

NINE LIVES / 九命

Written by

Jason A. Green

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green.jason.a@gmail.com

NOTE: All dialogue spoken in Mandarin. English subtitles throughout. NINE LIVES is structured as nine long-take action sequences – each a life – separated by compressed passage. The camera never looks away for long.

FADE IN:

EXT. SHANGHAI – DAWN – THE BEFORE

A city alive at full capacity.

Traffic snarls through intersections. Horns bark. A vendor stacks oranges into a pyramid that catches the early light. Schoolchildren walk in clusters, backpacks bouncing. An old man feeds pigeons at a fountain.

The sounds of ten million people occupying the same morning.

EXT. SHANGHAI – THREE WEEKS LATER – DAWN – THE AFTER

The same streets. Empty.

The orange pyramid sits at the abandoned stall – the oranges rotting now, black at the bottoms, flies circling. The pigeons are gone. The child's backpack lies in the center of the road. Traffic signals cycle green-yellow-red for no audience.

DRONES trace slow geometric arcs overhead. Their speakers carry a flat, amplified voice:

DRONE SPEAKER (V.O.)
(Mandarin, subtitled)
Control your soul's desire for
freedom. Stay inside. Comply.

A DABAI – one of the Big Whites, entirely faceless inside a white hazmat suit – sets a woven bag on the curb. Walks away. Doesn't look back.

The bag moves.

Inside it: something small and confused. A meow, thin and terrified. Then more, from bags nearby. A growing chorus – cats, dogs, small animals – crying into the sealed city.

From a sealed apartment building across the street: WELDING SPARKS shower from a doorway. A door being fused shut from the outside.

SEALED MAN (O.S., MUFFLED)
Please. Please. Please–

The bag on the curb goes still.

CUT TO BLACK.

TITLE CARD: NINE LIVES / 九命九死一生

("Nine deaths and one life" – surviving against impossible odds.)

CUT TO:

EXT. RESIDENTIAL HIGH-RISE – DAWN

A thirty-story tower. Every window sealed or taped. Every balcony fenced with wire. Drones orbit it at three-floor intervals, steady as a heartbeat.

The camera begins a slow orbit – floor after floor, sealed door after sealed door. It finds one lit apartment on the 24th floor. Curtains drawn. A shadow moves behind them.

The camera pushes toward it – closer – until the glass fills the frame –

SMASH INTO:

INT. APARTMENT – FLOOR 24 – DAWN

HERO. Fifties. Lean. He moves the way people move who have spent years in places where bad decisions kill you – every gesture deliberate, every position considered. There is no excess in him. He has put something away.

A white-and-orange TABBY CAT rides his shoulder like a small, insistent emperor.

They have routines. Hero eats; the cat eats from the edge of his bowl. He does pushups – precise, unhurried – the cat sitting on his lower back, unimpressed. He folds a towel; the cat claims it before he sets it down.

On the dresser: three photographs. A younger Hero in military uniform, medals crowding his chest, holding the cat as a kitten. A woman laughing at something off-camera, her eyes nearly closed from it. The three of them together – Hero, the woman, a boy – at a beach that no longer exists in his life.

The woman and the boy are gone from this apartment. Not recently. The photographs are the kind you keep when you've long since accepted the keeping.

Hero opens the balcony door a crack. He and the cat listen to the sealed city: the drone hum, the distant welding, the silence where traffic should be.

He closes the balcony door. Opens the dresser drawer. Pats it softly.

HERO
 (Mandarin, barely a
 whisper)
 Pss pss pss.

The cat steps in. Circles once. Lies down.

The cat looks up at him. He touches the tip of one finger to the top of his head – once, quick, the same small pressure every morning. The cat closes its eyes.

Hero covers the drawer with a folded towel. He touches the photograph of himself in uniform. His fingers rest on it – not nostalgic. More like a promise.

Then: POUNDING. Not knocking. Pounding. The sound of a door being treated like an obstacle.

INT. HALLWAY – FLOOR 24 – DAWN – CONTINUOUS

MUSIC: A low, building drum pulse. Sparse. Single hits. The rhythm of a heartbeat under pressure.

Two DABAI at his door. They move with the casual efficiency of people doing a job they've done many times this morning.

DABAI #1
 Test.

One swabs him. Another takes his temperature, jabs a needle into his arm without asking – quick, rough, impersonal.

Hero says nothing. His hands are at his sides, open. His eyes move past them to the apartment.

A sound. Almost nothing.

Meow.

DABAI #1 (cont'd)
 (into radio, flat)
 Backup. Floor 24, apartment six.

THREE MORE DABAI push past into the apartment. Methodical. They open the dresser.

Hero moves before he decides to.

HERO

No—

TASER.

He drops. The world becomes static. His body shakes on the tile while the Dabai seal the cat in a bag with the same blank efficiency they bring to everything else.

The cat cries. High and thin.

