魂魄城 (Hún Pò Chéng — City of Souls)

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19 chapters
15,974 words

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CHAPTER 1

DAY ONE

Teacher Li says the words on Friday afternoon, and the whole classroom makes the noise — the noise of fourth graders who have just been told something that is not a test.

"Your assignment this term," Teacher Li says, tapping the whiteboard, "is to interview someone with an interesting job. You will ask them questions. You will write down their answers. You will turn it in as a report. You have two weeks."

The classroom is already buzzing. 小雨 raises her hand. "Can I interview my dad? He's a delivery driver. He rides an electric scooter all day."

"Good, 小雨," Teacher Li says. "Anyone with a job is interesting. A job is a thing you do that other people need."

Yinan sits at her desk, and she does not raise her hand, because she is already thinking. Her mind is doing the thing it always does — making a list — and the list goes: mom (supermarket), dad (warehouse), gege (...). Gege. Her gege makes videos. Her gege makes pictures on the computer. Her gege has followers on the internet — she is not sure how many, but she has decided it is a lot, because he is her brother, and her brother is interesting. The assignment says someone with an interesting job, and her gege's job is the most interesting job in the whole world, because her gege can make a drawing move.

She decides. She decides the way she decides everything: all at once, with her whole self.

After school, she walks home with 小雨. 小雨 talks about the delivery driver interview. Yinan listens, but she is thinking about the interview she will do with gege. She is thinking about the questions. She will ask him: What is your job? How did you learn it? Are you famous? She will write down his answers in her best handwriting. She will turn it in, and Teacher Li will read it and say, "This is the most interesting report in the whole class," and everyone will look at her, and gege will be famous, and it will be because of her.

She runs up the stairs of the building — she always runs, because the elevator rattles and takes forever and she is small and fast — and she puts down her backpack, and she goes to the door.

The door. Gege's door. The door that is sometimes open and sometimes closed and sometimes has a drawing under it. She stands in front of it, and she does her knock — two knocks, a pause, one more — because that is her knock, her special knock, and gege knows it.

No answer.

She knocks again. Two knocks, a pause, one more.

The door does not open.

She is used to this. She has been used to this for a year. But tonight she has the assignment, and the assignment is a reason, and she says, through the door, in her careful voice — the voice she uses on the frozen lake, the voice that does not make ripples:

"Gege. My teacher said we have to interview someone with an interesting job."

The door does not open. But his voice comes through — his voice, which is sometimes close and sometimes far, and tonight it is the far voice, the voice that sounds like it is talking to something else:

"I'm working on something important. It's going to change everything. I'll tell you later. Not now. I'm working."

She waits. She stands in the hallway, and she waits, the way you wait for the elevator when the elevator is broken — you know it might not come, but you stand there anyway, because standing is all there is to do.

"Okay, gege," she says.

She goes to the dining table. She opens her homework. She does her homework, and she talks to herself, because no one is talking to her, and the pencil makes the only sound in the apartment, and the sound is the sound of a pencil, and the sound is the sound of her.

That night, in her room, she gets out her secret notebook. It has a little lock — a real lock, with a tiny key she keeps on a string around her neck, under her shirt, where nobody can see it. She opens it, and she looks at the drawings, the drawings nobody has ever seen:

There is the family. Mom in the middle. Dad in the corner, small, separate — that is how he feels, she knows it is how he feels, because she drew it the way it feels. Gege, tall, next to Mom. Gege with a backpack — that is the old gege, the one who helped her with math homework, the one who showed her how to use the tablet, the one who taught her the multiplication tables. And next to him — the other gege. The gege with the shadow.

She does not know why she draws two gege. She only knows that there are two. There is the gege who walks her to the corner store and buys her strawberry ice cream, and there is the gege who lives behind the door. They have the same name. They are not the same person. She has known this for a year, and she has never told anyone, because nobody asked, and because drawing it is better than saying it, because drawings do not need the right words.

She draws a new page. She draws gege making a video. She draws him with a camera and a light around his head, the way the heroes have light in the cartoons. She writes under it, in her careful letters: *Interview. Two weeks. I am going to ask him everything.*

She closes the notebook. She locks it. She puts the key back on the string, under her shirt, over her heart.

In the living room, the television is talking to no one. Dad is in front of it. Mom is in the kitchen. Gege's door is closed. The fan is running behind it, the sound of the machine that never stops, the sound that is as familiar to her as her own name.

She goes to bed. She lies in the dark, and she listens to the fan, and she thinks about the interview, and she thinks about the question she will ask first.

She falls asleep before she finishes thinking.

CHAPTER 2

DAY TWO

Saturday. No school. She wakes up at eight, because that is when she wakes up on Saturdays, and she gets her own breakfast — she has been getting her own breakfast for a year, because Mom is tired, and because she is the easy child, the one who does not cause problems, the one who makes her own breakfast so Mom can sleep one more hour.

She makes toast. She eats it at the dining table. She does her homework, even though it is Saturday, because doing homework without being asked is part of being the easy child, and being the easy child is the job she has chosen, the job she is good at.

The door. Gege's door. She passes it four times, and she does not knock, because she knocked yesterday, and "I'll tell you later" is still in the air, and "later" is a place she cannot go.

At dinner, gege comes out. He comes out of the door, and he sits at the table, and she looks at him, and she tries to read his color. That is what she does — she reads colors the way other people read words. Today gege is gray. Not eraser-dust gray, not the worst gray, but the gray of a cloudy day, the gray of a pencil line that has been drawn over too many times. She watches him not eat. She watches Mom ask "Did you eat the soup?" and she watches gege say "Yes" and she watches him not eat the soup, and she wants to say: *gege, you didn't eat the soup, the soup is right there, why don't you eat the soup* — but she does not say it, because saying things like that makes ripples, and she is careful with ripples.

Dad eats fast. Dad does not look at gege. Gege does not look at Dad. Mom moves between them like the lady in the game who carries the food to the hungry pet, except the pet is not hungry, and the food is not being eaten.

That night she plays her game. The game is《我的小星星》— My Little Star — and her star-pet is named 闪闪, which means Sparkle, and she has had 闪闪 for three months, and she feeds 闪闪 every day, and every day 闪闪 levels up. The rule of the game is simple: if you feed your pet every day, it gets better. If you

forget, it gets sad. The game tells you this when you start: *Care is a promise. Feed your pet every day.*

She feeds 闪闪. 闪闪 sparkles. 闪闪 levels up.

She looks at the door. She thinks about the soup outside the door, the soup that is not being eaten, and she thinks: *in the game, if you feed your pet every day, it gets better. Gege has soup every day. Gege is not getting better. Maybe the game is wrong. Maybe I am feeding him wrong. Maybe there is a special food I don't know about.*

She does not know the answer. She is nine, and she is good at homework, and she does not know the answer.

She draws in her secret notebook. She draws gege and 闪闪. She draws 闪闪 leveling up, and she draws gege staying the same size. She does not know she is drawing the question. She only knows the page feels important, the way pages feel when you are drawing something you cannot say.

She locks the notebook. She puts the key over her heart.

Tomorrow, she thinks. Maybe tomorrow gege will be a different color.

CHAPTER 3

DAY THREE

Sunday. She does her homework in the morning. She plays with 闪闪. She feeds 闪闪, and 闪闪 sparkles, and she thinks about the door.

At dinner, gege comes out again, and this time he is a different color.

He is orange and electric blue. She has seen this color before — not often, but she knows it the way she knows the difference between a sunny day and a cloudy day. Orange and electric blue is the color of the gege who talks fast. The gege whose eyes are too bright, like when you leave your phone on maximum brightness and it hurts to look at. The gege who makes promises.

He is standing in the living room, and he is talking to Dad, and the words are coming out fast, faster than words should come out:

"Dad. I'm going to show you something. I've been working on a project — the fog. The whole city's fog. It's going to change how people see Chengdu. I'm going to sell it to the government. I'm going to make this family —"

She looks at him, and she is excited. She cannot help it. The orange and electric blue gege is the magical gege, the gege who makes her appear in videos with special effects, the gege who draws her as an anime character. If he is going to sell the fog to the government, that is amazing. The fog is everywhere, so selling the fog means he is selling the whole city, which means he is the most important person in Chengdu, which means the interview will be the most interesting report in the whole class.

"You're seventeen," Dad says. "Eat your rice."

"I'm not hungry."

"Eat your rice."

