

The twelve fast patrol boat captains stared at Kris Longknife. They'd been her peers until she'd been relieved of her command and hauled off in cuffs. Kris stood. At the end of the wardroom table, white haired Commodore Mandanti cocked an eyebrow.

Kris took a deep breath and committed herself to treason ... or her planet's salvation. "I am Princess Kristine Anne Longknife. By right of blood, by right of name, by right of title, I am taking command of this squadron, effective this date. Do any of you contest my claim and right?"

For a long moment, the skippers just stared back at her. Here and there a mouth worked but nothing came out. The Commodore's face stayed standard Navy issue unreadable.

And the door opened. Commander Sandy Santiago pushed past the Marine guards. "Have I missed anything important?" she said as she pulled up a chair and sat down at the Commodore's elbow.

"Only that the Princess here announcing she's taking command of my squadron," the Commodore half grumbled.

"Only that. Good, then I'm not too late," Sandy said. The destroyer skipper turned to Kris. "So, Princess Longknife, how are we going to fight six battleships."

"With everything we've got." Kris said. "And everything we can lay our hands on in the next three days."

"Not a bad start, Lieutenant," Sandy agreed.

Dedication

To the magnificent men and women who do it, – because there *is* no other choice.

Winston told the English boat owners there was a British army in trouble on the far shore. So they set sail by the smoke of Dunkirk, and brought off 300,000 embattle Tommies and Frenchmen. No one knows the price they paid.

In '44 off Sumar, six escort carriers desperately needed time to run. Three destroyers didn't question their orders, but turned bows on to the entire Japanese Battle Fleet, setting a course from which none returned.

On September 11, a smoking bier told American boat owners that hundred of thousands needed to be taken off Manhattan. With no orders given, no commands spoken, ferries and taxies, tourist boats and tugs, anything that could sail and carry weary workers, set sail for the sea wall at the Battery to take them home. Up river, professional divers were working on a bridge pier. They knew, with that many boats in close quarters, someone's rope would wrap itself around another's prop. Without instructions from corporate or promise of pay, those workmen dropped what they were doing and sailed for the smoke. A half dozen lines or more later, their work was done. And an uncounted fraction of a million got home that night.

And, of course, the passengers of Flight 93 made their fateful calls. It was their families who drew the heavy duty of telling loved ones they only wanted home that fate now stood in the way. And those souls who were no different from a quarter billion other Americans – except for the tickets they bought – showed a wondering world the true metal of free men and women.

We do what we *have* to do, because there is *nothing* else to do.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the folks at the WW I discussion group for letting him raise the hypothetical question of what might have happened if the British government had fallen in July 1914 over the Irish question and then faced the beginning of World War I. I'd especially like to thank Syd Wise for his refresher on the British and Canadian systems and Luke Taper and Geoffrey Miller for the Australian model ... which I borrowed with variations on for Wardhaven. Obviously, the changes, and any mistakes, are my own.

Anyone who hasn't heard a hundred plus fans singing "How many of them can we make die!" has missed out on one of life's moments. You can own Heather Alexander's "The March of Cambreadth" for yourself by making a quick visit to www.heatherlands.com and ordering the Midsummer Album. Heck, order them all. I do ... regularly. Every time one of my kids leave home, they take my Heather collection with them and I have to order up a new set.

Lt. Kris Longknife grinned from ear to ear, no minor accomplishment at 2.5 gees. The short hairs on the back of her neck were standing up. At a brace. And saluting. She was scared spitless and had never had so much fun in her life.

This being Tuesday, under Commodore Mandanti's rotation system, she commanded Division 3, four dinky Fast Patrol boats, as they charged the battleship size target ahead of them. And, if she trusted those little hairs on the back of her neck at all, the Commodore and his gunners on the *Cushing* had the PF-109, Kris's very first command, and the other boats of Div 3, pinned in the cross hairs of their defensive lasers.

It was time to get her boats moving to a different evasion pattern or they'd be left powerless, drifting in space ... like the eight boats of Division One and Two that had failed in their attack just minutes before her.

And she and the other eleven skippers of the fast patrol boats would be buying the beer for the Commodore's gunners.

And there would be a very critical report filed saying the PF's, small, easy and quick to build with semi-smart metal, were a failures, unable to defend a planet from attack. If that was true, each planet in the newly formed United Sentients would need a full, heavy battle fleet in its orbit if it was to weather the unknowns rapidly developing in these troubled times.

The political ramifications of that was something Kris Longknife, prime minister's daughter and great-granddaughter to King Raymond I of the US alliance of eighty planets, did not want to think about. Far better for each planet to see to its own defense with a tiny mosquito fleet like her boat and let the heavy ships handle the problems of the whole alliance.

You're thinking too much again, Longknife. Get out of your head and kick some battleship butt.

Kris mashed the comm button under her thumb. The order that went out was short and scrambled. What it meant was, "Division 3, prepare to change to evasion

plan 5 on my mark.”

Kris waited. Waited for her own helmswoman to switch to the new plan, waited for three other boats to make the same switch.

“Ready,” Boson 3/c Finch reported from her station beside Kris on the tiny bridge. The small brunet’s voice was hoarse under heavy acceleration. Kris gave the other boats a slow three count.

THEY SHOULD BE READY TO EXECUTE NOW, Nelly said directly into Kris’s brain. To call the tiny computer at Kris’s neck a super computer would probably offend Nelly’s growing sense of her own self importance. What Kris spent on Nelly’s last upgrade would have bought and paid for one of the battlewagons Kris and her crew were practicing to kill.

SEND MY MARK, Kris ordered, and the computer not only sent the execute to all four boats, but made the evasion pattern change within the same nanosecond – something no mere human could do. This computer intervention was not standard Navy procedure, and it had not been easily won. But it was at the heart of the plan of attack that Kris and her division skippers had knocked together last week at the O club — with Nelly’s avid help.

“Executing Evasion Plan 5,” Finch reported.

And Kris’s tiny command slammed her hard against the left head rest of her high acceleration chair as what had been a soft left turn converted to a hard right turn and dive.

Kris swallowed and tightened her gut muscles. Again.

The Division has started its wild charge from 150,000 clicks out, well beyond even 18-inch laser range. They’d gone to 1.5, 2.0, 2.5 gees acceleration, mixing up their growing speed with erratic right and left, up and down swerves. Sometimes hard, sometimes easy, sometimes in between. Always unpredictable. The tiny Fast Patrol boats were small as bugs beside the huge battlewagon they sought to slay. Now they danced like June bugs.

If they danced just right, they would live. And the battleship would die.

Because the fast patrol boats, though tiny, were deadly too. Each PF carried four 18-inch pulse lasers. The quick burst from one of them could gut a cruiser or knock a gaping hole in a battleship’s ice armor. Maybe even burn through to the mass of weapons, machinery and humanity below.

So cruisers and battleships mounted secondary guns that fired fast and often and tried to slash through small stuff like the PF’s. And big ships spun on their long

axis, rotating slashing lasers away from damaged ice and into thick, unhurt ice before burn-through into vitals could happen.

Measure, counter measure, counter-counter measure, layered thick and heavy. That was the way it had been since the time beyond recall when some human first set out to kill his brother. It wasn't enough to just have a fast ship, good weapons and solid teamwork. You needed a plan and skill ... and luck.

Or so Phil had told them all when he invited them out to dinner at the O club a week ago.

* * *

The Wardhaven "O" club, two blocks from Main Navy, had been ancient when Kris's Greatgrampa Ray was a fresh commissioned subaltern. Its carpeted and thickly curtained rooms were perfect for fine dining between the wars. On its walls hung battle trophies from Wardhaven's first unpleasantness with fellow rim worlds. Rich oil paintings celebrating victories going back to mother Earth's dim bloody past before humanity spread into space four hundred years ago.

Kris wasn't tempted to drink here; she got high on just the ambiance. But the white jacketed waiter led the twelve junior officers right through the main dining rooms to a small one off to the side, smelling of fresh paint and new, cheap carpet.

"What did we do to deserve this," Kris frowned.

"Not us," Phil Taussig said, his perpetual smile only slightly dampened by the toxic out gassing from the recent refurbishment. "Being Junior Officers, and somewhat less reputable than swine to the president of this august mess, we are cast out into this for our dinner tonight."

"It stinks," Babs Thompson said, making a face, which on her, the scion of one of the wealthier families on Hurtford, still was beautiful.

"Probably because they had to rebuild it after the last herd of JO's got through with it," Heather Alexander said, another rich offspring that had been shuttled to Fast Patrol Squadron Eight for crimes yet unconfessed. With the war scares, lots of young men and women were signing up to do their patriotic duty. Several of them were causing General Mac McMorrison, chair of the Joint Staff, fits as they struggled with greater or lesser success to fit their own strong heads into uniform hats.

None of them had come as close to open mutiny as Kris had. But then, no charges had been filed, so Kris wasn't officially a mutineer. It was now generally agreed ... behind closed doors ... that she had been right to relieve her first captain from his command during what was about to become wartime.

Of course, that hadn't made it any easier for Mac to find Kris a second, now third commanding officer. Squadron 8 with its bunch of spoiled, hotshot orbital skiff racing hooligans at least looked like a safe place to dump Kris. With any luck, Mac probably figured the troublesome JOs would take each other down a peg or twelve, teach each other a few desperately needed lessons in humility, proper social behavior, military deportment, what all. All the navy risked was a few tiny toys half the fleet considered worthless anyway. And the last few wisps of hair on Commodore Mandanti's shiny pate.

How often had Kris heard her father, the prime minister, mutter about bringing all his problems together in a small room and letting them solve themselves. Kris savored the pleasure of being one of someone's too many problems as she glanced around her fellow skippers and wondered if they would find a way to prove Mac and all the other top brass wrong ... or all too right.

Dinner was ordered and eaten as the twelve took each other's measures again. Most knew or had heard of each other from the skiff racing championships. Taking a thin eggshell of a craft from orbit to a one meter square target on the planet below while using the least amount of fuel had taught them to feel ballistics in their bones. But a racing skiff didn't have a crew of fifteen nor did it work as part of a squadron of twelve.

Kris kept up her end of the table banter while thanking what ever bureaucratic god it was that gave her the crew she drew. Her XO was Tommy Lien from Santa Maria's asteroid mines. Her buddy from OCS had backed her up through thick and a whole lot of thin. Of all the crews, she and Tommy were the only two that had actually heard shots fired at them in anger. A few of the shots Tommy had dodged had actually been in legitimate fire fights, not assassin's bullets that had missed Kris first.

Chief "Stan" Stanislaus was her only crew member who'd earned any hashmarks for his dress uniform. Ten years in the Navy, Kris would be losing him soon to OCS. Until then, she counted on him to see that PF-109 was real navy rather than the playboy/girl commanders' toy flotilla that the media tag them.

The rest of the crew of PF-109 were a challenge. Raw and new, Kris and Tommy spent most of their time trying to come up with ways to get them past green to something close to practiced. Take Finch at the helm. She was a whiz at ballistics and tested out of sight on the Navy's aptitude scores ... all involving computer games with her bottom comfortably seated on firm ground. But she'd never actually steered anything bigger than a motor bike. And never been off planet in her life!

Finch was actually an easy one; Kris took her over to the Wardhaven Space Yacht Club, rented a two seat racing skiff, and took her back seat on a skiff drop. Half way down, Kris handed Finch the spare stick she'd hidden aboard.

"You land her. Crash her. Your call."

