

Kris Longknife – Defender,

by Mike Shepherd,

Life is full of decisions. It's time for Kris to make some hard ones.

One

“That was what was about to attack Alwa?” Granny Rita said. Once commodore of BatCruRon 16, she'd fought hopeless battles. Still, her voice held dismay as she surveyed the wreckage of the alien base ship.

“It was about twice this size before we took some bites out of it,” Lieutenant Commander, Her Royal Highness, Kris Longknife said. Herself no stranger to hopeless battles, she added. “And we're still quite a ways off. It will get bigger.”

Rita Nuu Longknife Ponce, former commodore and captain of the battlecruiser *Furious*, was the recognized leader of the humans, and uniformly called Granny Rita by both the heavy ones, us humans, and the indigenous inhabitants of Alwa, who were either the People, or the Light People.

Granny Rita turned to translate to the delegation of six Alwans who had come out to see and verify for all the unbelievable story Kris had told their Associations of Associations.

Privately, Granny Rita called them the assembly the flock of flocks, but she'd warned Kris never to say that where any Alwan might overhear.

Kris listened as Granny Rita and the Alwans clicked and cooed with maybe one word in five sounding familiar to Kris. It was a pigeon that they'd worked out over eighty years.

However, Nelly, Kris's not-very-personable computer, was working on a translator for the two people. Kris wondered if some of the peace that had been maintained for the last eighty years between the Alwans and the humans might have been helped by both sides' not fully understanding what the other side said.

When Nelly finished this effort, Kris would have to have a talk with her.

The six Alwans' movements were quick, almost jerky, as they moved around the forward lounge. Their arms and hands waved. Kris had a feeling that a couple of million years earlier, the flock would have taken flight at this news. Now, having given up most of their feathers as well as flight, they formed and re-formed groups of two or three, talking among themselves and rarely glancing at the view screen that showed the battered alien-invasion base.

This meeting was not being held on the USS *Wasp*'s bridge. The Alwans had taken in the intensity of the bridge crew at their work and immediately expressed distress to Granny Rita. Kris had offered the Forward Lounge with its four huge screens. Since Kris's staff were all equipped with Nelly or one of her children, Kris was confident they could do anything that needed doing while letting the Alwans take in the familiar activities of humans eating, drinking and, in general, enjoying themselves in the familiar surroundings of a restaurant.

And now, thanks to the magic of Katsu's wizardry with Smart Metal™, Kris was able to separate the restaurant from her transferred Tac Center with a transparent wall. Yep, Katsu-san could make Smart Metal™ clear as glass!

Kris missed him already, but Katsu said he had trained the *Wasp*'s ship maintainers as well as he could. He wanted to get back to Musashi and his job at Mitsubishi Heavy Space Industry; his head was already full of ideas for making the next class of ships even better. Thus, buzzing with new ideas, he joined the IMS *Sakura* for the long voyage back to human space.

Kris hated the idea that the *Wasp* was all by itself clear on the other side of the galaxy. Still, there was no question folks back home needed to know that the sacrifice of their Fleet of Discovery had saved the world they fought for. Even more, the strange planet they laid down their lives for had provided a home to a desperate group of humans. Now, eighty years later, it sheltered a growing human colony.

That colony was led by the former wife of King Raymond of United Society (or United Societies depending on how you thought the new constitution should be interpreted). Problem was, she had buried two husbands in the last eighty years on Alwa and was now mother to seven, grandmother to thirty-four and great-grandmother to 123. That number was subject to change . . . often.

Kris herself was included among the great-grandchildren and had spent a full week meeting a big chunk of her half uncles, aunts, and cousins. Still to one and all of the humans on Alwa, related or not, the former commodore was Granny Rita.

Surprises on top of surprises. Kris could only wonder how the news the IMS *Sakura* carried would be received.

But for now, she had no time for Longknife family matters; a huge alien mother ship loomed larger and larger on their screens. Now the Alwans seemed mesmerized by its promise of death. They huddled before the screen, eyes locked on it, only occasionally whispering something low.

“This isn’t good,” Granny Rita whispered to Kris. “Once or twice, I’ve seen one group of them resort to confrontation to settle differences. When one side is fully intimidated by the others’ show of force, the weaker side would just hunker down and surrender. These folks don’t fight. If you can strut yourself a good enough show, you win.”

“Can you get across to them that a couple of human ships smaller than this one chewed that monster up pretty good and only spit out this much?” Kris asked.

Granny shrugged. “They’ve walked this ship. They know its measure. That . . .?”

“Maybe we should have shown them the two Hellburners we have amidships?” Jack said. He was her chief of security, skipper of a rump battalion of Marines composed of a reinforced Wardhaven Marine company and a borrowed, and equally reinforced Musashi Marine company.

For all too brief time, they’d managed to be lovers.

At the time, they were fugitives and Jack not in Kris’s chain of command.

Now Kris was back on the new *Wasp* and Jack was keeping her safe and both of them were keeping doors open whenever it was just the two of them alone.

Simply put, Navy regs on fraternization sucked bilge water, through a straw. But Kris and Jack wore the uniform and followed the regulations.

Kris shook her head. “The Hellfire missiles look pretty tiny.” Though the few cubic millimeters of Neutron Star material weighed fifteen thousand tons, it was hard for anyone who hadn’t seen them in action to believe how destructive they were.

Again Granny was shaking her head. “These folks have theater. They really enjoy attending a show. But their media is just for what is happening now. They do not record their history. Yes, some plays are historically based, but they really don’t have any concept of either battle, like you showed us, or of recording it for later review.”

“This isn’t going over all that well, is it?” said Penny. Chief of Kris’s intelligence, she also stood double duty on the bridge as Defensive Systems. On a ship that could convert your spacious stateroom into a footlocker and send the extra Smart Metal™ to armor the ship’s hide, it was a critical battle station.

Kris’s usual battle station was next to Penny’s, Weapons, putting the enemy in the crosshairs of the *Wasp*’s destructive lasers. For the new *Wasp*, those included four long 18-inch laser rifles, usually reserved for a battleship. The Weapons Division was still looking for a chance to show what they could do.