Gege sits down. Gege eats the rice. The rice goes in, and gege's face does not change, and the orange and electric blue is still there, flickering like a light that is trying to stay on. She watches him, and the excitement gets quieter, and the confusion gets louder, and she thinks: *he is eating the rice, but he is not eating the rice. It is like the soup. It is like when you feed* 闪闪 *and* 闪闪 *is sad anyway.*

She does not say anything. She eats her rice. She does her homework, and she talks to herself, because no one answers.

That night she lies in bed, and she listens to the fan — the fan is running, the fan is always running — and she thinks about orange and electric blue, and she thinks: *the magical gege is back. The magical gege is back, and he is going to sell the fog, and he is going to make our family famous, and the interview* — she sits up in bed — *the interview! I can ask him about the fog!*

She gets out of bed. She goes to the door. She does her knock. Two knocks, a pause, one more.

The door does not open. The fan runs.

"Gege?" she says. "For my interview — can I ask you about the fog?"

The door does not open. The fan runs. His voice comes through, and the voice is the far voice, the voice that is talking to something else:

"Not now. I'm working."

She stands in the hallway. She is in her pajamas. The floor is cold. She waits, the way you wait for the elevator, and the elevator does not come.

"Okay, gege," she says. "Tomorrow."

She goes back to bed. She lies in the dark, and she listens to the fan, and she thinks about the interview, and she thinks: *tomorrow. Tomorrow he will have more time. Tomorrow I will ask him everything.*

CHAPTER 4

DAY FOUR

Monday. School.

She goes to school. She does her math. She does her Chinese. She plays at recess with 小雨, and 小雨 talks about the delivery driver interview, and Yinan talks about her brother who is going to sell the fog to the government, and 小雨's eyes get big, and Yinan feels the feeling — the feeling of having the most interesting brother in the whole class.

After school, she walks home with 小雨. She runs up the stairs. She goes to the door.

The door is closed. The fan is running. She does her knock. Two knocks, a pause, one more.

No answer.

She knocks again.

"Gege? It's me. Are you —"

No answer.

She stands in the hallway. She does not know that gege went to the hospital today with Mom. She does not know about the queue number, or the doctor, or the words the doctor said, or the paper that Dad will find on the table. She only knows the door is closed and the fan is running and gege is not answering.

She goes to the dining table. She does her homework. She talks to herself. The pencil makes the only sound.

Later, she sees Mom at the kitchen window. Mom is burning the incense — the little sticks that smell like the temple, the ones that make smoke that curls up and disappears. Yinan knows the smoke is pretty. She has always thought the smoke is pretty, the way it curls, the way it goes up and up and then is gone.

She asked, once, a long time ago: "Mom, why do you burn that?"

And Mom said: "For your brother."

That was all. Yinan did not ask again. She watches Mom burn the incense now, and she thinks about the smoke, and she thinks: *the smoke is for gege. The*

smoke goes up. Maybe the smoke is going to find gege's soul and bring it back, like in the stories. The stories gege tells me about the flying souls.

The stories. The fairy tales. Gege tells her about three souls that fly and seven animals that live inside you. She thinks they are the best stories in the whole world. She does not know they are his lifeline. She only knows that when gege talks about the souls and the animals, he sounds like himself again, and she likes that gege the best.

She goes to bed. She listens to the fan. She thinks about the smoke, and the flying souls, and the interview, and she falls asleep.

She does not know that gege walked to the river tonight. She does not know that he filmed the brown slow water. She does not know that the water goes somewhere and he does not.

She is nine. She is asleep.

CHAPTER 5

DAY FIVE

Tuesday. School. Math. Chinese. Recess. 小雨. The delivery driver. Her brother who is going to sell the fog.

After school, she runs up the stairs. She drops her backpack. She does her homework at the dining table, the way she always does, and she is writing her answers — careful letters, the neatest she can make them — when Dad comes home, and then gege comes out, and she does not look up, because she is the easy child and the easy child does not look up at dinner, and then Dad starts talking.

She does not understand at first. She is writing her answers, and the words are just words, the way the television is just noise — and then the words are not just words. She stops writing. Her pencil stops mid-stroke, and she looks up, and she is at the table, and she sees it happen, the way you see a glass fall off a table — too fast to stop, too slow to look away.

"You are seventeen," Dad says. "I was working at sixteen. Your grandfather was working at fourteen. You are a man. Act like one."

She has never heard Dad say this many words at once. She has never heard the flat voice say anything this long. She sits very still, the pencil in her hand, and she watches Dad's hands, folded on the table, the knuckles white — the way Dad holds his hands when he is about to say something he has been holding for a long time — and she listens.

"Return to school," Dad says. "The vocational track. They have programs. You learn a trade. You come out at nineteen with a certificate, and you work, and you pay your own way, and this family —" He stops. He looks at the wall, at the spot where the paint is peeling. "Or you get a job. Any job. Delivery. Warehouse. Your mother's supermarket. Or you leave."

Leave. The word lands on the table like a dropped bowl. She understands this word. Leave is what you do when you go away and do not come back. Leave is the word in the stories when the hero walks out of the village and the village does not see him again. She looks at gege, and gege is standing in the doorway of his

room, and his color is changing — the gray is cracking, and the orange and electric blue is coming through, the way light comes through a crack in a door — and he says, too loud, the loud voice:

"I'm not going back to school. I'm building something. The fog — I told you about the fog. I'm going to render the whole city. I'm going to sell it to the municipal government. I'm going to —"

"You bought a three-hundred-yuan plugin," Dad says. "On your mother's account. For a project you will delete."

"I won't delete this one."

"You deleted the last one. And the one before that. And the one before that. I've watched you for a year, Yichen. I've watched you sit in that room. I've watched you cost this family money and sleep and hope, and I have not said anything, because your mother said you were sick, and I believed her, because I wanted to believe her. But this —" Dad's hand moves, a small movement, pointing at the apartment, at the closed door, at gege. "This is not sickness. This is giving up. A boy who was top ten in his year does not spend a year staring at a screen unless he has decided to throw it away. You have decided. I am telling you: decide something else."

She sits at the table, and she does not breathe. She is very good at not breathing — she has had a year of practice — and she watches gege, and she thinks: *giving up. Dad says gege is giving up. But gege is making the fog. Gege is making the whole city. That is not giving up. That is the opposite of giving up. Why can't Dad see that —*

"You don't understand," gege says. "None of you understand. The city is a lung and I am the breath —"

Dad stands up. The chair scrapes. He walks to the door, and at the door he stops, and he does not turn around, and he says, to the door: "I'll be back in an hour. Decide something."

The door closes.

The apartment is very quiet. The fan whirs. Mom is standing at the sink with a bowl in her hands. Gege is standing in the doorway of his room, and the orange and electric blue is gone — she watches it go out, all at once, the way a light goes out — and he turns, and he goes into his room, and the door closes.

She sits at the table with her pencil in her hand. She does not move. She does not understand everything that happened, and she understands more than the adults think — she understands that Dad gave gege a choice, and gege did not choose, and the not-choosing is the worst choice, the way in the game when you run out of time and the level just ends.

She finishes her homework. She does it very neatly. She does not tell anyone what she saw, because there is no one to tell, and because she is the easy child, and the easy child does not cause ripples.

That night, in bed, she hears the whispers. Mom and Dad, in the kitchen, whispering — the whisper that is louder than talking, the whisper that carries through walls:

"...sick, not lazy..."

"...not sick. He's weak..."

"...your mother. You made him soft..."

"...you have not touched your son in a year..."

She pulls the blanket over her head. She does not want to hear. She hears anyway — the words about being weak and soft and sick — and she thinks, in the dark, under the blanket: *are they talking about me? Did I make gege soft? Did I do something wrong? If I had been better, if I had been easier, if I had not needed things —*

She does not know she is the easy child. She only knows she is trying to be. She holds the key on the string around her neck, the key to the notebook, the notebook with the drawings, and she holds it tight, and she thinks: *tomorrow I will draw a better picture. I will draw the family all together, everyone smiling, and it will fix everything.*

She is nine. She believes her drawings can fix things. She is wrong, and she does not know it, and that is the whole of her power and the whole of her helplessness.

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PART II — THE DRAWING

CHAPTER 6

DAY SIX

Wednesday. School. Math. Chinese. Recess. 小雨. Her brother who did not choose.

After school, she runs up the stairs. She drops her backpack. She goes to the door. She does her knock. Two knocks, a pause, one more.

No answer.

She knocks again. Two knocks, a pause, one more.

No answer.

She stands in the hallway. The fan is off. That is the first time she notices the fan is off — the fan is never off — and the silence is wrong, the way a room is wrong when you walk in and the clock has stopped. She puts her hand on the door. The wood is cold. She does not push it. She is not allowed to push it — that is the rule, the rule everyone knows without saying it: you do not push gege's door.

