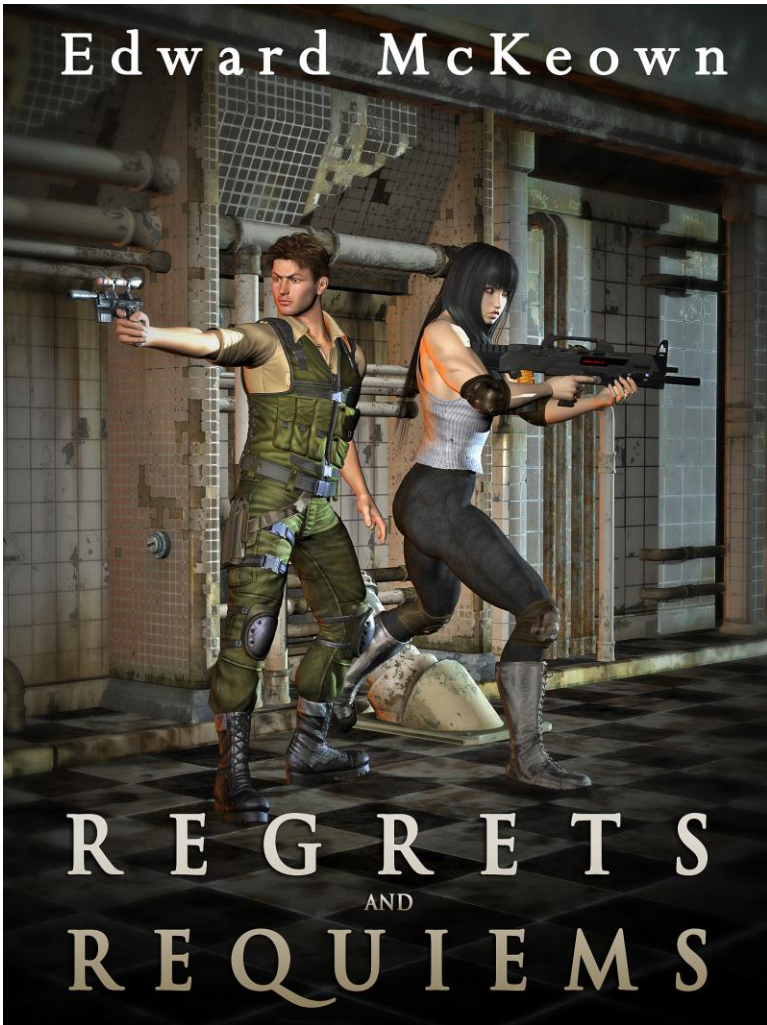


Edward McKeown



Regrets and Requiems

*Prequel to the Robert Fenaday Series*

By: Edward McKeown

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※ Dedication ※

"To my love and my inspiration, Schelly Keefer."

## Regrets and Requiems

Robert Fenaday eased *Sidhe's* 10,000 tons down on the open field that served as Morokat colony's main spaceport. Her scarlet hull settled on the huge jacks under her winged dart-like body. "Done with engines," he said with relief.

"Aye, sir," Carlos Perez said. The mustachioed and balding engineer leaned over his board and began shutting down the reactor.

Dropping the frigate into a gravity well was a tricky operation. *Sidhe* was overdue for a refit, one of the reasons Fenaday flew her in, though he was master onboard. He also didn't trust the recently hired helmsman to handle his precious ship in a port with so few automatics. The young man stood behind his seat watching Fenaday's every move. *On the job training*, Fenaday thought. *He ought to be paying me.*

Fenaday stood and turned to look at his crew as they locked down their boards. It was the usual motley assortment. He had a hard core of regulars, but a good percentage of his crew turned over in every port. The ship's quartermaster, Dobera, a lizard-like Frokossi, stood at the back of the spade-shaped bridge. His jeweled eyes blinked independently of each other as he awaited orders. Dobera was doing double-duty as first mate. Fenaday's last mate lay on a mortuary slab on Kandalor, dead from an overdose.

"Prep the cargo bays for off-loading," Fenaday told him, stretching. "General liberty for the crew. Bring me word when our contact calls. It will be after sunset local time."

Dobera nodded and turned back to his board.

“Security measures?” came a cool voice. *Damn*, Fenaday thought, *how did she get behind me again?* He turned to look up at his new Chief of Security.

Shasti Rainhell gazed down at him, a head taller than his solid six feet. She combined the athletic body of a powerlifter with the grace of a dancer and the face of a goddess. Raven hair cascaded over her broad shoulders to her narrow waist. Jade green eyes looked calmly out of her pale face.

Fenaday had known her for only a few weeks, having rescued the Olympian colonist from a slaver ship taken in one of *Sidhe*'s privateering patrols. She'd taken quick vengeance on the slavers and looked as if she might try to take over *Sidhe* as well. Instead, Fenaday had hired her. Discipline on his rough and unruly crew was instant and effective. Shasti was far stronger and faster than any human, the result of generations of genetic selection on her home colony. She actively discouraged any discussion of her past, so Fenaday had learned little about her.

*Of course*, he thought, *with the sort of crews I get, that's often a good thing*. All the real spacers are in the Navy or Merchant Marine, fighting the Conchirri.

“Recommendation?” he said.

“I'd go with Class A,” she replied in a surprisingly high and musical voice for so large a creature. “This is a lawless port. I'll put Gunnar and the trouble team in close. I want the Tok brothers wandering about the near port area in local clothes. They're Moroks after all. Let's see if they can pick up any hint of trouble.”

“Expecting something?”

She gave him a look he had come to think of as saying: *how in God's name did you survive before I came along? It's a fair question*, he thought. *Little more than a year ago I was a spoiled rich merchant's son, running a*

*boardroom*. But that was another life. Before Lisa disappeared.

“I always expect trouble,” Shasti said. “Would that I were disappointed more often.”

“Make your arrangements,” he said. “I’ll want you to accompany me for the delivery of our refrigeration parts.”

“Of course,” she said, knowing as well as he, that the “refrigeration parts” were twenty crates of Conchirri power weapons from a scavenged base. With the Conchirri driven out of this sector, the Moroks were returning to their first love...civil war. Gunrunning didn’t sit well with Fenaday, but *Sidhe* was expensive and the syndicate backing him was bitching about declining revenues.

Fenaday watched Shasti as she walked to the communications board and keyed a mike, all smooth muscle and curves. Shasti seemed indifferent to male attention. He didn’t know if her preferences lay with her own gender or if she just regarded all the humans on board as beneath her.

*What does it matter?* he thought bitterly. *Only one woman for me and she’s lost in a million light years of space. Lisa, how I miss you. Are you a frozen corpse tumbling in the darkness or stripped atoms moving at light speed? Or do you live under some alien sky and wonder if I have forgotten you?*

Lisa’s small scoutship, the CSS *Blackbird*, had disappeared during a clandestine mission. Fenaday had sold off the family shipping business to buy *Sidhe*, a captured Conchirri frigate-leader, and search for her. It was hopeless and foolish, and he’d been at it for over a year now.

Shasti returned. “All security arrangements set.”

Fenaday headed for his cabin to change and perhaps catch a few hours’ sleep. He assumed Shasti was off to check her guard posts. He opted for the gangway as

opposed to the turbovator. To his surprise she followed him.

“You’re still going to see that salvage merchant?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “The parts he sent me holos of were clearly from a Confed scout of *Blackbird’s* class.”

“There’ve been many such lost during the war,” she said, easily keeping pace with him as they walked down the ship’s main corridor. Around them crewman were busily shutting down the ship’s systems, doubtless anticipating the less savory pleasures of the off port.

“Yes,” he said, “it’s hopeless and futile. Did you have something on for tonight that I’m keeping you from?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I go where you pay me to go.”

“Glad we understand each other, Commander. Meet me at the mule just before sunset.” He turned off the corridor toward his quarters. *Wonder if she’s drawing a bead on my back*, he thought. *If I were worried about my life, I might look. There is a certain freedom in being totally screwed.*

After nightfall, Fenaday walked down the gangway built into the mid-ship’s landing jack. At the foot of the gangway, he paused to zip the black leather ship’s jacket and loosen the tie-down on the Martini laser that rode on his right hip. A cool breeze dispelled the smell of burnt rock and vegetation from the afternoon’s landing.

Stevadores had off-loaded his legitimate cargo onto carriers. One of the huge flatbeds was disappearing toward the gray warehouses at the end of the field carrying some of his crew as well. A few pallets remained and behind them sat a small, six-wheeled cargo-carrier mule, painted the same blood red as *Sidhe*. It contained a single crate of “refrigerator parts” to show their prospective clients.

“Looking for me?” Shasti said from behind him.

“Damn,” he said. *She’s making a point with this.* He turned to see her, also dressed in black leather, but over black fatigue pants as opposed to the olive drab ones he wore.

“You need to be more alert,” she said. “I could have slit your throat.”

“But you wouldn’t,” he said.

“No one is paying me to,” she nodded.

“That the only reason?”

Shasti gave him an enigmatic look, her face luminous in the reflection of the ship’s undercarriage lights.

“Never mind,” he said, a chill stealing through him. “I’ll drive. You keep an eye out for trouble.”

“Always.”

They bounced over the grassy, rutted field, through the warehouse district and into the narrow streets of the true off port, watching for the randomly placed street signs, as there was no computer map of the city of Foosha. The town around them was a riot of color and canopies along with the usual hive-like Morok buildings. A *mélange* of strange scents came from the mule’s vents: alien food, alien smoke, alien farting. *You used to be a merchant,* he reminded himself. *Could eat almost anything and never noticed how anyone smelled.*

There were no traffic controls, and Fenaday drove around or honked through the throng. A few drunken Morok spacers made obscene gestures as the mule splashed through one of the frequent puddles.

