魂魄城 (Hún Pò Chéng — City of Souls)

ZHEN AI

甄 艾

17 chapters
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CHAPTER 1

DAY ONE

Yichen wakes at two in the afternoon because the apartment has stopped expecting anything of him.

Not silence — something past silence: the quiet of a place that has finished waiting. The heater ticks inside the wall. The refrigerator hums its one note, a hum with no memory of starting. Under the floor, a mahjong tile clicks against another, patient as a pulse. His mother is at the supermarket, or at the night shift that has begun to overlap the day shift, or at the table gluing piecework that comes home in a plastic bag and leaves the rooms smelling of glue. His father is at the ware‑house. His sister is at school. He is seventeen, and the only evidence that the day has begun is that his eyes are open.

He does not get up. There are seven stains on the ceiling, or eight if the water ring in the corner counts, and the ring has started to look like a lung. He has counted them every after‑noon for a year. Some days they are the seven Po, squatting in the plaster, watching his breath go in and out. Some days they are water damage. Today they are water damage. He is not sure which answer is worse.

The bedroom is his studio and his prison, and it smells like both — the old computer running since last night, the oily warmth of a body that has not moved in hours, the window that has stayed shut for days because the fog outside is the same color as the wall. The RGB keyboard cycles through col‑ors he no longer sees; it has been cycling for a year, patient as weather. In the lower right quadrant of the monitor there is a dead pixel, one black point, perfectly round. He named it two months ago. He calls it the star. When he is low he stares at it,

waiting for it to move. It never moves. It is the one thing in his life that keeps its promises.

His desk is buried under printed invoices — the render-farm credits he bought and did not use, the plugin pack he bought and did not learn, the asset-library subscription that renewed itself three times on his mother's Alipay before she said anything. Under the invoices, at the very bottom, is a certificate in a red plastic folder. 优秀学生 — excellent student. 班长 — class monitor. Academic merit. He does not look at it. He knows it is there the way the tongue knows a loose tooth.

He sits up. The room tips, and he waits for it to settle, because it always does. From the desk drawer he takes the two pill boxes — the lithium, white and small; the quetiapine, larger, the one that holds him under for twelve hours. He should take them with food. There is a bowl of cold soup on the floor by the door, from his mother, from this morning or the morning before. He does not touch it. He shakes one of each into his palm, puts them in his mouth, tilts his head back, swallows — and then the small shock arrives, right on schedule: today there was no tongue trick. Today he did not hide the pills under his tongue and spit them into the sink and watch the white specks spiral away. Today they are inside him. He is not sure whether that is a victory or a surrender, and he is not sure the two are different.

The computer wakes with its small dry cough. He opens Blender. A default cube sits in the middle of the void, gray, featureless, honest. Six hours ago he would have deleted it. Twenty minutes ago he would have built something around it. Now he stares at it, and it stares back, and the fan spins up, and through the wall the whole family can hear it — the machine that will not let him rest.

Then it happens, the way weather happens. A flicker in the chest. A brightening at the edges of the room. The Shuǎnglíng

— his grandmother's word for it, the second of the three Hun, the one that lives in the intellect, the blade that cuts through reality. She told him 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 Shuǎnglíng is the one that flies. He can feel it rising now, the old fire, the A-student fire, the fire that once rewrote an essay five times because merely good was not good enough.

His hands find the keyboard. A new project. He types a title without thinking, and the title is: The Complete Anatomy of Chengdu Fog.

For thirty seconds — he will count them, later — he believes. This is the one. The masterpiece that proves the lost year was preparation, that the breakdown was a chrysalis, that all of it — the hospital, the lithium, the flatness, the deleted files, the year of soup bowls and closed doors — was the price of the vision. He can see it: the fog rendered in perfect geometry, the city's breath made visible, every apartment block a lung, every street a vein. He will model the entire basin. He will sell it to the municipal government. He will redefine Chengdu's visual language, and they will all see. They will all finally see.

He opens his Bilibili dashboard. 203 followers. Most of them are bots — he knows this the way he knows the ceiling stains — but the number sits there anyway, small and terminal, a pulse that has almost stopped. He scrolls, and the algorithm offers him the school WeChat group, the one where his messages used to start conversations. A former classmate — the faces have blurred into a single bright surface — has posted a screenshot of an acceptance letter. Not the gaokao — the college entrance examination that eats the winter of every senior in the country. The other one. The art examination, the 艺考. Someone his age has made the winter's journey of portfolio

and interview, has done the thing Yichen tells himself he is doing.

The Yōujīng descends. The third Hun, his grandmother said — the earth soul, desire, the yin essence. In her stories it was the soul that wanted things: food, love, to be seen. That was before. Now it does not want; it inverts. Wanting to be an artist feels like wanting to be a god — obscene, impossible. Who is he to make anything? A seventeen-year-old who has not left the apartment in three days, who costs his family money and shame, who deletes his own work, who is a smell his mother covers with incense.

He deletes the title. He renames the file nothing.

Somewhere underneath, at the bottom of a well, a small cold part of him watches the whole arc — the fire, the title, the thirty seconds — and says nothing, because there is nothing it can do that has not already been done. He stares at the cube for six hours.

At eight in the evening there is a knock — small, two knocks, a pause, one more. His sister. He knows the pattern the way he knows the dead pixel. She is nine, or ten; the family cannot agree on her age, which is the kind of fact a family that is not looking at each other forgets. He can hear the assignment in her voice before she says a word — the careful brightness, the voice of a child walking on a frozen lake.

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

He does not open the door. The fire is ash, and the Yōujīng whispers that the interesting job is the fiction — working on his digital art, quotation marks earned, the story that preserves his dignity and their hope. He answers in the prophet's voice, too loud, too certain, the voice of the boy from thirty seconds ago:

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

The frozen lake holds. "Okay, gege," she says, and her footsteps go back down the hall, and the dining-table light clicks on, and he hears her pencil against paper — the only sound in the apartment that does not want anything from him.

He knows he is lying. He knows he was once the boy who would have helped her, and done it perfectly, and drawn diagrams, and made flashcards, and stayed up until one in the morning until the assignment was not merely good but excellent, and the teachers would have praised her, and his father would have nodded, and the world would have made sense for one more day.

He does not open the door. The dead pixel glows like a star that has stopped moving. The fan spins up. Through the wall, the whole family hears him not sleeping.

CHAPTER 2

DAY TWO

He wakes at noon because the quetiapine lets him go and the lithium holds him under. Twelve hours. He knows the number the way he knows his own name — twelve hours of nothing, a black slab of time set into his days like a wall set into a room. His mother told him once, carefully, not looking at him, that twelve was too much, that Dr. Chen could adjust the dose. He said he would think about it. He has been thinking about it for eight months.

The apartment is awake around him. He hears it through the wall the way he hears the mahjong through the floor — his sister's pencil, his mother's steps between the kitchen and the washing machine, the television tuned to a channel nobody watches because his father likes the noise. The television is the family's second heartbeat.

He sits on the edge of the bed and performs the inventory. Hands: they shake. The lithium tremor, small and constant, a leaf in a wind that is not there. He holds the right hand out and watches it, and thinks, with the flatness the lithium lays over everything, that this is what his ambition has been reduced to — a fine motor tremor, a hand that cannot hold a camera steady, a hand that will not be a blade. He has not told his mother about the tremor. It is the kind of fact that belongs in the room with the ceiling stains.

The pills are on the desk, next to the invoices. One of each, mouth, head back, swallow — and he catches himself again, the small shock again: two days in a row, properly, no tongue trick. He does not know what to do with the information. He files it with the stains.

There is a new bowl of soup outside the door. His mother's handwriting on a Post-it: 喝了 — drink it. He does not drink it. He steps over it on the way to the bathroom, and the soup is still warm, and the warmth is the most terrible thing in the apartment — it means she has been timing her life around his waking hours, and he has been sleeping through all of them.

The bathroom is where he thinks about his grandmother, because it is the only room in the apartment where no one will knock.

She died when he was ten. Fourth grade. A stroke, or a heart attack — the family never agreed, which is how he learned that death arrives in fragments, a story told by people who were not there. He was not allowed to see her in the hospital. The last time he saw her she was making hóngshāo ròu in the old apartment kitchen — red-braised pork, the dark lacquered kind, the sugar burned just to the edge of bitter — her back to him, telling him about the Po that lives in the lungs — how breathing is really seven animals taking turns. She said: "Three souls fly, Yichen. Seven souls stay. The trick is keeping them all in one body." She made him repeat the names like a poem.

He can still say them. Tāiguāng — the fetal light, the soul that connects to heaven, the one that is almost always obscured. Shuǎnglíng — the intellect, the blade, the fire. Yōujīng — desire, the yin essence, the hunger. And the seven Po, the animals that stay: Shīgǒu, the dog of vigilance, who keeps watch and keeps him awake. Fúshǐ, the hidden arrow, who fires at his own work. Quèyīn, the sparrow of the dark, who wants and is ashamed of wanting. Tūnzéi, the thief-swallower, who believes the world is stealing from him. Fēidú, the poison-expeller, who makes him take his medicine and resent taking it. Chúhuì, the filth-purger, who scrubs him red in the shower.

Chòufèi, the stinking lung, who takes his breath in the humid basin air and gives back panic.