Everyone else on the *Wasp* was fervently hoping the Weapons Division would continue polishing their guns and wondering what they could do. The *Wasp* was as far from human space as a ship could get.

She was also very alone now that the *Sakura* was gone.

Being far from any repair facilities and any help was no time to go looking for a fight.

On this Kris and her entire staff agreed.

But they did want to know what kind of damage they'd actually done to the alien raider's base ship? Just how good were the Hellburners at doing bad?

Inquiring minds wanted to know.

But carefully. Very carefully.

"Nelly, how far has the hulk drifted from the jump point it was just out of when we hit it?" Kris asked her personal computer. Nelly was much upgraded from the day she'd been given to Kris before she started school. She was now worth at least half the value of the *USS Wasp*. Nelly had condescended to give the Mitsubishi Heavy Space Industries Chief Engineer, Katsu, one of Nelly's. This had made up for the other half of the frigate's cost not covered by bake sales and the donations of the schoolchildren of Musashi.

"She was accelerating away from the jump point," Nelly said, "at about half a gee. Then we hit her hard in the rump and that must have accelerated her more."

"I agree with that," said Captain Drago, from the bridge. Hired by the Wardhaven Intelligence Service to captain the *Wasp* under a contract that had more to do with King Ray wanting to somehow save Kris from making all of the worst mistakes he'd made as a junior officer, Drago hadn't kept Kris from taking on the giant planet murderer that tumbled and rolled in front of them.

Old men's plans for young people don't always work as they wished.

"Captain," Kris said, "you can call me paranoid, but I'd like to approach the hulk so as to keep it between us and anything that might suddenly pop out of that jump."

"Paranoia had kept a lot of Longknives alive," Granny Rita said.

"Adjusting course," Captain Drago said.

"Nelly, how much of the *Wasp's* Smart Metal™ do you want to use for explorer nanos?"

"As much as Penny will let me, Kris. I'll be controlling them with all the self-organizing matrix that I haven't yet used for my next child." In half payment on the *Wasp*, Nelly had swapped one kid to Katsu, with solid overrides if he, or his father, should ever try to duplicate her child. Having lived with Kris for twenty years, Nelly came by her paranoia honestly. Nelly's price for that one had been enough matrix to birth three more children to replace those lost on the long, dangerous flight from this battle.

She'd only granted two of the new personnel on the *Wasp* the honor of working with one of her children. That left one yet unborn. Nelly was willing to divide that matrix up and share it out among the exploration drones to give them top-notch guidance for their study of the hulk.

That still left the basic question. How much Smart Metal™ would there be for her matrix to fly?

Penny took a while to talk to Mimzy, her own computer and one of Nelly's offspring. "Kris, I'd like to shrink the *Wasp* down to Condition Baker."

Under Baker, the "love boat" proportions of Condition Able became a bit constrained. Unused spaces shrunk or vanished. The reaction mass tanks that had given up a part of their contents on the way out here would be resized. All that spare metal would be moved to the outer hull of the *Wasp* to form a reflective surface and a honeycomb through which cool reaction mass flowed. This sandwich of armor should protect the *Wasp* from laser hits as good, if not better than the six-meter-thick ice armor on heavy battleships.

"I concur," Captain Drago said. This meeting with the Alwans might not be taking place on the bridge but clearly he was following it very closely.

He was, after all, the captain.

"Mimzy," Penny said, "announce to all hands that we will be going to Condition Baker in one minutes and that we may go to Condition Charlie without further notice." Charlie was worse than Baker, but not as bad as Condition Zed. When Zed was ordered, people's quarters were compressed down into a few lockers and the entire rest of the room vanished. The same went for the scientist's research labs.

Boffins had complained loudly about Condition Zed. The scientists had been shown the fine print in their contracts and reminded that they were all subject to activation as reserve officers, and as such, would follow the proper orders of their duly appointed superiors.

The scientists still complained, but they knew it wouldn't matter if ever Captain Drago, Kris or Penny ordered Condition Zed.

Around Kris, the Forward Lounge began to shrink. Empty tables melted into the deck. Folks in the middle of their dinner found their table and chairs moving closer together, as empty places vanished away.

All hands went through this drill once a week for Baker and once a month for Zed. Folks kept right on eating, drinking, and when a new couple came in, the lounge expanded to provide them a table.

The Alwans were still fixated on the wreck ahead; they failed to notice what was happening around them.

“Princess, my boffins have noticed something strange about the wreck,” came in the calm, aristocratic voice of Professor Joao Labao. He was on sabbatical from the University of Brasília and senior administrator of the 250 scientists aboard the *Wasp* and the reason the frigate could honestly claim to be a research ship. “Have your examinations identified anything different between the right and left sides of the aft end of the hulk?”

“That’s a negative,” came from Senior Chief Beni. He’d come out of retirement to have “a shot at them that killed my kid.” “I’m getting no radio readings from that hulk. The reactors are dead. Anywhere you look on the electromagnetic spectrum or radioactive scale, she’s as dead as Caesar’s ghost.”

“I would most certainly agree with you, Chief,” the professor said. “It’s our optics that are giving us cause for second thoughts.”

“Pass them through to me in the Forward Lounge,” Kris said.

“And me on the bridge,” the skipper spoke over Kris.

The rolling, tumbling hulk had been getting closer. Now, using the powerful optical instruments usually reserved for deep-space research, the aft end of the blasted wreck jumped into clear definition.

Bits of hull and I-beams were twisted like a child’s strand of candy. Other thick hull strength members were nearly broken through. Some hung by a thread and did their own dance as the ship waddled through space.

“We hit it hard,” Kris muttered.

The Alwans had broken from their fixation on the huge ship and now were once again moving quickly among themselves, talking rapidly.

“I think,” said Granny Rita, “that they are now impressed with what you can do.”

That was good, because the picture then changed.

The professor took up the narration. “What you were looking at was the left end of the aft quarter, portside aft to you Sailors. What you’re now seeing is the right side, starboard aft quarter. Notice the difference.”

There was still clear evidence of damage. But much of the beams that had looked knocked about like jackstraws on the other side were gone. The picture zoomed in further.

“We think someone has been cutting away at that wreckage with laser welding torches. We’ll need to get in closer. Have nanos take a good look at the cut, but that side of the ship does not look like we left it, of that I am sure.”

