

# THE LEDGER

A NOVELLA OF THE TORTUGA CAMPAIGN

Robert Landrigan

## Chapter 1 — The Pour

Account: J. McGee ("Blackjack"). Opened 3000. Balance outstanding: one (1) life. Settled in full 3008 — at the bar, in cash.

The Outback settlement on Tortuga Prime had one pub worth the name, which is to say one pub, and the girl who ran it kept very good books. She wrote down everything: what came in and what went out, who drank on credit and who would never be good for it, which of the settlement's several dozen varieties of dangerous man was dangerous in the way that spent money and which was dangerous in the way that cost it. She was seventeen. She had been keeping books of one kind or another since she was nine, which was the year she opened the only account that ever mattered.

Her mother had kept books too, once, on a world that had laws about it. She had been a pharmacist — a real one, licensed, the kind of woman who measured things for a living and wrote down the measurements — and she had come to Tortuga against every wish she owned, brought by men who had decided a pharmacist was a useful thing to own. She lived nine years on the pirate world and died in the tenth, in a doorway, over a matter the man who did it had forgotten before he holstered the weapon. She left her daughter two inheritances. One was a temper, which the girl kept in a jar. The other was an education in what a milligram is and does, and how little of it you need if you are patient and you know your subject.

The girl was patient. It was the thing she was best at — better than the pub, better than the temper — because patience is only revenge that has learned to wait, and she had a great deal to be patient about. She had killed before, once, at eleven, for a reason the settlement had considered adequate and never discussed again. But that had been weather. This was bookkeeping. There is a difference between a thing that happens to you and an account you choose, and open, and carry, and close on a date of your own selecting, and she had spent six years learning to feel the difference in her hands.

The man who had killed her mother was named Jack McGee. The settlement called him Blackjack, and he did not know the girl existed — not as carelessness, exactly, but as the natural condition of a man in his line, who does not keep books so much as a rough running estimate, and whose estimate does not include the children of the entries. To McGee the girl behind the bar was the girl behind the bar. She poured well, did not water the good bottle, and laughed at the parts of his stories that wanted laughing at. He tipped her when he was flush, which was after a raid, which was tonight.

She had been pouring for Blackjack McGee for a year and a half, and had never once been tempted to hurry. That was the discipline of it, and, if she was honest, the pleasure. A milligram is a small thing. So is a night. She had a great many nights and she spent them the way her mother had taught her to spend a prescription — exactly, and never early.

What changed tonight was not resolve. Resolve she'd

had since she was nine. What changed was that McGee, drunk and expansive and a hundred thousand C-bills richer than he'd been at breakfast, announced to the room, to no one, to the ceiling, that he was thinking of standing his Banshee down for an overhaul, and had the girl heard — ha — that a good tech on New Hati would do the whole gyro for the price of a night in this dump. He said it the way men say things they have decided are jokes. He was leaning on her bar. He was telling her, with no idea he was telling her anything, that ninety-five tons of walking murder had a soft season coming, and where, and how much.

She wrote it down. Not on paper. She had a place for the entries that mattered.

She made his next drink herself, which she did not usually do — she had a boy for the pouring — and she made it well: the good bottle, no water, because a thing worth doing is worth doing to the customer's complete satisfaction. Her mother had taught her the measurement of it years before either of them knew what it was for, on the simple principle that a person should understand what a substance did before she was ever in a room with it, and had drilled her daughter on doses the way other mothers drill spelling. The girl had been a good student. She had always been a good student. She carried the glass down the bar herself and set it in front of Blackjack McGee and said, because it was true, "On the house."

He drank to her health. This is the sort of detail the official histories would later decline to record, on the grounds that it made the reader feel things about Lady Death that Lady Death had not authorized.

Then she waited, which she was good at, and talked to him while she waited, which she was also good at, and somewhere in the talking — gently, the way you coax a tab out of a man too proud to admit he can't cover it — she got the rest of what she needed. Not the overhaul schedule now, but the thing beneath it: the six characters and the countersign that turned a hundred tons of somebody else's property into anyone's. Men give up a great deal to a sympathetic bartender in the hour when their own body has begun, very quietly, to file its objections. McGee gave up the codes believing he was bragging. It was the last transaction of his life he understood as one.

He was dead before he was frightened, which was more than he had given her mother, and she noted that too — not as mercy, she did not deal in mercy then or ever, but as a figure that failed to balance. Her mother had been frightened. The account was therefore not quite closed. She had settled the principal. The interest, she was beginning to understand, would be much larger, and was not owed by McGee — who had merely opened it — but by the world that had made a man like McGee a reasonable thing to be.

She shot him once, afterward, for the books: a death should have a cause of record. And because a girl who means to walk out to a Banshee in the morning and drive it off in front of the whole settlement had better be a girl publicly known to have shot the man it belonged to. Ambiguity is bad for business. She was, at seventeen, already very good at business.

She renamed the machine that week. Lady Death. She took the name for the machine, and then, as it settled, she

took it for herself. Paula Trevaline walked into the pub. Lady Death walked out to the 'Mech. She was not, after all, a woman who collected debts. She was a woman who compounded them.

The settlement, which had watched the entire thing the way a small town watches a wind devil on the horizon, revised its estimate of her accordingly and began, wisely, to pay its tabs on time.

The books recorded it in a single line, because that is what the books were for. One account, opened 3000, settled 3008. Paid in full, at the bar, in cash.

There were many more accounts to settle. But the Lady was patient, as well.

## **Chapter 2 — Corrected Balance**

The warehouse had been a cannery once, which meant it had drains in the floor and walls thick enough to muffle small arms. Paula had selected it for the consolidation meeting before she knew consolidation would be necessary. She selected most things before she understood why.

The Wraith sergeant — his name was Dornan, she had learned, and she had entered it in the personnel ledger with a note: Transfer, probationary, demonstrated adaptability — stood at the warehouse door with his hand not quite resting on his sidearm. He had placed himself between her and the nine surviving Wraiths arranged in the loading bay. Not protection, exactly. Observation.

She appreciated observation. It was cheaper than trust.

"Your previous commander," she said to the nine,

"considered civilian casualties acceptable overhead. I do not. This is not a moral position. Civilians generate revenue. Dead civilians generate retaliation, infrastructure repair, and recruitment difficulties. The Wraiths under Commander Voss operated at a loss."

She let them absorb this. Three were MechWarriors, heavy and medium. Six were support: techs, loaders, a comms specialist with a burned hand she noted for medical evaluation. They were watching her the way people watch an angry sky, which she recognized from her own past.

"I am offering corrected employment," she said. "Standardized revenue sharing, scheduled operations, inventory accountability. You will keep books. You will be paid according to them. The alternative is departure, with no equipment, to find alternative employment in a market that will shortly learn you were associated with Voss's operational failures."

One of the MechWarriors — his jacket named him Estrada, his insignia marked him a lieutenant — stepped forward. "And if we don't like your books?"

"Then you will keep your own, elsewhere, and I will keep mine, which will note your departure as a liability realization." She paused. "I do not require affection, Lieutenant. I require accuracy."

Estrada looked at Dornan. Dornan looked at nothing, which was the correct answer.

"Warehouse secure," Kessler said from the loading bay door. Her own crew, Kessler, who had been with her since the first year and was the only person alive who remembered her before Lady Death. "Marketside perimeter

clear. But we've got a situation."