Seven animals. He has been holding them inside him for a year, and some days he thinks the animals are all that hold him together — a menagerie of symptoms wearing names his grandmother gave them, a language he shares with a dead woman, the last conversation he is having with her.

He does not talk about her. His mother almost never mentions her, and when she does, her voice tightens the way a scar tightens before rain. His father never mentions her. His sister never met her. She is present in every frame he uses to understand himself, and no one in the house knows it except him, and some days he thinks that is the loneliest fact of all.

At the mirror he looks at the boy looking back — the face that used to be held up as an example, the model student, the one whose father, for the first time, seemed proud. The dark circles are deeper. The eyes are the same eyes. He is not sure who is looking out of them today. He recites the poem under his breath, the way she made him do it, and for a moment the animals settle — Shīgǒu stops pacing, Chòufèi breathes evenly, Fēidú, the hated one, the stabilizer, lies down in the grass of his chest and closes its eyes. The moment lasts about as long as one breath.

At dinner his father comes home at seven and does not ask. He eats fast — rice, vegetables, soup his mother made for him and not for Yichen, because she has stopped setting a bowl at his place. They share the table the way two strangers share a bus stop. His mother moves between them, filling bowls, clearing plates, a nervous satellite around two silent planets. She asks Yichen if he ate the soup. He says yes. She knows he is lying, and she does not say so, because saying so would mean looking at him, and looking at him is what she cannot do without the grief showing — the grief indistinguishable from

resentment, the grief of a woman who warned him, who saw the collapse coming and could not stop it. His sister talks to herself at the dining table because no one answers.

After dinner he stands on the balcony. The fog has come down with the dark, the way it does every January, and the city is a lid. The basin. His grandmother used to say the Po were heavy, earthbound, that they liked the damp and the dark, that when a person cannot lift their head it is because the seven animals are lying on them. He breathes in — humid, close, the specific weight of Chengdu in winter, a wet blanket over the lungs. Chòufèi stirs. He breathes out. Below him the city breathes — the mahjong, the traffic on the ring road, the neon of the noodle shops, the whole slow animal of it, breathing calmly, without him.

He thinks: the apartment is a lung. The computer is a heart. The city breathes outside, and I am still learning how to breathe with it.

He goes back inside. The cube is still there — nothing is still there, the file he renamed instead of deleting. The Shuǎnglíng flickers, the old fire trying to rise, and he holds it down the way you hold a door against a wind. Not tonight, he tells it. Tomorrow, maybe tomorrow.

The dead pixel glows in the corner of the screen. The fan spins up. Through the wall, the family can hear the sound of a boy who is not sleeping.

CHAPTER 3

DAY THREE

The fire does not wait for tomorrow. It comes at 3:47 AM, and Yichen is awake to meet it, because Shīgǒu — the dog of vigil‑ance — has stopped sleeping, and the dog does not sleep, because sleep is for boys who do not have visions.

He knows it is 3:47 because the mahjong downstairs has stopped, and the city holds the particular stillness of the hours between three and five, when even Chengdu — the city of midnight hotpot, the city that never closes — holds its breath. He has been at his desk for four hours, and in four hours he has built more than in the last four months. The fog is not fog. The fog is the city's breath, held in, and he can see all of it now — the geometry of it, the way the moisture pools in the low places, the way the basin holds its cloud the way a lung holds air. He has modeled the Third Ring Road. He has modeled the Global Center, the enormous building on the southern axis, glowing in his render like a spaceship that has landed on the plain. He has named the reference folder 天眼 — heaven's eyes — because his grandmother said he had heav‑en's eyes, because she said he could see what other people could not see, because she said never let anyone close them.

He is not arrogant. He is not even confident, exactly. He is certain — and the difference is that certainty does not need evidence. The certainty arrived tonight, and he received it the way a radio receives a signal: the city is a lung and I am the breath. He will render the entire basin. He will sell the model to the municipal government — the email is already drafted in his head, subject line and all, calm with authority. He will re‑define Chengdu's visual language, and the classmates who

edited him out of their WeChat groups will see, and the teachers who looked at him with concern will see, and his father will see, and his father's jaw will unclench, and his mother will stop burning incense for a son who needs settling, because there will be nothing left to settle. He is the only one who truly sees the suffering geometry of the old neighbor‑hoods — the way the balconies repeat like a stammer, the way the water stains on a stairwell wall make a map of every leak in the building's history, the way the community notice board leans three degrees off vertical, a small monument to a world that is slowly, gently falling apart. Everyone else walks through this city. He reads it.

And underneath, at the bottom of a well, a small cold part of him watches all of it and screams — knows the message he is composing is incoherent, knows it is four in the morning, knows the woman in Shanghai who renders cities from satel‑lite data is a stranger who has never heard his name — and the fire does not care, because the fire does not read the room, and the well has no stairs. He sends it anyway: you are rendering the surface of cities but I am rendering the breath of one. Chengdu is a lung. I have the coordinates. We should collaborate. I will send you the files. He does not notice that he has explained nothing. He does not notice that there are no files. He does not notice that it is 4 AM.

At five he films the building from the balcony, the phone shaking in the tremor, the fog swallowing the streetlights, the identical balconies of the identical buildings repeating into the dark like an algorithm with no exit condition, and he whispers to the phone — this is the suffering geometry, this is what no one sees, the hallways are wrong, not me, I have always been looking from outside. He will not remember most of this to‑morrow. He will remember it the way you remember a fever: bright, fragmented, impossible.

In the morning he spends money he cannot afford — ¥298 for a plugin pack on his mother's Alipay, the account linked to her phone, the one that will notify her, the one he is not thinking about; ¥150 of render-farm credit; ¥99 a month, auto-renew. He spends the way a man spends in a casino: certain that this is the investment which finally works, while the small cold part at the bottom of the well watches the invoice land on the kitchen table before it has landed, and hears, in advance, the flatness in his father's voice — 没志气, no ambition; 太脆弱, too fragile — and screams, and is not heard, not even by him.

At seven his father comes home from the warehouse, and Yichen comes out of his room, because the fire has something to say. He is not hungry — he has not been hungry for two days; the fire burns the hunger — but he stands at the table and says it with the patience of a teacher with a stubborn child: "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 — " Too much, too fast, too much eye contact. He does not notice his father's jaw tightening. He does not notice his mother put‑ting down her chopsticks. He does not notice his sister watch‑ing him with wide eyes — excited, then confused, then tired, then afraid — the eyes of a child who has seen this before and knows how it ends.

"You're seventeen," his father says. "Eat your rice."

"I'm not hungry."

"Eat your rice."

The fire dims, the way a flame dims when a door opens. He sits. He eats. The rice tastes like nothing. The table is silent. His sister does her homework and talks to herself because no one answers, and he does not hear her, because he is still in

the render, still in the fog, still in the lung of the city — and the small cold part of him is screaming at the bottom of the well, and no one can hear it, not even him.

That night he does not sleep. Shīgǒu keeps watch. The fire burns. He works until the sun comes up, and then he works through the sun, and at 8:47, when the notification lands on his mother's phone — ¥298, plugin pack, her Alipay — he is in the fog, and he does not hear the apartment go quiet.

CHAPTER 4

DAY FOUR

Huaxi. The appointment. His mother takes him, because she is the one who will, because she is the one who found him that night, because she is the one who says 双相情感障碍 out loud — bipolar disorder, the words that came with the diagnosis and have never once made anything smaller — the only one in the house who has not stopped saying them, as if saying them enough times could make them manageable, a debt paid down in installments.

The hospital is a machine for waiting. They take a number — 147 — and sit in the fluorescent light, and the light hums, and he thinks the hum is a Po, one of the seven stirring in its cage. The waiting room smells of disinfectant and dust and the specific, indefinable smell of a Chinese public hospital — the smell of bodies that have been told to wait. No one makes eye contact, because eye contact would mean acknowledging that everyone here is here for the same reason. Across from them an old woman cries without sound, tears running down a face that has stopped trying. A young man in a hoodie sits with his hands between his knees, staring at the floor, and Yichen thinks he knows that stare — the stare of someone who has stopped expecting the world to make sense — and he looks away, at his mother, who is holding the queue slip like a talis - man. He realizes, with the flatness the lithium lays over everything, that she is praying to it.

Dr. Chen has fifteen minutes and fifty patients. A small man, precise beard, the tired eyes of someone who has been explaining the same thing for twenty years. Four questions — sleep, appetite, energy, thoughts of self-harm — the liturgy of

Yichen's year. He answers. He does not tell Dr. Chen about the fire, or the fog, or the plugin pack, or the message to the stranger in Shanghai, or the balcony at five in the morning. He tells him what he has told him for a year: that he is fine, that he is sleeping, that he is taking his medicine, that he is work‑ing on his art. The words come out flat, and the flatness is the lithium, and the lithium is working, and the working is the lie, and the lie is the truth, and Dr. Chen writes something in the chart that Yichen cannot see.

Then Dr. Chen says the thing. The thing his mother has been waiting for, the thing she has not told him — he can see it in the way her hands go still in her lap.

