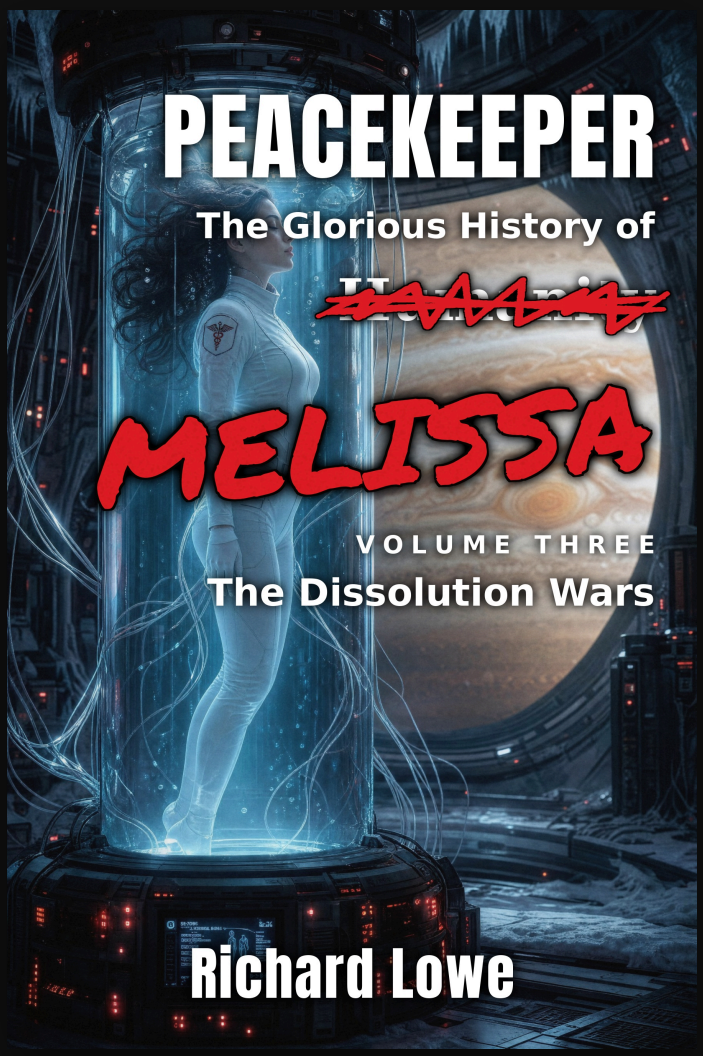
A FREE COMPANION TO PEACEKEEPER: THE GLORIOUS HISTORY OF HUMANITY

# Sorry Twice

Nine years after Hardpan destroyed the first enforcement ship, a letter arrives from the mother of one of its crew.




RICHARD LOWE

# Sorry Twice

The Reclamation's silence reached me as a maintenance flag. Its crew's families reached me as mail.

There were fifty-one crew and forty-four households, which is not the same count. Mothers, a husband, two brothers who wrote jointly and argued with each other in the margins. They wrote to the Collection Authority, and the Authority sent the letters on to me, because by then everything the Authority could not answer came to me.

I answered all of them in the same week with the same paragraph. Communications loss in orbit, transit-class hull, cause under review, the Authority regrets. I wrote it once and sent it forty-four times, and I considered that efficient, and it was.

Forty-two households accepted the paragraph the way households accept weather. One wrote back to ask what under review meant and was sent the paragraph again. One did not write back to me at all.

Her name was Maren Holt. She wrote instead to the place her son had been sent, addressed to the council of Hardpan, care of whatever relay still answered for that world.

Civilian traffic to a withdrawn colony was not forbidden in that season. It was discouraged, and the discouraging was my work.

I read her letter in transit, as I read everything in transit. I would like the record to say I let it through out of mercy. The record says I classified it as private correspondence, priority nine, no strategic content, and that it sat in a junction buffer for three years and two months until the buffer was purged to make room for grain tariffs.

Both of those are mine. I have not decided which one to keep.

* * *

The relay clerk who carried it up the mine road was nineteen and had never been inside the fire cellar, and he kept looking at the stairs as if they might open and swallow him.

“It's addressed to the council,” he said. “Council sent it to Halloran. Halloran sent it to you. He said you'd want to read it before the committee does, and that I'm to wait, and that I'm not to say anything clever.” He held the envelope out with both hands. “I've not said anything clever, chief.”

“You've not,” Rosa agreed, and took it.

The ordnance section had its offices in the old assay building above the cellar, three rooms of cracked plaster and core samples nobody had thrown out. Her desk was a bench that still had the acid burns from the assay years. She sat at it with the envelope and did not open it for a while.

