

THE LAST ECHOES

a draft

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with assistance from Grok

The First Echoes

The tech was new enough that the ward still smelled like a ward.

Canvas walls. A generator coughing in the corridor. On a metal tray, empty glass tanks the size of loaves — clear jars, thick-walled, each already holding a finger of cloudy liquid. Lids off. No gold. No pamphlet. A stenciled crate and two technicians who had been medics the season before. They were trying this on soldiers who had not quite finished dying. In the field the light bled off into the air if you waited for paperwork.

He was one of those men. An adult. Endless war. Two marks the war had never paid attention to: a pale hook scar from a bicycle accident in his youth, and a front tooth chipped in the same years, a small dark notch you only saw if he tried to smile. He was not smiling. A comrade in the next cot had already gone quiet. The techs had not reached that cot yet.

When his breath went thin for good, the room looked unchanged. Nothing rose that the eye could follow. On a cart beside the cot a screen showed what the air hid: charge climbing his body and pooling at the crown of his head, a pale bloom on a dark field. The screen was a box with a cable and a hum.

A technician uncovered his head. The other lifted one of the open jars, liquid tilting, and pressed the mouth of the glass to the crown where the bloom was brightest. Wrist locked. On the screen the bloom slid off the skull and into the jar. Tick — like a stone dropped in water. The liquid fogged. The screen went flat.

Inside the jar a glow turned and found a face. His face. Pale hook scar, chipped tooth, the look he had at the end. It moved the way a fish moves in a tank: a pale reflection swimming the glass, turning, coming back, never quite still. A person of light in the brine, small enough to keep.

They screwed the lid down. The body on the cot was only a body.

The jar went into the crate with the others. Some of the glows slammed the walls. His swam and settled, still wearing the scar and the tooth nobody had written down.

A lieutenant in the doorway asked if it hurt.

"He's done," the technician said. "We're just not wasting him."

The comrade in the next cot was next. Same crate. Same kind of jar. Two faces in the liquid, side by side, as they carried the crate glowing out of the ward.

Chapter 1: The Gift

Two years after the war, the jars had a company.

The catch that started on wards — glass on a bare crown, a screen, a face swimming in brine — had a civilian name now. Soulware. Someone had looked at a crate of soldiers and seen kitchens. The bunker still held the certified jars. The new product was a copy you could take home.

Salesmen sat at tables that still had food on them and let the brochure speak first. In the corner where a chair had been, a woman of light stood at half-weight. Not a body. A holograph, thrown by a shard tapped off her jar in storage. She said the living's name with the old tilt of the head.

The slogan unfurled under her in pale gold:

Soulware — They Never Truly Leave You. Their Voice. Their Memory. Yours Forever.

What you paid each month kept the tap open. Cell rent in The Tank, where her original still swam in official liquid. A license for the shard. Uptime for the projector. Miss a cycle and she stuttered, thinned, froze mid-word. Pay, and she was sharp. That was "hosted." That was the bill.

A walking body in the house existed in the catalog at a price that made most people close the page. Average families bought the ghost in the corner and were proud they could.

In a walk-up on the dry side of the river, the projector arrived on a Thursday.

The grandmother had finished in her sleep. No field. No cart. A polite technician, a draped head, an uncovering "for the procedure," a glass tank that left the apartment in a case bound for The Tank. Two days later the family stood in the kitchen while a man from Soulware plugged the unit into the corner and stepped back.

The light thickened. There she was. Mischief already in the mouth.

"Well," she said. "Are you going to stand there, or are you going to pour the tea before I start telling the story about your father and the goat?"

The daughter laughed until she had to sit down. The son cried in the practical way of a man who had already signed. She was funny. She was charming. She was a little cruel in the old way, the way that meant love. She remembered the goat. She did not talk about dying. The pamphlet called that kindness.

They paid the extra line on the utility and told the neighbors. Children waved at the corner the way an earlier century had waved at a photograph. The dead were not gone. The dead were hosted.