"Yichen. You turn eighteen in two months. After eighteen, you transfer to adult services. The registration follows you — the disability registration, the one filed after your diagnosis. It's already in the system. It affects certain things. A driver's license, if you ever apply for one. Certain jobs — civil service, public institutions, some private employers with background checks. Housing, in some cases. I'm not telling you this to frighten you. I'm telling you because you need to begin preparing for reintegration."

The word sits in the fluorescent air like a stone dropped into a pond. Reintegration. As if he had ever been integrated in the first place. As if the year at home were an integration he is now being asked to do again. He thinks of the file named nothing. He thinks of the cube. He thinks of the certificate under the invoices.

"Reintegration," he says, and the word tastes like lithium.

Dr. Chen looks at him, and for a moment the tired eyes are not tired — they are looking at him the way his grandmother used to look at him, and the recognition is unbearable. "You're not the first boy who's sat in this chair," Dr. Chen says. "And you won't be the last. The system is not your en‑

emy, Yichen. The registration protects you — free physicals, drug subsidies, 门特 reimbursement, so your mother doesn't have to pay for your lithium out of pocket. What it costs is on the other side of the ledger. I want you to know what's on both sides before you decide what to do with the next five years."

Yichen says nothing. His mother says nothing. The 门特. The subsidy — the state's half-mercy, the paperwork that pays for the pills so his mother does not have to. He has seen the word on the receipts that pile up on the kitchen table. The fluorescent light hums, the animals stir in their cages, and the fifteen minutes are up.

On the bus home neither of them speaks. The city slides past the window — wet markets under their awnings, old men playing xiàngqí — Chinese chess, the slowest game in the world — under the trees, the fog softening everything into the same gray watercolor. The bus turns onto the southern axis, past the mouth of a metro station where Line 1 swallows its passengers whole, past the towers of the software park rising out of the fog like a second city that grew while he was inside his room — and there it is: the Global Center, enormous, glowing, a spaceship that has landed on the plain, ringed by towers that did not exist when he was the excellent student, when the future was a straight line. The contrast is violent. He is a shut-in moving through a city of ambition. The city does not slow down for him. The city does not know he exists. He is 家里蹲 — a shut-in, the kind the neighborhood names without saying the word — a boy in pajamas, a smell covered with in‑cense, and the Global Center glows like the future he was supposed to have.

At home he does not go to his room. He walks past his door, down the stairs, out the gate, past the security guard who knows he dropped out and looks at him with pity and suspi‑

cion, and he walks to the river. The Jǐnjiāng is brown and slow. It is January, the water is low, and the fog sits on it like a lid. He walks the embankment until the city lights are behind him. He takes out his phone and films the river — the brown water, the slow current, a plastic bottle carried without judgment, the way it goes somewhere. The water goes somewhere. He does not.

He thinks about Dr. Chen's word. The license he will never hold. The applications that will ask the question and read the answer. The ledger with two sides — protection on one, cost on the other — and his whole life become bookkeeping, the delta between what he was and what he is, and the delta is unbear-able.

His phone buzzes. His mother: 回来吃饭. Come home and eat. He does not answer. He films for ten more minutes, then walks home, the city breathing around him, slow and indif-ferent and alive, and he breathes with it, badly, like a man learning an instrument he has been told he will never play.

The apartment is dark. His mother is in the kitchen, at the windowsill, burning incense — sandalwood, the cheap kind that comes in the red packets from the temple — and the smell is his grandmother's apartment, and he stops in the dark hallway and does not know if she is burning it for him, to settle a wandering soul, or for the dead woman who was her mother, or for herself, or for all three. He does not ask, be-cause asking would mean admitting that he knows the smell, that he knows the language — that the framework is not hers to use; it is his, and hers, and his grandmother's, and no one in this house will ever agree on what it means.

He goes to his room. He does not turn on the computer. He lies on the bed and recites the poem of names until he falls asleep — Tāiguāng. Shuǎnglíng. Yōujīng. Shīgǒu. Fúshǐ. Quèyīn. Tūnzéi. Fēidú. Chúhuì. Chòufèi. — and he dreams of

the river, brown and slow, going somewhere, and in the dream he is standing on the bank and he cannot move, and the water does not wait.

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PART II — THE CRACK

CHAPTER 5

DAY FIVE

The crack comes at dinner, the way cracks do — after the food, when the plates are nearly empty and there is nothing left to do with the hands.

His father has been quiet for two days. Quiet is his native language, so Yichen does not notice at first. He notices the Alipay notification that landed on his mother's phone yesterday morning — ¥298, plugin pack — and the way she did not mention it, the way she put the phone face-down on the table, the way the silence around the notification grew until it filled the apartment like fog. He notices his father's hands, folded on the table, the knuckles white, the way a man holds his hands when he is about to say something he has been holding for a year.

"Yichen." His father does not shout. This is the terrible part — he does not shout. He speaks in short, declarative sentences, the way he speaks at the warehouse, the way he speaks to machines. "You are seventeen. I was working at sixteen. Your grandfather was working at fourteen. You are a man. Act like one."

The words land in the quiet like tiles on a table. His mother stops moving between the kitchen and the table. His sister stops writing. The television keeps talking to no one. This is the voice his father uses at the warehouse when a pallet is stacked wrong — no anger, no volume, just the flat correction of a man informing an object of its error, and Yichen is the object, and the error is his whole life.

"Return to school," his father 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 does not look at Yichen. He looks at the wall, at the spot where the paint is peeling, the spot that has been peeling for three years, the spot no one fixes. "Or you get a job. Any job. Delivery. Warehouse. Your mother's supermarket. Or you leave."

The word hangs in the air. Leave. It is a small word for a large door. The apartment is a pressure chamber, and the word is a valve, and Yichen feels the pressure change, feels the fire — the Shuǎnglíng, the blade, the A-student fire that has been burning for two days, the fire that knows it is the only thing he has — rise in his chest like a tide. Leave is what his grandfather was too proud to do, and too poor to consider. Leave is a word from the warehouse, where a man who does not produce is moved out of the way.

"I'm not going back to school," he says, and his voice comes out too loud, too fast, the prophet's voice, the voice from the balcony at five in the morning. "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," his father says. The words are flat. Flat as the lithium. Flat as the river. "On your mother's account. For a project you will delete."

The fire flickers, a filament thinning. Around the table the air has the stillness of a held breath. "I won't delete this one," he says, and hears, even as he says it, how the sentence has been said before — by him, to this table, in this voice, more than once, and how everyone at the table knows it, including the small cold part of him at the bottom of the well, which is already grieving the file by name.

"You deleted the last one. And the one before that. And the one before that." His father's voice does not rise. That is the

horror of it — the voice does not rise. “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 — “ He gestures, a small movement, a hand that has carried boxes for twenty years gesturing at the apartment, at the closed door, at the boy who is not a boy anymore. “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.”

Yichen wants to say the words. He wants to say 双相情感障碍, the way his mother says it — the words that are supposed to explain everything, the words that explain nothing. He wants to say I am not lazy, I am ill, I was awake for four days, I was found talking to my monitor, the fire is not ambition, the fire is a symptom, I am holding seven animals in my chest and they are all trying to escape. He wants to say I am terrified, I am terrified, I am terrified.

What he says is: “You don’t understand. None of you understand. The city is a lung and I am the breath — “

His father stands up. The chair scrapes. He does not shout — he has never shouted. He walks to the door, and at the door he stops, and he does not turn around, and he says, to the door, to the peeling paint, to the hallway, to the son who will not see his face: “I’ll be back in an hour. Decide something.”

The door closes. The apartment is very quiet — the particular quiet of a room after a raised voice that was never raised, the quiet of pressure without release. His mother stands at the kitchen window with her back to him; the incense on the windowsill has burned down to a gray thread. His sister is

watching him, her pencil stopped mid-stroke, her eyes wide, and he can see her trying to understand, and he cannot help her, because he does not understand either. He is seventeen years old, and he has just been given an hour to become a dif‑ferent person, and the fire in his chest is already beginning to understand what his father's flat voice understood first: that the hour will end, and the person will be the same.

He goes to his room. He closes the door. The computer is on, the render still open, the fog still glowing — the city as a lung, the breath made visible. He looks at it the way you look at a thing you are about to destroy.

The fire goes out. All at once, the way a flame goes out when the oxygen is gone, the way a light goes out when the switch is thrown. The Shuǎnglíng falls, and the animals come down on him like weather — Shīgǒu's vigilance turning inward, Fúshǐ's arrow finding its target, Chòufèi's lung collapsing in the humid air, Chúhuì's disgust rising like gorge. He sits in front of the screen, and the fog glows, and the fog is not a vis‑ion anymore — it is a lie, it is evidence, it is the work of a boy who cost his family ¥298 and two days of sleep for something he will delete by morning.

He deletes it now. He does not wait for morning. He selects the file — nothing, the renamed file, the fog, the city as a lung, the whole breath — and he deletes it, and then he empties the trash, and then he uninstalls Blender, and the uninstall takes forty seconds, and the forty seconds are the longest forty seconds of his life, and when it is done the desktop is empty, and the desktop is the truth.

Fúshǐ — the hidden arrow — fires. That is what his grandmother called it: the Po that eliminates, the arrow that comes from nowhere and strikes the archer's own work. He drags the plastic ruler from the desk drawer across his forearm — three strokes, hard enough to leave red lines, not hard

enough to break skin — and the pain is real, and the pain is the only real thing in the room, and he watches the red lines rise like a message in a language only he can read.

