

Lieutenant j.g. Longknife – Deserter

by Mike Shepherd

Kris Longknife had no choice about growing up the Prime Minister's brat.
She had no choice about being a debutante heiress.
She didn't even have a choice about being made a Princess.

When she did have a choice, she joined the Navy.

But now a friend is desperate for help half way across the galaxy,
yet she and her computer are needed aboard ship.

It's time for Lieutenant j.g. Longknife to make the hard choices.
Her choices could get her in trouble with the Navy.
Her choices could lead her into a trap.
Her choices could dump her where she won't have any choices.
But that's what Longknife's do.
They do the impossible when there is no other choice.

ONE

“Okay, Engineering, let’s see if we can finish the test run this time,” Captain Hayworth announced.

“And let’s try not to blow up the ship.” Lieutenant Junior Grade Kris Longknife added under her breath. Still, she nodded agreement with the captain of the Fast Attack Corvette *Firebolt* as did the others on the bridge around her. The crew attended to their duties, faces professionally bland in the reflected reds, blues, and greens of their underway stations. The cool processed air didn’t actually smell of fear. Not quite.

The Captain turned his attention to Kris. “Lieutenant Longknife, match your board to engineering. Inform me if you see anything wrong. And this time, only use Navy issue gear.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Kris tapped her station, converting it from offensive weapons to a copy of the ship’s engineering station a hundred meters aft of the bridge. Everything was green. Question was, would the board show anything red before the *Firebolt* was nothing but a glowing cloud of dust?

The Kamikaze class corvettes, with their smart metal armor, were great ships to serve on during peace time. Rather than keep the ship a cramped and crowded man-of-war, the armor was thinned out and used to expand the vessel. Kris liked her private stateroom. For the last five years as more ships of this class joined the fleet, that had not been a problem. Built as large “love boats,” they rarely converted to thick-skinned warships.

But Earth’s Society of Humanity was only a memory along with the eighty years of peace it had brought. Every newscast told of rumors of war. Wardhaven needed fighting ships.

And the last few conversions of Kamikaze class ships into tight, small, war-fighters with thick battle armor had shown a disturbing tendency to catastrophic problems with their reactor.

So the *Firebolt* had spent much of the last two months tied up to the Nuu shipyard docks converting itself back and forth between large and small and trying to figure out what didn't work quite right. Solve that problem and Wardhaven had forty good warships to contribute to the United Sentients Navy. Fail, and Wardhaven's allies would have a very small stick to face the other six hundred planets of fragmenting human space.

And Kris might very well end up dead.

"Engineering, I show your board green," Kris said.

"Aye, aye. Bridge sees no problems," the chief engineer drawled with carefully measured sarcasm. Kris had less than a year in the Navy and had yet to meet a chief engineer who valued any viewpoint that originated outside his domain of reactors, generators and maze of superconductors that connected them.

Still, Kris had closed down two of the last five tests.

"NELLY," Kris thought. "ARE THE ENGINES STABLE?" Facing guns and mutiny had finally convinced Kris that sub-vocal talk between her and her personal computer was too slow and subject to problems. In the last up-grade of Nelly's hardware, Kris had submitted to a direct jack into her brain. What Kris thought, Nelly heard, and what Nelly heard, she was very likely to make happen. The pet computer around Kris's shoulders might weigh less than a quarter kilo, but she was a hundred times more capable than the combined computers of the *Firebolt* – and fifty times more expensive.

"ALL ENGINEERING READOUTS ARE NOMINAL," Nelly verified Kris's own assessment.

"WATCH THEM. IF YOU SEE ANYTHING DEVELOPING THAT THREATENS THE SHIP, TELL ME. IF TIME'S TOO SHORT, ACT ON IT YOURSELF."

"THE CAPTAIN DOES NOT LIKE IT WHEN I DO THAT."

"THAT'S MY PROBLEM. I JUST WANT TO BE ALIVE TO HAVE IT." Kris thought, noting that the latest upgrade seemed to have added something unplanned to Nelly's repertoire – backtalk.