Shasti peered about, watching the shifting crowds of apish blue-skinned Moroks, the occasional human, Okaran, Frokossi or other Confederate species. As usual there was no trace of expression on Shasti’s cold, perfect face, but Fenaday got the impression she was enjoying the sights. *Maybe she’ll hang her head out the window,* he thought.

“Why are you smiling?” she asked.

He shook his head.

They pulled over in front of a dilapidated warehouse made of local woods and concrete. A sign in neon gave names in Standard and Morok. *Reliable Salvage*, it said. *Hopefully true*, Fenaday thought.

They walked into the building, Shasti trailing, her eyes alert. Black-haired Moroks in drab coveralls paused in their work to look at the pair. A particularly simian specimen with indigo skin came up to them. "Captain Fenaday," it coughed out in badly-accented Confed Standard.

He nodded, then realized the gesture might not mean anything to the alien. "Yes, Captain Fenaday and Commander Rainhell."

"Schul is expecting you. Follow me." It rolled away from them. As they came up to a small room, Fenaday saw a number of Moroks seated around a desk covered with papers, holopads and machine parts. The skinniest Morok greeted Fenaday, its canines bared in a scary imitation of a human smile. "Welcome, Fenaday." Schul's Confed Standard was far better than his assistant's efforts.

"Greetings, Schul," he replied. "I've got a load for your inspection."

"My buyer will be very interested in seeing them. The rest of the load is somewhere safe?"

"Yeah, I moved them to Warehouse Five," behind him Shasti stirred, possibly irritated by his frank reply. "What about those ship parts? When can I see them? Where are they?"

"Now if you like." The Morok stood and gestured for Fenaday to follow them down a narrow corridor leading to the back of the ramshackle building.

"Have him bring them out here," Shasti said.

"They are too large and heavy," Schul said.

"Come."



Fenaday stood, the familiar eagerness welling in him. *No, no. I can't let my hopes be raised again.*

They followed the Morok.

"I don't like this," Shasti whispered.

Fenaday shrugged in irritation. He had to see the material. There might be some clue to Lisa's fate.

They ducked under a rolled plastic curtain into a large open space. Tackle of various types hung from the ceiling. A huge tarpaulin covered something in the center of the space.

As they walked forward toward the tarp, Shasti cursed under her breath. "Fenaday," she whispered, "there are a dozen men above us in the catwalks. Don't do anything stupid."

He looked up but could see nothing. *Damn you, Schul*, he thought, *what are you up to?*

Schul reached forward and threw back the tarp. Beneath it sat a wizened old Morok and two younger ones armed with rifles. Warned by Shasti, Fenaday did not twitch. Schul pulled a pistol from atop a crate.

"Please do not move, humans," the old Morok said. "My men are all around."

"We know," Fenaday replied, a cold rage shooting through him. "Why?"

"God moves in mysterious ways. He also uses the instruments of the Enemy against the Dark One," the wizened Morok said, his red eyes fastened on Fenaday's. "Relieve them of their weapons." More Moroks appeared. They seized Shasti's and Fenaday's weapons and hand coms, roughly patting them down and finding a knife and small slug pistol on Shasti. She endured the probing without expression.

*It may be an open question whether she'd rather kill them—or me*, Fenaday thought. *I walked right into it.*

"The weapons are in Warehouse Five," Schul said.

“Good,” the old Morok thumped his ornate white staff. “It is owned by a believer. Send the men to move the weapons, then tell the owner that God needs his sacrifice. He must have a fire.”

“All things will be as you wish, Venerated One.”

“Who are you?” Fenaday demanded.

One of the young Moroks cursed and raised his rifle. Fenaday thought about dying.

“Wait, Disciple,” the old Morok said. “Even creatures of the Enemy are entitled to some respect. We are not barbarians.”

“Yes, Venerated One.” The other ducked his head.

The old Morok rested his hands on the white staff. “I am the right honorable Volka, Senior Mage of the People on this world.”

“What do you want with us?” Fenaday asked.

“Nothing more than has been done. You have brought us weapons we will use in God’s work.”

“Funny way to treat your supplier,” Fenaday said, “bad for return business and spare parts.”

“There will be no more business,” Volka said. “The devout will drive all foreign influences off our world. We will regain control of our destiny under God’s guidance. You have brought us the means, hoping for profit, as have others. But now we have no further need of commerce with the Enemy.”

“We’re not your enemy,” Fenaday said.

“God created my kind in his own image,” Volka said. “You are creations of the Anti-God.”

“So sorry for existing,” Fenaday muttered.

The cleric took the comment seriously. “No need to apologize. It is not your individual fault that you are a creature of the Enemy. I do not hate you, as I do not believe that you have free will. After all, you cannot choose to be one of us.”

“Attractive though that might be,” Fenaday said.

“To each his own, as you humans say. Are you not from a separatist colony of your own ethnic group, Captain Fenaday? Was not New Eire settled only by your tribe, the Irish? Did you fight no religious wars?”

“But enough, I bore your kind no malice so long as you kept your contamination from our worlds, but that is no longer the case.”

“What’s to be done with them?” their guard asked.

“Hold them till after we secure the weapons in case there are complications. After that, their deaths must be painless and quick in accord with the Taborokassa. Dispose of their bodies near the spaceport. Make it seem the work of robbers.” Volka looked at them one last time, his red eyes devoid of any expression Fenaday could read. “I shall pray for your peaceful rest.” He stood and turned away.

“I will pray for your soul,” Fenaday said. “You’ll need it, Holy Man. Satan himself awaits you at the gates of hell.”

Volka paused, hesitated as if he might say something, then walked on.

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The guards locked the cell door and held a brief debate about how many of their number were needed. They settled on two, the other four wanting to join the crew heading for the warehouse.

Fenaday leaned against the wall. “You would be entitled to an ‘I told you so’ at this point.”

Shasti was conducting a quick inspection of their room. “No cameras and no sensors.”

“Just a three-inch door and two armed guards, with God knows how many more armed Moroks in the compound.”

She walked over to him. “We need to get them into the cell. Do you think they would come in if you were pretending to rape me?”

“If they even believed there was any chance I could overpower you, they might either just watch or turn away in disgust. God knows I don’t want to see any of them having sex.”

“Good,” Shasti said. “I will mostly pretend to be beating you to death for getting us into this mess. When they intervene, we turn on them.”

“Mostly?” he asked.

“You stupid motherfucker,” Shasti screamed, seizing him by the jacket. “I told you it was a trap.” She flung Fenaday the length of the cell to crash into the door. In a second she was on him again, hauling him upright and thrusting him into a wall, and he wondered if she was really trying to kill him. “You dumb bastard. We are going to die, and it’s your fault.” She began swinging wildly, her hand slapping the wall and him alternately. It stung and made a lot of noise. “I hate you,” she shrieked. “You stupid Irish piece of shit.”

“Help, Help,” Fenaday yelled. “The crazy bitch is out of her fucking mind.” They rolled to the ground. He could see the Moroks looking through a panel in the door. “Help, Volka wanted me alive.”

“I’ll kill you, you ignorant fuck,” Shasti shrieked wild-eyed. “I hate your guts.” She rose and pulled Fenaday up to a standing position, her back to the door.

The Moroks charged in. One came forward, his rifle raised to club the berserk Shasti.

“Die, Fenaday, die,” Shasti bellowed, then put a foot in Fenaday’s sternum, dropped over backwards and flung him like a two hundred pound shot at the door guard. Fenaday slammed into the Morok and they both crashed into the hallway, dazed. Fenaday struggled to a sitting

position in time to see the other guard swing and miss Shasti, who pulled him in and snapped his neck. Suddenly she turned to face Fenaday, raising the rifle and pointing at him.

“Shasti, wait—”

The shot cracked past Fenaday’s ear and smacked wetly into the Morok behind Fenaday. The red-eyed alien made no sound as he dropped, his weapon clattering on the ground.

She ran over to him. “Grab his weapon and follow me.”

Fenaday scabbled for the slug-thrower and raced after her.

They burst into the main room where they’d come in. Schul had time for a moment’s panic before Shasti shot him. Fenaday hit the guard beyond Schul as Shasti leapt over Schul’s body and gunned down the others. She was halfway through the room with Fenaday running flat out to catch up with her when he saw a Morok jump atop the crates at the back of the room.

Fenaday shoved Shasti to one side and fired. He missed. The Morok’s return beam didn’t. It lanced through his jacket and he fell, his right arm and chest suddenly numb and unresponsive. *I’m hit*, he thought, *I’m hit*. He barely felt the floor as he tumbled onto it. He heard Shasti curse and fire, followed by a choked, guttural cry. *Of course, she wouldn’t miss, would she?*

Her beautiful face slipped into his field of view, and he concentrated on it. The numb was beginning to fade to be replaced by burning pain. He realized she was tearing open his jacket and the shirt beneath. “Fool,” she said. “I’m faster than you. I’d have spotted him.”

“You know,” he coughed out, “you really are an ungrateful bitch.”

To his surprise, she smiled for the first time that he could recall. “Yes, I suppose I am. That’s twice you’ve tried to save me.”

“Tried my ass,” he said in feigned outrage. “I plucked you off a slaver and that gunman was behind you.”

“I guess I am not used to saying thank you,” she said, spraying wound seal and anesthetic into his burn. She produced a small flask from under her vest. “Burn fluid,” she said. “Drink it all and it will help with the shock.”

“What, no scotch to wash it down with?”

“It wouldn’t be—”

“Joking, Shasti, joking.” He downed the fluid, full of electrolytes and healing agents. “It tastes god-awful.”

“Can you walk?”

