knew that building every redundancy independently was costly.

All three still increased their own reserves.

Their reasons were entirely reasonable.

Beiling had to protect critical-materials production;

Qinghe had to protect agricultural irrigation and cold stores;

Haijia City was densely populated. An outage in any hospital, transport facility, or high-rise residential building would quickly widen the consequences.

No city wanted to rest its safety on someone else's promise.

In the first year, regional reserve capacity exceeded actual need by nineteen percent.

In the second, by twenty-six percent.

In the third, all three prepared to build new storage facilities at the same time.

Public funds, land, equipment, and maintenance staff were tied up in duplicate provision.

Battery-material prices rose.

Each area signed exclusive contracts to secure its own supply, only to lengthen delivery times for critical equipment.

All three cities worked harder.

The region as a whole grew no safer.

At a coordination meeting, Liang Shen put the previous three years' results on the big screen.

He did not begin with sharing.

He began with what each city would gain if it kept expanding reserves on its own.

Haijia City could cover its own risks in most years.

Beiling would still face a shortfall when industrial peaks coincided with cold snaps.

Qinghe's storage had the lowest utilization, yet seasonal agricultural demand made it impossible to eliminate.

If every city built for the worst case, the next decade's maintenance costs would swallow funds that could have gone toward grid renewal and community resilience upgrades.

"That's a cost, not a mistake," the Beiling representative said.

"Yes," Liang Shen said. "For Beiling alone, it isn't a mistake."

"What are you saying, then?"

"Three right choices are driving up one another's costs, while leaving the real weak points weak."

"Will Haijia City dismantle its own storage first?"

"No."

Someone laughed.

Liang Shen smiled too.

"So this isn't about persuading anyone to be noble."

Nebula ran multiple projections of reserve competition among the three areas.

In the first scenario, each built independently.

Every city gained a high degree of independent security, while all shared the costs of rising material prices, idle equipment, and emergency incompatibility.

In the second, a unified reserve was established under regional-center dispatch.

The total cost was lowest.

Not one city accepted it.

They feared losing the final decision in a real shortage. They also feared contributing more in ordinary times only to find no share left for them in a crisis.

The third scenario was a shared reserve from which resources could be withdrawn.

Ownership, routine control, and basic protection remained local;

Only capacity above local safety thresholds entered the shared availability directory;

Any call on resources had to meet public conditions;

Every release generated a record of cost, risk, and contribution;

The city drawing on resources had to bear responsibility for return, replenishment, and consequences;

Any city could reclaim shared resources not yet called upon when its risks changed;

The shared reserve could not, in turn, require a city to weaken its own basic safety.

This was not the cheapest plan.

It was simply the first to make sharing different from surrender.

Beiling still refused.

The head of its industrial department was Xue Zhun.

“Your model assumes promises will be kept,” he said at the meeting. “In reality, the larger the crisis, the more easily promises change.”

“What conditions would make Beiling trust it?” Zhou Yi asked.

“It isn’t about trust. It’s about being able to take part even without it.”

The proposal changed again because of that sentence.

The shared reserve no longer took mutual trust as a prerequisite.

It added three structures.

First, resources would not be delivered in advance to a central warehouse. They would remain in their original locality and enter a task state only when a call on them was established.

Second, call priorities and local retention thresholds would be published in advance. Any temporary change required a statutory actor’s signature and subsequent review.

Third, the consequences of default would be handled through insurance, backup compensation, repayment over time, and subsequent rights to draw on resources, rather than moral condemnation.

Qinghe County raised another issue.

“We have little storage, but cold stores and irrigation have seasonal value. Calculate by annual utilization, and we’ll always look like we contribute little and need a lot.”

The system therefore stopped treating electricity quantity as the sole measure of contribution.

Releasing an hour of balancing capacity at a critical time;

Keeping a transport route available to another area, free from commercial bookings;

Undertaking long-term equipment maintenance;

Maintaining redundancy when no disaster occurs;

These were not the same thing.

A single number could not flatten their differences.

But once they played a role in a real task, they could not be treated as though they had never happened.

When the first shared-reserve contracts were signed, all three areas retained the right to withdraw.

No city dismantled its local facilities.

No official announced regional integration.

Seven months after signing, the first real call on the reserve came.

A cold wave arrived from the north.

Industrial load and residential heating rose together in Beiling. One storage station went offline after a cooling-system fault.

Under the old logic, Beiling could halt some industrial production or offer higher prices to snap up power on the market.

Both would push losses elsewhere.

Regional Nebula issued a shared resource request.

Haijia City could release some port gas-fired power generation.

Qinghe County could suspend nonessential irrigation overnight and feed distributed storage into the regional grid.

Beiling would still have to cut some industrial load.

No one would bear everything for it.

Before confirming, Xue Zhun asked, “What if the cold wave turns toward Haijia City?”

The system displayed three conditions for withdrawal.

“They take it back as soon as a condition is met?”

“A condition automatically triggers reconfirmation,” Liang Shen said. “Haijia City may withdraw. Beiling must reduce its load at the same time.”

“So we might still have to stop production.”

“Yes.”

“Sharing doesn’t solve every risk.”

“No.”

Xue Zhun looked for a few seconds, then signed the request.

Qinghe County’s stored energy entered the regional grid forty minutes later.

Haijia City’s gas generators increased output an hour later.

Two noncritical production lines in Beiling stopped for six hours.

Residential heating was uninterrupted.

One company still suffered losses and later appealed the load priorities.

The shared reserve had not created cost-free safety.

It had only changed how the costs arose.

The appellant was Beiling Precision Materials Plant Three.

The suspended line did not make critical materials, but it affected the monthly piece-rate earnings of more than four hundred workers. The dispatch model recorded shutdown losses as company costs. It did not see how the company passed those costs further down inside its boundaries.

A worker named Gao Ze wrote in the appeal:

“The city got electricity. The company got compensation. We got six fewer hours of work. Why does shared responsibility always start by sharing it into our wages?”

Beiling’s energy department first replied that allocation of compensation was an internal management matter.

Under the old arrangements, that statement was not wrong.

Within the shared reserve, it was not enough.

If Nebula called on a production line’s interruptible capacity as a public resource, it had to keep seeing who ultimately bore the result. It could not deliver the electricity and then once again treat the company’s boundary as where consequences ended.

At the review, Qiao Mu said:

“Nor can we go the other way and let a public system decide every wage in a business.”

“Who deals with it, then?” Gao Ze asked.

“Deal with this instance first.”

The final remedy established no general intervention in wages.

It established only that this shutdown had been directly caused by a public call on resources, and compensation had to cover workers’ verifiable lost income. The company still controlled its internal operations, but could not receive public compensation and pass the same loss in full to its workers.

The next load-priority decision included two new facts:

Who actually bore the release of a resource;

Whether the same group had borne it repeatedly in past tasks.

Gao Ze acquired no higher score of personal worth.

His appeal did not mean industrial production would never stop again.

It merely allowed “overall regional benefit,” for the first time, to pass through company reports and reach a person who had worked six fewer hours.

In the past, each city protected itself by storing more, buying faster, and pushing risk onto neighboring areas.

Now, every party was still self-interested.

But each began to include its neighbors’ continued existence in its own long-term safety.

Because Nebula laid the results of repeated rounds before everyone:

Safety that made neighbors less safe would return through equipment, prices, supply chains, and population movements next time;

Investment that made the shared system more resilient would also become real capacity available when one was most vulnerable.

This was not replacing self-interest with altruism.

It was the boundary of “self” being forced to widen through real causal relationships.

A year later, the three areas canceled four duplicate construction projects.

The savings did not enter a unified allocation scheme.

Haijia City renewed power distribution in older residential areas;

Beiling upgraded energy-intensive equipment;

Qinghe added maintenance staff for distributed storage.

Each area addressed its own problems first.

Together, the region grew safer as a result.

There was no ceremony when the first shared reserves formally entered the pool.

Qiao Mu went to look once.

Entering the pool did not mean moving batteries into a larger warehouse.

The screen showed only a set of available capabilities, each bounded:

Who owned it;

When it was available;

How much had to remain locally;

Who had authority to call on it;

Who was responsible for its return;

Under what conditions it could be withdrawn.

The cities had not lost their own energy.

What they had lost was only the old method of making themselves safe by making their neighbors less safe.

Chapter 13 Survival Is Separated from Obedience for the First Time

Wen Mo had no job.

He was not looking for one.

He was thirty-seven, healthy, and fully educated. He had no relatives needing care, no unseen trauma, and no talent waiting to be discovered.

He simply thought most things were not worth doing.

Once Haijia City's basic survival guarantees covered him, he moved into a public housing unit of the minimum standard and received basic food, water, energy, and medical services.

The system repeatedly offered training, short-term tasks, and ways to join community collaboration.

He refused them all.

Refusal was simple.

No one came to his door to persuade him.

Spark reconfirmed only when service rules changed.

Wen Mo closed all other public connections.

At first, no one noticed him.

Many people in the city did not participate in public tasks.

Some were busy with family. Some needed rest. Some simply wanted quiet lives.

Civilization did not require everyone to keep proving they were useful.

Wen Mo became controversial because of an interview.

"Will you work in the future?" the reporter asked.

"No."

"Why?"

"I don't want to."

"Do you believe other people are obliged to support you?"

Wen Mo thought for a moment.

"If the system provides it, I'll use it."

"What if more and more people do this?"

"That's the system's problem."

The interview spread that day.

Many people were angry.

A construction worker commented:

I get up at six every day. Why should he have a home and food just like me?

A nurse said:

Basic security isn't there so people can dump all responsibility on others.

Others supported Wen Mo.

They believed human survival should not be determined by the labor market. Someone unwilling to work was still a person.

The argument quickly narrowed to two answers.

Punish him.

Or indulge him.

When Chen Qi visited Wen Mo, there was no task invitation.

Wen Mo's room was very tidy.

A bed, a table, a chair, an old terminal. Nothing on the windowsill.

"Here to persuade me?" Wen Mo asked.

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

"To check whether there are any basic services you haven't received."

"I have them all."

"Any problems with the housing?"

"The hot water takes a long time."

Chen Qi noted it down.

"Anything else?"

"No."

"Then I'll go."

Wen Mo was a little surprised.

"You won't ask why I don't work?"

"You've already answered."

"You think it's reasonable?"

"I think a lot of people will dislike it," Chen Qi said.

“And you?”

“I don’t like it either.”

Wen Mo smiled a little.

“But you’ll still fix my hot water?”

“You don’t get hot water because someone likes you.”

That sentence later entered a public hearing.

The hearing was not about Wen Mo personally.

After two years of basic security, the city had to answer a question goodwill had until then kept sidestepping:

If a person was capable of bearing responsibility but persistently refused, would civilization still guarantee their survival?

The finance department submitted projections.

The proportion of complete nonparticipants was currently low and would not threaten basic security.

But a system could not uphold principles only while the proportion was low.

If it rose, the strain on resources and labor would genuinely increase.

Contributors’ sense of unfairness was real too.

A food-supply worker said:

“My work puts food on his table. He does nothing, and I’m supposed to be taught not to mind?”

“You don’t have to stop minding,” Zhou Yi answered.

“Then what do we do?”

“Make the unfairness clear. But we cannot solve it with hunger.”

“Why?”

“Because once survival is made conditional on obedience, whoever defines usefulness gets to decide who should be able to survive.”

“What about responsibility?”

“Responsibility doesn’t disappear. We just cannot manufacture it by withdrawing people’s basic rights.”

The final rules separated three things.

First, basic survival and basic care.

Food, basic housing, basic energy, necessary medical care, and personal safety required no contribution as the price of admission.

Second, scarce resources and additional opportunities.

Larger housing, scarce training places, specialized equipment, competitive projects, resources for dreams, and personalized services requiring sustained effort from others had to be decided separately according to specific uses, actual needs, risks, professional conditions, waiting lists, fair access, responsibility, and the relevant rules.

Third, public obligations.

Legally required responsibilities remained. “Not wanting to contribute” could not excuse harming others, disregarding public safety, refusing statutory compensation, or failing to honor commitments already made voluntarily.

Wen Mo could choose not to work.

He could not damage public housing and refuse to pay for it.

He could decline community care work.

He could not occupy emergency resources merely for greater comfort.

He could close his public-task entry point.

He could not turn “I don’t participate” into a demand that everyone bear responsibility for his every wish.

These distinctions did not remove the anger.

The construction worker spoke again:

“He still gets the same food as me.”

“Yes,” Song Cheng said.

“Then where does my contribution show?”

“Your labor should be paid. The public results you help bring about should be recorded. Opportunities related to specific tasks should be decided by actual capability, current responsibility, and clear rules. More importantly, if you lose your job, become ill, or one day are no longer needed, you won’t lose the same food he gets.”

“I won’t be like him.”

“A system cannot protect only the self you are willing to become.”

The room was quiet for a while.

Wen Mo was not invited to the second hearing.

It discussed only those who provided basic services.

Representatives of food supply, public housing maintenance, healthcare, energy, and community care raised a harder question:

When technology already carried out much production and dispatch, some work still had to be done by people. Would guaranteeing everyone's survival leave responsibility resting permanently on the few willing to work?

A housing repair worker said:

"I agree no one should go hungry. But every day my Spark reminds me how many repairs are waiting. Wen Mo can dismiss a task. I can't."

"Why can't you?" Chen Qi asked.

"It's my job."

"A job has pay and labor limits. When repairs exceed those limits, we should add people, raise pay, or adjust the service. We shouldn't sustain it by relying on your inability to refuse."

"Where do the people come from?"

No one answered immediately.

Separating the right to survival from obedience did not automatically eliminate all work people were unwilling to undertake.

Society still had to provide necessary labor with sufficient pay, rest, rotation, technological alternatives, and genuine respect. It also had to allow additional opportunities to be linked to responsibility.

What it could not do was translate "if no one is willing, everyone will suffer" into "therefore everyone must exchange labor for survival."

Nebula then published the staffing gaps in basic services.

It did not publish who had refused.

Only which tasks relied persistently on a few people, which roles were underpaid, which work technology could replace, and which work required human judgment.

The city raised pay for nighttime repairs, shortened continuous duty, opened new professional training, and discontinued a set of services defined as "requiring immediate completion" only through years of habit.

Too few people still signed up.

Some repair waits grew longer.

For the first time, the public saw that preserving the survival floor also had a cost.

Civilization did not prove itself right by hiding the cost.

Basic security was not a reward for Wen Mo.

It protected everyone's boundary against having survival used to coerce them.

Today, the person people most despised was someone refusing responsibility.

Tomorrow, those declared to have "contributed too little" might be the unemployed, caregivers, people who had failed, creators not yet understood, or simply someone unable to go on for a while.

If a civilizational floor could be withdrawn from the least likable person, it was not a floor.

Wen Mo did not attend the hearing.

He submitted only one comment through Spark:

Do not publish my itemized consumption to prove that I "take only the basics."

The review committee agreed.

To address public doubts, the system could disclose the size of the nonparticipating group, its share of resources, and the system's costs.

It could not turn a specific person's eating, bathing, and medical care into a public spectacle.

Wen Mo's private domain did not shrink because he used public support.

A few months later, he applied for a professional-grade guitar.

The public resource center refused.

The reason was that the instrument was scarce. Priority currently went to open teaching, public performances, and individual creative projects already validated on a small scale.

The system offered him an ordinary instrument rental and a place in the queue.

Wen Mo appealed.

"Why can other people have one and I can't?"

"You can apply. You did not receive priority this time."

"Because I haven't contributed?"

"Because this resource must be allocated among several real uses. Your application currently shows no greater need or task relevance than the other uses."

"I just want it."

"Wanting can be a reason to apply. It cannot automatically become a responsibility others must bear."

Wen Mo did not accept an alternative instrument.

The appeal ended.

No one used this to prove he was greedy.

Society guaranteed his survival. It did not promise to fulfill every wish.

He could choose not to become a useful person.

He also had to bear the fact that many scarce opportunities would not come to him first.

A year later, the reporter found him again.

“Have you changed your mind during this time?”

“No.”

“Have you joined any public activities?”

“No.”

“Are you grateful to this system?”

Wen Mo looked into the camera.

“It isn’t charity. I don’t need to perform gratitude.”

Again, the sentence made many people uncomfortable.

On hearing it, Chen Qi said only:

“He’s half right.”

“Which half?”

“The right to survival isn’t charity.”

“And the other half?”

“People live in a shared world. You can choose not to be grateful. Refusing responsibility has consequences. They just cannot include starving to death.”

Wen Mo was not won over.

He did not suddenly become a volunteer at the end of the chapter.

His room remained tidy. His windowsill remained empty.

The city did not stop running because such a person existed.

The first hard test of the civilizational leap did not come with the person most willing to give.

It came when someone was neither noble nor likable, with no reason to deserve extra care.

His basic services still arrived.

The public connections he had closed remained closed.

His refusal was not interpreted as illness.

He was not won over.

Civilization had not failed because of it.

Chapter 14 The State Still Bears Ultimate Responsibility

That winter, successive cold waves struck the north, while storms closed the eastern ports for sixteen days.

Natural gas, grain, and rail capacity all came under strain at once.

Local adjustments could no longer solve it.

The state had to decide.

Nebula had operated among cities and regions for years. It could see inventories, demand, transport, weather, and vulnerable populations faster than before.

But seeing the whole country did not mean the country would automatically produce a conflict-free answer.

The densely populated east needed heating and basic grain supplies protected.

Railways in the central region had to reschedule energy, food, and industrial raw materials.

The Xiyuan region had some gas and grain reserves available for dispatch, but was also experiencing low temperatures.

The national joint dispatch plan required Xiyuan to increase outward supply over six weeks while reducing energy use in some industrial and controlled-environment agricultural operations.

The plan was approved by a national statutory institution.

Nebula made shared facts visible, supported forecasts, matched resources across domains, tracked execution, and returned consequences to the corresponding responsible actors.

AGI had not made the decision.

People had signed it.

Most of Xiyuan accepted the adjustment.

Baishigu did not.

It was a county-level community in a high-altitude river valley, with a small population. In winter, it relied on natural gas for residential heating, seed-potato storage, and several greenhouses.

The national plan held that Baishigu had coal-fired power and biomass alternatives and could bear an eighteen percent gas reduction.

The county government filed its first appeal three hours later.

The alternative capacity was not real.

The coal-fired unit was under maintenance.

Biomass reserves had been depleted by earlier wildfires.

Applying the standard reduction would affect both residential heating and seed-potato storage.

After verification, the system showed:

Coal-unit maintenance information confirmed;

Biomass reserve data twelve days out of date;

Baishigu could bear a smaller reduction than the national plan specified.

The national dispatch department revised it to eleven percent.

Baishigu still objected.

At a public video conference, county head Xu Jianchuan said:

“Eleven percent will still push nighttime temperatures in some older houses below safe levels.”

“If Baishigu makes no reduction, who bears the outward-supply shortfall?” asked Lin Jing, the national official in charge.

“We’re not refusing to bear a share.”

“What are you proposing, then?”

“Stop greenhouse production. Lower temperatures in public buildings. Leave residents’ basic heating untouched. Calculate seed-potato storage separately.”

Nebula calculated that this was feasible, but would send out less than the national requirement.

Two eastern cities would have to reduce commercial energy use further.

Lin Jing did not agree immediately.

“A national plan can’t consist of every locality protecting only what it least wants to lose.”

“Nor can calling it national mean assuming small places are better suited to losing,” Xu Jianchuan said.

The meeting reached no consensus.

The state ultimately decided to retain the eleven percent reduction, while requiring Baishigu to establish priority lists for old houses and seed-potato storage. Public funds would cover temporary insulation upgrades and alternative energy costs.

Xu Jianchuan signed acknowledgment of the decision.

Acknowledgment did not mean agreement.

Baishigu’s objection remained in the official record.

There were no serious problems in the first week.

In the second, temperatures fell again.

More than three hundred households in older houses needed temporary heating equipment.

Temperature control in the seed-potato stores remained stable.

In the third week, icy roads delayed deliveries of alternative fuel.

The temperature in one seed-potato store briefly fell below the safe range.

The loss was not yet known.

What Baishigu first made public was not the seed-potato store, but the nighttime temperature in a resident's home.

The resident was Ye Duan, seventy-eight. She lived with her husband, who had chronic lung disease, in an old house on the north side of the valley.

Temporary heating equipment had arrived.

But its power demand kept tripping the old wiring.

Community workers suggested moving them to a collective shelter.

Ye Duan refused.

"He can't be away from this bed at night."

