

Kris Longknife Audacious

by Mike Shepherd

Something is rotten on New Eden

To shoot or not to shot,

that is the question for Kris Longknife

Silly question.

One

Lieutenant Kris Longknife, sometimes styled Princess of Wardhaven, hated running in high heels. To make matters worse, the street here was paved with uneven cobblestones ... and they were wet!

The street was also empty. The brick buildings were five and six story high relics of New Edens early days four hundred years ago. Rehabilitated and converted to government offices, they'd emptied at close-of-business with amazing speed. The restaurants and small "shoppes" that serviced them had also closed down for the day.

Kris had the place to herself — except for tonight's assassins.

The ratcheting back of an arming hammer on an automatic weapon reminded her that she was once again the hunted.

Kris dodged to the right, heading across the street. Forcing assassins into a deflection shot had often kept her alive. One "shoppe" had an open alcove for an entrance. She sharpened her angle and redoubled her speed despite complaining ankles.

And ducked inside the cover not a second too soon.

A spray of rock shards told her the stone front of the store was real. Only scratches showed on the large display window where they'd repulsed shots as well. A glance at the name on the glass told Kris she'd been lucky ... again. Brevel's Fine Jewelry had paid for bulletproofing.

Kris took all this in as she dropped to the ground and reached for her service automatic.

Abby, Kris's erstwhile maid, had insisted that she show off her figure tonight. "Let the newsies see it once, then we can do what we want." The clingy burgundy sheath had been padded so Kris almost looked like she had a bust, and it fit nicely over Kris's armored underthings. The short slit up the side reminded her to take graceful little princess steps tonight. Now it was a much less modest long rip; Kris easily got at her weapon.

Kris rested her automatic on the brick pavement and edged it around the corner, then waited for Nelly, Kris's pet computer ... worth more than several blocks of the surrounding real estate ... to paint a sight picture on the retina of Kris's eyeball.

Nothing happened.

"Nelly, where's my target?"

"Kris, we are still being jammed. I can not read the gun's transmissions."

"Still!" Kris spat in dismay. "Short ranged personal networks *can't* be jammed."

"YES, MA'AM. I KNOW, KRIS, BUT WE ARE." The computer voice in Kris's head conveyed disappointment at her failure, but Nelly was absolutely sure of her conclusion. Between woman and computer there was a direct hook-up. Kris hadn't known when she signed for the hardware that she'd face this, but she was grateful she had.

Scowling at what couldn't be – but was – Kris waited. When the next blast of rapid fire ended, Kris risked using her own eyeball to draw a bead on the gunner. In formal black tie and tux, he seemed a bit chunky for the tights he wore in place of the more conservative pantaloons that were in this year for men in Garden City.

Kris put two rounds in the center of his chest.

That only drove his aim high. His next burst smashed windows above Kris ... government offices didn't rate armor. Shards rained down on Kris, including one that speared her gun hand.

She bit back the pain – and raised her aim. The next three rounds did things to his face that Kris didn't need to see. She'd been there, done that ... and had a long lineup of gory memories for her nightmares. She scanned left for a second shooter.

He'd skidded to a halt poorly, dropping down to one knee. A hand on the cobbles steadied him. He whirled around and headed back the way he'd come.

Kris put two rounds in his head but all it did was knock him down.

"Smart man, armored toupé," Nelly observed dryly.

Kris's long ringlets were also borrowed for the night – and similarly fortified. She took off running for the corner while the assassin picked himself up and decided if the game was worth the cost.

"Where is Jack?" Kris growled.

Normally her chief of security was attached to her at the hip and full of nanny advice. As a Navy lieutenant she outranked his Marine first lieutenant. She should have been able to ignore him. Only after she made the mistake of drafting him did she learn that he had absolute say over her security matters. Which he insisted extended much further than she found plausible.

They argued a lot.

Sometimes it was actually fun.

At the moment, Kris would love to have him to argue with.