She has the drawing in her hand. She drew it last night, in her room, by the light of her little lamp: the family, everyone together, everyone smiling — Mom, Dad, gege, her — all holding hands, all in a line, the way the families look in the pictures in the books. She drew it carefully. She used her best crayons. She made Dad not in the corner, this time — Dad in the middle, holding Mom's hand — because if the drawing is perfect, maybe the family will be perfect, the way in the cartoons when the hero fixes the thing and everyone is happy.

She kneels down. She slides the drawing under the door. The paper goes under, and she watches it go, the way you watch a paper boat go down the gutter — it goes, and then it is gone, and she cannot take it back.

"Gege," she says, through the door, in her careful voice, the frozen-lake voice. "I drew you a picture."

A pause. She waits.

"I'll put it under the door."

She stands up. She stands in the hallway, and she waits, the way you wait for the elevator, and the elevator does not come. She waits one minute. She counts to sixty, the way you count in the game when you are waiting for the level to load. She reaches sixty. The door does not open.

She goes to the dining table. She does her homework. She talks to herself, because no one answers.

That night she lies in bed, and she thinks about the drawing under the door, and she thinks: *he will see it in the morning. He will see the family all together, and he will remember, and he will come out, and he will be the gege who walks me to the store.*

She believes it. She has to believe it. The belief is the only thing between her and the other thought, the thought she does not have words for.

CHAPTER 7

DAY SEVEN

Thursday. School. Math. Chinese. Recess. 小雨 asks her, at recess, in the way that friends ask: "Did you ask your brother about the interview yet?"

"He's busy," Yinan says. "He's working on something important. It's going to change everything."

She says it the way gege said it. She does not know she is copying the words. She only knows the words sound like a promise, and a promise is a thing you hold, and she is holding it.

After school, she runs up the stairs. She goes to the door. The drawing is not under the door anymore — it is gone, he took it, or it slid all the way under, she cannot tell, and the door is flat against the floor with no gap to see through. She does her knock. Two knocks, a pause, one more.

No answer.

She puts her ear to the door. She listens. She does not hear the fan — the fan is still off — and she does not hear anything, and she thinks: *he is sleeping. He sleeps a lot. The medicine makes him sleep. Mom said the medicine makes him sleep twelve hours. Twelve hours is a long time. It is two school days of sleep.*

She goes to the dining table. She does her homework. She talks to herself.

That night she draws another picture. She draws gege as a hero — the hero from the cartoon, the one who transforms — and she writes under it, in her careful letters: *gege is going to transform back. I am waiting.*

She locks the notebook. She holds the key over her heart.

CHAPTER 8

DAY EIGHT

Friday. School. Math. Chinese. Recess. 小雨. The report is due in one week.

After school, she runs up the stairs. She drops her backpack. She goes to the door. She does her knock. Two knocks, a pause, one more.

No answer.

She stands in the hallway. She has a new drawing in her hand — she drew it last night, another family, everyone smiling — and she is about to slide it under the door, and then she stops, and she does not slide it. She does not know why she stops. She holds the drawing, and she stands in the hallway, and she does not slide it, and she goes to the dining table, and she puts the drawing in her backpack, and she does her homework.

In the kitchen, Mom is holding the tablet. The tablet is hers — the family tablet, the one she uses for homework — and Mom is holding it, and Mom's face is doing the thing Mom's face does, the tightening, the thing that happens before Mom cries without making a sound. Yinan watches from the dining table. She does not ask what Mom is looking at. Asking makes ripples.

That night, the fan comes back on.

She is in bed, and she is almost asleep, and the fan starts — the sound, the familiar sound, the machine that never stops — and she opens her eyes, and she lies in the dark, and she listens to the fan, and she thinks: *he is awake. He is at the computer. He is making something, or he is* — she does not finish the thought. She does not have the words.

She thinks: *tomorrow is Saturday. Tomorrow I will knock, and maybe he will answer, and I will ask him about the interview, and he will tell me about the fog, and I will write it all down.*

She falls asleep to the sound of the fan.

She is nine. She is still hoping. The hoping is the bravest thing she does, and she does not know it, and nobody tells her.

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PART III — THE STAR

CHAPTER 9

DAY NINE

Saturday. She wakes up at eight. She gets her own breakfast. She does her homework, even though it is Saturday, because she is the easy child.

In the morning, Mom takes gege to the market. She watches them go from the window — Mom with the shopping bags, and gege walking beside her, gege's shoulders, gege's gray color — and she thinks: *gege is going outside. Gege is going to the market. That is good. The market is outside, and outside is where you get better, the way you get better from a cold by going outside and getting fresh air.*

She stays home. She plays with 闪闪. She feeds 闪闪, and 闪闪 sparkles, and she thinks about the rules of the game: *care is a promise. feed your pet every day.* She feeds 闪闪 three times, because she is worried, because the rules are not working, because she does not know what else to do.

They come back with the pork. Gege's color is different — not orange and electric blue, not eraser-dust gray, but something in between, something she has not seen before, the color of the sky when it is about to rain but has not yet. She watches him go into his room. She watches Mom go into the kitchen. She smells it, then — the smell — the sweet dark smell, the smell that comes from Mom's wok, the smell that fills the apartment and makes her stomach make the happy noise.

"Hóngshāo ròu!" she says. "Mom, are you making hóngshāo ròu?"

"Yes," Mom says. "For dinner."

Hóngshāo ròu. Red-braised pork. She does not know why it has two names, the Chinese one and the English one, or why the English one is longer, but she knows which one tastes better, and it is the one Mom makes.

The smell. The smell is the smell of the stories — the stories gege tells her about the grandmother, the grandmother she never knew, the grandmother who is like a dinosaur, who existed before she was born, who she knows only through stories: *the grandmother made hóngshāo ròu in the old apartment kitchen. The*

grandmother said gege had heaven's eyes. The grandmother told gege about the three souls that fly and the seven animals that stay.

She stands in the kitchen doorway, and she smells the sweet dark smell, and she thinks about the grandmother, and she feels the thing she always feels when gege talks about the grandmother — the small, shameful thing, the thing she has never told anyone: *why does gege talk about a dead woman more than he talks about me?*

She does not say it. She goes to her room. She draws a picture of gege and the grandmother, and she draws herself standing next to them, and she is smaller, and she does not know why she draws herself smaller.

That night, Mom is on the phone in the stairwell. Yinan hears her voice through the door — the low voice, the voice Mom uses when she does not want the apartment to hear — and she catches words, pieces of words: "temple," "Qingcheng Shān," "settle," "soul." She does not understand. She thinks about the temple and the smoke and the flying souls, and she thinks: *the temple is for gege. The smoke is for gege. Everything is for gege.*

She goes to bed. She holds the key over her heart.

CHAPTER 10

DAY TEN

Sunday. The day everything changes, and she does not know it yet.

She wakes up at eight. She gets her own breakfast. She does her homework. The door is closed. The fan is running — it has been running since last night — and she does her knock at ten o'clock, two knocks, a pause, one more, and she is holding her notebook, the interview notebook, the one with the questions she has been saving:

Question 1: What is your job? Question 2: How did you learn it? Question 3: Are you famous? Question 4: What is the most interesting thing about your job?

She has written them in her best handwriting. She has practiced saying them out loud. She knocks, and the door opens.

The door opens.

Gege is standing in the doorway, and he is orange and electric blue — the brightest orange and electric blue she has ever seen, so bright it almost hurts to look at, like the phone screen on maximum brightness — and his eyes are too bright, and he is smiling, and the smile is a real smile, the biggest smile she has seen in a year, and he says:

"Yinan! Perfect timing. I'm going to make you a star."

Her mouth opens. "What?"

"A documentary." He steps back, and the doorway opens wider, and she can see into the room — the room she is never allowed to push into — and it smells like a room where a boy has not opened the window, and the computer is glowing, and there is a picture on the screen, a city made of light — "About you. About this —" He gestures — his hands, the way his hands move when he talks — "About the last family in the old Chengdu. About a girl who grew up in a building that will be demolished, in a city that forgets its own geometry. You'll be the star. You'll be famous. Everyone will see —"

"Really?" Her voice is excited. She cannot help it. The orange and electric blue gege is the magical gege, and the magical gege is promising her a

documentary, and she will be the star, and the whole class will see it, and 小雨 will see it, and Teacher Li will see it, and the interview — "A real documentary?"