Paula did not ask what kind. She walked to the door, and because she was who she was, the Wraiths followed.

The situation was a girl, approximately nine years old, standing in the cannery alley with a burned hand and no shoes.

She was not from the market. The market's children had evacuated or hidden during the firefight, and in any case they dressed differently, moved differently, knew the alleys well enough to disappear. This girl stood in the open, watching the warehouse door with an expression Paula recognized: the particular stillness of someone waiting for a verdict.

"She came up through the east drainage," Kessler said. "Came up through the service tunnels. Says she's looking for her mother."

Paula looked at the girl's hand. Second-degree burns, untreated, approximately eight hours old by the blistering. The sort of injury you got from grabbing a hot pipe or a reactor casing. The sort of injury you ignored if you were running from something worse.

"Your mother," Paula said.

"She worked the market." The girl's voice was flat, practiced. "She was there when the shooting started. She told me to run. I ran. I came back."

"She's not in the market," Kessler said, not quite to Paula. "We checked the casualty list. No match."

Paula understood. The girl's mother had not been a casualty. She had been one of the fourteen civilians, counted by Paula's own methodology, who had not been

armed, had not moved when kicked, represented no recoverable value. The girl had not found her because the Wraiths had not kept records of names. Only numbers.

"The Red Wraiths," the girl said, and her voice cracked on the word, "they took people. During the raid. They took people who weren't fighting."

Paula turned to Dornan. "Is this true?"

Dornan's face had gone through several colors. "Voss... sometimes. Civilians with skills. Medical, technical. For ransom or... recruitment."

"How many?"

"Three, four from this raid. The Wraiths kept them at the secondary site. I don't know —"

"Where."

"North ridge, the old —"

Paula was already moving. She did not run — running was inefficient — but her stride lengthened, and Kessler fell in beside her, and behind them she heard Estrada and Dornan and the others following because she had not told them not to.

The Banshee waited where she had left it, reactor cycling down to standby. She could have taken it. She could have covered the north ridge in ten minutes, weapons armed, and reduced the secondary site to component elements.

She kept walking.

"Lady Death," Kessler said, which was not her name when they were alone.

"She's nine," Paula said. "The girl is nine."

She did not explain what this meant. She did not need

to. Kessler had been there in the year that mattered, and he kept his own books, and he understood that some accounts could not be closed, only carried.

They reached the north ridge in forty minutes, moving at a pace that cost them tactical surprise. The Wraiths at the secondary site — four personnel, two vehicles, three civilian prisoners in a cargo container — saw them coming. One raised a weapon. Estrada, who had followed without being asked, shot him.

The other three surrendered. They were, Paula noted, not surprised to be surrendering. Voss had selected for compliance.

The cargo container had no climate control. The three civilians inside were dehydrated, two with minor injuries, one — a woman in a pharmacist's coat — unconscious from heat exhaustion. The girl's mother was not among them.

Paula stood in the container doorway and looked at the pharmacist's coat. She looked at it for a long moment, long enough for Kessler to clear his throat, long enough for Estrada to begin securing the prisoners, long enough for the nine-year-old girl to arrive at the ridge with Dornan and see the container and understand what it did not contain.

"Your mother," Paula said to the girl, without turning. "What did she do?"

"She sold spices. She — she kept the books. For the cooperative."

Paula closed her eyes. She did this rarely, and never where others could observe, but the girl was nine and could not see her face, and Kessler had seen worse.

"She was in the market," the girl said. "She wouldn't

leave the books. She said someone had to —"

"I know," Paula said. She opened her eyes. The pharmacist's coat was the wrong color, the wrong name stitched above the pocket, but the principle was the same. The principle was always the same.

She turned. The girl was watching her with an expression Paula had learned to read as shock processing toward calculation. Most survivors displayed it. The useful ones completed the transition.

"Your name," Paula said.

"Mira."

Paula made a note in her ledger. Not in the personnel account. Not in the operational log. A separate page, which she had not used since she was seventeen and closing an account that had opened when she was nine.

Mira. Age nine. Dependent, status pending.  
Obligation: carried.

"Your mother," she said, "was killed by men who did not keep books. I am correcting their accounts. This is not the same as justice. I do not deal in justice. But it is accurate, and it will be recorded."

She looked at the unconscious pharmacist, at the other civilians, at the Wraith prisoners who were watching her with the particular fear of men who had expected death and received something worse.

"Kessler," she said. "The Wraiths who took these prisoners. Their names."

"Three are here. One died in the container — heat

stroke. Voss had already —"

"Their names. All of them."

Kessler understood. He gave her four names, and she wrote them down, and then she wrote four more — the Wraiths who had died in the market fire, who had participated in the raid that killed Mira's mother — and she totaled the column.

Account: Mira, dependent. Opening balance: eight (8) lives, partial payment.

She would not, she knew, complete this account. The men who had fired the weapons were dead or accounted for, but the man who had ordered the raid was dead by her own hand, and the system that made such raids profitable was not something you shot. It was something you replaced.

She was beginning to understand that replacement was a larger ledger than she had opened.

"Take them back," she said to Kessler. "The civilians to the market, with medical and compensation. Mira —" she paused, because this was not in her methodology — "Mira comes with us. Find her a billet. She keeps books, she said. We will teach her to keep them properly."

"And if she doesn't want —"

"She is nine," Paula said, "and her mother is dead and I am the reason the men who killed her are also dead, which is not the same as saving her but is the only currency I have. She will learn the difference, or she will not. I cannot compel comprehension. I can only record the attempt."

She walked back down the ridge, leaving the Banshee where it stood. She would not need it today. The weapons had not been required, which was the second insight: that the threat of organized violence was not the only efficient tool — that accounting itself could be a weapon, if you were willing to spend what it cost.

She was willing. She was, she was beginning to understand, willing to spend a great deal more than she had intended when she opened the first account at seventeen.

The books would not show this. The books would show only the consolidation: forty-seven personnel, twelve BattleMechs, one supply cache, corrected market relations, and one dependent, status probationary, carried forward.

But she knew what the books would not show: that she had taken the girl for no operational reason, only because the girl was nine and kept accounts and had lost her mother to men who did not know what an account was.

She was, she realized, in terrible danger of becoming someone the official histories might record without embarrassment.

She would have to be careful.

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Kessler organized the evacuation, and Mira stood alone by the container, her arms wrapped around herself, staring at the place where the numbers said her mother was not.

A boy approached from the edge of the landing zone. He was perhaps eleven, with the particular stillness of someone who had learned early not to draw attention. He carried two ration packs and sat on a crate beside her without

asking permission.

"You're the market girl," he said. Not a question.

Mira nodded.

"I'm Arturo. She found me on the docks three years back." He handed her a ration pack. "She doesn't keep kids 'cause she likes them. She keeps them if they're useful. Can you do anything?"

"I kept books. For my mother. For the cooperative."

Arturo's expression shifted — something like recognition, something like warning. "Then you're valuable. Don't forget that. Valuable means kept. Not valuable means..." He gestured toward the door, where the Wraith prisoners had been led out. "Other outcomes."

Mira opened the ration pack. "What does she do with the valuable ones?"

"Teaches them to keep her books. Her books are very good. They show exactly what came in and what went out." He paused. "Just remember the books only show what comes in and what goes out. Not who gets lost in between. You'll learn. Or you won't."