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Tonight's assassination attempt had been layered. First the attendant in the ladies room ... one of the few places Jack didn't insist on escorting her. After putting that overly helpful and far too deadly woman to sleep, Kris found the door locked and even Nelly unable to do anything about it. That blasted jamming.

So Kris threw a chair through the low back window.

Only to find some very fancy dressed men waiting for her.

She'd kicked the closest one in the groin before he realized this Navy lieutenant was not the usual damsel, given to easy swoons when in distress. Both guys went down in a ball and Kris took off running for her life ... or at least freedom.

Which frequently meant the same. It had for poor little Eddy.

The front of the Hotel Landfall had been a zoo of newsies, cameras, and security. The back was quiet as a Buddhist Temple, but Kris lacked the time to contemplate. To her right, at the end of the alley, a car waited with two more thugs. She headed left at full speed.

Running footsteps and the crash of several garbage cans told her it was going to be a long night.

At the end of the alley, Kris found a guy in a full length, leather coat taking a leak. Bad timing. While he scrambled to finish with one hand, he clutched inside his coat with the other, grabbing for what Kris suspected was an illegal weapon on this wonderland of planets, New Eden.

Or just plain Eden as the local's insisted.

Kris didn't wait to see what he came up with. She chopped him on the side of his neck to put him down.

She'd kept running and been running every since.

As Kris ran for the corner, behind her came more sounds of the chase. Either her second pursuer was finding the nerve to keep this up, or whoever was paying for this hit had not stinted on numbers. The quality his money bought had yet to be determined.

Maybe it was the first time for them.

It wasn't for Kris Longknife.

As she neared the corner, a gruff, "You're blocking my fire lane," greeted her in Jack's wonderful voice.

Wonderful for at least the moment.

Kris went wide around the corner, then skidded into a turn and a stop. Jack knelt there, in dress red and blues, service automatic covering the street. Kris took the situation in as she caught her breath.

Ineye's Qck-Stp. "Lunch in five minutes or it's on me," probably didn't have armored glass, but solid bricks covered the lower half of his store front.

Kris ducked behind Jack. "You got a handkerchief or a bandage?" Kris asked as she eyed the half inch glass sliver in her gun hand.

"Bandage in my hip pocket," Jack said, and snapped off two rounds. There was a shout out there and the clatter of a weapon bouncing along the cobblestones.

Kris located the bandage, drew the sliver with her teeth, then spat it out as she wrapped the bleeding hand if not expertly, at least with experience. "What took you so long?"

"How am I supposed to know how long you need to take a leak, put that outfit back together and powder your too large nose. Your opinion, not mine," he said, and snapped off two more shots. No noise rewarded him this time. A stream of bullets stitched the far window glass but failed to make it through to the window above Kris's head. Other rounds ricocheted off the pavement.

"I am not slow in the head," Kris snapped. Well, there was the time she'd planted bombs to blow up a space station's sewage treatment plant, but that was a special occasion.

"Besides," Jack continued, "the Hotel Landfall did not take well to me shooting the door off their ladies room. Insisted I wait for someone with a key. And asked dark questions about whether or not I had a permit for this thing." Jack fired two more rounds to punctuate the reference to his Corps issued weapon, authorized on Wardhaven ... but illegal on a mature, civilized place like Eden.

Kris had been naive enough to believe that line in the official "Welcome to Eden" handbook given her by the inattentive secretary in the ambassador's office. But not naive enough for her and Jack to leave their back-ups at home on this night of Kris's coming out as the visiting Princess from the Rim.

"You'd have thought they'd give us a couple of free passes," she grumbled. "Two or three quiet nights out."

Kris's complaint was cut short by the roar of a car engine. A gray sedan shot around the corner up from them, an automatic pistol already out the window. But the gunner was busy holding on tight as the car took the corner, giving Kris the first shot.

A major mistake.

Kris aimed one for the gunner, then quickly spaced ten across the front window.

The car wobbled in its turn. Then slammed into a fire hydrant. Water geysered up, showering everything, including the car. No motion there.