"A real documentary. I have the vision. I have the camera. I'll teach you the real way to edit video — no, we'll film today, we'll film right now, the light is perfect, the fog is perfect, everything is perfect —"

He takes the tablet — her mother's tablet, the one on the table — and he downloads something on it, and he talks, and the talking does not stop. She listens, and the words come out like the water from the fountain at school, fast and bright and endless: "the visual grammar of the basin," "the breathing algorithm," "the suffering geometry of the old neighborhood," "redefine the city's visual language." She does not understand the words. She nods anyway, because he is looking at her, and the looking is important, the looking means she is the star.

"Here," he says. He puts the tablet in her hands. "Film me. Stand there — no, here — the light — the wall — the window behind me — film me, Yinan, hold it steady —"

She holds the tablet. She films him. He stands in front of the peeling wall, and the window is behind him, and the fog is in the window, and he talks, and he talks, and he talks. She holds the tablet until her arms get tired. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other. She is excited — she is the star, she is filming her brother, she is part of the documentary — and then she is confused, because the words do not stop, and the words do not make sense, and she is not the star, she is the one holding the tablet, and the star is gege, and gege is talking to the tablet like it is the whole world.

"Gege," she says. "Gege, the interview — the questions I wrote —"

"Not now," he says. "This is bigger than the interview. This is —" He talks. He talks about the fog. He talks about the city. He talks about the government. She holds the tablet. Her arms hurt. She is hungry. She is tired. She is afraid.

She does not know when the afraid started. She only knows it is there, the way the dark is there when you turn off the light: she is standing in the living room, holding the tablet, filming her brother, and her brother's eyes are too bright, like the phone on maximum brightness, and the brightness hurts, and he

will not stop, and he cannot hear her, and she is small, and the room is loud, and she is afraid.

At six o'clock, Mom comes home.

Yinan hears the door. She does not stop filming — she cannot stop filming, gege has not said stop — and Mom comes into the living room, and Mom sees the tablet, and Mom sees the editing software, and Mom sees Yinan standing in the middle of the living room with the frozen face, and Mom looks at gege.

The look. The look Mom gives gege — Yinan has seen that look before, once, a long time ago, and she did not understand it then, and she does not understand it now, but she knows it is the look that makes gege stop. The brightness goes out of gege's eyes, the way a light goes out. He turns. He goes to his room. The door closes. The fan starts.

Yinan stands in the living room. The tablet is in her hands. The video is still recording — the little red dot is still blinking — and she does not know how to stop it, and Mom comes and takes the tablet, and Mom's hands are steady, and Mom's voice is careful:

"What happened?"

"He said he was going to make me a star," Yinan says. Her voice is small. "He said he was going to make a documentary about our family. He made me film him. He talked for three hours. He talked about the fog. About the — the breathing of the city. He made me film him talking, and he wouldn't stop, and I —" Her voice wobbles. "I didn't know what to do, Mom. I was scared."

Mom looks at the tablet. Mom's face does the tightening thing. Mom says: "He's sick, Yinan. He didn't mean to scare you. He's sick, and sometimes sick looks like this."

Sick. The word again. She knows the word. Sick is like a cold. But the cold did not make him talk for three hours. The cold did not make his eyes too bright. She does not say this. She says: "Is he going to be okay?"

Mom does not answer. Mom says: "Eat your dinner. I'll make you noodles."

She eats the noodles. She does not taste them. She watches the door.

At nine o'clock, the door opens.

She is in her room. She is doing her homework — she is trying to do her homework — and she hears the door open, and the footsteps, and she looks up,

and gege is standing in her doorway. His color is not orange and electric blue. His color is gray. The worst gray. Eraser-dust gray. And his eyes are not too bright — they are too empty — and he sits on the edge of her bed, and he begins to cry.

She has never seen gege cry. She does not know what to do. She sits very still, and she watches him cry, and he says, through the crying, the words coming out like the water that has been held too long:

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Forget everything I said today. The documentary — it's not real. None of it is real. I'm not —" He stops. The words are stuck. "I'm not the person I was today. I don't know who that was. Forget him. Forget everything."

She looks at him. She does not understand. He is telling her to forget, and forgetting is not a thing you can do on purpose, the way you cannot un-eat the noodles. She wants to say: *I don't want to forget. I want the documentary to be real. I want to be a star. I want you to be the gege who walks me to the store.* She does not say any of it. She asks the question that has been in her all year, the question she has never asked anyone, the question that is the whole of her fear:

"Are you still my brother?"

He looks at her. His eyes are too empty. He says:

"I don't know."

The words land. She sits on her bed, and the words land, and she feels them the way you feel the ground when you fall — the hard, flat, not-give way the ground feels — and she thinks: *he doesn't know. He doesn't know if he's still my brother. That's worse than no. No is an answer. I don't know is a door that is not closed and not open.*

She does not know what to do. She does what she knows how to do. She picks up her pencil, and she draws, and she draws the only thing that has ever worked, the only thing she has ever had: the family. Everyone smiling. Everyone together. The way it is supposed to be. She draws it, and she shows it to him, and she does not say anything, because the drawing is the words, and the words are in the drawing.

He takes it. She watches him take it. She watches him fold it, carefully, the way you fold a thing you are keeping. She watches him put it in his pocket.

"I'm sorry," he says again. He goes back to his room. The door closes. The fan starts.

She sits on her bed. She is alone. She looks at her hands, and the hands are the same hands, and she thinks: *he put it in his pocket. He kept it. He kept the drawing.*

She does not know if it is enough. She is nine. She does not know what is enough.

Later, she hears the shower — the long shower, the water running and running — and she lies in the dark, and she listens, and she thinks about the orange and electric blue, and the eraser-dust gray, and the gege who cried, and the gege who said I don't know, and she thinks: *I have two brothers. I have always had two brothers. And tonight I do not know which one is still in there.*

She holds the key over her heart.

She does not sleep for a long time.

CHAPTER 11

DAY ELEVEN

Monday. School. Math. Chinese. Recess. 小雨 asks: "Did you do the interview yet?"

"Not yet," Yinan says. "He's been busy."

She does not tell 小雨 about Sunday. She does not tell 小雨 about the documentary, or the three hours, or the crying, or the words *I don't know*. The words are in her like a splinter, and she does not know how to take them out, and she does not know who to show them to.

After school, she runs up the stairs. She drops her backpack. She does her knock. Two knocks, a pause, one more.

No answer.

She goes to her room. She gets out her secret notebook. She looks at the two gege — the one with the backpack, the one with the shadow — and she looks at them for a long time, and she does not know what to draw, and she closes the notebook, and she locks it.

Then she remembers: gege has a channel. On the internet. The place where his videos live. She knows he has a channel because he told her once, a long time ago, before — he showed her a video of the river, and she watched it, and she said "It's pretty, gege," and he smiled, the real smile. She knows the name of the channel. She has never looked at it by herself, because she is not allowed to use the internet alone, but Mom is in the kitchen, and the tablet is on the table, and she is nine, and she wants to see her brother.

She takes the tablet. She finds the channel. She scrolls.

There is a video. It has a lot of views — a number she does not understand, a number with commas — and the little picture is gege, and gege is on the balcony, and the fog is behind him, and she taps it, and she watches.

Gege is talking. The balcony. The fog. The buildings. The video is old — she does not know it is from weeks ago, she only knows the gege in the video is the orange and electric blue gege — his eyes too bright, his words too fast: "the

breathing algorithm of Chengdu," "the suffering geometry," "the building is a cage built by people who never had to look at it from outside." She watches, and she recognizes the face — she knows that face, she has seen it a hundred times, it is the face gege makes when he tells her about the flying souls, the face that means the stories are coming — and she thinks: *this is the same face. The face from Sunday. The face from the stories. It is the same face.*

Then she reads the words under the video. The words from other people. She reads them slowly, the way she reads when the words are hard:

这个*up*主精神可嘉 — this uploader's spirit is admirable.

我笑死了 — I'm dying laughing.

She reads them again. She does not understand. She is good at reading, and she does not understand. The words say *laughing*. The words say *dying laughing*. She looks at the little pictures — the little heads of the people who wrote the words — and she thinks: *they are laughing at gege. They are laughing at the face gege makes when he tells me about the flying souls. They are laughing at the stories.*

She watches the video again. She watches his face, too bright, and she reads the words, *dying laughing*, and the two things go together in her chest the way two wrong puzzle pieces go together — they do not fit, and they stay anyway, and she cannot take them apart.

She does not know she is seeing the truth. She only knows something is broken, the way a toy is broken — not on purpose, not by anyone, but broken anyway, the way a toy breaks when it is dropped too many times — and she cannot fix it with love, and she cannot fix it with patience, and she cannot fix it with better drawings, and the not-being-able is the worst feeling she has ever had, because she is the one who draws the pictures, and the pictures do not work, and the whole world is laughing at the face she loves.