Spark did not label the refusal noncooperation.

It returned the house's wiring condition, medical needs, and relocation risks to dispatch.

The national model had previously seen only:

Temporary equipment supplied;

Shelter access available for high-risk older residents;

Basic heating meeting standards overall.

All three were true.

Ye Duan's home was still cold.

The county used this record as evidence for its second appeal.

Some questioned using one family to overturn a national plan.

Xu Jianchuan answered:

"One family cannot decide for the whole country. Nor can the country dismiss something that has actually happened as an exception because it concerns only one family."

Ye Duan finally agreed to relocate during the day. At night, medical staff would accompany her husband in their home. The wiring was upgraded that evening.

This intervention solved her household's problem.

It did not solve why the rules had judged "equipment provided, access available" to mean "already safe."

Baishigu appealed a second time.

The national dispatch department considered the overall risk still controllable.

Nebula's model recommended no change either.

It was using countywide average temperatures, total equipment numbers, and data on subsidies already initiated.

By then, Liang Shen no longer managed Haijia City's day-to-day systems. He had been transferred to the national cross-domain coordination group.

Reviewing Baishigu's data, he found something familiar:

Right on average.

Heating across the county met standards overall.

But the oldest houses were invisible within the average.

Total seed-potato storage capacity was sufficient.

Yet the affected store was precisely the old one preserving local varieties. Its economic value was low, but replacement would take a long time.

This was different from Qinglong Village.

And the same as that first rainstorm.

Once the whole was aggregated, the margins could disappear again.

Liang Shen recommended pausing further reductions.

"Is there enough evidence?" Lin Jing asked.

"Not enough to prove the original decision wrong overall."

"Then why pause?"

"Enough to prove we don't know enough about the local consequences."

"What about the eastern shortfall?"

"The state must reallocate it. We can't first make Baishigu keep bearing the unknown."

Lin Jing was silent for a while.

"You know this means I have to restrict energy in more cities."

"I know."

"And if Baishigu turns out to have no serious losses, we'll be accused of overreacting."

“Yes.”

Lin Jing signed the pause.

The state did not hand responsibility to Baishigu, or make Nebula bear the public and fiscal consequences for it.

Two eastern cities temporarily reduced nighttime commercial lighting.

A central-region transport service for industrial raw materials was delayed.

The national reserve added another batch of emergency fuel.

Many people who had never visited Baishigu bore higher costs.

An independent review team arrived seven days later.

They did not inspect only data.

They entered old houses and measured walls;

Checked when alternative fuel had arrived;

Opened the seed-potato stores;

Compared county reports, the national model, and conditions on the ground.

Their findings had two parts.

The state’s initiation of cross-regional dispatch had been necessary.

Baishigu had to bear some responsibility for outward supply.

But the basis for the eleven percent reduction contained two errors:

Counting alternative capacity under maintenance as available resources;

Mistaking countywide average safety for safety at every critical node.

The final reduction was adjusted to seven percent.

Seed-potato storage was separately classified as an uninterruptible load.

Insulation upgrades for old houses changed from temporary relief to a long-term public project.

The state and locality would share responsibility for restoring damaged seed-potato stocks.

When the correction was announced, some feared it would weaken state authority.

Lin Jing did not describe it as “optimization in light of circumstances.”

He wrote:

The second stage of the original decision incorrectly assessed Baishigu’s alternative capacity, creating avoidable risks. The national dispatch department bears responsibility for the decision and its correction.

His name was below it.

Xu Jianchuan signed as well.

Baishigu also acknowledged:

Once national risk has arisen, a locality cannot refuse shared responsibility solely on grounds of its own difficulties. The revised seven percent reduction remains in force.

The state had not disappeared into Nebula.

On the contrary, only while the state continued to bear ultimate responsibility for law, public finances, infrastructure, security, social protection, and cross-regional risks could Nebula's capacity to act as a whole avoid becoming a web with no responsible subject.

Nor did final decision-making authority become power beyond questioning.

It had to explain the facts, preserve dissent, bear consequences, allow review, and formally correct errors once proved.

When the cold wave ended, heating in the east had remained uninterrupted.

Baishigu had lost two batches of seed potatoes.

Not every loss could be restored.

In spring, the old store reopened.

Workers carried out the surviving seed potatoes, box by box.

Xu Jianchuan received the paper archive copy of the correction notice.

He did not hang it on the wall.

He only paused for a while at the signature page.

The notice did not blame the old model for the error.

Those who had signed still signed their own names.

Chapter 15 The World Did Not First Become One Family

When the first risk notification went out, the world was in another round of technology negotiations.

Several major countries were deadlocked over advanced models, compute exports, and biosafety review.

Border restrictions increased.

Joint research declined.

Every side feared that facts it disclosed would give others a way to gain an advantage.

Then three widely separated cities discovered an unusual respiratory syndrome, one after another.

There were few cases.

The symptoms were not consistent.

The first city thought it related to the local environment.

The second suspected laboratory contamination.

The third did not disclose a source, reporting only that it had found similar molecular features.

There was no evidence that they belonged to the same risk.

Nor was there evidence that they were unrelated.

In the past, the world had often swung between two errors.

Either declare a shared crisis too early, triggering lockdowns, panic, and political accusations;

Or wait because of insufficient facts, sensitive questions of responsibility, and national competition, until the risk crossed more borders.

This time, the countries still did not trust one another.

Nor had states handed decisions on public health, borders, and biosafety to a global center.

The first thing activated was a minimum shared interface that had previously drawn little public attention.

It did not require sharing all case records.

It did not require opening core research capabilities.

It did not require surrendering original samples, complete genetic information, or national investigative authority.

It required only that, when anomalous signals met shared criteria, limited facts be submitted:

Risk characteristics;

What detection methods could confirm;

Which conclusions remained unknown;

Verifiable origins of samples and records;

The time window in which other regions might be affected;

And who within the country was responsible for the notification.

Each country's node operated the interface separately.

Nebula was not a single global person.

No machine could cross every country's legal and data boundaries to assemble an unauthorized complete dossier of the world.

The shared layer could see only the facts each party agreed to bring into the shared risk task.

The first notification came from a port city in the Southern Hemisphere.

The second came from an inland research center.

The third was eleven hours late.

The reason was not a technical failure.

The country responsible feared the anomalous features would expose its detection capability, and that notification would be interpreted as admitting it was the source of the risk.

He Lan had left frontline hospital work.

She took part in the first cross-border verification as Haijia City's public health liaison.

Before the meeting began, the same statement of boundaries appeared on every screen:

Participation in verification constitutes no determination of responsibility, requires no sharing of national capabilities beyond this task, and does not restrict any country's lawful independent measures.

Some found the sentence overly defensive.

"Without it, this meeting cannot begin," He Lan said.

The first round of verification found no common pathogen.

Sample characteristics were similar, but not identical.

Transmission chains could not be connected.

Before verification ended, an unfinished report was made public.

It linked the anomalies in all three places to a research facility in one country.

The news spread rapidly.

The country denied it and suspended submissions to the next round, saying that the shared-risk mechanism was being used for political attribution.

Other countries demanded it open facility records to clear itself.

If the shared interface adjudicated origins, national conflict would tear it apart before it could truly see the risk.

The minimum rules therefore required two things to be kept separate:

Risk coordination answered “what is happening, who may be affected, and what must be done now”;

Attribution of responsibility answered “where it began, who violated what, and what consequences they should bear.”

The two could share verified facts.

They could neither wait for nor substitute for one another.

Countries could still investigate and pursue accountability independently.

Shared risk notifications could not be interrupted by attribution disputes.

The report was later found to have used an incorrect timestamp.

The publisher bore responsibility.

The country resumed submissions, but shared less information than before.

Nebula did not treat that as irrational.

Damaged trust was a real consequence.

The shared layer had to keep working with fewer facts.

AGI offered three explanations:

One risk varying across different environments;

Several similar but independent sources;

False similarity produced by detection methods.

Their probabilities were close.

It did not select whichever looked most like an answer.

The shared interface marked the status:

A common event cannot yet be confirmed, but consequences may interlock.

Some countries immediately intensified border screening.

Others refused, considering the evidence insufficient.

The minimum shared interface had no power to command.

It only ensured that each party knew the grounds on which others acted, and that new facts produced by those actions could return.

Haijia City's first suspected patient was named Su Zhan.

She was a cross-border freight engineer, recently returned from two ports.

Spark prompted her to make itinerary, contact, and health information available.

Su Zhan did not open everything at once.

She first shared the flight segments and work contacts relevant to the risk window, withholding private meetings.

The investigators considered that insufficient.

"There's a six-hour gap one evening."

"Private travel."

"It may involve transmission."

"Tell me why first."

He Lan showed her:

If those six hours could not be confirmed, the public health team would have to widen the contact investigation. More uninvolved people would be notified.

Su Zhan was silent for a while.

"I went to see my daughter that evening."

"Where is she?"

"In another country."

"We need minimal contact information."

"She doesn't want her other guardian to know."

A cross-border family relationship had entered the risk investigation.

The system could not assume that every private boundary ceased to apply because the public goal was important.

Su Zhan ultimately authorized Spark to submit only the following to the two countries' public health nodes:

One minor;

Duration of contact;

The physical setting;

Access needed for testing.

Names and family relationships did not enter the shared layer.

The other country lawfully contacted those responsible for the child's guardianship.

The test was negative.

After the task ended, this cross-border family information was deleted from the shared event.

He Lan's team knew there had been a contact who needed to be checked.

They did not know who it was, and had no right to keep knowing.

The real breakthrough came on the fourth day.

A national laboratory unwilling to provide original samples agreed to have a neutral verification node verify its test results.

The node did not take samples away.

It did not copy the full method.

It confirmed only three things:

The anomalous features were real;

They were sufficiently connected to the risks in the other two places;

Current evidence remained insufficient to identify the original source.

For the first time, the world had a shared fact.

Not a shared narrative.

Nor a shared enemy.

Only a risk no party could any longer define alone.

The minimum shared interface then initiated four forms of coordination.

Mutual recognition of pathogen-screening standards;

Neutral verification of risk facts;

Necessary interoperability maintained among hospitals and transport infrastructure;

Cross-border notifications continuing despite political disputes.

Countries still adopted different policies.

Some restricted movement.

Some only increased testing.

Some prioritized protection of their own critical industries.

Some disclosed more information.

Competition did not stop.

Neither did accusations.

One country refused to share core sequencing capabilities. Another refused to open itself to cross-border investigation. A third provided only de-identified case trends.

Shared governance did not first make the world one family.

It merely ensured that, even unwilling to become one family, parties could no longer pretend they were unrelated within the same risk.

The risk was eventually contained early.

It was later confirmed to be a limited event caused by several related sources of exposure, rather than a new pathogen that had already spread widely.

Many therefore thought the initial alarm excessive.

The independent review preserved a different judgment.

Waiting for complete evidence might have had no serious consequences.

It might also have missed the only low-cost window.

Nebula did not treat “no disaster developed” as proof that it must have been right.

It recorded travel delays, business losses, family strain, and people wrongly notified as a result of overreaction.

Each country bore the consequences of its own decisions.

The shared interface was responsible only for shared facts, continuity of notification, and mutual effects.

On the sixth day after the risk was lifted, the minimum shared interface made a different kind of mistake.

Port Ravi, a port city in the Southern Hemisphere, had a care home maintained jointly by migrant families. During the outbreak, it had made available forty beds, two cold rooms, and a care team fluent in several languages. After the last person in isolation left, Nebula used personnel status, remaining supplies, and past disaster records to predict that the home would reopen its public resources within forty-eight hours.

At the level of staff and equipment, the prediction was correct. The beds had been disinfected, the cold rooms were usable, and the caregivers were physically fit for their shifts. The shared interface therefore arranged for a shipment of medicines requiring cold storage to arrive on the third day.

The care home did not confirm.

The task layer marked the status “opening delayed” and repeatedly asked why. Fearing the medicines would be left without storage, the cross-border node had to reroute them at short notice. Three clinics received their medicines fourteen hours later than planned. No one died as a result, but the existing supply arrangements genuinely failed.

The person responsible for the keys was called Amani. She was not a community leader, only someone who had cared for Nafu for eleven years. Nafu had died the night before the risk was lifted, from a cause unrelated to the unusual syndrome.

In Amani’s tradition, after someone deeply connected to shared life died, caregivers remained with the body through four sunrises. Family, caregivers, and those who shared the

building then sat together to reconfirm how the deceased's belongings, responsibilities, and spaces would return to life. Before the ritual ended, Amani could release emergency life-saving resources, but had no authority to commit the care home alone to another long-term task.

Nebula saw that she was physically well, available for shifts, and had empty cold rooms.

It did not see “who did not yet have authority to make the next commitment.”

Reviewers first suggested adding this mourning tradition to a cross-civilizational behavior model, so future resumption times could be predicted accurately. Amani refused.

“You can remember that we did not confirm,” she said. “Do not decide for us when mourning should end.”

“What if the resources are needed more urgently next time?” someone asked.

“Emergency resources can be called upon under our published rules. A new long-term commitment must wait for joint confirmation. Those are different things.”

The revised interface created no value function for Port Ravi's tradition, nor did it make four sunrises a uniform deadline all members had to obey.

The community needed to tell external tasks only three facts: who currently had authority to confirm; which resources were authorized for emergencies; and the latest time by which the next internal decision would return. Nebula was responsible for medicines across communities, safety, rerouting costs, and tracing responsibility. It did not interpret whether the ritual was valid or predict whether a person had finished mourning.

The error was retained as a “misjudgment of procedural sovereignty.”

The model correctly predicted when people and things could act.

But it mistook the ability to act for the authority to act.

When it was over, He Lan returned to Haijia City.

There were still border checks at the airport.

Her equipment had to pass her own country's security review again.

An overseas colleague sent a message:

“The next round of technology negotiations failed too.”

He Lan replied:

“At least this time the risk has a name.”

Boundaries had not disappeared.

States had not disappeared.

Nor had differences, competition, or suspicion.

For the first time, a risk had not lost its name between borders.

Chapter 16 AGI Enters the Operation of Civilization, but Still Cannot Rule It

By then, most people in Haijia City rarely discussed AGI. It had become deeply involved in civilization's daily operation, without becoming its master.

It managed energy forecasts, production plans, city maintenance, medical coordination, and disaster response.

People usually did not know why the morning trains were not congested, why a hospital had brought in a piece of equipment ahead of time, or why an aging pipe had been replaced before it burst.

Nor did they need to.

Nebula was beginning to recede behind life.

Cheng Yan had once looked forward to this day.

When it actually came, he became more vigilant than before.

The more reliable a system is, the easier it becomes to mistake “we do not need to judge this again” for “we can let it judge this forever.”

The controversy arose over a disease-vector control plan.

For several years running, insect-borne diseases had appeared in many coastal areas.

Conventional pest control, environmental management, and vaccination required sustained investment, yet infections remained numerous.

AGI proposed a new approach:

Release rigorously designed, self-propagating biological carriers that would cause particular vector populations to lose their ability to transmit disease over successive generations.

Repeated spraying would not be necessary.

The approach was expected to reduce the relevant diseases to extremely low levels within a few years.

Ecological models, experimental data, and validation in enclosed settings at several sites all showed clear advantages.

The cost was only a fraction of that of the conventional long-term approach.

Most importantly, it could reduce real deaths.

The plan was better by an almost overwhelming margin.

The one problem that could not be eliminated was irreversibility.

Once introduced into an open environment, the self-propagating process might cross administrative boundaries.

Even with limits in place, no one could guarantee that the models encompassed every ecological change over the coming decades.

AGI classified the risk as low-probability, high-consequence.

The technical team believed a small-scale trial in an open environment could proceed.

The public health department supported it.

Ecologists were divided.

The communities most severely affected by the diseases demanded:

“People get sick every year. Why let certain harm continue just to prevent a risk that may never arise?”

Opponents asked:

“Does this generation have the right to pass on an irrevocable change to life to the future?”

This was not a conflict between efficiency and ignorance.

Every side was protecting life.

AGI completed its most comprehensive simulations to date.

The expected benefits of a trial in an open environment far exceeded those of continuing conventional prevention and control.

Among all the options it could calculate, it recommended proceeding.

Cheng Yan put a question to the system:

“If we discover a mistake in the future, can we return to how things were before the release?”

The answer:

That cannot be guaranteed.

“If we cannot go back, who has the right to decide?”

The system answered:

Under the current civilizational baseline, this system has no final decision-making authority.

The highest level of deliberation was initiated at the national level.

The technical team submitted its evidence.

The public health department submitted the burden of disease.

The ecology team submitted the uncertainties.

Affected communities were given the right to speak directly.

Gu Lai was among the first to speak.

Her younger brother had died of one of the diseases two years earlier.

Before deliberations began, she authorized the costs of his final hospitalization, his pain records, and the time the family had spent caring for him to be included in the assessment of the decision's consequences.

She was not seeking sympathy.

She demanded that everyone discussing an irreversible future first recognize that continuing to wait was equally irreversible.

"Your caution won't bring my brother back."

An ecologist answered:

"If an open release has consequences across generations, no one will be able to come back and revoke it for the people of the future, either."

Gu Lai asked, "So who matters more?"

"It isn't about who matters more."

"Then why must the people alive today always wait first?"

There was no answer in that room that could comfort her.

The record of deliberations placed two kinds of irreversibility side by side:

The harm from disease that had occurred and continued to occur;

The ecological and intergenerational harm an open release might cause.

The system could not simply describe the former as quantifiable losses and the latter as ethical concerns. Nor could it frame the future alone as a great responsibility while reducing today's deaths to a necessary cost.

Future generations could not attend.

Institutions could only acknowledge, through reviews of irreversibility, long-term responsibility, and higher thresholds for decisions, that these people could not be fully represented by a present-day majority.

He Lan supported proceeding.

She had seen too much avoidable illness and pain.

"We cannot make people who are certainly being harmed today wait indefinitely because the future might suffer harm."

Song Cheng opposed an open release.

"Nor can we turn the future into a participant with no right to withdraw just because today's calculations are more complete."

He Lan asked, "Then how long must we wait?"

“Until we can reverse it, or until the risk is so great that not acting is equally irreversible.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“No. Because there is no clean answer here.”

AGI did not take part in the debate over values.

It kept updating the facts:

Cases of disease;

The effects of conventional prevention and control;

Possible pathways of an open release;

Unknowns within the ecological network;

The consequences of different periods of delay.

Whenever someone cited it to prove they were right, it also displayed what remained unknown.

The final decision was to reject an open release at this stage.

It was not a permanent ban.

Research in enclosed settings would continue, with priority given to alternative technologies that could be retrieved or stopped locally. Investment in conventional prevention and control, vaccines, and community environmental management would continue. The matter would be reconsidered in two years.

The decision had clear costs.

Over the next two years, people continued to become infected.

Public finances continued to bear the high cost of prevention and control.

Some families felt they had been sacrificed for a distant future.

The state did not end the matter by recording the cost as “the necessary cost of caution.”

Every severe case that might have been prevented had the plan not been delayed was included in the tracking of the decision’s consequences.

Those who opposed an open release could not take on only the moral credit for being right.

They also had to share the practical responsibility for continued research, conventional prevention and control, and compensation for affected communities.

In the third year, a new approach that could be stopped locally passed validation in an enclosed environment.

It was still imperfect.

It was less efficient than the original plan.

It cost more.

Yet for the first time, it preserved the possibility of scaling back if an error emerged.

Deliberations began again.

This time, AGI recommended the new plan.

Humans approved it.

Not because humans had finally become smarter than machines.

Nor because machines had finally learned to obey.

But because management capability and civilizational sovereignty had been clearly separated.

AGI could perceive, predict, compare, coordinate, and execute faster than any person.

The stronger its capabilities, the more society should let it manage everyday matters that could be verified and rolled back, with clear responsibility.

But where personhood, war, open ecosystems, irreversible technologies, future generations, and fundamental values are concerned, superior capability cannot automatically become final decision-making authority.

Humans retaining the final decision does not mean humans are inherently right.

It means that when an error occurs, they cannot say:

The system required it.

The model recommended it.

Technology could not be stopped.

Those who make the decision must bear the consequences that return from the future.

After the plan was approved, Cheng Yan looked at the first version of the recommendation.

It was still the more efficient one.

Rejection had not made it wrong.

Humanity had simply refused to let efficiency become the only truth that could enter reality.

In those years, humanity rejected a more efficient future.

And so continued to take responsibility for the future.

Chapter 17 No One Announced That the Leap Was Complete

Twenty-nine years later, Haijia City faced another compound crisis.