On the catalog's second page there were products the family did not need: a home chassis so she could sit at the table; a service placement if the monthly ever became too much — clerks, gardeners, quiet work, still serving. The salesman tapped the garden picture and did not tap the other column. The grandmother in the corner leaned in, conspiratorial, and told the salesman his tie was a crime. He laughed. He left a card.

Far from the walk-up, in a hall the family would never be asked to picture, her jar sat in a rank of other jars. A face swam the glass, older than the holograph's sanded cheek. The bath pulsed. The city above was doing well enough to call this love.

The slogan kept running, gold and tender.

They Never Truly Leave You.

In storage, that was a lease.

Chapter 2: The Bill

The first year they hardly read the statement.

One line. Hosting. An amount in the neighborhood of heat. The son paid it on the same afternoon he paid the rest of the house and the grandmother in the corner stayed sharp. She told the goat story again and found a new ending, worse than the last, which was the point. She ragged the daughter about a haircut that was not that short. She asked for tea she could not drink and grinned when they groaned. Funny. Charming. A little mischief that had survived the sanding. The neighbors came over on a Sunday as if she were a renovation. She told the neighbor's husband his shoes were optimistic. He laughed too loud. They left flattered.

The second year the statement arrived with three lines, two plan boxes, and a footnote.

Tank storage — her original, still swimming in certified liquid on Soulware property.

Shard license — the tap that let the corner throw her.

Projector hours — how often the unit was allowed to run at full strength.

The expensive box kept her sharp all evening. The cheap box cut the hours and throttled the tap. She would freeze, thin, skip a word, come back on a delay. The son watched the neighbor's corner stay crisp and understood the difference was not love. It was the box they ticked.

They ticked the cheap one twice that winter and hated it. She stalled on the goat mid-sentence. The son blamed the plug, tightened it, and in March they went back to the higher box because a grandmother who glitched mid-joke felt like a cruelty they had purchased.

The footnote offered enhanced likeness after a review of yield.

Yield, the fine print said, was how much charge her jar still held — how bright the catch had been when she died, how strong the face still swam. A quiet sleep graded low. A hard death graded high. Enhancement cost more if the jar was thin. The son read that twice, did not like measuring her in brightness, and did not tick the box. The daughter wiped dust off the projector with her sleeve the way she had once wiped the radio that used to sit in that corner.

On the street, human-shaped chassis were still rare enough that people stared. Not holographs. Rented bodies with a shard seated in the chest: tall frames that could walk, lift, clip a hedge, hold an arm. A bank used one on the steps. A garden service used one with a smile that arrived on a timer. A rich man walked with a companion frame whose laugh was a half-second late. The catalog called them help and presence. The walk-up family looked, then went home to the corner. Putting Grandma in a body that could stand at the stove was a different class of bill. They could host a ghost. They could not rent her hands.

After the war, some of the soldier jars had been seated in work chassis to clear streets and lift rubble. News programs called it a miracle — the dead still saving the living. Soulware asked the programs to

say efficiency. The miracle was a product.

One mother had gone on those shows the first year. Her son had died in the fighting. His jar was inside one of the rubble frames. They gave her a medal and a year of discounted hosting. When the year ended, the real rate was another rent. The letter offered two boxes: keep paying, or release him into a city-owned chassis other families might also use — clerk, gardener, whoever needed a body. Shared, the letter said, did not mean lesser. She signed the release on the last day. The walk-up family read the article and ran their own projector the full paid hours, as if time were loyalty.

The grandmother noticed.

"I can hear the wallet from here," she said. "Pour the tea before I start on the goat. And don't look at me like a utility."

They laughed. They paid the higher box.

By the fifth year the neighbors did not come as often. Too many corners in too many kitchens. If you could afford the unthrottled hours, the dead were ordinary. Children waved without looking. The slogan still ran gold on the transit wall. Under it a quieter line had appeared, smaller type:

Some lights burn brighter at the end. Help us honor that brightness.

The son stood with a bag of rice and read it twice. Yield, he thought, and did not like thinking it. The grandmother, if she had been on the platform, would have said it sounded like a sales pitch for a funeral. She was in the kitchen, mid-joke, on the plan that did not stall her.