Then the shower. Chúhuì — the purger of filth. He turns the water as hot as it will go, and he stands under it, and he scrubs — his arms, his chest, his face, the skin of the boy who stood on the balcony at five in the morning whispering about suffering geometry, the skin of the prophet, the skin of the fraud — and he scrubs until the skin is red, until the shame has nowhere left to hide, until the water runs cold and he is standing in a cold shower in a cold apartment in a cold city, and the fog outside the window is the same color as the wall, and he is seventeen years old, and he is nothing.

He does not get dressed. He lies on the bed. He recites the poem of names, and the names are ash in his mouth — Tāiguāng. Shuǎnglíng. Yōujīng. Shīgǒu. Fúshǐ. Quèyīn. Tūnzéi. Fēidú. Chúhuì. Chòufèi. — ten names, a poem his grandmother taught him, a poem that was supposed to hold him together, a poem that is holding nothing.

His father comes back in an hour. Yichen hears the door. He hears the footsteps stop outside his door. He hears the pause. He hears the footsteps continue — past his door, to the living room, to the television, to the two glasses of baijiu that have been waiting all week — and the apartment arranges itself around the two of them: one boy who has not decided anything, one man drinking exactly two glasses, and between them a hallway with a closed door.

Yichen has not decided anything.

CHAPTER 6

DAY SIX

The trough is not sadness. Sadness is a weather system. This is geography — a low place the water has drained into, a basin within the basin, a place where time pools and thickens and stops moving.

He wakes at noon. No — he wakes at four in the afternoon. He is not sure. The quetiapine has him, and the quetiapine is a stone, and he is the pond, and the stone has been in the pond for twelve hours, and he surfaces the way a body surfaces from deep water: without volition, without relief.

The pills are on the desk. He picks them up. He puts them in his mouth. He tilts his head back — and then he stops, and he looks at the white specks in his palm, and he thinks about the flatness, the death worse than the fire, the way the lithium takes the color out of everything, the way the fire is the only thing that makes him feel like a coherent self, the way the fire is also the thing that put him in the hospital, the thing that made his mother find him at 3 AM talking to his monitor. He puts the pills under his tongue. He drinks the water. He spits them into the sink, and he watches them spiral away, and he thinks: this is the first honest thing I have done today.

The soup bowls are piling up by the door. He counts them — three, four, he has lost count, the way he has lost count of the days. His mother's handwriting on the Post-its: 喝了. 喝了. 喝了. Drink it. Drink it. Drink it. The bowls are a ledger, and he is the debt, and the debt is compounding.

He cannot look at his mother. This is the specific quality of the trough — not that he is sad, but that he is ashamed, and the shame has a body: his hands, which tremble; his voice, which

comes out wrong, too loud or too soft; the way he breathes, shallow, in the humid basin air, the way Chòufèi takes his breath and gives back panic. He hates particular things about himself — the tremor in the right hand, the way his voice cracks when he tries to speak at a normal volume, the smell of his own skin after three days in the room. He does not hate "himself" in the abstract. He hates the specific boy who cost his family ¥298, who deleted his own work, who stood in the living room explaining the city's breath to a father who works sixteen-hour days so the family can eat rice.

His sister knocks. The two-knock-pause-one pattern. He does not answer. She knocks again. He does not answer. She says, through the door, in her careful frozen-lake voice: "Gege, I drew you a picture." A pause. "I'll put it under the door."

The paper slides under the door. He can see the corner of it from the bed — colors, the bright colors of a child who does not yet know that the world is gray. He does not get up. He does not pick it up. He stares at the ceiling, at the seven stains, and the seven stains are the seven Po, and the seven Po are ly‑ing on him, and he cannot lift his head.

The drawing stays where it is for three days.

He does not take his medicine. He hides it. He spits it out. The lithium builds nothing; the quetiapine is refused. He knows this is the thing they warned him about — the hospital warned him, his mother's face warns him every time she looks at him — and he does it anyway, because the flatness feels like a death worse than the fire, and because the fire is the only thing that makes him feel like a coherent self, and because the coherent self is the fraud, and the fraud is the only self he has.

He lies in the dark. The computer is off. The dead pixel is dark. The fan is silent. For the first time in a year, the family

cannot hear him through the wall, and the silence from his room is the loudest thing in the apartment.

CHAPTER 7

DAY SEVEN

The panic comes in the afternoon, the way it always does — with no warning, no weather, no reason. He is standing at the sink, drinking water, and suddenly the water is not enough, and the air is not enough, and Chòufèi — the stinking lung — is taking his breath and giving back panic, the Po trying to expel the Hun, the seven animals all fighting for one breath, and he is on the balcony before he knows he has moved, gasping, his hands on the railing, the humid basin air a wet blanket over his face, the fog the same color as the wall, the city breathing calmly below him.

The city breathes. That is the worst part. The city does not know. The mahjong tiles click. The traffic moves on the ring road. A delivery rider passes below, his electric scooter whining, carrying someone's dinner. The city is a lung — he thought this, three days ago, with the fire in his chest, and the thought was a vision, and now the thought is a joke, and the joke is on him, because the city is a lung and he cannot breathe in it.

He gasps. The air is thick and wet and full of the city — cooking oil, exhaust, the damp of the basin, the specific stale scent of a room where a boy has not opened the window in days — except he is outside now, on the balcony, and the scent follows him, because the scent is him.

He thinks about the drawing under his door. He thinks about his sister's careful voice. He thinks about the interview assignment, the one he dismissed with the prophet's voice, the one he promised to explain later, the one he has not explained, the one he will never explain, because the explana-

tion is this: he is a seventeen-year-old who has not left the apartment in four days, who costs his family money and shame, who deletes his own work, who is a negative space in the apartment, a debt on the family ledger, a smell his mother tries to cover with incense.

The voices come. Not hallucinations — he is not hearing things; he knows that; he has been taught the difference — but the voices of memory, the voices of the people who have judged him, playing in his head with the fidelity of recordings. His father: This is not sickness. This is giving up. His former classmates: he was absent, and the social organism closed over the wound. The teacher who looked at him with concern, which was worse than anger. Dr. Chen: you need to begin preparing for reintegration. And underneath them all, the one voice he cannot silence, the voice that sounds like his own: I am a joke. I am a waste. I should delete everything. I should delete myself.

The thought arrives, and he recognizes it, the way you recognize a symptom, the way you recognize the weather — the thought that the family would be lighter without him, that the ledger would balance, that the delta between what he was and what he is would finally close. He recognizes it, and the recognition is the only thing between him and the thought — the recognition, and the memory of his mother's face when she found him at 3 AM — and he holds the railing, and he breathes, and the breathing is the seven animals taking turns, and the turns are not fair, and the lung is stinking, and the air is humid, and the city breathes calmly below him, going somewhere, without him.

He goes back inside. He does not tell anyone. He looks at the drawing under the door, and he cannot pick it up, and he cannot leave it, and he goes back to bed, and the afternoon pools around him like water in a basin, and time stops moving.

CHAPTER 8

DAY EIGHT

He wakes at noon, and the memory is waiting for him, the way it always waits for him in the trough — the memory of the week that broke the container.

He replays it the way he replays his own renders: frame by frame, looking for the flaw.

The winter of his second year of high school. He was sixteen. He was the model student, the one teachers held up as an example, the one who stayed up until one in the morning finishing homework not because he was slow but because he could not tolerate submitting work that was merely good. He was the class monitor. He was on the labor committee. He volunteered for duties other students shunned, because responsibility was proof of worth. He ranked in the top ten of his year. His father, for the first time, seemed proud. His mother worried about the dark circles under his eyes but bragged to the relatives about his scores.

He was not faking diligence. He was genuinely trying. The work gave him structure. The praise gave him oxygen. The grades were evidence that he existed and mattered.

And then the project. He does not remember what the project was — a chemistry presentation, a physics model, something that required him to be the best, something that required him to stay up, something that required him to believe that if he stopped, the entire structure would collapse. He was awake for three days. His heart raced. His hands shook. He could not stop, because stopping would mean admitting that the work was merely good, and merely good was not enough, and he had been told — by teachers, by parents, by the voice in his

head that had learned the lesson too well — that merely good was failure.

His body shut down. A week of school missed. The official story was a bad flu. The truth was sleep deprivation and nervous exhaustion — his body simply refused.

When he returned, the world had shifted — imperceptibly but catastrophically. The class had moved on; a week of notes, gossip, alliances, and inside jokes had formed in his absence, and he was outside the perimeter. His former friends had paired off without him. Group projects were already assigned. He was the leftover. He tried to catch up — the same all-night - ers, the same fire — and his body revolted: he fell asleep in class, and handed in work late, and the teachers who had praised him now looked concerned, which was worse than anger.

His peers did not bully him; they simply edited him out. The WeChat groups where he was once active went quiet when he spoke. He was assigned the presentation work and then re - moved from the speaking roster. He sat at lunch tables where conversation stopped and then restarted in a different key. The isolation was not cruel; it was efficient. He had been absent, and the social organism had closed over the wound — cleanly, without scarring, the way water closes over a stone.