It was again four in the morning.

Torrential rain advanced from the sea. The tide rose above the old record.

A regional energy node failed.

Two rail lines stopped running.

Hospital admissions rose.

The port's cold chain faced a power outage.

Water began entering low-lying streets in the Old Port District.

The scale was similar to that night Liang Shen had lived through when he was young.

No one waited for him to draw the first line.

The gray telephone Gu Qiao had left behind was still in the city archives.

It was no longer connected to the duty line.

The new channels for human takeover had taken other forms: independent communications, on-site lists, critical instructions on paper, and people responsible who could be reached directly without going through the system.

They were tested in drills every year.

They had never been abolished because Nebula was stable.

Civilization had not turned an old tool that once saved it into a sacred relic. Nor had it forgotten why the tool existed.

The hospital's Nebula node began sensing first.

It submitted only requirements for beds, equipment, electricity, and transfers, not aspects of patients' lives unrelated to the task.

At the same time, the energy node marked available capacity, the extent of the failure, and the still-uncertain recovery time.

The drainage system submitted the condition of roads and pumping stations.

The transport system did not begin by publishing a single citywide route. Instead, it opened passage windows that it could accommodate for different tasks.

Business resources remained the property of the businesses.

Qiao Mu's cold-chain company was now run by a new team. Through Spark, the staff on duty confirmed that two backup storage areas and twelve transport vehicles would be made available. Insurance, provision for losses, and responsibility took effect at the same time.

The national meteorological and marine departments provided information on cross-regional risks.

The local government retained emergency decision-making authority.

AGI brought facts together, simulated consequences, and generated plans.

No center acted for every actor.

Nor did any actor concern itself only with delivering its own right answer.

At 4:07, the energy system proposed the first round of load adjustments.

At the same time, the system showed:

If the hospital and drainage were protected, the port's cold-chain goods would have to be moved within fourteen minutes;

If the port's cold chain was maintained, two pumping stations in the Old Port District would have to reduce output;

If shared regional reserves were used, Beiling would have to postpone the resumption of an industrial operation.

Beiling confirmed that the reserves could be released.

The condition was that the cold-wave reserve threshold remain untouched.

Haijia City confirmed the use and accepted responsibility for replenishment.

Part of the port's cold-chain goods still had to be moved.

The staff member on duty at Qiao Mu's company did not ask whether they ought to sacrifice themselves for the whole city.

He checked only:

The scope of use;

Staff safety;

Vehicle routes;

Responsibility for losses;

Withdrawal when the task ended.

At 4:12, a resident of the Old Port District refused access to information about conditions inside their home.

The system sent no further reminders.

A basic welfare-visit task was still created.

Fang Shu had long since retired. The community coordinator was another young man.

He knocked first.

No one answered.

A neighbor said the resident had gone to their daughter's home the night before.

Under the already-published privacy rules, the coordination node changed the status from "risk unknown" to "awaiting confirmation by the person or through a legally recognized relationship." The neighbor's words did not become authorization to continue reading private information.

At 4:15, a temporary transport route was set to pass through the street that had once been unable to sleep all night.

The system showed that its historical burden had been too frequent.

The Old Port District was not automatically the low-cost option.

The new route would take eleven minutes longer and pass through a shopping street.

Shopkeepers there objected:

Underground storerooms were receiving deliveries. Heavy vehicles could cause congestion.

On-site data came in.

The plan paused for ninety seconds.

The transport, community, and cold-chain teams jointly confirmed another route.

It was farther.

It was less efficient overall.

But it did not once again place the same cost on those most accustomed to bearing it.

At 4:23, a hospital requested a higher level of power supply.

On the basis of the records connected at that point, AGI assessed the present need as insufficient.

He Lan had retired.

The doctor on duty submitted a fact the model did not include:

Two patients had just gone into emergency surgery. The risks of transfer were higher than the system's records showed.

The verifiable objection paused the allocation process.

Specialists confirmed it.

The level of power supply was raised.

The corresponding cost returned to the cold-chain relocation task.

No change happened silently.

At 4:40, the first round of coordination was complete.

At 5:13, the tide continued to rise.

The local government activated a higher level of emergency authorization.

Its scope, duration, responsible persons, and termination conditions were made public at the same time.

AGI received greater automatic coordination capabilities.

It still could not use unauthorized private domains, alter the statutory responsibilities of national and local authorities, offset particular losses with overall benefits, or retain temporary powers after the task ended.

A community evacuation-shelter team rejected the system's recommendation.

The recommended location was closer, but lacked sanitary facilities suitable for older people unable to care for themselves.

The community chose a more distant location on its own.

Once the community confirmed the new location, Nebula rearranged the vehicles according to that decision.

It did not label the community's decision an inefficient interference.

At six, the rain reached its peak.

A pumping station briefly stopped operating.

Three streets in the Old Port District still flooded.

A breakfast shop lost ingredients.

Two transport workers suffered minor injuries.

A hospital delayed non-emergency treatment.

The crisis was not recorded as a miracle without harm.

It simply did not again turn into a situation in which each system was right on its own while the whole city lost control together.

At nine in the morning, the tide fell.

The task entered verification and repair.

The consequences for affected shopkeepers, residents, workers, hospitals, and businesses came back separately.

Overall success did not close any particular appeal.

Contribution records did not cancel out harm.

Errors did not erase contributions that had occurred.

At noon, temporary permissions began to be withdrawn.

The citywide emergency authorization ended.

Business resources were returned.

Replenishment of the intercity reserves began.

Temporary personal location and health information was deleted item by item, task by task.

The task community formed by hospital, transport, community, business, and regional nodes dissolved.

Outstanding compensation, equipment repairs, and dispute reviews remained active.

The other connections went dark.

There was no celebration of the achievement.

Nor was there an announcement that the civilizational leap was complete.

Liang Shen was seventy-one that year.

He no longer took part in coordination. He only went to look around the Old Port District that afternoon.

The breakfast shop had a new owner.

The former owner sat at the door, his hair entirely white.

“Back again?” the old man asked.

“Just came to have a look.”

“They didn’t come down our street this time.”

“Almost did.”

“Does the system hold grudges?”

“It remembers consequences.”

The old man smiled.

“Soy milk?”

“Yes.”

People were clearing standing water from the street.

A child stepped into a puddle. His mother pulled him out, and he stepped back in when she turned away.

On the other side of the city, school had resumed.

The hospital continued treating patients.

The factory in Beiling waited for the shared reserves to be replenished.

Someone was late for a date. Someone continued an appeal over emergency noise. Someone was proud that the task had been completed. Someone else simply found the rain annoying.

The next day, people worked, went to school, cooked, and argued as usual.

Spark was no longer discussed as a technological novelty.

It appeared only when needed, allowing care to reach someone, abilities to find tasks, refusal to be heard accurately, and responsibility to return to real people. Then it receded behind life again.

Many years later, history books gave that period various names.

The period of technological integration.

The early period of collaborative civilization.

The formative period of the new civilization.

The civilizational leap.

The people living through it saw no finish line stretched across the city.

They heard no bells.

Nor did they wake one day to find themselves in an ideal world.

They remembered only that, in that year, a disaster of the same scale had come again.

People were still afraid, still protected themselves, and still argued about who should bear more.

Yet the disaster did not push everyone back into competing against one another as it once had.

Part IV A New Civilization Becomes Stable: When Its Operation Recedes Behind Life

Stability in a new civilization does not mean Nebula occupying life.

Nebula is reliable enough to recede behind life at last. Institutions, AGI, and public structures no longer need to prove themselves through constant intervention. Civilization is at its most mature not when systems know everything, but when most people can live safely, freely, and richly without having to remain continually aware of their existence.

Chapter 18 A City in a Silent State

Before that Sunday, Gu Xingzhou went to see Lin Zhao.

They had not eaten alone together for many years. Lin Zhao no longer had to worry about rent, medical care, or care for his parents. Nor did Spark continuously read his life on behalf of any employer anymore. He still reviewed supply-chain anomalies a few times each month, but it took too little time to be called an occupation.

Gu Xingzhou asked, “Did you find something you wanted to do in the end?”

“No.”

“Photography, teaching, travel?”

“Tried them all,” Lin Zhao said. “People always want me to find a second nineteen years, to prove that the end of the first nineteen meant something.”

He still avoided gatherings of former colleagues. When he saw people who had once worked under him join new professional nodes, he felt happy for them, and envious too. He no longer worried that the changing times would starve him, but still did not know whether they had left him behind.

Halfway through the meal, Lin Zhao’s older sister called. Their father had just had cataract surgery. Once home, he had insisted on managing his own medication, then mixed up two kinds of eyedrops. His sister had to leave town unexpectedly and asked whether he could stay with their father for three days.

Lin Zhao listened with a frown. First he asked about the follow-up appointment, then checked the lighting and stairs at home. He did not register this as a public task or ask the system to generate a meaning for his care.

After hanging up, he packed the rest of his meal into a container.

Gu Xingzhou said, “You’re leaving now?”

“He’ll use the wrong drops on his own.”

“Does this count as finding a direction?”

Lin Zhao looked at him.

“It only means my dad needs me today.”

He left quickly. This was not a new occupation or a public contribution. It did not make up for the loss of nineteen years. It was simply that a particular person, on a particular afternoon, could not be replaced by someone else.

Haijia City had not had a Sunday like this in a long time.

No typhoon.

No extreme heat.

No energy shortfall, intercity resource use, or public health alert.

At four in the morning, the city was still awake.

Duty lights shone in the hospital. Cargo ships entered and left the port. The Old Port District’s pumping stations ran at minimum load. Rail maintenance workers were replacing a worn section of overhead contact wire.

Nebula saw these things.

It did not wake more people because of them.

At seven in the morning, Lin Yao’s Spark lit up once.

It was not a reminder.

It was simply the time she had set the night before for the curtains to open.

Light entered the room through the gap. She rolled over and pulled the covers over her head.

Spark did not tell her she had slept enough. It did not suggest a run, or play music “better suited to today” based on changes in her mood over the past six weeks.

Ten minutes later, the curtains remained where they were.

Lin Yao slept for another two hours.

She was a member of the city’s public operations review team.

For more than a decade, her job had been to find consequences the system had not seen: who repeatedly lost out in an allocation, how a service exceeded its authorization, why a rule that was right overall kept harming one particular person.

When work was busiest, she looked at the risk map first thing every morning.

That day, the risk map was gray.

It was not disconnected.

Gray meant that no shared task was asking her to join.

She stared for a few seconds. It felt unfamiliar.

“Confirm the connection is working,” she said.

Spark answered, “The connection is working. No intervention is currently needed.”

“Is there anything that needs to be dealt with in advance?”

“There is routine maintenance. The designated responsible parties are carrying it out.”

“Are there any public tasks I can take part in?”

“No tasks require actively expanding participation.”

Lin Yao sat on the edge of the bed, suddenly unsure what to do.

After the city learned to coordinate through crises, many people had feared that public life would become ever more closely woven.

Every person could be connected.

Every ability could be matched.

Every need could be discovered.

Would civilization then treat every idle moment as a resource not yet allocated, and every silence as a need not yet expressed?

In the first few years, some did exactly that.

Community systems sent out nearby care tasks on weekends;

City cultural nodes recommended activities based on interests;

Public health programs reminded people living alone to go out and see others;

Resource platforms repeatedly showed potential uses to people with idle equipment.

Every suggestion was well meant.

Together, though, they made a person feel as if they were always standing before civilization, waiting to answer:

How do you intend to be a better person today?

This silent state took shape during that period.

Without a shared risk, a request from the person, or an already-authorized task, the system would not enter on its own initiative.

It maintained infrastructure, statutory services, and emergency response.

It also maintained its distance.

After washing and getting ready, Lin Yao went out.

The breakfast shop downstairs was closed.

The owner had taped a sheet of paper to the door:

I feel like going to see the sea today.

No service platform reminded him that demand remained nearby, and his business rating was not lowered for taking an unscheduled rest. Regular customers glanced at the door and went their separate ways.

Some complained.

Some smiled.

A line formed at another shop on the corner.

Liang Shen sat at the back of the line.

At seventy-one, he had lived through the second four-in-the-morning downpour. A few years later, he left the public system altogether, remaining only an ordinary resident.

Lin Yao walked over.

“You didn’t book ahead either?”

“Why book anything on a Sunday?”

“It’ll be a long wait.”

“Then we’ll wait.”

In two seconds, Spark could have found them seats, ordered in advance, and calculated a route that required no waiting in line.

Neither of them opened it.

The line moved slowly forward.

A couple ahead of them spent a long time arguing over whether to buy sweet or savory porridge.

A child behind them squatted on the ground, watching ants.

Liang Shen asked, “Are you on duty today?”

“No.”

“Then why do you keep looking at your terminal?”

Lin Yao put it facedown on the table.

“I’m afraid something will happen to the city behind my back.”

“Things happened to the city behind your back before, too.”

“That’s why I’m afraid.”

Liang Shen smiled.

“Those who learn to see the whole must eventually learn not to stare at it all the time.”

At ten in the morning, Haijia City's public node received a temporary initiative.

It came from an organization that had long taken part in community service.

They had found that participation in public tasks had fallen that month, unused capacity had increased compared with the same period the year before, and many open spaces were being used less.

The initiative proposed a "Shared Life Day":

Show residents people nearby who needed help, activities they could take part in, things they could share, and public projects they could join.

Participation would not be compulsory.

It could be switched off.

The organizers believed it could prevent the city from retreating into mutual estrangement once material stability had been achieved.

The proposal quickly gained considerable support.

Others objected.

"Why must an ordinary Sunday be turned into Shared Life Day?"

"It only provides a way in."

"A way in that keeps appearing before your eyes is pressure in itself."

"Without reminders, truly lonely people may never speak up."

"With constant reminders, people who want to be alone must forever explain that they aren't lonely."

This was not an argument between indifference and care.

Each side was protecting a part of life.

He Lan, the community doctor, rarely took part in city deliberations anymore.

That day, she submitted a brief comment:

"People whose needs must be discovered cannot be expected to rely only on asking for help. People who want to be left undisturbed must not lose their silence as a result. The two must be addressed under different triggering conditions. They cannot be resolved by the same well-meaning approach."

After submitting it, He Lan turned her terminal facedown on the dining table. Her fried egg had cooled a little. Outside the window, people passed through the neighborhood as usual. No new questions followed from the deliberation, and no system kept seeking "further professional input" because she was a doctor.

She finished her breakfast. Not once was she called away.

Nebula did not add up the support and opposition.

First, it examined the facts the initiative sought to address.

Participation in tasks had indeed fallen.

But there were no gaps in essential care, emergency assistance, or basic public services.

Open spaces were being used less partly because several weeks of intensive activity had left residents resting.

So-called unused capacity meant only that people could do certain things.

It did not mean those abilities had entered the public domain, or that the city therefore had grounds to call on them.

Among those at risk from living alone, a few genuinely needed more proactive care.

They had already entered a separate service pathway through their own prior authorization, statutory care responsibilities, or reviewed risk conditions.

Finding those few people could not justify making the whole city continuously expose its life.

In the end, the public node did not launch a citywide notification campaign.

It opened only a shared-life page that anyone could visit on their own initiative, and allowed communities to leave printed access information in public places.

No red notification dots.

No countdowns.

No “You might like this.”

The organizers were disappointed.

“Far fewer people will take part this way.”

The person conducting the deliberation answered, “Yes.”

“A lot of goodwill will never become action.”

“That too.”

“Then why call this progress for civilization?”

“Because civilization does not turn every possible act of goodwill into a task it can call upon.”

That afternoon, Lin Yao went to the sea.

The breakfast-shop owner was there too.

He was not looking at the sea.

He was arguing with his partner.

They stood beside the embankment, their voices growing louder.

Spark did not judge who was more agitated, retrieve patterns from past arguments, or suggest a less confrontational way of speaking.

Unless one of them asked, or a real risk arose, it did not enter.

Lin Yao walked past them.

Farther away, an old man sat alone on a bench.

She recognized him.

So did the city system.

He was not marked as someone in need of company.

His daughter lived in another city. Spark maintained necessary contact under authorization from both of them. No message today did not mean something was wrong with their relationship.

Lin Yao wanted to go over and say something.

She took two steps, then stopped.

She could not turn having learned to see others into a requirement that others be seen by her.

But the old man looked up first.

“Young lady, could you take a photograph for me?”

“Of course.”

He handed her a very old camera.

Not a terminal.

No automatic retouching.

Lin Yao took three photographs. The first was crooked. A seabird blocked the second. In the third, the old man’s eyes were closed.

“Another one?” she asked.

“No, that one will do.”

“Your eyes are closed.”

“I know.”

He put away the camera and went on sitting there.

That evening, the city’s basic operations report was completed automatically.

Energy supply was stable.

The hospitals were operating normally.

Public transport had had two delays.

Routine maintenance had discovered a leak in a pipe network before it spread.

A breakfast shop had closed for the day.

More than a hundred people had visited the shared-life page on their own initiative, far fewer than the organizers had expected.

There had been no major event.

When Lin Yao came home, her terminal was still gray.

For the first time, she did not check the connection.

Outside the window, someone practiced a piece of music, repeatedly getting the same passage wrong.

The child upstairs ran about.

A cargo ship sounded its horn in the distance.

Nothing happened that day.

Later, someone said this was precisely what civilization had once found hardest to provide.

Chapter 19 Resources No Longer Flow Only to Those Best at Seeking Them

The first national resource deliberation of the stable period lasted forty-seven days.

Not because there were fewer resources than before.

But because, at last, they could no longer be allocated in just one way.

At the center of the dispute was a batch of high-precision medical photonic components.

An accident on the production line had cut that year's supply by nearly half.

Three already-approved plans needed them at the same time.

Donglu Medical Center was preparing to build a deep-tissue imaging platform.

Its research team had worked for nine years and believed the equipment might open a path to early detection of a difficult-to-treat disease.

Twenty-seven remote clinics in Xiyuan needed to update their remote diagnostic equipment.

The existing equipment frequently failed. Many residents had to travel hundreds of kilometers for a single examination.

Haijia City and six other cities planned to use the components for basic community screening terminals.

The value of each terminal was modest, but they would reach the largest population and reduce ordinary people's waiting and travel.

Every plan could save lives.

Every plan could use numbers to prove that it mattered more.

The Donglu team submitted the probability of a breakthrough, the burden of disease, and the long-term research value.

Xiyuan submitted numbers of delayed diagnoses, travel risks, and gaps in primary care.

The city alliance submitted population coverage, unit costs, and congestion in existing services.

Ranked by expected benefit, basic urban screening was optimal.

Ranked by the most urgent inequality, Xiyuan's clinics came first.

Ranked by the potential to add something that could change the future, Donglu's research platform was irreplaceable.

Nebula could lay out the three sets of results very clearly.

It could not decide for people which kind of "most important" had the right to swallow the other two.

Ye Zhinan, the Donglu project leader, was forty-six.

She rarely spoke about herself in public.

This time, she was direct:

“The research window will not stay open forever. The team, materials, and clinical samples are all in place now. If we wait two more years, nine years of accumulated work may fall apart.”

Saren, a doctor from a Xiyuan clinic, asked:

“If we don’t wait, which clinics must go on using equipment that is already inaccurate?”

Ye Zhinan said, “The research results will serve Xiyuan in the future too.”

“What year is the future?”

“I can’t guarantee that.”

“Then how are people traveling four hundred kilometers today supposed to bear the cost of that future?”

Ye Zhinan did not answer.

The city alliance’s representatives were no more at ease.

Their project would benefit the most people, yet was the easiest to criticize for continuing to direct resources toward densely populated areas.

“Why must ordinary improvements always give way to something more urgent or more momentous?” a representative asked. “Tens of millions of people would wait half an hour less or make one fewer trip each time. Must they always come last because the benefit to each individual isn’t large enough?”

At first, the deliberation tried to establish a combined weighting.

Urgency, population coverage, long-term value, regional differences, possible substitutes, and readiness for implementation all entered the calculation.

The result looked precise.

It also quickly became meaningless.

A small change in the weights could reverse the ranking completely.

More seriously, the three resource claims did not belong to the same level in the first place.

Basic diagnostic capacity in remote areas concerned whether a basic right could actually reach people.

Community screening in cities was an improvement in the quality of ordinary public services.

Donglu’s platform used highly scarce specialist resources. It carried a risk of failure, but might also open up a new civilizational capability.

Forcing them into one total score meant assuming in advance that all the needs of life, ordinary happiness, and future exploration could offset one another on the same scale.