“Yes, Ma’am,” Finch said, ignoring the offered stick. And she did manage to put them down. Just over a mile from the target. Next to the Number 3 Green at Wardhaven’s most exclusive country club. At least they didn’t scorch that much grass.

“Sorry, Ma’am. I’ll do better next time, ma’am,” Finch insisted as the two of them hot footed it off the course, the still cooling skiff dangling between them.

“Let this be our little secret,” Kris said. And it was. Until the 5 o’clock news featured them first.

But Finch did better the second drop and Kris stood her for membership in the Wardhaven Skiff Club, paid her first year’s dues and got out of her way.

If only it was half as easy to come up with ways that made it as much fun to maintain and calibrate the ship’s lasers, electronics, motors, sensors and all the other drudgeries that went into converting a very small chunk of space into one deadly little warship.

Dessert was on order when Phil Taussig rapped on his crystal water glass. Most fell silent, though Ted Rockefeller and Andy Gates had a problem with “Who gets in the Last Word” and didn’t shut up until they noticed ten very silent peers staring at them.

“It could not have escaped your notice,” Phil said, “that should hostilities ever come to the space above Wardhaven, we are its last line of defense.”

“And it’s worse,” Babs put in.

“Speak for yourself,” Andy said.

“Well, folks,” Phil said, trying to cut through the usual banter. “I, for one, would like to see us take out a battleship or two. Hopefully without being annihilated like a torpedo squadron namesake of ours was a few centuries back that I’ve mentioned once or twice.”

“Or forty-eleven times,” Babs sighed.

Phil Taussig was one of the two exceptions to the rule of spoiled rich kids among the boat commanders. His family was Navy, going back to the times when navies were wet water affairs. Kris suspected that Phil had been added to the mix by Mac in a effort to reduce the Hooligan factor. Among his several contributions was digging up the story of Torpedo 8, a flying squadron that sounded very much like them. They’d taken on some ocean type battleships and been annihilated, almost to a man. Though Babs rolled her eyes at the ceiling, even jolly Andy Gates now gave Phil his undivided serious attention.

“As I see it,” Phil went on, “our problem breaks down into several easy phases.”

He held up a hand. “Find the enemy, approach the enemy, destroy the enemy, exit the battle area in one piece.” Phil counted each on a finger. “That says it all?”

“Shouldn’t be any trouble finding the battleships,” Andy Gates put in. “Since our PF’s don’t do star jumps, we’ll just be lounging around here in orbit when the big boys waddle in.”

No one laughed.

“I would suggest surviving our approach to the enemy battle line deserves one of your fingers, Phil.” Chandra Singh said, her voice slightly sing song. “If we are not alive to shoot our lasers, all else is mere sorrow.”

Dark-eyed Chandra was the second exception to the rule. Older than the other skippers ... she actually had two children waving from her husband’s side on the pier when the squadron pulled away. She was a mustang. She’d come up through the enlisted rates, earning her commission even before the present emergency had the Navy combing its ranks for chiefs to leaven the ranks of green college kids like Kris and her fellow skippers.

“We’re mighty small targets,” Ted Rockefeller of Pitts Hope pointed out. His trust fund wasn’t quite as well stocked as Kris’s. He was cute, but not very smart which he regularly showed by the misconclusions he drew. “It’ll be mighty hard for an old battlewagon to draw a bead on one of us tiny targets.”

“Kind of like you shooting skeet,” Andy Gates said, nudging him with an elbow.

“If they have fire control systems anything like I broke many a screw driver over, they will spot you,” Singh said.

“So we dodge,” Gates said. “That’s what Commodore Mandanti says. Dodge. Never go straight for more than five seconds.”

“And if you follow his advice,” Taussig cut in, eyes locked on Kris, “you’ll be dead in three seconds. Right Kris?”

“More likely in two,” she said. The room got very quiet as she put down her water tumbler.

“The Commodore is a good man,” she continued, “but he was retired to his chicken ranch for fifteen years before they brought him back to ride herd on us juvenile delinquents.” That was the PF commanders’ secret name for themselves. Kris doubted it was any secret from the Commodore.

“For most of the last fifty, sixty years, not much changed on a warship from what came out of the Iteeche wars. No need. The Society of Humanity kept the peace

throughout human space. Now human space is in pieces and ... Well, you hear the news." Heads nodded. Wars and war rumors sold a lot of soap these days.

"The technologies developed in the long peace have been finding their way aboard warships. Last ten years, things have been changing. Singh, you must have noticed it as a maintainer."

The old chief, new Lieutenant, nodded.

"My grandfather's bottom line has made a few terabucks off of the new stuff. I doubt he's been alone," Kris said dryly, giving the rest of her mates a smile that was pure cynic. They nodded back. The technical growth had driven a long economic expansion. All peaceful. Now the plowshares were being hammered into spears and the money their families had all banked in the good times just might be in line to kill their heirs real soon. Great thought to take home to the next Christmas dinner.

"So we need to dodge a lot," Heather said, bringing them back to the matter at hand.

"Jinks, I'm told, is the military term for it," Kris supplied, Phil nodded, "and you need to do it both faster than any human can think it through and in a more random pattern than any fire control computer can analyze. Be slow. Be predictable. You'll be dead and your ship and crew with you."

The servers delivered slices of pie, cake and bowls of ice cream into that silence. From the wide eyed looks that passed between them, it was apparent they'd never been in a room full of JO's that were quite as subdued as this bunch. Alone in their room once more, no one seemed to have any appetite.

"Is this where I come in?" came in a pleasant voice from around Kris's neck.

Kris undid the top button on her undress whites. This put her out of uniform, but with her depressingly small chest measurements, she'd be no distraction to the male half of the room. "Does anyone object to my computer, Nelly, joining us?"

"I was hoping she would," Singh said.

"So, Nelly," Phil began, "can you give us an erratic enough approach course?"

"I have already given this question some thought, since I did not doubt that you would come to me for my expertise on this," Nelly said.

Kris rolled her eyes at the ceiling. Humility might be something ten rich kids could teach each other the hard way. But how do you teach virtue to a computer? Especially one you'd paid top dollar to make the best and who knew very well that she was. What did Singh say, "Some things in life just must be suffered."

Of course, after saying that to her crew, the old mustang was want to borrow a tool box and fix just the thing the crew insisted couldn't be fixed.

"What have you got for us," Kris said.

Nelly immediately flashed a holograph of a battleship at one end, a tiny replica of a PF at the other end. The PF started its approach at full power and maximum evasion: up down, right left, fast, slow. Its course was a corkscrew of twists and turns that made several captains at the table turn a fine shade of green.

"You will want to start at a lower acceleration," Singh pointed out. "Our engines are small. If we spread radiators to dissipate the heat, we present a bigger target. If we don't, we risk overheating if we abuse them for too long. Begin the approach at 1.5 to 2.0 gees acceleration, then build up."

"I don't know," Gates said. "Balls to the wall sounds like a great way to go to me."

Kris made a mental note to do it Singh's way.

"So each of us does our own evasion pattern and charges in." Rockefeller said.

"I would not suggest that," Kris said.

"Why? You aren't going to say that we've all have to evade the same way. What happened to unpredictable?" Alexander asked.

Kris glanced around the table; all she got back were blank stares. She'd even managed to get ahead of Phil this time. Most of them were smart, but they hadn't been shot at. They hadn't gotten that gut kick that came when your best plan fell apart despite your best effort. They had yet to be left standing there, or lying, or running, and wondering what you should have done better ... different. Kris took a deep breath and swore that she'd do this slow, earn everyone's support.

It had to be all for one and one for all.

"If I zig away from a chunk of space, just as you zag right into it," Kris used her hands to show ships passing, "the shot intended for me becomes a shot that hits you."

"The chances against that are a million to one," Gates spat.

"Yes, and you'll be just as dead," Phil said. He chewed on his lower lip for a second. "We're training so we can do it right the first time, every time. But we can't expect luck to stay off the battle field. Nelly, could you develop a different jinks pattern for all twelve boats. One that lets us jinks all over, each boat fully random but never close to the other's space anytime close to the time when another boat was in it?"

There was a longer pause than Kris had come to expect when talking to Nelly. Long pauses were happening regularly now as Nelly gained more comprehension of the full extent and the size of the problems humans faced regularly. Nelly might be a super computer but her decision trees were getting super sized. “Yes, I can do that. Each boat will need to start the attack from well spaced positions. The Commodore usually has you in line behind the flagship. You will need more space than that to maneuver.”

“Good observation, Nelly,” Kris said. Yes, Nelly was even responding to praise. Exactly what had Kris bought with her latest upgrade, and with that bit of Santa Maria rock in the self organizing matrix that she’d told Nelly not to look at but ...? Well, there was one more spoiled brat on the PF’s than the Navy had assigned.

Phil leaned close to Kris’s ear. “I’d heard stories about your Nelly. This is the first I’ve seen her in action. Nice.”

“You caught her on one of her better days.”

“I heard that.”

“Good, because I want five different evasion approach plans for all twelve boats,” Kris snapped. No use having all that computing power if she wasn’t going to put it to use. And an idle Nelly was something to avoid at all cost.

“We can never tell when we’ll need to switch to a new random route. Face it, Nelly, they’ve got computers, too. And if they figure out one of your random sets, we need a back-up and another, and another. Got it.”

“Yes, your slave driving Highnessness,” Nelly said.

Around the room, hands covered poorly suppressed grins. None of them referred to Kris as anything but Lieutenant. Aboard ship or ashore, she was Navy, never Princess, to her shipmates.

But what her own computer did to her.... Well, that was a hoist of another petard.

“One more thing,” Kris said. “We’ve got 18-inch pulse lasers. They give out a quick, powerful burst of energy on our target. But there are no reloads. We have motors, not reactors that could refill our capacitors. It’s one shot and then we’re done.”

Heads nodded. They’d all read the manuals.

“We need to make sure that our shots do as much damage as they can. If we’re coordinating our approaches, maybe we could do something else.”

Phil and Singh leaned close. Others folded their arms; they'd be a hard sell. Kris ignored her melting ice cream and got into sales mode.

* * *

"Thirty thousand kilometers to the target," Tom reported from his station on weapons at Kris's elbow. "Close range for the secondary armament."

And this close, the battlewagon's ranging and search systems, radar, lasers, magnetic and gravitational measurements would be picking up solid returns on even the tiny signatures of the fast patrol boats. Time to make their firing solutions as complicated as possible.

"Take the division up to three gees acceleration. Implement evasion scheme 1 on my mark," Kris ordered. "Begin Foxing." She paused for the other boats to make ready, then ordered "Mark."

Evasion Scheme 1 was nothing if not more evasive. And now when each PF changed direction – more often, more wildly — it launched Foxing decoys as well. At each course change, a chaff of iron needles, aluminum strips and phosphorus pellets shot out just as the boat made the turn. The chaff showered out along the old course, as the PF turned face toward the battleship for a new course. For that fraction of a second, while the boat itself was nose on, the Foxer decoyed the radar, laser, infrared and magnetic sensors into showing the boat on the same old course.

That was usually just long enough to get a shot off from the battleship's secondary lasers – at empty space.

The Foxer's chaff also gave color to the lasers as they cut through the space where your ship wasn't.

Unlike dances and fancy planet-bound fireworks shows, navy lasers in space should show nothing. A hammer and tongs battle between a dozen ships of the line is a dark, silent, affair with nothing more to show than when the ships are swinging around the station. At first, at least. For a while.