"Somebody's got to notice that," Kris said.

"Glad we've heard from the motor brigade," Jack said, then followed it by three shoots down the street he was covering. The storm sewer was backing up fast, turning the street corner beside them into a lake. Water now lapped at Kris's very expensive if nearly nonexistent shoes.

Jack snapped off two more shots, the last of which brought a scream from someone. "Unless you're planning on walking on water tonight, your Princesshood, what say we make tracks?"

Kris was already running. She didn't need to be told twice.

At least, not tonight.

The Wardhaven Embassy was just a few blocks further down, its gray stones looking wonderfully bullet proof. Still, Kris figured they'd spent about as much time on this street as they dare and zigged right at the next block. Halfway down that block, in mid-street, Kris's luck ran out – again.

The guy in the leather coat came racing around the corner, so intent on beating feet to get a shot at where Kris's back had been that it took him a second to notice her front. Kris and Jack put a pair of rounds into his jacket.

It must have been armored, the shots just sent him sprawling backwards, his feet flying into the air like he'd stepped on a banana peel. His gun clattered half-way across the street.

Kris took a hard left. This government building had a well sheltered entrance. Surprise, it wasn't locked. Kris held it open for Jack, then followed him through.

"Nelly, can you lock that door?" Kris bit out

"No. That jamming, Kris."

"I'll belt it shut." Jack whipped off his issue belt and began tying the door handles together. "Check the back door."

Kris galloped the length of the foyer, past a bank of elevators and a tiny coffee stand. Through the glass she could see the front entrance to the Embassy. She tried the door

"It won't budge," Kris shouted over her shoulder.

"Or unlock," Nelly added.

"Shoot it," Jack said, racing for Kris.

She did. It flew open. Kris took the right side of the granite-sheltered entrance.

The street looked empty. Across it lay the embassy; a stately colonnade lorded it over the center of its many wings. An inviting driveway lead to the formal greeting area within the columns. Kris just wanted to slip into the basement entry of the nearest wing. Only an empty white guardhouse with a red roof offered anything like protection. The

black, wrought iron fence looked strong enough to hold back a mob of very angry cub scouts. On second evaluation, make that pre-schoolers.

Jack joined her on the left. "I don't see anything."

"But tonight we don't usually see them coming," Kris said.

"Lucky amateurs. Make for the guard booth."

They did. Kris covering right, Jack left, they dashed across the street and piled into the stall. "Will this stop anything?" Kris asked Jack, his face on top of hers and tantalizingly close.

"I'm told it will. If it doesn't, I'm writing the captain of the Marine detachment a very angry letter."

"We should live so long," Kris muttered and tried to sit up enough to look out. The arm around Jack managed to stay there.

The wrought iron gate began to slide close. Across the street, three men rounded the corner. Ugly looking machine pistols came up from under long black coats.

They proceeded to hose down the guard post.

Kris raised her automatic, but Jack pulled her hand down.

"Watch this," he said with a wide grin.

The stall sheltering them didn't puncture or even rock from a hit. Jack disentangled himself from Kris just enough for both of them to get a good look out the guard post's open door.

There was a faint sheen between the flat black of the fence's iron bars. There, suspended in wicked lines, were the incoming 4-mm rounds. As Kris watched, more lines crossed and criss-crossed the space between the bars. The darts that hit the "wrought iron" bars bounced off.

"That's a spider silk mesh between the ceramic bars!" Kris chortled. "Our gentle looks are deceiving."

"Like a certain princess," Jack said, climbing off of Kris.

She turned a sigh into a grunt as she helped herself up. Foul words came from across the street. A soft whirling sound came from the top of the guard post's red roof as a camera unfolded itself and turned to take pictures of the shouting, impotent assassins.

"I want copies of those," Kris said.

"Let's talk to the duty sergeant about that."

With a backward wave, that only brought more foul language and frustrated fire, Kris headed up the driveway. Jack cut the walk short as they came to the steps down to the basement entrance of the nearest wing. The door opened for them. LET ME GUESS, WE'RE OUTSIDE THE JAMMING AREA? Kris said.