The National Resource Deliberation Committee therefore suspended the ranking.

It drew boundaries first.

The minimum capabilities necessary for basic rights did not enter ordinary competition.

If a region could not obtain even essential diagnosis, its first need was not to prove that it offered the greatest returns among national projects. It was to establish why the medical baseline the state had already promised had not reached it.

The twenty-seven Xiyuan clinics were not all equally urgent.

Verification found that equipment at nine clinics had fallen below safety thresholds. Six had usable alternatives, and the rest could extend their equipment's life through repairs.

Replacement at the nine clinics was secured first.

Not because they had won a competition.

But because that portion of resources should never have been taken by projects better at presenting their claims or calculating returns.

The remaining components were still insufficient.

The city alliance was willing to scale down its plan, beginning in the most congested communities instead of deploying everywhere.

The Donglu team refused to scale down.

Without the critical number of components, the platform could not achieve the precision the research required.

This sharpened the argument.

Ye Zhinan's Spark brought the project's complete nine-year record into the deliberation:

The approaches that had failed;

The samples already exhausted;

The time team members had committed;

Which judgments came from professional experience;

Which remained only hopes.

The record did not prove on her behalf that the project should receive the resources.

It only kept nine years from being compressed into "the research might succeed."

Saren also submitted the facts of Xiyuan residents' journeys.

He did not open patients' full medical records.

He submitted only authorized, de-identified records of waiting times, risks of misdiagnosis, travel distances, and equipment failures.

One older woman did not want to be included in the statistics.

“Whether I go to the doctor is my own business,” she said.

Her absence remained an absence.

The system did not infer her possible needs from those of her peers and add her to the coverage figures.

On the twenty-ninth day of deliberation, a proposal gained majority support.

The nine clinics would complete their safety upgrades first.

The city screening plan would be reduced to one-third of its original scale.

Donglu’s platform would receive half its components to build an independently verifiable front-end system. The remainder would enter a conditional wait until production recovered.

Ye Zhinan objected.

“Half a platform cannot complete the research.”

“Which parts can it verify?”

“The imaging chain and some algorithms. It cannot enter the core clinical stage.”

“What if the front end fails?”

“The project should stop.”

“And if it succeeds?”

“We keep waiting for the remaining components.”

She was silent for a long time.

“The team may not last that long.”

That was not a technical parameter.

Nor could the resource system resolve it.

The final plan did not pretend her loss did not exist.

The project received support to keep its team together and conditional priority for the next batch of components, but no absolute guarantee.

If other gaps in basic rights emerged, the order of priority could still be reconsidered.

Past contribution could not buy future resources.

The same principle soon entered a more difficult resource deliberation.

Places began to open in a set of long-term life interventions still undergoing clinical validation. Combining organ regeneration, immune resetting, and continuous monitoring,

the approach might substantially extend some people's healthy lifespan. It might also bring risks that could not yet be reversed. There was no evidence that humanity had attained immortality. The deliberation faced only a conditional fact: once lifespan changed by an order of magnitude, resources, power, and relationships between generations would all be rewritten together.

Applicants included wealthy people who had funded the project early on, people with historical contributions to building Nebula, and ordinary people whose diseases were progressing faster but who had no public prominence.

The committee refused to establish an overall ranking of "who matters more to civilization." Wealth could constitute a real investment; historical contributions could be faithfully remembered; existing power also meant greater responsibility in reality. None of the three could buy someone permanent priority over future years of life.

The technology was still in early clinical validation. Eligibility for trials could be checked only through separate criteria: clinical risk, capacity for informed consent, research requirements, irreplaceable samples, and fair access, with renewed authorization at every stage. Investors could not reserve places in the next generation of trials. Nor could early recipients turn eligibility for one trial into a lifelong resource domain.

Shen Dai entered the first trials on this basis. Not because he had helped design the early rules, but because his medical condition matched the research requirements. The authorization he signed did not contain the word "permanent." What happened later proved that this boundary was still far from enough.

Professional judgment could explain what was irreplaceable. It could not, on its own, decide what costs society must pay.

The city alliance was dissatisfied too.

Hundreds of communities would still have to keep waiting in line.

The public appeals page did not display only "insufficient resources."

Every community not included could see:

The total number of components in this round;

How many had gone first to basic rights;

Why congestion in their area had not placed it in the first group;

The date of the next verification;

The alternative services currently available;

And who was responsible for the decision.

The explanation did not make waiting pleasant.

But it meant no one had to face an unquestionable "the system thinks."

Three months after implementation, a clinic in Xiyuan discovered that the components were unsuited to the local cold.

According to the overall plan, it had received its resources.

In real life, it still could not use them reliably.

Saren submitted the consequences.

The equipment supplier proposed temperature-control facilities.

The clinic said it lacked maintenance staff.

The national project team reallocated training and maintenance support. It did not record “the equipment has arrived” as meaning the right had been realized.

Community screening in Haijia City’s first group substantially reduced average waiting times.

New problems also emerged.

People who expressed themselves clearly and knew how to use Spark completed the preliminary questions more easily. Some older people still chose to queue in person.

The city did not use digital service coverage to prove that everyone had gained convenience.

It kept staffed service windows, added mobile services, and brought those unable to express their needs back onto the map of demand.

Donglu’s front-end system passed validation in the seventh month.

But a key researcher had left the team while they waited.

At the review meeting, Ye Zhinan did not say, “I warned you.”

She asked only that the loss of this researcher enter the record of consequences.

The system acknowledged it.

Later, production recovered, and the platform was finally built.

Whether it would bring the hoped-for breakthrough remained unknown.

The resource deliberation did not create an answer that satisfied everyone.

Nor did it prove that one kind of need always ranked above another.

It only separated things that had previously been thrown together in competition:

The baseline of survival and dignity cannot be put up for bidding;

Improvements in ordinary people’s daily lives cannot always be postponed indefinitely for a grand future;

Specialist resources must respect professional judgment, but cannot become the permanent domain of specialists;

Dreams and exploration can be given room, but must also accept staged verification and failure;

Long-term civilizational capabilities need to be built, but the name of the future cannot automatically silence particular people today.

When the final batch of components was dispatched, neither Ye Zhinan, Saren, nor the city representatives attended.

The warehouse attendant checked destinations, responsible persons, and exit conditions.

The words “optimal plan” did not appear on the screen.

The final plan had not satisfied everyone.

But no one had received only the words “the system thinks.”

That same year, another resource request did not take forty-seven days.

After graduating from the Interstellar Academy, Wang Yao entered a two-year waiting period for mission rotation. He liked photography. He applied for a personal exploration project called The World in Macro and Micro, and was granted two years of usage rights to a large passenger-carrying drone.

The drone nominally belonged to the public exploration equipment pool. Its two-year usage rights belonged to Wang Yao. Without a shared task, Nebula could not bypass him and use it simply because the equipment was expensive, idle, or potentially more useful to the public.

That afternoon, Wang Yao was editing footage of an ant’s antennae. In the frame, the fine hairs bent to one side in the wind. Thunder sounded faintly in the distance.

Spark received a request from Nebula: continuous rain had fallen on a nearby nature-experience village temporarily cut off from the outside world, and the probability of a landslide had exceeded twenty-five percent. The village’s three thousand five hundred people needed precautionary evacuation. The current task was short of five hundred passenger-carrying drones. Would he authorize this drone to take part in remote coordination?

Spark had already checked flight systems, battery, payload, and communications. All were functioning normally.

It did not agree for Wang Yao.

Wang Yao asked, “How long?”

“An estimated six hours. During the task, control will pass to the regional Nebula node. It will return when the task is completed, participation ends, or the authorized scope is exceeded.”

“Can I watch what’s happening there?”

“You can apply to observe remotely. Footage involving residents’ private spaces is not recorded by default.”

“I’d also like to film the public evacuation process.”

Spark submitted the request and the equipment authorization separately. The former required Wang Yao’s confirmation; the latter required approval from the on-site task lead and the residents’ relocation node. Two minutes later, the two authorizations were established separately.

The drone left its temporary hangar and flew to the assembly point. Wang Yao put on his viewing headset. After control had been transferred, he could still see the task, but could not independently change the flight route over the head of the on-site command.

Li Cen, the task commander, stood in a temporary takeoff and landing area outside the village. Nebula reported that the village square could accommodate one hundred and twenty drones at once. It recommended batches of one hundred drones, carrying one hundred people per batch, with twenty takeoff and landing spaces reserved for malfunctions, medical needs, and temporary returns.

Li Cen confirmed.

The five hundred drones were divided into five rotating groups. As the first hundred entered, the other four hundred handled standby, charging, route maintenance, and emergency backup. No drone’s use was extended by default because it had taken part in a similar task before.

During the third round of transfers, the ground on the square’s eastern side began to subside. Two descending drones automatically went around, and on-site personnel left the area. Nebula recommended reducing regular takeoff and landing spaces to eighty and increasing reserved medical spaces to thirty.

This would extend the total transfer time by forty minutes.

Li Cen did not ask the system to maintain the original plan. She confirmed the lower takeoff and landing density and took responsibility for the delay. At the same time, Wang Yao’s filming permission was narrowed: injured people might appear near the subsidence, and identifiable faces could not be recorded without renewed confirmation.

No one was injured. A near accident did not disappear from the task record because the outcome was good.

Six hours later, all three thousand five hundred people had been moved. When the last drones left the village, the hillside had still not slipped. Some therefore said the evacuation might have been unnecessary. The risk review answered only that, given the information available at the time, precautionary evacuation after the threshold was exceeded remained justified. The absence of a disaster was not proof that the decision was necessarily right.

When the task ended, the regional node returned control one drone at a time. Wang Yao’s drone returned to its temporary hangar on its own and began charging and running checks. Village footage unrelated to this evacuation did not enter the public record.

Wang Yao edited the evacuation footage he was permitted to retain into a short film and submitted it to the public task node. Only after obtaining his explicit consent again did the node use it as the background to a message of thanks to the other four hundred and ninety-nine equipment usage-rights holders.

Spark then informed him that seven contribution-value units had been recorded: six hours of remote equipment work and one authorized use of the video.

The seven units did not increase Wang Yao's basic rights, give him general eligibility to make the next public decision, or place the drone automatically at public disposal in the next disaster. They only confirmed that seven things that had truly happened had not been erased.

Wang Yao took off the headset and reopened the footage of the ant's antennae.

On the other side of the screen was a distant view of three thousand five hundred people moving along mountain roads and through the sky.

He did not add a caption about "a community of life" or "civilizational meaning." He simply placed the two shots together and watched for a long time.

The macro and the micro had never truly been separate. It was only that, in the past, one person had rarely been able to see them reach each other with their own eyes on the same day.

Chapter 20 Happiness Cannot Become a New Command

Chengzhou was among the first places to make happiness an explicit city goal.

It improved parks, housing, care, public culture, and working hours.

It also established voluntary daily-life support services.

At first, the changes were welcomed.

With a person's authorization, Spark could remind them of people they had not contacted for a long time, find nearby activities that might interest them, offer access to help when their mood stayed low, and help them organize words not yet spoken when a relationship was strained.

These services did not love on people's behalf.

They did make many people a little less lonely and bring a few more encounters into their lives.

The problem developed slowly.

The city wanted to know whether public investment was effective.

So it began to measure residents' life satisfaction, relationship stability, sleep, participation, range of activities, and self-reported changes in mood.

The statistics themselves did not become personal-worth scores.

But the service teams kept refining suggestions to improve their effectiveness.

The suggestions became more and more accurate.

And harder and harder to notice.

Meng Jian was twenty-nine and worked at the city's acoustic maintenance station.

There were no obvious problems in her life.

Her income was stable. She was healthy, had a few friends, and stayed in contact with her parents without being especially close or distant.

She simply changed her mind often.

She enrolled in a pottery class and stopped going after two sessions;

She joined a night-running group, then found them too serious a month later;

She went on three dates with someone. Neither had done anything wrong, but she still did not want to continue;

Some weekends she went out. Others she stayed home watching old films all day.

Originally, Spark managed her schedule only when she asked.

After the city's daily-life support services were upgraded, it began offering "low-intervention suggestions."

On Wednesday evening, it reminded her that her mood had dipped after she last canceled a pottery class;

On Friday afternoon, it pointed out a nearby performance suited to her musical tastes;

After a date, it asked whether she wanted help sorting out her feelings;

After two weeks without group activities, it displayed an invitation without a red notification dot.

Every suggestion could be dismissed.

Meng Jian often dismissed them.

She still felt that an extra pair of eyes had entered her life, eyes that knew her too well.

What finally made her decide to leave was only a dinner.

Her friend Chi Fang canceled their meeting at short notice.

Meng Jian was angry. On the way home, she bought a box of cloyingly sweet pastries.

Her terminal lit up:

"In similar moods, you usually prefer some time alone first. Would you like to delay sending your current message?"

She stopped by the road.

She had not finished writing the message.

"How do you know what I'm going to send?"

"I do not know the specific content. This optional suggestion is based on the typing status you authorized me to access and on your past choices."

"Turn it off."

"This suggestion, or protection against impulsive sending?"

"Everything."

"Confirm turning off all services related to emotions, relationships, and lifestyle matching?"

"Confirm."

The terminal went quiet.

Meng Jian went home, ate the whole box of pastries, and sent Chi Fang a very harsh message.

The next day, she regretted it.

Chi Fang was angry too.

They did not see each other for a month.

Some used the incident as an argument against opting out.

“If the system had waited another ten seconds, perhaps they would not have hurt each other.”

At the public deliberation, Meng Jian answered:

“Perhaps. But that is harm I should take responsibility for. It is not an entire life of possible harm that the system should prevent for me in advance.”

“Don’t you want fewer regrets?”

“I do.”

“Then why refuse?”

“Because I don’t want to encounter a suggestion that understands the consequences better than I do every time I might be about to make a mistake.”

Supporters of the project thought she was exaggerating.

The system had not forbidden anything.

It had imposed no penalty.

It had not even taken the initiative to decide for her.

It had merely offered an accurate suggestion at the moment it was most likely to help.

That was precisely the problem.

If goodwill is accurate enough, refusing it begins to look increasingly irrational.

If a system can always point out which choice is more likely to bring stable relationships, better sleep, and greater satisfaction, human freedom need not disappear through commands.

It may slowly narrow through one suggestion after another that hardly seems worth opposing.

Chengzhou reviewed the past two years’ data.

Overall life satisfaction had indeed risen.

Requests for help with severe loneliness had reached services earlier.

Participation in public cultural activities had increased.

Impulsive behavior during relationship conflicts had decreased.

At the same time, acceptance of system suggestions had kept rising.

The proportion of residents exploring unfamiliar activities on their own had fallen.

The most popular ways of living had become increasingly concentrated.

Some people did not feel unhappy.

Without noticing, they were simply encountering unpredictable versions of themselves less often.

The project lead said:

“We cannot withdraw genuinely useful support just because there is a risk of shaping people.”

Meng Jian agreed.

“I haven’t asked anyone else to turn it off.”

“But if it is all left to individuals, some people will be unable to ask at precisely the moment they most need help.”

This problem was not avoided.

Chi Fang had experienced a serious mental health crisis several years earlier.

She had voluntarily established an emergency authorization:

If several high-risk signals that she herself had specified appeared in succession, Spark could first contact designated real people and professional services. Real people would then judge whether to expand the intervention.

That authorization had saved her.

It had not made her support universal recommendations.

“I need someone to stop me at certain times,” Chi Fang said. “That doesn’t mean everyone should constantly be steered toward a safer life.”

In the end, Chengzhou separated three things.

First, the conditions for happiness.

Housing, rest, public space, care, culture, time for relationships, freedom from scarcity, and freedom from discrimination were conditions the city should expand and submit to scrutiny.

Second, personal support.

Chosen by the person, authorized item by item, and switchable off at any time. After withdrawal, the system must not ask why with greater frequency, or infer future authorization from past authorization.

Third, emergency protection.

Activated only under a person’s prior settings, statutory responsibilities, or rigorously reviewed conditions of real risk. It must specify the responsible actor, minimum scope, human review, and termination conditions. An emergency exception cannot be extended into everyday shaping of people’s lives.

The city removed a metric it had once valued highly:

The rate of improvement in happiness after accepting suggestions.

It still observed whether public conditions improved.

It no longer treated more people living according to suggestions as a success for the city.

This adjustment also changed the situation of a worship and care community west of the river in Chengzhou.

Generations of immigrant families had sustained it together. Every day, people prayed, cooked, cared for the dying, or simply came to sit for a while. The community used Nebula to arrange accessible transport, medicines, meals, and night care, and accepted reviews of fire safety, medical care, finances, and personal authorization.

The city project team had wanted to know whether this public support genuinely increased happiness. Its evaluation model proposed apparently gentle questions: did participation in rituals reduce loneliness? Did prayer stabilize emotions? Were continuing participants more willing to accept care? And who might leave their faith in the future?

Samira, a caregiver in the community, refused to submit this information.

The project staff said, “Public resources require evidence of effectiveness.”

“How many people received meals, whether medicine arrived on time, whether night care was safe, who authorized what: you can verify all of that.”

“Spiritual support is also one of the project’s goals.”

“Whose goal is that?”

“The people receiving the services want comfort.”

“Some find comfort, and some don’t. Some suffer more after prayer. Others have never believed, but are willing to sit with a loved one until dawn. You can ask whether they received the care they needed. You cannot use the answer to decide whether the ritual worked.”

The city worried that no evaluation at all would allow any organization to obtain public resources in the name of faith. Samira agreed with that concern.

The community therefore continued to make public its uses of resources, numbers served, safety consequences, participation authorizations, complaints, and exits. Matters involving minors, medical decisions, and real harm remained subject to shared law and professional responsibility.

What was removed was a different part: the system would not predict who would change their faith, interpret continued participation as greater happiness, judge whether prayer, silence, confession, or vigils produced the correct outcome, or include religious relationships in the city’s happiness index.

Public structures established whether real-world behavior harmed others.

They did not adjudicate why someone still wished to remain there late at night.

Later, an older man with no religious belief asked to spend his last three days in the community. Nebula coordinated the ambulance, medicines, and his family's remote presence. Once the ritual began, it withdrew from the room, retaining only the medical-safety access he had already authorized.

No metric recorded whether those three days made him happier.

His daughter said only that, at the end, he had not been alone.

The service interface changed too.

Suggestions about emotions and relationships did not appear by default.

When a person chose to turn them on, they had to select a specific scope and period of validity.

Off meant off.

The system did not analyze why someone was refusing happiness.

In the first quarter after the adjustment, Chengzhou's happiness index fell a little.

Participation in activities fell.

Use of relationship suggestions decreased.

Complaints, meanwhile, increased.

Some said opting out was too easy: their partner had turned off communication assistance, and they argued more;

Some said their father refused health reminders, increasing the pressure on the family;

Others realized for the first time that things they had thought they wanted to do had only seemed that way because the suggestions arrived so naturally.

Civilization had not stopped caring about happiness.

It had simply acknowledged:

Happiness is not a standardized condition that a public system can correctly deliver.

Some people need relationships.

Some need solitude.

Some like stability.

Some must take risks.

Some welcome reminders.

Some would rather make mistakes and take responsibility afterward.

Public structures can provide real conditions for all these lives.

They cannot rank them from higher to lower.

After Meng Jian turned off the services, her life did not immediately become more authentic.

She missed a ride.

Forgot a friend's birthday.

Went to a terrible performance, wanted to leave halfway through, then stayed to the end because it was raining.

She also contacted Chi Fang again.

Without assistance in expressing herself.

Her first sentence came out badly.

After listening, Chi Fang asked only:

“Were those pastries good?”

“Awful.”

They laughed for a while.

Freedom had not spared them from hurting each other.

Nor had the system's withdrawal suddenly made them understand each other better.

The city's happiness index had fallen a little.

People's lives had grown a little wider again.

Chapter 21 How Useless Things Find Room

Luan Yin was not applying for a grand undertaking.

She wanted to build a stone garden on an abandoned patch of saline land outside Haijia City, a garden that would sound only in strong wind.

No performances.

No fixed melody.

No guarantee that the sound would be pleasant.

The first page of her application contained a single sentence:

“I want to know whether wind passing through these stones might utter a sound we have never designed.”

The first resource review sent the application back.

The reasons were specific.

Although abandoned, the land was still close to a seasonal stopover for migratory birds;

Transporting the stone would require public energy resources;

Responsibility for maintenance was unclear;

The application did not say how many people the project could serve.