He stood, brushing dust from his knees. "Welcome to the household, market girl. Try to stay useful."

Account: Mira, dependent. Status: Active. Balance: Carried.

### Chapter 3 — The Cost of Doing Business

Account: Tortuga City Council — acquisition. Date: 17 March 3015. Status: closed, majority shareholder.

The council chamber had been designed for intimidation, which meant it failed entirely with Paula Trevaline.

She assessed it as she would any hostile position: twelve meters by eight, poor sightlines to the entrance, single balcony vulnerable to sniper fire from the warehouse district across the canal. The seven chairs on the dais were arranged in a semicircle that suggested unity but permitted no mutual support. The central chair, occupied by Lord-General Harrow, was elevated by forty centimeters and positioned to catch the afternoon light through the stained glass ceiling, casting its occupant in red and gold.

Harrow had held Tortuga City for nineteen years. He had survived three coups, two assassination attempts, and one marriage. He was not, Paula had determined, a stupid man. He was merely a man who had learned the wrong lessons from survival.

"Trevaline." He did not rise. The six council members flanking him did not rise. Only the guards at the doors moved, adjusting their positions to cover the entrance. "You requested an audience. The council grants you three minutes."

"I requested membership," Paula said. "The council will grant me a seat."

The chamber was not silent. Nothing in Tortuga City was silent. Through the open windows came the sounds of the harbor: cranes, arguments, the distant percussion of a 'Mech being loaded. Paula had chosen her arrival time to coincide with the afternoon shift change, when the docks were crowded and her own people were positioned at the warehouse exits.

Harrow smiled. He had a smile like a scar. "You command forty 'Mechs and change. The council commands four hundred. You have killed... three? Competitors in eight months. The council has killed three hundred in nineteen years. You're a single entry, Trevaline. The council is the ledger."

"Forty-seven 'Mechs," Paula corrected. "And the council has not killed three hundred of anything except time. Your council has survived while three hundred competitors killed each other. That is probability, not power."

She walked to the center of the chamber, stopping at the point where the light from the stained glass would have illuminated her if she had been seated in Harrow's chair. She was not. She stood, and the light caught her ledger instead, which she opened with a sound like a gun being cocked.

"Account: Tortuga City Council, current term. Assets: BattleMech complement, substantial — on paper. Operational readiness: degraded, and degrading. Maintenance posture: deferred past the point of compounding. Attrition: structural. Revenue streams: protection, extortion, salvage, slavery. Cost of goods sold: the usual — inefficiency, internecine conflict, organizational entropy."

She looked up. Harrow was no longer smiling.

"Your innovation," she said, "was unification. You stopped the bands from killing each other long enough to kill everyone else. This was sufficient for the 29th century. It is not sufficient for the 31st."

"And yours?" Harrow's voice had gone flat. "What

innovation does Trevaline offer that the council has not considered?"

"Scheduled operations," she said. "Invoiceable violence. Protection contracts with delivery guarantees. The difference between piracy and taxation is bookkeeping, and I keep better books."

She turned to face the six council members. She knew their names, their 'Mechs, their medical histories, their debts. She had been collecting information for fourteen months, which was longer than she had been collecting 'Mechs.

"Lord Chen," she said to the man on Harrow's right. "Your son owes forty thousand C-bills to the Golden Suns cartel. You have been paying his interest from council reserves. This is embezzlement."

Chen's hand moved toward his sidearm. Paula's did not. She had already calculated the angles.

"Lord Vex," she continued. "Your 'Mech has a faulty gyroscope that your techs have been concealing. You have not won a combat engagement in eleven months. Your authority derives from reputation, not performance."

Vex's face was the color of the stained glass. Red.

"Lord Pritchard. Lady Okonkwo. Lords Fisk, Morales, and Sato." She named each with the same tone she used for inventory. "You are not a council. You are a cartel of mutual hostages, each waiting for the others to falter. I am not waiting."

Harrow stood. He was a tall man, and the elevation of his chair made him taller. He had killed his first man at fourteen, his first 'Mech pilot at twenty. He was sixty-three

now and had survived by understanding that violence was a language, and he was fluent.

"You come into my chamber," he said, "with accusations and ledgers. You think this is power?"

"I come into your chamber," she said, "with a majority share."

She closed her ledger. The sound was not loud, but in the chamber it carried.

"Lord Chen's debt is now my debt. I purchased the note from the Golden Suns this morning. Lord Vex's gyroscope was repaired by my techs three days ago; he owes me for parts and labor. Lords Fisk and Morales have been negotiating with me privately for six weeks regarding the reorganization of the harbor protection rackets. Lady Okonkwo's medical condition requires treatment available only through my pharmaceutical contacts. Lord Sato..." She paused. "Lord Sato is the only one of you who has not accepted my terms. I am prepared to offer him the same consideration I offered his predecessor."

Sato stood. He was a young man, new to the council, still believing in the theater of power. He reached for his weapon.

Paula did not move. The guards at the doors did not move. The shot came from the balcony, which Paula had noted was vulnerable to sniper fire from the warehouse district, and Sato sat back down with a surprised expression and a third eye.

"The warehouse district," Paula said, "is under my control. It has been for three months. You did not notice because nothing changed except the bookkeeping."

Harrow looked at Sato. He looked at the balcony. He looked at Paula with an expression she had seen before, on Voss, on McGee, on men who had mistaken violence for power and found themselves outbid.

"You cannot hold this," he said. "The bands don't trade loyalty for a balance sheet. The crews trust steel, not numbers. You'll be a footnote in a year."

"Probably," Paula agreed. "But I will be dead with better books. And you, Lord-General, will be dead tonight, unless you accept my terms."

She opened her ledger again. She had prepared two pages for this moment. One was a contract of retirement: generous terms, off-world transport, a pension calculated to keep him comfortable and silent. The other was an obituary, already written, noting his service and his sudden illness.

"I require," she said, "unified command. Standardized revenue distribution. A monopoly on protection contracts for all shipping within three jumps of Tortuga Prime. In exchange, I offer you the thing you have been trying to purchase for nineteen years: permanence."

Harrow looked at the contract. He looked at the obituary. He looked at the six council members, who were not meeting his eyes, who had already made their calculations, who understood that Paula's books were closed and his were open.

"All this, for a line in a book," he said.

He took the contract. He did not take the pen she offered; he had his own, a heavy thing with a family crest he had invented. He signed his name with the flourish of a

man who had never learned that flourish was a liability.

"Lord-General Harrow," she said, "retires effective immediately due to health concerns. The council welcomes his wisdom in advisory capacity, which he will provide from his estate on..."

She checked the contract.

"...Skeptana. A lovely world. You will find the climate restorative."

She turned to the six remaining council members. They were no longer a council. They were a board of directors, and she was the majority shareholder.

"Gentlemen. Lady Okonkwo. We have operations to discuss."

The meeting lasted four hours. When it ended, Paula walked not to her 'Mech but to the harbor, where Mira was waiting with the books.

The girl was ten now, or perhaps eleven; Paula had never been certain of her birth date and had assigned her one arbitrarily for the records. She sat on a crate of machine parts, scratching figures into a ledger that was a smaller copy of Paula's own, learning the discipline that was not merely arithmetic but accountability.