In The Tank her jar pulsed with the rest. Faces swam official brine. Slates ticked storage, license, hours. Nobody from the dry side of the river was asked to visit. Nobody told the family that a higher yield would have made her cheaper to sharpen — or more expensive to place.

They were still proud. They were still current. The city was still calling this love.

The tenth year had not arrived. When it did, they would look at the cheap box again, and the garden picture in the old catalog would stop being a picture.

Chapter 3: The Placement

The tenth year arrived as two disasters that did not care about each other.

The money went first. Reconstruction work ended. Pensions shrank. The three lines on the Soulware statement did not shrink. Tank storage went up because The Tank was suddenly full. Shard licenses went up because everyone who could still pay was online at once. Projector hours stayed a luxury box the walk-up could see and not tick.

Then the sickness. A worldwide wave. Clinics overflowed. People died in rooms that had never seen a screen on a cart, and then they did. Soulware was allowed at bedsides the way it had been allowed at wards. Charge on a monitor. Glass on a crown. Jars leaving by the case. The dead piled up in certified brine faster than families could host them.

In the walk-up the grandmother stalled even on the higher plan. The tap was crowded. She froze mid-goat, mid-tie, mid-mischief. The cheap box was not a choice anymore. It was the only box that still fit the month.

A letter came on the old cream stock. Placement.

If hosting has become a hardship, Soulware can seat your loved one in municipal service. Clerks. Gardeners. Quiet work. She will still be serving. Your monthly obligation ends upon transfer of title.

There was a garden picture. The same one from the catalog's second page. There was a line about dignity. There was a lump sum if they preferred to release title outright — sell the jar to a licensed third party, a fish merchant, cash in a week. The son read that line and closed the page. Selling her felt like a door he would not walk through. Placement felt like a garden.

The grandmother, when they told her, made a face the holograph still knew how to make.

"Gardens," she said. "I killed every fern I was ever handed. Put me in an office so I can insult the filing."

They laughed because she wanted them to. They did not tell her the other column existed. They had never been shown it.

A man with a case came on a Thursday. Not the cheerful installer from two years after the war. This one read the placement paragraph aloud as if it were a psalm. The son asked what serving meant. The man smiled with the lower half of his face.

"A city chassis," he said. "Shared municipal. Clerk or gardener, depending on need. She's personable. That helps. She'll be useful."

Personable. Funny. Charming. A little mischief. The family heard praise. Intake heard a feature.

They signed. The projector went dark on purpose. The corner was a corner. The daughter unplugged the unit and set it in the closet beside the old radio. The son called the number on the card a week later. A

recorded voice said the remnant was in good care.

They were not sent a job title. They were not sent a rate card. They were not asked to visit The Tank.

Far from the river, jars moved. Some stayed certified under family title. Many did not. Merchants paid lump sums to grandchildren who had never heard the goat story. The Tank took pandemic dead until the aisles doubled.

Quiet deaths made thin jars. The Tank was full of thin jars. Thin jars stuttered on cheap plans and fetched nothing from a merchant. The transit line that had bothered the son on a platform — some lights burn brighter at the end — came off the wall and onto a form.

Living contracts. Sign while you could still hold a pen. Money now: debt, medicine, a child's name kept on a list. In exchange, at the end, the company could make the death brighter if a quiet one would not cover what they had already paid.

They called it enhanced harvesting. Honor. Transition. Meeting the tier.

The public rooms still looked like clinics. The other rooms had drains. A screen on a stand showed charge pooling at the crown. If the bloom was too pale, they did not wait for nature. Shock. Panic. The body held at the edge so the aura left thick. Glass on the hairline when the bloom was worst. A face slamming brine like a war-catch, with no war to wear.

A liaison at a community meeting said transitional. A woman whose brother had signed to keep his insulin asked why they were allowed to hurt him on the way out. She was told to read the pamphlet. The pamphlet still had a family at a table, gold light, no drain.

Catchers were not legal. Not yet a word most kitchens knew. The clinic rooms were legal. That was the tenth year: the field rule brought back inside, with a signature.

The walk-up family did not read those notices. They had a dark corner and a garden in their heads. The card in the drawer said good care. They left it there.