“All hands, battle stations,” Captain Drago’s voice announced on the 1MC. “All weapons, report when you are manned and ready.”

Two

Around them, all hands beat to quarters. The Forward Lounge became suddenly vacant.

And the Alwans looked ready to climb the walls.

Granny Rita did her best to calm them, but the idea that they were about to be in a fight to the death was having a very erratic impact on their behavior. Some ran around. Others froze in place. At any particular moment, with no particular rational, the runners would freeze and the statues would take off running.

They did a lot of clicking whether they were running or not.

Jack was suddenly at Kris's elbow, just in case any of the crazy birds failed to notice she was in the way of their mad running.

"What do you do with them?" Kris ask Granny Rita

Still, without a word from Jack, she fell back to the wall well out of the way of traffic. Jack gave her a smile that said, "Thank you, love for not making me have to fight with you."

Granny Rita gave the two of them a look that said . . . nothing to Kris. It did make her fidget.

Then Granny Rita shrugged. "I don't know. I've never seen them like this. As I said, they don't fight among themselves. They resolve conflicts by impressive displays."

"How'd something like this ever rise to the top of the food chain?" Jack asked.

"You haven't seen them feeding," Rita said. "I've seen them bite strips of meat off a living, running beast. But fight among themselves. Never."

"So how did you establish that the Heavy People were not prey?" Penny asked, watching the show with the native curiosity of a natural-born intelligence officer.

"Our Marine detachment put on a very impressive display. They also killed a few prey beasts, publicly butchered them, and held a BBQ. The Alwans discovered they liked cooked meat. We did what we had to make friends," Granny Rita finished

vaguely.

The battle-stations Klaxon went silent. That had a settling effect on the Alwans.

“Lieutenant Lien,” called Captain Drago. “Please set condition Charlie as quickly as you can.”

Drills had shown that having the ship changing shape while all hands were racing to be someplace else was not a good idea. Now, with all hands where they were needed, getting more armor to the ship’s hide became a priority.

Penny announced, “We are setting Condition Charlie. All hands stay put until I report the condition established.” After a pause, she added for just those close at hand, “Mimzy, set Condition Charlie.”

“Daughter,” Nelly added, “call on as many of your brothers and sisters as you need to make this go quick and clean.”

“Yes, *mother*,” Mimzy said in a voice Kris had practiced before a mirror when she was thirteen. “All right, crew, you heard mom, let’s make this happen shipshape and Bristol fashion.”

Behind them, bottles at the bar folded themselves up into cases as what was left of the lounge floor rolled itself up. The glass wall vanished as the small part of the lounge Kris was using suddenly was backed up to the non-airtight doors that had been fifty meters away a few seconds ago.

The Alwan’s watched wide eyed.

“Condition Charlie is set throughout the ship,” Penny announced moments later.

Captain Drago followed that announcement with one of his own. “The Blue Team is relieved from its battle stations and will don high gee stations. When they report back to their stations, the Gold Team will do the same.”

“Blue, Gold team?” Granny Rita asked.

“I’ve told you about how handy Smart Metal is,” Kris said. “This ship can handle gee forces way beyond what the Mark I Sailor can. So we’ve got a new high gee station, made of Smart Metal, to help us keep from splattering ourselves all over the deck as we honk the ship around to avoid getting hit. In combat, the *Wasp* never follows any course for more than three or four seconds.”

“Two,” Nelly put in.

“We dodge around a lot,” Kris went on, “and the gee stations let us do it. The armor is there, but it’s better not to get hit. The problem with the eggs as we call them is that they fit you like a second skin. Once, for political reasons, I had to go into an egg wearing undress whites. I was black-and-blue from the belt buckle, the

clutch backs on my ribbons and my shoulders. Ugh. The standard uniform in an egg is buck naked.”

“Oh.” The old lady’s eyes lit up.

“Granny. We all look like a collection of Easter eggs from the outside, boys and girls alike.” There were certain aspects of Granny Rita’s outlook on life that Kris found a bit hard to understand.

Now Granny shrugged. “It sounds like a young person’s way of fighting.”

“Most of our crew members are under thirty,” Kris admitted.

“So, what are you going to do about us?”

The ship’s pharmacy had a small supply of antiaging pharmaceuticals. After all, Cookie, the cook, was well over a hundred as were several of the restaurateurs. Granny Rita had been glad to have her arthritis cured, her bones strengthened and her arteries cleaned.

Still, knocking her around at high gees was not what Kris wanted to do to her new found great-grandmother.

And the Alwans! Though their bones were more solid than they had been when they flew several million years ago, the odds were quite high that a battle might have Kris returning the six delegates looking more like boneless chicken than spokespersons for how much Alwa needed human aid.

“Nelly, do you have the specs for the water tanks the Iteeche used to survive the last battle?”

The Iteeche Empire, some eighty years ago, had almost made the human race extinct. Just ask any veteran. Just ask Granny Rita! It was Iteeche Death Balls that had got her into a running gun fight, them gunning, her running, that she hadn’t been able to slow down from until she was on the other side of the galaxy.

Only recently had Kris had a chance to talk to some Iteeche and discovered that their veterans were proud of how they’d saved their people from annihilation by the humans. During the Voyage of Discovery that had resulted in the shootout with the wrecked base ship they were coming up on, Kris had three Iteeche aboard.

“Of course I have the tank designs stored in my bursting innards,” Nelly snapped. “I can knock out seven of them, one for Granny and six for the Alwans. I suggest you use your normal Tac Center. That way, Granny Rita can follow the battle or we can show pleasant scenes from around human space to relax the Alwans.”

“Do that, Nelly.”

“You’ve had Iteeche aboard?” Granny Rita said.

“It’s a long story, but the only reason I came out here and found you and that,”

Kris said, nodding toward the hulk, “was because they were losing scout ships and came asking for our help.”

“So we made peace. I kept telling Ray he should do more to find a way to stop all the killing.”

“We can talk about this later,” Kris said.

“Yes. Are you expecting a fight, now?”

“Yes, no and maybe.”

“You can ask a Longknife a question, but you better not expect an answer,” Granny Rita said with a sigh.