"You're bleeding," Mira said, not looking up.

Paula looked at her left hand. She had not noticed the cut, which ran from wrist to thumb and had probably come from a splinter of Sato's chair. She had not noticed because she had been calculating the next six months, the consolidation of the bands, the renegotiation of the protection contracts, the elimination of the three competitors who would inevitably test her before the year

was out.

"It's not mine," she said, which was true in a way that would satisfy the books.

Mira looked up. She had her mother's eyes, which Paula had learned to recognize because she had met the woman once, years ago, before the raid that made Mira an orphan and Paula a... guardian? The eyes were the color of harbor water - whatever color the sky reflected, and they were currently reflecting something Paula did not want to examine.

"You killed him," Mira said. "Sato. I saw from the warehouse."

"I had him killed. There is a difference."

"Is there?"

Paula sat on the crate beside her. She had not planned for this. She had planned for the council, the consolidation, the unification of the bands under a single ledger. She had not planned for a ten-year-old girl.

"Sato would have killed me," she said. "If I had not prepared the contingency, he would have drawn his weapon and I would have been forced to respond, and the outcome would have been the same except for the uncertainty. I do not deal in uncertainty."

"And Harrow?"

"Harrow will live. He will live comfortably, and he will keep his silence, because I have purchased it and he has sold it and that is the only transaction that matters."

Mira was silent for a moment. She returned to her ledger, scratching a correction. Paula watched her hand, which was steady, which had been steady since the first

week, which had never shown the tremor that Paula's own hands had shown in the months after McGee.

"You're building something," Mira said finally.

"I am building order. The bands have been a mob. Mobs are inefficient. They waste resources on internal conflict, cannot plan beyond the next raid. They cannot negotiate from strength because they have no strength, only momentum."

"And you will?"

"I will have strength. I will have schedules, and invoices, and delivery guarantees. I will have something that has never existed in the Tortuga Dominions: a state."

Mira looked at her. The harbor light was failing, and the girl's face was in shadow, and her voice when it came was smaller than Paula had ever heard it.

"Will you have me?"

Paula stopped. She had been calculating the personnel requirements for the expanded harbor guard, the training schedules, the equipment purchases. She had not been calculating this.

"You are not a transaction," she said.

"I'm a dependent. Status: probationary. Carried forward." Mira quoted the ledger entry with the flatness of someone who had memorized it. "You wrote that. I found it. In the 'O' section, after 'Operations' and before 'Ordnance.'"

Paula was silent. She had not known the girl had access to the master ledger. She had not known that anyone had access, which was a failure of security that she would have to correct, except that she did not want to correct it, because Mira was looking at her with those harbor-water

eyes and waiting for an answer that was not in the books.

"You are..." she began, and stopped. She had never spoken the word aloud. She had written it, in the ledger, in the private notation that she had invented for things that could not be quantified. But she had never spoken it.

"You are my obligation," she said. "Not my asset. Not my liability. My obligation. This is not the same as affection. This is not the same as family. But it is recorded, and it is carried, and it will be settled only when I am dead or you are grown and choose to close the account."

Mira looked at her for a long moment. Then she returned to her ledger, and her hand was steady, and her voice when it came was steady too.

"Then I will keep the books," she said, "until you are dead or I am grown. And I will remind you, when you forget, that obligations are not the same as transactions. You taught me that. You should remember it yourself."

Paula sat on the crate in the failing light, watching the girl scratch figures into the ledger, and she felt something she had not felt since she was seventeen and standing over Blackjack McGee with a pistol in her hand and a ledger in her other hand and the understanding that she was not, after all, a woman who collected debts.

She felt afraid.

Not of the council, or the bands, or the competitors who would come for her. She was afraid of the thing she was building, which was larger than piracy and more permanent than revenge, and which required her to be something the official histories would not be embarrassed to record.

She was afraid that she was becoming worth saving.

## That Evening

Mira found him in the alley behind the processing center, smoking a cigarette he was too young to have. His hands were shaking.

"You shouldn't be here," Arturo said, without looking at her.

"I have the weekly inventory." She held up her ledger. "What happened in there?"

Arturo laughed, a sound like breaking glass. "Inventory. That's what she calls them now. Human beings with serial numbers. Do you know what we did today?"

Mira shook her head.

"We processed forty-seven 'recruits' from the rimward raid. Twelve had medical skills. They went to the technical pool. Eight had combat experience. They went to the auxiliary forces. The rest..." He dropped the cigarette, ground it out. "The rest were not valuable. Do you know what that means?"

Mira thought of her mother. "I think so."

"It means they were sold. To the mining consortiums. To the pleasure houses. To anyone with C-bills and no questions." He looked at her, and his eyes were old. "She keeps books, Mira. Perfect books. Every transaction recorded. Every life accounted for. Do you understand what that means?"

"That she's organized?"

"That she's made horror efficient. That she's built a machine for turning people into line items. And the worst part—" He stopped, looked toward the door. "The worst part is that it works. The raids are down. The killings are

down. Because she's given the pirates something they never had before: a system. A way to profit without wasting resources on murder."

Mira considered this. "Isn't that better?"

Arturo stared at her. "Your mother is dead. Is that better?"

He walked away before she could answer.

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Account: Tortuga City Council. New entry: Trevaline,  
P. - "Lady Death." Status: majority shareholder.  
Balance: opening.
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## Chapter 4 — The Annual Report

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Account: TriStar Interstellar, Rimward Division.  
Fiscal Year 3018. Line item: Transit Assurance -  
Tortuga Corridor.
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Amos Thrale had been Comptroller for eleven years when the first invoice arrived, and he knew immediately that it would ruin everything.

He sat in his office on the forty-third floor of the TriStar Tower on Memphis, surrounded by the hum of climate control and the distant percussion of the spaceport, and he looked at the document on his screen. It was not formatted like a ransom demand. It was formatted like a contract.

Party of the First Part: Tortuga Dominions Consolidated Revenue Authority  
Party of the Second Part: TriStar Interstellar, Rimward Freight Division

Consideration: Annual Transit Assurance Fee - 2,000,000

C-bills (base year; scales with shipping volume)

Term: One (1) Standard Year

Deliverables: Guaranteed safe passage for all TriStar-flagged vessels within three jumps of Tortuga Prime

There was a routing number. There was a tax code. There was a clause for late payment penalties calculated at 1.5 percent monthly, compounded.

Amos Thrale was sixty-three years old, and he had survived three corporate reorganizations, two hostile takeovers, and one marriage. He understood that the document before him represented either the most sophisticated protection racket in the history of the Periphery, or the beginning of a very expensive mistake.

He forwarded it to the CEO with a note: Requires immediate review. Recommend rejection with extreme prejudice.

Marlene Starr called him to her office seventeen minutes later. She was forty-seven, had commanded TriStar for twelve years, and had the particular calm of someone who had made peace with decisions that would shame her company for decades.

"Sit, Amos."

He sat. The office was decorated with the memorabilia of corporate achievement: awards from the Federated Suns Business Association, a hologram of the FarStrider, a painting of the original landing site where Star's End now stood. There was nothing that suggested she had ever considered paying pirates.

"The 'Tortuga Dominions Consolidated Revenue Authority,'" she said. "Does it exist?"