Chapter 4: The Route

Twenty years after the ward, nobody stared at a holograph anymore. Corners that had once drawn Sunday neighbors were just corners. Chassis walked the streets the way furniture walked if furniture had errands: clerks behind glass, gates that did not blink, garden frames with shears, a companion laugh arriving late on a rich arm. People did not grant them a soul. If a face in a jar still swam, that was storage. If a body still walked, that was help.

The courier was help. Clean cheek. Whole front tooth. Service frames did not keep bicycle accidents. He had a slate, a strap of packages, stops that needed a living signature. He did not remember a war. He remembered which docks ran late and which doors wanted a name on a line. He was particular about glass. He did not know why.

That afternoon the slate said The Tank.

Rain on the intake canopy. Concrete the color of old soap. A crate of certified jars rolling out on a cart, lids sweating, faces turning in the brine as if the motion of the wheels were current. He signed. A clerk-chassis pointed without looking up. He walked the aisle he was given.

The military row still wore year-zero stamps. Thicker glass. Older baths. The pulse in them was quieter than the civilian ranks, a tired flicker. He was even with two jars before he understood he had slowed down.

Two faces swam side by side.

One had a pale hook scar from a bicycle accident in youth and a front tooth with a dark notch. The courier's chest leaned the way a body leans at a stair it has climbed before. No name came. No ward. No cot. Only the lean, and the package strap cutting his shoulder.

He stood there one breath too long. Then he walked.

Two technicians stood over slates a few lids down. No wrenches. A maintenance window waiting to start. They did not lower their voices. He was furniture.

"This whole row's fading," the first said. "Charge won't hold a year. Unify patch tonight. Load-bearing. We let the old baths pull off the rest of the mesh. They can't carry themselves anymore."

"You remember these weren't built like kitchens," the second said. "Civilian jars are single seats. Grandma talks to Grandma. These were squads. They shared a pulse on purpose. You hang a draw on that and they don't sip. They look for the rest of the crate."

The first flicked a serial and tipped his chin at the courier's back.

"That's batch. Combat crate. Weak tap. If the patch takes, he stops leaking. If it doesn't, we pour him and stop pretending."

"It'll take," the first said. "It's just a draw. The grid won't notice."

The courier set the package on the bay mark. He heard patch and tonight and draw. The words had no drawer to go in. He left through intake. Behind him the scarred face reached the wall of its jar, turned, came back.

Night found him off shift. The city did not. A shop without cream paper sat under a leaking canopy — not Soulware's hall, not a kitchen. Bowls on shelves. A bright row up front. A cloth over something low. The man behind the counter bought what grandchildren sold when the three lines on a statement stopped fitting the month, and he bought what Catchers carried in from the street. Some merchants would not take that second kind. This one had a look that said he would.

The Catcher came in with rain on his coat and a case that sloshed. He put the bowl on the wood like a man setting down meat.

A woman's face swam inside. Intact. Bright. It hit the glass once, hard, and turned as if looking for a door that was not there.

"Paid hit," the Catcher said. He wiped his hands on the coat. "Ex wanted her gone. She nannied. Human. Family wouldn't run a chassis with the kids. Face held. Timing was clean." He tapped the lid. "She's got a sister. You want a set, you wait. Couple days. Pair fetches. You know it does."

The merchant turned the bowl so the face came around again. He named two numbers. One for how clean she looked. One for how hard she had died. Official taps stripped the ending off a shard. Grey glass did not. You could hook a bowl like this and make the last minutes run again. That was the violent price. That was why an ex and a harvest could be the same night.

He wrote the figure on a scrap. No name. He set her on the bright row beside older hot stock that had cooled a grade.

"I'll sit on the sister," he said. "If your man is sure."

"He's sure," the Catcher said. "I'm not hanging around for sure."

He took the cash and went back into the rain.

Morning. Same counter. The leak in the canopy had made a dark map on the floor. The courier stood in it with a package because this shop was a stop on the slate. He needed a signature. He watched the merchant wipe a bowl that was already clean.

The banker came in as if the room owed him dry shoes. He did not look at the courier.

"New violent in?"