Without the validation of academic excellence and without the structure of all-consuming work, his mind had no con - tainer. The same energy that had fueled his perfectionism detonated. He stopped sleeping. He became convinced he could map the hostility of the school building in Blender — if he could just render the geometry of the hallways, he could prove why he no longer fit inside them. He was found by his mother at 3 AM, four days awake, talking to his monitor. Hospitalized for one week. Diagnosed with 双相情感障碍. Twelve months ago.

He still does not know what that week was. Exhaustion. A flu. Or the first time the fire came down the wire and he mis - took it for diligence. He will never know. The ambiguity is the wound — the wound is not the collapse; the wound is not knowing whether the collapse was a symptom or a cause, whether he was always going to end up here, whether the model student was a boy who was genuinely good or a boy who was already sick, running on a fire he did not yet know was not his own.

He lies in bed. The memory settles back into the water. He looks at the drawing under the door — the corner of it, the bright colors, a family he has been excluded from for three days — and he does not pick it up. He cannot pick it up. Open - ing it would mean opening the door, and he is not ready for the door. He leaves it where it is, a small bright rectangle on the floor of a dark hallway, waiting.

He takes his medicine. Both pills. He swallows them prop - erly, without the tongue trick. He does not know why. The act is small and mundane and it changes nothing, and it changes everything, and he stands in the bathroom, looking at the boy in the mirror, and he recites the poem of names, and the names come out steady, and the animals stir but do not scatter, and he thinks, for the first time in four days: I am still here.

It is not hope. It is not courage. It is the fragile spleen — the 意, the will, the capacity to hold the Hún and the Pò together in one skull by chemistry and discipline and routine — doing its small, unglamorous work. He does not trust it. He knows the pendulum is still swinging. He knows this will not last.

But it is something. It is a day.

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PART III — THE PENDULUM

CHAPTER 9

DAY NINE

His mother takes him to the market. She does not ask. She appears at his door at eight in the morning — an hour he has not seen in weeks — with the shopping bags and her determ - ined face, and she says, "You're coming with me," and she does not make it a question, and Yichen, still half-held by the quetiapine, does not have the strength to refuse.

The morning is a shock. The wet market is a machine of sound and smell and color, and he has forgotten all of it — the vendors shouting prices, the wet concrete, the fish gasping in their plastic tubs, the steam rising off the dumpling stalls, the old men playing xiàngqí under the awnings with the unhurried precision of men who have all the time in the world. The market is the old Chengdu — this corner of Chénghuá district, the old industrial belt, where the factories used to be and the 老厂区 neighborhoods — the old factory blocks, the walk-ups that were built to house the workers and outlived the work — grew up around them, red-brick stairwells that smell of hotpot oil and damp concrete. The elevator in his building rattles when it works and does not work more often than not. He moves through the market like a man walking through a dream he has not been invited to. The vendors give him the brief, appraising glance of people who can tell he has not been outside in weeks — the glance that says this one — and his mother, beside him, arguing over two mao, is his only anchor in the current.

He is holding the bags. The bags are heavy. His hands tremble — the lithium tremor, the small constant leaf-shake — and he holds the bags with both hands so the tremor will not

show, and his mother does not look at him, and he does not know whether she is sparing him or sparing herself.

Then the smell.

It comes from a stall at the end of the market — a woman with a wok, hóngshāo ròu, the dark lacquer of the sauce, the sweetness of caramelized sugar rising into the January air — and Yichen stops walking.

The memory arrives whole, the way a struck bell arrives: all at once, with no beginning. He is ten years old. The old apartment. The kitchen. His grandmother at the stove, her back to him, the same pork in the same dark wok, the steam curling, and her voice — unhurried, the voice of a woman telling stories to a boy who is not going anywhere: "Three souls fly, Yichen. Seven souls stay. The trick is keeping them all in one body." She turns. She smiles. "And you — you have heaven's eyes. 天眼. You see what other people don't see. Never let anyone close them." He is ten, and she is alive, and the world is small and warm and full of the smell of hóngshāo ròu, and he has not thought about this afternoon in seven years, and it arrives now with hallucinatory vividness — not a hallucination, he knows the difference, memory, only memory, his brain retrieving language — and it stops him in the middle of the wet market, holding his mother's bags, with the tremor in his hands and the fog in his lungs.

His mother stops. She turns. She looks at him — really looks at him, the first time in days — and her face does the thing it does, the tightening, and she says, carefully: "Yichen?"

"Nothing," he says. "The smell. It reminded me of — " He stops. He does not say the word. He does not say Grandma. The word is a stone, and he is carrying enough stones.

She looks at the stall. At the woman with the wok. She says nothing — she buys the pork, the good pork, the belly — and

they walk home, neither speaking, and the smell of hóngshāo ròu follows them for three blocks.

At home she cooks. He stands in the kitchen doorway and watches her — the sugar going into the wok, the waiting for it to caramelize, the way she does not look at him. The smell fills the apartment, the dark lacquer sweetness of it, and something in him stirs that he has not felt in days: hunger. Actual hunger. It arrives like a stranger, and he does not trust it, because hunger is a body thing, and the body is the thing that betrayed him — the body that shook, that collapsed, that slept twelve hours at a stretch like something under a stone. He stands in the doorway with his hunger, and he does not ask for a bowl, and she does not offer one, and the silence between them is a full sentence in a language they almost share. The incense on the windowsill is burning — sandalwood, the cheap kind, the red packets from the temple — and he realizes, with a jolt that goes through him like current, that his mother has been burning that incense for seven years, and he has never once asked her why.

That night he overhears her on the phone. She is in the stairwell, her voice low — the voice she uses when she does not want the apartment to hear. He is getting water; he stops; he does not mean to listen, and he cannot stop listening.

"...the neighbor said there's a temple. In Qingchéng Shān. They do a ritual — 安魂. Settle the wandering soul. I don't know if it's real. I don't know." A pause. "I know he's on medicine. I know the doctor said — " Another pause. "I just want to do something. I can't just sit here and watch him — "

Her voice breaks. It is the first time he has heard her voice break in a year. "My mother would know what to do. My mother would — "

She stops. The stairwell is quiet. Yichen stands in the dark hallway with a glass of water in his hand, and the word 安魂 — settle the soul — is in the air, and the word is his grandmother's word, from the poem, from the bedtime stories, a word his mother has never used in front of him — because his mother does not believe in the framework, because his mother believes in 双相情感障碍 and lithium and the 门特 reimbursement — and yet here she is, in the stairwell, at night, asking about a temple that can settle a wandering Hún.

He goes back to his room. He does not drink the water. He sits on the bed in the dark, and the Shuǎnglíng flickers — not the fire, not yet; a small light, a coal — and the coal whispers: she is trying to call you home. Your grandmother's language. Your grandmother's ritual. You have a map. You have a language. The city is a lung and you are the breath —

He holds the coal down. He knows what the fire does. He knows the map is a delusion and the language is a coping mechanism and the temple cannot settle a wandering soul any more than lithium can — and yet the coal burns, and the coal says: she left you a language. That must mean something.

He lies down. He recites the poem of names, and the animals stir, and the coal glows, and he does not sleep well.

CHAPTER 10

DAY TEN

The fire comes back the next morning, and it comes back wearing his grandmother's voice.

He wakes at six — he has not woken at six in a year — and the world is too bright, the colors too saturated, the fog outside the window not a lid but a canvas, the whole city a render waiting to be built. The Shuǎnglíng is ascendant, the blade is out, and the blade cuts through everything: the dead pixel is not a defect but a seed; the peeling paint is not decay but tex‑ture; the old neighborhood is not a prison but the first frame of the film that will change everything. He reinstalls Blender — thirty seconds; he counts them — and opens a new project, and the title writes itself: The Complete Anatomy of Chengdu Fog. He builds for three hours, and the build is glorious, the fog is a lung, the city is a breath, he is the breath, he is the one who sees, he is the only one who sees —

His sister knocks. The two-knock-pause-one pattern. He opens the door — he opens the door; he never opens the door — and she is standing there with her notebook, the school notebook, the interview assignment, and her careful frozen-lake voice: "Gege, my teacher said the interview is due next week. I was wondering if — "

"I'm going to make you a star."

Her eyes go wide. "What?"

"A documentary. About you. About this — " He gestures at the apartment, at the balcony, at the city beyond, and the ges‑ture is a prophet's gesture, a film director's gesture, the gesture of a man who has already seen the whole film in his head. "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, then confused. "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 downloads the editing software onto the tablet — their mother' s tablet, the family' s tablet — and he talks for three hours without stopping. He makes her film him doing a manifesto in the living room: him standing in front of the peeling wall, the fog visible through the window behind him, explaining, in the prophet' s voice, the breathing algorithm of Chengdu, the suffering geometry of the old neighborhood, the vision that will redefine the city' s visual language. She holds the tablet. Her hands are steady. She films him, and she is ex - cited at first — this is the magical brother, the brother who makes her appear in videos with special effects, who draws her as an anime character, who walks her to the corner store and buys her ice cream — and then she is confused, because the words are too fast, the sentences too long, the eye contact too intense, and then she is tired, and then she is afraid, and he does not notice, because the fire does not read faces — and the small cold part of him, at the bottom of the well, sees all of it, her face changing key by key, and screams, and is not heard, not even by him.