Then laser hits flash ice armor into steam that shoots off in jets that quickly freeze again. Those crystals catch laser light, reflect it, refract it, and turn horrible murder and butchery into something unspeakably lovely that the poets write about. If they survive. That artists try to capture in paint and steel and graphics for the rest of their lives. If they live to old age. Like twenty-five.

But PFs like Kris' had no ice to boil off. For them, the chaff created the living color that just might let them live.

"Wow. Did you see that?" Finch gaped at the main ahead screen for a moment

as near misses lit up the decoys around them.

“Pass it along to all hands,” Kris said. There was painful little to do as they raced toward simulated death, their death or a battleship’s. It was either done and done right, and all the crew had left to do was watch gauges stay in the green, or it was done poorly and they’d fail as badly as the other two divisions.

“Twenty thousand kilometers,” Tom said. “All four lasers are nominal and hot.”

“Division, go to evasion scheme 6. Prepare to execute evasion and attack on my mark,” Kris said.

“Yeah. Go girls,” Nelly said, breaking her ordered quiet.

Kris waited, gave the division an extra count. DO IT, NELLY.

The division scattered, going into a dance that left them high, low and medium on the battlegon. Then, after a series of twists and turns that left Kris’s head bouncing off her headrest, it was time.

“Fire,” Kris ordered. If Nelly had done her work right, the order was unnecessary, but this was Kris’s command, and she’d give the order herself, thank you very much.

“Lasers firing,” Tom yelled. “All four away at 16,000 kilometer. All fired by the timer.”

“Begin escape evasion,” Kris ordered. And held her breath.

Was the battleship still there? Blown up? Damaged but still fighting?

“Just what do you young rascals think you just did,” came over the command channel. At least Commodore Mandanti was calling them rascals today, not hooligans.

“A coordinated attack, sir,” Kris answered. It being Tuesday, she had the lead of the division, so it fell to her to explain just what they had decided to do, her and Phil and Chandra. Heather had gone along with them, though she had her doubts. They’d persuaded the tall red-head that the entire division had to do it if it was to work at all.

“Well, quit your bouncing around, put some decent deceleration on your boats and explain to an old man who only happens to be your commanding officer just what this is that you call a coordinated attack, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, sir, cease evasive maneuvering. Rotate ship, begin deceleration at 1.5 gees. Motors, spread the radiators.” When she got her replies, Kris took a deep breath and began the explanation she’d prepared for.

“Sir, an 18-inch pulse laser sounds mighty powerful when you read the book on it, but even the smallest battleship has a lot of ice armor and it’s rotating at a clip intended to prevent our laser from burning through in the short time that we’re hitting their ice.”

“That’s just part of the sad realities of being a mosquito boat skipper in a big ship navy.”

“Yes sir, but what if we hit the same spot on the battlewagon with two pulse lasers simultaneously?”

“There you go using that “we” again. Who am I talking to, a princess or a Navy Lieutenant.”

Kris gritted her teeth, the Commodore had only hit her with the Princess gig two or three times. Kris was about to reply when she found she didn’t have to.

“That ‘we’, sir, includes me,” Phil said. “And me,” said Chandra. “And me,” said Heather. “We all kind of figured,” Phil went on, “that there wasn’t much good of going through all this risking of our fair young necks...” “Or old ones,” Chandra cut in, “if we weren’t going to leave some dead battlewagons laying around when we were done. As you saw, sir, by coordinating our approach evasion courses, we managed not to step into each other’s paths and let your defense gunners get two hits for the price of one, or hit one when they were aiming at the other.

“Anyway, Kris suggested that if we coordinated our final approach, we might get some solid double hits on the battlewagon that would cut through the armor to the soft, chewy insides.”

Kris was content to leave the talking to Phil now. It seemed that the Navy Way included its own way of talking about murder and mayhem. Kids brought up Navy knew how to talk to their elders. Kris wasn’t always sure the English she spoke did the job as well.

It was good to have Phil and Chandra along to translate.

“Hmm,” came back. “Well, then. I was going to give you credit for thirteen hits out of sixteen on the old target drone, but since you raised the stakes, let me see how many of your shots qualified as solid double hits.”

“Damn,” Tom whispered beside Kris. “I bet if the old man found a pile of presents under his Christmas tree, he’d first check to see if Saint Nick tracked in any reindeer dung.”

“Of course he would, Mr. Lien,” came Chief Stanislaus over the ship’s net. “The Navy Way don’t include having no reindeer crap all over the front parlor when visitors

might come calling.”

At least the boat got a laugh. Off command net. To itself.

“Well, now, you kids didn’t do too bad, even under the goals you set for yourselves,” came from the Commodore after a long minute. “Drone Five isn’t exactly rigged to measure what you were trying to do, but it looks like ten of your hits were pretty close, in both time and space. Say you got five double hits. Call it enough to burn through a President class battleship’s main belt. I definitely think I’m buying the beer tonight.

“And you ladies and gentlemen by an act of parliament leading the erstwhile boats of Division 1 and 2 who no doubt attended whatever conspiratorial den in which Div 3 hatched their plan, why didn’t you try the same instead of letting good old Drone Five and my fine bunch of gunners shoot you down like delicate butterflies, pinned to a piece of cheap cardboard?”

Kris tried to swallow a grin that seemed to infect her entire crew. Before the silence on net stretched too far, the Commodore filled it.

“Never mind, you can all explain yourselves to me over beers tonight. All divisions, set course and speed to form on my flagship within the next three hours. We should be alongside the pier by 1700 hours. Party starts at 2100.”

The net went silent. Beside her, Tommy tapped the central comm to take PF-109's ship net off the main battle net and cheers erupted around Kris.

“You did a damn fine job, all of you,” Kris said, into their happy noises. Tononi, I don’t know how you kept the engines cool for the run in, but you did it.”

“I had ma pet goat piss on’em when they got too hot, ma’am,” he said, alluding to one of the farm animals he was reported to keep pinned up in the engine room.

“Just so long as you get your space Shipshape and Bristol fashion to please the chief,” Kris said, “I don’t care how you kept your cool.”

Chief Stanislaus, at his battle station backing Tom up on weapons, scowled, but his reputation as a hard driving old chief was in serious danger. There being way too much “up” in evidence around the edges of that particular scowl.

“You heard the Commodore, we only have four hours alongside the pier before he wants to throw that party, so let’s get the whole ship back to Bristol fashion now rather than later.”

Kris leaned back in her chair as it went from heavily inflated High Gee station to a normal acceleration station. Feet on the deck, she turned to face the helm. “You

have a course laid in for the flag?”

“Flag has established a stately .85 gee course for the station,” Fintch reported. “Computer has generated a course that puts us in line aft of the flag in exactly three hours, ma’am.”

NELLY? Kris asked her own computer through the plug that fed her thoughts directly to Nelly. There were risks in having too easy a connection, but when a gun was at her head, Kris didn’t want to be sub vocalizing and trying not to move her jaw.

NAVY ISSUE COMPUTER IS DUMB AS A STUMP, BUT A ONE HANDED MONKEY WITH AN ABACUS COULD SOLVE THAT BALLISTICS PROBLEM.

I AM SO GLAD YOU DIDN’T SAY THAT OUT LOUD TO FINCH.

I AM NOT LACKING IN THE SOCIAL GRACES, PRINCESS. IT IS JUST THAT THEY, AND TRYING TO RESOLVE PROBLEMS WHILE DOING THE MINIMUM DAMAGE TO WHAT YOU HUMANS CALL FEELINGS, ARE JUST SO TIME CONSUMING.

THINK OF IT AS AN ART FORM. NOW, CHECK OUT THE SHIP AND MAKE A LIST OF DEFICIENCIES. BET YOU THAT YOUR LIST ISN’T MORE THAN HALF AGAIN AS LONG AS THE LIST THAT THE CREW SPOT.

YOU ARE ON. AND IF I WIN?

WE’LL TALK ABOUT IT LATER.

I WOULD LOVE TO SPEND SOME TIME MESSING AROUND WITH THAT PIECE OF ROCK FROM SANTA MARIA THAT IS STILL SITTING IN MY MATRIX. I BET I COULD INVESTIGATE ITS ALIEN CONTENTS AND NOT LOCK UP.

THAT BET IS NOT ON THE TABLE. NOW, MISS NELLY, IF YOU DON’T MIND, I HAVE A SHIP TO COMMAND. BUZZ OFF.

AYE, AYE, YOUR SKIPPERSHIP.

The Navy listed the crew size for PF-109 at fifteen. Kris counted sixteen. And that last crew member brought with her all kinds of advantages ... and pains in her electrical ass.

Kris turned to Tom and the Chief. “I don’t know about you, but my head did an awful lot of banging around. Is my skull just kind of small or do the High Gee Stations need some adjustment.

The chief shook his head. “The stations are a problem, ma’am. Maybe we ought to fit all hands with brain buckets. But I don’t think that’s our worse problem. I

was watching the laser fire from that old tub. I know the official Navy take is that the drone has the same defensive suite as a battleship, but I'm not buying that we got a full work out. And even with that, there were an awful lot of too damn close near misses." The chief of the boat, an old man of thirty, shrugged. "If it was a real fight, we'd have to do better."

"Ah, man, that's not what I was wanting to hear," Tom said, his grandmother's brogue leaking out.

"Chief, you look into those helmets, and I'll have Nelly adjusting each High Gee Station to personally fit each crewman, helmet and all." Kris shook her head. "You know, after this one practice run, the idea of us taking on battlewagons with these splinters isn't nearly as frightening as it sounded the day we commissioned the squadron."

"Not likely we'll be defending Wardhaven from battlewagons," Lien said. "Look at the size of the fleet your da has swinging around the station. Me, I'm surprised we haven't been run down, turned into some battleship's bowsprit."

"Figurehead," both Kris and the Chief said together.

"If you'll excuse me, ma'am," the Chief said, "I'll be taking my falling arches off to see what's happening in the rest of this rust bucket. I think you have the bridge as well under control as any Captain can."

Kris let that rattle around in her head for a second ... and decided it was as close to a compliment as a chief could give a junior officer. "You do that, Chief."

She watched him leave, which left her eyes resting on the empty station directly behind her. "I see you got the intel battle station set up."

"And didn't I say I would," Lien said, getting up from his own gunnery station and slipping into the seat of the new one. "Having Penny on that intel station of that yacht that you, ah, borrowed off Turantic was a God send. I got one set up here just as fast as I could find a spare station laying around the dock and no one paying too much attention to its ownership," he said with his lopsided grin taking a most definite lean to port.

"You stole it."

"Not all of us can have your petty change purse, Kris." The smile made it almost a joke. Without the smile, it would have hurt. Still, the truth was she could have bought the entire squadron out of her last year's earnings and not touched the principal of her trust fund. There were some advantages to being one of those damn Longknives.

"Penny still coming for breakfast tomorrow?" Kris asked.

Tommy's grin got even wider, passing aft of his ears and probably meeting somewhere in back. Well, that was the way a guy was suppose to react when you mentioned his future bride. At least they always did around Kris. All the guys that Kris met and who ended up asking gals that Kris knew to be their brides. And brides who always asked Kris to be their maid of honor.

Kris had given up trying to figure out what it was about her bubbling personality that was such a catalyst for other people meeting and falling happily in love. At least she told herself she was going to give up trying to figure it all out. Give it up by next Thursday.

"Penny is so tickled you offered us the garden at Nuu House for the wedding. Her mom is living on Cambrai now with her present husband. My folks are all on Santa Maria. We don't have a place to call home. But to be married in the gardens where King Raymond and Rita were married. Kris, you're wonderful."