Hero hauls himself upright against the door frame, arms shaking. He's been hit harder by worse. He moves through it.

He gets to the sealed door. Feels the welds — fresh, hot at the edges. He kicks. Metal groans. He kicks again, full weight. The weld snaps.

He's out.

THE LONG TAKE BEGINS. The camera locks onto him and will not cut.

INT. HALLWAY — FLOOR 24 — CONTINUOUS

The Dabai with the bagged cat head for the elevator. He runs. The elevator DINGS. The doors slide closed as he reaches them.

From the stairwell: BOOTS. More Dabai plus two police officers forming a containment line.

He reads the geometry: narrow hallway, four bodies wide. He moves at a measured walk toward them, hands visible — then at six feet he drops his angle, steps inside the lead officer's reach, and the fight begins.

There is no drama in how he fights. He is precise the way a surgeon is precise. Redirected baton. Trapped wrist. Hip check using the officer's own momentum. The line folds without anyone being badly hurt.

INT. STAIRWELL — FLOORS 24 TO 22 — CONTINUOUS

Narrow concrete. Echo. Two Dabai above. Radio chatter rising below. He moves low, one hand trailing the rail. Floor 23 landing — three bodies converge. He lets the first man commit, steps offline, uses the railing as a backstop. Two exchanges. Done.

INT. HALLWAY – FLOOR 23 – CONTINUOUS

A full Dabai sweep team mid-operation. They haven't heard the radio call yet. Hero walks past them – mask grabbed from a wall dispenser. Eyes forward. Pace steady.

The radio call hits. Every head turns. He moves. Through two Dabai before they process it. A third clips him across the shoulder. He absorbs it. Doesn't stop.

Elevator: DING. Three more Dabai step out. He ducks inside before the doors close.

INT. ELEVATOR / SHAFT – CONTINUOUS

The elevator drops one floor. Then JOLTS to a stop. Emergency override.

He shoves the ceiling hatch, grabs the emergency ladder, hauls himself through. Cold. Grease. An eighty-foot drop below with nothing soft about it. He climbs. The elevator rises – someone called it back. He moves faster. Reaches Floor 22, pries the doors apart, pulls himself through.

INT. HALLWAY – FLOOR 22 – CONTINUOUS

He's barely upright when the stairwell door EXPLODES open.

Three Dabai. One carries a NAIL GUN – a construction tool repurposed with concrete fasteners.

LIFE 1 – NEAR-DEATH.

The nail gun FIRES. Concrete nails punch into the wall frame six inches from his skull as he drops and rolls. He comes up moving. Cuts the angle, covers the distance, gets inside the nail gun's range. Traps the arm, twists the wrist until the weapon drops, redirects the man into his partners.

He goes over the balcony railing – drops – catches the railing of Floor 21 – swings – lands hard.

THE LONG TAKE ENDS.

He lies on the Floor 21 balcony, chest heaving. The cat is somewhere below him.

TITLE CARD: ONE LIFE SPENT. EIGHT REMAIN.

PASSAGE – FLOORS 21 TO 20: Visual shorthand. Stairwell. A mask from a wall dispenser.

A hallway where residents pull back. He is not one of them yet. He is something that has broken into their building.

INT. APARTMENT 2001 – FLOOR 20 – MORNING

MUSIC: Warm tension under domestic intrusion.

A FAMILY at breakfast. Cereal bowls. A small TV. A CHILD with a stuffed rabbit who looks up and goes still.

The FATHER lunges – kitchen cleaver in hand. He's not wrong about the danger. He's wrong about the direction.

Hero sidesteps the cleaver, catches the wrist, applies a controlled lock – nothing that breaks. The cleaver drops. He presses his palm to the Father's sternum, steadying him.

He pulls the worn photograph of his cat from his pocket. Holds it up.

The Father stares at the photograph. His eyes move to his DAUGHTER – the child with the stuffed rabbit. Their cat was taken this morning. Same bags. Same Dabai. Same thing.

Something moves across the Father's face. Not trust. The beginning of a calculation.

Dabai crash in through the apartment door. The family screams. Fight erupts in the cramped living room. Hero keeps his strikes minimal – enough to create space, not enough to end anyone.

Through the chaos, Hero catches the Father's eye. Regret. Acknowledgment. No time.

He goes through the back window.

INT. HALLWAY – FLOOR 20 – CONTINUOUS

THE LONG TAKE BEGINS.

One long corridor. One straight line. Both stairwells already compromised – he is in the center, both ends filling simultaneously. He chooses the south end and walks toward them. The fight is claustrophobic and unrelenting: deflect, step, strike, step, redirect.

INT. STAIRWELL – FLOORS 20 TO 19 – CONTINUOUS

Narrow concrete. A single bulb. The drop below is real.

He descends – and the door below him SLAMS open.

A POLICE OFFICER fills the landing. Gun raised. Hands shaking hard enough that the barrel traces a small, involuntary circle.