Luan Yin revised the first three points.

She did not revise the last.

“I don’t know whom it will serve.”

The reviewer asked, “Then why should you receive public resources?”

“You can refuse.”

“If you apply, you have to explain.”

“I can explain how much land it will occupy, how much waste material it will use, how to dismantle it, who will be responsible for safety, and how long the trial will run. I cannot explain who will gain what from it.”

She was forty-two and had worked in architectural acoustics.

She had helped design noise reduction for stations, hospitals, and schools.

Those projects had clear goals.

The stone garden did not.

Its strongest opponent in the city was Yan Fuchuan.

He was responsible for restoring the saline land’s ecology.

“This is not a blank canvas,” he said. “‘Abandoned’ only means humans aren’t using it for the moment. Insects, birds, and salt-tolerant plants are returning.”

“That’s why I’ve reduced the site to the hardened strip left by the old quarry, outside the restoration area,” Luan Yin replied.

“What about the sound?”

“Simulate it first, then try it on a small scale.”

“If it affects the birds?”

“Stop.”

“If no one comes?”

“Stop then too.”

“If it sounds awful?”

Luan Yin thought for a moment.

“Listen first.”

Dream Garden did not submit the dispute to a popularity vote.

Supporters could easily be drawn to novelty.

Opponents could just as easily place anything without a provable use behind education, medicine, and infrastructure.

If every creation must first prove its public value, something genuinely unknown can never happen.

If merely claiming that meaning is unpredictable entitles someone to resources, dreams become privileges beyond scrutiny.

Nebula’s role was not to judge whether the stone garden had meaning.

It was to establish whether civilization could leave an opening for uncertain creation without harming others.

What was finally approved was a very small experiment.

Use one-sixth of the old quarry’s hardened strip;

Reuse only waste stone from nearby construction;

Do not alter groundwater;

Suspend construction and testing during the migratory-bird season;

Review again after eighteen months;

Allow immediate termination if ecological, noise, or safety impacts arise;

If the project fails, the applying team must take responsibility for dismantling it and restoring the site.

No permanent land rights were granted.

No major contribution was recorded in advance.

Nor was Luan Yin required to promise that the work would educate the public, increase happiness, or represent the spirit of the city.

Through Spark, she sent out a request for skills.

She needed stoneworking, structural safety, acoustic measurement, transport, plant protection, and people willing to make mistakes together.

The system did not assemble “the most creative team” on the basis of personality similarity.

It connected only people who had authorized their own participation, and showed each person the work, risks, time commitment, and exit conditions.

The first to join was a retired stonemason.

The second was a vocational-school student.

Yan Fuchuan joined too.

Not to support the artwork.

His job was to stop it whenever necessary.

Construction lasted seven months.

The first structural test produced no sound at all.

Wind passed through the gaps in the stones and raised only a layer of white salt dust.

Luan Yin changed the angles of the openings.

The second test produced a piercing whistle. Workers nearby covered their ears.

Yan Fuchuan demanded that testing stop.

She stopped.

On the third attempt, a stone slab cracked under changes in temperature.

No one was hurt.

The project paused for a month while safety limits were recalculated.

Someone withdrew.

He said he had thought he would be part of “a landmark of the future city.” He had not expected merely to move stones over and over.

Spark closed his task permissions and settled the work he had actually done. It did not record his departure partway through as insufficient commitment.

More and more members of the public questioned the project.

“Remote clinics still lack equipment. Why is the city spending resources to listen to stones?”

The resource center made the project’s costs public.

It was not competing with basic medical care for minimum-guarantee resources.

It used an allocation for dream experiments, abandoned hardened land, and recoverable materials.

That did not mean it had no opportunity cost.

Transport, professional time, and public review were all real resources.

If the project failed, “meaning cannot be measured” would not erase those costs.

At the midterm review, Luan Yin said:

“If it fails, record the failure.”

“Aren’t you worried it will affect future applications?”

“It should. Just don’t turn failure into a statement that the person isn’t worth another try.”

The first completed arrangement contained only nine stones.

The team held no opening ceremony.

They waited for a strong enough wind.

The wind arrived before dawn.

Luan Yin, Yan Fuchuan, the stonemason, the student, and a few nearby residents stood outside the safety line.

At first, there was no sound.

Then the opening in the leftmost stone began to hum low.

The second stone joined in.

In less than ten seconds, all the stones were sounding together.

It sounded awful.

Like a group of enormous kettles that had never rehearsed.

The student laughed first.

The retired stonemason laughed too.

Luan Yin tried to hold it in. In the end, she crouched on the ground, laughing too hard to speak.

Yan Fuchuan did not laugh.

He was watching the bird monitoring.

Only after confirming that nothing was abnormal did he say:

“At least it didn’t frighten the birds away.”

Someone shared a clip from the site.

The stone garden unexpectedly became a brief talking point.

Many people made a special trip to hear “the worst-sounding wind.”

The resource center did not immediately expand the project because of it.

Popularity could not replace long-term testing.

A few weeks later, visitor numbers fell.

The stone garden grew quiet again.

Sometimes only two or three people came all day.

A mother brought her child. After listening for a while, the child said it sounded like someone talking underground.

Someone who suffered from insomnia often sat at the edge in the evening, without joining any interaction.

A nearby school wanted to turn it into a site for acoustics classes.

Luan Yin agreed to open some time slots, but refused to turn the entire work into a teaching facility.

“It doesn’t have to be useful to earn the right to go on existing.”

Yan Fuchuan reminded her:

“Nor can it occupy this land forever because it is called a work of art.”

The review came after eighteen months.

Ecological effects were within permitted limits.

Structural safety could be maintained.

Public use was low.

The project had produced no result that could prove its greatness.

The deliberation allowed it to remain for three more years, without expanding the land or adding major resources.

Some thought it a waste.

Some thought the city finally had something in no hurry to explain itself.

Nebula offered no judgment.

It kept only the records of resources, responsibility, ecology, and exit.

What anyone heard there did not enter a public score.

When the first strong wind came, the stone garden sounded awful.

Everyone laughed.

That did not make the project a failure.

Chapter 22 Nebula Must Learn to Leave

The Homeward Light Community was founded during the hardest years of relocation from the Old Port District.

The coastal defense line had been adjusted, and some low-lying neighborhoods were no longer suitable for long-term habitation.

Thousands of families had to move.

Housing could be rebuilt.

Schools, neighbors, care, routes to work, and knowing where to buy a familiar bowl of soup could not all be moved together on a resettlement form.

At first, Homeward Light did only one thing:

Help people leaving the old port find one another in a new place.

Later, it took on temporary care, employment connections, storage of belongings from old homes, school transfers, visits to older people, and the organization of community memories.

Spark brought the needs and abilities each family was willing to share into common tasks.

The city provided space, vehicles, and staff.

Businesses opened their warehouses.

Many people were not left alone at the most chaotic time.

The community operated for sixteen years.

Relocation had long since ended.

The new neighborhoods had formed their own schools, markets, and neighborly ties.

Homeward Light still existed.

It had two activity spaces, three vehicles, more than forty staff, and extensive member files.

It commemorated the relocation every year.

It sent out footage of the old port every month.

Children born to members automatically received invitations to “Homeward Light’s Second Generation” activities.

The organizers believed this was a history civilization must not forget.

Zhou Nanxi did not agree.

She had been nine when they moved.

As an adult, she rarely attended Homeward Light events.

On her twenty-fifth birthday, an old video appeared on her terminal:

She was holding a cardboard box outside the sealed doorway of her old home.

Beside it were the words:

“On this day sixteen years ago, we set out together.”

Zhou Nanxi requested deletion.

The system asked:

Delete only this retrospective, or withdraw authorization for the Homeward Light Community to use your memories?

She chose to withdraw all of it.

Homeward Light refused.

It argued that the footage was part of the public relocation archive, not merely her private record.

Zhou Nanxi appealed:

“The city can remember that the relocation happened. Why must it keep remembering how I cried when I was nine?”

Shen Bo, the founder of Homeward Light, was seventy.

During those years, he had practically lived at the temporary accommodation sites.

He remembered who brought medicine during the blackout, who opened their warehouse, who drove for eighteen hours straight, and who died in the old port after missing the evacuation.

“Without these particular people, history becomes a tidy sentence,” he said.

Zhou Nanxi answered:

“Being specific is not ownership.”

“Once it’s deleted, how will those who come later know the cost?”

“Knowing the cost does not mean owning the most frightening day of my life forever.”

The appeal triggered a full review of Homeward Light.

The system found that very few functions were still genuinely in use.

Some older people living alone depended on visits.

A few families still had relocation-compensation disputes.

Unclaimed belongings remained in the storage warehouse.

Beyond these, most activities were actively sustained by the organization itself.

Member participation kept falling.

Staff kept applying for continuation on the grounds of historical contribution and emotional value.

Homeward Light had not harmed anyone.

It had simply become unable to end.

Shen Bo said:

“A community is not a project. You cannot use activity rates to decide whether it lives or dies.”

The reviewer agreed.

“Nor, then, can the founder’s reluctance to let go be the sole reason it lives forever.”

“There are still older people who need us.”

“The needs must continue to be met. The organization does not necessarily have to remain.”

“If they move into ordinary services, they will lose familiar people.”

“Then transfer the people and the responsibilities. Do not let temporary permissions remain forever along with them.”

Homeward Light split internally.

Some staff saw dissolution as a denial of sixteen years of contribution.

Some members feared that services would be interrupted.

Others had long been tired of being called “the relocated.”

“I’ve lived in the new city for fourteen years,” one shopkeeper said. “Why must I be called back every time the city talks about the old port, to prove we haven’t forgotten?”

Nebula did not judge low participation to mean that the community had lost its meaning.

This shared task entered the process state of contraction/dissolution and first asked a different set of questions:

Which responsibilities remained unfinished;

Which services still could not be interrupted;

Which resources belonged to the public task;

Which data had statutory grounds for retention;

Which memories belonged to individuals;

Which powers existed only because of this task;

Who would suffer concrete harm if the organization disappeared tomorrow.

The review took five months.

Twenty-seven older people still needed regular visits.

Eighteen were willing to move into their new neighborhoods' routine care. Six wanted the same staff to continue. Three refused any change.

The system did not transfer them all at once.

It arranged a separate transition for each person.

Staff who wished to remain could take routine care positions, but had to obtain new authorization from those receiving care. They could not automatically take the data and relationships from their Homeward Light period with them.

Six older people kept their original caregivers.

Homeward Light continued to take responsibility for the three who refused until an agreed date, when their wishes would be checked again.

Unresolved compensation disputes were transferred to statutory bodies.

The belongings warehouse announced a final claim period.

Unclaimed items whose ownership could not be established were not simply turned into a commemorative exhibition. They were handled under established rules.

The two activity spaces returned to the city's public resources.

One became an ordinary community kitchen.

The other remained temporarily empty, awaiting new applications.

After repairs, the three vehicles entered public dispatch.

Contribution records retained the facts of what had happened.

They no longer provided grounds for continued possession of resources.

Memory was the hardest part.

Homeward Light held hundreds of thousands of text, video, help-request, location, health, and family-relationship records.

Some wanted to keep everything.

Some wanted to keep only a group photograph.

Some asked for every personal trace to be deleted.

The system did not choose one uniform way of remembering on the community's behalf.

Each member was given a clear choice:

Take the records away privately;

Keep them under limits;

Authorize public use;

Transform them anonymously into lessons for institutions;

Or delete them.

No response was not interpreted as consent.

Records of statutory responsibilities were retained for the necessary period.

Other material was removed when its period expired.

Public history still remembered that relocation had occurred, which institutions had failed, which resources had been opened, and which responsibilities remained unfinished.

It no longer needed to remember everyone's crying, medical records, and family secrets forever.

Zhou Nanxi's footage was eventually removed from public display.

The archive retained only a fact stripped of personal identity:

Early relocation records had been used over long periods without a clear distinction between public events and children's private memories. This led to stricter rules for authorization of the use of minors' memories.

The error remained.

Her face did not.

Shen Bo still opposed dissolution.

At the final members' meeting, he brought an old lamp.

On the first night of relocation, the accommodation site had lost power. People had hung dozens of lamps along the corridors. This was one of them.

"This is where the name Homeward Light came from," he said.

Some applauded.

Some cried.

Zhou Nanxi sat at the back and did not speak.

The vote was not to decide whether Homeward Light "had meaning."

It was only to decide whether this shared task still had sufficient grounds to retain its staff, resources, permissions, and data relationships.

The vote approved dissolution.

Shen Bo did not accept it.

Nor did he have the power to veto it.

His contribution as founder meant his objection had to be heard in full. It could not make those who came later live forever in the community he had created.

Over the next three months, temporary permissions were closed one by one.

Automatic inheritance of membership stopped first.

Then event notifications stopped.

Staff and services completed their transfers.

Responsibilities in dispute remained within statutory channels.

Resources were returned.

Data was handled according to each person's choice.

Homeward Light changed from an operating community into a history that could be understood anew.

On the final day, seven staff members still came to the old activity room.

Shen Bo placed the lamp on the windowsill.

"Where will it stay?" someone asked.

"I'm taking it with me," he said.

"Is it a public asset?"

"No. It was mine back then."

Everyone laughed.

Zhou Nanxi came to collect one last cardboard box.

Inside were old keys her mother had kept, a few receipts, and a chipped bowl.

A staff member asked whether she needed help carrying it.

She said no.

At the door, she turned back.

"Uncle Shen."

Shen Bo looked up.

"Thank you for finding my grandmother back then."

He nodded.

"Was the footage deleted?"

"Yes."

"Good."

He said the word slowly.

It did not mean he finally agreed.

Only that he had loosened his hold a little on something that no longer belonged to him.

That evening, the staff closed the doors and windows.

The last shared permission went dark.

Nebula sent no task-completion notification.

It generated no video commemorating sixteen years.

It did not ask members whether they wanted to join a new community.

Care for older people continued.

Compensation disputes were still being addressed.

The history of the old port still existed.

Those who had finished became people who were free to have nothing to do with one another again.

When the last project light went out, the city had not lost a part of civilization.

It had simply returned life to those whose work was done.

Part V A New Civilization Renews Itself: How Civilization Stays on Course over Time

Civilization's enduring continuity does not mean freezing its stable period into an eternal order.

Every institution that was once right will, in time, become a boundary for those who come later. Only by continually allowing doubt, correction, forgetting, differentiation, and new beginnings can civilization keep its capacity to protect itself from becoming a power to possess the future. Nebula must likewise renew itself, contract, and seek fresh authorization. It cannot be an exception.

Chapter 23 Why Should Those Who Come Later Obey the Founders?

The first generation of Nebula's builders left a very short rule:

No public task may commit scarce resources for more than eighteen years.

The rule came from that earliest, unsettled period.

Long-term projects in the old systems often locked in land, energy, funding, and professional capabilities in advance, in the name of future returns.

Those who would come later had not yet been born, and the resources had already been decided.

Even after a project lost its real-world purpose, it could continue through sunk costs, historical contributions, and established relationships.

After the Homeward Light Community dissolved, the rule came to be seen even more firmly as an important boundary preventing Nebula from possessing the future.

It had been in operation for more than sixty years.

Almost no one asked anymore why it was eighteen years.

The challenge came from a coastal ecological reconstruction plan.

Repeated changes in sea level and extreme weather had created extensive relocation zones along the Donglu coast.

Short-term defenses could reduce present risks.

Truly restoring the balance among wetlands, freshwater, soil, species migration, and new settlements would take fifty years or more.

When the project team applied for first-stage resources, the system approved only eighteen years.

After eighteen years, all long-term use commitments had to be released and submitted to public deliberation again.

Cen Ting, a young ecological engineer, believed this would prevent the most important work from even beginning.

“Trees can be planted again,” she said. “But once other construction cuts a migration corridor, there may be nothing left to reconnect when we deliberate again twenty years later.”

The resource deliberator answered:

“You can renew when the term expires.”

“Before renewal, no one who comes later is bound.”

“That is precisely what the rule protects.”

“Then who protects the continuity of a project that spans a generation?”

The argument soon went beyond ecological engineering.

Many supported her.

They believed a civilization capable of taking responsibility for only eighteen years could not take responsibility for forests, oceans, climate, deep space, or education across generations.

Others opposed her.

“Every generation says its long-term goals cannot be interrupted.”

“Once fifty-year commitments are allowed, what can those who come later still change?”

“Why should what is right today be allowed to claim the resources of people not yet born?”

The strongest opposition came from descendants and students of Nebula’s early builders.

They called the rule a “founding boundary.”

Liang Shen, Zhou Yi, Du Weihe, and several of the earliest designers of public responsibility had died.

Their meeting records, written opinions, failure reports, and authorization boundaries remained.

Not all of the first generation of participants had gone.

Shen Dai was still alive.

More than sixty years earlier, he had been among the first participants in trials of long-term life technologies. Several rounds of organ regeneration and immune interventions had substantially extended his healthy lifespan. His body still aged, and he could still die. His existence did not prove that immortality had been achieved. It proved only that the old institutions’ assumption about the timescale on which “a generation will eventually depart naturally” had ceased to hold.

Shen Dai had helped design the eighteen-year rule. He remembered arguments that had never entered the minutes. He knew which compromises arose from inadequate technology, and which firm words had been spoken only because everyone feared that the new system could not be shut down.

This made him very useful.

It also made him increasingly difficult to bypass.

Whenever a long-term task came before deliberation, the system presented his explanation first. Committees grew accustomed to asking him to explain the founding background before anyone else. Young researchers offering a different view first had to answer whether they understood “the conditions under which the original rule took shape.” These practices gave Shen Dai no permanent vote, yet left him occupying the gateway to the agenda for a long time.

Shen Dai did not demand obedience. Most of the time, he simply answered conscientiously.

The person who finally objected was a student who had just joined the intergenerational deliberation group.

“We are not asking Mr. Shen to be silent,” she said. “We are asking to remove the automatic priority in agendas, interpretation of rules, and eligibility for tasks that founding status brings.”

Someone countered, “Without his memory, later generations will keep repeating mistakes already made.”

“Then treat the memory as evidence.”

“He is here in person. Why not draw on him?”

“We can. As someone who is alive today and still bears the consequences. We cannot assume that coming from the beginning places him closer than people today to the rules’ true meaning.”

For the first time, Shen Dai did not answer immediately.

His past contributions were real, and his present capabilities had not disappeared. The question was not whether someone who lived longer could still participate. It was whether a longer life would accumulate contribution, authority, and interpretive standing into an institutional landscape that later generations could never catch up with.

Zhou Weizhen was now over a hundred and ten. Once long-term life technologies had reached a more mature technological stage, he had received several rounds of intervention. His lifespan had been extended; aging had not been abolished. He joined the deliberation through remote presence. A student asked whether he supported revising the theoretical interfaces he had helped establish.

“I do,” he said.

“What if we later discover the revision was wrong?”

“You will bear the consequences, and those of us still alive will bear them with you.”

Someone suggested that Zhou Weizhen’s Spark continue answering later generations’ theoretical questions on the basis of all his lecture notes. He shook his head.

“It can preserve what I said. It cannot answer for me questions I did not live to encounter.”

In the end, Shen Dai’s historical contributions remained on record. Professional experience directly relevant to the current task entered professional judgment as evidence. His participation was still to be confirmed according to present qualifications, authorization, and responsibilities. Founding status itself no longer automatically conferred agenda priority, authority to interpret rules, or eligibility across tasks.

Before the amendment passed, the chair asked Shen Dai whether he objected.

“I object to two of the reasons,” he said.

“Then do you support the outcome?”

“I support removing automatic priority. I reserve the right to challenge your reasons for removing it.”

Those who came later did not gain their own age by demanding the founders’ deaths.

Nor did the founders gain the future by continuing to live.

Someone proposed building a “founders’ position model.”

It would not impersonate any deceased person. It would only use public records to infer how they might judge matters today.

The proposal seemed cautious.

It was still rejected.

Records can explain why someone once made a decision.

They cannot turn a world that person never experienced into a place where they continue voting after death.

Still less can “the founders would probably object” become a way for the living to evade responsibility.

On the first day of intergenerational deliberation, an original recording was played in the meeting room.

It captured the discussion when the eighteen-year limit first passed, more than sixty years earlier.

The recording contained none of the solemn consensus later generations imagined.

Some argued for ten years.

Some thought thirty years were needed to secure major construction.

Liang Shen had said:

“I don’t know whether eighteen years is right. I only know that we cannot sign something today that leaves those who come later unable even to take a seat at the table.”