"Helm," the captain ordered, "hold her steady on course at one gee acceleration."

"Aye, sir. One gee acceleration, steady as she goes." The ensign at the helm wore the relaxed expression expected, but one eyebrow lifted toward Kris. Was he counting on her to

save them all, no matter what the skipper said?

“Engineering, give me eighty percent.”

“Reactor coming up on eighty percent. At eighty percent ... now, Captain.”

“Helm, put on one point five gees. Steady on course.”

As the helm answered, Kris did a full review of her board. Nelly was doing the same review many times a second, but Kris did not trust any man-made device with her life, not even Nelly. All was green. Around Kris, the ship groaned as it took on more weight. One of the freebies with the smart metal was now happening. Without human intervention, the ship automatically thickened up scantlings, added an extra millimeter to decks, prepared itself for the growing weight of equipment and crew.

“Crew, prepare for high gees,” the captain announced. Kris’s chair, which a moment before looked solid, began to grow a foot rest for her. The headrest stretched out to match her height, a full six feet; its cushion inflated. On a Kamikaze class the crew didn’t require high gee stations; they made them when they needed them. And if the crew had to move, their station just flowed along with them. Too cool!

“Engineering. A hundred percent on the reactor, please.” No sooner had the Chief Engineer reported full reactor than the skipper ordered the helm up to two gees. Kris held her breath and eyed her board. The *Firebolt*’s first test cruise had ended at this benchmark; the Engineer himself scrambled the reactor.

Five seconds into two gees, Kris let her breath out ... and everyone on the bridge seemed to breathe easier. The captain held this course and speed for a long five minutes as every station reported in, not just engineering. No problems.

“Lieutenant Longknife, is space clear ahead of us?” the skipper asked.

As quickly as Kris could at two gees, she converted a small portion of her board back to weapons and did a search sweep. “Nothing ahead for 250,000 clicks, sir.”

“Discharge all four pulse lasers, if you please.”

“Yes sir,” Kris answered and walked her fingers over all four of the *Firebolt*’s main weapons. Twenty-four inch pulse lasers shot out into empty space, deadly for 25,000 kilometers, then slowly diverging. “All pulse lasers fired, sir.”

“Recharge lasers,” the captain ordered.

Energy flowed from engineering into the laser capacitors. Kris checked; there was still plenty of power to keep the fusion containment field up and direct the flow of super-heated plasma to the massive engines accelerating the *Firebolt* at two gees.

“NO PROBLEMS,” Nelly reported unnecessarily, but Kris was not about to squelch a good report.

“No problems,” Kris announced to the captain after a thorough check of her board.

“All systems working well within their safety margins,” the Chief Engineer reported.

Captain Hayworth cracked a tiny smile; test runs two and three had not got past this benchmark. “Helm, take us smartly up to three gees acceleration. Steady on course. Engineering, put us in the red.” Aye, ayes answered him. Kris locked her eyes on her board, now back to mimicking engineering as her seat settled into a bed and the board slanted up to where she could easily see it. Except for the three master switches on her seat’s armrest, it would take a major physical effort to get to any of her controls. The reactor scram button was right under her thumb.

“Power flow to the lasers is decreasing. Recharge will take two extra minutes at this acceleration,” she told the captain.

“No problem,” he muttered, his eyes on his own board.

“Three gees it is sir,” the helm answered through gritted teeth. Kris didn’t much care for weighing over one hundred and seventy kilos. The helmsman, a footballer in college, was easily approaching four hundred. Great for crashing a line, lousy for deft movements on a control board now in his lap.

Again the captain went down the department list. Every station reported itself nominal, if a bit on the heavy side. That put them past test four’s failure point.

“Four gees if you will, helmsman. Keep her very steady on this course.”

“Reactor heading into 111% overload,” Engineering reported, his voice heavy with strain. “112%... No problems. 113% ... All stations steady. 115% and everything is as good as it gets.”