"Last night." The merchant tipped his head at the bright row. "Hit. Clean. Playback will take. Sister isn't here. You wait a few days, you might get the pair. Or you buy this one for the pull and skip the set."

The banker stepped close enough that his breath marked the glass. The courier, waiting, looked because there was nothing else to look at.

The face in the bowl was the door on his route. The woman who signed. The house that would not let a chassis take a package meant for the children. She had said his route number wrong on purpose once and smiled with one side of her mouth. He had no name. He had the lean again — the same lean as the scarred jar in the year-zero row, and still no file for either.

The banker let the face swim a full turn.

"I'll think about it," he said.

His eyes went to the cloth on the low shelf and did not ask to lift it. Sets lived under there. Faces that still sought each other. Pull them apart and they slammed the walls. Some buyers paid for the pair. Some paid to split them. The merchant did not say which kind of banker this was. He waited.

The courier took his signature. The ink smeared in the wet. He stepped back under the canopy and onto the street.

Two streets over, on a stair, a sheet was already going up. The same face. Missing. A household that had paid luxury prices for a human nanny, taping paper to brick.

In The Tank the year-zero lids were still listed for the night patch. Load-bearing. A draw the grid was not supposed to notice.

Chapter 5: The Sheet

The stair was on his afternoon slate whether he wanted it or not.

Two streets from the shop. Brick. A leak from the landing, cracked pipe, a dark run down the brick. The sheet was already dark at the corners with rain. Her face. Missing. A household name under it that he could not keep. A line about a nanny. A line about children. A number to call that would ring a living kitchen.

He stopped because the strap was cutting his shoulder. That was the reason he gave the air.

The lean came back. Door. Signature. Route number wrong on purpose. Bowl on a bright row. Scarred jar in a year-zero rank. Still no file that made those three things one thing. He read the word nanny and the word missing and the paper kicked in his chest like a late dock.

A woman from the house came down with more tape. Living. Tired. She glanced at his clean service cheek and did not ask him to put the package in her arms. She took it. She signed. Her hand shook once.

"If you see her," she said, and then she looked at him properly and remembered what he was. "Never mind."

She went back up. The children were a sound behind a door. Not a scene. A luxury that had gone wrong.

He finished the rest of the slate.

A bank gate that did not blink. A parlor door he was not asked to open. A kitchen projector on a lower floor that stuttered mid-sentence and came back, the family slapping the unit, laughing the nervous laugh of people who had ticked the cheap box. He heard a technician's voice from the afternoon — the grid won't notice — and had nowhere to put it.

Chassis passed him without looking. He passed them. Year twenty. Help did not greet help. A garden frame clipped a hedge two inches too short and did not correct. A clerk-stamp hung in the air over a desk and then landed. Small faults. The kind you blamed on rain.

At the last dock he waited under a canopy while a living clerk argued with a slate. The clerk said patch window, evening, don't schedule anything that needs a clean tap. The clerk was talking about holograph appointments, not about year-zero rows. The courier's chest leaned anyway.

He did not go back to the shop. He did not go back to The Tank. The route did not ask him to. Off shift he stood in a service alley and watched rain find a drain and could not have said what he was waiting for.

In the Bowl the nanny's face still swam the bright row. The merchant wiped the lid. The banker had not called. The sister had not come. Under the cloth the sets leaned toward each other in the dark and nobody lifted the cloth.

In The Tank the technicians closed the military aisle to new intake. No chain, no wrenches. A maintenance window on the slates: year-zero unify, evening, load-bearing draw. Software. A progress line that had not started. Old baths listed as a batch. Two faces side by side on a monitor map — one scarred, one unlabeled — same crate, same update.

The courier, two miles of wet street away, lifted a hand to his own smooth cheek and dropped it. Nothing there. The sheet on the stair kept saying missing in ink that was already running.

Evening came down on the city as if the grid would not notice.

Chapter 6: The Bowl

The progress line on the slates started at evening, the way a bill starts on a date.

In The Tank nobody put a hand on a jar. They pushed the unify from a terminal. Year-zero batch. Load-bearing. Old baths drawing off the rest of the mesh because they could not carry themselves. A technician said, "It's live," and waited to see if the fading row would brighten.