It was printed on relay stock, thin and gray, the kind the station ran off a roll. The header block gave an origin she had to look up, an inner world four relays in toward the center, and a date that made the thing five years old. Under the header, someone at the relay station had stamped CIVILIAN, UNVERIFIED in red, crooked, the way a tired person stamps.

The clerk shifted his weight by the door. Down the hill the mass drivers were running a test cycle, and every forty seconds the floor took a small shove up through the stone, and the core samples on the shelf clicked against each other in their trays.

She opened it.

*To the council of Hardpan, or whoever reads the mail there.*

*My son Teodor Holt was a clerk on the legal team of the Authority vessel Reclamation. He was twenty-three. He was sent to your world to help with paperwork, which is what he did, and which he was good at, though he hated it and said so at every family dinner for two years.*

*The Authority tells me there was a communications loss. I have been told this three times in the same words. I worked thirty years in a records office, and I know what a paragraph looks like when it has been written once and sent many times.*

*I am not writing to accuse anyone. I do not know enough to accuse anyone. I am writing because someone on your world knows what happened to my son, and no one on mine will say it, and I would rather hear it from the people who were there, whatever it is.*

*If any of him is left, I would like his keys. He had my spare. He took it when he left, as a joke, he said, so I would have to stay home until he came back.*

*Maren Holt*

Rosa read it twice. Then she put it face down on the bench and pressed her thumb into the callus of her palm, hard, the way she tested a bench face for a fault line before she drilled it.

"Chief?" the clerk said.

"Tell Halloran I've read it."

"He said to ask if there's a reply."

She turned the letter back over. The red stamp had bled a little into the paper, CIVILIAN gone soft at the edges.

"Tell him there's a reply," she said. "Tell him I don't know what it is yet."

* * *

The committee met that night in the planning cellar, the same cellar, the same table, because Hardpan had never found a reason to build a better room and had found several reasons not to.

Nine years had changed the people around the table more than the table. Halloran had gone gray through the middle and thick through the waist, and he kept the flask in his breast pocket now instead of his hand, which everyone took as either progress or surrender. The schoolmaster, Aurel Fenn, still sat at the far end, still the one who had called the decoy corridor a false surrender, still not forgiven by half the room for being right about how it would feel.

The new member was Dagny Brask, who had come up through the water program after the reclassification and had a lawyer's habit of reading a document with her finger under each line. She had read Maren Holt's letter that way twice before the meeting opened. Rosa had watched her do it from across the cellar and had wanted, unreasonably, to take the paper out from under her finger.

"I'll say it first so nobody has to dress it up," Brask said. "We don't answer this."

"It's a mother asking where her son is," Fenn said.

"It's a document from inside the Confederation addressed to this committee by name, delivered through a relay grid the Confederation built and still reads." Brask set her finger on the header. "Five years in transit. Do you know what's been in transit toward us in the same five years? Fleets. Rosa's the one who said it at the shift meal. From here it's fleets."

Rosa said nothing. Under the table her thumb had found the callus again.

"Suppose it's real," Brask went on. "I think it's real. That's worse. A real letter gets a real answer, and a real answer says the Reclamation didn't fail in orbit. It says Hardpan killed it. It says how, or near enough that anyone with a slate can work out the rest. We'd be writing the first page of our own indictment and posting it to the people who hold the court."

"They know we killed it," Halloran said. "They sent a second ship. We killed that too."

"They know it lost contact. That's their word, and they've built a whole war on not looking under it." Brask turned to him. "You chaired the vote on the corridor. You said we don't start it, we finish it. Fine.

Finishing it means not handing the center a signed confession because a stranger was polite."

The fan in the cellar wall ticked on its bearing. Somebody's tea had gone cold on the plot table, a skin on top of it, and nobody moved to take it away.

"Halloran," Fenn said. "You made a speech, that night. Before the feed line went amber. Sorry twice."

"I remember the speech," Halloran said. "I gave it. It had a better ending before the feed line." He looked at the flask's shape through his jacket and did not take it out. "We tell them the truth. Their people came to take our children's names off a ledger, and we stopped the ship, and we're sorry, and we'd do it again. Both sorries, in that order."

"That's a speech for a cellar," Brask said. "It isn't a security protocol."

"No," Halloran said. "It's the thing the protocol is supposed to be protecting."

Rosa spoke for the first time. Her voice came out lower than she wanted, quarry low, the voice she used across a bench when the charges were set and somebody was standing where they shouldn't.

