

## **ALAS, LIRETTE**

KENDRA KNEW WITH EVERY pulse of her blood what the people of Liadhe remembered best about Sharadon Brent: his steady eyes and pale hair and shining medals, hero of battles past... the scandal when he left Liadhe after the war to become a mercenary, wandering among foreign stars. Warmonger, they called him now, the man who loved bloodshed so deeply he abandoned his home in peacetime.

It was different for her. She remembered instead his strong hands drawing chord after chord, descant after shimmering descant, from his lute. An anachronism, that lute, requiring human hands to sing. Years ago Kendra had listened drowsily while Sharadon Brent tuned the seven strings, adjusted the frets, serenaded the night. His voice haunted her, too: as quiet in song as in speech, yet she had ached for it later, after they called him to the war against Veretys. Even today, in her faltering and tuneless way, she could hum his oldtime ayres and ballads.

Sometimes, while flying patrol with her taciturn ghost Falcon in the unvanquished night between Liadhe's burning stars, she wondered what it would have been like to serve military duty during wartime. At crossover points, where her wing's circuit met another's, they still danced the pointwise duel: ship against nimble ship, lances dimmed to a caress of coherent light, to third strike rather than destruction. She found a beauty in the duello, challenge-without-bloodshed, and told herself that killing had no place in this pleasure. Yet Kendra wondered if her father had felt differently. Her father, called Warmonger. He had not come home after the war's end, and so she had never had a chance to ask.

When last you lingered by the burning city,  
When you saw my eyes were parched of pity,  
I thought that you surely should depart;  
I thought I no longer held your heart.

They pulled her from patrol duty unexpectedly, without warning; and so Kendra left her ship, the Nightcry, at the starport Spindance, making her way past the sleek, silent cradles of docked needleships to the scarred Mirror's Edge. She swallowed her apprehension long enough to say, "Sharadon Kendra reporting for duty." Most veterans had left military service after the war, and Kendra had met few of those who remained, let alone a legend.

The hatch slid open. "Edge acknowledges. Pleased to have you, Kendra," replied the ship's ghost in a surprisingly mild tenor. Then again, an AI could choose any voice it pleased. "We're to receive orders shortly."

Kendra nodded her thanks and entered, setting down her duffel when she reached her quarters. They were spartan, stripped of personality or luxury, as befitted a wartime vessel. "Do you know what this is about?" she asked Edge. She did not need to mention that she had originally been assigned with Falcon of the Nightcry to border patrol; Edge had access to the records. Highly unusual, that a young wingsecond should be promoted or requested to partner such an experienced ship. Kendra thought with a pang of Falcon, now obliged to accustom itself to a new partner, but she must follow where duty led her.

"Not precisely," said Edge, "but one might find some significance in the fact that I once partnered your father."

She frowned, studying the instrument panels, the deck; they stared back blandly. Sharadon Brent had left Liadhe twelve years ago, as time was measured on a world called Liadhe's-heart, with nary a visit home. Kendra remembered envying the ghosts who had spent time with him, bound by battlefield necessity, and the old bitterness threatened to drown her again. "If I may ask -- how well did you know him?"

"Well enough, before he was transferred to the Doppelganger." After an uneasy pause, the ghost said, "Incoming call."

Kendra made her way to the command console and its communications array. "I'm ready."

A woman's face blazed into color on the screen. She raised a hand in greeting. "Carredas Maro," she said without stating rank or position.

"Edge, ship's ghost."

Kendra raised her hand as well. "Sharadon Kendra --" Her voice faltered.

"Wingsecond on special duty," Edge filled in.

"Fortunate that you chose to continue military service last year, Kendra," said Maro, lowering her hand. "Had you not --"

Kendra followed suit. "Had I not, you would have sought me out, and I would still be here."

The woman smiled faintly. "True. As you may have guessed, this involves your father."

"I thought he was exiled a long time ago."

"Given an exile's status two days after they discovered he left," Edge corrected politely, with a ghost's concern for accuracy.

Maro nodded. "Yes. He has put us in a difficult situation."

"Us'?" asked Kendra.