He sees Hero.

He fires.

The round punches through the wall six inches wide. Drywall dust. The sound in the enclosed shaft is enormous.

Hero does not stop walking.

The officer fires again – the round sparks off the railing above him. The stairwell rings like a bell.

Hero does not stop walking.

The officer is four steps below now, still firing – wide, wider – and Hero is still coming, pace unchanged, hands at his sides. The officer's eyes above the barrel are the eyes of a man who has discovered that hitting something unafraid requires a steadiness he doesn't have.

CLICK.

CLICK. CLICK. CLICK.

Hero reaches him in two more steps.

He closes his hand over the grip. One controlled twist. The officer's wrist bends and the pistol comes free – clean, practiced, nothing wasted.

One pistol-whip. The officer folds against the wall and stays there.

A second officer on the lower landing – younger, weapon half-raised – watches this. He presses himself back against the concrete and puts both hands up.

Hero looks at him once. Keeps moving.

From below: the stairwell door BURSTS open. Boots. A flood of Dabai and police, three across, coming up fast – the first man's visor already filling the frame of the doorway.

He looks at the empty pistol in his hand.

He throws it.

The grip catches the lead officer's visor dead center – a hard, percussive crack. The faceplate spiders. The man staggers back into the two behind him, the formation compressing into itself.

Hero is already moving – down the last steps, into the gap the stagger made, shoulder into the seam between the second and third man. The bodies haven't recovered. He drives through the compression, uses the packed weight behind them to push himself out the other side.

He's through.

THE LONG TAKE ENDS.

He reaches Floor 18. Back to the wall. Breathes. His hands, when he looks at them, are steady.

TITLE CARD: TWO LIVES SPENT. SEVEN REMAIN.

PASSAGE – FLOORS 17 TO 16: Compressed beats. A stairwell. A taped corridor. The building goes to CONSTRUCTION FLOORS – skeletal, stripped, scaffolding visible through open wall sections. Rebar. Hanging tarps. Concrete dust and cut metal.

INT. CONSTRUCTION ZONE – FLOOR 16 – DAY

MUSIC: Irregular, asymmetric drum hits. Sudden ambush rhythm.

Renovation mid-pause. Exposed joists, stripped-out drywall, scaffolding along the exterior wall. The building's bones visible.

He moves through carefully – the floor uneven, some sections boarded over structure below, some not.

FOUR DABAI drop from scaffolding above him simultaneously.

THE LONG TAKE BEGINS.

Bodies drop from the scaffolding above. He reacts – first man's momentum redirected into a post; ducks under the second; the third gets a grip. Close quarters. He drops his center, drives an elbow into the ribs – twice. Grip breaks.

He uses the scaffolding: pulls a Dabai off a platform into a support cable, collapses a hung tarp over two more.

More from the stairwell. He's being pushed toward the center – toward the floor sections that are less certain.

INT. CONSTRUCTION ZONE — FLOOR 16 — CENTER — CONTINUOUS

Hero plants a foot on a boarded-over section. The board shifts under him.

He reads this. He moves — not away. Toward.

He leads the pursuing Dabai onto the compromised section. Three of them. Four.

The boards groan. Crack. A board drops through — a slice of Floor 15 visible below.

He is already off the section, behind a scaffolding post, when it goes.

Two Dabai drop with it. One floor. They hit Floor 15 hard and stay there.

The third grabs Hero's jacket as the floor gives. Both go down.

INT. APARTMENT — FLOOR 15 — CONTINUOUS

LIFE 3 — NEAR-DEATH.

They hit Floor 15 in a cloud of plaster and insulation. Violent, structural impact. The weakened floor beneath registers the new load —

And gives again.

INT. APARTMENT — FLOOR 14 — CONTINUOUS

He hits Floor 14. Two stories in three seconds.

The low structural moan of a building deciding whether to hold.

He lies still. Body inventory: ribs possibly cracked, left shoulder burning, head ringing.

He gets up.

The Dabai who grabbed his jacket is not moving — unconscious, armor absorbing the impact the hard way. Hero checks him. Breathing. He leaves him.

He looks up at the ragged double-hole in the ceilings above. No one coming through that hole quickly. He has minutes.

THE LONG TAKE ENDS.

TITLE CARD: THREE LIVES SPENT. SIX REMAIN.

PASSAGE – FLOORS 14 TO 13: He moves through Floor 14. A taped-shut door has a bottle of water left on the ledge outside it. He picks it up. Drinks. Sets the empty bottle back. The building is watching itself – stories moving between sealed apartments through pressed ears and creaking floors.

INT. HALLWAY – FLOOR 13 – DAY

MUSIC: Nervous, syncopated. Clicks like a server rack.

He steps out of the stairwell into a corridor thick with chemical fog and held breath.

The floor is sealed – taped doors, tags flapping. But the residents are out. They've heard two floors come down above them. They've heard the boots and the shouting and the deep structural groans of their building deciding whether to hold.