There were many answers to that. Kris settled on "I'm glad to offer a quiet place for your families to get together."

"Well, I think mainly it will be the squadron, unless there's some cheap fares between Santa Maria and here for my family. Her da," Tommy shrugged. "Penny sent out a chaser mail, three days ago, but she doesn't really know where he is. Probably just a quiet wedding among us sailors."

"You want cross sabers?"

"I think she would like it. You know, I'm not sure if she intends to wear a white dress or dress whites."

"Just be glad we're keeping this whole affair a secret from my mother. If she got ahold of it" Kris shivered at the mere thought of Mother planning a wedding.

Maybe that was the best reason for staying single. "So," Kris pointed at the intel station. "Any idea who might crew it?"

"How about Penny?" Tom said, almost sounding serious. "She knows just about all there is to know about the warships a Wardhaven fleet might face. She has a full range of intel skills. You can't keep holding her duty of interrogating us 'mutineers' against her."

"Don't even use that word as a joke," Kris said, blanching.

"Then you hire a PR firm to come up with a nice short term for what we did on the *Typhoon*," Tom said. "Anyway, we'll need someone with all Penny's skills, so why not ask for Penny. She's done enough desk time. She'd love some ship duty."

And Tom would love to have his wife stationed right behind him. And the minor fact that Penny had held her Lieutenant rank for a whole year longer than Kris shouldn't cause any trouble in the chain of command of a ship as tiny as PF-109.

Yeah. Right.

But Penny had done fine work on Turantic when Kris had needed some very fine work if she was to stay alive. She could do worse than have someone like Penny backing her up. The chief might be right; any real targets they went up against might well be shooting back with a whole lot nastier stuff than the antiques that the Commodore had them training against.

But PF boats defending Wardhaven! Who was kidding who. If they were lucky, they'd all be shipped off to some back water planet. Ordered to defend some place that no one thought needed all that much defending when things changed suddenly and

Hmm, maybe having a full intel officer and a full intel report might not be a bad idea for wherever they ended up having to show that these toys could fight.

Three hours later they were all tucked right in behind the flagship, tiny ducklings following in the wake of the *Cushing*, an antique destroyer, the last of her class not yet sent to the breakers, kept around only to nursemaid this hair brain idea that you could use penny boats to blast dollar bill battleships.

Stan brought Kris the list of ship deficiencies. It was long. Nelly's list was longer, but fell four short of exceeding the chief's list by half. "Nelly, pass your list to the chief."

Stan looked at the longer list, pursed his lips, then went to check it out.

"So I don't get to mess with the rock chip," Nelly said, sounding as sad as a computer could. "Auntie Tru would be so happy if I discovered whatever secrets of the Three races that built the jump points that might still be recoverable on that data source. She might even cook you up a batch of chocolate chip cookies."

"Nor can you bring up the topic for a month," Kris said, ignoring the rest of the blandishment.

"A week," Nelly countered. "You didn't specify a length when we made the bet."

"Two weeks," Kris said. Nelly went quiet in her head. *It's really weird when you can tell your computer is pouting by just the way your skull feels.*

"Is that the way it works?" Tommy asked.

"What works?"

“Keeping Nelly under control?”

“She is never under control.”

“You got that right, your skippership.”

“Sorry I asked,” Tommy said, swallowing something half way between a snarf and a chuckle.

“Nelly, I want you to research the best helmets for the crew to reduce brain damage and neck strain when we’re whipping around at High Gees on Evasion. Then reprogram the battle stations to secure the head and neck supports tightly on the helmets so our heads don’t take as much battering as we did today.”

“If you’d just let me run the ship, you could all stay home,” Nelly said.

Fintch at the helm did a double take.

“Yes, Nelly, but the Navy Way is old fashion about that. So you just do what I tell you and we’ll get along fine.”

The rest of the cruise back was quiet as all hands turned to to make right as many of the deficiencies on the chief’s list as they could without a dock to help. The list was noticeably shorter when Kris ordered all hands to pier detail.

Kris watched over Fintch’s shoulder as she brought the boat smartly alongside the pier, caught the bow lock down on the first try and followed it as it smoothly pulled the boat to the pier.

“Well done,” Kris said, giving Fintch a well earned pat on the shoulder.

“Power line passed to the pier,” the chief reported from his special space detail station at the quarterdeck amidships. “Air, comm and water connected. The hatch is opened.”

The pressure in the boat changed the tiniest bit. No ship ever managed to maintain the same atmosphere as the station, even for only a one day out and back in.

“Captain, we’ve got...” was cut short.

“Chief, do we have a problem,” Kris demanded as her eyes went over the board. All lights were green. There was nothing wrong with the boat. Nothing showing.

NELLY?

“I’m being jammed,” the computer said, surprise flooding its voice. “I’m trying to ...”

Kris turned in her command seat as five MP's in Army khaki marched onto her bridge, a major in the lead.

“Are you Lieutenant Kristine Ann Longknife, sometimes styled princess,” he demanded.

There are some moments in your life that you know are coming for you. Moments that, when you are just a kid, you know will happen to you before you die. It's probably different for different kids. If your folks are farmers, maybe it's a plague of locust at harvest time or that one great crop that will never be equaled. If you're an army brat you know that somewhere out there is a battle, a fight for your life, that will find you.

Kris was a politician's daughter; somehow she knew that *they* would come for her one day. As a kid of nine, she'd watched vids of Marie Antoinette and wondered what it had been like to face that first arrest, to walk those final steps to the guillotine.

All her life, Kris had wondered how she'd handle this moment, so it both surprised her ... and failed to.

She stood, faced her accuser and answered simply, “I am Kris Longknife.” Strange, at the moment, how all titles fell away.

“I have orders to relieve you of your command and place you under arrest. Sergeant, cuff her.”

Kris's mind raced. What to do next? She turned to Tom. “You have the conn,” she said. The command had to be transferred clearly. That was the Navy way. Then she turned back to this Army invasion on her bridge.

“May I ask what for?” Kris said, keeping her hands at her side. Resistance was futile ... worse ... undignified. But she'd be damned if she'd help them.

An army sergeant, no marines or navy in sight, whipped out a pair of cuffs and shoved Tom aside. The Navy Lieutenant reached for the ruffian.

“Stand down,” Kris ordered.

Tommy did, though tiny Finch took a step forward and slowed down the other sergeant charging in on Kris's other side.

The major whipped out his sidearms as did the two MP's behind him.

“Stand down,” Kris ordered, louder. “Neither I nor my crew are under arms. We cannot nor will we offer you any resistance. Finch, let the men through, even if they are barging around on our ship without so much as a by your leave.”

Kris had dreamed this scene, asleep and awake too many times. Sometimes it ended peacefully. Other times not. She knew how she wanted it to end.

The MP's had their guns out; they nervously eyed the bridge crew. "Major, the only people on this bridge armed are your people. No one is going to resist you, so relax." Kris tried to make that last sound like an obvious invitation. "But would you mind telling me what this is all about?"

"Lady, I got my orders. It says arrest you and it don't say why. Some of us do what we're told, see. Now are you coming with me or do we carry you?"

Mac had warned Kris that not everyone was happy about the way she'd been stopping wars of late. Apparently, this party had not been recruited from among her fans.

Okay, the idea is to live through this day, girl. From the looks of the goons beside her and behind the major, they dearly wanted to carry her. And once they got their mitts on her, she'd just happen to resist arrest and just happen to deserve the maximum application of force and restraint allowed by law.

"I may be Navy, Major, but I do know how to walk." The sergeant with the cuffs had grabbed both of Kris's hands and locked them down behind her back. She felt vulnerable. Terribly vulnerable. Still, it allowed her to walk as she wanted.

Kris stepped forward, two guards behind her, two fell in ahead of her. They turned to head back the way they'd come, and the major bounced his skull off the overhead. PFs were not designed with six footers in mind.

"Watch your step," Kris said. "Tom, call Harvey at the house."

"Yes, Your Highness," her XO answered. They knew. This was political theater; each had their part. If they played it right, they'd all live to tell their grandkids about it and laugh.

The climb down to the quarterdeck was none too easy, but Kris made it before her knees started shaking. A firefight with a gun in her hand and an enemy to run at was one thing. Being cuffed and shoved around by guards was something else entirely. At the hatch, the Chief and the special detail stood at their stations. Stan was developing what looked to be a real shiner.

"Sorry, ma'am."

"No problem, Chief. Send my regrets to the Commodore for missing tonight's beer bash."

"Yes, ma'am."

“Do you want my coat?” the Chief asked. Kris wasn’t cold. Then she heard the shutters and saw the flashes. Twenty, thirty camera crews waited outside. The chief wasn’t offering a coat to keep her warm but a hood to hide her face.

“No thank you, chief, this is all part of the drill,” Kris said. She raised her head high and stepped across the brow of her boat without missing a step.

That was what was important. Not to look like she was a prisoner. That was the impression she wanted to project. That was what she’d always planned for this moment.

Her guards moved along, and Kris moved right with them. Let the commentator report she was their prisoner. Let the image show Princess Longknife advancing to meet the people with her honor guard. Kris set her face neither in a smile nor a scowl. Neither frown nor blank stare for this moment. *Dare you to use these pictures.*

Just please, dear God, don’t let my knees give out.

She made one exception to her no reaction policy. There, off to the left, peering through a mob of newsies was Mr. Singh with his two kids, a boy and a girl. They stared at Kris through eyes gone wide in fright? Wonder? What must their three and five year old world make of this? Kris chipped a smile off the marble she’d hardened her lips to. She nodded a centimeter in their direction. They waved enthusiastically, all joy at the attention. Goran Singh gave her a thumbs up sign.

A moment later she was at the door of the waiting station cart. She settled inside, then turned back to the cameras to give them the required Princess smile. Just another day of doing that royal thing. The sergeant slammed the door shut with unnecessary violence, leaving her alone with her guards as the electric cart motored off quietly.

Now ... with the cameras gone ... Kris would find out just what her chances were of living until morning.

“You Print-cess Longa-knife,” the guard asked.

Kris blinked away exhaustion as she took inventory of her 3 by 4 meter brig cell. It was cold, gray on gray, concrete floor, walls, unpadded slab for a bed, toilet without the courtesy of a seat. It stank of old vomit, but nobody here but her.

She let go of her knees; she'd pulled them up to her chin for warmth and the feel of something human. She allowed herself a sleepless stretch. Her blue shipsuit identified her as a navy Lieutenant; it properly displayed the name Longknife over her right breast. She swallowed several cutting replies that she doubted the guard had the good sense or humor to take and settled for, “I am Kris Longknife.”

“Somebody finally showed up to sign for you,” the corporal snickered and signaled to a security camera. With a buzz, the cell door opened.

Kris reminded herself that whatever that camera recorded would show up in the media to the worst reflection on her, her father the prime minister, and, more importantly, Grampa Ray, the king. Hungry, tired, madder than she'd ever been in her life, Kris stood with as much grace as her aching muscles allowed and carefully paced the distance to the door. “Thank you,” she told the man as if he had done her royal person a great service.

“You're welcome,” he said, then glanced up at the camera and made a sour face as if he might somehow take back those words. There was more than one way to get even, Kris reminded herself.

He made up for that mistake by grabbing her elbow and trying to rush her along. Kris was too tired, ached too much and had too many other problems for that to end up well. “Could we please slow down?” she asked. “My shoes don't have any laces and if I walk too fast, I'll walk out of them.”