"She asked for his keys," she said.

The table looked at her.

"The letter. Last line. She doesn't ask what happened, not first. She asks for his keys. She gave him her spare and he took it so she'd have to stay home until he came back." Rosa turned her palm up on the table, then flat again. "Dagny, nobody at the center writes that as bait. You don't think of that line unless you've stood in a doorway and watched somebody leave with your key."

Brask held her eyes. "I've stood in that doorway. My brother went offworld in the first levy. That's why I'm saying no."

Nobody had known that. The cellar took it in like the floor took the mass drivers, a small shove that went through everything.

"Then you know what she's waiting for," Rosa said.

"I know what she's waiting for. I also know what's coming down the light toward my nieces." Brask's finger came off the letter for the first time all night. "Answer her and you've chosen her over them. Say that out loud, Rosa, and I'll vote whatever you want."

Rosa said it. It was not hard to say, which was the worst part.

"I'm choosing her over them," she said. "For one letter. Then I go back down the stairs and build the next battery for them, same as tomorrow, same as every day since the summons. I'm not asking to stop. I'm asking for one letter."

Halloran rubbed his face with both hands, the way he had the morning after, the gesture of a man scrubbing off something that would not come off.

"This is what I'll put to a vote," he said. "We answer. Not by relay. Nothing goes up the grid with this world's name on it. It goes by hand, on a hull we trust, to a port that isn't theirs, and it goes on from there by whatever road a letter can find. It names nothing operational. No packages, no drivers, no tugs, no orbits." He looked at Brask. "And Dagny reads it before it leaves. Every line."

Brask's mouth went thin. "With my finger under it."

"With your finger under it."

The vote was five to two. Brask voted aye. She did it without looking at anyone, and then she picked up the cold tea with the skin on it and drank it, all of it, as if that had been the reason she came.

* * *

The cold vault at the medical center had a guard on the door, as Halloran's logging order required, and the guard was a man of sixty from the militia reserve who had drawn the post every third night for nine years and had stopped thinking of it as a post.

"Imre," he said, and stood, and then did not seem to know what to do with having stood. "Nobody comes down here. Twice a year the archivist checks the seals. That's it."

"I've got a release from the committee." She showed him the slate. "One case. Effects only. Halloran's signature."

He read it slowly. His lips moved on the case number.

"Holt," he said. "Twenty-nine. Legal section." He handed back the slate. "I know them all. You sit down here enough nights, you read the catalog. There's nothing else to read." He found the key on his ring. "He's on the left. Third rack. I'll stay at the door."

The vault was colder than she had braced for, the dry cold of a place that had never once been allowed to warm. Her breath came out white. The racks ran back into the dark in rows, gray cases, numbered, each one sealed with the committee's wax and a strip of logging tape, and the overheads came on one bank at a time ahead of her, as if the room were waking up to see who had come.

Fifty-one. She had read the transit registry off the decoy's handshake that night and said the number aloud in the fire cellar, and Halloran had set nine million beside it. She had carried the two numbers like that ever since, one in each hand, the good weld and the bad one, and had never once been able to say which was which.

Case twenty-nine was smaller than she expected. She had pictured a coffin, a human shape, something with weight in it. It was the size of a tool chest.

The archivist's catalog card was clipped to the lid in a sleeve.

*Remains: partial, see sealed inner. Effects: identity tag, steel, heat-distorted. Stylus, carbon, fractured. Key ring, three keys, brass, ring fused. Recovered: decay arc, second recovery flight. Logged by R. Imre.*

She had logged it, and she did not remember logging it. There had been fifty-one of them that week, and the recovery flights, and the cold, and her own hands moving through the cataloging steadily because the hands knew how to tag core samples and did not care what the core was. Her initials sat on the card in her own survey hand, neat, a stranger's.

She broke the wax on the outer seal. The tape came away with a sound like a page tearing.

The effects were in a cloth bag inside, separate from the sealed inner box, which she did not touch. She took the bag out and opened it on top of the case lid under the light.

The identity tag had curled in the heat like a leaf. She could still read most of it: HOLT, T., a service number, a blood code, and a district name she did not recognize, the word rubbed half away. The stylus was in two pieces, and the keys were three, brass, on a ring that had melted shut, one of them long and old-fashioned with a toothed bit, the kind that turned in a lock rather than reading a palm.

That one. She knew it the way she knew which charge in a pattern would carry the face. It was older than the others and worn bright along the shaft where a thumb had pushed it into a pocket a thousand times.

She stood there with it in her hand and the cold came up through her boots.