They believe he did it.

A woman in the back raises a hand and points at him. Not to Dabai. To each other.

He moves forward. The corridor narrows as they hold their ground – six people, eight, filling the width of the hall. Brooms. A chair. A length of pipe.

He keeps walking.

A MAN near the front reaches up and pulls the FIRE AXE from its wall mount.

His hands shake on the grip. He is not a man who has held an axe like this before. He holds it the way people hold weapons they hope they won't need to use – out in front, point forward, telegraphing more than threat.

He is going to swing.

Hero does not stop walking.

The axe comes around – wide, high, fear not fury, the swing of a man who has misjudged both the distance and his own arms.

He ducks under it.

He closes the distance in two steps.

THE BACKSWING.

The axe head BURIES into the wall – solid, percussive – and the impact rings through the corridor. Six inches from his skull. He feels the air of it. Dust from the drywall settles on his shoulder.

He is inside the man's guard now.

He puts one hand on the axe handle – not grabbing, pressing down. The man's grip loosens on its own. He takes it.

He turns.

He walks to the wall.

He SETS THE AXE against it.

Gently. Upright. Handle out, so someone can take it if they need it. Like you'd set down a tool.

He turns back to them.

He reaches into his shirt pocket. He holds up the photograph of the cat.

Silence in the corridor.

He stands there. Doesn't speak. Doesn't move. Just holds the photograph up in the chemical light.

A WOMAN near the middle of the group looks at the photograph. Looks at him. Looks at the axe sitting against the wall.

She steps aside.

Not relief. Not forgiveness. Just – aside.

The man beside her looks at her. Looks at Hero. Steps aside.

Then the one behind him.

The corridor opens.

He pockets the photograph. Walks through.

TITLE CARD: FOUR LIVES SPENT. FIVE REMAIN.

PASSAGE – FLOOR 12 – THE MARKET: He emerges into an improvised market floor above – folding tables, boiled eggs, canned goods, barter economy born of necessity. The crowd recoils when they see him. Whispers thread through the stalls. A woman slams her door.

Someone hurls a can – it clangs near his foot. He keeps moving. An elderly woman meets his eyes and doesn't scream. She presses a tiny paper packet into his palm: a single bandage wrapped in tissue. He nods. No words. Riot boots from the stairwell. He moves on.

A MAINTENANCE WORKER watches him pass a utility closet on the descent. Leaves a folded cloth on the floor as Hero passes. Looks away before Hero can thank him. Deniability.

INT. FLOOR 12 BALCONY – DAY

He lands hard off the balcony drop, ribs screaming. A door cracks open.

An ELDERLY WOMAN, 70s – small, quiet, with the deliberate movements of someone who has survived things – peers out and gestures him inside. Firm. Come.

He hesitates. He's brought destruction to every space he's entered today. He doesn't want to bring it here.

She gestures again. He comes.

INT. ELDERLY COUPLE'S APARTMENT – CONTINUOUS

A small, lived-in home. Family photographs. A kettle steaming. The smell of tea.

The ELDERLY MAN, 70s, stands with a clean shirt folded over his arm. He's been waiting too.

Neither speaks. They simply attend to him. The man helps him out of his damaged shirt. The woman opens a first-aid tin – real supplies.

She finds the nail embedded in his shoulder. She grips it. He braces. She pulls.

His breath hitches – pain flashing across his face.

ELDERLY MAN
(quiet, resolute)
You're not alone.

They wrap his shoulder with practiced, gentle hands.

The old man caps the first-aid tin. The old woman sets her hands in her lap. Silence – the kind that has weight.

Hero reaches for the photograph. He has reached for it a hundred times today – automatic, the way you check a weapon.

This time his hand doesn't put it away. He just holds it. Not looking at it. Looking past it.

The old man puts his hand on Hero's arm. Not comforting. Just present. Just: I see you.

Hero puts the photograph away. He stands.

A BANG rattles the door. Then fists. Then boots.

He rises – slow, hurting, ready. The old woman steps in front of him, cane raised like a weapon.

(over her shoulder)
They won't take you.

He moves her gently behind him.

THE DOOR EXPLODES INWARD – DABAI BREACH.

White suits flood the entryway. He meets them. A baton swings – he blocks, drives an elbow into the visor. Another charges – he pivots, uses the man's momentum into the kitchen table, splintering it.

The old couple doesn't hide.

The old man swings a broom – WHACK – it cracks against a helmet. The old woman jabs her cane into a Dabai's ribs. The man stumbles.

ELDERLY WOMAN
Leave him alone!

He absorbs a baton to the ribs, drives a knee upward, folds the attacker. Another Dabai grabs the old man – he sweeps the legs, drops the Dabai flat.

He ushers the couple toward the bedroom. The old man shakes his head.

ELDERLY MAN
We're not leaving you.