“Very good, Engineering. We will hold the reactor there. Let me know if anything changes,” the captain said.

“NELLY?” Kris thought.

“THERE ARE SOME INTERESTING ANOMALIES IN CERTAIN SYSTEMS, KRIS. NONE SHOULD

BE A THREAT TO THE SHIP.”

Interesting words for a computer. “I show all green,” Kris said after checking her own board to verify Nelly’s report.

“Strangely enough, so does mine,” the captain answered.

“We are at four gees,” the helmsman announced weakly.

Kris watched the seconds tick away on her board for a full minute before Hayworth spoke, and then it was to the entire crew. “All hands, this is the Captain. The *Firebolt* has now done what no other Kamikaze class ship has done before, held four gees for a full minute. We will complete our scheduled quals after two more tests. Helm, turn right forty-five degrees smartly.”

The helm whispered “Aye, aye, sir” as his fingers stabbed at his board. Kris did not feel the ship bank around her, accommodating its human occupants needs at four times their weight. “On new course.”

Everyone breathed a sigh. One more test to go.

“Helm, Execute jinks pattern A.”

“Jinks pattern A, sir. Executing now.”

The ship rose suddenly, attitudinal thrusters adding more weight to Kris. It jinked right, then left, then left some more, dodging imaginary laser fire.

“PROBLEMS ARE DEVELOPING IN THE ...” Nelly began. Kris’s board showed green. Sucking in air, Kris’s gaze raced from green gage to green gage, searching for any sign of something going wrong. Nothing!

“SCRAM!” Nelly shouted in Kris’s head.

Kris was weightless in the dark as the ship went dead around her.

“Where are those damn auxiliaries?” the captain snapped. Ventilation hummed as engineering corrected the problem with the back-up power. The bridge took on light as boards came alive. Emergency lights cast long shadows. Systematically, Kris studied her board; nothing told her why Nelly had shut down the test.

“Engineering, are you on line?” the captain asked into his commlink.

“Yes, sir. We lost no test data. I’m organizing it while my team initiates a reactor started up.”

“Am I to understand that you did not initiate that scram?”

“No sir. We did not hit the button down here.”

“Thank you, Engineering. As soon as you have a rough handle on your data, report to my day cabin.”

“Aye, sir.”

“XO, you have the conn. When we get systems back online, set a one gee course for Nuu docks. They should have our usual berth waiting for us.”

“Yes sir.”

“Longknife, you’re with me.”

“Yes, sir,” NELLY, WHAT HAPPENED? Kris demanded as she pushed away from her station and swam, weightless, after the captain to his day cabin off the bridge. Normally, that cabin was quite roomy. Under combat conditions, it was little more than a table and four chairs. The captain settled into his place at the head of the table as a boson announced the ship was getting underway. Kris closed the door, rotated herself as she took on weight and stood at attention.

“Have I missed something about my ship, Lieutenant? Last time I checked, there were three scram buttons on this boat. Mine and the chief engineer’s, the two every ship of this class has. I know the *Firebolt* has a third, authorized to you because of your job as coordinator of this smart metal test, and, I suspect, because of your unique relationship with the yard.”

That was a rather original way of saying her grandfather owned the shipyard that made all the Kamikazes.

“Yes, sir,” Kris agreed, stalling, praying the engineer would show up with whatever reason Nelly had for stopping the test only moments before the captain could have declare them done and over.

“The engineer tells me he did not hit his scram button. I know I did not hit mine. Did you hit yours?”

Kris’s board would show no contact between her and the red button. No use claiming she had. “No sir. I did not scram the reactor.” Stall. Stall.

“Who did?”

Kris stood board straight, dreading the answer but unwilling to lie to her skipper, certainly not going to tell a lie that would be disproved as fast as she said it.

“Whoever scrambled my engines saved our butts,” the Chief Engineer said, opening the door ... and saving Kris’s butt. “Pardon me, Captain, am I interrupting a private counseling session?”