Fenaday tried to sit up, and the universe swam. He collapsed back. Shasti caught his head before it smacked on the floor. He drew a deep breath. “You’d better get going.”

“That would be practical,” she said. “My chances of escaping with a wounded man are very poor.”

“Very,” he said.

“Very,” she repeated. “Perhaps as bad as your chances of ever finding your wife.”

“About that lousy.”

“Just so you know.” She reached forward and with little effort pulled him to his feet and then onto her shoulders. He gasped as his weight came onto the burn and he felt the wound leak despite the air-seal. He grayed out for a second but managed to hang onto his laser.

“Don’t shoot me in the leg,” Shasti said.

“Nice that you have such confidence in me,” he said.

Shasti started forward. If Fenaday’s two hundred pounds troubled her, she didn’t show it. He gripped his laser tightly and tried hard not to pass out.

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Shasti set the dead Morok's laser to narrow beam and cut through a door lock, heading for the loading dock. She saw the mule there. *They must have moved it here to keep it out of sight*, she thought. *Good, that's what I would have done.* Checking the dock area quickly, she sprinted over and almost threw Fenaday in the side door, then raced around to the other side and leapt in. A harsh guttural voice yelled and a shot cracked. Shasti fired through the mule's windscreen. The plastiglass scattered some of the laser but enough ripped through to set a Morok guard on fire. Shasti gunned the small mule, charging for the rolled metal doorway. Fenaday rolled down his window to peg shots at Morok fanatics. Return fire spidered the bulletproof plastiglass and blew chunks of metal off the mule.

"Brace," Shasti shouted as the mule hit the garage door. It came off its roller and smacked down into the street beyond, scattering bewildered civilians. Gunfire pursued them, hitting several pedestrians. The soldiers of God seemed indifferent to collateral damage. Shasti cut up onto sidewalks and sped around traffic, heading for the port. A fanatic on a hoverbike started after them, only to be broadsided by a car dodging Shasti.

"The gauge," Fenaday rasped.

"What?" she snapped, focused on dodging a neon-lit hovertruck.

"Heat gauge," he said. "It's peaking. They must have damaged something."

"Damn." As if to confirm his statement, the mule began emitting horrible grinding noises. Shasti kept the machine floored for another three kilometers before smoke billowed out from the small hood and she ditched it in a small alley. She helped Fenaday stagger out from his side of the machine.

“Go on,” he said, leaning against the wall. “Get back to the ship. I’ll make my own way. I’m the one who screwed up and got us into this.”

Shasti briefly debated it. Alone, she might draw off pursuit. Abruptly she realized what he was doing. “You’ll never make it alone. You know that. You persist in being concerned about my life. Why? What am I to you?”

He looked at her. “What do you have to be?”

She shook her head. “Standard human, you’re a mystery to me. No one from my people would sacrifice themselves. To lose is to be proven unworthy.”

“We all lose some time.” His eyes fluttered and he sank against the wall. Shasti caught him, and tucked his weapon into her belt, then hoisted him onto her shoulders. “If we’re not killed, there may be something you can teach me, Fenaday.”

Holding her laser in one hand, Shasti started out for the port. She followed her training from her earliest days on Olympia, cleaving to shadows, waiting for distractions in order to move through open spaces. She kept her weapon out of sight, hoping to be taken for a spacer helping a drunken friend back to the port. She debated whether to seek help from a passing patrol craft but couldn’t bring herself to trust them. They might be infiltrated by the fanatics or they might be curious about *Sidhe* and her cargo. Either could be equally lethal.

Gradually Shasti made her way to the field. *Sidhe* sat at the far end. A dozen other ships dotted the grass and hard-packed earth of the spacefield. Most were insystem Morok vessels, two were legitimate freighters from the Kenowa line. No help there.

She opted for an indirect approach in the grasslands, hoping the waist-high orange and gold foliage would supply cover. The jungle beyond the grasslands would



supply better concealment but Fenaday's weight was beginning to wear her down.

Shasti shifted Fenaday a little higher on her shoulders, he groaned in response. She started out, slipping between the two furthest warehouses, then into the grassy fields beyond. As she moved around a low hill, something slammed into her arm. An instant later the sound of the shot caught up to the bullet. She spun, dropping them both into the grass. Fenaday sprawled, unconscious or dead. She checked her arm. The sleeve of the body armor she wore under her clothes had stopped the bullet, but her arm hung numb. Her genetically enhanced body was already shrugging off the pain. In a few minutes the arm would function again. Meanwhile her enemies would find she shot equally well off either hand.

Shasti crawled forward, reluctant to leave Fenaday but needing to deal with these new enemies. She moved slowly through the tall grass, reaching with all her senses. Her hypersensitive nose and ears brought her clues, three, possibly four Moroks. Not city folk from the way they moved through the grasses. Hunters, spreading out and heading for where she'd dropped Fenaday. She needed to reduce the odds, quickly.

Shasti holstered the laser and slid forward on all fours, her arm already recovering from the blow. She selected the noisiest of her attackers for a target. A minute's stalk brought her near the Morok. Shasti froze as the stocky, blue figure slipped through the grass. She gathered herself panther-like, staring at his weapon, not his face, hoping to avoid triggering his senses. He stepped forward and stumbled on the uneven ground.

Shasti leapt. His startled shot went wide. Then she was on him, carrying them both to the ground. As he snatched for his knife, she drove stiffened fingers deep into his eyes. The Morok shrieked. She put a kagi hold on his

knife hand, wrenched the blade away and slammed it into his brain. Seizing his weapon, she ducked behind the corpse and fired bursts into the grass at waist height toward the sounds made by his charging companions. She heard one cry, then return fire thudded into the corpse she lay behind. Shasti pulled the knife out and scrambled away. She came up for a quick look only to confront a Morok ten meters away. His laser crisped the grass between them. Shasti's shot hit his weapon, breaking off the stock. The Morok dropped before she could fire again.

Shasti backed away from the spreading flames ignited by the laser. She looked westward, where she could see the tall tail fin of *Sidhe* and safety. *I can make it if I leave Fenaday*, she thought, even as she made her way back toward him. She wondered if his stubborn posturing had worn off on her. *Standard human*, she thought, *you owe me big time.*

She jumped up and took another shot at her pursuers and again a laser licked out at her. Suddenly she heard a flurry of shots and a scream, then silence. Shasti waited.

“Thor,” a voice called out. “Thor.”

“Mjolnir,” she shouted the counter password back, slowly coming out of her crouch. The Tok brothers, Hanshi and Lokashti, rose out of the grass. “There were three more. Did you get them all?”

Hanshi, the bigger of the Morok brothers, nodded. “We were patrolling near the warehouses and heard the shots. I spotted you and we came running.”

“Good. Get over here and help me with the captain. He's been shot.”

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Fenaday awoke in the familiar cool grays and blues of his cabin on the *Sidhe*. A quick look out the armored viewpoint of his cabin told him they were still on Morokat.

“How are you feeling?” The ship’s physician, a nervous old man named Rinaldi, blinked at him.

“Like shit on a stick,” Fenaday answered. “Is Shasti all right?”

“Yes,” she said, walking into sight.

Rinaldi looked up at her and backed away. “See, I told you, a little surgery and three hours under a regenerator and he’s almost as good as new.”

“Excellent,” she said. “Then you get to live.”

He gulped. “You should have left him in the sickbay.”

“Go back to the sickbay,” she replied. “Wipe all records of this. Officially Fenaday never left the ship. Mention this to anyone, and I will feed you into the main reactor.”

Rinaldi left hastily.

“Making friends and influencing people?” he asked.

“You are faring better than some of his former patients. Considering his record, I wanted to be sure he was motivated to stay focused.”

“Shasti.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

She looked uncomfortable for a moment, then leaned forward, gazing into his eyes. “Obstinate man, you interest me. Searching for your wife against all logic. Urging me to abandon you and look out for myself. How many more times do you think you can offer up your life before the universe takes it?”

“Maybe the universe is entitled to it for some of what I’ve done.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If I don’t stop him,” Fenaday said, wincing as sat up, “Volka will start a religious uprising against off-

worlders and the Morok government, using weapons I sold him.”

“But,” Shasti said as she sat back to gaze out the rain-splattered viewport, “he’ll pray for our souls afterward.”

“Somebody should.”

Shasti turned to face him. “You believe that you have one?”

He sat quietly, looking beyond her at the rain. The port was far too dense for the sound of the storm to penetrate, but lightning flickered, illuminating half of Shasti’s face. “I hope so,” he whispered. “I sure hope so.

“And you,” he asked. “What do you believe?”

She looked away, then shrugged. “What do you plan to do? Go to the authorities?”

“And end up in a dank Morok cell? The local government is inept and corrupt and probably riddled with Volka’s followers. No, I have to stop Volka and I have to do it tonight.”

“By yourself?” she asked

“There are so few in the crew I can trust. I can only think of one.”

“Yes,” she said leaning against the bulkhead. “Sounds like you could use the services of a trained assassin. Fortunately, I just happen to be one.”

“If you’re in?” He tried to see her half-shadowed face.

“No you, no *Sidhe*, no job for me.”

“Sound logic,” he said.

“I anticipated you could not leave well enough alone,” Shasti said. “While you were in surgery, I sent the Toks to find the owner of Warehouse Five. He is perhaps less devout than Volka imagined. He seemed unenthusiastic about fanatics burning down his warehouse or having his limbs sawed off by Hanshi. I have coordinates for the

gathering place of the faithful. They will meet there for evening prayer.”

“I feel like a little religion myself tonight, Old Testament style.”

“Certainly,” she replied standing. “I’ll prepare the flyer and two jetbelts.”