He positions himself between the Dabai and the couple. He's hurt. He's bleeding. He's outnumbered. But he stands.

He drags the fight into the hallway, pulling the violence away from them. They shout after him.

INT. SECURITY CONTROL ROOM – FLOOR 10 – DAY

MUSIC: Nervous stickwork under static. The rhythm of surveillance.

A wall of monitors: dozens of feeds – hallways, stairwells, balconies, elevator interiors. The building's nervous system in low-res grey.

FOUR OFFICERS and a TECH cluster around the console.

OFFICER #1

He dropped two floors – check 16 and 15 for structural compromise.

OFFICER #2

(pointing at screen)

He's moving. Heading toward ten.

The Tech scrubs footage. She finds the moment he picked up the water bottle and checked on the Dabai who fell with him. She watches it twice. Then she closes the window – quietly, before the others turn around. Nobody sees her do it.

She pulls up the live floor overlay. Her cursor finds the feed for Floor 11 – corridor camera, empty. She closes it without looking at the Officers. Then the Floor 10 service passage feed. Then the utility alcove outside this room.

The Officers don't see her do it. They're watching feeds die from structural damage and calling it the same thing.

Monitors begin dying – one by one, feeds going dark as floors lose power from structural damage. The room is losing its eyes.

OFFICER #1

(watching feeds die)

He's coming here.

They hear him in the corridor outside. Locks slam. The door SLAMS open.

The Tech has stepped back from the console. She stands at the far wall, hands at her sides. She is not reaching for anything.

He moves through the room – compact, nonlethal: an elbow to a chest, forearm shield redirecting a grab, hip pivot freeing a wrist. No words. He reaches the main console. SLAMS a palm onto the power kill.

The room's hum dies. Monitors go black. Drone feeds cut. Radio static swells – then drops.

He looks at the Tech. She meets his eyes. One beat – the length of a decision already made.

He turns away.

OFFICER #3

(whisper)

What did he do?

He moves into the corridor.

A service passage running along the building's spine. Incomplete. The wall on the right is exposed conduit – orange wire nuts, junction boxes, a length of bare copper where the insulation was pulled and left.

No cameras. This is the dead zone.

He's moving for the stairwell when a Dabai steps out of a utility alcove – mask down, shield absent, alone, separated from his unit.

The narrow space forces the grapple immediately. No room for technique. Just weight and grip – both men slamming into the conduit wall as they fight for control. A junction box catches his elbow. An orange wire nut pops loose.

The Dabai drives him BACKWARD.

His shoulder blades hit the conduit.

CURRENT.

The world inverts – one frame of white where the corridor was. No sound. Then it snaps back.

His muscles do not belong to him. Arms locked. Jaw locked. Body shaking at the frequency of the current. His vision whites to nothing – not tunnel, full white – the corridor dissolving.

The Dabai shifts angle for a better grip and drags his shoulder blade off the contact point. Current drops. He hits the floor.

The Dabai reaches for him.

He kicks the man's knee sideways. The Dabai goes down.

He gets up. Finds his legs. Walks the way you walk when your nervous system is still catching up.

His hand finds the wall-mounted sanitizer dispenser. He pumps. Rubs his hands.

He looks at them. Trembling. Not badly. But there.

He keeps moving.

TITLE CARD: FIVE LIVES SPENT. FOUR REMAIN.

PASSAGE – FLOORS 9 TO 8: Two residents crack their doors to watch him go by. They don't block him. They don't help. They just watch. The allegiance arc is shifting. He doesn't know it yet. He's only looking down.

INT. HALLWAY – FLOOR 8 – DAY

He comes through the stairwell door and they are already on him.

Not one. Four. More behind them.

He gets his arms up – forearm shields, tight, covering his head – but there is no geometry here that helps him. The corridor is wide enough for two abreast and they fill it.

Boots hit his ribs.

He drops to a knee. More boots. He covers – arms pulled tight to his skull, chin down, curling inward on the force of it. A baton cracks across his spine. He grunts, doesn't fall all the way. Another boot. His ribs again. He curls tighter.

DABAI

(flat)

Stay down.

He does not stay down.

He tries to push up. A boot catches his shoulder and puts him back. They are not in a hurry. Not angry anymore. Rhythmic. Boots and batons finding the same spots, the way you tenderize something.

A boot comes down toward the back of his skull –

The floor doesn't just give. It is beaten through.

THE FLOOR GROANS.

Not a crack. A groan – low, structural, the sound of weight redistributing in something that has been asked to hold too much. The accumulated damage – the double collapse on floors 16 and 14, the wall breaches, the compromised joists – it has been traveling through the building since Floor 14.

It arrives here now.

The floor DROPS.

A section – three meters by two – around the largest cluster of boots. The wood and subfloor give simultaneously, a wet tearing sound, and four Dabai go down with it.

He goes down too.

But he was already low. Already curled. Already braced against the floor.