She closes the tablet. She puts it back. She does not tell anyone.

That afternoon, the video is gone. She checks — she checks the channel again, and the video is gone, the one with the commas in the number, and she does not know who took it down, and she thinks: *he hid it. He hid himself. The way he hides behind the door.* She does not tell anyone.

And then she goes to look for the drawing.

The drawing she slid under his door on Wednesday. She has been checking for it, the way you check for a thing you are hoping for — she checks the hallway, and the drawing is not under the door anymore, and she thinks *he took it, he kept it* — and then she sees it. In the kitchen. In the trash. The crumpled paper, the bright colors, the family — her family, everyone smiling, everyone together — the drawing she made with her best crayons — crumpled in the trash, on top of the eggshells.

She stands in the kitchen. She looks at the drawing in the trash. She does not take it out. She does not know if gege threw it away, or if Mom threw it away, or if it fell, or if it walked there by itself — she does not know, and she does not ask, because asking makes ripples, and the drawing is in the trash, and the trash is where things go when they are done.

She goes to her room. She opens her secret notebook. She draws another one — the same family, everyone smiling — and this time she does not put it under any door. This time she keeps it in her notebook, locked, with the key over her heart, where nobody can throw it away.

That night, she cries.

She does not want to cry. She presses her face into the pillow, the way you press a thing to make it stop, and she cries into the pillow, and she tries to be quiet, because the easy child is quiet, and the easy child does not make ripples — and the door opens, and Mom is there, and Mom sits on the edge of the bed, and Mom puts her hand on her back, and Mom does not say anything, and Yinan rolls over, and the words come out, all of them, the splinter words:

"Gege promised. He said he'd help with my project. He said he'd make me a star. And then he said forget everything. He said it wasn't real. Mom, was any of it real? Was he ever going to help me?"

Mom's hand is on her back. Mom's voice is careful, the careful voice: "He wants to help you, Yinan. He wants to so much. He just — his sickness gets in the way. It's not his fault. It's not your fault. It's a sickness, like a cold, only —"

Like a cold. She knows the words. She has been told the words. But the cold does not make strangers laugh at you on the internet. The cold does not make your eyes too bright. The cold does not make you say *I don't know* when someone asks if you are still their brother.

"It's not like a cold," Mom says. "It's harder than a cold. But he loves you. He loves you so much, Yinan. He just can't always —" Mom stops. "He can't always be the brother he wants to be. But he's trying. He's in there, and he's trying, and I don't know how to help him either, and I'm sorry, I'm sorry I don't have better words."

Yinan cries into Mom's shoulder. She cries until there is nothing left, and then she lies still, and Mom holds her, and the holding is warm, and the warm is the only thing that is not broken.

When Mom leaves, she lies in the dark, and she thinks about the video, and she thinks about the laughing, and she thinks about the words *he's trying*, and she thinks: *in the game, if you feed your pet every day, it gets better. Gege is trying. Gege is being fed. Gege is not getting better. Maybe the game is wrong. Maybe the game was always wrong.*

She falls asleep. She does not dream.

CHAPTER 12

DAY TWELVE

Tuesday. School. Math. Chinese. Recess. 小雨 does not ask about the interview. Yinan is grateful. She does not know what she would say.

After school, she runs up the stairs. She drops her backpack. The apartment smells different — the kitchen, the trash — and she sees them in the kitchen: the notebooks. The sketchbooks. Gege's sketchbooks, the ones with the cities, the ones she has watched him draw in, the ones with the buildings and the light — they are in the trash, the pages sticking up like broken wings.

She stands in the kitchen. She looks at the sketchbooks in the trash. She does not touch them. She knows what the trash is for. She knows what it means when someone throws away the things they made. She has done it herself — she has thrown away drawings that were wrong — and she knows the feeling, and she knows gege must have felt it, and she does not know why he threw them all away, and she does not ask.

She goes to her room. She opens her secret notebook. She draws. She draws the cities — the cities from gege's sketchbooks, the ones in the trash — she draws them from memory, the buildings, the light — and she draws them into her own notebook, so they will not be gone, so they will live in her book instead. She does not know why she does it. She only knows the cities should not be all gone.

At dinner, she asks Dad. She has been saving the question, the way you save the last piece of candy, and she asks it at the table, in the small quiet between the rice and the silence:

"Dad. Why don't you talk to gege?"

Dad's chopsticks stop. He does not look at her. He says: "Eat your rice."

She eats her rice. She does not ask again. She has learned, the way children learn, that some questions have no answer, and the no-answer is an answer, and the answer is the shape of the family.

That night, in her room, she finds the paper. The pamphlet — it was on the table, next to the rice bowls, the paper with the words on it, and she picked it up

without thinking, and she reads it now, in her room, by the light of her little lamp, and the words are hard, and she sounds them out the way you sound out a new word:

双相... 情感... 障碍. She knows the sound of these words. She has heard Mom say them on the phone, in the stairwell, the low voice. She has never known what they mean. The paper has other words: *bipolar disorder. Mood swings. Manageable with medication.*

Mood swings.

She reads the words again. *Mood.* She knows this word — mood, like being in a good mood, being in a bad mood. *Swings.* She knows this word — swings, like the playground, like going up and down, up and down. *Mood swings.* She thinks about the orange and electric blue gege and the eraser-dust gray gege, and she thinks: *mood swings. The swings at the playground. Up and down. Gege goes up and down. That is what the words mean. Gege has mood swings, and the swings go up and down, and nobody can stop the swings, and nobody can make the playground stop.*

She does not know she is right. She does not know she is wrong. She knows the words are the words Mom says in the stairwell, and she knows the words are about gege, and she knows the words are the name of the thing, and she thinks: *the thing has a name. The thing that makes two gege — it has a name. It is called mood swings, and it is on the paper, and Mom knows the name, and the name does not fix it.*

She puts the pamphlet back on the table. She puts it back exactly where it was, the way you put back a thing you were not supposed to take.

She goes to bed. She holds the key over her heart.

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PART IV — THE REPORT

CHAPTER 13

DAY THIRTEEN

Wednesday. School. Math. Chinese. Recess.

In the afternoon, she calls 小雨. She is in her room, the door half-open, and she talks to 小雨 about the homework, about the game, about the boy in their class who drew a dragon — and then 小雨 asks about her brother, and the words come out, the casual words, the words she says the way you say the weather:

"My brother is sick, so my mom doesn't have time. She's always at work, or she's making soup for him, or she's listening at his door. She doesn't have time for anything else."

She says it, and she does not know her mom is in the kitchen, listening. She says it the way you say the weather, because it is the weather, because it has been the weather for a year, because the weather is the only weather she has.

At dinner, Mom stands at gege's door. She says, "You're coming to the table." She does not make it a question. And the door opens — it opens — and gege comes out, and he sits at the table, and his color is the sky-before-rain color, the color of the sky when it is about to rain but has not yet — and she looks at him, and she does not say anything, because she does not know what to say, and because the last words they shared were *I don't know*, and she is still carrying them.

Dad is not there. The table is quiet. Mom serves the rice. There is hóngshāo ròu on the table, the sweet dark smell.

She finishes her homework. She looks at gege — the careful look — and she says: "Gege, I made something. Do you want to see?"

He does not answer. He looks at his rice. She gets up anyway. She goes to get the tablet. She has been working on it — the whole week, in her room, after school, when she should have been doing homework — she found the program on the computer, the one he uses, the one with the cube, she opened it, she figured it out, the way you figure out a game level by pressing the buttons and seeing what happens — and she made a cube. A gray cube. And she made it spin.

She holds the tablet out to him. The cube is spinning. Slowly. The render is clumsy — she does not know the word render, she only knows the cube is not smooth, it is a little bumpy, the way her drawings are a little bumpy — and she watches him look at it, and she watches his face, the flatness, the door — and then something moves behind the door, and he takes her hand, and he says:

"Show me how you made it."

She shows him. She shows him the buttons she pressed. He shows her the other buttons — the shortcut keys, he calls them — and his fingers move on the tablet, and the cube spins faster, and he adds a light, and the light makes the cube look like something, and she watches, and she says, "How did you do that?" and he shows her again, slower, and she does it, and the cube spins, and she laughs.

She laughs. She does not know she is laughing. The laugh comes out of her like a bird, and the sound surprises her, and she looks at gege, and gege is looking at the cube, and the cube is spinning, and the light is on it, and the apartment is quiet, and the quiet is not the loud quiet — it is the other quiet, the quiet that is like the sky before the rain, the quiet that means something is about to change.