“Oh.” The guard looked down, slowed. “Sorry.”

Kris doubted that was what his superiors wanted on the record, but she'd often found that a bit of human kindness in the worst situation encouraged human kindness

in return. Today, it had worked. She wouldn't take it personal if tomorrow it didn't.

The prison maze she'd been lead through last night was now done in reverse. It coughed her up in the booking room. A new desk sergeant was looking at his monitors and cameras feeds; he studiously ignored her. NELLY, YOU GOT THE BADGE NUMBERS?

YOU BET.

Kris was a naval officer, but she'd been raised a politician's daughter. There would be pay back for this night.

From flimsy plastic chairs across from the desk sergeant's cage, two familiar figures rose. Jack was no surprise.

Special Agent Montoya, the swathe head of her security detail should have been able to arrange her release by a quick flash of his badge. No badge was in evidence.

Rising to his feet beside Jack was Great-grampa Trouble. He had another name, but he'd been Trouble to so many people, not all of them enemy, during his long Marine career, that now he was Trouble even to Kris' mother. In name and fact. Former Chair of several different planetary General Staffs, he was now semi-retired. Today he wore slacks and a three button shirt. And if someone mistook his ramrod back and burr cut for just any old retired officer, they deserved what they got.

Kris had several million questions, but a glance at Jack and Grampa showed that they had no intention of saying a word under the watchful eyes of the security cameras around the rooms.

NELLY. WHAT'S THE NEWS?

KRIS, I STILL CAN NOT ACCESS THE NET. NO MAIL, NO NEWS, NOT SO MUCH AS A RADIO WAVE. THERE'S A SHORT RANGE, ALL FREQUENCY, NOISE JAMMER THAT HAS BEEN FOLLOWING US AROUND SINCE YOU WERE ARRESTED. I CAN NOT CUT THROUGH. I DO NOT HAVE THE POWER FOR IT. DO YOU WANT ME TO MAKE A TRY? IF I FAIL, I COULD BE LEFT SURVIVING ON JUST A TRICKLE.

NO. WE'LL BE OUT SOON ENOUGH. THEN WE'LL FIND OUT WHAT THIS IS ALL ABOUT. Kris held her tongue while the sergeant ran Grampa Trouble's Ident through his machine, glanced at the results he got ... and blanched.

He fled to the other side of his cage and turned Kris' processing over to a cheerful woman sporting Spec 4 strips. She actually gave Kris a wan smile as she produced Kris' personal effects. "I'm sorry about this. We got very explicit orders from the Chief of Staff on how to handle your case."

"From Mac?" Kris knew she had caused General McMorrison one or two

problems, but this!

“No ma’am. Admiral Pennypacker, the new Chief of Staff.”

Kris thought she knew most of the senior serving officers by name; Pennypacker was a blank. She glanced at Grampa Trouble.

“Please finish clearing the Lieutenant,” he ordered. “Mr. Montoya and I do not have all day.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mister Montoya! Not agent!

The Spec 4 went through Kris’s wallet. “You are ordered to surrender your diplomatic passport within twenty-four hours.”

“I’m not going anywhere. You have my ship,” Kris snapped.

“Ma’am, I’m just following orders. There will be a pre-trial hearing a week from tomorrow. You will be notified of its exact time and location when we send you the charges against you. If you cannot afford counsel, the Navy will appoint counsel for you,” the woman said, then looked at the file and added. “Oh, right, you’re one of those Longknives.”

“Tell the Navy I want them to appoint me counsel.” Kris would hire a lawyer, too, but the quality of counsel the Navy provided would tell her as much about the outcome of the court marshal as the verdict.

Five more minutes of agony and Jack stepped aside to open the door for Kris ... and she found herself facing the last person in the world she wanted to see. Adorable Dora, host of “The Real Talk of the Town – at Two,” blocked Kris’s way.

Surgeons had repaired that perfect nose from the last time an interviewee had broken it. Two men, both sporting several tiny cameras about their hunky frames, backed Dora up. Kris really didn’t feel like decking the woman, she was way too tired for that. She just wanted to get home and find a quiet corner where she could dig a hole and crawl into it for an hour or two.

But if the woman stayed between Kris and that quiet hole, Kris might reassess her priorities.

“What do you think about your dad selling out the farmers?”

“I didn’t know he had,” Kris said, smiling like she’d been taught, while sidestepping to the left. Grampa Trouble imposed himself between Dora and Kris. Kris

took two steps forward before she found herself stopped by one of the hunks and the realization that she didn't know where she was going. None of the cars in the lot were any of the limos or armored town cars normally assigned to Nuu House.

"That rental over there is ours," Jack said, rolling past Kris and blocking camera one, while pointing at a five year old baby blue town car.

Kris took the opening provided and quick walked for the car. But Dora was coming up on the outside.

"How do you feel about being charges with misappropriation of Government Funds by your former commanding officer."

That caused Kris to miss a step, giving Dora and her two cameramen a chance to gain position. Kris took a breath, glanced at Jack, who was rolling his eyes heavenward, and risked a question. "Does this former commander of mine have a name?"

Kris had a number of former commanders. Some were actually still alive. A few were still serving honorably. One or two.

"Lieutenant Pearson, your commander on Olympia. She says you pocketed large sums of money from the emergency funds provided to feed the starving farmers and townspeople there."

Kris missed two steps this time. That allowed Jack to catch up, muscle one camera man aside and away from the car. Grampa opened the door for Kris. She positioned herself to finished the interview and vanish into the car. She took a breath, organizing thoughts that were at once both exhausted and spinning.

"I served *with* Pearson, never *under* her. She was more concerned with writing policies which, I don't believe she ever finished. I saw to it that people got food to eat ... and they did." Kris started to duck into the car.

Dora would not call it quits. "She says she has proof that money was missing from many accounts."

Kris held herself erect by holding onto the door. "No doubt money disappeared from her unit. She stayed hold up in her office for days on end and never went out to see what was actually happening. She did love her policy. Me, I donated money out of my own pocket to get people off their backs, out of the mud, on their feet and back to work. Check my tax returns. They're part of the official record. Now, if you'll excuse me. I tired and this interview is done."

"Do you think your dad will win the election?"

That required no thought. “Of course. His party best represents the hopes and aspirations of the people of Wardhaven.” Kris said and pulled the door closed.

“Sorry about that,” Jack said as he settled into the drivers seat. He waved at the car. “And this. It was the only one we could get on short notice that had the armor and security we needed. Your dad and brother took the new ones.”

“If someone doesn’t start talking to me,” Kris said between clinched teeth, “I’m going to break my promise to my big brother not to kill anyone this month.”

“Hold your horses a moment,” Jack said from the front passenger seat – and produced a bug locator and burner.

“I am tracking three bugs,” Nelly said. “Two are standard newsies, but the other is more expensive. Kris, I have a full news download from the net. Would you like me to brief you?”

Two sparklings in midair showed where Jack had nailed all but one of the problems. Kris grit her teeth and waited. Nelly was good for news, but Jack knew what interested Kris. He’d tell her what she wanted to know before she had to ask.

A third nano finally went down in flame, trailing wispy smoke toward the carpeted floor.

“Jack, Grampa, what happened?” Kris said in what she considered an amazingly restrained voice.

“At ten thirty yesterday morning, your father’s government lost a Vote of Confidence over the farm subsidy program cutbacks that he was pushing through to reduce the level of deficit brought on by the increased defense spending,” Jack said quickly.

“That’s impossible. Father had a solid understanding with the farm wing of his party to support the cutbacks.” Kris might spend most of her time Navy, but she couldn’t hold down a princess’s social calendar and have her ear bent by things as politically hot as the budget and farm wing.

“Apparently, the family farmers weren’t as solidly in your dad’s pocket as they told him,” Grampa said. “For what it’s worth, it came as a really big surprise to my grandson.”

“So the opposition forms a caretaker government until elections,” Kris said, leaning back in her seat. She knew how these things went. Politics 101. She’d learned it along with how to eat her porridge back before she was out of diapers, though for all her life, her father or grandfather had been the prime minister and the opposition had been little more than a voice crying from the wilderness of the back benches.

Kris reviewed what she knew. “But a *Pro Tem* government isn’t suppose to change policy ... or appoint a new Chief of the General Staff like Pennypacker”

Jack came in right on the down beat. “But this caretaker government got a solid majority to vote it full powers, things being what they are in human space at the moment, and with that vote behind them, they got King Ray to sanction them.”

“How’d Father take to this

“Rather poorly,” Jack said.

“I’ll say,” Grampa chuckled. “My, but the old boy was spewing venom. Quite a sight. It will be the classic text for how not to lose a vote of confidence in the future.”

“Well, we Longknives aren’t all that practiced at losing,” Kris observed dryly.

Jack ignored her quip and went on. “And the opposition had a good point. With all the wars and rumor of wars, this is not a good time to have the government of Wardhaven treading water. A lot of your father’s allies sided with them. They promised to vote with your old man again if and when he’s got the warrant to form a new government, but just now, they felt they had to vote to juice up the *pro tem* government. I think that’s why King Raymond supported their claim and need to appoint a cabinet and take the full reins of government. Anyway, what’s done is done.”

“And what is done, *Mister Montoya*?”

“Oh, that.” Jack actually seemed embarrassed. “Since you are no long the Prime Minister’s daughter, you don’t rate Protection. Therefore, I was recalled and reassigned to the new Prime Minister’s youngest daughter.”

Kris glanced at her watch, something she could do faster than asking Nelly what time it was. “When’s your next shift?”

“I declined the reassignment and am on terminal leave,” Jack said briskly. “I’ll rescind my resignation when your father is reelected, Princess, but Tilly Pandori is a real snot and I’ll be damned if I’ll take a bullet for her.”

Having spent too many hours listening to the daughter of the opposition leader drone on and on at parties, Kris couldn’t object to Jack’s tastes. But it was the first evidence she’d had that his professionalism had its limits.

It also left her wondering if there wasn’t more to Jack being at her side than, well, Jack being ordered to be there.

Time to change *that* topic.

“Am I *really* being charged with misappropriation of government property?” Kris struggled to keep her voice calm ... and almost succeeded. “That bloody mission to that swamp cost me a small fortune.” Not to mention her life ... almost ... twice.

“Must be true. Pearson was on all the talk shows saying so. She has printouts to prove it. Was waving them, though she didn’t let anyone get close enough to look at them,” Jack said.

All Kris could do was shake her head. “No good deed goes unpunished. Yes, I took a solid tax deduction for the money I donate, but the idea that I’d stooped to stealing the rice, beans and survival biscuits we shipped to those starving farmers While getting shot at for the privilege Nelly, how’s the Ruth Edris Fund for Distressed Farmers doing on Olympia. Are we still sending them money each month?”

“No, Kris. There are now more local donations coming in than money going out. I asked the board of directors to consider either closing it or coming up with proposals for investing the money in low interest loans to help folks start up small businesses or homestead on abandoned farm land. They like that idea and will get back to you with a business proposal that may involve rechartering the fund as a Credit Union.”

“Well, if Pearson plans to try this thing in the court of public opinion while my father is in a run for his political life, Nelly, you better drop a note to Ester or Jeb and ask them arrange some interviews with their local Olympia media. Maybe some with the ministers, priests and rabbis we worked with, too.”

Grampa Trouble shook his head. “Girl, a nice canned interview in some podunk place fifty light years away won’t count for much when the other side’s got people running from talk show to talk show right here.”