OR THEY TURNED IT OFF. Nelly answered.

Just to the right, off the wide hallway, a marine sergeant sat his post, monitoring several screens. "Glad you made it," he said, without looking up.

"Glad we made it, too," Kris snapped, a regal frown coming tight to her mouth. "Don't we call out the guard, or come to the aid of distressed citizens any more?"

"We are not permitted to carry weapons on the streets of the capital, Lieutenant," came from behind her. She turned to see Gunny Brown, shipshape and starched as if it was oh nine early, not twenty-two something late. The buck sergeant on duty kept his eyes on the screens and let the senior NCO take over the education of a certain junior officer.

Kris sighed. Yes, this was New Eden, or Eden if you prefer. Yes this was old humanity, four hundred years settled. Not the raw rim of space, two hundred years since planet fall, like Wardhaven. Or even rawer rim of human settlement where Kris had spent much of her three year Navy career.

Kris marshaled her thoughts to logic, not an easy thing when the adrenaline was pumping. "One would think automatic weapon fire deserved attention no matter where it came from."

"I fully concur with you, Your Highness." Smart Gunny. "However, this Marine's orders and my orders are logged and signed. Our detachment is here to protect Wardhaven's sovereign property and do it smartly, Lieutenant."

Before Kris could snap back a rejoinder she'd regret, Jack cut in. "Come morning, I'll have a talk with your detachment's captain. See what we can work out. I definitely want the services of a larger escort. And a female Marine to go where I shouldn't. It's either that or your maid is going to be spending her nights out with us."

"I should hope not." Said maid said, plucking a dart from the back of Jack's dress red blouse. "Better warn your dry cleaner to check for the rest of these."

"Didn't duck fast enough," Kris said with a grin.

Abby pulled a dart from Kris's rear. "You didn't either."

Kris swallowed her grin.

"And look at what you did to that brand new and very expensive dress. My, my, girl. What am I going to do with you?"

"Draw me a warm bath," Kris said, hopefully.

"The tub is filling. Good thing I didn't go out tonight like I planned," Abby said, putting a guiding hand on Kris's elbow and steering her down the hall. "I put my feet up for a minute to relax and you sneak out and make a mess of yourself."

Kris had made a mistake. She didn't have a nanny, she had two. Jack to nag and nanny her outside the perimeter fence, and Abby to do the same inside.

Not for the first, nor the last time did Kris wonder just what was so special about being a princess. So far, all it did was paint a big target on her back. Though, come to think about it, she'd been dodging assassins long before joining the Navy.

She'd been ten when the first attempt was made ... and Eddy six. She survived. Little Eddy hadn't.

Kris made it back to her room in one piece. Quickly, she was out of her dress, the ceramic strengthened underalls and the spider silk bodysuit. She was in the water and under the bubbles before the shakes caught up with her.

"You got the trembles, girl?" Abby demanded, a foul look on her face as she surveyed the damage done to tonight's gown.

"No," Kris lied.

"The whirlpool may be riling up that water, girl, but your shoulders are doing their own little shake and roll. You wanna talk to your Mama Abby?"

"I'm fine," Kris insisted, sinking into the tub up to her neck. "I'm fine."

Kris's mother hired Abby to make Kris presentable. She'd also put forth more than half an effort to provide some of the mothering that Kris never got from her mom. Still, it was now old news that Abby was on more than one payroll.

She also sold news about Kris.

It wasn't unusual for servants to pass along tidbits about their employers to gossip mongers. Abby, however, sold her gossip for top dollar to various intelligence services around human space. Even Kris's own Wardhaven Intelligence subscribed! Kris had

chosen to look for the silver lining. Now she got a copy of Abby's reports and used them for her own. Still, Kris was having a hard time trusting Abby with certain things.

Like who did Kris think was behind tonight's fun?