"Not in any registry I can find. The routing number traces to a shell corporation on Tortuga Prime itself. The tax code is..." He paused. "The tax code is valid. Someone filed the paperwork."

"Someone organized."

"Apparently."

Marlene Starr stood and walked to the window. From forty-three floors up, Memphis looked orderly. The spaceport was visible, a grid of landing pads and cargo terminals, the JumpShips rising and descending with the regularity of public transit. TriStar moved forty percent of the rimward freight in the Federated Suns. They had done it by being cheaper than the competition, and they had been cheaper by accepting risks that other companies refused.

"The Meridian Star," she said. "The Celestial Crown. The Prosperity."

Amos knew the names. Three JumpShips lost in the past eighteen months, eleven DropShips, two hundred and forty crew, forty million C-bills in cargo. The losses had been attributed to "pirate activity, Tortuga Dominions," which was the standard insurance classification for "we don't know which band and we're not going to find out."

"The board wants increased security," she said. "Convoy operations. Military escorts. A ten percent increase in transit times and a fifteen percent increase in costs."

"Standard response."

"Standard response." She turned from the window. "And if we do that, Amos, what happens to our margin?"

He knew the numbers. He had written them. "We become uncompetitive on the rimward routes. The smaller

carriers take the contracts. We lose market share."

"And if we pay?"

"Two million is approximately six percent of our annual losses to piracy in that corridor. If the assurance is genuine, we reduce costs and improve delivery times. If it is not genuine, we lose two million and learn something."

"Learn what?"

"Whether the Dominions can be negotiated with. Whether there's someone on the other end of the line who understands that recurring revenue is preferable to single captures." He paused. "Whether we're dealing with pirates or a state."

Marlene Starr smiled. It was not a pleasant expression. "You think she's building a state."

"I think someone filed tax paperwork. I think someone calculated compound interest. I think someone understands that a dead merchant pays once, but a living merchant pays annually." He looked at the screen. "I think, Madam CEO, that we may have found a pirate who keeps better books than we do."

She was silent for a long moment. Then she reached for her authorization pad.

"Set up the account. Code it as 'Transit Assurance - Miscellaneous.' I want quarterly reviews. I want independent verification that our ships are actually passing unmolested. And I want..." She paused, her finger over the confirmation key. "I want you to write it down, Amos. Every C-bill. Every transaction. I want a ledger that would survive a corporate audit, a criminal investigation, and a war crimes tribunal. If this goes wrong, I want

documentation that shows we were victims of extortion, not willing participants."

"And if it goes right?"

"Then I want documentation that shows we were brilliant." She pressed the key. "The Starr family has been paying protection money to someone since we stole our first JumpShip. The only difference is that this time, we're getting a receipt."

Amos Thrale created the file that afternoon. He named it "TDCRA - Transit Assurance" and he buried it three layers deep in the accounting system, under "Operational Risk Mitigation," which was itself under "Supply Chain Optimization," which was under "Logistics."

He entered the first payment: 2,000,000 C-bills, transferred to the shell corporation on Tortuga Prime. He noted the confirmation code. He noted the timestamp. He noted that this was the first time in TriStar history that the company had paid a pirate band directly rather than through the intermediary of mercenary security or insurance premiums.

He did not know that he would keep this file for eleven years. He did not know that he would record 25,920,000 C-bills in total payments before the account was closed. He did not know that his meticulous documentation would become evidence in a trial that would not happen, or that his ledger would be cited in a military tribunal that would find the company complicit in crimes against humanity, or that his careful records would be the only proof that someone, somewhere, had understood exactly what was being purchased.

He knew only that he had entered the first line item, and that the line item was:

```
Date: 14 March 3018 Payee: Tortuga Dominions  
Consolidated Revenue Authority Amount: 2,000,000 C-  
bills Purpose: Annual Transit Assurance Fee Status:  
Paid
```

And beneath it, in a private notation field that he would not share with the auditors, he wrote:

The pirate queen sends invoices. The corporation pays them. Both parties pretend this is business as usual. I am not certain it is not.

```
Account: TriStar Interstellar - Tortuga Corridor  
Status: Active Balance: 2,000,000 C-bills (debit)  
Assurance: Pending verification
```

## Chapter 5 — The Partnership

```
Account: Joint Venture - Tortuga/TriStar Corridor.  
Date: 3023. Status: active, year five.
```

Hanse Davion's wargames were still two years off — Operation Galahad, the readiness exercises the Federated Suns swore were only exercises — but the Prince was already arming for a war he would not admit he was planning, and that had been very good for business.

Paula Trevaline sat in her office on the forty-second floor of the Tortuga City Administration Building — a structure that had been, until three years ago, the

headquarters of the Tortuga Port Authority, which had been until five years ago a loose confederation of dock bosses who answered to no one and killed each other with the regularity of tides.

She had not moved into the building. She had absorbed it. The Port Authority had been the first organization to recognize that her "Consolidated Revenue Authority" was not a temporary arrangement, and they had negotiated a merger that left their leadership retired to country estates and their operational staff keeping the same books with different letterhead.

Now she sat at a desk that had belonged to six men before her, none of whom had survived their retirement, and she reviewed the annual reports.

The TriStar payments were up 12 percent. Not because she had raised the rates — she had never raised the rates, which was part of the contract's genius — but because TriStar had increased their rimward shipping volume. They were winning market share from competitors who refused to pay her, whose ships disappeared with the regularity that had once made the Tortuga Dominions notorious.

She made a note: Competitor attrition: 23 percent annual. Recommend outreach to remaining carriers regarding standardization of assurance fees.

Mira entered without knocking. She was eighteen now, or nineteen — Paula had stopped tracking the arbitrary date she had assigned — and she wore the uniform of the Revenue Authority's Inspection Corps, which was to say she wore whatever she wanted and everyone else adjusted.

"The Celestial Harmony is three hours overdue," Mira

said. "Jump signature confirmed at the pirate point, but no arrival beacon at the transfer station."

Paula looked up. "TriStar registry?"

"Independent. Meridian Shipping."

"Then it's not our problem."

Mira sat on the edge of the desk, which was a liberty she alone was permitted. "It is if the crew talks. The Harmony was approached six weeks ago. We have a file. Captain Yuki Tanaka, she was considering our offer."

"Considering."

"She wanted to see the protection in action. She wanted to know that paying us was different from paying the old bands." Mira paused. "She wanted to know that Lady Death kept her word."

Paula closed the ledger. In five years, she had built something that had never existed in the Dominions: a monopoly on violence that was predictable. The bands still operated, but they operated on her schedule, her routes, her percentages. The merchants who paid her did not disappear. The merchants who did not pay her disappeared with the efficiency of accounting.

And TriStar-TriStar had become her partner in a way that neither company would ever acknowledge. They paid. She protected. Their competitors did not pay. Their competitors did not receive protection. It was not written anywhere. It was understood.

"Send the Wraith's Embrace," Paula said. "Not to intercept. To observe. If Tanaka's ship was taken by freelancers, we recover the cargo and the crew. If it was taken by someone in our network..." She paused. "We

recover the cargo. The crew is a lesson."

"And if Tanaka was simply delayed?"

"Then we have demonstrated responsiveness. Either way, Meridian Shipping receives a message: the Revenue Authority answers calls. The old bands did not."