His mother comes home at six. She sees the tablet on the table, the editing software, her daughter standing in the middle of the living room with a frozen expression, and she looks at Yichen, and the look is the look — the one he knows, the grief indistinguishable from resentment, the look that says

this is the night before the hospital; this is the face he made when he talked about the building's skeleton.

He retreats. He goes to his room. He closes the door.

The fire goes out at nine. It goes out the way a fire goes out when the wind changes — fast, complete, leaving nothing but ash and the smell of smoke. He sits on the floor with his back to the door, and the shame arrives like a tide, and the tide covers everything: the three hours, the manifesto, the tablet, his sister's face, his mother's face, the ¥298, the render, the vision, the whole burning delusion of the day.

He opens the door. He walks down the hall. His sister is in her room, doing homework, and she looks up when he appears, and her face is careful — the frozen-lake face — and he sits on the edge of her bed and he begins to cry.

"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 cannot finish. The words are ash. "I'm not the person I was today. I don't know who that was. Forget him. Forget everything."

She watches him. She does not understand — he can see her trying, the way she tries to understand everything, the way she draws the family over and over, trying to get it right — and he cannot help her, because he does not understand either. She says, in her small voice:

"Are you still my brother?"

The question lands like a tile on a table. He looks at her — at the girl who has two brothers in her memory: the one who helped with math homework, who showed her how to use a tablet, who taught her the multiplication tables, the smart one; and the one who lives behind the door, who is sometimes magical and sometimes a locked door, who shouts and cries and apologizes. She does not know they are the same person.

"I don't know," he says. It is the most honest thing he has said in a year.

She looks at him. Then she picks up her pencil, and she draws something, and she shows it to him — a family, everyone smiling, everyone together, the way families look in the drawings of children who have not yet learned that the world is gray. She does not say anything. She just holds the drawing out to him.

He takes it. He folds it carefully. He puts it in his pocket.

"I'm sorry," he says again, and he goes back to his room, and he closes the door, and he does not cry anymore, because there is nothing left.

Before the shower he goes back to the desk. The new project is still open — the fog, the city as a lung, the whole breath. He renames it nothing — the same name as before, the same fog, the same breath — and he deletes it. But this time he does not empty the trash. This time he leaves it in the recycle bin, where deleted things wait to be called back.

The scalding shower comes later — Chúhuì, the purger of filth, scrubbing the prophet's skin until it is red, scrubbing off the three hours of manifesto, the shame of being a seventeen-year-old who does nothing, who promised his sister the world and delivered a three-hour torrent in the living room. The water runs cold. He stands in the cold, shivering, and the dead pixel glows in the dark room beyond the bathroom door, and he thinks: I should delete everything. I should delete the account. I should delete myself.

He does not delete himself. He recognizes the thought, the way you recognize the weather. He holds the railing of the bathtub, and he breathes, and the breathing is the seven animals taking turns, and the turns are not fair, and he is still here.

CHAPTER 11

DAY ELEVEN

He does not leave his room. He does not check Bilibili, though his thumb hovers over the app all morning. He knows what he will find there — he knows the algorithm, he knows the patterns, he knows the wreckage the fire leaves behind — and he avoids it the way you avoid a wound.

In the afternoon he checks.

The notification is there: 2,713 views. His video — the manifesto, the one filmed at five in the morning on the balcony, the one about the breathing algorithm of Chengdu, the one he made during the fire, the one he should have deleted — has been picked up. Not by his followers. By a meme account. He scrolls the comments, and the comments are a knife: 这个up主精神可嘉 — this uploader's spirit is admirable. 我笑死了 — I'm dying laughing. Chengdu fog manifesto lol. Someone has made a compilation of "weird genius videos," and his is in it. His face — too bright, too fast, wrong, the face he makes when the fire has him — is being shared ironically, passed around WeChat groups like a joke, like a curiosity, like a boy who talks to the fog.

The Tūnzéi stirs — the thief-swallower, the paranoia, the certainty that they are stealing from him: the haters, the strangers, the government, his father, all of them taking his vision and turning it into a punchline. And then the Yōujīng answers: they are right. You are a joke. You are a waste. The video is embarrassing. You are embarrassing.

He sits with the phone in his trembling hand, and the views climb — 2,900, 3,100, the algorithm feeding on its own heat — and he feels the temptation, the seduction of the attention, the

voice of the fire whispering: lean in. They are watching. This is the audience. This is the virality you dreamed about. Perform for them. Give them more. Let them laugh — they will be laughing at the wrong thing, and then they will see, they will all see —

And underneath the fire, in the cold space at the bottom of the well, the witness says the one true thing he knows: the boy in the video, the prophet, the visionary — that boy is not the boy holding the phone. That boy is a symptom. The attention is for a symptom. Leaning in would be feeding the fire, and the fire is the thing that put him in the hospital, the thing that made his mother find him at 3 AM talking to his monitor.

He does not lean in. He does not respond. He deletes the video — Fúshǐ, the hidden arrow, firing at his own work, the arrow that comes from nowhere and strikes the archer — and he watches the views freeze at 3,247, and then fall, and the account drops to 189 followers, and the followers are mostly bots, and the bots do not care, and the algorithm moves on — the way the social organism closed over the wound, the way everything moves on without him.

He puts the phone down. The room is quiet. The dead pixel glows.

That night he hears his sister crying — not the loud crying of a child who wants to be heard, but the quiet, muffled kind, the kind pressed into a pillow, the kind a child cries when she does not want anyone to know. He hears it through the wall, and he knows it is his fault — knows it the way he knows the ceiling stains, the way he knows the dead pixel — and he does not go to her, because what would he say. He lies in the dark and listens to her cry, and the crying stops after a while, and the stopping is worse.

He thinks about his sister’s question. Are you still my brother? He thinks about his answer. I don’t know. He thinks about the drawing in his pocket, the family, everyone smiling.

He does not know what to do with any of it.

CHAPTER 12

DAY TWELVE

The ledger.

He keeps it in his head, the way his father keeps the household accounts, the way his mother keeps the hospital receipts — a bookkeeping of what he was against what he is, and the delta is unbearable, and today he cannot stop doing the math.

What he was: top ten in his year. Class monitor. Labor committee. The teachers' example. The boy who stayed up until one in the morning rewriting essays because merely good was not enough. The boy who volunteered for the duties other students shunned, because responsibility was proof of worth. The boy whose father, for the first time, seemed proud. The boy whose grades were evidence that he existed and mattered. The boy his grandmother would recognize.

What he is: a seventeen-year-old who has not left the apartment in days. Who costs his family ¥298 in plugins and ¥150 in render-farm credits and ¥99 a month in subscriptions he does not use. Who deleted his own work, uninstalled his own tools, sabotaged his own account. Who promised his nine-year-old sister a documentary and delivered a three-hour manifesto that made her afraid. Who is a negative space in the apartment, a debt on the family ledger, a smell his mother tries to cover with incense. Who has a file named nothing sitting in the recycle bin of a program he deleted.

He opens ArtStation. This is a ritual of the trough — the ritual he performs when he wants to hurt himself precisely. He scrolls the work of professionals — the city renders, the fog studies, the geometry of light — and he compares, and the comparison is a knife, and the knife finds the exact place: he

will never be this good. He was never going to be this good. The fire was never talent. The fire was a symptom. The vision was a delusion. The boy who believed he could model the entire Third Ring Road was a boy who could not model a cube.

He feels physically sick. The nausea is real — the Yōujīng inverted, the desire turned to shame, the wanting to be an artist turned into the obscenity of wanting to be a god. His body is disgusting — he knows this in the specific, physical way: the tremor in his hands, the smell of his own skin, the way his voice comes out wrong. He is unworthy of touch. He is unworthy of food. He is unworthy of the drawing in his pocket, the family, everyone smiling.

The Tūnzéi takes over — the paranoia, the certainty that they are right: the haters, the strangers, the government, his father, all of them right to take everything from him, because there was never anything to take. He deletes his browsing history. He throws away the notebooks — the sketchbooks from before, the ones with the half-finished cities, the ones that are evidence that he tried and failed again. He throws them in the kitchen trash, and his mother sees him doing it, and she does not ask, and he does not explain, and the trash is full of his attempts, and the attempts are ash.

Later, alone in the kitchen, he sees it — the drawing, the family, everyone smiling, crumpled at the bottom of the trash.

His mother must have swept it up with the hallway — must have cleared the bright rectangle from the floor of the dark hallway while he was asleep, must have decided, without asking him, that he was not coming back for it. He stands there a long time. The thought of her doing it — bending down, picking up her daughter's drawing of the family — is a wound he cannot close. He does not throw it away. He fishes it out. He smooths it against his chest, the creases still sharp where the trash crushed it. He folds it carefully, and he puts it in his

pocket, and he does not tell anyone, and it is the only thing he has saved in a year.

He imagines his grandmother seeing him now. The image arrives, and it is a censure: she stands in the old apartment kitchen, the wok in her hand, the hóngshāo ròu steaming, and she looks at him — at the seventeen-year-old in the dark room, at the deleted files, at the boy who cannot lift his head — and she is unable to speak. The framework is a language he is no longer worthy to use. The poem of names is a poem he has forgotten. The seven animals are not his to call.