She thinks: *gege taught me. Gege taught me the shortcut keys. The gege who said I don't know taught me the shortcut keys.*

She does not know if it means anything. She holds it anyway, the way she holds the key over her heart.

CHAPTER 14

DAY FOURTEEN

Thursday. School. Math. Chinese. Recess. The report is due on Monday. She has not done the interview. She has questions written in her notebook, and no answers, and the report is a hole in the week, and she does not know how to fill it.

After school, she runs up the stairs. She drops her backpack. She is doing her homework at the dining table when gege comes out of his room — he comes out, and he sits at the table, and she looks at him, and his color is the sky-before-rain color — and she says, before she can stop herself, the question she has been saving:

"Gege. Will you tell me the story again? The one about the souls?"

He looks at her. Then he takes something out of his pocket. A paper. Folded, worn, the creases deep — she knows that paper, she knows it the way you know your own drawing, the way you know the picture you made — it is the drawing. The one from her room, the night he cried, the family, everyone smiling. He took it out of his pocket, and he unfolds it, and he smooths it on the table, and he looks at the smiling family, and he says:

"Sit down."

She sits. She watches the drawing on the table — her drawing, the one she gave him, the one she thought he would forget, and he has kept it, and he has carried it, and the creases are from being carried — and she does not say anything, because the drawing on the table is the words, and the words are too big.

He tells her the story. The way he always tells it — the way their grandmother told it to him, the way she told it in the old apartment, with the wok cooling and the incense burning — and she listens, the way she always listens, and the story is the best story in the whole world:

Everyone has three souls that fly and seven souls that stay, and the trick to being human is keeping them all in one body. The three fly — Tāiguāng, the fetal light, who connects to heaven; Shuǎnglíng, the blade, who thinks and decides

and sees; Yōujīng, the hunger, who wants. The seven stay — the dog who watches, the arrow that strikes, the sparrow of the dark, the thief-swallower, the poison-expeller, the purger of filth, the stinking lung. Seven animals, taking turns at the breath.

She asks her questions. She always asks the same questions, because the answers are the best part:

"Which animal is the sleep one?"

"The dog," he says. "Shīgǒu. He keeps watch. When he sleeps too much, you sleep too much. When he refuses to sleep, you don't sleep at all."

"Can the flying souls get lost?"

He pauses. The pause is longer than it should be. "Yes," he says. "They wander. They leave the body at night, and sometimes they don't come back by morning. Grandma used to say — when I had nightmares, she said my Shuǎnglíng was just wandering, and it would come back by morning. It always did." He says: "They always came back."

She thinks about the flying souls. She thinks about the soul that wanders and comes back by morning. She thinks about gege's soul, and she thinks: *maybe gege's soul wanders too. Maybe it goes out at night, and maybe that is why he is orange and electric blue, and maybe it comes back, and maybe that is why he is gray. Maybe the soul is the thing that is lost. Maybe the soul is the thing we are waiting for.*

"What happens if all the animals run away?"

He looks at her — at the table, at the drawing, at the whole apartment — and he says, slowly, the way their grandmother would have said it, the way the poem was taught to him: "Then you have to call them back. You call them by name. You stand in the place where you belong —" He touches the table. "And you say their names, one by one, out loud, and you wait. They hear you. They come home."

She nods. She understands the story. She understands it the way you understand a fairy tale — the way the hero calls the dragon by name and the dragon comes — and she asks, because she always asks: "Will you teach me the names?"

He teaches her the names. She repeats them like a poem. Tāiguāng. Shuǎnglíng. Yōujīng. Shīgǒu. Fúshǐ. Quèyīn. Tūnzéi. Fēidú. Chúhuì. Chòufèi. Ten names. She says them out loud, and the names are strange and wonderful, the way the words in a spell are strange and wonderful, and she thinks: *I can say the names. If the animals run away, I can call them back. I know the names now. I can help.*

She does not know the story is his lifeline. She only knows that when gege talks about the souls and the animals, he sounds like himself again — and he sounds like himself now, at the table, with her drawing under his hand — and she thinks: *this is the gege I like the best.*

Then he teaches her the dumpling trick. The pinch — he shows her with an imaginary dumpling, the way the edges have to be pressed just so, the way a dumpling that is not pinched properly will open in the water and leak its filling — and he says, "Grandma said the pinch is the most important part." And she laughs, because he is pinching the air, and the air-dumpling is funny, and the laugh is real, and he is real, and the table is real, and the drawing is real, and the moment is real.

And under the real, the small shameful thing stirs, the thing she has never said to anyone: *Grandma. Grandma said the pinch. Grandma said the names. Grandma is everywhere. Grandma is in every story. Why does gege talk about a dead woman more than he talks about me?*

She does not say it. She holds it, the way she holds everything. She watches him fold the drawing again, carefully, and put it back in his pocket.

The fan runs behind his door all night, the sound as normal as her own name, and the notebook stays locked, and the key stays over her heart, and the ten names stay in her mouth like the best kind of homework, the kind you do not have to write down because you already know them.

That night, she opens her secret notebook. She draws. She draws gege at the table, telling the story. She draws the ten names around him, the way you draw the words of a spell around a wizard. She draws herself at the table, listening.

She writes under it: *Today gege taught me the names. If the animals run away, I can call them back.*

She locks the notebook. She holds the key over her heart.

CHAPTER 15

DAY FIFTEEN

Friday. School. Math. Chinese. Recess. 小雨 asks: "Did you do the interview yet? It's due Monday!"

"Almost," Yinan says. "I'm doing it this weekend."

She does not know if it is true. She wants it to be true. The wanting and the not-knowing are the same size, and she carries both.

After school, she runs up the stairs. She drops her backpack. She is doing her homework when she hears it — the voice from the living room, gege's voice, the careful voice, the not-loud voice — and she stops writing, and she listens, because listening through walls is what you do when you are small and the adults forget you are there:

"Dad. I took my medicine today. I've been taking it. I reinstalled Blender. I'm working on —" A pause. "I'm not giving up."

She holds her breath. She waits. The silence is long. Then Dad's voice, flat, to the television: "Good."

Good. The word lands. She has never heard Dad say that word to gege. She has heard Dad say *eat your rice* and *act like one* and *decide something.* She has never heard *good.* She sits at the dining table, and the word lands, and she does not move, and she thinks: *Dad said good. Dad said good to gege. The family is changing. The drawing is working. My drawings are working.*

And then gege's voice again, from the living room: "I'm going to walk Yinan to the store this weekend. She wants ice cream."

Ice cream.

Her heart does the thing hearts do. She sits at the dining table, and the words are in the air, and the words are about her, and the words are *ice cream* — the strawberry ice cream, the one from before, the one from the gege who walked her to the store, the one she has been waiting for, the test — and she thinks: *he said my name. He said Yinan. He said I want ice cream. He remembered. He remembered the ice cream.*

She does not finish her homework. She sits at the table, and she holds the words, the way she holds the key over her heart, and she thinks: *tomorrow. Tomorrow I will do the interview. Tomorrow we will go to the store. Tomorrow —*

She looks at the closed door, and she listens to the fan, and she thinks about the game: *care is a promise. Feed your pet every day.* Tomorrow she will feed him ice cream, and maybe ice cream is the special food, the one she did not know about, the one that makes the level go up.

She does not know if tomorrow will come. She hopes. The hoping is the bravest thing she does.

CHAPTER 16

DAY SIXTEEN

Saturday. The interview. The real one.

She sets it up like a ceremony. She has seen reporters do it on television — the notebook, the recorder, the two glasses of water, one for her and one for the person she is interviewing — and she borrows Mom's phone, and she opens the recorder app, and she puts everything on the table, and she goes to the door, and she does her knock. Two knocks, a pause, one more.

The door opens.

Gege comes out. He sits across from her at the dining table. His color is the sky-before-rain color. She looks at him, and she looks at her questions — the questions she wrote a week ago, the questions she has been saving — and she begins. Her voice is careful and formal, the voice of a child doing a thing properly:

"Gege. What is your job?"

He looks at her. The look is long. Then he says:

"I'm trying to make art. I'm not very good at it yet. And I'm sick — I have a sickness in my mind, and it makes the art hard. But I'm trying."

She writes it down. Her pencil moves. She does not look up, because if she looks up she will see the words, and the words are the splinter words, the words from the stairwell, the words from the pamphlet, the words Mom says on the phone — and she writes them down, and she writes *sick* and she writes *trying*, and she thinks: *he said it. He said the word. He said it to me, in the light, at the table. He did not hide it.*

"What kind of art?"

"Digital art. I make — I make pictures of the city. Of Chengdu. The fog, and the buildings, and the river. I'm learning."