Mira nodded and made a note on her own tablet. She had grown into a woman who kept books with the same precision as Paula, but who understood something Paula was still learning: that the books were not the point. The books were the method. The point was the thing you built with them.

"There's something else," Mira said. "A message from Memphis. Not through the usual channels."

Paula felt the familiar coldness in her chest. In five years, TriStar had never contacted her directly. The payments went through shell corporations. The confirmations came through intermediaries. The relationship existed only in Amos Thrale's ledger and her own, and neither of them spoke of it.

"Read it."

Mira's voice changed as she recited, taking on the flat cadence of someone reading words they did not fully understand: "The partnership has been noted. The partnership will be tested. The son remembers what the mother forgot."

Paula stood. She walked to the window and looked out at Tortuga City, which had become, in five years, almost orderly. The streets were swept. The power grid functioned with 94 percent reliability. The harbor processed more tonnage than any three ports in the Periphery combined,

and the Revenue Authority took its percentage with the regularity of gravity.

"The son," she said.

"Marlene Starr has a son. Tennessee. He's been running the family mercenary unit. The Tennessee Star Guards." Mira paused. "He's thirty. His parents were killed three years ago. ComStar assassination. The board handed him a mercenary company to grieve into, and he raised three regiments instead."

Paula knew. She had sent condolences through the appropriate channels, which was to say she had reduced the assurance fee by 5 percent for the quarter and noted it as "bereavement accommodation." She had not known that the son would remember, or that he would blame her, or that he would understand what his mother had chosen not to: that the partnership between TriStar and the Tortuga Dominions was not a line item. It was a collaboration.

"He thinks we killed them," Mira said. It was not a question.

"He thinks we benefited. He's correct. The new CEO is..." Paula stopped. She had not considered this. In five years of building a state, she had forgotten that other people built things too. That a boy who lost his parents might build an army. That an army might have a ledger of its own.

"Prepare the defense projections," she said. "Not for war. For demonstration. I want Tennessee Starr to understand what his mother purchased. I want him to see the cost of ending the partnership."

Mira hesitated. "And if he doesn't care about costs?"

She thought of Arturo. The correction chamber. The

ledger with 12,847 names. His voice in the silence before the shot: Someone's going to come when she takes too much.

Paula turned from the window. "Everyone cares about costs. Some just realize they do so too late."

Mira nodded and made a note on her tablet. She understood something Paula did not: that the cost of the partnership had already been paid. By Arturo. By 12,847 names in an unauthorized ledger. By everyone who had believed that truth mattered more than efficiency.

She watched Paula open the ledger, watched her write:

```
Account: TriStar Interstellar - Partnership Status  
Risk Factor: Elevated | Contingency: Active
```

And beneath it, in the private notation:

The son remembers. The mother paid. The account is not yet closed.

Mira said nothing. She had learned, in nine years, that some accounts could not be closed. That some debts could not be ledgered. That Arturo's 12,847 names would never appear in Paula's books, but they would appear in hers.

And somewhere in the city, in a correction chamber that had been quiet for three months, there was still a chair. And a ledger. And a lesson about the cost of truth.

## Chapter 6 — Wrecker's Yard

```
Account: 3rd Lackland Regulars. Engagement: Wrecker's  
Yard, New Port Royal. Debit: nineteen 'Mechs, forty-
```

one dead. Status: carried. To be read at slack tide.

The shareholders had been promised a rout, and Captain Yara Sund had read the promise, because the 3rd Lackland's intelligence section circulated the quarterly investor briefing every morning as a form of calisthenics for the sense of humor. Operation FINAL INVOICE, the briefing said, represents the collection of a long-outstanding account. It projected the pacification of the Tortuga Dominions in a single campaign season. It used the word pacification the way a man uses a word he has only ever seen written down.

It had a chart.

Sund was from Lackland, which is a world that is mostly ocean and entirely honest about it, and she had been diving habitat wrecks since before she could drive, and she knew the one thing the chart did not: that the difference between a salvage yard and a graveyard is bookkeeping, and that the woman they had come to collect from kept the best books in the Periphery. The 3rd Lackland were the March's specialists in hostile enclosed environments — the anvil, the habitat divers, the regiment you sent into the places that killed you slowly if you got the pressure wrong. It was, everyone agreed, exactly why they should take Wrecker's Yard. Nobody stopped to ask why the pirates had chosen to make their stand in precisely the terrain the 3rd Lackland were best at, which was the sort of question that only occurs to you afterward, in the debrief, in the pause where the names are read.

Wrecker's Yard was where the Dominions broke their

captures. Five centuries of piracy leaves a great deal of dead metal, and the pirates had rendered it down here — a shipbreaking field forty kilometers on a side, on the plain below New Port Royal's fortress line, where the gutted hulls of DropShips and rusting hulks of old containers lay in rows like the vertebrae of things that had drowned standing up. TriStar hulls, some of them. Sund had seen a nameplate on the way in, half-cut, the letters TRI-ST still legible on a hull rib the size of a cathedral, and had thought: we paid for the guns and we furnished the target. She kept the thought. She kept most things. It was a regimental trait, and a Lackland one.

The pirates did not meet them at the wire. This was the first correction to the chart. The pirates let them into the yard — let three companies of the 3rd Lackland move a full kilometer into the maze of dead ships, into terrain where a hundred-ton 'Mech could not see its own lance-mate past the next hull — and then they closed the account from prepared positions they had been improving, patiently, for a year, since the day a message from Memphis told a pirate queen that the son remembered.

It was not a battle. A battle has a shape. This had the shape of an audit: line by line, without haste, everything checked against a list. The pirates fought the way she kept her books — they never spent what they didn't have to. No massed charge, no glory, no 'Mech standing on a hull to be silhouetted and admired. They traded the yard to the 3rd Lackland one firing lane at a time and made them pay the posted price for each, and the price was posted in advance, and it did not vary, and it was always exactly a little more

than you wanted to pay and a little less than would make you turn around. That was the genius of it. Turning around costs you nothing you can see. She kept them paying.

Sund lost Okoro in the first hour, to a gauss slug fired from inside a fuel bunker by a gunner who had ranged the lane weeks before and chalked the number on the bulkhead where his relief could read it. She lost Trell and half of her lance in the second, in a cul-de-sac of hull-plate that the map called a thoroughfare and the pirates called a killbox and had, she later learned, actually labeled Killbox 9 in their own fire-control ledger, with an estimated-yield column and a restocking note. She lost Bwinna to nothing anyone ever identified, a single clean hit from an angle that should not have existed, and spent a long time afterward being unable to stop admiring the shot, which is a thing that happens to you at Lackland: you are taught to respect the ocean that drowns you, and it does not entirely wear off when the ocean starts using autocannons.

By the third hour she understood the war she was in, which was not the war in the briefing. In the briefing they had come to punish pirates. On the ground they were being killed, methodically and within budget, by a state — by roads that were mapped and lanes that were ranged and crews that were paid on schedule and did not break because breaking was against the operating procedure and the operating procedure was enforced. Everything that made the Tortuga Dominions worth eleven years of TriStar's money was the same thing killing the 3rd Lackland in the yard. The company had spent a decade purchasing the queen's protection. It had, without ever intending to, spent

a decade funding the discipline of the guns now firing on its own regiment. Somewhere a comptroller had a number for what TriStar had paid the Dominions. Sund was standing inside what the number had bought.