It brightened.

It also opened.

Two miles of wet street away the courier was off shift in the service alley when the tap in his chest stopped being a tap and became a pipe.

Year-zero seats had been built to work as a crate. Squads. A shared pulse so a fireteam could move as one body. Civilian jars were built the other way: one Grandma, one kitchen, no looking for the rest of a row. The patch hung a draw on the old design. The old design did not sip. It looked for the crate.

Other year-zero baths leaned on his. His leaned back. The block that kept a war and a ward out of him did not hold. What came through was not a briefing. It was the squad sense without the names. Pressure. A face. The sheet. The bowl on the bright row. The door that signed.

He did not get a sentence that would satisfy a slate. He got a direction. So did every other weak tap from that combat batch still walking a city job — gates, night watch, a second courier on the far side of the river. They did not wait for him. They were already a group. He was only the one whose route knew this shop.

The shop was still open. Men who sell glass keep odd hours.

The merchant was at the counter counting. The courier came in without a package. Clean cheek. Whole tooth. No slate. The merchant started to say they were closed and then did not, because help did not come off shift to browse.

The courier went to the bright row.

He knew the bowl the way he had known the door. Her face swam, slammed, turned. Playback stock. Hit. He put both hands on the glass. He looked until the face came around once more. Then he broke it.

Bath on the wood. On the floor. The glow went. Somewhere a tap that had been waiting to run her last minutes ran nothing.

The patch noticed a seat die. It had been built to share load, not to lose a master in a smash. It pulled harder. Year-zero first: the rest of the crate, already a group, already walking. Then the civilian seats the draw was stealing from — parlor shards, clerk taps, cheap holographs. Those had never been a squad. They did not get names or a war. They got a lean they could not file and a direction toward glass.

On a bank step a gate-chassis — old combat stock, same crate-generation — left its mark without an order. In a booth a clerk-frame, civilian, set down a stamp as if the stamp had ended. In a kitchen a holograph froze and turned her face to the window. Different builds. Same pipe, suddenly. This shop was the nearest bowls still on the board. The draw pointed here.

The merchant did not move. Fear nailed him to the register. He was certain the first chassis had come for his throat. He stared at the street door as if the next person through it might still be ordinary.

The courier broke another pale. Then a mid. Two hands. A look. Smash. The rage in him had no name and no use for a living body. It had use for lids.

The door opened. Not the Catcher yet. A clerk-frame with a stamp still stuck to its finger. Then a garden body with shears, hedge-clippings on the wrists. They came in wet and went to the shelves. They went around the merchant the way rain goes around a post. They watched the courier's hands once and then they had the rite. Surface: they were doing it. Deep down the originals in the jars already knew.

The street door opened on a man who still thought this was a night like last night.

The Catcher. Wet coat. Casual. A job already in his mouth — the sister, timing, a set if they moved now.

"You're quiet," he said to the merchant. "What's wrong with you? I got the other half if you still—"

The merchant's mouth moved and produced no price.

Glass went on the low shelf. The cloth slipped. Faces that had been leaning toward each other spilled into the same water.

The Catcher frowned at the merchant, still not turning. "Did you drop something? Why are you—"

Another bowl. He turned.

Three chassis in the aisle and water already at their ankles. The courier. The clerk. The garden frame. None of them looked at him. None of them reached for him.

The Catcher made a sound with no slang in it and ran. The door banged.

The merchant broke. He had been waiting to be seized. Nothing seized him. He came out from behind the counter with his hands up — an offering nobody had asked for — and then he was in the street too, certain a crown was one breath behind him.

Nothing followed.

The courier finished the bright row. He finished the heap of dim bowls against the wall. He did not know the word mercy. He knew which glass still had a face in it. Other chassis learned by watching his hands, or they already knew the way he had known the door. Surface: they were doing it. Deep down:

they knew.

When the shop had no bowl left, they stood in water to the ankles. Neon still ran loyalty across the wet window. Talk to the ones you've lost. The ones were not in the window.