“No, Dale, take a seat. You too, Longknife,” the skipper said wearily. Dale Chowski, Chief Engineer, a half dozen oversize readers under his arm, settled into one chair. Kris took the chair across from him.

“What went wrong this time, Dale?” the captain asked.

“Specifically, the superconductors on the containment coil for plasma headed for our number one engine was four nanoseconds away from losing the super part of their name when the reactor scrambled.” The engineer ran a hand through his crew cut. “I take it was that fine computer around your neck, Lieutenant, that we have to thank for this bit of grace.”

Kris nodded. “My personal computer spotted the developing problem. It tried to advise me but the problem came on too fast for me to react.”

“It!” Nelly spat in Kris’s head.

“SHUT UP.” Kris ordered.

“So your pet computer was working faster than the ones in my engine room,” the engineer finished, not missing the captain’s scowl as he did. “Skipper, I know you don’t much like the idea of non-standard software roaming around the innards of your ship. Can’t say I like it much either, but rather than look the gift horse we got in the mouth, why don’t we tell BuShips that we need a computer like she’s got. Hell, if she transferred off the ship tomorrow, I swear I’d go out and buy one for myself. What would a gadget like yours set a guy back?”

Kris told him the cost of Nelly’s last up-grade, minus the surgery to get the jack into her head. He let out a low whistle. “Guess we keep you around for a while.”

The skipper’s scowl got even deeper. “Dale, what exactly went wrong from a systems point of view?”

“This is just an old engineer’s personal guess, but I’d say the calculations the metal is supposed to do automatically as to what this or that part of the ship needs for high gees was off a bit for our rocket motors that are farthest from the center of the ship. Engine one and six got whipped around by the jinksing the most. Number One failed. I think we’ll find Six wasn’t that long for the world.”

“So we need to adjust the automatic algorithm for redistributing metal,” the captain said.

“Could do that,” the engineer agreed, his face going sour. “But I stand by my last recommendation. Take Engineering off the smart metal regime. Set the specs for our reactor, machinery and plasma containment fields, then freeze it in place.”

“You’d freeze engineering in the tight combat structure?” Kris asked.

“No can do,” the engineer said, shaking his head. “Right now, I can’t get to half of my gear to maintain it. Whoever designed the combat format for my spaces was either a midget or expected us to expand back out if we needed to repair or maintain anything. We’ll need a middle ground, something small enough to fight, but big enough to work in.”

“How much bigger?” the captain asked.

The engineer slaved the skipper’s table to one of his readers. A schematic of the *Firebolt*’s engineering spaces now took up most of the table top. It quickly sequenced through the change from large and comfortable to combat ready and cramped. As it expanded back out, Dale froze it. “That’s about what I think we’ll need.

“Computer, calculate the metal requirements to armor that area. Post it to the schematic.” A second later Nelly added a list of weights to the graphic. Again the engineer whistled.

“A hundred tons of smart metal. You’d need that much to cover fifteen extra meters of engineering space?”

“After the damage the *Chinook* took,” Kris said, damage she had done the targeting for, “BuShips wants the engineering spaces well protected.”

“How much does a hundred tons of smart metal cost?” Dale asked.

Kris told him. He didn’t bother whistling at that one, he just looked at the captain and groaned. “I guess I know why we’re out here trying to solve this problem.” The engineer leaned back in his chair, stared at the lowered combat ceiling of the *Firebolt* and took in several slow breaths. “Could we replace some of the smart metal with regular old metal? I mean, if I’m not going to go around rejiggering my engine rooms, we don’t need that fancy stuff.”

Captain Hayworth raised an eyebrow in Kris’s direction. She shook her head. “Nuu Enterprises has done some testing. Mixing regular and smart metal together on the same ship only seems to confuse the smart metal. They can’t recommend it.”

“Why am I not surprised,” Dale snorted. “When they can charge us an arm and a leg for

smart metal, why figure out a way to do something on the cheap.” Both officers carefully avoided looking at Kris. That her grandfather Al was the CEO of Nuu Enterprises and that her own portfolio was centered on several hundred million of Nuu Enterprise preferred stock did not prevent them from holding the usual low opinion fleet officer’s held of corporate practices. The skipper was good about not saying it to her face.