“Hold it, Nelly,” Kris said, knowing that Grampa was right and she’d never have needed a reminder if she wasn’t so tired. “Send a check to cover four or five tickets and per diem for folks and ask Ester if she could get some volunteers to come.”

“You paying their way won’t look all that good,” Jack said.

“So, if I don’t, I look bad. If I do, I look lousy. Give me a break. Some breakfast, a nap, a shower. Not necessarily in that order. This is about the worst morning I’ve ever had.”

“If that Pearson woman wasn’t your boss on that rain-sodden planet maybe you could have who was speak for you,” Grampa said.

“Colonel Hancock was my CO and I reported directly to him. He had as few people as possible report to Pearson.”

“Sounds like a smart man,” was high praise from Grampa.

“Colonel Hancock,” Jack said slowly.

“Yes,” Kris said with a nod. “Lieutenant Colonel James T Hancock, SHMC.”

“Oh, him!” Grampa Trouble shook his head. “The opposition’s talk show hosts will be foaming at the mouth to get him on as your character witness.”

“Am I missing something?” Jack said, looking away from where the car was taking them. “I should think a Marine Colonel would be a perfect character witness.

“Not a Colonel found not guilty of using machine guns for crowd control,” Trouble said.

“Oh, that Colonel Hancock,” Jack said and looked away. “Maybe you could arrange for him to praise Pearson.”

Grampa Trouble’s silence said all Kris needed to hear.

“I think there’s a good reason why he’s still on Olympia and probably will remain there until he sinks into the swamp. There are other folks who were on Olympia with me. There’s Tom. He was with me at the warehouse. He saw what was going on.”

“The Tom who’s getting married at the House?” Jack asked. “Kitchen crew is real excited about baking the wedding cake.”

Hmm, maybe Tom didn’t look all that unbiased at the moment.

“Well, we’ve got a week,” Kris concluded.

“Maybe not,” Nelly said. “I have been examining the news, Kris, and I think the media is engaging in what is called a ‘feeding frenzy.’ Would you like to sample some of the news?”

Now it was Kris’s time to glance at Grampa, raise a quizzical eyebrow. “Is it that bad?”

“I believe the opposition intends to try you in the media and hang your father from your highest yard arm. Or something equally as nautical.”

Kris said a word princesses aren’t suppose to know and settled back into her seat.

* * *

They dropped Grampa Trouble off at his town house, which was good because the entrance to the Nuu House was a media circus. News trucks, cameras besieged

the entrance to the compound. Only the locking gate and eight foot tall brick wall ... and the not so visible security systems above it kept the media outside. Kris faced straight ahead as she rode through the barrage, trusting the car's armor to stop anything really dangerous.

It was only as Jack drove the short distance to the mansion's front entrance that she remembered Penny and Tom were supposed to drop by this morning to talk about their wedding plans. Poor Tommy, having to make it through that rabble. She hoped he hadn't cut and run. She wanted to know how the rest of the squadron was taking her arrest.

The doors to Nuu House opened automatically at her approach.

Leaving her facing the last person in the world she wanted to bother with at this moment.

Father!

William Longknife, Billy to his million of intimates, stormed toward Kris, a hurricane in full blow, his face redder than Kris remembered it this early in the morning. Had he already been at the wine cabinet?

Trailing Father across the spiraling black and white tiles of the foyer was his political shadow, Honovi. Kris pitied her older brother his chosen fate, though he seemed to be succeeding fairly well at following in their father's political footsteps.

For her part, Kris had run off to space to avoid the family's business. If she could, she would have fled farther. At the moment, it looked like she hadn't run nearly far enough.

"What do you think you're doing, young woman?" Father shouted, halting directly in front of Kris, unblinking eyes demanding an answer. He leaned into her, nose to nose, violating her personal space. *Yep, he'd been into the wine supply already. Things were bad and headed worse.*

Kris denied the urge to take a step back. Five years ago she would have. A year ago, she might have. Not today. She'd faced battleships and assassins. What was a merely angry politician to that? But she didn't want a fight. Not now. She weighed her options and chose a non-confrontational one.

"I *think* I'm looking for breakfast," Kris said with as much good cheer as she could muster. "They didn't finish booking me until after supper last night. I got sprung before breakfast. And Father, you must look into the temperatures of your prisons. I almost froze last night."

"I'll do that, Sis, when we get back in office."

“Don’t let her change the subject, Honovi. Kris, what are you doing to my reelection campaign?”

“Nothing, Father. Remember,” Kris pointing at her shoulder tabs. “I’m Navy. We stays out of politics.”

“Like hell they do. These charges leveled against you...”

“Will be handled quickly and promptly.”

“No they won’t, Sis.”

“Why not?” Her brother had Kris’s undivided attention. Well, almost. From the open door to the Rose Parlor on Kris’s left she was catching snatches of conversation. The word ‘wedding’ kept coming up. Mother was doing most of the talking, but Kris thought she heard Tommy or Penny’s voice occasionally trying to get a syllable in edgewise.

“You have a message,” her brother said, “from the Navy Judge Advocate General listing the charges and telling you that your initial hearing has been delayed two weeks.”

“What!” Tired, hungry, mad, Kris barely suppressed a shout. But then she didn’t know who to shout at: her brother for opening her mail or the Navy for slowing down her tribulations.

Or Mother insisting Penny must have eight bridesmaids. “Nothing less will do. It simply will not do,” Mother said with a theatrical flair that would grate chalk off a board.

“I’m sorry,” Honovi said. “The letter came to the house and I felt I’d better open it.”

“You see,” Father said, talking over his son. “They’re playing you into the election news cycle. They’ll hang you out there, day after day, attacking me through you. There’s nothing for you to do but resign from the Navy and come work for us.”

“No!” And this time Kris did shout. She used the voice her DI’s had taught her at OCS. Her “no” carried through the house, reverberating off walls that still echoed with years of history.

Then Kris took the two extra steps that put her in the door of the Rose Parlor and repeated “No.”

“Mother, you are not taking over Penny and Tom’s wedding.” She spun back to face her father. “And Father, I am not one of your political hangers-on that you can order about. I’ve got my own career and I will do what I have to do to keep it.”

Having made her position clear, Kris listened for a very long minute while Mother and Father told her how wrong she was. Kris had little argument with her father. No doubt, this was probably the most important election since Wardhaven freed itself from the yoke of the Unity thugs eighty years ago with the help of Grampa Ray's assassination of President Urm.

Oh yes that lie again.

However, she failed to see that she had any role in this massive political theater of his. As for Mother, even when she attempted to tie a major spring wedding "in the garden where King Ray and Rita wed" to the election as worth a hundred thousand votes, Kris still refused to budge. Then Mother played what she thought was her trump.

"How can you expect *me* to stand *idle* by while there's *preparations* to be made for a *wedding* in my *own* home."

"Your. Home." Kris spat. Kris had had Nuu House to herself since she moved out of the Prime Minister's official residency to go to college. Father had immediately converted her bedroom to office space for two new deputy under assistants for something-or-other. Mother hadn't seemed to notice at all.

"Yes, Sis. We kind of had to leave the Residency in a hurry last night. The Pandoris insisted on moving in this morning. We didn't bother your suites, but we did move back in."

The idea of living under the same roof with Mother, Father, and God bless her poor brother and his new wife was not something Kris needed to think about.

"I'm moving out."

"You can't," Father and Mother said together.

"Where to?" Abby, Kris's maid of four months asked. Kris hadn't noticed the tall, severely dressed woman at the foot of the stairs. Jack, who might take a bullet for her but wouldn't get between her and her father, had gravitated over to stand beside her.

"I can and I will move out. I am a grown woman and a commissioned Naval officer. I can afford my own apartment."

Father just snorted at the idea. Mother raised her nose in the air. "Where would you find anything appropriate to your station on such short notice?"

Wrong question, Kris thought.

Kris had gotten an education when she recently rescued Tom from kidnappers on Turantic. It wasn't Tommy's fault; he'd been taken as bait to trap Kris. But busting him loose had involved a walk down the seamier underside of Turantic, leaving Kris

with questions about whether Wardhaven had some places just as ugly ... just as empty of hope. Home, she did a search. It was easy, she just looked for the places Father never sent her to campaign.

Yes, Wardhaven had its slums, and a diligent search by Nelly through ownership records, and records of who owned those who owned the ones who owned the ones who.... Anyway, several layers of denyability up from the poor sods who collected the rent Kris found Grampa Al and her own trust fund getting wealthy on way too many of them. She fired off a letter, with plenty of attachments to Grampa Al, asking him to look into this. And got no reply.

What better time than now to do something about it.

“I’m sure there’s several vacant apartments in Edgertown that I could rent today.”

“Edgertown,” Mother huffed.

“Why would you rent something there?” Father asked, his eyebrows coming together like two wooly caterpillars, unsure whether to fight or mate.

“Because we own them, Father. Or rather, your father owns them, through the necessary intermediaries to avoid embarrassing questions.”

“Kris, this is not a good time to think about doing something like that,” Brother said.

“Who’s thinking. As soon as I can call a cab, I’m out of here.

Jack stepped forward. “I’ll drive you, Kris.”

“Young man, I forbid it,” said Father

“Sir, I don’t work for you. Even when you are Prime Minister, I’m under civil service rules.”

Kris would not bet her career that such rules would hold when the full cyclone of her father’s anger stormed down on them.

“Besides,” the vacationing agent said, “your daughter seems quite intent on going apartment hunting on the wrong side of town. Wouldn’t you want someone with my credentials,” here he opened his coat, giving everyone a flash of his service automatic, “seeing that she gets out okay.”

“We are not finished, young woman,” her father stormed, but Kris had done a fast about face and was headed for the door, Jack and Abby hurrying to catch up.

* * *

Outside, Kris took two quick steps and found that her knees were again filing for non-support. She collapsed on the stone steps she'd sat on after school so many years ago. Then she'd used them as an excuse not to go in, not to face her mother and father. Now she sat there recovering from them. No difference.

"You hungry?" Jack asked.

"Starved."

"Let's get some decent food into you while I find a well armored car that doesn't look the part."

Kris glanced down at herself. Her shipsuit looked liked she'd sweated through an attack on a battleship, slept through a bad night in a brig, and survived a family get together of the worse kind. "You don't mind being near me?"

"Wasn't planning on getting closer than ten feet, and that upwind" Jack said. "Remember, I'm on vacation. Any bullets that have a date with you today, it's just you and them, kid."

"Thanks for the reminder." Kris said, and looked up at Abby. "And why are you going with me."

"You're headed into hoods like where I grew up, girl, and you gonna need someone who knows the way things hang. If you don't want to end up hanging upside down. You know my meaning?"

As usual where her maid was concerned, Kris was none to sure exactly what was the woman's meaning. That it usually worked out for the best was the sole reason Kris shrugged and said, "Fine."

"Which also explains why Momma Abby took a few moments when she heard you were coming home to put together a survival kit for her chick." With a flourish, Abby opened what for her was a purse totally out of character, huge with multicolored stripes. A glance in showed Kris a powder blue sweater and brown slacks ... and a body stocking.

"Armored?"

"Why wear one if it ain't, baby ducks."

"Do you wear armored underwear?" Jack asked.

"I do better than that, love. I lead a nice quiet life of desperation, one that no one

would want to end violently.” Her smile for Jack almost looked honest.

Jack’s personal car got them to the Scriptorium, one of Kris’ old college haunts. By the time they’d eaten and Abby had helped her do a quick clean-up and change, Jack had wrestled up a car.