“I don’t expect a fight,” Kris said, expanding on her initial cryptic reply. “You notice that none of us here are rushing to our battle stations. However, we now have evidence that someone has been mining this wreck. Are they its former owners or someone we haven’t met yet? We’ve run into these raiders four times. Three times they started shooting. We managed to run away the other time. Tell me, Commodore, wouldn’t you be at battle stations?”

“No question about it. Those water tanks you were talking about. You want me to get me and my friends into them now?”

“No, we’ll wait. All this drill may be for nothing.” Kris said, then switched topics.

“Nelly, I want to survey that hulk as fast as we can. I also want to make a change in your nano allotments. We’re going to tuck ourselves in just as close as we can to the wreck, with it between us and the jump. I want a belt of sensors around the hulk focused on the jump. Anything comes through that jump, I want to know.”

“I was already working on just such a sensor array, connected with tight-beam communications,” Nelly said. “However, how fast we can examine the hulk will depend on how much Smart Metal Penny lets me have. Penny?”

“The *Sakura* transferred a lot of supplies to us before she left,” Penny said. It had also donated an 18-inch laser rifle that the *Wasp* now had pointed aft. Smart Metal™, used to its maximum, was a delightful and flexible material. “They also stripped out a thousand tons of Smart Metal and transferred it to us. I’ve been using most of it for armor. Nelly, if I gave you a hundred tons of the stuff, would that be enough?”

“Perfect,” the computer said. “Now, Mimzy, let’s get to work giving the boffins something to look at and making sure that jump point is under constant observation.”

Three

The four huge screens in the Forward Lounge were now showing sixteen different pictures as the nanos spread out through the wreck. Or, more correctly, fifteen pictures of the wreck and one picture of blank space.

The jump point was blessedly unemployed and Kris fervently hoped it would stay that way for a long time. A very long time.

“You don’t have to keep glancing at the jump point, Kris,” Nelly said. “I and every one of my kids have it under constant observation. If it burps out so much as a grain of sand, you will know.”

“I know, Nelly, it’s just a human thing.”

“A Longknife thing,” both Jack and Penny said at once.

Granny Rita just grunted.

The nanos were starting from the blasted aft section, and moving inward.

Of the engineering spaces, nothing remained. The two Hellburners that hit there along with the corvettes lasers and smaller antimatter torpedoes, had only started the damage. The hundred or more thermonuclear reactors that powered the huge rockets had lost their containment systems, freeing superheated plasma to add more destruction to what the humans started.

A third Hellburner had hit farther forward. There had been reactors there, too. Reactors that powered the ship and the uncounted lasers that dotted the ship’s surface.

Amidships, shock, whiplash and torque added to the destruction. They came across gaping holes in the middle of the ship that appeared to have been caused by reactors that lost their containment fields when their superconducting magnetic containment systems failed.

Kris revised her estimate of the bite they’d taken out of the monster. Her original guess was they’d blown away thirty to forty percent of the base ship. Now it looked like more than half of the ship was wrecked.

“It must have been pure hell aboard this ship,” Granny Rita said.

Kris nodded. “Still, even as it was blowing itself apart, it was shooting too many lasers to count at our battle line, blasting hundred-thousand-ton battleships with six meters of ice armor into hot gases in only seconds.”

Even Penny was shaking her head. “I wish I could feel some sort of sympathy

for those who suffered through this. But Kris and every human ship around had done everything they could to open communications. And the aliens just came out shooting every single time we ran into them.”

Granny Rita did her best to translate all this to the Alwans. They now stood still, alone, not in any group, in stunned silence.

Kris wondered how much of this they were really getting and how much was being lost in translation.

NELLY, ARE YOU GETTING ANY OF THIS?

KRIS, AS BEST I CAN TELL, THE ALWANS DON'T BELIEVE US. THEY CAN'T BELIEVE THAT THESE ALIENS DID NOT TALK TO US. I THINK ONE OF THEM SAID SOMETHING ABOUT HOW CAN ANYONE PUT ON A COURTSHIP DANCE WITHOUT CROWING. I COULD BE WAY OFF ON THE TRANSLATION.

THAT'S OKAY, NELLY.

Kris had yet to get around to telling Granny Rita about Nelly Net, the ability she and Nelly had to talk directly to each other and to talk to anyone who had on one of Nelly's kids. There were a lot of things they just hadn't had time for, Kris told herself.

“We're getting some interesting stuff,” came from Professor Labao. “We've only done a small part of the search but we haven't found a single body. Not even a skull. It's too soon to tell for sure, but it looks like someone went over this entire ship and removed every dead body, body part or blood smear.”

“That's what we found on the planet they murdered,” Kris told Granny. “No grave yard. If it wasn't for three women murdered and their bodies hidden among all the native ones, we would have nothing on that bunch of murderers.”

Granny made a face. “Beasts that they are, they seem to revere their dead.”

“That, or they want to use them for reaction mass,” Jack growled.

“We think we're finding hydroponic gardens as well as vats for growing proteins. The vegetation is very dead, the tanks and vats are drained,” the professor added.

“See if we can get any residue,” Kris ordered. “It would help to know if they recycle their dead in the hydroponic tanks and what kind of vat meat they ate.”

“We're on it already,” the professor answered.

“We've just found something else interesting. It looks like someone dug a hole into the wreck so they could get out the reactors that hadn't blown,” said Professor Labao.

One screen went from four windows to just one. Yes, there was a huge tunnel into the wreck. Nanos following it found evidence of undamaged portions of the

ships, but some large chunks had been hastily removed with welders torches. There were a lot of thick power cabling leading out from those holes.

“Best bet,” the professor said, “is that reactors and their superconducting containment gear were hauled out through this hole. It’s about the most expensive gear aboard a ship. That and its weapons systems.”

“Is there evidence of the lasers being taken out?” Kris asked to anyone listening on net. “Also, have we found the bridge?”

“The forward section of the ship took a lot of damage. This monster and her baby monsters might have been slaughtering the battleships, but we humans were getting our licks in too,” came with a touch of pride from Captain Drago.

“This is a huge ship, Your Highness,” Professor Joao Labao said respectfully but firmly. “Rome was not built in a day and we will not plumb its secrets in an afternoon.”