It had been an amateur effort; Jack was right about that. The shooters had not been that prepared. Had whoever bought this gone for a bargain basement special? Or was what passed locally for hit men that out of practice? Kris frowned in thought. Certainly, that line was the one both the ambassador and the local police would want to believe.

There was just one hole in that story. The jammer.

Jamming a major network was not supposed to be possible. Jamming a computer with Nelly's power was supposed to be in the realm of fantasy. Still, Nelly was being jammed – and had been jammed before. Aunty Tru, Wardhaven's retired Chief of Info Warfare ... and the woman who'd helped Kris with her math and computer homework and the upgrading of Nelly since first grade ... was working on the problem.

Tru had no solution to it yet.

One thing was clear. Only someone with a whole planet of software hacking under their thumb could have pulled this off.

The Peterwalds had eighty planets last time Kris checked.

And the last time she'd been jammed, there'd been a Peterwald in the mix.

Kris sighed. The trembling had stopped; she reached for a towel Abby had left within reach. She'd better get a good night sleep ... as good a night's sleep as she could. Tomorrow she'd have to start hunting for a Peterwald. Last one that crossed her had ended up dead. She hadn't exactly killed him. She just shot his ship up and he ended up dead. A fine point she couldn't expect his father or other relatives to think much about.

Better to find this Peterwald before he ... or she ... found her.

“The ambassador wants to see you after the nine o’clock staff meeting,” Chief Beni hollered Kris’s way as she entered the military dining room for breakfast. The embassy, though huge on the outside, was really pressed for space. Now that Devolution had turned each of the Society of Humanity’s six hundred planets into independent and sovereign nations, the Wardhaven Mission to Eden was splitting at the seams.

Wardhaven, under the benign leadership of the recently elected King Raymond I ... grampa to Kris ... had about a hundred planets forming the United Sentients, or maybe it would be a Commonwealth, or Association. No one was quite sure. The politicians from those one hundred planets were still debating the constitution on Pitt’s Hope.

But what it meant in the real world was that the Wardhaven Embassy on Eden did work for all hundred planets. Kris had been told she’d be buying paperclips, pens, and the likes. “The likes” included business computers and their software. Usually not the actual items, but the right to reproduce them locally.

So someone in the embassy’s administrative branch had settled on one dining room for all the military on staff. Not a wardroom for the officers and a mess for the enlisted personnel. Nope, one for all, and all in one.

So the chief usually had the hot dope for Kris even before she had her hot cakes, or bran muffin, or whatever.

Kris nodded and went down the chow line quickly, putting her breakfast on white bone China rather than the metal trays reserved for the other ranks. Done, she joined the officers at their tables in the back of the room. You could tell the wardroom area. It had napkins and linen table cloths, rather than the bare table tops of the enlisted swine.

Kris had gotten a formal invitation to join the diplomatic dining room. Maybe she would ... later. For now, she preferred the company of the line beasts and their officers.

“I understand you had a rather more exciting evening than you signed on for,” Captain DeVar, commander of the Marine detachment, said as she settled in the vacant chair next to Jack.

“Jack tell you all about it?”

“In quite detail,” the Marine lieutenant said.

“It sounded like a well executed withdrawal,” the Marine captain said, dryly.

“A running gunfight,” Kris said, “them gunning. Me running.

“Yes, there was that unexpected aspect,” Captain DeVar said, raising an eyebrow. “You were actually running.”

“Can we talk about them gunning,” Kris didn’t quite screech.

“I’ve already asked,” Jack said, “for four of his hulking marines to accompany us next time out. And two female marines to keep an eye on you in the head.”

The Marine captain frowned. “There is that matter of the local legality of anything more dangerous than a paperclip.” He punctuated that with a smile ... not a bad look on him.

“Isn’t that why we brought Penny along? To liaison between us and the local constabulary?” Jack said.

At that moment, the subject of their conversation entered the dining room. Lieutenant Penny Pasley had started her career in Intelligence, but her father had been a cop and hanging around Longknives quickly found her drawing on the easy way she had with local police officials. Today she had a sheaf of printouts under her arm, but she approached the steam tables first.