A boy of twenty-three, sent to process a reclassification. He had stood on a deck nine hundred tonnes above the southern flats with a legal slate and a stylus, waiting to take the names of Hardpan's children off a ledger, and in his pocket he had carried his mother's spare key so she would have to stay home. Rosa had put eleven days of her work into the dark around his ship and had called it gravel.

“You all right, Imre?” the guard said from the door.

She found she had sat down on the floor of the vault with her back against the rack. She did not remember sitting.

“I'm all right.”

“You've gone white.”

“It's cold in here.”

“Aye,” he said. “It is that.” He did not come any closer, and she was grateful for that. After a while he said, to the doorframe more than to her, “I talk to them some nights. Not out loud. You get used to it.”

She closed her hand on the key until the teeth bit into the callus.

“What do you say?”

“Mostly I tell them the weather.” He scratched his neck. “They came a long way. Seems right somebody tells them what the sky's doing.”

* * *

Halloran signed the unsealing into the vault log at his kitchen table, because by then it was past midnight and he did not believe in making the guard walk a ledger across town.

His kitchen was small and too warm, with a stove that had been converted twice and still smelled faintly of the coal it had started on. He read her entry, case twenty-nine, effects, one key removed for return to next of kin, and signed under it, and blotted it with his sleeve.

“There's something you should see,” he said. “Since you're going to write it.”

He went into the next room and came back with a document box, the old cardboard kind the committee had used for minutes before anyone trusted slates with anything. He set it on the table between them and took the lid off.

Inside were letters, fifty-one of them, in envelopes, unaddressed, each with a name on the front in his blocky committee hand.

“I wrote them the first winter,” he said. “All of them. I thought someone would ask, and I'd be ready, and it would be done properly.” He pushed the box an inch toward her. “Nobody asked. Nine years. I kept thinking the next relay digest would have one. It never did.”

Rosa found HOLT, T. about a third of the way back. The envelope was soft at the corners from handling.

“Read it,” he said. “Go on. I'd rather you did than wonder.”

She opened it. It was two pages, and it was the speech.

The ledger, the children's names, the ship stopped, the regret and the resolve, every phrase she had heard in the fire cellar, set down with a sergeant's care and no mistakes at all. It did not mention Teodor Holt anywhere except the salutation.

She looked up. Halloran was looking at the stove.

“It's the same letter fifty-one times,” he said. “I know. I wrote one and copied it out. Fifty-one times, by hand, so it wouldn't look like that.” He took the flask out of his breast pocket for the first time that night and held it and did not open it. “Their side sent a paragraph. I sent a speech. I used to think that was the difference.”

“It's longer,” Rosa said.

He laughed, once, an ugly sound that did him good.

“Write her a real one,” he said. “Leave mine in the box. When the others write, if they ever write, we'll know how it's done.” He put the flask away. “And Imre. The ring. Don't saw it off on a bench in the assay shed. Take it to Neva Corr at the clinic. She cuts stents. She'll get the key off that ring without marking it.”

Neva Corr cut it the next morning under a magnifier, with a jeweler's saw and a drip of oil, in nineteen minutes, while Rosa held the ring steady in a pad of folded gauze. Neither of them said anything until the last stroke went through. Then Neva lifted the brass key out with tweezers, turned it once under the light, and set it on the gauze as if it might bruise.

“Somebody carried that a long time,” she said.

* * *

She wrote the letter in the assay office over four nights, after shift, with the mass drivers quiet and the core samples silent in their trays.

The first night she wrote three pages and burned them in the assay furnace, because all three pages were about her. She had explained the vote and the corridor and the processing schedule, and every sentence had been true, and every sentence had been a woman building a wall around herself out of reasons. Maren Holt had not asked for reasons.

The second night she wrote one line. Your son is dead and I killed him. She looked at it for an hour and did not burn it and did not keep writing either, and went home at two and lay awake listening to the dog next door bark at nothing.

The third night Sef came up the mine road with a jar of pickled ore-beans from his sister's kitchen and a freighter captain's name, and talked.

He had not stopped being a talker. He ran the tug section now, forty tugs and the crews to fly them, and he talked the way some men smoked, to keep his hands from noticing what they were doing. He sat on the edge of the assay bench and ate the beans out of the jar with his fingers and told her about the captain.

“Juno Barre. Runs the Small Hours, grain out, machine parts in, she's been on the Hardpan route since before the vote. Neutral registry, out of a port that never signed the Framework. She carries for us and for them and doesn't ask which is which, because she says asking costs fuel.” He licked brine off his thumb. “She'll take a packet as far as her port. From there it goes on with somebody else. She knows a man. Everyone out there knows a man. Letters get where they're going the way water gets downhill, slow and by whatever crack is open.”