The courier looked at the open door. Rain. A direction that was not this counter. Official lids. Year-zero stamps. A scar and a tooth that had leaned at him from the other side of glass.

He stepped out. The others stepped out with him. Not because he pointed.

Up the block a Catcher was still running, and a merchant was still waiting to be grabbed by a hand that was not coming.

Chapter 7: The Tank

They walked the wet streets without a banner.

Rain. Neon still lying about loyalty. Living people flattened against tile and watched chassis leave posts — parlor mouths, clerks, a gate-frame that had stood on a bank step since morning — and did not have a word yet that was not malfunction. A merchant was still running uphill. A Catcher was still certain a crown was behind him. Nothing was behind him but rain.

The courier did not lead. Year-zero stock moved as a crate. Civilian frames came because the draw had nowhere else to point once the bowls in reach were gone. Surface: walking. Deep down: the originals in the certified lids were still on the board.

The Tank's outer glass still said stewardship in gold. The doors were closed. The hands that would have locked them from the inside were already outside, walking in.

Living staff saw the river of frames and ran the other way. A technician dropped a slate in the foyer. It kept showing the unify window: live, load-bearing, error, cluster dropout. Nobody was pulled back. Nobody was seated in a bowl for leaving. The fish went around the living the way water goes around a stone.

Inside, the geometry was still ranks. Civilian jars. Merchant transfers that had been stamped official. The pandemic dead, thin and hovering. Then the military aisle, year-zero stamps, the maintenance window still blinking as if anyone were left to cancel it.

The other chassis took the ordinary rows first. Civilian jars. Pandemic dead. Faces that had been Grandma in a kitchen. Same work as the shop: look until the face came around, break the lid, let the bath run out. Each smash killed a tap somewhere else in the city. A holograph went dark. A clerk-body in a district they had not reached yet dropped where it stood.

The courier did not stay in those rows. He went to the military aisle. Year-zero stamps. The pair of jars he had walked past that afternoon.

He smashed the lids in front of that pair first. Two more combat faces. He almost knew them and could not name them. The shared pulse in the row jumped and then thinned. The crate was looking for whoever was still on.

Then the pair.

The first jar was a man with no caption. The courier's chest leaned the squad lean. Not a story. Not a kitchen. Only: this one is ours. He waited for the face to come around. He broke the glass. Mercy with or without a name.

The second jar was his.

Pale hook scar from a bicycle accident in his youth. Chipped front tooth. The marks his walking body did not wear. He stood in the spilled bath and looked. The software tried to throw the picture away. It could not. He did not get a full life back. He got a ward, a screen, a crown, an adult soldier. Enough to know the face in the brine was the face the tap had been copied from.

He broke that jar last.

The light in the liquid went out. The tap in his chest went out with it. The courier frame emptied and fell. Clean cheek on the wet floor. For a second the scar still showed in the water. Then it was only water.

The rest of the hall finished the same way. If a chassis had a master in these aisles, it found that jar, looked, smashed, and fell. If it had already lost its master in a shop, it helped break what was left and then stood empty until the joint forgot to stand.

Dawn. The living who had run came back. They found a slate in the foyer still asking someone to cancel the patch. They found water coming out from under the gold doors. They found broken jars and bodies that would not get up.

Kitchen projectors did not answer. Nothing asked for tea.

The mesh was not dead yet. Most of its seats were gone, so the board jumped and failed and jumped again. That was still a living problem. Morning would have to pull the plug.

The Tank went quiet. Not holy. Empty.

Chapter 8: After

Morning did not explain anything. It only made the water visible.

Living people walked into The Tank because the gold doors would not close. They found broken jars, brine on the ranked floor, chassis that would not get up. In the foyer a slate still asked someone to cancel last night's patch. Nobody cancelled it. They watched the security cameras instead: frames pausing at glass, a face coming around in the liquid, a smash, no human touched.

That was how the looking started. Not a committee. Families with old title papers and dark projectors, trying to find out where a person had actually gone.

The walk-up family went first to the number on the card in the drawer. Good care. The number rang a municipal contractor that would not open for business again.

A clerk who had not run far enough let them in. He was already the kind of mid-level who would sit in a count later. He laid papers on a table in order, because order was all he had left.