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Johan Gunnar, from Shasti’s trouble team, flew *Sidhe*’s four-seat aircar to within two kilometers of Volka’s jungle compound. Shasti and Fenaday stepped out of the flyer in their short-range flying belts and zipped along at tree top height. Maps extracted from their reluctant informant glowed green on the inner screens of their helmets. An evening storm strobed around them, and the rumble of thunder covered the small sound of the jetpacks.

They came upon the walled compound of the faithful with its scores of poor shacks and tents.

“These guys can always get the have-nots ready to kill the haves,” Fenaday muttered.

Shasti signaled him, and they split, heading for their separate targets.

Fenaday continued on to where the warehouse owner said the armaments were stored. With typical Morok disregard for rules, the ordnance lay piled in one wing of what had been an old church. Fenaday flew up to the window. Just as he neared it, a Morok in priestly robes looked out. His mouth opened in astonishment, but no sound came out. Fenaday gave the belt all its remaining power and cannoned into him. The priest and Fenaday tumbled into the silent church with a crash.

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Shasti landed on a minaret-like tower and slipped out of her jetbelt and into her old role as an assassin. *This is almost literally what I was made for*, she thought bitterly. *Not that anyone offered me any choices.* She tied the

exhausted jetbelt to the roof eaves and set its timer to eliminate the evidence. Her fingers found purchase in the roof's rain slick surface, and she froze every time lightning flickered. Using small hooks in her gloves and boots, she maneuvered her way to a window and slid into the building.

Out of the rain, she threw back her hood, struggling slightly with her overly long hair. *Not too practical*, she thought. But the hair was a private defiance of hers. Free of the rain, she adjusted her equipment then strained her senses, picking up faint rhythmic noises and the scent of incense.

*Excellent*, she thought. *They are still talking to their God. Tonight they will get answers.* She padded along the hallway heading to the balcony above the main chapel. According to their contact, Volka always conducted a last prayer service with his faithful inner seven.

Prayers and incense both grew stronger, and Shasti found herself in a dark wooden hallway, over a chapel, which featured a fountain of pulsing lights and rushing water. Volka sat on a cushion. His seven sat on ornate rugs.

Shasti pulled both lasers from their holsters and sighted. The laser's red beams danced and hissed among Volka's inner circle. In seconds they fell, only barely aware of what was killing them.

Only Volka remained seated. He stared up at Shasti as she dropped from the balcony to the chapel floor. "So it seems the Almighty has other plans for me," his red eyes focused on her green ones.

"Ah," Shasti smiled over her laser. "Am I now an instrument of the Almighty?"

"We all are. Even the Enemy bows to the will of God and serves him indirectly."

"One cannot argue with logic like that," Shasti said.

“Still,” the cleric mused. “I did not believe that I could be stopped by any creature born in our universe. A demon perhaps—”

“Let me ease your mind as you step into the infinite. I’ll share my little secret with you.”

“What?” Volka asked.

“I wasn’t born,” Shasti said and pulled the trigger.

\*\*\*\*\*

Fenaday huffed, his wound leaking from hitting the priest, who lay with his neck canted at an odd angle. He pulled his laser and scanned for other enemies, then placed charges on the crates of weapon. Hitting the timer, he hobbled away as fast as he could, virtually falling out the second-story window. Fenaday barely cleared the window before the explosives went off. He scrambled into a nearby runoff ditch, partly filled with water, as the air filled with metal and wood splinters from secondary blasts among the ammunition.

Fenaday could feel the heat of a fireball sweep over him as he started crawling toward the pickup point, the pain of his wound forgotten. Shouts and screams sounded as Moroks ran hysterically to and fro. Another blast cut down the running figures. More screams and panic.

A vehicle whined to a stop near Fenaday. He whipped up his laser, then paused as he spotted Shasti and Gunnar in the aircar. Gunnar’s auto pistol stuttered as he laid down fire with one hand still on the controls.

“Come on,” Shasti yelled. He gathered himself and dove through the door, landing face down in her lap as she fired over his back. Gunnar cursed and spun the wheel as the compound shuddered and belched flame from every window and door. The small flyer sprang up to treetop level to flee back to *Sidhe*.

Fenaday rolled over in Shasti’s lap, looking up at her beautiful, remote expression.

“Comfortable?” she asked.

“Very,” he said. “I could get used to this.”

She didn’t smile but something told him she was amused. Or maybe it was just having the chance to blow things up.

“Home, Johan,” Shasti said. “I think we’ve worn out our welcome on Morokat.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Ambassador Caroline Degas walked into a small office in the basement of the Confederate Embassy on Morokat. The office was far less impressive than her own, but there was absolutely no question of relative power between her and the occupant of this temporary space.

“Ambassador,” said the sturdy, genial dark-skinned man seated behind the plain desk. Two ASAT troopers, his personal guards, stood behind him.

“Mr. Mandela,” Degas nodded. She suspected it was not the spymaster’s real name. “Things have gone rather differently than you planned.”

“They so often do,” Mandela said. “Please proceed with your report.”

“The privateer you were hoping to put out of business seems to have been more formidable than you expected. He and that Amazon shadow of his have killed Volka and his inner circle. They’ve also destroyed the weapons.”

“Well, the glass is half full,” Mandela replied. “I had hoped Volka’s rebellion would be prematurely triggered with the weapons Fenaday brought. Then we would quickly crush it with the ASAT teams and Mariner raider battalions I have in nearspace, cementing the Morok Conglomerate into the Confederacy. The Conchirri war will be ending soon. We have to plan ahead to the peace.”



“The boys won’t be sorry,” the Morok behind Mandela said. “Less casualties for the 71<sup>st</sup> and the job’s done anyway.”

“Quiet, Rask,” the human trooper said.

Mandela shrugged. “That’s all right, Sgt Rigg. Rask is right. The job’s done. We shall have to keep an eye on Mr. Fenaday and his lethal associate. It may be that Robert is destined for greater things.”

Degas raised an eyebrow. “You sound as if you know him.”

Mandela grimaced. “His wife. Lisa Fenaday worked for me.”

“Past tense?”

“Her ship went missing in action,” Rigg said.

“A loss to the Confederacy,” Mandela said. “She was one of the most promising agents I ever had until I lost her to him. One must admire his single-minded tenacity in searching for her. It’s one reason I haven’t had his ship blown out from under him for his many violations of Confederate law.

“Yes, I must keep an eye on her husband. He could be very, very useful...”

The End

Here are the first three chapters of the next Book in the series, Was Once A Hero, on sale now.

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Was Once A Hero

By

Edward McKeown

## Chapter One

Winter 2805AD. Confed Forward Base Brendara  
Robert Fenaday looked through rain-streaked windows at the field where the sleek shape of his wife's ship lay in its launch cradle and thought...*this can't be happening*. But it was. Ground crews were clearing the last connections holding *Blackbird* to Brendara base. The small scoutship was bound for war—a war that made no sense, against the Conchirri, a species out of a child's nightmare.

“Hey, spaceman,” a voice called softly. He turned away from the concourse windows to see Lisa. She'd slipped up on him, her footsteps covered by the dull roar of the refugees and military filling the halls behind her. Her long, auburn hair was tied back, under a white naval cap that seemed too large for her delicate features.

Robert strode over and embraced her. Her face lay against his neck for a few seconds and he felt a tremble run through her. Then she stepped back, all cool dignity again, for all that no one had paid them any mind.

“What's this?” she said. “Somebody might think you were afraid you wouldn't see me again.”

“I love you, Lisa,”

“I love you too. Always will.”

“Then let me use my influence—”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I know you'd do anything to protect me, but not that. I'm *Blackbird's* captain and where she goes—I go. Darling, there are some things that can't be fixed with money and even if they could, they shouldn't be.”

“What good is my family's wealth if it can't protect you?” he said, twisting his hands. “I'd trade every credit if only it could.”

Lisa's gray eyes were bright. "It's bought us more than most get. You've been able to meet me every time *Blackbird's* put in. Even if it meant diverting one of your family's freighters, something I shouldn't have let you do. Few others have had that luxury.

"The universe is on fire, darling, and I'm one of the firemen. My family has been Confed Navy since there's been one. I have to do this."

"This time I can't even follow you."

"No, not where I'm bound. You and your father have a shipping line to run. One that's vital to the Confederacy, and Robert, he's old now. So that's your post. Mine's with the fleet."

He looked at his wife and was filled with foreboding. "I wasn't much before we met, you know, a spoiled brat of a rich kid, partying like a fool."

She smiled through the tears in her eyes. "We've been good for each other Robert. We will be again when this damn thing is over."

A claxon sounded overhead and he jumped, fighting back a curse. A voice read out a string of numbers.

Lisa's smile faded into a grim line. "That's my ship's launch clearance."

Now that the moment was here, it seemed unreal. How could she be leaving? They stepped toward each other again and this time didn't care about military discipline or onlookers.

"Now," she said finally. "I want you to stay here. So that this will be my memory of you, until I see you again."

"When will that be?" he said, fighting down his anguish and trying to smile. *I can't make this harder on her.*

"I don't know, Love, and I couldn't tell you if I did. But I think it will be a long time."

He kissed her again. "Return to me, Lisa. Return to *New Eire*, the house above the cliffs. It will all be waiting for you."

She touched his face. "I'm counting on it. Now, Robert you have to let me go." She kissed him, then turned and walked quickly into the throng.

He watched her until her slender form in navy dress whites could no longer be seen. "I'll never let you go, Lisa," he whispered. "Never. Not if all of time and space were arrayed against me. I swear it."

Eleven months later:

To Robert Fenaday- New Eire

The Secretary of State wishes to express the Confederacy's sincerest condolences in the loss of the C.S.S. Blackbird. The vessel having been missing long past its life-support capacity, the crew must regretfully also be considered lost.

C.S.S Blackbird was operating alone in a classified operation far beyond the front and was last reported in the Fringe Star sector. We deeply regret...