She got what was left of her company out through a flooded drydock, which the pirates had not ranged because no sane commander would take 'Mechs through eight meters of standing water and a current that could roll a machine that lost its footing. Sund was not a sane commander. She was a Lackland one. Her people came up on the far side coated in the black water of a dead ship's belly, having lost two more machines to the drowning and none to the guns, and she counted them, because counting was the job, and the number was the number.

Of the fifty-one 'Mechs the 3rd Lackland Regulars took into Wrecker's Yard, thirty-two came out. Forty-one crew did not come out at all. It was, the after-action report noted, the heaviest single-engagement loss the regiment had sustained since the founding — worse than anything the Fourth Succession War had cost them, worse than the Guards had believed the whole campaign would cost, and it had bought them one salvage yard on one fortress world that was still, by any honest reading, two hundred and fifty light-years short of the thing they had come to collect.

The Lackland dead are read once a year, at slack tide, on the beach below the Deepwatch, in the ten minutes when the ocean stops moving in either direction and a person can hear a list of names against the quiet. It is the regiment's oldest habit and the reason outsiders find the 3rd Lackland unnerving: they do not talk about their dead, they file

them, and once a year they open the file and read it to the sea, on the theory that the sea is the only creditor patient enough to hear the whole thing out. Sund had read at slack tide before. She had never had to add a page of her own. She wrote the forty-one that night, in her own book, in her own hand, because a name that is not written down is a name that did not happen, and she had learned that on Lackland from an ocean and confirmed it in the yard from a queen, and she would be damned before she let either of them be right about it for free.

She wrote something else, too, below the names, which was not for the after-action report and not for the sea. She wrote: We came to make her pay. Correction: she has been making us pay for years, and today she sent the invoice. And she looked at it, and she understood — before the strategists did, before the board did, before the man who commanded them all worked it out in a bunker still nine weeks in the future — what the campaign had become. They were no longer collecting a debt. They were servicing one. The account had a new column now, opened at Wrecker's Yard, and it was not denominated in C-bills, and the 3rd Lackland already knew, the way the sea knows the shape of a coast, that it would be paid in the end the only way an account like that ever is: at the capital, in full, and with interest, on somebody who had already stopped fighting.

New Port Royal fell eleven days later. It opened the road to Tortuga Prime, which was the objective, which was the point, which the chart had promised. The 3rd Lackland took the fortress and did not celebrate, because the Guards

had come to the Dominions grieving for two. Now they were leaving Wrecker's Yard grieving for far more of their own, and a grief that arrives with a siege train does not, in the end, want the enemy captured.

It wants the enemy to have been there when the shells came down.

## Chapter 7 — The Settlement

Account: Tortuga Dominions. Final settlement. Debit: 25,920,000 shells. Credit: one (1) city, surrendered intact. Balance: unrecoverable. Signed, both parties.

He had expected resistance. He had not expected an audit.

Tennessee Starr had brought the whole apparatus of a hard war to Tortuga Prime — the siege train, the assault companies, the three regiments and what Wrecker's Yard had left of the 3rd Lackland, which was grieving and quiet and wanted, in the specific way an army wants a thing it will not say aloud, for the queen to be standing on her wall when the guns spoke. He had brought forty-one names the 3rd would read to the sea. He had brought a fleet's worth of ordnance and a plan the infantry had already, with the black humor of men who have done the arithmetic, started calling the Ledger Barrage. He had brought everything you bring to take a fortress from someone who will make you take it.

And in the hour before touchdown, the pirate queen broadcast her surrender. Palace gates open. City guns cold. Every band clear, every frequency, the message repeated in

the flat unhurried voice he would come to know: the Dominion capital is undefended and will not be defended. She gave them the city the way you hand a creditor the keys to a house you have already emptied — correctly, completely, and in a manner calculated to make the repossession feel like the crime it legally was not.

His staff said it was a trap. He walked the perimeter himself and found no trap, which was worse, because a trap he understood. This was something else. Tortuga City lay open below the siege line — a warren of prefab domes and old colonial stone and the long fortified ring she had spent a year improving and had now, without firing it once, abandoned — and it lay open on purpose, and the purpose was not mercy. Trevaline did not deal in mercy. She had run the same numbers he had. She could not hold the capital. Defending it would only add her own people to a bill that was already unpayable, and she had never in her life spent what she did not have to. So she declined to spend them. She gave up the city to keep the ledger clean, and she left the Guards holding a siege train and a grief and a target that had surrendered, which is the one thing a siege train and a grief cannot use.

He led the landing himself, because he did not send people where he would not go. The ramp came down into heat and silence and a line of Dominion clerks in black and gold with their hands visible, and the silence was worse than any fire, because fire he had an answer for.

The palace foyer had been stripped to the stone. At its center he took spiral stair down, through old stone and newer ferrocrete to a vault whose reinforced door stood

already open, and inside, at a steel table ringed with ledgers and printouts and three sealed boxes, Paula Trevaline was waiting for him with her hands folded, having timed it, he understood later, so that she would be sitting when he arrived. She was smaller than the propaganda. Her hair was cropped and her uniform bore nothing at all, no rank, no ornament, no name, and she looked up at him with the mild attention of a woman receiving a scheduled appointment.

"Commander."

"Queen Trevaline."

"You've brought the account book."

He set the blue ledger on the table. He had carried it down himself; it had seemed important, though he could not have said to whom. She opened it, turned to the last page, and read the running total the way a person reads a familiar number — without surprise, checking it against the one she already carried.

"You have the sum," she said.

"Twenty-five million, nine hundred twenty thousand C-bills."

"You see the error."

"There's no error."

"No," she agreed. "There isn't. Eleven years, and not one late payment on either side. Do you know how rare that is?" She made a small notation in the margin, closed the book, and slid it back across the steel to him. "Paid in full."

He stared at her. "Protection?" He pushed the ledger back across the steel. "My mother paid extortion. There's a different word for it when you hold the gun."

"Is there?" She didn't touch the book. "Your company runs the Periphery March, Commander. You keep an army to ensure your freight moves and your competition doesn't. You call it 'assurance.' I call it good business. The language is a clerical matter. The account is closed."

"Then why —" He stopped. He had meant to ask why the years, why the bodies, why any of it, and heard, before he finished, how young the question was.

"Because you did not come to collect," she said. "You came to be paid back, which is a different transaction, and it does not appear in these books because it cannot be entered. You want the thing that has no line. I understand it. I have carried an account like that since I was nine. I can tell you what I learned, if it's of use: it does not close when the debtor dies. It closes when you stop keeping it, and not one hour before." She glanced up at him. "You will not stop keeping it. I can see that from here. Neither did I."

He said, because it was the only true thing left to say, "You understand what's next."

She met his gaze. "Perfectly. You'll fire it anyway."

He did not answer, which was an answer.

"Of course you will." There was no fear in her, and no triumph either — only the flat professional interest of a woman confirming a figure. "A city that surrenders is no use to you. Your shareholders were promised a reckoning. Your grieving regiment was promised a wall to break. I have declined to provide either, so you will provide them yourself, out of your own stores, into a city that has already put its hands up — and you will document it, because you are your mother's son and you cannot help but keep good

books, and the record will show, forever, that TriStar Interstellar fired twenty-five million, nine hundred and twenty thousand shells into a capital that had already surrendered. One for every C-bill you paid me. I made you pay me for eleven years. My last invoice is the one you'll write in your own name." She unfolded her hands. "I couldn't beat you, Commander. So I made sure that when you won, it would cost you the only thing you came here with that I couldn't already put a number on."