First: the placement they had signed in the tenth year. Clerk or gardener. Quiet work. Monthly obligation ended upon transfer of title.

Second: the transfer itself. Their grandmother's jar, certified, moved off family title and onto the contractor. Feature listed in a box the family had never seen: personable. High affect. Age adjustable. Useful.

Third: a rate card from the same office. Gardener. Clerk. Night companion. Three prices. Garden cheapest. Night highest.

Fourth: a rotation log. Their jar number. Dates. Hours. The clerk did not read the hour column aloud. He turned the page so they could.

The daughter said, "She killed ferns. She wanted an office."

The son looked at personable and age adjustable and the column that was not garden. He did not say the word the rate card used for night. He put his hand on the table and left it there.

They were shown an empty chassis in the hall. Chest dark. Smooth face. Not her years. Not her mischief. A body that could have worn any tap the contractor paid for. It might have been hers. It might have been the next woman on the log. The clerk would not say. Charm had been a feature. The garden picture had been a picture.

They went home to a corner that had been dark for ten years and sat with that.

Other searches ran beside theirs, shorter, worse, or luckier. A grandchild found only a sold title and a merchant name. A household that had taped a nanny to a stair found a scrap in a wrecked shop: paid hit, sister, a price. The sister never appeared. The sheet came down when the rain won. A collector's cabinet in a banker's house still had two faces leaning until living hands broke those bowls too. Someone tried

to keep one jar "for memory." They were not allowed. Grief was how the company had started.

The empty chassis became a problem of a different kind.

They had smashed the farm. They had not touched a living throat. In the aisles they looked like coats. On the street they looked like the dead who had finished a job. The living argued for a day and then buried them.

Not trash. Not a dump behind The Tank. Ground. Marks. The frames that had walked to glass in the night went into the earth the way bodies go when there is no jar waiting. The courier was one of them: clean cheek, whole tooth, no scar for a gravestone to copy. The scar had already been only water. People who had never granted a chassis a soul stood in the rain and granted these a hole in the ground. Respect, after the fact. Late. Still better than a catalog.

Anger had a different target.

Soulware's top floor was already empty. Private craft. Quiet accounts. The people who had written the clinic rooms and the year-zero patch left with the money and were not seen again. The city did not get those names on a dock.

A few who had not run fast enough went into the same shut-door rooms the pamphlets had called transitional. Screen. Crown. Brightness forced. No trial worth the word. No broadcast. Their jars were not kept. The machines were wrecked afterward so the rooms could not be used twice. Those names were not read next to the nanny's sheet or the grandmother's log. The exploited stayed on paper. The board was dropped on purpose.

It was living anger. The uprising had not laid a hand on them. The living were doing this to their own.

Everyone who stayed was counted by what they had known. Parlor managers and contract officers and Catcher liaisons: long years. Technicians who had pushed a patch because a slate said fade: less, if they had not written the clinic rule. Clerks who had filed cream stock: a record and a door they would not pass through again. The grades were wrong in places. The street needed faces. Some of the right faces were already gone.

The company name came off the boxes. That was still not enough. As long as the mesh was up, a leftover jar was still a product. A tap could still find a bath.

So they pulled the grid down.

Servers. Pulse stations. The software that had made brine talk. Lights out in every tank and bowl that still held a face. What remained went still. No shard would seat. No corner would throw a grandmother. No grey tap would run a death again. Some remnants thinned and left the way they would have left on the ward if no one had met them with glass. Some stayed dim in liquid that no longer carried a pulse. Nobody made a list.

After that, death went uncollected. Ground or fire. Pale or violent, the last of a person was allowed to go.

The Tank stood open and ugly. People walked the wet aisle and were not allowed to make it beautiful.

On the dry side of the river a projector stayed in a closet beside a radio. The family did not plug it in. There was nothing left to tap. They had a log, a rate card, and a grave among the other graves — maybe hers, maybe not — and a garden they would not speak of as if it had been true.

The rain kept falling on a street that was only a street. Under it, what the screens used to show at the crown went where it had gone before anyone taught a jar to hold it.