Kris concentrated on attacking her bran muffin.

As Penny settled at the table next to the Marine Captain, her face lost a thousand yard stare and took on a scowl. “That must have been quite a night, your sharpshooting Highness,” she said as she dumped the printouts on the table before them. “I woke up to reports from the Garden City P.D., Eden Bureau of Investigation, Secret Service and Park Service.”

“They glad she’s still alive?” Jack asked, fishing the Secret Service report from the pile and eyeing it with professional interest.

“How about hopping mad about the mess she made.”

“You must send them Her Highness’s regal regrets for not letting them kill her quietly,” the Marine captain said, not quite covering his grin with a napkin.

Penny pulled a short printout from the bottom. “A police lieutenant, ah, Martinez, offers to help you complete the necessary forms for carrying heat hereabouts.”

“There might be one level head among our nervous grannies.”

“Looks that way. Did you really blow up a water hydrant?”

“No, I got the driver of a car that was shooting at me. The fire hydrant put a stop to his car’s further involvement.”

“None of the reports mention a car around the hydrant.” Penny said, flipping through several of them.

“Any decent field lab should be able to tell whether metal has been knocked over or blown up,” Jack said.

“Don’t count on Eden cops to be that observant,” Abby said, entering the conversation. She’d come in the back door. Sometimes the maid ate in the officer area, sometimes in the enlisted section. Usually she was invisible in either. Kris made the mistake of ignoring Abby once ... for about a day.

“You’re from here,” Jack said.

“Yep.”

“How long you been gone?”

“Not nearly long enough,” Abby said, slipping into the chair next to Jack. She filched an orange from his breakfast and began to peel it with the dinner knife from Jack’s napkin.

“Think the cops might have changed in your absence?” Jack said, reaching for his banana before it also was requisitioned.

“They ain’t changed in human memory,” Abby snapped. “Don’t bet on the tiger to change its spots. You’ll lose every time.”

“Don’t tigers have strips,” Penny said.

“Maybe where you come from. But on Eden, they do things their way.”

“They,” Kris said. “Not ‘we?’”

“Baby ducks, ‘they’ are the main reason I left this place and, you may remember, said I didn’t want to come back. Ever.”

Kris had read up on Eden. The Chamber of Commerce had been rosy. The embassy hand-out was as optimistic as they come. The financial reports, even those available to a major stockholder in Nu Enterprises said things couldn’t be better.

So why last night’s little escapade?

One report on Eden was missing. Abby’s personal views. She hinted plenty, but when pushed, went silent. Just like now.

Kris pushed back from the table, her eyes narrowing. Around her, the group fell silent. Down the way from them, the table where Commander Malhoney was telling one of his long, rambling jokes broke into chuckles as he finally reached his punch line. He fit his undress whites like a small whale might, bulges here and there. In any Navy still applying up-or-out, he would long ago have been out. But the expansion left room for

men who had reached a certain level even if they never would exceed it. Now his table fell into the silence, furtively looking Kris's way.

Her Highness weighed the benefits of keeping secrets verses what she'd gain by inviting the whole crew into what lay ahead of her. She tossed a coin mentally and made her choice.

"I was told," Kris said slowly, voice low. The hush now spread from the officers to the enlisted. Even at the steam tables, the clatter seemed to continue on kitten toes. "That I'd made the Rim too dangerous for me. I was told that Eden was about the only place I could walk the streets in peace.

"Then last night it turns out I can't even take a piss without someone trying to perforate me." There were soft chuckles at that. The Marine Gunny Sergeant turned to the staff sergeant who'd had the duty last night; they exchanged winks.

"The last time Grampa Ray gave me one set of orders but dumped me into a totally different stew, it turned out that I was supposed to cook that stew and ignore the orders." Around her, there were grins at her family reference to King Raymond I, but the grins were quickly swallowed as Kris finished her thought.

"Since Eden clearly isn't the advertised paradise, I find myself wondering what I'm really supposed to get done here?"