“Well, so far you’ve got plenty to interest me,” Kris said. “Have your boffins get the nanos collecting as much data as they can, because I don’t intend to spend a day here waiting for whoever has the salvage contract on this mother to wander back through that jump point,” Kris said.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself,” Captain Drago said.

“Your Highness, we have something I think you will find very interesting,” the professor said, as if to placate an irascible princess.

Smart man.

“I have seen that video of a huge choir addressing an even larger audience, followed by a lone man giving quite a long harangue to his listeners.” The subject video, picked up while the USS *Hornet* was running for its life showed up in a small window.

“I think we have found the room.”

The screen that had been showing the huge tunnel now switched to show a massive auditorium. No, from the fine decorations it was more like an opera house. There was statuary, usually of the same man in an heroic pose and white columns along the walls separating box seats that looked quite plush. The common people, however, were packed in row upon row, balcony atop balcony. The aisles were narrow to allow room for more seats.

“To fill as many seats as those with only aisles that size, I’d have to march them in, like Marines,” Jack said. “I’m not even sure my line troops would put up with that kind of regimentation.”

“Lots and lots of people, marching in lockstep,” Kris said.

“You told me,” Granny Rita said, “about one ship you blew up after it

attacked you being filled to the gills with people. It looks like they filled a monster ship like this just as tightly.”

“We are looking into what we think are the crew quarters,” the professor said. “I’ve heard of places on Earth that pack the unemployed into cramped public housing, but this is something entirely different. There’s barely room to slip yourself into a bed from a narrow passageway. No privacy. Just stacks and stacks of beds.”

“Huge numbers of people who just want to kill us,” Penny said. She had argued the hardest against Kris launching her tiny command into a battle with so little intelligence on the target. Now the look on her face bore the sadness of the ages. “How are we going to kill all these people?” she finally said.

“They’ve *got* to talk to us before we have to do that,” Kris insisted.

“Kris Longknife, an optimist?” Jack said with a bit of a grin. Jack was the only man alive she’d let get away with something like that.

Still she elbowed him in the ribs.

He put both hands up in surrender and retreated behind a wide grin.

Granny Rita gave the two of them the eye, and they sobered quickly and returned to the problem at hand.

“Kris, could we get a better look at the ceiling of the place?” Nelly asked.

One of the nanos dutifully began scanning the overhead. It took several seconds before the immense ceiling was resolved into a single picture.

“Dots, lots of dots,” Penny said.

“In a random pattern,” Kris added, stroking her chin.

“If that thick belt of dots isn’t the Milky Way then I’ve never looked at a star chart in my life,” Granny Rita said.

“Professor,” Nelly said. “I need to combine several of the nanos in the room and close by to it. I want to get a full coverage and very exact copy of that picture.”

“What are you thinking, Nelly?” Kris asked.

“I think someone went to a lot of trouble to put a very exact sky on the ceiling of this very large room that they regularly filled with people. Kris, have you heard of the Sistine Chapel?”

“We did take art history in college, Nelly.” Kris said sarcastically.

“Yes, but I could never tell how much you were paying attention and how much you were just using me for an easy A.”

“Nelly, what happened to you being polite?” Kris asked.

“Auntie Tru is on the other side of the galaxy and there’s no way you can

threaten to take me in for her to look under my nonexistent hood.”

Kris was beginning to wonder who else might be taking advantage of their being so far from home that the threat of sending them dirtside was very much out of the question.

“Tell me, Nelly,” Jack said, “I didn’t take art history in college. Why is the Sistine Chapel so important to our present conversation?”

“You did too take art history,” Nelly snapped. “I have access to all your records, I will have you know, Jack.”

“Nelly, get back on topic,” Kris snapped.

“The Sistine Chapel was a place of worship. It was decorated with some magnificent art work for the instruction and edification of those attending services there. The pope in charge at the time spent a lot of money to have that ceiling painted, although he had a war on and paying the painter was regularly a second priority to paying his army. Anyway, I wonder if this is not such a special artifact. I am merging several nanos so that I can get a high-definition recording of not only the precise relations of the stars to each other, but also any color texturing the stars have.”

“You think this might represent the night sky over a unique planet?” Penny said.

“I think it’s possible.

“Let me know as soon as you finish that, Nelly,” Kris said.

“Yes, your not so smart Highness,” Nelly said, her voice more smug than any computer had a right to be.

“Alert, Alert,” Nelly’s voice came in a totally different tenor, and it came over the entire 1MC. “A ship has just exited the nearest jump point. Ship matches the profile of one of the smaller hostile ships. Just four or five hundred thousand tons of crazy kill you.”

The bong-bong of the battle-station Klaxon went off.

“This is no drill. Man your battle stations. All hands, man your battle stations. This is no drill,” resounded through the ship.

“Bath time,” Kris yelled as she yanked the door open and led the way out of the truncated Forward Lounge. Jack was at her elbow. Granny Rita led the Alwans, who once again looked like they wanted to take flight. Penny followed up the rear, doing her best to shoo along any who tarried without actually touching them.

Alwans did not like to be touched. At least not by Heavy People.

That was something Kris hoped Nelly’s translator would explain.

Assume they survived the next few minutes.

Behind them, the last vestige of the Forward Lounge melted away, as did the passageway they trotted down just as fast as they left it.

The *Wasp* was moving to protect herself.

“The jump has spit out a second ship. Same type,” Nelly announced.

The distance from the Forward Lounge to Kris’s Tac Center just off the bridge was a surprisingly short gallop. The water tanks were there, already filled and lids hanging open like waiting coffins.

The Alwan’s balked.

“They’re claustrophobic,” Granny Rita said. “I’d better show them how. Is it better not to go into the tank clothed?”

“The Iteeche never wore clothes.”

In a moment, the old girl was down to the buff and climbing into the tank. She was clicking and cooing at the others.”

SHE’S TELLING THEM THAT IF SHE CAN DO IT, SO CAN THEY, Nelly told Kris. I’M PRETTY SURE OF THAT TRANSLATION.

Five removed what little they wore and went, reluctantly, into the tanks. The sixth balked.