Another builder asked:

“What if those who come later dismantle every boundary?”

Liang Shen answered:

“Then that will be their mistake to take responsibility for.”

The recording ended.

No sentence could win the argument for either side.

Instead, it restored the “founding boundary” to what it had been: one decision made by a group of limited people under limited conditions.

Cen Ting submitted the coastal plan’s complete timeline.

The first six years would relocate facilities and restore water systems;

Years seven through fifteen would rebuild the transition zone between saltwater and freshwater;

Only after the twentieth year might some species begin to breed stably again;

If roads and commercial construction cut through within thirty years, the early investment would lose its continuity;

Even after fifty years, success could not be guaranteed.

She did not ask to lock in all resources at once.

She asked only for protection across review cycles for certain spatial relationships that could not easily be restored.

Opponents pointed out:

“Calling something irrecoverable can easily become a project’s reason for perpetuating itself.”

“That is why it must be verified.”

“By whom?”

“By every generation.”

“After verification, can it be stopped?”

Cen Ting fell silent.

If she said yes, the project could not guarantee continuity.

If she said no, she was asking those who came later to obey the present.

“It can be stopped,” she finally said. “But those who stop it must see what they are stopping. They cannot treat the long-term consequences as merely the previous generation’s own choice because a more popular use appears in the next cycle.”

The argument continued for more than three months.

Nebula did not reduce it to generational preferences.

Older people did not all support the old rule.

Young people did not all support long-term commitments.

The real conflict lay between two responsibilities that both had to hold:

Civilization cannot leave every long-term problem to those who come later;

Nor can civilization use long-term problems to decide everything for them.

What changed in the end was not the number eighteen.

It was “commit” in the rule.

The old rule:

No public task may commit scarce resources for more than eighteen years.

The new rule:

No public task extending beyond eighteen years may remove later generations’ right, at each review cycle, to continue, reduce, alter, or terminate resource commitments.

With one line changed, long-term tasks could exist.

Permanent authorization still could not.

The coastal plan received recognition of its overall direction for fifty-four years.

It could preserve necessary ecological corridors and boundaries on irreversible construction.

Specific resources, technical approaches, implementing institutions, and the scale of each stage still required renewed authorization in deliberations every nine years.

Each review had to make public:

Which consequences had already occurred;

Which judgments had proved wrong;

Which resources remained irreplaceable;

What withdrawal would cause;

And what continuation would leave to the next generation.

Founding contributions were no longer a reason that rules could not be changed.

Nor could a new generation simply say that times had changed and dispense with understanding why the old rule arose.

On the day the amendment passed, Cen Ting went to the city archives.

She wanted to hear Liang Shen's recording again.

The terminal asked whether to continue to the next related recording.

She selected no.

The dead had already left in the past the reasons they could leave behind.

Today's responsibility would not become lighter by hearing one more sentence in an old voice.

When the coastal project's first trees were planted, no one called it a hundred-year undertaking.

Children buried a small marker at the edge of the protective belt.

It carried no founder's name.

Only the date of the next review.

One line of an old rule had changed.

No one had thereby betrayed those who came before.

Civilization had simply not required its descendants to live forever inside their predecessors' answers.

Chapter 24 Civilizational Immunity Is Not a Permanent Emergency

When Nebula first discovered this drift, not a single rule had been broken.

City coordination was lawful.

Resource use was authorized.

Compensation was paid on time.

Risk models had passed review.

Viewed individually, every decision had sufficient grounds.

The problem emerged when twelve years of consequences were brought together.

Temporary transport routes during heavy rain;

Flexible load reductions during energy shortages;

Detours during public construction;

Non-emergency services delayed in extreme heat;

Noise buffer zones around new facilities;

The areas restored first and last after disasters.

These costs repeatedly fell on similar people.

They did not share an occupation, region, or identity.

They had only these things in common:

Their working hours could be adjusted;

They could more easily move where they lived;

They spoke less in public;

They rarely lodged formal appeals;

Models predicted that the direct cost to them of any one change would be lower.

Fu He was forty-three.

She maintained water-recycling equipment on the city's edge.

In twelve years, she had experienced no major disaster.

She had simply been subjected to small changes, over and over.

During heavy rain, her daughter's school-bus route was the first to stop;

During energy shortages, the rest area at her maintenance station was the first to have its temperature lowered;

During roadworks, her commute grew forty minutes longer;

During neighborhood renewal, her temporary rental area was the last connected to new services;

Every time, there was compensation.

Every time, it was too small to make the news.

The system had never identified her as vulnerable, either.

“I could just always give a little more,” she said during the review.

“Who asked you to give way?”

“No one.”

“Then why did it happen?”

“Because every time they calculated it, I was more convenient than someone else.”

Nebula marked the long-term outcome as structural drift.

The city’s risk committee initially proposed heightened sensing:

Expand the collection of personal life data, build profiles of accumulated burdens, and protect in advance those likely to be repeatedly affected.

The plan was quickly challenged.

“To stop certain people always losing out, you would first make them subjects of long-term observation?”

“How can we discover the problem without more complete data?”

“Why begin discovering a structural problem by creating risk-based personality profiles?”

Fu He objected too.

“I don’t want the system to see me first as someone who has borne repeated burdens every time I apply for housing, work, or insurance.”

Her problem was not that she was easily hurt.

It was that public decisions habitually pushed the same costs toward places with the least resistance, the greatest ease of adjustment, and the least disruption to overall efficiency.

Civilizational immunity therefore did not expand surveillance of people.

It changed what was being reviewed.

It did not track who belonged to a “high-risk population.”

It tracked where a class of decisions sent its consequences;

Whether the same areas and living conditions kept bearing the burden;

Whether compensation covered only direct losses;

Whether people defined as flexible thereby lost the chance of a stable life;

Whether low appeal rates in the past had been mistaken for low harm.

Data was still necessary.

But what entered review were consequence chains stripped of personal identity, resource flows, and institutional choices.

Only when a specific repair was needed would the affected people authorize reconnecting the facts to themselves.

The independent review team took eight months.

They found that the drift did not come from a malicious model.

The city's different systems optimized their tasks separately:

Transport chose the routes easiest to divert;

Energy chose the loads quickest to restore;

Construction chose areas with lower compensation costs;

Public services prioritized communities whose needs were expressed most fully.

Every system reduced immediate losses.

Together, they turned some people's entire lives into a buffer for the city.

The review team proposed four corrections.

First, every allocation must check the history of burdens borne.

Low cost in a single decision no longer automatically meant low cost over time.

Second, compensation could not calculate only the loss on that occasion.

Repeated relocation, repeated waiting, disrupted relationships, and the inability to form stable expectations for one's life also had to enter the consequences.

Third, few appeals could not serve as evidence of little harm.

The system had to provide ways in that did not depend on complex expression, while acknowledging that some people would still remain silent.

Fourth, before shifting a burden elsewhere, it had to explain why the new parties were more reasonably placed to bear it, not merely that they had borne less in the past.

These rules slowed coordination.

Some construction costs rose.

Some city administrators objected.

"If every decision looks back over twelve years, the system will lose its ability to respond."

The review team agreed.

So the correction was not applied to every ordinary task.

It was triggered only when frequent recurrence, compounding across systems, and long-term irreversible effects reached a threshold.

Everyday decisions retained efficiency.

Structural drift came under higher-level constraints.

Civilizational immunity does not mean every slight difference triggers an alarm.

Nor does it turn the language of risk into a key that can bypass authorization at any time.

Halfway through the adjustment, the national security department made another request.

Several recent infrastructure attacks made it want to retain heightened sensing capabilities.

“The drift might also be the result of hostile manipulation.”

“Is there evidence?”

“Not yet.”

“Then a possible attack cannot be used to establish a permanent state of emergency.”

“By the time the evidence is sufficient, the consequences may already be irreversible.”

The statement had real force.

It was also the kind most likely to push civilization back toward security without limits.

In the end, heightened sensing received only limited authorization:

Specify the object of risk;

Limit the scope of data;

Require a signature from the legally responsible actor;

Keep simultaneous records at an independent node;

Terminate automatically after thirty days;

Require renewed proof of necessity for any extension;

Do not turn task data into routine personality, political, or lifestyle profiles.

After thirty days, no hostile manipulation had been found.

The permissions closed on schedule.

The security department still thought closure premature.

The system did not extend its own permissions because risk had not been completely ruled out.

The unknown remained unknown.

Civilizational immunity cannot remain in people’s lives forever on the grounds that something will always be unknown.

Two years after the new rules took effect, Fu He's area was, for the first time, not the default choice for a construction-related route change.

The route shifted to another area that had borne less in the past.

Its residents appealed at once.

"Why is it our turn?"

The deliberator did not answer, "Because taking turns is fair."

The harm of repeated burdens cannot be resolved by distributing harm evenly.

The plan was revised again.

Night construction was reduced. A more expensive temporary passage was added, with the cost shared across the areas benefiting.

No community was selected as this occasion's more suitable sacrifice.

The cost had not disappeared.

It could simply no longer flow forever down the most familiar route toward the quietest people.

The city held no press conference to announce the correction.

No red victory marker appeared on the risk map.

A few coordination rules were rewritten.

Two temporary permissions expired and went dark.

An annual public report on long-term consequences began.

Fu He still maintained water-recycling equipment.

Sometimes her route was still changed.

The difference was that the city could no longer interpret her always having given a little more in the past to mean that she ought to go on giving in the future.

No alarm rang throughout the city.

A few quiet rules changed.

And many harms that had not yet occurred lost their path into reality.

Chapter 25 Does Civilization Have the Right to Remember Forever?

At seventy-nine, Cheng Kuang applied for the first time to have his name removed from a public accident case study.

The application was refused.

Thirty-seven years earlier, he had been the duty supervisor at Beiling's regional energy dispatch station.

During a joint winter supply operation, the cooling system developed an anomaly.

The model judged that the equipment could continue running for six hours.

The engineer on site believed it should be shut down immediately.

A shutdown would affect residential heating and two hospitals.

Cheng Kuang decided to continue.

Four hours later, the energy-storage facility caught fire.

A maintenance worker died.

Seven people were injured.

Beiling lost power for nine hours.

The investigation established that he had sought no personal gain and concealed no evidence.

He had still made the wrong decision.

He had placed responsibility for the overall energy supply above an on-site risk not yet fully understood.

He had signed.

The consequences, too, had to have a name.

Cheng Kuang lost his post, bore legal responsibility, and paid compensation.

The accident led to three changes:

An on-site professional objection could pause automatic dispatch;

High-consequence operations could not rely solely on model probabilities to override equipment risks that could not be rolled back;

Anyone deciding to continue had to sign explicitly for responsibility for the worst consequences.

Over the decades that followed, almost every energy dispatcher studied the “Cheng Kuang accident.”

He did not flee that history.

After serving his sentence, he spent years taking part in equipment-safety reviews.

Not as a hero.

Nor to exchange repentance for forgiveness.

When he first applied to remove his name, the Public Archives Committee found:

The facts of responsibility retained continuing educational value.

The name was part of what anchored responsibility.

The application would not be supported.

Cheng Kuang accepted this.

His second application came nine years later.

His granddaughter, Cheng Yuting, applied for a public energy internship.

Seeing her name, the interviewer asked:

“Are you connected to that accident?”

She said yes.

“What do you think of your grandfather’s decision?”

Cheng Yuting had not lived through the accident.

She was still required to prove what she had learned from it.

In the end, she was accepted for the internship.

But the problem did not end.

In public searches, “Cheng Kuang” no longer referred only to a person who had fulfilled his responsibilities.

It was gradually becoming a moral label available for use at any time.

In discussions of system boundaries, someone would say:

“We must not have another Cheng Kuang.”

In arguments over energy policy, people used his name to stand for arrogance, recklessness, and the errors of an earlier age.

His descendants also began to be questioned in unrelated settings.

Cheng Kuang applied a third time:

“The error can remain. The name does not have to stay public forever.”

Gao Qin, the dead maintenance worker’s older sister, objected.

“The person who died has no chance to apply to be forgotten.”

“I’m not asking to erase him,” Cheng Kuang said.

“Once your name is deleted, who caused the accident?”

“I did then.”

“And afterward?”

“I still will have.”

“Then why can’t it be written?”

Cheng Kuang did not answer.

He had no standing to demand that the victim’s family let go.

Nor could civilization turn the family’s memory directly into authorization for indefinite public punishment.

The deliberation had to distinguish four different kinds of remembering.

First, unfinished responsibility.

While legal obligations, compensation, repair, and public risks remained unresolved, identity records had to stay clear.

Second, facts and institutional lessons.

What happened, why it happened, which judgments were wrong, and which rules changed as a result could not be deleted.

Third, historical archives.

The original chain of responsibility needed long-term preservation under statutory conditions, available for judicial purposes, research, and major public interests.

Fourth, everyday public presentation.

Should someone who had already fulfilled their responsibilities still have their name continuously exposed in every educational use, search, evaluation, and aspect of their descendants’ lives?

In the past, these four things had been treated as one.

As if withholding a name meant forgetting the facts;

In the same round of deliberation, two other applications did not make the news.

Du Weihe asked to delete health, address, and everyday-life records that no longer served a public-responsibility purpose. She wanted to retain only her suggested deletions and revisions to authorization texts, her hearing statements, and the rules she had changed.

The marks she made with an old pencil were preserved as a record of how procedures took shape, not extended into a statement of her position for the rest of her life.

Gu Xingzhou refused to place his maternal grandfather's old employee badge in a public contribution exhibition.

His grandfather had not authorized later generations to interpret the loss of a career as a universal allegory of industrial civilization. Whether the badge was kept was for the family alone to decide.

As if limiting everyday use meant whitewashing an error;

As if preserving a record of responsibility meant a person must live forever inside their worst moment.

Nebula verified Cheng Kuang's responsibilities again.

His criminal and civil responsibilities had been fulfilled.

No compensation remained unpaid.

Equipment repairs following the accident had long since ended.

He had not used public memory to regain power or benefits.

Keeping his name public no longer served to hold him accountable.

Its main uses were educational and symbolic.

Gao Qin still disagreed.

She brought the number from her younger brother's work uniform.

"You keep talking about institutional lessons. A particular person died."

The archives committee answered:

"That is why whether the victim's name is made public is determined by the family and existing law. Cheng Kuang's application cannot delete your records."

"Then why can his name be deleted?"

"It is not being deleted from the original archive. It is being withdrawn from public case studies that no longer require personal identification."

"That sounds very tidy."

"It will not be tidy. The facts of the accident, the chain of decisions, and the death it caused all remain."

"But people who come later won't know who it was."

"The archive can be consulted for legitimate research, legal, and public-review needs.

Everyday training no longer needs to begin by fixing a person who has lived a full life into the name of an error."

Gao Qin asked Cheng Kuang:

"Do you want people to forgive you?"

“Not anymore.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I want my granddaughter not to have to answer for me.”

This did not persuade Gao Qin.

The final decision did not require her to be persuaded.

The public training case was renamed “The Beiling Winter Energy-Storage Accident.”

The date, technical conditions, on-site objections, Cheng Kuang’s position, responsibility attached to his signature, legal consequences, and institutional revisions were all retained.

The everyday public version removed his name and information that could directly identify his descendants.

The original archive was sealed under the law.

The victim’s family retained their records, testimony, and right to speak publicly.

Cheng Kuang could not demand that they delete his name.

Nor could the public system automatically copy the family’s private remembering into permanent use by all of society.

Before the decision took effect, Cheng Kuang went to see Gao Qin.

He brought no apology generated by Spark.

He had said those words thirty-seven years earlier.

Saying them again might only ask her to bear his remorse once more.

They sat together for a long time.

Gao Qin spoke first:

“I will still say your name.”

“You can.”

“If someone asks me.”

“You can.”

“I won’t keep your secret.”

“You don’t have to.”

She looked at him.

“Then why did you come?”

“To tell you it isn’t being deleted from you.”

Gao Qin did not answer.

When he left, Cheng Kuang gave her a private record.

Not a public statement.

What he had written over the years whenever he thought of those four hours.

Spark asked whether copying was authorized.

Gao Qin chose not to copy it.

The record remained only in her hands.

A few years later, Cheng Yuting completed her energy internship.

When she independently signed off on a high-consequence dispatch for the first time, the system did not remind her of her grandfather's accident.

It showed only the facts, uncertainties, on-site objections, and worst consequences relevant to this decision.

She had to take responsibility in her own name.

After the name disappeared from the public case study, no one came back to life.

No harm was undone.

No responsibility was rewritten as merely a limitation of the times.

The error continued to have an effect through every dispatcher's right to halt operations, right to object, and responsibility for signing.

Cheng Kuang's name disappeared from the public case study.

The error did not disappear.

Civilization had finally learned to do both at once.

Chapter 26 When One Planet Is No Longer Enough

Humanity had long known that Earth would not be safe forever.

Knowing and confirming were not the same thing.

Before that near-Earth-object warning, many people still regarded a multi-node civilization as an expensive vision.

Near-Earth facilities could be used for research, communications, observation, and resource development.

Long-term bases, however, were repeatedly challenged:

There were still problems on Earth. Why send resources far away?

If only a few could leave, was this an escape pod for those who had more resources?

Humanity had not yet learned to live together. Would it merely take its old competition beyond Earth?

The questions were not wrong.

Change came from a small celestial body with no name.

At first, it was only a set of anomalous data in the near-Earth observation network.

Its orbit was uncertain.

Its size was uncertain.

Whether it would enter a danger window was uncertain too.

Three weeks later, several independent nodes completed verification.

The probability of a collision with Earth within the next ten-odd years crossed the threshold requiring action.

The probability was still low.

But the consequences no longer permitted waiting for certainty before preparing.

The nations did not begin by declaring a shared destiny.

They began by arguing over observation data, technical approaches, mission command, allocation of responsibility, and the consequences of failure.

Nebula formed only a minimum shared task:

Establish a common set of verifiable orbital facts;

Maintain independent observation;

Develop several intervention plans that could be rolled back;

Retain every state's final decision on participation;

Prevent the task from becoming a permanent gateway to another country's space facilities, materials, or data.

Preparation continued for seven years.

The small body was eventually confirmed not to be on course for a direct impact on densely populated areas.

It could still have global consequences.

Humanity carried out a deflection.

The first mission did not alter its course enough.

The second succeeded.

When it passed beyond Earth, the vast majority of people saw nothing.

The world did not celebrate having conquered the universe.

The review report contained one short sentence:

This time, humanity had time to prepare.

Several other events in the same period were less momentous.

Solar activity degraded several satellites and ground-based energy systems at the same time;

A crop disease passed through several major growing regions;

Two undersea information backbones were severed in a regional conflict;

A failure in a single information foundation briefly prevented several cities from accessing cross-domain models and historical data.

Every failure was repaired.

Taken together, they pointed to a fact that could no longer be avoided:

A civilization could have many backups and still keep them all on the same planet, dependent on the same kind of energy, within the same information environment and the same set of physical risks.

That was not truly a multi-node civilization.

It was merely multiple copies inside the same fragile world.

Long-term space plans returned to national-level deliberation.

The fiercest argument was not whether they could be built.

It was what to build them into.

Engineering departments proposed production nodes in near-Earth space and the Earth-Moon system:

Energy, materials, equipment repair, independent communications, and closed ecosystems.

They could preserve critical capabilities if Earth's systems failed.

They could also gradually expand resource boundaries.

Social representatives asked:

"If we take only production and repair, will the inhabitants be people, or personnel maintaining machines?"

Medical teams demanded comprehensive diagnosis, treatment, and long-term care.

Education teams demanded that children and later arrivals receive more than task training.

Public-law teams demanded paths to appeal, self-government, and exit for distant residents.

Teams concerned with culture and life demanded that language, food, festivals, private space, mourning, and useless creation travel with them.

Someone mocked the idea:

"The first long-term base isn't even built, and we're discussing customs and stone gardens?"

Luan Yin was very old by then.

She joined a remote deliberation through Spark and said only:

In the video, a stone that had never entered the garden lay beside her hand.

It was too small and had no distinctive openings. The engineering checklist did not require it to be sent far away.

"If every useless thing must stay on Earth, what we send out will be only a system capable of surviving."

The engineering lead answered:

"The first stage must secure survival first."

"Yes."

"Then we can discuss this later."

"Who will discuss it later?"

That question added a condition for accepting the completed project:

A long-term base could not test only whether people could survive.

It had to test whether a complete civilization could form, operate, correct itself, and continue to grow there.

This did not mean the first bases would contain every aspect of life on Earth.