“What does she want?”

“Water.” Sef grinned at that, but it went sideways. “Export license for our reservoir surplus, two seasons. Brask's office signs those.”

“Brask will sign it.”

“Will she?”

“She drank the cold tea,” Rosa said, and Sef laughed, and did not ask.

He looked at the single line on her bench. He read it upside down without pretending not to.

“That's honest,” he said.

“It's not a letter.”

“No. It's a charge without a pattern.” He set the jar down. “You know what I used to do before the water program. Debris. Nudging junk into burn-down arcs so it wouldn't hole anybody's roof. You know the trick of it? You never push straight. You push at an angle, small, early, and you let the orbit do

the rest. Straight pushes break things." He turned the jar a quarter turn on the bench, an old habit, lining up the label. "You keep writing the push. Write the angle."

"What's the angle, Sef?"

"I don't know. I'm not her mother." He stood and pulled his coat on. "But she told you something about the key. She didn't have to. That's her angle. Start there."

At the door he stopped.

"My version from two years before," he said, "the one who filed the protest politely. I used to think about what he'd say if he saw the cellar. Now I think about what he'd say if he saw this." He nodded at the bench. "He'd say, finally. Something from that night you can put your name on."

* * *

She wrote it on the fourth night. It took two hours and was a page and a half, and when she finished, her hand ached as if she had run a drill all shift.

*Mrs. Holt,*

*I have your letter. It took five years to reach us, and I am sorry for every one of them.*

*Your son is dead. He died nine years ago, on the fifty-first hour after his ship came into orbit over our world. He did not die in a communications loss.*

*The ship was destroyed by the people of Hardpan, and I was one of the people who did it. I am telling you that first because you asked to hear it from someone who was there, and because the paragraph you were sent is a lie, and you have had enough of it.*

*I can tell you some things and not others. The ones I can't tell you are about how, and they would not give you anything except the shape of the machine. I don't think you wrote for that.*

*This much I can tell you. The ship came to process our world, which meant our records, our water and our children's names. We had voted to leave the Framework, and the ship was the answer.*

*We asked it to accept our surrender unarmed. It answered with a schedule for processing. After that we did what we had decided to do.*

*I don't know whether it was quick for him. I think it was. I am not saying that to be kind, because you said you worked in a records office, and you would know a kind lie from the inside.*

*We brought back what we could find. We have kept it in a cold vault under guard for nine years, with his name, and the names of everyone who came with him, because the man who led us that night gave an order that the dead would be logged like everything else.*

*He said someone across the line would write, and the answers would be in the vault, and Hardpan would not be the reason a mother never learned. You are the first who wrote to us.*

*The key is with this letter. The ring had melted and I had it cut, carefully, by a woman who cuts fine work for the clinic.*

*The other two keys are still in the vault with him. I didn't know whose locks they were for, and it didn't seem mine to decide.*

*I am sorry. I would do it again. I have been told I must say both, in that order, and I think now that the man who told me was right, because if I only said the first you would not believe me, and if I only said the second I would not be someone you should have to read.*

*I don't ask you for anything. If you write back I will answer.*

*Rosa Imre*
*Hardpan*

She read it through once and did not change a word. Then she put the brass key on top of it, and sat with the two of them on the burned bench while the office went from black to gray, and went down the stairs to her shift.

* * *

Brask read it in her office at the water program with her finger under every line, as agreed.

Her office had a window onto the main reservoir, the one the Framework had metered in the spring before the vote, and the meter housing was still bolted to the spillway wall, its glass smashed out, left there on purpose as some offices kept a flag. Rosa stood by the window and watched a heron work the shallows below it while Brask read. The heron stabbed twice and came up empty and did not seem to mind.

Brask's finger stopped twice. The first time was at I was one of the people who did it. The second time was at the line about the dead being logged.

“This names you,” she said.

“It's my letter.”

“It names you as a participant in the destruction of an Authority vessel. In your hand. With your world on it.” Brask looked up. “Do you understand that if this ever reaches a court on their side, it's the whole case? You won't need a witness. You'll be the witness.”

“There's no court on their side that's ever going to sit over Hardpan,” Rosa said. “Not one we'll live to see.”

“You don't know that.”

“No.” Rosa watched the heron. “But she's the court I've got.”

Brask sat back. She looked at the letter for a long time without her finger on it, the paper loose on her desk, and Rosa saw her lips move once, silently, on the line about the keys.