HE SAYS WE’RE ALL GOING TO DIE, Nelly reported.

“Granny, you tell him that these are the prey we hunt. Yes, they are bigger than us, but don’t the Alwans hunt prey bigger than any one of them?”

GRANNY JUST TOLD HIM THAT AND THAT IF HE DIDN’T GO INTO THE TANK, HE WILL BE DEAD MEAT AND DISGRACE HIS TRIBE.

The Alwan went.

Kris, Jack and Penny gave the tank residents breathing masks and waited as they verified that they worked, then they sealed them in, locked them down and let the tanks top themselves off with water.

There was a lot of chatter; the air masks had mikes in them. Granny Rita’s

last words to Kris were “You better get your bare ass into your egg, honey.”

Kris raced for her quarters. Again, they were much closer. Abby was waiting her, already stripped. She helped Kris skinny out of her uniform and into her egg, then, as Kris rolled out for the bridge, Abby settled into hers.

“A third ship just joined the other two,” Nelly reported. “They are starting a slow, quarter-gee approach to the wreck.”

Kris rolled onto the new *Wasp*’s bridge. It was just like old times. Captain Drago held the command chair. Penny was at Defenses. An older Chief Beni was at sensors, assisted now by a shy female chief from Musashi. The woman on Navigation was also Musashi Navy; Kris had not had a chance to get to know her like Sulwan Kann.

“Warning to all hands. We are taking the ship to Condition Zed. We are going to Condition Zed on my mark.” Penny waited a few seconds in case anyone had a strong objection, then announced. “We are setting Condition Zed. Don’t expect anything you’re holding on to to be there in a second.

Since everyone was already in their egg, they shouldn’t be holding on to anything.

The bridge shrank. The skipper, Kris and Penny were almost rubbing elbows. The overhead was a good half meter closer.

The only thing that didn’t change was the main screen.

It was still there, showing death coming for them in living color.

“Sensors, anything new?” Captain Drago asked.

“Nothing sir. They match both the visual and electromagnetic signature of the hostile raiders. Their reactors match to the third decimal. They’re radar is active and they are pinging the hulk.

“Oh, that was rude,” the senior chief added. “They just lased a small meteorite.”

“So much for just drifting up on them again,” Captain Drago said.

That ambush had worked once. They couldn’t expect it to work forever.

“Any suggestions, Your Highness,” the skipper asked.

“They’re out of range of even our 18-inch laser rifles. But they’ll have to flip ship to start deceleration if they intend to match orbit with this hulk giving us some up-the-kilt shots at their reactors. Let’s see what happens then.”

They waited. Waited for something to happen. Waited for the enemy to make a move . . . to make a mistake.

While doing their best not to make one themselves.

“Edge us in closer to the wreck,” Captain Drago ordered.

The helmsman obeyed, but it was no easy job. Even half-destroyed, the hulk was huge, with a gravity well of its own. If Kris and the skipper hadn't decided to keep the *Wasp* on the side of the hulk away from the jump point, the natural thing would have been to go into orbit around the wreck.

The helmsman had been working against the nature of things and the laws of physics. Now he worked against them even more. The navigation jets, never intended for this, got a work out.

Maybe those gases showed up as a corona around the hulk. Maybe someone on the other side noticed that there was a lot more hot gases in the general vicinity of the dead wreck. For whatever reason, the three alien ships began to spread out, widening their field of view around the dead base ship.

Hiding behind the hulk got harder.

“That's not good,” Captain Drago muttered.

Kris grinned. “But we get a crack at them one at a time.”

The skipper frowned at Kris's optimistic assessment of the situation. “That just might work. Helms, hold steady, but get ready to move us right or left fast, on my order.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

The long wait continued. A hundred thousand kilometers out, the alien ships did what they had to do if they didn't want to fly right by the hulk. All three flipped ship and began to decelerate at a quarter gee. If all went well, they would arrive at the hulk with no headway, ready to go into its weak orbit.

Of course, it was Kris's job to see that things did not go well.

“The right ship has eight reactors,” the senior chief reported. “The other ships have only six.”

“I suppose that makes the rightmost ship our target,” Captain Drago said.

“Main battery is locked and loaded.” The new frigate packed four of these huge battleship guns into her bow. They had great range, but a problem.

They could be fired only fifteen degrees to the left or right, up or down, of the direction the ship was pointed. Somehow, Captain Drago would have to get his ship over to the right of the wreck fast enough to surprise the enemy, but arrive with the bow aimed dead on his target.

The brilliant engineer who had designed the class hadn't come up with any suggestions as to how you fought his marvelous new toy.

Then it got more complicated.

“The Alwans want to know if you are going to talk to the aliens,” came over the net from Granny Rita.

“We’d kind of planned on killing them, Granny. We are outnumbered three to one and every other time we try talking, they just shoot.”

“The idea of not making any demonstration upsets the Alwans.”

“The idea of our all getting suddenly dead kinds of upsets us, Granny.”

The nods from around the bridge supported Kris’s position. They were in the eggs but the eggs weren’t the all-encompassing containers they would be at four or five gee.

“Kris, honey, I understand where you’re coming from, believe me. I’ve been where you are. But I have to live with these people. I beg you to accommodate them.”

Kris had already offered Granny Rita a ride home, if only for full rejuvenation. The strong willed old woman had turned her down. The Alwans were in danger and she was not leaving them in their time of need.

Kris expected that position would cause a lot of trouble. She’d expected that trouble at some indefinite time in the future. Strange how it popped up sooner.

Well, what do you expect from a Longknife, even one that called herself Granny Rita Ponsa at the moment.

“There was the approach you tried on that scout ship in the Iteeche system,” Penny said.

“There’s not time to launch a communication’s buoy,” Kris muttered. “Nelly, can you put together some nanos. Make them give off enough noise to seem like a ship, as well as send a ‘we come in peace for all humanity’ message.”

“It will mean that I lose some of my next child’s matrix,” Nelly complained.

“I’ll buy you more.”

“From the other side of the galaxy?”

“Nelly, we don’t have time for this argument.”

“I know, Kris. I’m already collecting the nanos and forming them into the craft you require. There is a hole in the wreck we can launch it out of. I’m using the collection of messages we sent the last time. I hope the Alwans won’t mind us sending in Iteeche as well as human.”