\*\*\*\*\*

December 14, 2809-Enshar Star System: same year

Telisan stretched his arm over his head, as he had every day since his release from the hospital ship. The injury had kept him from joining his fleet carrier on the final attack on the Conchirri homeworld.

"Gad, it makes me queasy just watching," said one of the human pilots draped over a chain in *Earheart's* ready room.

Telisan smiled, a gesture he'd learned from humans. "I'm surprised you humans have only one joint in your arms, must have made it hard to swing from tree to tree."

"Hey Rico," another pilot called. "The commander knows your family." The humans began to shout good-natured abuse across the room.

Seeka, the only other Denlenn aboard, walked in. Like Telisan, he was tall and angular, with leathery skin, a lipless mouth and golden eyes under a rough mane of thick hair.

“Greetings, young one,” Telisan said in Denleni.

“Greetings, Mighty Warrior, Ace of Aces.”

“Ah, knock it off,” Telisan added in Standard to his young friend’s amusement.

“What word from the bridge?” Seeka asked.

Telisan shrugged. “We’re still at defcon 4. There’s been no signal, no sightings since we left jumpspace.”

The young Denlenn’s face looked grim. “Can it be? Can the freighter captain’s wild story be true? Is Enshar destroyed?”

“I do not see how with the Conchirri fighting in their home system,” Telisan replied. “Pity the freighter didn’t dare get closer to Enshar.”

“Damn him,” Seeka said. “He fled when he could not raise system control, even dumped his cargo.”

“Perhaps it is best. Had he gone in, he too, might have been destroyed. As it is we are here with a fleet.”

“Fleet?” Seeka snorted. “A rust-bucket escort carrier and whatever else was handy in the fleet resupply depot when the call came.”

“Which included me,” Telisan replied.

Seeka nodded. “That is the only reason we’d have a century ace like you on a CVE. Trust me; the Black Diamonds are glad to have you here.”

“Now hear this,” the speaker sounded over their heads, “all senior officers to the bridge.”

“Now maybe we’ll find out what’s going on,” Seeka said.

Telisan looked over at the rostrum where his XO, Lieutenant Bailey, stood. “Bailey, get the pilots down to the

flight deck. I'm betting we sortie soon. We have time for once; I want everything double-checked."

"Aye, aye, Wing." He turned to the waiting room. "Black Diamonds, on your feet!"

Telisan nodded to Seeka and sped off, his long legs eating up *Earhart's* corridors until he arrived at the bridge. A marine opened the hatchway for him and he ducked to enter Earhart's bridge, with its multitude of holo screens and stations.

Officers filled *Earhart's* cramped bridge and stared at the multiple views of Enshar displayed on the ship's view-screens. Telisan, taller than most of the human crew, looked over their heads at the green and blue world they'd come to rescue.

"They're all dead," Captain Demidov said, passing a shaky hand through her gray-streaked hair.

"Gods," Telisan whispered, chills running through him. Billions of Enshari gone, along with thousands of other Confederate citizens, the scale of the catastrophe numbed the mind.

Demidov dropped into her chair, looking weary for the first time in Telisan's experience. She waved a hand at the expedition's chief scientist, a dark-skinned human male. "Fill them in, Doctor."

The scientist walked over to the screen. "Our probes show millions of corpses on the upper levels of their underground cities," he said, his voice grave. "We see trains wrecked and strewn off grav-rails. Thousands of ocean-going vessels are still afloat, but drifting or steaming to no purpose." He gestured at the one of the screens showing a metallic splatter in a field. "Destroyed aircraft litter the planet's surface. All movement we've detected is either robotic or animal in nature. All forms of intelligent life on Enshar are gone. We are assuming some sort of

chemical or biological attack, though there is some evidence of direct-fire weapon being used.”

Demidov nodded to the scientist who sat down at his station and stared at the deck.

“How can this be?” Telisan asked. “How could a Conchirri fleet strike here? Even at the height of their strength, an assault on Enshar’s defenses would have been grueling. How could they manage it now, in the midst of defeat?”

“It makes no sense,” Demidov said, staring at the screens as if she could will answers from them.

“Communications?” Demidov demanded. “Anything new?”

“No answer, sir,” the officer replied. “I’m detecting some automated signals from Enshar...nothing else.”

“Scan picked up clouds of metallic debris over Enshar,” a tech added. “They’re in the same orbit as Enshar’s main space stations. The stations are gone.”

“Any sign of debris from Conchirri vessels?” Demidov asked.

“None,” he replied.

“Even if a Conchirri attack achieved total surprise,” Telisan said, “Enshar’s defense would have taken a heavy toll on any attacking force.”

“Communications,” Demidov ordered, “have the destroyer escort *Flamme* move to the vanguard. She’s handiest in atmosphere. Relay to the rest of the fleet that we are moving into orbit. ”

“Have you ever been to Enshar before, Commander?” Demidov asked, staring at the lights of the dead cities.

Telisan turned to look at the human. It still struck him as odd to be taking orders from a true female, even if of another species. His own people had three genders, male, demi-female and true-female. A male or demi might command a warship, but never a true female. He’d served

with her for only a few weeks, since leaving the hospital ship *Solace*, but Telisan respected her ability.

“No,” the Denlenn replied. “It is too far from the Conchirri theatre of operations. Before the war I attended university on Denla. I met an Enshari there, Professor Belwin Duna. He is my greatest friend, if he still lives.”

“I never met one,” Demidov said. “They withdrew from space travel as the war dragged on, hid out in the safety of their underground cities.”

Telisan forbore to argue with her attitude. Humans measured everything in terms of the war effort.

Hours passed as more probes dropped into the atmosphere. They found no sign of radiation, chemical or biological agents.

“We’re not learning anything up here,” Demidov finally announced. “I’m sending down a landing force. I want a complete chemical, biological ordinance protocol in effect. The assault group will go in three shuttles. Two will carry Marines and Air Space Assault troops; the third will carry a scientific and medical team. Commander Telisan, send half the fighters in with the shuttles; keep half with you as a combat aerospace patrol.”

Telisan snapped a salute and left as launch alarms shrilled. Twenty seconds later he reached *Earhart’s* capacious hanger deck. His squadron had already manned their *Spacefires*. Telisan waved to Seeka, who grinned back and vaulted into his fighter. Armored doors dropped and the fighters spilled out. They hit their engines for a quick burn, moving the *Spacefires* through the formation to take station behind the winged shape of the destroyer escort *Flamme*.

“Black Diamond One to Casino,” Telisan called, as his slender fingers raced over the controls. “We are taking position.” He switched to the squadron frequency. “One to



Six. Take sections Alpha and Beta. Stick close to the DE and the *Wolverines*. I'll fly high guard."

"Yes, mighty ace of aces."

Telisan smiled briefly at Seeka's informality. *One of these days I shall have to remind him to watch his manners with his elders.* He turned his attention to the world ahead. It filled his view, massive, dark and enigmatic.

Three *Wolverine*-class attack shuttles launched from the *Earhart* and headed for the planet. They passed the lowest vessel, the destroyer escort *Flamme*, which had dropped to within one hundred thousand meters of the surface. Telisan and the rest of the fleet stacked between two hundred thousand and three hundred thousand meters.

"Fighter Computer," Telisan said, "display the landing force."

The *Wolverine* shuttles appeared on the fighter's small video screen. He watched as they cut through the upper atmosphere, heading for the city of Gigor, near the Confed naval base. The big, gray-green camouflaged ships landed far short of the base in a triangular formation.

Suddenly the picture on Telisan's screen changed. A cloud of dust sprang from nowhere, engulfing each shuttle. Then his screen derezzed and electronics on Telisan's *Spacefire* went mad with feedback and distortion. Sparks showered him as his electronics shorted. He cried out, snatching at his fire extinguisher. Telisan's helmet slammed against the canopy and he realized the fighter was tumbling. With one hand he fought his ship, using the other to trigger the extinguisher. With a fighter pilot's trained instinct, he climbed.

"All Black Diamonds form on me," Telisan called. Only a burst of static answered him. "Black Diamonds to me."

He dropped the extinguisher and switched frequencies. "Black Diamond One to Fleet, respond."

“This is the *Flamme*, enemy on board!” The voice cut out as Telisan heard a scream and a shot. His fighter’s screen snapped back on, blurry and crackling. “Select DE *Flamme*,” he ordered. The escort appeared on the screen. *Flamme* was tumbling end for end, plunging planetward.

“No,” Telisan cried as the ship exploded in the Northern Sea.

He frantically switched to the squadron channel. “Seeka, come in. Seeka!” He tapped the small fighter’s AI screen. “Computer, progressively select all Black Diamond fighters.” The scanner showed him what he feared. Only his section survived. All the others lay smashed into the world below, like the *Flamme*, or burned to cinders in uncontrolled reentry.

The captain’s voice crackled in his headphones. “All ships, this is Demidov, general retreat. Climb, damn it—climb.”

The surviving fleet units fought for control and altitude. No targets appeared for him to lock weapons onto. As he cleared five hundred thousand meters, his *Spacefire*’s systems snapped back to normal. Telisan craned his head around to glare at Enshar, the deathworld that had reached out and claimed most of his squadron and the *Flamme*.

“We are not done,” he swore to the looming world. “We are not done.”

“All Black Diamonds,” Telisan keyed his mike, “return to the carrier.” The surviving four ships answered his call.

## Chapter Two

Robert Fenaday sat alone in dark wood and leather of Luchow’s Marsport bar, trying to get drunk. He wasn’t much of a drinker, another of his father’s several

disappointments in him, but a man had to be somewhere. But tonight was the fifth anniversary of the day the young officer had come to his door bearing a flag and condolences that Lisa was missing, presumed dead along with her ship.