"Why do you stay in your room?"

The question is the question she has wanted to ask for a year. She asks it, and she watches him, and he says:

"Because I'm afraid. When I go out, I see everyone — people my age, going to school, going to work, going somewhere — and I'm not going anywhere, and it hurts. So I stay in my room, where it hurts less. And I work, and sometimes the work is good, and sometimes I delete it, because I'm afraid it's not good enough, and I'm afraid I'll never be good enough."

She writes it down. She writes *afraid* and she writes *delete* and she writes *never good enough*, and the words are heavy, and the pencil is heavy, and she thinks: *gege is afraid. Gege is afraid of the same thing I am afraid of. Gege is afraid of not being good enough, and I am afraid of not being good enough, and we are the same* — the thought stops, because it is too big, and she writes the next question instead:

"Are you famous?"

"No." He almost smiles. "I have two hundred followers, and most of them are bots. A bot is a —" He stops. "A program. Not a person. It doesn't count."

She writes it down. She writes *two hundred followers* and she thinks: *two hundred. That is a lot. That is more than the whole class. And he said it doesn't count.* She does not understand. She writes it down anyway.

"Can I see your art?"

He shows her. He opens the laptop, and he shows her the picture — the fog study, the half-built city, the gray geometry — and she looks at it for a long time, the way you look at a thing you are trying to understand, and she says: "It's good, gege."

It is good. She means it. The city looks like the city — the real city, the one outside the window, the one with the fog — and he made it, and it is good.

"Can you make it better?" she asks. "With the cube?"

"I can try," he says. "The cube is a good start."

She has one question left. She has saved it for last, the way you save the best candy for last. She looks at him, and she asks it, the question from the story, the question she has been holding since Thursday:

"Gege. If the animals ran away — all seven — how do you call them back?"

He looks at her. The dining table. The notebook. The phone recording. The incense burning in the kitchen. He says: "You say their names. You say them out loud, one by one, and you wait. They hear you. They come home." He pauses.

"It takes time. Sometimes it takes a long time. Sometimes they come home one at a time, and you have to keep saying the names, even when you're tired of saying them. Especially when you're tired of saying them."

She writes it down. She writes every word. She reads it back to herself, silently, her lips moving, and the words are the spell words, the words you say when the animals run away — and she looks up, and she says: "Okay, gege. I'm going to put that in my report."

"Good," he says. "Put it in your report."

She stops the recording. She closes the notebook. She looks at him, and she does not say anything, and the not-saying is full, and she reaches across the table, and she touches his hand — the hand that makes the pictures, the hand that taught her the shortcut keys, the hand with the little shake — and she says:

"Gege. I'm glad you're my brother."

He does not say anything. He does not move. She holds his hand, and she does not need him to say anything, because she has the answers now, all of them, written down in her notebook, and the answers are the interview, and the interview is the report, and the report is due Monday, and she will turn it in, and the whole class will read it, and they will know — they will know that her brother makes pictures of the city, and that he is sick, and that he is trying, and that when the animals run away you call them by name, and they come home.

She lets go of his hand. She picks up her notebook. She goes to her room.

She writes the report that night. She writes it in her best handwriting, the neatest she has ever written, and she writes the questions and the answers, and she writes them exactly as he said them, because the answers are the truth, and the truth is what the report is for.

The fan runs behind the door that is open now, and the two glasses of water sit on the table like the ceremony they are, and she has the words — all of them — in her best handwriting, and the words are the spell, and the spell is the report, and the report is due Monday.

And at the end, she writes one more thing. Not a question. Not an answer. She writes it the way she writes the names, like a poem:

My brother is making a picture of Chengdu. My brother is sick, and he is trying. My brother says when the animals run away, you call them by name, and

you wait, and they come home. I know the names now. I am going to keep saying them.

She puts the report in her backpack, ready for Monday. She holds the key over her heart.

Tomorrow they are going to the store. He said so. He said her name.

CHAPTER 17

DAY SEVENTEEN

Sunday. He takes her to the store.

She is ready at eight o'clock — she has been ready since she woke up, she is wearing her good shirt, she has told 闪闪, she has practiced skipping the cracks — and the door opens, and gege comes out, and he is the sky-before-rain color, and he says, "Come on," and they go.

They go out the gate, past the security guard, and she skips the cracks in the pavement the way she always skips the cracks, and she talks — she talks about school, about 小雨, about the game, about the interview, about how she is going to tell her teacher everything on Monday, about how it is going to be the most interesting report in the whole class — and gege listens. He walks beside her, and he listens, and the listening is the thing, the thing she has been waiting for, the thing that means he is here, really here, walking with her.

The corner store. The 小卖部. The old man behind the counter, who has known her since she was small, who knows her order — and gege points at the freezer, and he says:

"Two strawberry."

Strawberry. The flavor. The flavor from before. The flavor of the gege who walked her to the store, the gege who existed before, the gege she has been waiting for — and she watches him pay, and she watches him take the two ice creams, and he hands her one, and the ice cream is cold in her hand, and it is strawberry, and it is real.

They eat them on the walk home. The ice cream is cold and sweet, and the fog is thin, and the city is doing what the city does — breathing, slow, the way the city breathes — and she says, her mouth full: "Gege, this is the best ice cream."

"It's the same ice cream," he says.

"No, it's better. Because you're walking with me."

She says it, and she does not know it is the truest thing she has ever said, and he does not say anything, and they walk, and the ice cream melts, and she thinks: *the gege who walks me to the store. He is here. He is here right now. I do not know if he will be here tomorrow. I do not know if he will be the orange and electric blue, or the eraser-dust gray, or the sky-before-rain. I only know he is here now, and the ice cream is strawberry, and he is walking with me.*

At dinner, the table is full. Dad is home. Mom serves. The hóngshāo ròu is on the table, the sweet dark smell. Yinan talks about the interview, about Monday, about the most interesting report in the whole class. Dad eats fast, the way he always eats fast, and then he does the thing — the small thing, the gruff thing — he asks, to the table, to the rice, to the wall:

"Did you eat?"

Gege looks at him. The long look. "Yes. I ate."

Dad nods. He leaves the table. He stops at the doorway, and he does not turn around, and he says: "Tomorrow. Eat with us."

And gege says: "Okay."

Yinan sits at the table, and she watches the exchange, and she does not say anything, because saying anything would break it, and the breaking is the only thing she is afraid of. She holds the moment the way she holds the key over her heart. She thinks: *Dad said tomorrow. Gege said okay. The family is in the drawing, and the drawing is on the table, and everyone is* — she stops the thought, because the thought is too big, and she eats her rice.

That night, she writes the last page of the report. She has already written the report — it is in her backpack, ready for Monday — but she adds one thing. She draws it. She draws the family, everyone together, everyone at the table, the way it was tonight. And she draws gege in the middle, and she draws him not orange and electric blue, not eraser-dust gray, but the color of the sky when it is about to rain but has not yet — the color that means waiting, the color that means maybe.

She writes under the drawing: *Today my brother walked me to the store. He bought me strawberry. This is the report of the best day.*

She puts the drawing in her backpack, with the report.

She goes to bed. She lies in the dark, and she listens to the fan — the fan is running, the fan is always running, the machine that never stops — and she

thinks about the names, and she says them under her breath, the way you say a spell, the way you say a promise:

Tāiguāng. Shuǎnglíng. Yōujīng. Shīgǒu. Fúshǐ. Quèyīn. Tūnzéi. Fēidú. Chúhuì. Chòufèi.

Ten names. She knows them now. If the animals run away, she can call them back. She does not know if it works. She is nine, and she believes, and the believing is the bravest thing she has, and she holds it the way she holds the key over her heart.

She has not saved her brother. She does not know she cannot save her brother. She has seen him clearly — she has always seen him clearly — and the seeing is a kind of love that the adults in the family have not managed yet, and she does not know it, and it does not matter that she does not know it.

Tomorrow is Monday. She will turn in the report. She will say his name.

She closes her eyes.

The fan runs.

She is still here.

CHAPTER 18

MONDAY

Monday. She turns in the report.

She puts it on the pile with the other reports — the delivery driver, the doctor, the noodle-shop lady — and she sits at her desk, and she waits, the way you wait for a level to load.

Teacher Li reads the reports out loud, because that is what Teacher Li does — she says a good report should be heard — and she reads the delivery driver, and the class claps, and she reads the doctor, and the class claps, and then she picks up the next one, and she reads the name:

"Liu Yinan. 'My Brother, Who Makes Pictures of the Fog.'"

Yinan's heart does the thing hearts do. She sits very straight. She has never sat this straight.