He hits Floor 7 on his side – one hard impact, ribs screaming – and rolls into the debris as plaster and insulation rain down.

The Dabai land on their backs. On their armor. They are disoriented. One doesn't move.

He lies in the rubble. Dust settles on him like snow.

He gets up.

TITLE CARD: SIX LIVES SPENT. THREE REMAIN.

PASSAGE – FLOOR 7 TO 6: A brief corridor. His hand finds the wall-mounted sanitizer station. It spins. Whirrs. Empty. He stands there a moment with his palm on the empty dispenser. Then keeps moving.

INT. FLOOR 6 – DAY

A door opens before he reaches it. The FATHER from Floor 20 stands in the corridor.

They look at each other. The bruise on the Father's sternum – Hero's strike, hours ago – is visible above his collar.

HERO

(quiet)

I'm sorry.

The Father shakes his head.

FATHER

My wife told me about the photograph.
What you showed us.

FATHER (cont'd)

(beat)

She told me what kind of man keeps a photo of his cat in his pocket. She told me our daughter's cat is in the same place yours is.

FATHER (cont'd)
I know this building. I know which
stairs they're watching.

He holds open a utility door – a maintenance route, narrow,
no cameras. The Father is now carrying the photograph.

Hero goes through.

INT. MAINTENANCE CORRIDOR – FLOORS 5 TO 4 – CONTINUOUS

The maintenance route runs inside the building's walls –
pipes and conduit, emergency lighting at foot level. The
Father knows it. He moves quickly for a man who took a chest
strike hours ago.

They emerge on Floor 4.

INT. HALLWAY – FLOOR 4 – DAY – THE OLDBOY LANE

One long corridor. One direction. Nowhere to go sideways.

THE LONG TAKE BEGINS.

A squad forms without being asked – the Father, a
CONSTRUCTION WORKER, a YOUNG MAN from the floors above.
Untrained. Present.

They move as a unit. Hero at point. The others covering
angles they don't know the names for but understand
instinctively.

Dabai at both ends. The corridor fills. The fight is
exhausted and grinding – every exchange costs something.

The corridor grinds forward. The squad holds its shape –
Father at his left shoulder, the construction worker behind,
the young man on his right flank.

They've been fighting for minutes that feel like longer.
Every exchange costs more than the last. He is running on
something past adrenaline.

He goes for a redirect on the next Dabai – the move that has
worked forty times today. His timing is off by a fraction.
The baton clips his forearm instead of his hand. He absorbs
it and uses the stumble, falls forward into the man's chest,
drives an elbow home anyway.

It works. Not clean. Not like the first floor.

His hands are shaking. He can feel it now in a way he couldn't three hours ago. The technique is still there. The body is reporting.

A door on the left opens – a RESIDENT, middle-aged, face pale from days inside, gripping a kitchen knife with both hands. She has been listening to her building come apart floor by floor and she has decided she knows whose fault it is.

She is not wrong to be afraid of him.

He doesn't see her. He is watching the Dabai at the far end reforming their line. His head is down and forward.

She steps into his path.

The knife comes up –

The FATHER's hand catches her wrist.

Not hard. No strike. Just a hand around the wrist, stopping it.

She tries to pull free. His grip holds.

With his other hand he reaches into his shirt and holds up the photograph.

She looks at it. The cat in the man's arms. The photo worn at the corners from a shirt pocket.

She stops pulling.

The Father doesn't release her wrist until he sees her look change.

Then he does.

The squad keeps moving. No break in stride. The construction worker steps around her, eyes forward. Behind him, he drives his shoulder into the next barricade the way he drives it into walls for a living. No technique. Just weight and certainty. The young man follows.

Hero reaches the next barricade without knowing what just happened three feet behind him.

The Father glances back once at the woman – still standing in her doorway, the knife at her side – and turns forward.

THE LONG TAKE ENDS.

TITLE CARD: SEVEN LIVES SPENT. TWO REMAIN.

PASSAGE – FLOOR 3 APPROACH: Brief. The Father stays beside him. No words necessary now.

INT. STAIRWELL – FLOOR 3 – DAY – CONTINUOUS

MUSIC: Each hit a collision. The tactical percussive of John Wick sequencing.

THE LONG TAKE BEGINS.

Floor 3 is reinforced. EIGHT OFFICERS in full riot gear. Shield formations. Two with service weapons drawn. Two with nonlethal shotguns. This floor has been told: he stops here.

He comes through the stairwell door into it.

He moves with the nonlethal shotgun – controlled, rhythm-based. He doesn't fire at the shield line; he fires at the space around it, forcing formation breaks. Step. Fire. Reposition. Step. Fire. The rhythm is mechanical. Calm.

He draws the shield line toward the east wall, away from apartment doors.

Mid-fight – and his hand finds the wall-mounted sanitizer dispenser.

He hits it. Rubs his hands. The same gesture it has always been.

Then he hits it again.