*Here's to you Dad, he thought, too bad you aren't here to share it with me.*

The bartender walked over to Fenaday's corner table. "You gonna nurse that all night, spaceman?" It was early, and the bar was far from full, but Fenaday had a prime table to himself.

Fenaday barely glanced up from the glass. "Put another one down," he muttered, rubbing his eyes.

"Sure," the bartender said, giving him a frankly curious look, as if he somehow sensed Fenaday was not the usual freighter officer.

Fenaday was used to the scrutiny. His uniform was not standard military, but the black leather jacket held a captain's bar. Like most things on his ship the jacket was second hand, its name badge being newer than the jacket's old, worn leather.

*I probably look as worn as the jacket tonight, he thought.*

The bartender walked off, to return with another glass of amber liquid. "Drinking Olde Henley, huh?" he asked. "That stuff will kill you."

"I'm not that lucky," Fenaday said.

A couple of businessmen came in. The bartender, apparently smelling better tips, moved off, leaving Fenaday to his drink. He lifted the glass and held it at eye level, studying its shifting amber color in the low light of the bar, but didn't raise it to his lips. It wasn't alcohol he wanted; it was distance and numbness. Distance from the memories of a lost home and a lost love. Thoughts of Lisa crowded close and jagged tonight, and the traditional medicine of the Irish wasn't helping him. Maybe the ancient spirits of the island

he knew only from books were having fun at his expense. The *Sidhe* loved tragedy and the struggle of mortals.

*They must love me*, he thought, a lost man searching all of space for his wife. *Show's over*, he thought to the spirits. His ship, the *Sidhe*, sat in dock, probably never to fly again. The end of the Conchirri war and the bounties it generated made it impossible to run a private warship. Backers in the syndicate that financed the privateer dropped off. *Sidhe* had made port on Mars with barely enough to pay off her crew.

Fenaday had spent the last few days looking for work in the bars and haunts of the huge spaceport, refusing to give up. Now he found himself alone in a Marsport bar, staring at the turgid liquor.

People began to fill in, office workers and maybe more prosperous spacers. Fenaday had posed as one of those more prosperous. The deception had failed. His last hope had just left. The shipping agent for a small firm plying part of the Fringe Star sector had expressed her regrets. With the war over and the navy free to patrol again, her company no longer needed a privateer escort.

*God*, he thought, putting the glass back down, *there has to be some way. Pick yourself up, man. Find something. Think.*

Nothing came to him. A warship or exploring service would not take him on as a passenger. He was only thirty, but there were hundreds of younger regular navy captains looking for berths in the rapidly contracting Confederate Space Force. Merchants rarely traveled in the Fringe Stars, and then only to the settled worlds he'd already searched for any sign of Lisa or her ship, the *Blackbird*. *Sidhe* was the only instrument for his search. Now he and the ship lay useless on Mars.

Fenaday dropped his head on the table so no one could see his face. "You can't cry," he whispered. "You can't start; you're a tough pirate captain." It didn't help. Hot tears

slid down his nose. Lost in his own private misery, it took him a while to notice the being who walked up to his table, to react to the sudden drop in the noise level of the bar. Only the rare and bizarre drew attention in a place as blasé as Luchow's Marsport. The hush finally drew Fenaday's head up from the table. He met the alien's stare with a startled expression.

The being stood slightly over a meter tall; resembling a large otter, save for the face that suggested a human ancestor, *Homo Habilis*.

"You grieve, human," the alien said. Its voice was low for the small body and whistled in parts, but it spoke Confederate Standard clearly. "Enshari understand grief."

"With enough cause," Fenaday said, regarding the small being with wonder.

"Ah, then you know the story of my people."

Fenaday straightened in his seat, glad for the distraction. "I can't imagine that there's anyone who doesn't."

"You might be surprised by the shortness of memory for tragedy," the Enshari said. "Tell me of what you have heard." It seated itself unbidden at Fenaday's table in a fluid motion that heightened its resemblance to an otter. "Please."

"All right," Fenaday replied slowly, trying to guess the other's motives. "Three years ago, while we were scrubbing the last of the Conchirri out of the universe, they struck at Enshar. A freighter discovered the disaster—"

"Yes," the alien said, "disaster, the very word, complete and utter disaster." It seemed to fold into itself a little, as if in remembered pain.

The bartender appeared at the Enshari's elbow. It seemed that Fenaday's stock had risen. The alien pulled himself together and ordered a wheat beer. Fenaday waived another drink.

They waited for the bartender to return. In the background, music started. Mercifully, it wasn't the crap teens listened to, but a blue jazz piece. The bartender returned with a large bottle of nut-brown beer and an Enshari-scaled mug. Fenaday poured for the Enshari, who nodded his thanks. They listened for a minute while the small being drank some of his beer. After a few sips he looked up at Fenaday. "Yes captain, please continue."

"The Confederacy," Fenaday began, "sent a fleet, which was very nearly destroyed by some form of electronic attack. Anything and anyone who tried to land was annihilated. Not that it stopped returning Enshari ships from trying."

"Like moths to a flame," murmured the small alien.

"I guess so," Fenaday said. "The fleet dropped guard satellites and fled. The Government banned travel there. The only contact is a warship dropping into the system to pick up the guard satellite's information. Even that is done from the system's edge. No vessel has entered Enshar's orbit in nearly three years."

The Enshar made a whistling sound in its own language. "Just so, Captain Fenaday. You know the tale of our grief well, far better than most. That grief brings me to you. I'm Belwin Duna, Scientist of the First Order of Enshar."

"You know my name, Mr. Duna. Which means this is not a chance meeting. What do you want with me?"

"I'm going to Enshar." Duna replied. "I want you to take me there."

"Whoa," replied Fenaday, raising a hand. "Let's back up here. You may remember there is a death penalty for taking an Enshari to your system, Mr. Duna."

"Of course," Duna replied, "I have obtained permission for such travel."

"Can't be—" Fenaday said.

“Please listen, Human,” interrupted the Enshari. The Enshari’s alien face and eyes conveyed no cues Fenaday could interpret. Yet, the tension in the small body, the near desperation conveyed itself. It was almost a smell. “I alone, of the remaining eleven-thousand survivors of our species, have received authority from the Confederate Government for this final attempt to determine what destroyed us.”

The past tense sent a shudder down Fenaday’s back. “How did you manage that?”

“Very simple,” the alien said. “My surviving people have our compound, where we are cared for and protected, but they announced to their wardens that unless I was permitted to make the attempt, we would begin mass suicides. After the first dozen, we gained permission for one Enshari and one attempt. I am the foremost scientist and scholar left to my people. I’ve studied every scrap of information that could conceivably be related to the disaster. I have every authorization; you may check that with your government.”

“A dozen suicides with so few in the gene pool,” Fenaday murmured.

“You do not understand grief as well as I thought,” Duna said. “The grief of the Enshari is itself a waking nightmare.”

“My grief is my own concern,” Fenaday growled.

“But known,” replied Duna. “You seek your mate, a naval officer, lost in the long and dangerous borders of Fringe Space where only warships go. Your ship sits in a launch cradle. A private warship is an almost impossible expense, even to one with your former wealth and contacts. Your quest ends soon.”

Fenaday passed his drink from hand to hand. “Soon,” he acknowledged softly. At the bar a couple of young women laughed brightly, as if pain and terror didn’t exist in the universe.

“Perhaps not,” Duna said, leaning backward, a confusing body language to a human. Fenaday, suddenly intent, leaned forward.

“All Enshari property off-world is owned by the Exiles, as we call ourselves. In the material world, we are all wealthy, for the little consolation that gives. Take me to Enshar. The wealth we will bestow on you and your crew will allow you to fly forever. We will help you in your search for Lisa Fenaday in any way possible.”

Fenaday’s bark of disbelieving laughter startled the alien. It curled defensively. From the corner of his eye, Fenaday caught a sudden shift among several humans and a tall, elfin Denlenn, standing at the now crowded bar. Their attention fixed on him. As he suspected, the Enshari had not come alone. Duna was a VIP. Fenaday wondered if an Air Space Assault Team sniper had a bead on him.

“Apologies, gentlebeing,” Fenaday said, sitting quite still. “That’s not an expression of humor. You startled me. I sympathize with your quest, but it’s even more hopeless than my own. Mine may lead to death, but yours does without a doubt. Nothing has survived the attempt to land on Enshar.

“Why talk to me anyway? Surely the Confederate Space Forces would do it. This is a fleet job. You need dreadnoughts, bio-ordinance specialists and Air Space Assault Troops, not a privateer.”

“The fleet that went did nothing, accomplished nothing and left,” Duna answered.

“Leaving three shuttles, a destroyer escort and later a dozen Enshari vessels behind, lifeless,” the human retorted. “All we could do is die alongside them.”

“Perhaps not,” Duna repeated. “The fleet and other landings occurred just after the disaster, when whatever happened was still in effect.”



“You have reason to believe this has changed?”

Fenaday asked.

“We do not know, but it’s been well over two years since the last landing attempt. There is no way to tell. Animal life survived on our world as did test animals from other worlds when they were crash-landed on our world. Your government would not allow our volunteers or condemned prisoners to be used in such fashion.”

“What makes you believe conditions are different?”

Fenaday asked.

“Perhaps after almost three years... it sleeps,” Duna said.

Fenaday stared with pity at the poor creature. He often feared his own grief would end in madness. It chilled him to see it in another’s eyes.

“Bio-ordnance,” he said, looking away, “doesn’t sleep.”

“Nor does it destroy space stations and ships,” Duna replied.

“The Conchirri...” he began.

“Were never there,” Duna stated. “We studied every record from the war, including theirs. The Conchirri Xenophobes did not do this. We do not believe it was bio-ordnance.”