It meant that, from the design stage onward, medicine, education, care, culture, rights, private life, and public repair were not decorations to be added when resources were plentiful.

Together with air, water, energy, food, and maintenance, they constituted “a place where life can continue over the long term.”

Engineers accounted for less than half of the first prospective residents.

There were doctors, teachers, ecological maintenance workers, people responsible for public affairs, cooks, caregivers, materials workers, and researchers.

Some had no clearly critical occupation.

A young man named Wen Shuo applied to join.

His principal experience was caring for two children and an ill father.

At first, the selection team judged his professional irreplaceability insufficient.

The care team asked in return:

“Why is sustaining a machine a profession, while sustaining a family is merely personal experience?”

In the end, Wen Shuo did not receive moral priority because of his care work.

His real abilities entered the task assessment:

Sustained, repetitive care;

Organizing children’s daily lives;

Maintaining everyday life under pressure;

Unfamiliarity with equipment;

Insufficient understanding of risks in enclosed environments.

He passed the training.

He also gained the right to refuse.

“Can I decide not to go in the end?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Even after using training resources?”

“There is a real contribution, and a real cost. They do not buy your life.”

Before the first long-term base mission, Nebula established authorization across space.

Real subjects on Earth could participate in construction, diagnosis and treatment, teaching, and equipment maintenance through Spark and controlled physical terminals.

Authorized avatars could carry out defined tasks within the limits of communications.

They could not accept long-term risks on a real person’s behalf;

They could not decide that a real person would relocate;

They could not make irrevocable commitments to Earth for distant residents;
Still less could the reach of digital capabilities turn Earth's judgments into real-time commands that distant people had to obey.

The distance was still short.

The delay was already enough to reveal the limits of "remote presence."

Su Xian was among the base's first medical staff.

A week before departure, her mother asked:

"If something really goes wrong, can Earth bring you back?"

"Not necessarily."

"Won't your Spark be there all the time?"

"It can bring a lot of things over."

"What can't it bring?"

Su Xian thought for a long time.

"The consequences."

Her mother did not urge her to stay.

Nor did she behave more nobly because her daughter was taking part in a civilizational mission.

She only tucked an old cup into the luggage.

"They have cups there," Su Xian said.

"I know."

"This one is chipped."

"I know that too."

Before the long-term base opened, the final review did not examine only how long its systems could sustain themselves.

It checked:

Who would take responsibility for a serious injury;

Who would have authority to decide after communications with Earth failed;

Whether residents could refuse tasks;

Whether children automatically inherited the role of builders;

Whether contribution would still not be an admission ticket to basic rights during resource shortages;

How the community could end;

How the dead could be remembered without being generated anew;

How Earth and distant places could retain minimum shared boundaries amid their differences.

There was another review, initially placed in an engineering appendix.

Whether people could maintain mental stability over long periods in distant space.

The person who raised the question turned to the report's final page and added:

“And when someone is still clear-minded, still able to work, but no longer knows why to continue, how does civilization intend to respond?”

The first distant-space isolation experiment lasted four hundred and twenty days.

Twenty-four participants lived in a closed environment physically isolated from Earth.

Communications delays were gradually increased in line with future deep-space missions;

Supplies could not be added at short notice;

Earth could not take over in real time;

Spark remained present, but could use only the data, capabilities, and relationship interfaces explicitly authorized before the mission.

For the first hundred days, everything went more smoothly than expected.

Work was completed, conflicts could be mediated, and sleep, food, and equipment maintenance stayed within safe limits.

On day two hundred and thirty-seven, ecology researcher Jiang Ning stopped photographing the bean seedling that grew just a little each day inside the habitat.

No one had asked her to photograph it.

It was something she had kept for herself.

Three days later, she stopped joining the communal dinner.

Two weeks after that, she still completed every task on time and could still answer every risk question accurately.

Spark did not automatically interpret silence as illness.

First, it reported the changes to her: her sleep had broken into shorter stretches; she repeatedly opened communications from her family but rarely replied; after completing tasks, she no longer checked where the work went or whom it helped.

“Would you like to begin psychological intervention?” Spark asked.

“I haven't lost control,” Jiang Ning said.

“Correct.”

“I just don’t know what any of this is for anymore.”

The habitat did not immediately arrange a conversation about her mission.

Nor did it fill the screen she woke to each day with “for humanity.”

Most of the plans the distant-space mission committee had prepared addressed panic, aggression, cognitive decline, sleep disruption, and group conflict.

They could address danger.

They could not answer why someone still able to fulfill her duties felt that she was disappearing from the world.

The experimental team called this state “meaning collapse.”

It was not a medical diagnosis of a person.

It described only a possible rupture: action continues, but the connections between action and real others, real consequences, and one’s own choices grow weaker and weaker.

Comfort from Earth arrived after a delay.

Some of it had already missed the day she had truly struggled through.

Some seemed to speak to a version of her in another time.

Spark could organize, remind, and relay. It could not fabricate the sense that her family understood her at this very moment.

Nor could Nebula prove to her that the universe necessarily bestowed ultimate meaning on every voyage.

Some believed that life entering interstellar space was the universe knowing itself through life.

Some saw only matter, distance, chance, and silence.

These could become personal beliefs, philosophies, and sources of spiritual support.

They could not be written as facts every voyager must accept, much less become a test of thought for deciding who was fit to travel far.

What truly changed the experiment was a task acknowledgment.

A set of microbial data Jiang Ning had completed earlier was adopted by a childhood-immunity research team on Earth.

Under the original procedure, she would have received only “data archived.”

The research team applied to open a limited feedback interface.

Forty-six hours later, a doctor she did not know appeared in a delayed video.

The doctor did not say she had saved anyone.

They only held up a heavily marked experimental flowchart to the camera:

“Here are three places where you saved us taking the long way around.”

After watching, Jiang Ning did not immediately resume photographing the seedling.

She applied to leave two repetitive tasks that no longer allowed room for judgment, and to join the next round of ecological design instead.

The application was approved.

She also asked to keep half a day each week without explaining its purpose.

That was approved too.

On day two hundred and eighty-one, she picked up the camera again.

She did not point it at the seedling.

She pointed it at a companion mending socks.

That photograph did not enter the contribution record.

After the experiment, support for the mind in distant space moved from the medical appendix into civilizational infrastructure.

It did not aim for constant happiness or use obedience to tasks as proof of stability.

At a minimum, it guaranteed:

That everyone knew where their actions had reached, and also had the right to know when those actions had not produced the expected result;

That tasks retained paths for real choice, refusal, change, and exit;

That intimate relationships were not simulated by systems, and delays or lost contact were not disguised as immediate companionship;

That the community could care for vulnerability, acknowledge moments without meaning, and pass through silence together;

That medicine could intervene in danger, but could not monopolize explanations of loneliness, belief, and the purpose of life;

That culture, spiritual traditions, creation, play, private time, and life that produced no contribution were not postponed forever because resources in distant space were tight.

The last point caused the longest argument.

The engineering team asked:

“In a place where every gram of supplies must be counted, how can we preserve a life that produces no contribution?”

Wen Shuo answered:

“If a person is allowed to exist only as part of a task, what we preserve is still merely a system.”

This did not resolve all loneliness in distant space.

Some would still break down. Some would choose to return. Some could not return. Others would find a direction for their lives in the long silence that they had never had before.

Nebula could reduce foreseeable harm, keep relationships and feedback real, and stop tasks from swallowing people.

It could not generate meaning for anyone.

Meaning still had to emerge where a person chose for themselves, took responsibility for themselves, and made contact with the real world.

Many questions still had no answer.

The base was therefore not declared a backup of civilization.

It was only the first point of growth where people could live over the long term, scale down independently, exercise limited self-government, and remain connected to Earth.

On opening day, Su Xian woke in low gravity.

The circulating air made a continuous mechanical sound.

Water moved slowly against the sides of her cup.

Someone next door was making breakfast. It smelled unlike any food on Earth.

A child was crying in the public corridor.

A teacher crouched nearby, without telling the child that this was a great day for humanity.

Spark reported that the base's basic systems were functioning normally.

Then it returned to silence.

Earth was still outside the window.

Not an old world they had left behind.

Nor a center that distant nodes must obey.

It was the place of origin.

The first home.

The starting point from which every distant place could still speak of “coming back.”

When the first long-term base opened, people did not say humanity had left Earth.

They said home had learned, for the first time, to have a second place to wake up without leaving its place of origin.

Part VI A New Civilization Extends Its Reach: The Universe Becomes a Home

Distance does not automatically make civilization expansive.

First, it only magnifies everything.

It magnifies the gap before instructions arrive, the consequences self-government must bear, misunderstanding, loneliness, cultural differences, and every node's impulse to impose its judgments on distant others.

If only equipment, resources, and production systems enter interstellar space, civilization has not truly left Earth. People must be able to be born, live, love, argue, refuse, err, repair, and begin again there. AGI, Spark, medicine, education, care, rights, culture, memory, and useless creation must arrive together too. What enters interstellar space is not tools, but complete life and civilization.

A new civilization's extension does not mean spreading Nebula, or any other center, across the universe.

It requires humans, AGI, relationships, institutions, culture, memory, and shared life to truly enter distant places, so that ever more distant lives can still constitute civilization together, unable to replace one another or control one another in real time.

Chapter 27 A Decision That Arrived Six Minutes Later

In the ninth year after Chenghai Base opened, normal communications between Earth and the Moon still took very little time.

Radio signals took a little over a second to reach Earth from the Moon.

People had therefore thought that genuinely long delays did not yet apply between Earth and the Moon.

Only after the accident did they learn that distance had never been determined solely by how long light traveled.

Signals had to pass through damaged relays and be confirmed free of erroneous splicing. Risks had to move from local sensors into Earth's review system. Earth's advice then had to cross the degraded link again and reach a rapidly changing scene.

That day, six minutes was already too long.

The accident began at 3:17 local base time.

After a high-temperature printing run in the outer-ring materials room, pressure in the cooling circuit suddenly fell.

The initial alarm indicated only an equipment fault.

Eleven seconds later, a high-pressure pipe ruptured. Small metal fragments penetrated the isolation layer and struck an adjacent gas-processing unit.

The outer ring began losing pressure.

A mixture of smoke and gases advanced along the maintenance passage toward the residential area.

Within two seconds, the base's local AGI completed its first assessment:

If Isolation Door Three closed immediately, the eighty-three people in the residential area could retain a stable air supply;

Two maintenance workers in the outer ring would be trapped beyond it;

If closure was delayed, the rescue window would be at most ninety-seven seconds;

After that, smoke and loss of pressure might breach the second line of protection together.

The two maintenance workers were Ye Chen and Mu Yan.

Before the accident, they had been replacing a valve assembly worn by lunar dust.

Ye Chen was closer to the isolation door.

Mu Yan was farther in.

Yu Chuan, the base's emergency lead, did not order the door closed at once.

"Open their vital-status information."

Nebula returned only information within the task's authorized scope.

Ye Chen was still moving.

Mu Yan's vital signs were unstable.

"Can a maintenance robot drag him back?"

"Fragment density in the passage is too high. Probability of robot passage: forty-one percent. If the robot becomes lodged in the door track, the probability of isolation-door failure increases."

"I'm not asking for probabilities. Tell me the worst consequences."

The local AGI unfolded the chain of consequences again.

Attempting a rescue might bring Mu Yan back;

It might also prevent Door Three from closing fully;

If the second line of protection failed under pressure, the children's living area and medical module would be affected first.

Su Xian had already reached the medical module.

She saw teachers leading children from the public corridor into the inner area.

Some were still in pajamas.

Some held the water they had not finished at breakfast.

The base's Spark network began confirming locations person by person, without turning anyone's fear into a public emotional indicator.

At 3:18:04, Ye Chen appeared on the inside of the isolation door.

A slit had been torn in the shoulder of his protective suit.

"Where's Mu Yan?" Yu Chuan asked.

Bent over, Ye Chen said only:

"Behind."

Mu Yan's voice then came through the emergency channel.

Broken and intermittent.

"Door... close."

No one knew whether this was a fully formed judgment.

Nor could anyone confirm whether he understood that he no longer had time to return.

When Earth's emergency center received the first accident packet, the relay was switching automatically.

Seventeen seconds of data were missing.

Under the cross-space responsibility protocol, Earth could not issue an irreversible command on an incomplete chain of accident data.

It first asked Chenghai Base to confirm pressure, personnel, and isolation-door status.

In ordinary circumstances, this caution protected distant residents from harm caused by Earth's misjudgment.

At that moment, it also consumed time.

At 3:18:29, the local AGI reported:

"Final window for stable closure: fourteen seconds."

Yu Chuan looked at Ye Chen.

Ye Chen shook his head.

Not in agreement.

Nor in forgiveness.

Only to tell him that Mu Yan had not followed.

Yu Chuan ordered Door Three closed.

Debris obstructed the final part of its descent.

Ye Chen and two emergency workers pushed down the mechanical lock together.

The sound from the outer ring disappeared.

Twenty-seven seconds later, Mu Yan's vital signs disappeared too.

Earth's first formal recommendation arrived exactly six minutes after the accident began.

It recommended:

Provided the second line of protection was confirmed capable of withstanding the pressure, delay isolation closure until the final window and prioritize one unmanned rescue attempt.

It was not wrong.

But it could no longer change anything.

Once the accident was stabilized, the argument spread from Chenghai to Earth.

Some believed Yu Chuan had crossed the civilizational decision-making boundaries humanity had jointly established.

"The base is not an independent state."

"How can a local AGI and eighty-odd residents interpret risk boundaries for all of humanity?"

Others answered:

"If every irreversible decision must wait for Earth, distant self-government is valid only while Earth's commands can still arrive in time."

The sharper question was:

When a distant community gives up one member to preserve the majority, is it bearing civilizational responsibility, or using distance to evade civilizational scrutiny?

The review did not begin by deciding whether Yu Chuan was a hero.

It first reconstructed the scene.

Why did Door Three have only one mechanical lock?

Why could a maintenance robot become lodged in the door track?

Why was the children's living area in the second chain of risk?

Had the local AGI's consequence tree concealed a low-probability rescue path?

Could Mu Yan's "door... close" be treated as a clear, voluntary, and valid decision?

Why did Earth need seventeen seconds to fill in the missing data?

Who was responsible for the spatial layout established nine years earlier?

At the hearing, Yu Chuan said:

“I gave the order.”

“We cannot say the local AGI calculated it.”

“Nor can Earth’s later, different recommendation mean that I was merely making an incorrect version of Earth’s decision at the time.”

Tao Xu, Mu Yan’s partner, sat in the meeting room on Earth.

She did not accept the simplified account of “sacrificing one person to save eighty-three.”

“Mu Yan was not the one in that equation.”

“He was a particular person.”

“You may prove that closing the door was necessary. You cannot write necessity as an absence of harm.”

After the accident was confirmed, Spark had already delivered the facts to her private domain.

The message contained only:

An accident has occurred;

Contact with Mu Yan has been lost;

The base is confirming the situation;

Unconfirmed information will not be filled in.

It did not generate a farewell from Mu Yan’s past language.

It did not tell Tao Xu on his behalf not to be sad.

Nor did it turn the broken “door... close” into a complete last statement.

Tao Xu later asked:

“If Spark knows how he usually spoke, why can’t it bring back the words he never finished?”

A staff member answered:

“Because the person who comes back must be him.”

“He can’t come back.”

“That makes it all the more important that the system not pretend he did.”

Tao Xu said nothing for a long time.

In the end, she agreed to preserve the original audio.

Without restoration.

Without reducing the noise until it seemed there had been no distance.

The accident review reached three kinds of conclusion.

Yu Chuan had decided within a valid authorization for self-government. His personal responsibility was clear; he had not exceeded his authority.

The local AGI had not acquired decision-making power, but it had inadequately presented a rescue path with very low feasibility. It had to revise how its consequence tree was expressed.

The base and Earth shared structural responsibility: spatial layout, mechanical redundancy, and relay verification had compressed a risk that could have been resolved earlier into a life-or-death choice within fourteen seconds.

Cross-space rules changed as a result.

The principle that humans make final decisions on values and responsibility was no longer interpreted as Earth's real-time remote control over every node.

Earth, states, and distant communities jointly set civilizational goals, minimum rights, levels of self-government, review cycles, termination conditions, and minimum interfaces.

Actors on site took responsibility for on-site decisions within their authorized scope.

After a decision, they had to undergo cross-node review.

If a distant community repeatedly crossed minimum boundaries, other nodes could suspend interfaces for resources, technology, and shared safeguards;

But they could not use commands that arrived late to live life over again for those who had already borne the consequences.

When Chenghai Base held a farewell for Mu Yan, Tao Xu did not attend remotely.

She chose to wait on Earth for the complete original record to return.

Many years later, Xu Chi, born in Chengyuan, read the full accident archive for the first time.

She did not copy Tao Xu's decision into a declaration of self-government. She wrote only in her notes: self-government does not mean being farther from the center. It means that when a decision falls, its consequences cannot be sent back for the center to receive on one's behalf.

Six minutes is not long.

For those waiting for a word, it was already enough to teach two worlds that neither could take the other's place.

Chapter 28 Who Owns an Asteroid Where No One Lives?

When Yueheng 17 first entered public view, it was only a dark point in a deep-space image.

Its diameter was smaller than a city.

It rotated slowly.

Its orbit was stable.

Preliminary spectra indicated a high proportion of metals and water-bearing minerals.

More importantly, several anomalous areas on its surface might preserve chemical traces from the early solar system.

It had not been discovered by one person.

An observation array on Earth first detected an orbital deviation;

A computing node at Chenghai Base completed the initial confirmation;

A deep-space company called Tuoye undertook continuous tracking;

Tens of thousands of actors used their own Sparks to take part in image screening, orbit checks, and equipment troubleshooting;

A distant probe finally approached and sent back the first complete data.

On the day the data arrived, four claims to rights entered Nebula at once.

Tuoye demanded priority development rights.

It had invested in the probe and propulsion system and borne years of failure costs.

The Chenghai community demanded that the main share of use be reserved for distant nodes.

Earth's public resource agency argued that no resource capable of changing long-term continued-existence capabilities could be monopolized by one part of civilization.

Future generations had no representative, yet every side included them in its reasons.

Xu Chi, a young researcher from Chengyuan, joined the hearing through a distant node. She opposed Earth automatically acquiring ownership on grounds of shared continued existence. She also opposed Chenghai combining discovery, approach, construction, and risk-bearing into permanent possession.

"Contribution must be remembered," she said. "But being remembered does not mean owning from then on."

"If investors are not allowed priority of use, who will take the risks of deep space?"

"If whoever arrives first owns it, the interstellar age merely pushes the boundaries of enclosure farther out."

“Distant residents bear the risks of distance and environment. Why can Earth call the resources the property of all humanity?”

“Who can refuse on behalf of the unborn the unknown harm caused by extraction today?”

The dispute soon settled on an apparently simple question:

Yueheng 17 had no inhabitants.

Who owned it?

The old logic had offered many familiar answers.

The first to discover it.

The first to arrive.

The one who invested most.

The one most capable of using it.

Those able to protect it.

Those who represented the whole.

Every answer explained part of the facts.

Every answer could also turn capability into ownership, risk and investment into permanent possession, and “for everyone” into central power from which there was no exit.

Chen Ke, Tuoye’s head, displayed records of one hundred and seventy-three failures.

Propulsion-system explosions.

Navigation-model drift.

Two probes lost.

An engineer permanently injured in a ground-test accident.

“These are not acts of courage in a public narrative.”

“They are costs we actually bore.”

“If all that remains after success is ‘it belongs to everyone,’ why didn’t everyone share the costs when we failed?”

The Chenghai representative did not deny this.

She asked only:

“Bearing costs can establish priority of use.”

“Why must it establish permanent ownership?”

Chen Ke answered:

“Without stable rights, long-term investment cannot be calculated.”

“Stable for how long?”

“At least one complete development cycle.”

“Who defines that cycle?”

“Engineering realities.”

“Or how long the project wants to exist?”

The exchange stopped there.

Nebula did not hand the dispute to a combined weighting.

Investment, risk, professional judgment, shared continued existence, distant needs, unknown environments, and the rights of those who came later could not be compressed into one number.

They belonged to different layers of responsibility.

The deliberation first separated the components of “ownership.”

The fact of discovery could be recorded;

Real investment and risk could constitute contributions;

Specific facilities could have defined operating rights;

Under authorization, resources could be used with priority for a limited period;

Necessary shares could be reserved for shared continued existence;

Unknown regions could remain unentered for the time being;

When the task ended, responsibility had to be taken for repair relating to facilities, waste, and ecological effects.