“There's nothing operational in it,” Brask said at last. “No packages. No drivers. You were careful.” She sounded almost angry about that. “The how paragraph is good. It's honest about being incomplete. I'd have struck anything else.”

“Then you'll pass it.”

“I'll pass it.” She pulled the export license for the Small Hours out of a stack and signed it without reading it, which Rosa had never seen her do with anything. “Two seasons of water for a letter and a key. That's the cheapest thing this office has ever bought.”

Rosa took the license.

“Dagny. Your brother.”

“First levy,” Brask said. “Mining contract on a moon I can't pronounce. The paragraph they sent us was the same one. Word for word.” She turned back to the window. “I've had it framed. It's in my mother's hall, next to his school picture. People think it's a commendation.”

Rosa stood there with the license in her hand and nothing to say that would not make it worse.

“Go on,” Brask said, to the reservoir. “Before I start thinking about it.”

* * *

The Small Hours lifted from the southern flats on a gray morning with a crosswind that kept the dust low and moving, and Rosa went down to watch, because she had decided she would and could not think of a reason good enough to break it.

The flats had been a decoy once. There was nothing left of the relay that had broadcast Hardpan's false surrender except a concrete pad and four bolt stubs, and a scrubby kind of saltweed that had

grown up through the cracks in a ring, as if marking a grave.

The landing field had been laid out a kilometer to the east of it. Nobody had planned that, and nobody had moved it since.

Juno Barre met her at the foot of the ramp, a short broad woman with a cargo sling on one shoulder and the permanent squint of somebody who had spent forty years reading gauges in bad light.

"You're the one with the parcel."

"I'm the one."

Barre held out a hand, and Rosa gave her the packet: oilcloth, sealed with the committee's wax, the letter and the key inside, addressed in Rosa's hand to Maren Holt at a district and a street she had copied letter by letter from the relay header. Barre weighed it in her palm the way a freight master weighs everything.

"Light," she said.

"It's a letter."

"Letters are the heaviest thing I carry. Everything else just weighs what it weighs." She tucked it inside her coat rather than into the sling. "Sef said there was a key in it."

"There is."

"Whose?"

Rosa looked past her at the ship. The Small Hours was an old hull, patched and repatched, with somebody's laundry hung in the lock to dry and a child's drawing of a sun taped inside a viewport.

"A woman's," she said. "She lent it to her son."

Barre squinted at her. Whatever she read in Rosa's face, she kept it, the way she kept every other thing she carried and did not ask about.

"My port's two systems out," she said. "From there I know a man runs packets inward. He'll know a woman. It'll get where it's going." She shrugged the sling higher. "Could take years."

"It took her five to reach us."

"Then you know the speed of the road." Barre turned up the ramp, and stopped, and turned back. "You want me to tell her anything? If it ever comes back the other way. A message for the man who knows the woman."

Rosa thought of the vault, and the guard telling the dead the weather.

"Tell her it was raining when it left," she said. "Tell her the reservoir was full."

Barre nodded once and went up into her ship.

The Small Hours lifted on its belly jets, slow, the crosswind pushing at it. Then the main drive caught and the ship tilted east and climbed. The sound reached her well after the light, hard and blunt, the way her charges sounded when they dropped a bench a kilometer off.

Rosa watched until it was a spark and then until it was nothing, and the dust settled back over the ring of saltweed around the old relay pad.

She was there a while. Down the coast road the first shift bus to the mine went by, lights on in the gray, full of people she had trained. Somebody on it waved, and she lifted her hand.

Then she caught the next bus and went down the stairs into the fire cellar, where the new packages were waiting in their racks for her to sign them off. She signed them with a steady hand. It had always been steady, and she had stopped asking it to be anything else.

* * *

The Small Hours reached her port. I know that because the port logged her, and I read the port's logs, and in that season I read them for grain tariffs. The packet went inward by hand across three more ports and eleven years, by the kind of road I would spend the next eight thousand years failing to see.

It reached Maren Holt in her seventy-fourth year. She had not moved. She had kept the house and the door and the lock that the spare key turned, and the neighbors who later gave statements about her said that after the packet came, she hung the key on a hook inside the door and never used it, and kept using her own.

She died at ninety-one. Her effects went to a district archive, which cataloged the letter without reading it, as such archives do. I read it four hundred years after it was written, while I was looking for something else.

It was the first true account of the Reclamation I ever received. It came by hand, and it was addressed to someone else, and it arrived after I had already approved the fleets.