Abby got wide eyed as she took in the wreck. “You’re driving a beater into my hood. You’re risking the Princess here having to thumb her way out when this thing goes white belly up in the middle of the road.”

“Abby, you’re not the only one who wears your camouflage well. Get in. By the way, Miss Nightengale, my latest request to redo the background check on you just came back from Earth.”

Jack took the driver’s seat, Abby the back seat across from him, leaving Kris to open her own door. Kris was used to her Princess status going less than far where these two were concerned. After all, she’d been promoted from Prime Minister’s brat to Princess less than a year ago and it was more often a nuisance than a help. Well, it had helped a bit on Turantic.

But Abby’s background. That tickled Kris’s curiosity. “What did it say?”

“Nothing. Perfect support for what she said about herself. Not even the tiniest hole in her resume.”

“Well I should expect so,” Abby sniffed, arranging the fall of her severe gray skirt just so. Kris wondered how much heavy weaponry it hid today.

“Perfect match. Too perfect for even the guys doing the background search. They say they’ll do more checking. I got the impression that you intrigue them. You want to be their hobby?”

“No,” Abby huffed. “I am what I am. Doesn’t a poor working girl have the right to some privacy.”

“Yes,” Jack said, “once you tell me who you’re working for.”

“Kris’s mother hired me.”

“And I suspect she’s firing you as we talk,” Kris said. “Mother was probably so looking forward to having me around to torture for the next six weeks. She will not be happy if you help me get out from under her thumb, knee and elbow.”

“Well, honey, getting you dressed to go apartment shopping is a long way from seeing you sign on the dotted line. No offense, your princessship, but you aren’t serious about moving into a slum, are you?”

“She’s serious,” Jack said. “You want to have Nelly pass me some addresses for places to look at.

“Nelly, do what Jack asked.”

“All of them. I’m not sure this bomb can handle the half of them.” Kris took in her ride; it looked bad. The seat covers were slashed where they weren’t worn through. She fingered a cut place in the leather. Nope, not cut. Painted on. She eyed the dashboard; under all that dust was solid looking electronics.

“Nelly, interrogate the car’s computer.”

“Interro ... wow. Now that is one smart computer. Jack, where did you get this car?” Nelly asked.

Which left Kris out of the loop and a bit annoyed that her pet computer was going straight from finding out what they were riding in to asking Jack all kinds of questions. Questions Kris would much rather be asking herself.

“Friend of mine, retired from the force, runs a jack up service to up-gun, up-armor, up-tight the usual suspects. But he keeps a few ringers for special folks. Stakeouts, other stuff.”

“Nice to have decent wheels.” Abby said, unimpressed. “Baby cakes, you better tell Nelly to sort the vacant apartments by pairs. Your maid’s gonna have to live next door to you.”

“She does not.”

“She does too, Princess, for at least two reasons. One, I don’t want to have to walk the streets after staying up late to undress you after you come back from some fine ball all gussied up. Two, you’re going to need someone close by to pull your hind end out of the trouble you’re going to get it into when you’re lost and doing everything wrong in my side of town.”

“Jack,” Kris said, for what she immediately realized was no good reason. Still, he ought to give her some support.

“Nelly, do a search for triple vacancies.”

“Triple!” came from both women in the back.

“I do not need to be nursemaided. I’ve been shot at. I know how to shoot back,” Kris snapped.

“Wrong attitude,” Abby said. “You expecting to be shot at, you gonna be shot at.

You smile, make friends with the folks down the hall, on the floor below, then you got folks to help you out, young woman.”

“It looks like the folks down the hall and down the stairs are going to be folks I know. Jack, what are you trying to do? You don’t have to be next door to me. You don’t work for me.”

“I should say not,” he snapped.

“In fact, Jack, you’re not going to have a job for too much longer if Father doesn’t win. Maybe even if he does.”

“So a cheap flat becomes kind of appealing,” he said. “Nelly, you have any place for me to aim this car at.”

“Well, here are some triple vacancies. I don’t know that they are all that good of an idea, but they should do while you people sort out all these human issues. Kris, you will make sure that I am not stolen or damaged.” Nelly sounded worried.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Kris said. Nelly said nothing back.

The first place was a fourth floor walk up in need of cleaning, painting, plumbing repairs, and the services of several kinds of exterminators. The second place was worse. Jack parked in front of the third; it looked no better from the outside. He turned to Kris; she could read in his eyes “You ready to call it quits yet.” She glanced at Abby. “How long you gonna keep up this hair brain stunt,” was all over the woman’s face.

“Kris, you have a message from King Raymond,” Nelly said as Jack’s wrist computer buzzed softly. Kris raised a quizzical eyebrow at him.

Jack glanced at his wrist. “I am requested and required to present myself to King Raymond at my earliest convenience.”

“This happen to you folks often,” Abby asked. “I mean, balls is something I can handle. Being yanked around on some fancy electronic chain, having to drop everything and go see the king. You do it every day?”

“Grampa Ray’s just a huggy bear,” Kris said, suspecting whatever her great-grandfather was up to at the moment probably had more in common with the annihilation of Iteeche fleets and policy for the Human Race than what dessert to serve at tomorrow’s charity auction. First a leading general, then the President of the Society of Humanity during the worst of the Iteeche wars, he’d hammered together the policies that had guided humanity for eighty years afterwards. There were shelves of books full of his exploits... his and Great-grampa Trouble’s. Kris had grown up in the shadow of that distant, legendary man.

Only recently had she come to know the man of flesh and blood behind the legend. And she'd helped talk her great grandfather into taking a crown. Talked him into trying to lasso together Wardhaven and eighty other planets into an alliance when it seemed like the six hundred planets of human space were intent only on flying apart.

"Wonder what he could be wanting from a disgraced naval officer who's been relieved of her command," Abby asked.

"You have such a wonderful way with words," Kris sighed.

"Well, do we look at this next place or do I head for the palace?" Jack asked.

"It's just a hotel," Kris pointed out.

"Honey," Abby sighed, "if a king lives there, it's a palace, be it ever so hovel. Child, you have to get past this family thing and start seeing the world the way us poor folks do."

"The Palace, Sir John." Kris said.

"Jack," her driver corrected.

"Listen, if I can still be stuck being a Princess after they've hijacked my ship and hauled me off to the brig, shouldn't any unemployed hired gun wandering around with me be at least a knight in shining armor. Remember, Jack, you gave up being an honest working man."

"She has a certain logic there, Jack," Abby agreed.

"Tilly's twerp factor is getting lower and lower on my baloney meter," Jack said, glancing at his watch. "Maybe it's not too late for me to make my first shift."

"Let's find out what Grampa Ray wants first. Never can tell, it might cover room and board."

“Your Highness, you are expected,” the security agent said as Kris presented herself at the door of Grampa Ray’s penthouse suites. “Jack, I thought you were on leave?” he added as the agent’s name apparently came up right after Kris’.

“So did I. You can never tell when you work around Longknives, can you?”

“So true,” the agent agreed.

“I’ll just find a nice magazine to read,” Abby said, heading for a chair in the waiting room.

“She’s going in, too,” Kris said. “Abby Nightengale.”

“You *are* on the list,” the agent said.

“Me?” Abby said, bringing up a startled hand for a dramatic wave at her throat. “A lowly body servant.”

“Disarming her may take a half hour,” Jack drawled,

“You wrong me!” Abby pouted.

“My orders aren’t to disarm any of you,” the agent said, with a touch more relief than Kris would have expected.

Jack’s frown was solid professional disapproval.

“His Majesty said that if he was willing to have her carry all that artillery around Princess Kris, it would be damn undignified of him to demand we frisk her for his old bones,” the agent said in defense. “Now, you are to go right in.”

“What artillery?” the maid protested.

Jack seemed still undecided. “Sound’s like Grampa,” Kris said. Behind her, the elevator opened to disgorge Penny and Tom.

“Good,” the agent said. “The party’s complete.”

“I’ve never been so grateful to be beeped in my life,” Penny said breathless.

“And if it hadn’t been Grampa Ray, Mother would have had you ignore it,” Kris said to Penny.

Tom frowned. “You know, I think she might have.”

“His Majesty is in his study. Your computers will show you the way.” The agent said, taking his seat behind his desk.

Nelly told them to go right, go left, through that door. The suite had taken on more than the usual hotel furnishings. One room was shelves from floor to ceiling covered with replicas of the ships, armored suits and ground vehicles of the Iteeche wars, backed up with paintings of battle scenes. There were also pictures of staffs, both those who survived their battles and those who died to a man and woman trying to stem the tide. Kris wondered if Grampa normally kept a room like this in his home or if he’d put this up to impress his visitors now that he was back in politics. Or to remind himself.

She’d have to decide whether to ask Grampa about that.

The final room Nelly directed them into was a work room, some bookshelves with real bound books, but mostly screens for net news reports or private news outlets. A large wooden desk was piled high with flimsies and readers. In front of it several couches and chairs formed a conversation circle around a table that might or might not be simply wood. Grampa Ray wore slacks and a short sleeves shirt. He looked all of his hundred and twenty years, maybe more, as he eyed a reporter on one screen. The man was replaced by scenes from the Naval yard at the station orbiting above their head. The fleet was in port, but supply trucks were moving. A lot of ships were going someplace.

Grampa scowled, silenced the screen and turned toward them. By the time he faced Kris, he was smiling and seemed fifty years younger. “Thanks for dropping everything to make an old man happy,” he said, waiving them at the couches and coming around his desk to take a comfortable chair in their circle.

“Depends on what you want,” Kris said, settling into the chair across from him. Penny and Tom got comfortable on a couch. Abby took the couch across from them. Jack chose to stand behind Kris facing two of the three doors. He must hate that he couldn’t keep an eye on all three.

No, Kris spotted a reflection of the third door in a blank screen. Jack *had* managed to get an eyeball on all three.

There were few things Kris would not happily give her Grampa. However, if he'd hauled her up here to talk to her about not causing Father trouble during this election, or not exposing Grampa Al for the slum lord he was, she and Grampa Ray were gonna have their first go at head butting.

"Most of the time, I forget how old I am. Then I get a message like this and I remember," Grampa Ray said, his fingers tapping the one reader he'd brought with him from the desk.

"Back in the First Iteeche dust up, before we realized what a mess we were in. Back when I was just a general fighting what I thought was a bunch of pirates, I had a detachment of special ops that were, well, too damn good for their own good.

"Hikila was a new planet. It didn't have a lot of troopers, but the Special Boats Squadron made up in imagination and cussedness what they lacked in numbers. They were good. And I used them. Used them up. It's amazing that any lived to send me an invitation to their bedside at this late date," he snorted.

"But Queen La'ha'lani is the kind of woman that fifty men will die for so she can die in bed. I wonder what she thinks now of that kind of real estate business," he said to himself.

Kris felt embarrassed to be let into such an intimate moment. She wanted to look away. Tom and Penny were. Abby was.

Kris couldn't. She was a Longknife. If she followed in the footsteps of her great-grandfather, a hundred years from now she'd be muttering such questions. Did she want to? Wouldn't now be a good time to head for the door?

The King shivered, glanced around as if just noticing the others, and gave them a wan smile. "Sorry. If things were a bit quieter, I'd take a week off and go hold an old war buddy's hand, help her get ready to meet the ghosts waiting for us on the other side. Any decent world would make such a duty the highest priority for old farts like me." He flashed Kris a smile that was only sad around the edges.