“Then who or what?”

“We don’t know, but such ordnance would kill all life, not just sentients, ours and yours,” Duna replied. “Like all other survivors, I was off-world, on sabbatical, when the disaster struck. I am old and past fathering offspring, though we live much longer than your species. I know Enshar, our people, our world, better than any creature alive. I’m best suited to chance a landing and find some defense against whatever murdered our world.”

“The peoples of the Confederacy are weary of the expense and disruption of war. They are demobilizing

quickly, too quickly in a universe containing the Dua-Denlenn and the unknown. Your fleet and your people will not risk lives and treasure on the closed book of my race. I cannot go unless I hire a vessel. You have a powerful warship and a reputation for escaping tight spots, and finally, you may be the only being I can find who is as desperate as I.”

“And if you cannot find someone?” Fenaday asked.

The alien leaned back again. “The Confederacy has been kind, particularly your species and the Denlenn, as if they feel they have to make up for their half-brothers in their systems, the Dua-Denlenn. Even the Moroks have helped.” Duna hesitated. “But you are aliens and you cannot understand, though you mean well. Without our homeworld we will not survive. There is no separate word for our homeworld and the members of our race. Without Enshar, there will be no Enshari people.

“If we fail, I at least will leave my bones on Enshar,” Belwin Duna whispered.

The eyes showed no emotion but the human could see the fur ripple and twitch. *Enshari tears*, he wondered?

The Enshari produced a data disk from its jacket. “So, Human, here is everything: the contract, payments, authorizations, and a file marked confidential that I would ask you to read before you reject my offer. You may reach me at the Hotel Paradise. Think hard on it, Captain. For if you and I do not hunt the same trail, then it may be that we will hunt no trail separately. Humans do not live long, as we measure it, but you may live long enough to see the last of my kind.

“Good night, Captain.” The Enshari slid out of the chair and left without looking back. Four large humans quickly flanked him. Fenaday looked up and right to face a Denlenn, the same one who had stood at the bar earlier.

The slender Denlenn looked down at Fenaday from his nearly two-meter height. In low light he could almost pass for human, save for eyes that resembled those of a terrestrial cat, yellow or bronze, set in a tan face with skin that looked like supple leather. Those eyes caught and reflected the light, seeming to glow. His rough hair falling to his shoulders gave him a leonine look. This Denlenn wore a Confed flight jacket over civilian clothes. Badges and decorations spoke of hard service during the war.

“Help us,” he said in a voice rich in alien accents. “Help Belwin. He is a fine being and night closes in on his people.”

Fenaday shrugged. “If I even thought there was a chance...”

“I will tell you a thing that no one else alive knows,” the alien said. “The zone of death does not reach a hundred thousand meters any longer.”

As the Denlenn turned to leave, Fenaday seized its fine-boned arm. The Denlenn spun back, offended.

Fenaday stared at him, hard-eyed, “More.”

The Denlenn studied him, then casually broke Fenaday’s hold in a move that told of extra joints a human did not possess. Pulling back a chair, the long-bodied alien folded himself into it.

“A hyperbolic orbit,” he began, without preamble, “low, not aimed for a landing, but low, at the maximum speed of a *Dauntless* Scout. The zone does not go a hundred thousand meters high.” He paused, took a deep breath. “I made an illegal side trip when my ship was diverted to the Enshar system to pick up the last satellite data. I concealed my real purpose, allowing others to think I was gone on a joyride. In the months following the fall of the Conchirri, discipline was lax. I sabotaged my recorder, then made a run at the planet.

“I have breathed my last as a freeman if you are faithless,” the Denlenn said. “My service would court-martial me at the least.”

“Why didn’t Duna tell me this?” Fenaday asked.

“He does not know and must not,” the Denlenn replied. “If word leaked out, there would be no stopping his people. What if I am wrong? It would be by my hand that a whole race might perish. No. I must be certain.”

“Why? What’s this to you?” Fenaday asked.

After another long silence the alien replied. “Belwin was my teacher at the university on Denla. We became great friends.

“Then the war broke out. I served on the fleet carrier, *Empress Aran*. During the first assault on the Conchirri homeworld, a particle beam hit my fighter and I was wounded. On my release from the hospital ship *Solace*, I was assigned to an escort carrier, the *Earhart*. I flew with the first Enshar expedition. Half my squadron died there, many shipmates, the brother of my best friend.

“I rejoined the *Aran* for the final assault on the Conchirri homeworld. I have watched a species wiped out of existence in this war. For all that the Conchirri richly deserved their fate, it is a terrible thing to behold. I will fight to not see such a thing again.”

Fenaday studied the alien. “Big difference between a hyperbolic orbit and a landing.”

The Denlenn stood, rising on his arms. The extra joints made Fenaday queasy just watching. “The zone does not reach a hundred thousand meters,” he repeated. “Read the chip, read the confidential file on it. I risked my life to obtain both.” He began to walk away.

“Are you going?” asked Fenaday.

The alien half turned. “My name is Telisan,” he replied and left.

## Chapter Three

Fenaday paid the tab and hurried back to his room at the Spacer's Lodge near the outer edge of Marsport's dome, facing the industrial zone. He locked the door, turning on the battery of jamming devices he kept secreted in the room. Only then did he pull out an unlinked portable computer to scan the data disk.

Authorizations came first. They looked authentic. He'd have them checked by a lawyer if need be. Next came the contract. Fenaday gaped at the figure, one billion Confederation credits, exclusive trading rights to Enshar, citizenship, diplomatic immunity, protection from extradition for any past misdeeds, free docking and port privileges. All possible assistance in the search for Lisa Fenaday, including support for Fringe Star expeditions.

"Pity all I have to do for it is die," he muttered.

A knock at his door interrupted his reading. Fenaday cut off the computer. He picked up a lock-blade knife, snapped it open and tucked it in his back belt, wishing he'd been able to smuggle in something more lethal. He checked the outside monitor. A middle-aged human stood outside, bulky, once very strong, dark-skinned, balding, and utterly unremarkable. With a pang, Fenaday remembered his wife telling him what great spies undistinguished people made. Somehow he knew this was such a person. It fitted too well with the night's developments. He opened the door warily.

"Captain Fenaday?" asked the man in a deep, pleasant voice.

"You know that," Fenaday countered. "Are you Foreign Office, or my wife's old service?"

The man smiled suddenly, teeth bright in the dark face. “Yes. The branch doesn’t matter. You can call me, Mandela.”

“That’s not your real name,” Fenaday said wearily.

“Nope,” said the man, “one of my heroes. Can I come in?”

“I suppose it could be worse,” Fenaday said. “On second thought, I suspect it is worse.”

“Captain Robert Fenaday,” Mandela repeated, entering the room and examining it casually, “of the Fenadays of New Eire. That’s quite a name. Your people turned their first-landing privileges into land and later, into interstellar shipping. The Shamrock Line’s banner became quite famous as your family clawed its way to wealth and power. Not too interested in sharing that wealth and power though. Your great-grandfather opposed the original Articles of Confederation.”

“Did you come here to give me a history lesson?” Fenaday snapped.

Mandela seated himself on the most comfortable chair, placing his briefcase on the table. “Shall I cut to the chase, or do you want to go through the motions first?”

“The chase, by all means,” replied Fenaday, leaning against a table where he could watch the door and the one window.

“Good. I may even get home in time for the game. I know you met Belwin Duna and I know why.”

Fenaday raised an eyebrow. “And you don’t want me to help him.”

“On the contrary, Captain. We very much want you to help him. We can’t insist on such a suicide mission. However, we can give you additional incentives to go and additional resources, the like of which you never imagined.”

“Why?” Fenaday asked. “No bullshit, why?”

Mandela smiled. “No bullshit. Every planetary government in the Confederacy worries about Enshar. We don’t know what happened. We don’t know if it will happen again. There’s a threat out there, Fenaday. It has to be understood and if possible, controlled.”

“Send the Space Forces.”

“And risk having all those nasty pictures from orbit repeated for the folks back home?” Mandela returned. “All over the Daily Vid and the Times? Reporters and Congressman howling about why ‘Our Boys and Girls’ are being sacrificed for foreign worlds after all we lost in the war? Nope, it’s an election year, Fenaday, bad for the President.”

“Do it covert,” said Fenaday.

“Plug in your brain, Fenaday. Every surviving Enshari is waiting on Duna’s report. If he isn’t allowed to go or dies before he gets there, we face mass suicides, or they send another Enshari. Same problems for the President with the newsies.”

“So,” Fenaday began, “a highly expendable privateer, who you guys don’t like anyway...”

“Civilians ships running around with chain-guns and mass drivers are a loose end and a menace,” Mandela said. “Some have become private operators.”

“Not me,” Fenaday said. “My wife was ... is Confed.”

“Yeah,” Mandela replied after a few moments, “sorry.”

“Spare me.”

“Here’s the deal, Fenaday. For what it’s worth, I don’t like it. You may not be a private operator, but you skate damn close. There is the little matter of a Dua-Denlenn freighter and a surrendered crew murdered while under parole.”

Shock spread through Fenaday. Mandela knew *Sidhe’s* deepest secret.

“I don’t know...” Fenaday began.

“Now you can spare me,” Mandela fixed him with a glare as he settled further into the chair. “Your pet amazon, Shasti Rainhell, polished off the crew. You covered it up, even hired her as head of security. I’m sure she is quite effective. Not many people can boast a genetically enhanced assassin for their crew. Olympians are mercifully rare off their mad homeworld. Still, that’s accessory after the fact for you, beingslaughter, at best, for her. We are aware of your relationship with her.”

“Past tense,” said Fenaday tightly, wondering how in God’s name Mandela had ferreted that out.