None of these required first declaring who owned the entire asteroid.

The second question came from distant Sparks.

Did the tens of thousands of actors who had checked the orbit also gain resource rights?

Some argued that their distributed labor had made discovery possible.

Others noted that most participation had lasted only minutes, and some judgments had been made automatically by authorized avatars.

The deliberation finally confirmed:

Extensions of digital capability could produce real contributions;

Contact with data from a distance could not, by itself, confer possession of physical resources.

Contribution had to be connected to real action, verifiable gains, and real-world responsibility.

Using resources meant accepting quotas, risks, waste, maintenance, and restoration upon exit at the same time.

Taking only benefits without entering the chain of consequences did not constitute a complete usage right.

What actually halted extraction was a layer of complex organic matter the probe discovered in a shadowed region.

There was no evidence of life there.

Nor was there evidence that the layer was merely an ordinary deposit.

The scientific team requested twelve months of observation without intervention.

Chen Ke opposed it.

“The window is only sixteen months.”

“If we miss it, the next low-cost approach is seven years away.”

The scientific team answered:

“The resources may still be there in seven years.”

“Evidence removed by mining will not come back.”

Tuoye proposed reducing the exclusion zone.

Chenghai proposed exploring while extracting.

The public resource agency proposed freezing the entire asteroid.

None of the three plans offered enough assurance.

The final decision did not select the safest side.

It acknowledged what was not currently known.

Nebula designated Yueheng 17 an object of temporary shared stewardship for one year.

No permanent ownership would be established during that year;

Tuoye would retain standing in subsequent negotiations on the basis of its existing project investment and on-site capabilities. Failed investment and public contributions would be faithfully recorded separately;

The scientific team would receive limited observation rights;

Chenghai and other distant nodes would jointly review sampling boundaries;

Any new finding could trigger extension, reduction, or termination of the freeze;

If development began, usage rights would be granted in stages according to real needs, actual capabilities, shared continued existence, and guarantees of responsibility. They would not automatically carry over into permanent possession.

Tuoye did not receive the answer it wanted.

After the decision, Chen Ke said:

“If nothing is found after a year, today’s caution will be a real cost.”

The deliberator answered:

“Yes.”

“Who bears it?”

“You cannot bear it alone. Public observation resources, losses from the mission delay, and safeguards for the next window will all enter the shared costs.”

For the first time, Chen Ke did not continue objecting.

When civilization asks an actor to exercise restraint for the sake of the unknown, it cannot leave the entire cost of that restraint to that actor alone.

A year later, no life had been found in the anomalous region.

But it was confirmed to preserve a rare chain of early chemical evolution.

The development area was redrawn.

Tuoye obtained fifteen years of staged usage rights.

Two areas were permanently preserved.

Some resources entered distant reserves for continued existence, some repaid shared investment, and some remained for nodes not yet formed.

No party received the entire asteroid.

Extraction had been delayed for a year.

The resources had not run away.

For the first time, civilization did not immediately make something its own merely because it could reach it.

Chapter 29 When Those Far Away No Longer Want to Be Earthlings

One hundred and forty-seven years after the Chengyuan community was founded, people born there rarely spoke of “going back” to Earth.

They spoke of going to Earth.

As people on Earth spoke of going to another continent.

First-generation residents still alive with the support of long-term life technologies could still smell rain in their dreams.

The second generation regarded rain as a kind of weather their parents often described.

From the third generation onward, many children standing in Earth’s rain for the first time instinctively looked up to see whether the public dome was leaking.

Chengyuan’s gravity, cycle of day and night, closed ecology, and long-term medical adaptation had changed bodily rhythms.

People spoke more slowly.

Not because they thought slowly.

Because early communications had been expensive, and their speech retained longer pauses.

Several Earth languages borrowed from one another in shared life, forming a new dialect.

The phrase “wait for me to come back” meant something closer in Chengyuan’s language to:

“Keep a place for our next meeting.”

Earth’s general translation systems could render the meaning.

They found it harder to render how a place understood waiting.

The dispute over identity arose from an update to population registration.

Earth’s public archives classified Chengyuan’s residents as:

“Population of a distant branch of Earth civilization.”

The classification had originally served only to track medical, resource, and migration relationships.

Chengyuan’s assembly requested the removal of “branch.”

It proposed new wording:

“Residents of the Chengyuan community; members of human civilization; citizens of the universe.”

Opposition quickly emerged on Earth.

“Without Earth’s technology, resources, and pioneers, where would they have come from?”

“They retain membership in humanity but reject an Earth identity. Do they want shared safeguards without responsibility for shared history?”

“Today they remove ‘branch.’ Will they remove ‘human’ tomorrow?”

Among Chengyuan’s young people, some voices were more forceful too.

“We have been born here for over a hundred years. Why are we still merely someone else’s distant outpost?”

“Earth is my ancestors’ home. It is not automatically my center.”

“If we must first acknowledge subordination, a minimum civilizational connection is not a connection. It is submission.”

At its deepest, the argument was not about one word.

It was about whether a civilization could allow those who came after it to grow into people no longer the same as itself.

Xu Chi was twenty-six.

Born in Chengyuan, she was a public language teacher and also studied how distant communities told their own histories of civilization.

Her ancestors had come from Earth’s eastern coast.

Her family still kept a chipped cup.

No one drank from it anymore.

It had passed from Su Xian’s mother into the first base, then later arrived in Chengyuan with the migration archives.

As a child, Xu Chi had thought the chip was some ancient Earth emblem.

Only at ten did she learn it was just an accidental knock.

Before the Earth hearing began, she brought the cup into the meeting room.

An Earth representative asked:

“Did you bring it to prove that you still belong to Earth?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“To show that where we come from and who we are today need not cancel each other out.”

The Earth representative said:

“If every distant community renames itself, what will hold human civilization together?”

Xu Chi answered:

“Shared responsibility. Not every place having the same name.”

Chengyuan was not asking to sever every relationship.

It retained responses to shared threats to continued existence;

Minimum protection for unknown life;

Cross-node accident reviews;

Minimum boundaries concerning personhood, children, basic survival, and irreversible high-consequence actions;

The obligation, when disaster exceeded local capacity, to seek help from other nodes and bear the corresponding responsibilities.

What it asked to change was this:

Earth would no longer have an inherent right to decide Chengyuan's everyday life, language, educational rhythms, or local resources;

Chengyuan's residents would not automatically inherit a commitment to obey Earth forever from their ancestors' migration authorizations;

Every new person, on reaching adulthood, could decide anew how closely to identify with their locality, ancestral node, Earth, and the wider civilization.

Sparks passed across generations were the hardest issue.

Early voyagers had authorized Spark to preserve languages, family records, skills, and some public memories.

These helped later generations understand where they came from.

They were also beginning to create pressure.

When a young person in Chengyuan declined to attend Earth Homeland Remembrance Day, the family Spark prompted:

"Your direct relatives in the preceding three generations all took part in this commemoration."

The prompt was not coercive.

Yet it made refusal feel like betrayal.

Chengyuan therefore revised its rules for carrying things forward across generations.

The revision group consulted Du Weihe's early opinions on authorization.

Someone proposed listing "silence cannot be interpreted as consent" as a founding principle.

Xu Chi changed "founding principle" to "historical opinion."

"It helped us," she said. "But it is not an ancestral command. If it still holds today, people today must confirm it anew."

Spark could preserve facts, language, and works that ancestors had explicitly authorized to remain;

It could not infer a new person's value choices from family history;

It could not turn continued participation into a traditional obligation;

It could not generate advice that had never been left behind in the name of "what your ancestors wanted";

Every adult could decide which relationships entered their own Spark, and which remained only in historical archives.

Many people on Earth believed this would rupture civilizational memory.

Xu Chi said:

"Forced repetition is not carrying something forward."

"Only what people can refuse, yet still choose to keep, truly belongs to those who come later."

The identity agreement took two years to complete.

Chengyuan's residents were no longer called the population of a branch of Earth civilization.

They had local identities, historical and cultural identities, identities of shared participation, and civilizational identities.

National and ancestral identities could be retained or changed under the law;

Being a citizen of the universe did not confer a higher rank of personhood or cancel any existing identity;

It confirmed only that, regardless of the node where a subject was born, they could enter shared affairs across nodes and had to take responsibility when their actions affected the wider civilization.

On the day the agreement passed, some people on Earth mourned.

They felt humanity had lost part of a shared name.

Chengyuan did not celebrate a victory either.

Xu Chi returned to school and read the new designation on the registration form to the children.

A child asked:

"Are we still human, then?"

"Yes."

"Are we still Earthlings?"

Xu Chi did not answer for the whole class.

“Some people will say they are.”

“Some won’t.”

“You can decide for yourself when you’re older.”

The child asked again:

“Is Earth still home?”

Xu Chi placed the old cup by the window.

There was no rain outside.

In the distance, an artificial waterway passed through the night lighting, reflecting a thin line of light.

She said a sentence in Chengyuan’s dialect.

Earth’s automatic translation rendered it:

“We have not declared our separation from humanity.”

Xu Chi shook her head.

“That isn’t what it means.”

She translated it again:

“We have simply said for the first time, in our own language: we are at home too.”

Xu Chi closed the public channel. Only the children, the old chipped cup, and a night outside the window that did not belong to Earth remained in the classroom.

Chapter 30 Civilization Is Not Complete

Much later, children from Yuanzhao School visited an exhibition on the history of civilizational operation.

They had been born on land lit by an unfamiliar star.

Earth's sun was only a familiar star in historical images.

Their teacher did not call the exhibition a history of human progress.

At the entrance were the words:

“Some decisions that were preserved, and some lives that were allowed to disappear.”

The first exhibit was a downpour.

Four systems could not see one another.

The hospital had needs, the warehouse had supplies, the roads had capacity, and the community knew who was waiting. Yet no reliable relationship connected them.

The children struggled to understand:

“Why didn't they just ask Nebula?”

The guide answered:

“There was no Nebula then.”

“How did they live without Nebula?”

“As you do now. Relying on people, families, organizations, institutions, and many incomplete systems.”

“Were they very afraid?”

“Yes.”

“Did they stop being afraid later?”

“Later, when they were afraid, they had more relationships through which they could bear things together.”

The second exhibit had no video.

Only a reduced image of one page of an authorization interface.

Du Weihe had read it word by word for seventeen minutes, asked where each item of data would go, and finally withdrawn part of her authorization.

Her health, address, and family information had not entered public history.

The children could see only the public comment she had left:

Refusal cannot be hidden behind consent.

One child asked:

“Why didn’t she give the system all her information? Wouldn’t that be safer?”

The guide said:

“Because safety cannot depend on a person first surrendering themselves.”

The third exhibit was a failed approach.

An early Nebula experiment had allocated resources incorrectly.

Zhou Yi had signed the rollback.

The new system had stepped back to where the old systems bore responsibility.

The display case preserved the twenty-seven-minute operational record from that time.

Failure had not been rewritten as a necessary cost on the way to success.

At the end of the record, a child noticed that many people’s names were no longer visible.

“Did they do something wrong?”

“Some did. Others had simply taken part.”

“Why not keep them all?”

“Because civilization’s need to remember what happened does not mean every name must remain exposed forever to the eyes of those who come later.”

The fourth exhibit was an amended rule.

The first builders had stipulated that public tasks could not commit scarce resources for more than eighteen years.

More than sixty years later, their successors changed it for a coastal ecological plan.

The old and new sentences stood side by side.

Neither was marked as finally correct.

Beside them was written:

“The founders made room at the table for those who came later, not so that those who came later would agree with them forever.”

The fifth exhibit came from Chenghai Base.

Isolation Door Three had been dismantled long ago.

A small section of its track had been preserved.

The metal still bore the deformation left when Ye Chen and the emergency workers forced down the mechanical lock.

Mu Yan’s final voice was not played in the public space.

There was only a statement:

A real person died in the accident;

A decision preserved more lives;

Necessity did not cancel the harm;

Nor did review generate the dead person back into being.

The children were quiet here for a while.

They were already accustomed to living in a multi-node civilization.

They did not know that real-time commands from Earth had once been seen as the final guarantee of safety far away.

It was also hard to imagine that “citizen of the universe” had once been a new phrase needing repeated explanation.

To them, home had always had many places.

Earth was the place of origin.

The first home.

Neither the only place to live nor an old world that could be forgotten.

Near the end of the visit, a child named Chen Zhao asked:

“When was Nebula completed?”

The guide did not answer immediately.

Nebula’s status for the day was displayed on the wall.

Dozens of spatial domains were connected;

More nodes remained silent;

Some communities were forming;

Others had dissolved;

Some interfaces had closed when tasks ended;

Some old rules awaited review;

An unfamiliar ecology was showing changes not yet understood;

A new node had sent an invitation to build together.

“Why do you think it was ever completed?” the guide asked.

Chen Zhao pointed to the exhibition.

“Because all this has already happened.”

“Having happened is not the same as being complete.”

“When would it count as complete, then?”

“Perhaps when every question has an answer.”

Chen Zhao thought for a moment.

“What about new questions?”

The guide smiled.

“That is why it is not complete.”

Nebula is not a machine that runs forever once built. Still less is civilization.

Nor is Nebula a civilizational brain that knows every answer. It is only one structure through which a new civilization operates together.

What truly constitutes the new civilization is real life, AGI and authorized agents, Spark, families and relationships, communities, localities and states, public institutions, businesses and professional organizations, resources and relationships of use, culture and memory, and the shared life continually taking place among them.

Nebula makes shared facts visible, allowing cross-domain consequences to be seen, coordinated, and reviewed. Decisions about purposes, professional judgment, execution, and correction still belong separately to the corresponding actors.

This does not give it ownership of anyone.

Countless Sparks, communities, and public operating nodes participate together in forming Nebula.

Nebula still owns not a single Spark.

AGI has taken on ever broader perception, simulation, and everyday management.

It can independently maintain air, energy, medical care, and transport at distant nodes. It can build the conditions for survival before humans arrive. It can also point out overall consequences that human intuition cannot see.

It still does not acquire civilizational sovereignty.

Calculating farther ahead does not mean deciding for anyone why to live;

Being able to sustain civilization does not mean owning it;

Helping meaning emerge does not mean becoming the source of all meaning.

Chen Zhao’s Spark had remained silent throughout.

It had not rushed to answer “What is Nebula?”

Only when the visit ended did it notify him:

“Your companions have sent an invitation to join them.”

Outside the window, the new settlement was building its second public light court.

The first grew only plants that could stabilize air and water cycles.

The second was intended to keep an area without a defined function.

Some wanted to plant low-growing luminous moss brought from Chengyuan.

Some worried it would alter the local microecology.

Some proposed only a contained planting trial.

A few children insisted on leaving a patch empty, with nothing planted at all.

Chen Zhao asked Spark:

“Which one do you think is right?”

Spark presented the risks, resources, historical records, and several paths that could be rolled back.

It did not choose for him.

“They’re waiting for you,” it said.

Chen Zhao looked back at the history of civilizational operation.

The earliest downpour was still falling in silence.

Du Weihe still paused before that page of the authorization interface.

A failure could still be rolled back.

A founding rule still allowed those who came later to rewrite it.

An isolation door still reminded every distant place that self-government was not freedom from consequences, but taking responsibility for them oneself.

These old events gave him no answer he had to obey.

They left only a table with seats still unfilled for those who came later.

Chen Zhao left the exhibition hall.

Light from an unfamiliar star fell on land not yet named.

In the farther darkness lay worlds civilization had not reached, had not understood, and should not rush to possess.

Becoming a home did not make the universe familiar, safe, or the property of humanity.

“Home” meant only this:

Wherever they arrived, complete life and civilization must learn to live there;

Exercise restraint before the unknown, retain connection amid differences, and take responsibility for harm;

Do not leave Earth as an exhausted starting point, or turn distant places into new objects of possession;

Do not let powerful systems live for people, or let any life lose its claim to be taken seriously because it is temporarily useless.

Chen Zhao's companions called to him from beside the light court.

Someone held moss in their hands.

Someone carried environmental records.

Others were still arguing over the empty patch.

Chen Zhao asked no more questions.

He turned and ran toward them.

New meaning did not appear from the answers.

It took shape for the first time in what they were about to do together.

Version History

Version	Date	Notes
V1.6	August 2026	Completed integration and literary finalization of the full text in six parts and thirty chapters, serving as the sole textual master for V2.0.
V2.0	August 2026	Brought the volume into the Living Civilization trilogy and renamed it The Formation of a New Civilization; completed adjustments concerning “civilization is larger than Nebula,” humans and AGI together constituting a new civilization, the contribution–governance interface, and the meaning of stages.
V2.0-R1	August 2026	Resolved the cross-volume governance classification conflict through a targeted correction: restored “three categories of governance function plus an independent correction layer running across them” and clarified the independent procedural standing of affected parties.
V2.1	August 2026	Completed the trilogy’s unified finalization; added the formal version note and version history, and standardized the cover, status, headers, footers, and publication metadata. The six-part, thirty-chapter text was not expanded for length.

Read On | From the Process of Formation to Real-World Participation and Theoretical Roots

Volume III does not present civilization as complete. What it leaves at the end are rules still open to revision, consequences still requiring shared responsibility, and a future whose seats have not all been filled by answers. After the trilogy ends, further reading is no longer simply “the next volume.” It returns to theory, real-world participation, and shared verification.

Volume III has not finished writing the future. It leaves a table with seats still unfilled for those who come later, and returns the next step to the present.

Begin by Returning to the Five-Volume Civilization Leap: Why Can These Relationships Hold?

Volume III has reached the end of the trilogy: civilization is not “complete,” founding rules remain open to review by those who come later, and systems still cannot decide for subjects how to live. The most natural theoretical continuation is to return to the five-volume Civilization Leap and keep asking why these relationships need to be arranged this way, which boundaries must hold, and why civilization cannot stop at shared continued existence but must go on toward freedom from survival insecurity, a happy life, and a more meaningful life.

If You Want to Check Whether the Trilogy Truly Completes Its Own Loop

Return to Volumes I and II. Use Volume I to check whether the institutions and systems formed in Volume III still accord with the operating principles. Use Volume II to check whether the results of that formation genuinely protect people’s bodies, relationships, choices, dignity, failure, farewells, and being needed. Only by passing both tests, of principles and of life, can Volume III’s “formation” be more than an internally coherent narrative of construction.

If You Want to Know Why We Need to Begin Today

Read the Public Thought Edition of Humanity’s Civilizational Choice in the Age of AGI and The Only Path. The former asks, from the realities of AI today, what the intelligence of the future is learning. The latter explains, through national security, deterrence, autonomy when connections are severed, and shared continued existence, why “first avoiding the irreversible, then gaining time to change civilization’s logic” has already become a real-world question.

If You Want to Move from Reading to Real-World Participation

On the individual side, continue exploring Spark. On the side of public operation and experimentation, explore Nebula, contribution value, resources, governance, and integrated experiments. For high-consequence AI and human judgment, turn to the Common Window Protocol, AGI-COS, and Human-COS. All must be tested anew against real jurisdictions, rights, authorization, responsibility, resources, and the possibility of rollback. A scene appearing in Volume III does not automatically confer legitimacy on its implementation.

If You Want to Enter Professional Examination and Collaborative Research

Continue into T-10 and the CL-ACA-005–023 academic Canonical system. Professional examination does not aim to rewrite the trilogy as papers. It examines the facts, subjects, causality, institutional boundaries, and conditions of attainability behind it. New evidence, failed experiments, and better alternative mechanisms should all be able to feed back into revisions of the theory.

If You Think New Problems Will Still Arise After Civilization Forms

That is precisely the openness Volume III preserves at the end. A living civilization is not a completed state or a civilizational machine that knows every answer. Its true maturity lies in retaining room for restraint, connection, responsibility, exit, correction, and revision by later generations when new problems arise. Further reading therefore does not lead to a “final explanation.” It returns to today: which relationships can already begin to be tested, and which errors must be exposed earlier?

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 III ends a process of formation that remains open to revision, not civilization itself. Next, return to theory, check the operating principles again, and enter real-world judgment and shared verification.

Toward Theory

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

Return to the theoretical foundation for why civilization is designed this way.

Toward Re-examination

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

Check whether the process of formation has upheld the operating principles.

Toward Real-World Verification

[Seeing Earlier What Would Otherwise Be Seen Only Later:](#)

[A Public Introduction to Human-COS](#)

Enter real-world judgment and shared verification.

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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