He looks at the unit – the dispenser, the bracket, the plastic reservoir half-full of alcohol gel.

He RIPS IT OFF THE WALL. Bracket and all. Four screws tear out of the plaster, leaving four white holes.

He cocks his arm.

Down the corridor: an EIGHT-OFFICER SHIELD LINE, formed, locked, pressing forward. From behind them: a rifle barrel. Someone has escalated.

He throws the dispenser into the space between them – waist-high arc, end-over-end.

The RIFLE FIRES.

The round hits the dispenser mid-arc.

FIREBALL.

Not a small one. The alcohol catches in a single, instant bloom – a fist of fire at chest height – and it rolls outward in the sealed corridor because there is nowhere for it to go. No ventilation. No windows. The fire fills the available space aggressively.

The shield line fractures. Officers stumble back. Two go down covering their faces.

He moves through the gap before it closes.

The fire spreads along the floor, following the gel that splattered when the dispenser hit, then up the wall where the paint catches. The corridor fills with smoke in under thirty seconds.

He reaches the FIRE HOSE – wall-mounted cabinet, red handle. He opens it. The hose uncoils under its own weight.

He moves to the balcony.

The courtyard below is chaos – drones, Dabai lines, riot vehicles. Floor 2's balcony railing is visible below, twelve feet down.

He ties off the hose to the balcony rail. Tests the knot with two hard pulls.

He looks back into the smoke.

The FATHER stands at the balcony door with his DAUGHTER beside him. She made it down through the building's current and now she's here, her hand in his hand.

They watch Hero tie off the hose. Test the knot. Step to the railing.

FATHER
(quiet, to her)
Remember him.

He nods at Hero once.

Hero goes over the railing.

The hose takes his weight – he descends fast, smoke above, the courtyard below – and he is halfway down when a LIVE ROUND sparks off the hose fitting two feet above his hands.

LIFE 8.

The fitting shears. The hose bucks. He drops the last six feet –

– and hits the Floor 2 balcony rail on his left side, taking it across the ribs, and rolls over it onto the balcony.

He lies on his back looking up at smoke.

Someone's hands beat the embers off his sleeve.

THE LONG TAKE ENDS.

TITLE CARD: EIGHT LIVES SPENT. ONE REMAINS.

INT. HALLWAY – FLOOR 2 – DAY – CONTINUOUS

He steps through the balcony door onto Floor 2.

And stops.

The hallway is full.

Not Dabai. Residents. Fifty, sixty people – standing in the corridor with whatever they have: broom handles, shields pulled from downed officers, a length of iron pipe, a pot lid, a child's baseball bat.

The Father is here. The construction worker. The young man. The resident woman. The Father's DAUGHTER, holding the photograph.

And behind them, deeper in the corridor: the ELDERLY COUPLE from Floor 8. The old woman leans on her cane. The old man has a broom handle that is not for sweeping.

They've come down. All of them.

Hero stands in the doorway and takes this in. A man who went to retrieve his cat and has become the reason sixty people are standing in a hallway.

THE LONG TAKE BEGINS – the last one. The longest one. The one that doesn't end until the street.

INT. HALLWAY – FLOOR 2 – CONTINUOUS

Dabai arrive simultaneously from both stairwells. They find the numbers on the other side.

What happens on Floor 2 is not a fight in the traditional sense. It is a confrontation between an enforcement apparatus and the thing enforcement fears most: collective refusal.

Hero moves through it – the trained edge creating openings. The force behind the wedge is the people.

The Father takes a baton strike meant for Hero. Absorbs it. Keeps moving.

The construction worker breaks the lead Dabai's formation with weight and will.

The young man tears tape off sealed doors – residents flow into the corridor and join without being asked.

The old couple: the old woman drives her cane into a Dabai who has grabbed a resident. The old man pulls the resident clear.

It is not graceful. It is human.

INT. LOBBY – FLOOR 1 – DAY – CONTINUOUS

He descends the last flight.

The lobby: sealed, reinforced. In the corner near the entrance – a stack of confiscated bags. Woven sacks. Moving.

He moves toward them through the remaining lobby detail. The lobby fight is the clearest thing he's done all day. He knows exactly where he's going.

The building empties through this room. Residents pour from stairwells, from the elevator shaft, from breached walls – sixty, eighty people all moving in the same direction. The lobby is a single roaring compression of bodies and noise and forward momentum.

He moves with it, toward the bags, toward the cat, toward the end.

The CROWD SURGES – a wave from behind, the stairwell releasing another group – and he is driven sideways. He catches himself on a pillar. The crowd presses.

A Dabai appears directly behind him.

Not swinging. Not shouting. The crowd is too tight for either.

A forearm goes across his throat from behind – low, tight, locking under his jaw – and the Dabai's weight bears him DOWN into the crush.

He goes to the floor.