“The hostiles are a hundred thousand clicks out and flipping ship,” Captain Drago said. “I’d like to knock out one or two of them before they’re close enough to ram us,” he added dryly.

“Nelly, launch the diversion,” Kris ordered. “Lasers 1 and 2, prepare to fire:

3 and 4 stand by. Laser 5, maybe we can come up with a target for you.” Laser 5 pointed aft.

“Helmsman, prepare to rotate ship ninety degrees to starboard, lay on three gees acceleration for five seconds, then rotate ship ninety degrees to port, lay on one gee but begin Evasion Pattern 6. Understand,” Drago ordered.

The helmsman was a chief boatswain’s mate, but he still blanched at the order. “Sir, I’ll try.”

“Try ain’t good enough, Chief,” the skipper said. “Nelly, can you lay in the course?”

“It is done, Captain.” For once there was none of Nelly’s backtalk. Even if this was the first time Captain Drago had trusted his ship to her.

“Make it so, Nelly.”

On the 1MC the message being broadcast from the diversion demanding to know what ship had entered the system, to whom they offered their oath and . . .

It didn’t get any farther than that as all three ships fired on it.

While they shot, the *Wasp* rotated hard, kicked its crew in the rear with three gees acceleration. Then she gave them whiplash with a second ninety-degree rotation while coasting for maybe half a second.

Immediately, she then put on a single-gee acceleration and launched herself into a jinxing pattern that would have slammed heads hard if the eggs hadn’t locked down every inch of their bodies and cushioned them.

Kris had the larger of the three ships in her crosshair. Twelve huge rocket motors were putting out plasma from three or four reactors. Kris gave it her best guess, targeted where she’d expect to find two reactors and fired Laser 1 and 2.

Apparently engineering solutions galaxywide tend to yield the same answers. Two 18-inch lasers smashed into the engineering spaces of two reactors. Magnetic containment equipment suffered lethal disruption. Twenty-thousand-degree demons that were never meant to know the face of man were unleashed, ripping and tearing, feeding on construction that was not meant for the likes of them.

Two untouched reactors joined the dance of destruction, then their hunger spread the entire length of the ship.

In a blink, where a ship had been were only gases.

Kris would watch this on the recordings after the battle. Once she’d seen the destruction begin, she had already turned her attention to the second ship.

It had not yet reacted to the disaster overtaking her leader. Her slow response was her doom. This ship had only nine rocket engines. Kris targeted two reactors and hit one.

One was enough to begin the chain of catastrophic failures that would eat the ship

The third ship had a faster captain, he'd already begun to swing his vulnerable engines away from this sudden attack. Kris had had Nelly launch four of her limited supply of high acceleration 12-inch antimatter torpedoes at him even as she concentrated her lasers on the other two. The six 5-inch secondaries added what they could.

The third hostile, though smaller, was still equipped with way too many lasers and was bringing them to bear on the *Wasp*.

"Flip ship," Drago ordered. "Get that wreck back between us and them.

Nelly was already doing it as the helmsman reached to obey.

Kris had her eye on the alien. She still had her rear stinger. If the stern came within fifteen degrees of that puppy, she'd knock a big hole in its bow.

NELLY, CAN YOU GIVE ME A SHOT?

I CAN ADJUST OUR JINKING TO SHOW THEM OUR REAR, BUT ONLY FOR ONE SECOND. AND I'LL BE CHANGING COURSE EVEN AS I'M DOING THAT. I COULD FIRE THE LASER AND ADJUST ITS AIM TO MY JINKS.

DO IT, GAL.

A short breath later, Laser 5 fired. A few seconds more and the wreck was once again between them and their enemy. The entire sally had taken less than ten seconds.

As the *Wasp* returned to the safe shadow of the hulk, and to a more sedate smooth quarter gee, the bridge, and the entire ship exploded in cheers.

Captain Drago let the crew rejoice for a few moments, then punched his commlink. "All hands, good shooting, good ship handling all hands. Two down, but anyone want to bet the third ship heads home with its tail between its legs to let its betters know that the old wreck has a new owner?"

No one offered to take the bet.

Even as he finished speaking, sensors was already reporting. "Sir, the ship has continued on a course that will bring it around the hulk after us."

"Then we better play ring around the rosie," the captain said, and the helmsmen tucked the *Wasp* in close to the wreck. With one eye on the sensors on the hulk, he began edging them to port, keeping the still very hostile exactly opposite to them.

"Well, Your Royal Highness, have you got any more ideas, cause I'm plum out," said Captain Drago.

Kris sighed. She'd been about to ask Captain Drago the same question.

But she was the Longknife. Admitting she'd scraped the bottom of her barrel of ideas for how to keep alive while killing what was after you was just not part of the legend.

Five

For the next quarter hour, they circled the wreck.

Then the alien got sneaky and reversed course.

The *Wasp* also quickly flipped ship and took off in the opposite direction.

Unfortunately, that gave away that they had better situational awareness than the hostile. He noticed that quickly enough and started shooting up the hulk with all those lasers the aliens seemed to oversupply their ships with.

In fifteen minutes they'd lost so many that they could no longer communicate with them by tight beam. Rather than lose more of Nelly's next child's brainpower, they closed their net down.

"He's going to switch his direction real soon," Drago muttered.

"So let's change the game. How about hide-and-seek?"

"Explain yourself, Princess."

"There's a big hole in the wreck. I'd hate to take the love-boat-size *Wasp* in there, but at Condition Zed, we're pretty small."

"Nelly, have you mapped that hole?" the captain asked.

"No, but Professor Labao's computer has."

"Lay in a course to back us into said hole next time we pass it. Be careful with my ship, Nelly. I like it just the way it is."

A few seconds later, Nelly flipped the *Wasp*, slammed on the breaks with a three gee deceleration and brought the ship to a dead halt in space. In a human blink, she swung the ship around, aft end to the hole in the hulk, and then did a little

twisting dance as she backed it into a hole that was doing its own bit of rock and roll.

There was no crunch of metal.

They were hardly in the shade of the hole before the alien ship slid by a good thirty thousand clicks out. Not only was he changing his direction, he was also edging out to get a longer horizon.