“On the disk Duna gave you,” Mandela continued, “are plans Telisan stole for a new stealth electromagnetic emissions masking program. Doubtless he hoped it might help you sneak up on Enshar and whatever killed everyone. He needn’t have bothered. We’ll give your ship a far better EME holosystem. All factory assembled, even has a warranty.

“You’ll have trouble getting a crew and keeping it once they figure out where you’re going. We will give you additional people.

“Finally, we’ll add to that cash offer. We’ll throw in pardons for anything you and your command crew have done to this point. Which is more than you have any idea of, in regard to Rainhell. It’s that big, Fenaday.”

“So, I take them within shuttle range of Enshar and stand off—” Fenaday began.

Mandela laughed. “No, Fenaday. It’s too easy for an accident to occur. A shuttle explosion, perhaps? You’re not going to drop a decorated war hero and a Nobel Laureate on Enshar and watch the show. You’ll scout Enshar before they land. You personally, so we know there won’t be any accidents.”

“You think I’d do that?” Fenaday demanded, his lips drawn thin.



“No one pays me to think or to guess,” Mandela said, his smile fading. “My job is to know. For what it’s worth, I don’t think you would do it, but there are others on your ship who might. One of them is very pretty and very tall.”

“I could fight you in court,” Fenaday said. He walked to the window, looking out of it in feigned indifference, but careful not to let Mandela see the knife in his belt.

Mandela looked amused. “You got any friends left, Fenaday? Big friends with influence? You got money stashed away for real lawyers? You’ll be fighting us in our courts. I don’t even have to rig it to convict you on stock and securities fraud, committed when you sold off the Shamrock line. Then there’s the less savory stuff: gun running to Morokat, smuggling, illegal intelligence gathering, sheltering deserters, taking that condemned Frokossi prince off-world. He was declared a traitor. Do you want to be extradited to a Frokossi court on a political engineering charge and try out that defense?”

“Of course you might win,” Mandela continued, “but you’ll be broke and disgraced. As for Rainhell, whatever she is or isn’t to you, she goes away. The charges against her just start with murdering prisoners under parole. Assuming she decides to surrender into custody, which I doubt.”

“Christ,” Fenaday muttered, as Mandela put a data chip on the table.

“There’s a number on that chip. Call it and say the word ‘Faust’ if you’re going to accept. Our specialists will find you. You’ll still have to recruit your own crew, but we and Duna will advance you sufficient funds to make it possible.”

“Faust,” Mandela repeated as he stood, “and we make all your problems go away.”

“Lisa,” Fenaday said suddenly.

Mandela looked back from the door. “I won’t mess with you. You got everything we had. Lisa Fenaday was one of ours, one of the best. We looked and we still keep an ear out. Didn’t you ever wonder why your bribes and wire-taps worked?”

Fenaday snapped around startled.

Mandela opened the door.

“You forgot your case,” Fenaday called.

“It’s yours,” Mandela said breezily, “your jamming equipment isn’t worth jack. Instructions are in the case.” He closed the door behind him.

“Son of bitch,” Fenaday said. After a minute, he went to the single window and sat on the ledge. For a cheap room, the view was not bad. He could see part of the sandy Martian landscape, serene even in the weak sun. A hundred years of terraforming had raised pressure, temperature and oxygen levels to where a small re-breather mask allowed humans to endure the outside for short periods. The Martian sky remained pink in the daytime and the stars blazed brighter than in Earth’s night sky. Mars was still colder than hell.

He could also see the landing apron of the western edge of the port. A small freighter lifted off, the type the Shamrock Line used in another lifetime. He sat there for three hours watching the rusty sand blow and the occasional movement of ships and personnel in the distance.

Fenaday’s thoughts roamed over the years, the ones past and the ones seeming to lie empty before him. He was broke and alone. Family and friends had fallen away over the years—due to the war, the bitter breakup over the Shamrock Line, or the natural drift when one leaves the mainstream of life.

“How did I get here?” he asked the room. “How in the world did I get here?”

Her face came to him as if in answer, the details blurry, which frightened him. He'd first seen Lisa standing on the verandah, at one of his father's legendary business parties. Slender, with blue-eyes and dark-red hair, she wore a filmy white dress that floated around her in the summer breeze. Everyone else disappeared, until all that was left was her face, her voice, and her laugh. They created a minor scandal by disappearing from the party into the gardens.

"More idle playboy nonsense from my spoiled son," his father had growled when he learned of their relationship. He was wrong. Lisa differed from everyone else he had known. She held a commission in the Confederate Space Forces, Field Intelligence Section.

His father opposed the romance. Fenaday's hands unconsciously clenched as he remembered the fury his father's belittling of Lisa brought out in him, a rage that daunted even his domineering father, "The Fenaday."

"Well and enough," the elder Fenaday said, just before it came to blows. "I should know better than to cross a man where his woman is concerned."

Not many people stood up to the elder Fenaday and his son had been late in starting. Robert came to suspect that his father was secretly pleased with the changes Lisa wrought in his son.

They married in the fall of their second year together. Lisa stayed in the military despite his wealth. He accepted it as the price of having her. Then, humans and the six other member races of the loose Confederacy collided with the Conchirri, a nightmarish species of intelligent carnivores, implacably hostile to all other life. Scientists speculated the behavior was sociological or religious. The explanation was what sophisticated people afraid to believe in true evil fell back on.

When Lisa left for combat duty, Fenaday stayed to help his father keep the Shamrock Line afloat. Losses in ships

and lives mounted. The elder Fenaday, in bad health from a lifetime of hard living, aged rapidly before his son's eyes. Decisions fell to Robert more and more often.

In the second year of the war, Fenaday saw a Confed aircar land and raced to the door, reaching it before the butler. A nervous young officer in dress-blacks stood there.

"Lt. Commander Elizabeth Fenaday," he said, voice cracking with strain, "is three months overdue and presumed lost on a classified mission. The *Blackbird* left a forward base just before a Conchirri cruiser attacked the outpost. The base and the reasons she left charted space are gone.

"The Secretary of War wishes to express...."

Fenaday stared at him. *This isn't real*, he said to himself. *I'll wake up any second now. I always do.*

The young officer left the letter and a neatly folded gold flag with the butler.

Fenaday's father died two weeks later. Robert buried him on the estate. A few friends came by and offered useless advice and hollow comforts. Most had gone, fled to the safer inner worlds. Fenaday had no brothers or sisters; his mother had died when he was three. A throng of lesser relations came to the estate seeking advantages under the cover of consolation. He sent them away.

His Uncle Patrick had glared in contempt before leaving. "Aye, go sulk. Your old man would have got a gun and bagged a Xenos."

The words raced round and round in his mind till the early hours of the next morning when he stood on the veranda where they first met. "Lisa," he said finally, "I think I'll go get that gun now."

At sunrise he put everything up for sale. The government and the Shamrock board tried to stop him, but now he was "The Fenaday" and forced the sale through. He learned of a captured starship languishing in a Confed yard,

a Conchirri *Tokkoro* class Frigate-leader taken in a raid. Fenaday christened her *Sidhe*, after the ancient elvish sprits of Ireland. He ordered her painted in the cheapest color the dockyard had. In bitter irony, the color was blood-red.

Letters of Marque and Reprisal followed and Robert Xavier Fenaday became a privateer. Fenaday, who had rarely gone without anything, learned about want as everything went for the ship. He signed whomever he could, paring the misfits, at least those that he could live without.

*Sidhe* launched into the war as a hired escort, priority cargo runner, anything that kept Fenaday near the Fringe Stars where Lisa disappeared. Two years passed in his search, but he found no sign of Lisa or her ship. Fenaday lost track of the spaceport bars in which he hunted wild rumors of lost ships. Handling a board room or trade negotiation hadn't taught him how to live in the world he now sentenced himself to.

Confed fleets beat the Conchirri out of the lost colonies, back into their space and finally to their homeworld, where the Conchirri fought until exterminated. His enemies were extinct, but Fenaday was no closer to learning Lisa's fate.

Fenaday shook himself out of remembrance to find that Sol had long since set. He finally turned on his private computer and spent an hour reading the data chips. Afterwards, he walked to his dresser and fished out a tiny, precious possession. He opened the small silver box and gazed at the photo of his wife, studying her dark red hair and startling blue-gray eyes. He returned to the window and set it there.

"What should I do, Lisa?" he asked. "Mandela's offer seems like the only way to carry on. It also seems like certain death. Where, Lisa? Where do I go from here?" The picture gave back only silence now, where once it had

spoken hope to him. Fenaday slowly closed it and stood turning to the desktop communicator.

He made two calls. The first was brief; to the number Mandela left him.

“Faust,” he said. The videophone emitted a beep and the words ‘video denied’ flashed on screen. Then the line went inactive. He let out a long, shuddering breath. One way or another, life as he knew it had just ended.

He placed the second call to the suite of Belwin Duna at the Paradise. He wasn’t surprised when Telisan’s image flicked on the screen. Duna appeared on the screen a second later. “Yes, Captain,” said Duna.

“If I can get a crew,” said Fenaday, “we go. I’ll call you in two days. We’ll meet Friday at twenty hundred hours at the Excalibur near Dome Top. You’re buying.”

“God bless you, Captain Fenaday,” Duna exclaimed. “You will not regret this.”

“I know,” Fenaday said. “Only the living have regrets.”

“Now, now I can sleep,” Duna said. “Enshar... Enshar.” He wandered out of view of the monitor.

Fenaday found himself looking at Telisan.

“Hyperbolic, huh?” Fenaday said.

The Denlenn smiled, human-like. “As your people used to say in the war with the Xenos, ‘Hoo-rah.’” The screen faded.

Fenaday put his head back and laughed for the first time in weeks.

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