FROM THE FLOOR – looking up: a forest of legs, bodies pressing, moving without seeing him. In the lower frame: the Dabai's forearm locked under his jaw. Sixty pairs of feet navigating around them both, unknowing. No space. No angle. Nowhere to put a technique.

THE CROWD SURGES AGAIN – not knowing, not seeing – and the bodies above him are just bodies, residents, people trying to get out, and their weight presses down on him and on the Dabai both and there is no room to fight, no room to pivot, no technique that applies here because technique requires space and there is none.

The forearm doesn't release.

His vision narrows.

He reaches back, claws, finds nothing useful. He tries to bridge, to roll, and the weight of bodies above stops him at forty-five degrees. He cannot complete the movement.

He is running out of time.

FIFTEEN FEET AWAY – the FATHER sees him go down.

He doesn't look for a path. He goes through the crowd the way Hero went through walls – shoulder first, no hesitation, straight through the line of resistance. A woman stumbles aside. A man shoves back – the Father shoves harder. He is not asking permission. He is not looking for gaps.

He reaches Hero in four seconds.

His hands find the Dabai's forearm – both of his hands around one – and he PULLS. The CONSTRUCTION WORKER is right behind him, adding his weight, grabbing the Dabai's collar.

The forearm releases.

Hero comes up GASPING – one long, ragged intake – and the crowd closes back around them like water.

The Father steadies him with one hand. One beat.

Hero straightens.

He turns back toward the bags.

He is still moving.

INT. LOBBY – CONTINUOUS – THE RESCUE

He tears tape. Rips cloth. Unknots ropes.

A cat hisses, claws – then goes still when it sees his hands. Not his. He passes it backward to a resident who carries it toward the exit.

More animals. Residents flowing around him – the uprising and the rescue occupying the same space.

Then: a sound. Thin. High. Familiar.

Meow.

He reaches into the last bag.

His hands are trembling. The same tremor from the conduit on Floor 10. He has been moving too fast to feel it until now. He can feel it now.

The white-and-orange Tabby emerges – ragged, shaking, eyes enormous.

He looks at him.

Then he steps forward and presses the top of his head against the tip of his finger – once, quick – the same small pressure, the same handshake, the same every morning for however many mornings there have been.

The trembling stops.

He holds him to his chest.

He sits back on the lobby floor amid the chaos. The cat presses his face against his neck. Purrs. The sound is absurd. It is the only sound that matters.

Just for a moment.

THE LONG TAKE ENDS.

EXT. COURTYARD – DAY – CONTINUOUS

Residents pour through the broken entrance.

Then: a SWAT RING.

Rifles up. Laser sights painting the crowd. The crowd slows. Not stops. Slows.

Hero walks through the crowd to the front. The cat on his shoulder. The photograph still in his shirt pocket, above the heart.

He faces the SWAT line.

Lasers on his chest.

He does not raise his hands.

Behind him: sixty people. The old couple, leaning on each other. The young man. The construction worker. All of them.

The SWAT LEADER's visor reflects Hero and the cat and the crowd.

From behind the SWAT ring – from the far side of the courtyard, where confiscated bags are stacked against the wall –

The FATHER walks.

He walks past the gun line without looking at it. Not around it. Past it. Rifles track him. He doesn't track them.

He reaches the bags. Kneels. Begins tearing tape.

He finds an animal. Not his daughter's. He keeps looking. Passes it without looking up to the nearest resident.

One resident steps past the SWAT line to take it.

The rifles stay up. And do nothing.

Another resident steps past the line.

Then another. Then a family. The trickle becomes a current.

The SWAT line holds its formation and becomes a wall around nothing, one person at a time.

The Father finds a bag near the bottom. Opens it.

A small cat emerges. Looks at him. He looks at it.

He sits back on the courtyard ground.

Hero stands with his cat.

The Father sits with his daughter's cat.

Between them: the SWAT ring. Rifles raised. Laser sights on Hero's chest.

A WOMAN from the street – not a resident of this building, just a woman who watched it happen from the other side of the cordon – walks up to the nearest rifle and sets the barrel aside with her open palm. Not a fight. Not a shove. Just: aside.

The SWAT officer doesn't move.

Another resident reaches up and sets aside the rifle beside it. Then a man with a child on his hip. Then an old man with a cane.

The SWAT line becomes a formation of rifles pointing at the ground, held by men who have become ornamental.

The bags open. Animals emerge into daylight – blinking, thin, alive.

Hero stands. Cat on his shoulder. The photograph still in his shirt pocket, worn at the corners.

He walks down the street.

He doesn't look back.

FADE TO BLACK.

In the spring of 2022, municipal authorities in Shanghai ordered the confiscation and culling of pets belonging to residents in COVID-positive buildings.

Video footage of animals being removed and sealed in bags circulated widely on Chinese social media before being censored.

The public outcry was one of many pressures that contributed to the end of China's Zero-COVID policy in December 2022.

NINE LIVES is a fictional story.

The cat is real.

THE END