“Now what do we do?” Drago asked.

“Nelly, deploy visual sensors to the right and left, above and below our hide-out. Whatever direction he comes from next time, I want to get enough warning to accelerate out after he passes and get a shot at his engines.”

“Doing it, Kris. By the way, Kris, we got the full coverage of that ceiling I wanted and one of the nanos discovered a boot with the leg still in it. We should be able to get DNA off it.”

“Good Nelly, now where are my visuals?”

“Coming on line,” and the forward screen divided to show what was ahead of them as well as a large cross in all four major points of the compass.

“Kris, dear,” came Granny Rita’s voice over the net, “I do hate to joggle your elbow again at a time like this, but the Alwans would like you to make a new try at contacting the alien. They feel that the demonstration you have given should persuaded it to surrender to your will.”

“Sorry, Granny, it ain’t gonna happen. This is the fifth time we’ve run into these bastards. The only one that didn’t end with one side annihilated was the one where our ship managed to run away. Fights with these people are to the death. Tell your friends to get used to it. Either they die or we die, and I am busy doing everything I can right now to make sure they’re the ones dead.

“Thank you, love, I had to try.”

NELLY, WHAT ARE THOSE CRAZY BIRDS TALKING ABOUT?

SORRY, KRIS, I CAN’T FOLLOW THEM. THEY ARE USING TOO MANY SOCIAL REFERENCES TO THINGS THAT HAPPENED IN THE PAST. LANGUAGE IS MORE THAN EACH WORD.

ENOUGH, NELLY.

The alien was getting smarter. He’d adjusted his orbit by 55 degrees. Kris barely caught a glimpse of him as he headed for an orbital crossing that wasn’t too far from their hideout. He was also blasting away at the wreck, using his firepower to swat at anything or nothing.

“There’s a chance that one of his wild shots may blast our hole,” Nelly said. “Should I back us deeper?”

“No,” Kris and Captain Drago said at the same time.

“Get ready to boot us out of here on my order,” Kris said. “Jink the way you think you have to, Nelly, but get the forward end of the *Wasp* aimed at that bastard.”

“Jinking pattern standing by,” Nelly said.

Kris forgot to breathe as the alien slid close to their hole, but he didn't pass directly over them. The cave did take a near hit. A girder collapsed across the exit.

“Kris,” Nelly started.

“RAM IT,” Kris ordered. “THE SKIPPER CAN COMPLAIN TO ME ABOUT THE DINT. NOW GO!”

The *Wasp* leapt into a three-gee acceleration, then warped its bow around to chase the alien across the sky.

The crosshairs on the lasers settled on the now-targetable aft engineering space. Kris fired three, holding just Laser 4 in reserve.

Two of the lasers slammed into the ship but seemed to do nothing. The other one did critical damage to one of the reactors. The ship began to slew around as a couple of the rocket engines lost plasma. Its lasers were suddenly aimed at empty space, but they kept right on firing even as the rear of the ship began to vaporize.

Kris put her last 18-inch laser into where she would have put one of the two forward reactors, the ones that powered the life support and the lasers. Her instincts were good. The hit loosed the plasma demons that gobbled up the forward end of the ship.

The laser fire only died as the entire ship converted itself to a ball of expanding gas.

Nelly cut acceleration to a single comfortable gee, as the bridge crew silently took in that they would live. The aliens were dead, paying the full price for starting this fight. The humans would live to see another sunset. They would taste dinner. They still had the chance of finding someone who might love them back as strongly as they loved them.

“Is it over?” Granny asked over the net.

“It looks that way,” Kris answered. “Nelly, do you have a visual on the jump point?”

“Yes, Kris, and it's quiet. I'm launching two standard low-tech buoys to take up station on either side of that jump. They will tell us anything we need to know while we drop back to the wreck and pick up the nanos we left behind.”

“Do we have to?” the new navigator asked.

“Those probes are Smart Metal we can use for armor and matrix that Nelly

intends to use for her next child,” Kris said. “Yes, we will return quickly enough to pick them up. Who knows? Some of the nanos may have data we didn’t get a chance to download while we were fighting for our lives. Battles can be so distracting,” Kris said through a grin.

“I am so glad that Your Highness understands the hunger of her scientists for discovery,” Professor Joao Labao added on net.

That drew boos from several of the bridge hands, but they were careful to keep their comments low and to see that their mikes were off.

Thirty minutes later, Nelly reported that all her probes that were still able to move were back aboard.

“Navigator, set course for Alwa,” Captain Drago ordered. “One point five gees if you please. All hands we will maintain battle stations until we exit this system. Defense, we will maintain Condition Zed until the same. Commodore Rita Nuu Ponsa, if you feel that the one and a half gees is too much for your delegation, you may invite them to stay in their gee tanks. Since we won’t be jinking, I believe that we can pop the lid off the tanks and let them breath on their own.”

“Thank you, Captain. Please have someone get us out of these coffins.”

Kris rolled her egg for what would have been her Tac Center. Jack made to follow.

“You can park that egg wherever you want, Jack, but not where I’m going. Granny is not presentable and, if I have to pop this egg to help her and her Always’ out, I won’t be either.”

Jack eyed Kris as if to say ‘and I’d be seeing what that I haven’t?’ but kept his language a gentlemanly, “Aye, aye, ma’am.”

Penny rolled her egg after Kris. “I can lend a hand.”

HOW COME THE ALWANS GET TO SEE YOU NAKED AND I CAN’T? Jack said over Nelly net.

BECAUSE I SAY SO, AND LET’S SHUT THIS DOWN, I DON’T WANT TO SCANDALIZE THE COMPUTERS.

KRIS, I FIND HUMAN SEXUALITY VERY INTERESTING, BUT HARDLY SCANDALOUS.

NELLY, SHUT UP. JACK, SHUT UP. PENNY, LET’S GET THIS OVER WITH.

And they did. Kris found it interesting the way the Always looked anywhere else but at the naked humans who helped make their lives less claustrophobic.

To no apparent question from Kris, Granny whispered, “I’ll explain later.”

The sigh as the *Wasp* edged through the next jump could be measured on the

Richter scale.

having too much?