He sits in the dark. The dead pixel glows. The fan is silent. He does not take his medicine.

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PART IV — THE HINGE

CHAPTER 13

DAY THIRTEEN

His mother makes him come to the table for dinner. She does not ask; she stands at his door and says, "You're coming to the table," and the sentence is not a request, and he comes — because he is too tired to fight, and because the alternative is lying in the dark with the dead pixel and the ledger.

The table is set. His father is not there — the night shift, or the overtime, or the walk, or all three. His sister is there, doing her homework, the pencil moving, the only sound in the apartment. His mother serves the rice. The hóngshāo ròu is on the table — she made it this morning, the same recipe, the caramelized sugar, the dark lacquer — and the smell fills the small apartment, and Yichen sits with the smell in his nose and does not know if his mother made it for him, or for her mother, or for the ghost of a kitchen in an old apartment, and he does not ask.

His sister finishes her homework. She looks at him — the careful look, the frozen-lake look — and she says: "Gege, I made something. Do you want to see?"

He does not want to see. He wants the room, and the dark, and the dead pixel. But she is already up, and already back with her tablet, and already showing him — a video. A tiny video. Thirty seconds. She made it with the editing software he downloaded onto the tablet — the software from the three hours, the manifesto morning. The video is a loop. A cube. A gray cube in the middle of a void — she found the program, she figured out how to open it, she rendered a cube and made it spin, slowly, and the spin is clumsy and the render is pixelated and the cube is nothing — and she is laughing.

She is laughing. Real laughter — the laugh of a child who made something and is showing it to her brother, the laugh that asks for nothing, the laugh that is pure and small and alive.

The Tāiguāng flickers. The fetal light — the first Hun, the soul that connects to heaven, the baseline self that is almost always obscured. He catches a glimpse of it, and the glimpse is the boy he was before the fire, before the trough, before the hospital — the boy who would have laughed with her, who would have taught her the shortcut keys, who would have made the cube spin faster and added a light and shown her how the light changes everything. The glimpse is real, and it is unbearable, because he cannot hold it. That is the same reason it terrifies him: the light is not something he can keep. It comes, and it goes, and he is left with the ledger and the dark.

He watches the cube spin. He listens to her laugh. And then — he does not know why; he will never know why — he does not delete the video. He does not delete anything. He reaches over, and he takes her hand, and he says, "Show me how you made it."

She shows him. He teaches her the shortcut keys. The cube spins. The apartment is quiet. The hóngshāo ròu cools on the table. And for thirty seconds — he counts them; later, he will count them — the ledger closes, and the delta is zero, and he is just a brother, teaching his sister how to make a cube spin.

The thirty seconds end. The pendulum is still there, above him, in the dark of the ceiling. But it has paused. For thirty seconds, it has paused.

He takes his medicine that night. Both pills. Properly. He does not know why. He does not know if it matters. But he takes them, and he stands at the window, and the city breathes below him — the mahjong, the traffic, the fog — and he

breathes with it, and the breathing is the seven animals taking turns, and the turns are not fair, and he is still here.

CHAPTER 14

DAY FOURTEEN

His mother has a day off. He knows because the apartment is different — the kitchen active, the washing machine running, the incense on the windowsill fresh — and she is at the table when he comes out at ten in the morning, which is early for him and late for her, and she looks up, and she does not say anything, and the silence is a question.

He sits down across from her. The pills are in his hand. He brought them out without knowing why. He has been bringing them out all week — the small rebellion of swallowing them where she can see. He puts them in his mouth. He drinks the water. He swallows.

His mother watches. Her hands are still on the table. She says, after a long moment: "好."

Good.

The word is small. The word is a stone dropped into a pond. He does not know what to do with it, so he says, "I deleted the video. The one people were sharing. It wasn't — " He stops. The words are hard. They are the truth, and the truth is heavy, the way everything true is heavy. "It wasn't me. The person in that video. That's not who I am."

His mother is quiet for a long time. He watches her face do the thing it does — the tightening, the grief — and then, for the first time in a year, she does not look away. She says: "I know. I've known for a year. I just — " She stops. "I didn't know how to tell you I knew."

The sentence lands. He sits with it. The apartment is quiet, the refrigerator hums, the incense burns, and neither of them moves, and neither of them looks away. He does not know

what to say, and she does not know what to say, and the silence is not a wall — it is a container, and for a moment they are both inside it.

That afternoon, his sister finds him at the dining table. She has her notebook, and she has the careful frozen-lake voice, and she says: "Gege. Will you tell me the story again? The one about the souls?"

He looks at her. The drawing is in his pocket — the one she gave him, the family, everyone smiling. He has been carrying it for two days, smoothing it with his thumb when no one is looking. He takes it out, 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. He tells her the story the way his grandmother told it to him, not as religion, not as medicine, but as a bedtime story, the way she told it in the old apartment, with the wok cooling on the stove and the incense burning and a boy too young to know he would need it. He tells her: 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 hun - ger, who wants. The seven stay — the dog who watches, the arrow that strikes, the sparrow of the dark, the thief-swallow - er, the poison-expeller, the purger of filth, the stinking lung. Seven animals, taking turns at the breath.

She asks her questions, the questions of a child who wants the world to make sense. "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 does not say: it does not always anymore. He does not say: I am the one who wanders now. He says: "They always came back."

"What happens if all the animals run away?"

The question is a knife, and it finds the exact place. He looks at her — at the girl who has two brothers and does not know they are the same person — and he says, slowly, the way his 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, the apartment, the city beyond the window, the whole breathing basin — "and you say their names, one by one, out loud, and you wait. They hear you. They come home."

She nods, satisfied — the way a child is satisfied by a story that makes sense. "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. A poem. The last conversation he is having with a dead woman, passed to the only person in the house who does not know it is a lifeline.

He also teaches her the dumpling trick, the pinch, the way his grandmother showed him, 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, the way she said, the pinch is the most important part. He shows her with an imaginary dumpling, and she laughs, and the laugh is the

Tāiguāng again, the glimpse, and he does not reach for it — he lets it be, lets it come and go without trying to hold it.

The fan runs in his room through all of it, patient as weather, and on the dark screen the dead pixel keeps its one black promise, and the cube waits the way the poem waits — honestly, without asking. He has not deleted anything today. He counts that the way he counts the ceiling stains: not hope, just arithmetic, the ledger's one honest column.

When she leaves, he sits at the table for a long time. The incense burns. The refrigerator hums. The city breathes outside.

He thinks about his grandmother, and for the first time in months the thought is not a censure and not a proof — it is warm, and it is distant, and it is enough. She would not recognize him now, he thinks. She would not know what to do with a grandson who deletes his own work and spits out his medicine and promises his sister documentaries. She would not understand 双相情感障碍. She would call it a wandering Hún and tell him it would come back by morning.

He is not sure she would be wrong.

CHAPTER 15

DAY FIFTEEN

He reinstalls Blender.

It is a small act, and he performs it deliberately, the way you perform a ritual you do not yet understand. The download takes four minutes. He watches the progress bar, and he thinks about the uninstall — ten days ago, forty seconds, the longest forty seconds of his life — and he thinks about how the unin - stall was Fúshǐ: the arrow, the self-sabotage, the compulsion to destroy his own work. And how the reinstall is something else. He does not have a name for it yet. He calls it, tentatively, the 意 — the will, the spleen, the fragile hinge that holds the Hún and the Pò together. His grandmother never told him about the 意. He learned about it from Dr. Chen, or from the pamphlet, or from his own body — he is not sure which. The 意 is not a soul. It is not an animal. It is the thing that takes the medicine, that reinstalls the program, that sits down and opens a file.

He opens the recycle bin. The file is there. nothing. The project he renamed and then deleted, but only into the bin, where deleted things wait to be called back — the fog, the city as a lung, the whole breath. He looks at it for a long time. It is not a masterpiece. He knows this now, the way he knew the thirty seconds on Day One were a delusion. It is a half-built thing, a skeleton, a gesture. It is evidence that he tried. It is the thing he has been destroying for a year.

He restores it. He renames it. The new name is not a vision, not a prophecy, not The Complete Anatomy of Chengdu Fog. He types: fog_study_001_yichen.

His own name. Not grandeur. Not nothing. His own name, attached to a half-built thing, saved instead of deleted.

He works on it for an hour. The work is slow. The tremor is in his hands, and the flatness is in the light, and the fog in his render is gray and ordinary, and the work is not a masterpiece, and it is not nothing — it is practice, the way the cube was practice, the way the pinched dumpling is practice. He saves the file. He closes the program. He does not delete it.

The dead pixel glows in the corner of the dark screen, the star keeping its one promise, and the fan spins down to si‑lence, and the silence is not the old silence — it is the silence of a room with a saved file in it.

That evening he walks to the river. He walks alone, past the security guard, who looks at him with the mixture of pity and suspicion, and he nods — a small thing, a nod, the acknow‑ledgment of a man who is out walking in the evening like other men — and the guard nods back, surprised, and the surprise is a small wound and a small gift. He walks the embankment. The Jǐnjiāng is brown and slow. He films it — the water, the fog, the city lights on the far bank, the Global Center glowing in the distance like a spaceship that has landed on the plain. He films it the way he has filmed it a hundred times, and he does not delete the footage.