He went back up the stair and out into the heat and gave the order, because the board on Memphis was waiting for the call, because the 3rd Lackland had forty-one names, because a debt like the one that opened at Wrecker's Yard is not paid by taking a city gently, and because — he was honest enough, at least, to enter this in his own private book — she was right, and he did it anyway.

The Ledger Barrage began that afternoon and lasted ninety days.

They rendered it as accountancy, because that was the only way to render it. The perimeter batteries, now crewed by TriStar gunners, fired one shell for every C-bill the company had paid, in sequence, each round logged, each hundred cross-signed by an ordnance officer and a comptroller's clerk, the running count read aloud on the open band the way she had read her surrender — flat, unhurried, without emphasis, a number climbing toward a total everyone in the Periphery already knew. The shells fell on the abandoned fortified ring she had spent a year building and an hour giving away; on the emptied districts her people had walked out of through the tunnels while the

Guards secured the palace; on the monuments and the mausoleum and the swept clean streets of a city she had made almost orderly and then handed over intact so that the orderliness itself could be pulverized on the record. It was not a bombardment. A bombardment has a military object. This had an object the way a receipt has an object: it existed to prove that a thing had been paid. Ninety days. The noise never stopped. The count never stopped. It was, and remains, the most expensive receipt ever issued, and it was issued into a silence that had already conceded every point it was meant to make.

They took her at the edge of the spaceport, on the ninth day, where she had gone not to flee but to see the last of her people onto the last lifter — the girl who kept her books among them, who did not want to go and went because the queen entered it as an order — and having spent the final thing she had left to spend, which was the time it cost her to stand there until the lifter cleared the pad, she let them take her without a word. She still had the poison in her nails. She had, the record notes, no further use for it.

Tennessee Starr submitted the final report from orbit, with the barrage still running beneath him, a bright unhurried stitch of fire along a dead city's ring. He attached the blue ledger as Exhibit A. He recommended no commendations. He wrote, in the section reserved for the commander's assessment, a single line, which the board struck from the published version and which survives only because a clerk on Memphis kept his own books: The account is closed. We are the ones still carrying it.

## Coda

The marker stood in a field of green that ran to the horizon, and it was the only thing standing in it. The TriStar occupation had cleared the surrounding ground — pirates, collaborators, the nameless dead of five centuries — graded it flat and seeded it over, and left one stone, preserved as a caution. The inscription did not say here lies. Lady Death had no grave. She had been executed on Memphis, on the Mining Academy parade ground, on the fourteenth of August, and what Memphis did with the body afterward it did not enter in any ledger Mira was permitted to read. The stone on Tortuga said only:

Paula Trevaline. "Lady Death." Executed for piracy, murder, and crimes against the peace of the realm. Account closed, 14 August 3030.

Mira had watched the trial on the public band, the way everyone in the Dominions had, and she had heard the last thing Paula said — to the row of TriStar directors seated where the light would catch them: You paid me for years. You'll pay someone. You always will. The company had dedicated a full page of its official history to refuting the claim, which is how Mira knew it was true. You do not spend a page refuting a thing that isn't.

A shadow crossed the grass. Mira did not turn.

"I don't mean to intrude," the voice said. She knew it. She had heard it on the open band across the ninety days, flat and precise, reading the shell count toward its total. She had heard it in Memphis, reading the terms.

Tennessee Starr stood a few meters off. He looked older

than the recruiting posters, and tired in a way the posters were specifically designed to prevent.

"Do you miss her?" he asked.

"I might be the only person alive who mourns her."

Something moved behind his eyes — a calculation, an entry being made in a book she could not see. "You might be right," he said. "I mourn what she could have been."

Mira had seen that expression before. Not on his face. On Paula's. The moment of decision, the entry written before the act.

"If you mourn her," he said, "make sure that ledger stays closed."

He pressed something into her hand and walked away before she could refuse it: a black credit chit, no limit, warm from his pocket. It was, she understood, the most honest thing he knew how to do — the only apology a man who keeps good books is able to make, which is a transfer of funds, correctly documented, for a service he cannot bring himself to name.

She stood alone with the chit and thought of Arturo, who had not lived to see the shells. He had been right about all of it except the part that mattered, which was the part he had not lived to write down: that the books outlive the bookkeeper, and pass to whoever is still keeping them.

Mira made an entry that afternoon. It was small — the first line in a new ledger, in her own hand, in the private notation she had learned from a woman who had learned it from her own murdered mother:

Mararn Crop Program. Funding secured.

She had chosen Mararn on purpose. Everyone in the Dominions knew what had been done there — how, in 3017, Lady Death's pirates had brushed aside a desert world's militia and torn out its single water purification plant and hauled the thing home to Tortuga Prime as a trophy, a gift for the city of Miccosukee, and left a world of scattered settlements to die of thirst by the season. Forty thousand had lived, out of many times that. It was among the oldest debts on the Dominions' books and, to Mira's eye, the truest, because it was the one where the Dominions had not merely killed people. They had killed a place, and killing a place is the only murder that leaves an heir standing on both sides of the ledger.

So Mira set out to give Mararn back its water. It took the rest of her life. Not the stolen plant — that was scrap a lifetime before — but the thing that turned out to matter more: the drought-hardy grains the Dominions' own agronomists had bred for Tortuga Prime's bitter alkaline lakes, which proved magnificently, almost insolently indifferent to Mararn's brackish pans. Torment Barley and its patient siblings went out in sealed cases, royalty-free, in perpetuity, from the world that had stolen the water to the world it was stolen from. They came up green off the equatorial flats of a planet that had spent five centuries counting its dead by the cistern. A Cistern water-clerk's granddaughter is said to have stood in the first standing field and wept, and then, being a Mararner, filed a claim for the intervening years.

*That* was the change — not the paper, the barley. A state can vote itself virtuous in an afternoon; it takes a harvest to

prove it. The paper came too: in 3049, nineteen years after a stone went up in a cleared green field, the six worlds of the Tortuga Dominions ratified a charter that did the one thing no one who had ever ruled them had imagined possible. It disarmed them. By their own law and their own hand — no 'Mechs, no armed hulls, no standing army. The pirate kingdom that abolished itself, and kept the name, its founders liked to say, if none of the practice.

Mira Carey signed it. She was an old woman by then, and Carey was a name of her own making — taken the year she left Tortuga, made out of the one word Lady Death had ever written against her name, and never once explained to anyone who asked. She signed in the flat neat hand of a lifelong bookkeeper, and beside her name she made, out of long habit, a private notation that no clerk transcribed:

*Paula was wrong about one account. She said we would always pay someone. She never found the other entry — that a debt, kept long enough and honestly enough, can be retired. Not forgiven. Retired. Paid down to nothing by people who decide to stop compounding it.*

*She could not build. She said so herself, at the end, though she said it as a threat. I have spent my life proving her wrong, and the proof is not this charter. The proof is barley, standing on Mararn, on the water she stole and I sent back.*

*The account is closed. This one — the oldest one, the one she opened on a world that never sent an army after her — I got to close myself.*