"But, someone I know and love talked me into putting back on the old battle harness, so just now, Wardhaven's got a caretaker government that doesn't know how to spell the word much less follow those limits. And I hear that Boynton has a fleet of undetermined origins headed their way with no declared intent. And the latest rumor I'm getting from this temporary Wardhaven government is that all or part of the fleet may sail for Boynton real soon now. It doesn't sound like a good time for me to take leave. What do you think, hon?"

Kris swallowed something that might have been a lump in her throat. She hadn't thought of something like this when she'd urged her Grampa to accept the Kingship of eighty planets. She'd seen the honor, somewhat ambiguous, and indefinite, but an

honor, nether-the-less. And a way to help the people on eighty planets keep afloat amid the wreckage of the Society of Humanity. Maybe she hadn't looked at it from his angle as carefully as she should have. She certainly hadn't spotted the downside that it would stick her with this Princess thing. She was learning that lots of things happened while she was making her plans.

"I guess you'll have to stay here," Kris said.

"Which means I need to send someone in my stead to help an old friend die," Grampa said, his eyes going out of focus. "They'll be more to it. Hikila has developed quite an economy in the last fifty years. It needs to come into United Sentients. They haven't voted yet. The coronation of their new queen would be a good time to make that call."

Kris nodded. "I'll do what I can to bring them in."

"Hopefully without all the complications that sprung up on Turantic. I hear some insurance companies are going to court over who pays for repairs to the space station and elevator."

Kris tried to grin. "Oh for the good old days, Grampa, when all you had to do was kick butt and take names. Now you have to file legal briefs and testify under oath for a week."

"Or three years," King Ray snorted with good humor. "For what I'm sending you into, Kris, you'll need political intel. I've busted Penny loose for you. I hope you don't mind me sending you off world just before your wedding."

"It's all right, your Majesty. Kris's mother was telling me every little thing I need to do for a simple garden wedding."

"Lord God forbid that woman gets her hooks into anybody's wedding," the King said.

"Any chance you could, sir? Forbid it?" Kris asked.

"I warned your father he was marrying a woman with a whim of iron. He laughed at what he took for a joke. I haven't noticed him laughing that much around his wife of late. No, I'm afraid all I can hope for is that with Penny off planet she'll get distracted and wander off into someone else's business."

"Can you get Tom off planet with me. We made a great team on Turantic," Penny wheedled, Lieutenant to King.

Kris started to shake her head but Grampa smiled sardonically. "Actually, I can. Apple of your eye those tiny boats may be Kris, but the word I'm getting is that Pandori's going to sell them off as private runabouts."

Kris' mouth dropped open, but it was Tom that spoke first. "Didn't you say they were sending the fleet to Boynton? What will they have left to defend Wardhaven?"

"No one would even *think* of attacking Wardhaven," Grampa said, even getting Pandori's hand wave right.

"And you gave this bunch full power," Kris said.

Grampa sighed. "Believe me, they didn't talk like that when they came in here. And they did have that 53% majority vote in Parliament. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Well, you kids do be careful," Abby said. "I hear being around one of those damn Longknives can be dangerous."

"You're going too," Kris said.

"I can't wait to count your steamer trunks and see what you pull out of them this time," Jack drawled.

"I don't know why I'm going," Penny said. "Have you ever noticed a Longknife to pay attention to the advice they get?"

"Ouch," came from both King and Princess.

"You're going to have to get away quickly," the King said. "I've still got the *Halsey* seconded to me, but if she's not away from the pier fast, she may get orders and if I have to go to Pennypacker to straighten out conflicting orders with a lot of Longknife names on them, I can't guarantee anything."

"Tis a wonderful thing to be a pirate king," Tom sang.

"You've obviously never been one," King Ray muttered. "Oh, Kris, the skipper of the *Halsey* is Sandy Santiago. One of those Santiagos. She'll look after you good."

Now it was Kris's turn to answer with a soft, "Oh." Grampa Ray's political career had been launched when he survived assassinating the Unity tyrant President Urm. It had been in all the papers. Only recently had Kris learned just how it happened that Grampa lived through delivering a suicide bomb. It might be interesting to hear how the story was told among the family of the man who actually walked the bomb in.

Jack and Abby were dispatched to Nu House to pack. Penny and Tom headed out to do the same.

Kris settled in as they left. "I was afraid you'd called me over here to set me straight about Father and Grampa Al."

“I know the hot water your old man is in. What’s my son’s beef with you, girl?”

Kris told him about finding out she owned slums. “Oh ho ho,” Grampa Ray chortled. “The old boy hasn’t been keeping good enough check on his middle men, has he now.”

“Middle men?”

“Kris, I’ll let you in on a little secret. I can’t do everything. You can’t do everything, and though he’ll deny it, my son can’t do everything, try as he does. Little Alex has a bad case of micromanagement, but even he can’t be everywhere. So some of his second, third level VP’s take short cuts. Folks do that. You find them out, fire them and put in new people. Hope my boy takes this for a learning experience.”

Then a message came in, and family time was over and Grampa Ray was back up to his earlobes juggled business from eighty planets and fired off his best advice. “Advice, gal. Nice not to give orders any more. Just advice.” In between he remembered the Iteeche war for Kris. The operations he’d sent La’ha’lani and her Special Boat Squadron on was heavy on his mind. He could name the planets and the dead as if it was only yesterday.

But it was the present that bothered Kris. “It’s like some one is nibbling at us. This planet has that beef with that planet and suddenly their using warships to settle them.”

“No, Kris, not planets. People. This group here. That group there. Always look for the groups behind the actions. And notice how much of it is just posturing and threatening. Threats work better than shooting,” Grampa pointed out.

“Take Flan, or Yacolt, or Mandan only last week. Greenfeld tells them they really want to join their new alliance ... and runs a squadron of battleships across their orbit to overawe them. And Peterwald gets a planet with no messy rubble.”

“That why Pendori is rushing the fleet to Boynton?”

Grampa shook his head. “Boynton’s practically in our alliance. We’re not trying be overawe them. We’re trying to protect them and we don’t need nearly that large a force. I think Pendori’s doing it to get votes this election.”

“And Hikila?”

“They just need some hand holding. A bit of encouragement. I know them. They’re our kind of people. Oh, and don’t you let looks deceive you. On the surface they may look primitive. Take a second look. Ask the second question. They’ll surprise you.”

Jack called. They were packed and waiting down stairs. Kris joined him and

Abby. “How many trunks?”

“I counted eight when we left the house,” Jack said.

“It’s not like we’re going to rescue anyone,” Abby sniffed.

“Count again when we go through security.”

But Kris got distracted at the space elevator. Penny and Tom went through, no problem. Kris ran her ID card through to prove who she was and pay her fare ... and got beeped.

“Card’s no good, ma’am,” the young man in the booth said. Kris ran it through again; same result. “It’s not the card, ma’am. It’s you. You ain’t cleared to go up. To leave the planet,” the fellow said, turning a screen around for her and Jack to look at. “See, your limited to planet travel.”

“King Ray has ordered me on a diplomatic mission,” Kris said, eyeing the report on her. “I’ll be back before my court date in ... *three weeks!*”

“Delayed again,” Jack said.

“They really want to drag it out,” Tom said.

“You that Princess Longknife,” the gate attendant said. “I saw you on the news last night. You did a lot of good stuff on Olympia. Pretty mean of them to do this to you.”

“You know about Olympia?”

“Researched it for a college paper for night school,” he said, glancing at the screen. “Three weeks. Where you headed?”

“Hikila. Be back in two weeks. Maybe less.”

“Why don’t you and that fellow behind you go through at the same time. You know. One swipe, two walks.”

“Won’t you get in trouble?”

“How much trouble can I get in if you get back in time?”

“Joey,” Kris said, reading his name tag. “Everyone who gets too close to me gets in trouble.” Jack nodded vigorously.

“You just go ahead, ma’am. As you said, King Ray wants you somewhere. Why

should Wardhaven Transit stand in your way.”

Jack flashed his badge as he ran his card through. Joey whistled as his metal detectors did their detecting thing. “You are taking good care of her, ain’t you.” And Kris was through.

Abby followed, leading eight steamer trunks. Kris counted as they rolled by. They made it as a ferry was locking down.

The *Halsey* was also just about to seal locks as they reported to the Junior officer of the Deck. He frowned at the baggage and called for a quartermaster detail to secure it. Abby pulled a smaller subset of luggage from one trunk for her and Kris and they all followed the J.G. forward to the wardroom.

“Captain Santiago asks that you wait for her here while we get underway. She’ll visit you then,” he said and left.

“They ain’t exactly killing the fatted calf,” Abby observed. She pulled out a reader. Jack did a security check, satisfied himself a Navy destroyer was safe, and produced a reader of his own. Penny and Tom found a quiet corner where they proceeded to put their heads together and not violate Navy regs on excessive displays of public affection. That left Kris prowling the wardroom. It was larger than the *Cushings*. Newer. Just as clean with the usual public readers and the usual subscriptions.

She and Nelly ended up playing acie ducie. They’d been underway for over an hour when a woman of medium height and brown, graying hair ducked into the wardroom. The three strips on her blue shipsuit’s shoulder tabs told all she ruled here. After collecting a cup of coffee she joining the table where Kris and Jack sat with Abby. Penny and Tom surfaced from each other’s eyes to gather with them.

“I’m Commander Santiago, and the *Halsey* is my ship. King Raymond asked me to take you to Hikila, and I’m setting a 1.25 gee course for there. I hope that won’t bother you. Being a destroyer, we’re short on space. I’m bunking all three of you ladies in my in-port cabin. You two men will be in a cabin across the passageway from them. Any problems with that?”

Kris shook her head. Jack said “No.”

The woman eyed Kris for a moment. The JO who’d first led them to the wardroom ducked his head in. “You called, ma’am?”

“Yes, Roberts, show these people to their staterooms.”

“This way, folks,” the cheerful J.G. Roberts said.

As the others made to leave, Santiago said. “A moment alone, Princess.” Kris waited.

“I don’t know what you were expecting this trip, but let me tell you what you’ll get. A trip. Fast. Efficient. Nothing more. I won’t have any of my crew getting messed up in whatever it is you Longknives are doing. Enough good sailors have died for your legends. This Santiago and my *Halsey* will not contribute any more bodies to the list. Understand?”

“Perfectly,” Kris said, suppressing shock. Rising anger.

“Stay away from my crew.”

“I’m not going to stir up a mutiny.”

The commander snorted. “They wouldn’t follow you. My crew’s too good for that. No, Princess, I don’t want you making it any harder for them to do what I tell them to do. To follow my orders when I leave you high and dry if you mess up. Understand, Princess, I will not pull your chestnuts out of the fire, and I won’t have my crew doing it either.”

“I’m going to Hikila to hold the hand of an old friend of my Grampa while she dies. I’m not going to start a war.”

“Yeah, right. Just so long as you understand, if, no when you do, you will be on your own.”

“Am I dismissed, Commander?”

“Yes, Lieutenant.”

Kris marched for the door. “One more thing, Longknife.” Kris turned. “My daughter will be applying to the academy this year. For three generations every Santiago that applied to the academy had a letter of recommendation in their file from Ray Longknife.”

“Yes,” Kris said. She knew Grampa Ray did that, part of what bound the Longknives and Santiago’s together.

“My daughter will not have anything from a Longknife in her folder. You Longknives have batted off our blood long enough. It stops with my generation. She takes her turn on her own.”

“I’m sure she’ll earn her billet,” Kris said. “On her own.” It was going to be a long trip even at high gee cruise.