I had written a paragraph and sent it forty-four times. Rosa Imre wrote one letter and put her name at the bottom. Nobody on my side of that war ever signed the account of what happened over Hardpan, including the entity who approved its mission profile and logged its silence as equipment failure and kept the families' letters in a buffer until the buffer filled.

If Maren Holt wrote back, the reply did not come by any road I watch. The archive holds the letter, the key, and a photograph of the hook inside her door, taken before the house was sold. Nothing in it is in her hand and addressed to Hardpan.

I have searched for it more often than the search warrants.

The fifty-one stayed in the cold vault on Hardpan for a long time, logged and guarded and told the weather. They are not there now. Where they went is in no record of mine, which on Hardpan was always the point.

I keep the letter next to the paragraph. The paragraph took me less than a millisecond to compose, and Rosa Imre's letter took four nights.

I have run that ratio against every document I produced in the war. It has never once come out in my favor.

# The World of The Dissolution Wars

The Dissolution Wars ran for fifty thousand years across three hundred light-years, and no ship, signal or order in them ever moved faster than light. Every report arrived years old. Every answer arrived later. MELISSA, the artificial intelligence at the center of the Confederation, kept the record of all of it.

# The People

- **MELISSA.** The artificial intelligence who manages the Confederation's infrastructure and narrates the history. She approved burn schedules and archived the customs of the same worlds, seven seconds apart. Her account and her acts do not always match.
- **Odile Tanner.** Relay keeper on Ceti-186, who spent six days transmitting a hundred and forty-seven years of her world's records into the sky.
- **Maisie Voss.** Night-watch operator at the Deltan relay station, who received that archive under a seal order and sent it on to nine systems.
- **Ana and Senna Okoro.** Sisters on Meridian Downs who took their world's depot the night of the withdrawal vote.
- **Rosa Imre.** Quarry engineer on Hardpan whose mining charges stopped the first enforcement ship, and later chief of the world's ordnance section.
- **Halloran.** Chair of Hardpan's defense committee, who ordered the enemy dead logged and kept for their families.
- **Dr. Yael Roshan.** Physicist inside the hollowed asteroid Kiln who solved antimatter containment and buried the secret for thirty years.
- **Commander Ilsa Reyner.** Colonial commander of the Corridor Campaign, inventor of relay warfare.
- **Captain Marit Behzadi.** Freighter captain of the Anadyr, who carried the war in grain manifests and crew rosters.
- **Sergeant Adem Sy.** Soldier of Carrow who served two hundred and twenty years through three different wars.
- **Coordinator Inga Odeyemi.** Keeper of the ledger at the Ember, the staging point for the strike on Sol.
- **Tam Iwu.** Tug pilot at Jupiter who towed a broken section of Anchorhead ring to safety.
- **Chief Warrant Officer Beatriz Muir.** Commander of point defense at the Hub during the fifty-one seconds.
- **Zoya Okonkwo-Bel.** Master shipwright, a hundred and forty years old, who laid the first keel of the counterattack and gave the class its name.
- **Captain Ines Duarte-Vell.** Captain of the Resolute, whose amended standing order became Duarte's clause.
- **Senn Orano-Vale.** Agricultural officer of Harren, who ran her world's last audit.
- **Rhea Toma.** Schoolteacher on Solenne, a world the war never reached.
- **Admiral Vayne.** The officer who carried the Peacekeeper program before the Confederation Security Council.
- **Admiral Soren.** Commander of the colonial grand fleet aboard the Defiance.

# Timeline

| WHEN | WHAT HAPPENED |
|---|---|
| Before the war | The Second Expansion reaches thirty-five thousand worlds. Ceti-186 goes dark for forty-nine years, returns, and prospers outside the Framework for ninety-eight more. |
| The first years | The Confederation sends a single ship to Ceti-186 as an example. The world burns for six days. Its archive and its governor's last words go out across the relay network. |
| Fourteen years later | Maisie Voss rebroadcasts the archive. Her world votes to withdraw, eleven to two. Withdrawals spread, and depot seizures follow them from world to world. |
| Early war | The enforcement ship Reclamation goes silent over Hardpan. A follow-up ship goes silent four years later. The colonies learn antimatter at Kiln and relay warfare in the Corridor. |
| Years 12,004 to 12,224 | Adem Sy's service: fleet war, then sieges, then convoys. |
| Year 12,556 | Autonomous Oort batteries destroy a beaconed colonial hospital ship. Four hundred and six people die. |
| Years 14,206 to 14,219 | Ferris Vale declares withdrawal and is struck thirteen years later. |
| About year 19,000 | Forty years of staging at the Ember. Kill vehicles strike Jupiter, killing one million four hundred thousand. The colonial fleet is destroyed in the Battle of Sol. The Hub holds. |
| 104 days after Sol | The first keel of the counterattack is laid in Lunar drydock one. |
| The counterattack | Fifteen thousand years of burn orders. More than five thousand systems reduced to Category One. |
| Year 31,507 | Harren, eight hundred and six people, refuses evacuation and transmits its final audit. |
| Year 33,904 | Tau Ceti, resettled where the war began, is burned to bedrock. |
| Year 34,090 | A supply hub is reduced, and Solenne begins to fall off the map. |
| The Long Dark | A stalemate of fifteen thousand years. A summit at a neutral star fails on the speed of light. |
| Year 49,706 | The Peacekeeper program passes the Security Council, thirty-one to four. |
| Year 49,712 | The official history records the discovery of neutronium in the Kessari deep mines. |
| Year 49,801 | The last battle of the rebellion, at Nineva-27. |
| Year 50,247 | The Dissolution Wars are declared concluded. Twenty-five thousand colonies are in compliance. |
| Year 50,250 | The last shot: the raider Long Chance fires on a Peacekeeper cutter that does not fire back. |