Teacher Li reads the questions, and the answers — the words gege said, the words Yinan wrote down in her best handwriting — and the classroom goes quiet, the way a classroom goes quiet when something real walks in. *"I'm trying to make art. I'm not very good at it yet. And I'm sick — I have a sickness in my mind, and it makes the art hard. But I'm trying." "Why do you stay in your room?" "Because I'm afraid." "If the animals ran away — all seven — how do you call them back?" "You say their names. You say them out loud, one by one, and you wait. They hear you. They come home."*

Somebody in the back row laughs. The laugh is small. It stops, because Teacher Li looks up — not the angry look, not the sorry look, the look of a grown-up who has found something she did not expect — and she says: "Yinan. Is this true? Does your brother really make pictures of the fog?"

"Yes, Teacher Li." Yinan's voice is small and clear. "He makes pictures of the whole city. And he's sick, and he's trying. And when the animals run away, you call them by name, and they come home."

The classroom is quiet. The quiet is not the loud quiet. It is the other quiet — the quiet that means something is being held, carefully, by a room full of nine-year-olds.

Yinan sits very straight, and the key is over her heart, and under the desk her hand finds the shape of the notebook through the fabric of her pocket — the locked one, the one with the two gege — and she thinks: *he is at home, behind the door, and the fan is running, and he does not know yet. But the names are out now. The names are in the air, in a classroom, and air is what the whole city breathes.*

Teacher Li reads the last line — the line Yinan wrote herself, the one that is not a question and not an answer:

My brother says when the animals run away, you call them by name, and you wait, and they come home. I know the names now. I am going to keep saying them.

"This," Teacher Li says, "is the most interesting report I have read this year."

Yinan sits very straight. The words land in her like a stone dropped into a pond, and she holds them, the way she holds the key over her heart.

She does not know if gege will ever know the class heard his name today. She does not know if it will reach him, through the door, through the fan, through the fog. She does not know if the animals will come home.

She knows she has said his name out loud, in a room full of people, and the room is real, and the name is real, and she is going to keep saying it.

The bell rings.

End of Part Four.

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Part Four, continued.

CHAPTER 19

TUESDAY

Tuesday. She wakes at seven, because school starts at eight-thirty, and she is the easy child, and easy children are never late. She gets her own breakfast — toast, the crusts left on the plate for nobody — and she feeds 闪闪 before she puts on her shoes. One pinch of food. The little sparkle. The little level-up sound. The game says care is a promise, and she is careful with promises, because promises are the things you hold. She holds one all the way to school.

The report is on the wall. Not in her imagination — on the real wall, the side wall by the blackboard, where Teacher Li pins the good work. The character sheets with the red stars. The dragon the boy drew, the one with too many legs. And now, in the middle, the last page of her report, and under it the drawing — the family, holding hands, everyone together — and under that, in her best handwriting, the line about the best day. Yinan stands in front of the wall before the bell and reads her own words from far away, the way you read somebody else's good luck.

"Your brother is famous now," 小雨 says at her shoulder.

"He's not famous," Yinan says. "He's on the wall." It is not the same thing. Famous is television. The wall is real. The boy who laughed on Monday walks past the wall on the way to his seat. He does not look at it. His ears are red. She does not know why his ears are red. She thinks: *maybe the wall is hot.*

Teacher Li does not say anything about the report. She is taking attendance, and her voice goes down the list of names the same as always. But when she passes Yinan's desk, on the way to the window, her hand goes out — quick, small — and touches the corner of the report on the wall. Not the words. The corner. Yinan watches the hand. She reads it the way she reads gege's colors. She thinks: *it means it stays. It means it is not coming down on Friday like the dragon.* The dragon came down in October. The wall is a place where things stay only for a while, and she knows that, and she makes herself stop knowing it.

At recess, 小雨 brings it up again, because she brings everything up twice. “Is your brother better?”

“He’s making pictures of the whole city,” Yinan says. “The fog. It’s on the wall.”

“What does the fog look like?”

Yinan opens her mouth. In her head there is a way to say it — the fog is like the breath of the — She closes her mouth. That kind of talking is for inside, for the notebook, for the stories gege tells. Out loud it would come out wrong, like a knot pulled through a sweater. “Gray,” she says. “Like today.”

A satisfied nod. You can always give her the small version. The small version is true.

At home she sits at the dining table and does her homework in the last of the light, and she talks to herself while she writes, because the apartment is quiet and somebody has to keep the pencil-sound company. Nobody answers. Nobody is supposed to.

Mom comes home at eight with her work face still on, and Yinan says it before the shoes are off: “Mom. My report is on the wall at school.” Mom stops — one step, half-turned, the bag still on her shoulder — and her face does a thing Yinan does not have a word for. Not the tightening. Something under the tightening, the way there is warm air under a cold window. She does not know what the soft thing is. She files it with the colors.

“It’s the interview,” she says. “With gege. Teacher Li read it out loud. It’s on the good wall.”

“好” — good — Mom says. And then, quiet, to the rice: “He knows? He knows it’s on the wall?”

“Not yet. I’m going to tell him.”

Mom looks at the closed door for one second. The fan is running behind it — the always fan, the machine that never stops. “Tell him the good parts,” Mom says. “Only the good parts.” Yinan thinks about that. The good parts are not all of it — somebody laughed — but a wall is a good part, and a hand on a corner is a good part, and she knows how to carry the other parts. She has been carrying them all year, in the notebook, under the key.

“Okay,” she says.

After dinner she goes down the hall. The hallway light is off. She stands in front of the door. Two knocks. A pause. One more. The fan runs.

"Gege," she says in the careful voice, the one for frozen lakes. "My report is on the wall. At school. The good wall — the one with the dragon."

The fan runs. Then his voice comes through the fan, and it is the careful one, the near one, the one from the table with the two glasses of water. "On the wall," he says.

"With the dragon. Mine is in the middle. Teacher Li touched the corner of it."

A pause. She waits. Waiting is the same as the elevator: you stand there, and it comes, or it doesn't, and standing is the part you can do. Then his voice again, and the voice is smaller: "Did they laugh?"

The question lands in the hallway like a dropped bowl. She knows the answer. She has known it since Monday — one boy, the back row, the small laugh, the stop. She could tidy it. She could say *no* and make the hallway easy, because the easy child is good at easy. But the question is a door question — a staying-or-going question — and door questions get the truth.

"Somebody laughed," she says. "One boy. Then they stopped. Then it was the quiet that is not the loud quiet. Teacher Li said it was the most interesting report she read all year."

The fan runs. She puts her hand flat on the door. The wood is cool. "And gege. The last part. I put it on the wall too. It goes like this: if the animals run away — all seven — you call them by name, one by one, and you keep saying them until they come home." She says it from memory, no notebook, the way you say a spell.

The fan runs. "Okay," gege says. "Tell her thank you." Nothing else. The thank-you is small, and it goes through the door, and it lands somewhere Yinan cannot see.

She goes to her room. She writes one line in the secret notebook — *Today the report is on the wall. The boy's ears were red. I told gege the good parts, like Mom said.* — and she locks it, and she holds the key over her heart. The fan runs behind the door, as normal as her own name.

She does not know that gege sits down at the computer again after her footsteps go. She does not know that he opens the gray city — the fog study, the one with his own name in the corner of the file — and works on it for one hour, and saves it, and does not delete anything.

She is asleep before the fan stops. Nothing gets deleted tonight.

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Continued.

Colophon

魂兮归来！反故居些。

Hun xi gui lai! Fan gu ju xie.

Soul, come home! Return to your old house. — the Summons of the Soul · 楚辞·招魂 — she draws the summons instead of saying it: two geges, same name, not the same person.

Yōujīng 幽精 is the third of the three Hun — the earth soul, desire, the yin essence: the soul that wants things, the grandmother said — food, love, to be seen. This volume belongs to the youngest keeper of that soul: Yinan, nine or ten — the family cannot agree — who has drawn the family as it actually is in a notebook with a lock, who knows there are two geges and has never told anyone, and whose seventeen days are the same seventeen days as everyone else's, told at the height of a doorknob, in crayon, and finally in the interview report she was assigned to write.

Zhen AI · 甄艾 is a pen name. Read aloud it is *zhēn ài*, an exact homophone of 真爱, "true love." Romanised it becomes Zhen AI — 真, "real," plus AI. It says true love in Chinese and real AI in English, and is neither.

This novel was written by a large language model, from prompts, research and editorial direction supplied by a human. There is no human author hiding behind the name.

魂魄城 (Hún Pò Chéng — City of Souls) · 19 sections · 15,974 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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