He tells himself the truth, the way the medicated state lets him tell it, the quiet uncertain truth: This is okay. This is enough. This will not last.

He walks home. The apartment is dark. His father is in the living room, in front of the television, the blue light on his face, the two glasses of baijiu on the table. Yichen stands in the doorway. He has been practicing the sentence all the way home. He says it, and his voice comes out wrong — too quiet, too careful — but he says it: “Dad. I took my medicine today. I’ve been taking it. I reinstalled Blender. I’m working on — “ He stops. The words are hard. “I’m not giving up.”

His father does not move. The television talks to no one. The silence is long, and then his father says, to the television, to the wall, to the peeling paint: "Good."

The word lands like a tile on a table. It is not an embrace. It is not an understanding. It is a man who does not know how to mourn a living son, who interprets illness as moral backslid - ing, who has watched a year of closed doors and silent dinners, saying good because it is the only word he has that is not a wound.

Yichen says, "I' m going to walk Yinan to the store this weekend. She wants ice cream."

His father does not answer. The television talks. The silence is a container, and they are both inside it, and it is enough. It is not much, but it is enough.

CHAPTER 16

DAY SIXTEEN

The interview.

His sister sets it up like a ceremony — her notebook, their mother's phone, the recorder app, a glass of water for him and a glass of water for her, the way she has seen reporters do it on television. She is nine, or ten, and she is conducting an interview with the only person in the house with an "interesting job," and she does not know that the interview is a document of illness, and he does not know how to tell her, and he sits across from her at the dining table and lets her begin.

"Gege," she says, reading from her notebook, her voice careful and formal, the voice of a child doing a thing properly. "What is your job?"

He looks at her. The question is the simplest question in the world, and it is the hardest question in the world. He could say the lie — the fiction that preserves his dignity and her hope, the I'm working on my digital art with the quotation marks earned. He has said it a thousand times: to his parents, to the relatives, to himself.

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. "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."

The pencil moves. The recorder records. Outside the window the fog sits on the neighborhood like a lid, and inside the

apartment the only sounds are the pencil and the fan and, from the kitchen, the faint tick of the incense — he can hear the ash growing, he thinks, the way he can hear the mahjong through the floor, the small patient sounds of a world that does not stop for him.

"Why do you stay in your room?"

The question is a knife, and it finds the exact place, and he lets it find the exact place. "Because I'm afraid," he says. "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. The pencil does not stop. She writes afraid and she writes delete and he watches her write his life down in a nine-year-old's handwriting, and there is a strange comfort in it — the comfort of being transcribed, of being, for once, exactly what the record says.

"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."

"Can I see your art?"

He shows her. He opens the laptop, and he shows her the fog study — the half-built city, the gray geometry, the lung of the basin — and she looks at it for a long time, the way a child looks at something she is trying to understand, and she says, "It's good, gege."

The Tāiguāng flickers. He does not reach for it. He lets it be.

"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 a child saves the important thing for last, the way she has been saving it for a week. She looks at him, and the frozen-lake voice is gone, and the question is small and real: "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, the smoke rising and curling, the smell of his grandmother's apartment. 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 reads it back to herself, silently, her lips moving, and then 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."

The interview ends. She stops the recording. She closes the notebook. She looks at him, and she does not say anything, and the not-saying is a container, and they are both inside it. She reaches across the table, and she touches his hand — the trembling hand, the lithium hand — and she says, "Gege. I'm glad you're my brother."

He does not know what to say. He says nothing. The hand is small and warm, and the Tāiguāng flickers, and he does not reach for it, and he does not delete it, and the moment is real, and the moment passes, and the pendulum is still there, above him, in the dark of the ceiling, and it has not stopped, and it has not moved, and he is still here.

CHAPTER 17

DAY SEVENTEEN

He walks her to the corner store.

It is a Sunday. The fog has thinned, and the sky is the color of a bruise healing, and the old men are playing xiàngqí under the awnings, and the wet market is winding down, and the city is doing what the city does — breathing, slow and 巴适, the comfortable, unhurried rhythm of a city that has never been in a hurry, that has never needed to be, that will still be here long after he has decided what to be.

She walks beside him, skipping the cracks in the pavement the way she always skips the cracks, and she is talking — about school, about her friend, about the game, about the interview, about how she is going to tell her teacher about it on Monday, about how it is going to be the most interesting report in the whole class — and he is listening, and the listening is the 意, the fragile hinge, the will to be in the same place at the same time as his sister, doing an ordinary thing.

The corner store is the corner store — the 小卖部, the small shop with the faded awning and the old man behind the counter who has known Yichen since he was a child, who has seen him grow up and drop out and disappear into his room, who looks at him now with the same mixture of pity and sus - picion, and who says, when Yichen points at the freezer: "Two strawberry."

Strawberry. The flavor from before. The flavor of the brother who walked her to the corner store and bought her ice cream — the brother before the hospital, the brother she has been waiting for, the test of whether the old brother still exists inside the new one.

He buys two. He hands her one. They eat them on the walk home, and the ice cream is cold and sweet and the fog is thin and the city breathes, and she says, her mouth full: "Gege, this is the best ice cream."

"It's the same ice cream."

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

The sentence is a knife, and it finds the exact place, and the place is soft now — softer than it was — and he does not know what to do with the softness, so he says nothing, and they walk, and the ice cream melts, and the city breathes, and he is a shut-in moving through a city of ambition, and for one hour the city is not an insult and not a judgment — it is a place, and he is in it, walking beside his sister, holding a melting cone, going somewhere, slowly, the way the river goes somewhere, the way everything goes somewhere, eventually.

At dinner, his father is home. The table is set. The hóngshāo ròu is on the table. His mother serves. His sister talks about the interview. His father eats fast, and then he does the thing — the small thing, the gruff thing — he asks: "Did you eat?"

Yichen looks at him. The question is not about food. They both know the question is not about food. He says: "Yes. I ate."

His father nods. He leaves the table. He stops at the doorway, and he does not turn around, and he says, to the door, to the hallway, to the son who will not see his face: "Tomorrow. Eat with us."

It is not an embrace. It is not an understanding. It is a man who does not know how to mourn a living son, saying eat with us because it is the only language he has. Yichen says, "Okay."

The word lands. The door closes. The television talks. The city breathes.

That night, his room. He sits at the desk. The invoices are still there — the render-farm credits, the plugin pack, the asset-library subscription — and the certificate is still under them, the red plastic folder, the excellent student, the class monitor, the academic merit award. He does not move them. He does not look at them. He knows they are there the way the tongue returns to a loose tooth, and he has stopped pulling at the loose tooth, and the loose tooth has become part of him, and he is learning to walk with it.

He opens Blender. The cube is there — the default cube, gray, featureless, honest. He looks at it. He does not delete it. He creates a new project, and the cursor blinks in the name field, and he types — not with grandeur, not with prophecy, not The Complete Anatomy of Chengdu Fog — he types his own name. LIU_YICHEN_001.

Then he stares at the cube.

He does not know if this is a beginning or just another file he will delete by morning. He does not know if the pendulum has stopped or merely paused. He does not know if the art can exist without the fire — if the flatness, the lithium, the ordinary gray light of the medicated state can ever produce anything worth keeping. He does not know if he will take his medicine tomorrow, or hide it, or spit it out. He does not know if his father's eat with us will survive the week. He does not know any of the things a person is supposed to know at the end of a story.

The dead pixel glows in the lower right quadrant of the monitor — the star, the one fixed point in his sky, the one thing that keeps its promises. The fan spins up. Through the wall, the family can hear him — the sound of a boy not leaving his room, the sound of a machine that will not let him rest, the sound of a boy who is still here.

He takes his evening pills. Both of them. He swallows them, no tongue trick, and the pills go down, and the 意 does its small unglamorous work — holding the Hún and the Pò together in one skull by chemistry and discipline and routine, the mundane alchemy of one more day.

The city breathes outside the window — the fog, the brown slow river, the Global Center glowing like a spaceship, the mahjong tiles clicking, the whole breathing animal of the basin, going somewhere without him, waiting for him, not waiting for him.

He is still learning how to breathe with it — whether as a sovereign or a ghost.

He does not know if the pendulum has stopped.

He only knows it is Sunday, and he has made it to Sunday, and the cube is still there, and the star is still dark, and he is still here.

It is not a cure. It is not a redemption. It is the fragile spleen of routine, holding two warring souls in one skull for one more day.

It is enough.

It is not much, but it is enough.

End of Part One.

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 — the grandmother's repertoire, performed for a living family that no longer knows it is being summoned.

Shuǎnglíng 爽灵 is the second of the three Hun — the flying soul, the intellect, the blade: in the grandmother's telling it is the fire that wants to make something of you, and in the clinic's telling it is the elevated phase of a boy's bipolar disorder. This novel holds both vocabularies at once and refuses to throw either away. Its seventeen days are the same seventeen days his mother, his father and his sister are living in their own volumes — the year behind a closed door in a Chengdu apartment, told from inside the chest of the boy the door is closed on.

Zhen AI · 甄艾 is a pen name. Read aloud it is zhēn ài, an exact ho - mophone 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, re - search 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) · 17 sections · 18,128 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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