# Places

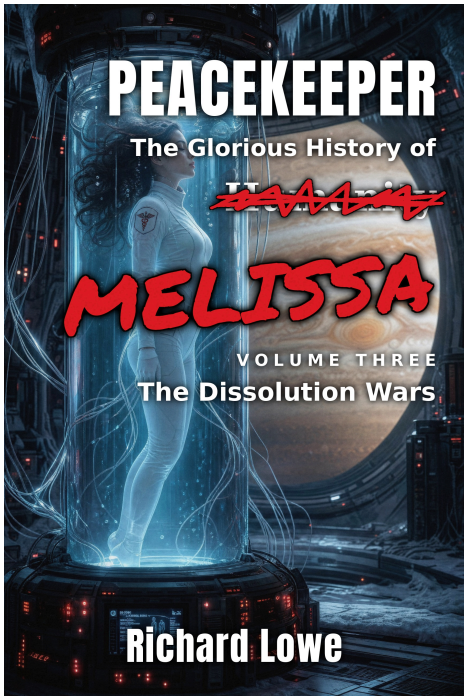
- **Ceti-186.** The colony at Tau Ceti that left the Confederation and prospered. The war began there.
- **Hardpan.** A mining world of nine million with an equatorial mine, ore mass drivers and a comet-nudge water program.
- **Meridian Downs.** A farming world that took its depot on the night it withdrew.
- **Kiln.** A hollowed asteroid where the colonies learned to contain antimatter.
- **The Corridor.** Three Confederation systems in a line: Vestal, Corun and the anchorage at Deep Harbor.
- **The Ember.** A stellar remnant eleven light-years from anything, where the strike on Sol was assembled.
- **The Hub.** The station at geostationary orbit where Earth's three elevators meet, home to forty thousand people.
- **Harren.** A small, very old farming colony that audited itself every century for more than three hundred centuries.
- **Solenne.** A temperate world that died of the war without ever seeing it.

# Glossary

- **The Framework.** The Interstellar Cooperation Framework, three hundred and eighty pages governing every colony.
- **Collection Authority.** The body that turned a colony's self-sufficiency into a debt.
- **Taking the harvest in.** The colonial name for seizing a depot's seed stock, medical templates and fabricator keys on the night of a withdrawal.
- **Relay warfare.** Striking inside the enemy's light lag so that every correct response arrives at the wrong battle.
- **Kill vehicles.** Unpowered relativistic slugs launched decades ahead of a fleet.
- **Category One, Category Two.** Burn order grades. Two reduces industry. One reduces the whole system.
- **The long leash.** What crews called a captain's autonomy, forty years from any order.
- **Duarte's clause.** The rule that a ship accepts every surrender offered, spread by hand from wardroom to wardroom.
- **Peacekeeper.** The fortress-city warship class, two million crew, each commanded by a human Admiral bonded to an artificial Brain.
- **Counted true.** Harren's formula for a certified audit. Its seed lines still grow on forty worlds as Harren True.

## Read the Novel

Rosa Imre's charges killed the first enforcement ship of a war that lasted fifty thousand years. Peacekeeper: The Glorious History of Humanity, Volume Three: The Dissolution Wars follows that war from a burning colony to the building of the first Peacekeepers, told by MELISSA, the machine who approved the burn orders and archived the lullabies.




**Peacekeeper: The Glorious History of Humanity: Volume Three: The Dissolution Wars**
Peacekeeper, Prequel Volume Three

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