Kris saw no reason to pussy foot around her birth connection today. “My Grandfather Al is working on something that might save my father, the Prime Minister, a chunk of the navy’s budget if you decide, Commander, the Navy should freeze the engineering space on the Kamikaze’s.”

The engineer chuckled and the captain rolled his eyes at the overhead. “They warned me that neither cowardism nor common sense had ever been mentioned in one of your fitness reports, Lieutenant. So, what might save me from telling BuShips that it has to totally unbalance the Prime Minister’s latest budget proposal?”

“Nuu Enterprises is testing something it’s calling uni-plex metal. This stuff holds its shape for the first two times it’s organized, then forgets it the third time you change it.”

“Forgets it. Metal’s metal,” Engineering frowned.

“Yes sir, but the third time, it’s more like liquid mercury than armor plate.”

“Who would want such a damn death trap?” Dale growled.

Somebody who wanted somebody dead, Kris knew from all too personal experience, but she just shrugged for her fellow officers. She still was none too sure how she felt about Grampa Al’s making a profit from the stuff that had almost killed her.

“Produced in thousand ton lots, the uni-plex costs about one sixth of smart metal,” Kris told them. “When you add in the savings by it self-fabricating itself on ship, its competitive.”

“Spoken like a true Longknife,” the captain drawled dryly.

But the engineer was eyeing the schematic. “How much of my engine room is smart metal?”

“Computer, answer the man,” Kris said aloud. Numbers appeared on the table.

“Three hundred and fifty tons,” Dale said thoughtfully.

“Plus a hundred tons of extra protection,” Kris added.

“But if we gave back three hundred fifty tons of smart metal....”

“And drew four hundred fifty tons of not quite so smart metal” Kris added.

“Then the Navy would actually be saving money by converting the engineering space of the forty Kamikazes,” Captain Hayworth finished with a chuckle.

“Sixteen thousand tons of smart metal would build us five or six more boats, sir,” Kris concluded.

“Got to love it when you can make everyone happy,” Dale sighed.

“From way out in left field,” the captain agreed.

“Maybe, maybe not,” the engineer sat up. “Has you Granddad AI checked how smart metal gets along with its retarded cousin? If I can’t order this uni-plex stuff to fix battle damage, I’m going to have to spray in smart metal around dumb metal”

Kris shook her head. “They aren’t that far along.”

“We can’t have this uni-plex migrating around the boat,” the captain added, “It could make for thoroughly unpleasant surprises.” All three officers nodded at that conclusion.

Dale got to his feet. “I got to check on the rest of my snipes, see if they’ve dug up anything new on our test.”

“Keep me informed.”

Kris stood to follow the engineer out. “A moment, Lieutenant.” A knowing smile crossed the engineer’s face as he closed the door behind him. Kris turned to face her captain, going back to a brace that would have made her DI at OCS proud.

“Once more, Lieutenant Longknife,” the captain began, “you have succeeded in turning insubordination into a virtue.”

Kris had no answer for that, so she kept her mouth shut.

“One of these days, it will not be a virtue. One of these days you *will* discover why we do things the Navy Way. I only hope that I will be there when you discover that... and that too many good spacers don’t die with you.”

Again, Kris had no answer for her captain, so she used the Navy’s all purpose response. “Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

Kris went. Once more she’d been raked over the coals for doing the right thing the wrong way. Still, the captain hadn’t been as hard on her as he could have been. At least he had dressed

her down as “Lieutenant,” not “Princess.”

TWO

No surprise, the yard had saved the *Firebolt*'s usual space alongside pier eight. Tied up snug by 1530, the crew settled into the along-side routine while Kris followed the skipper and chief engineer into the yard to their usual meeting with the usual dock managers at the usual conference room. After two months, too much of this job was becoming “usual.”

Today, the yard team included new faces. “We watched your run,” the yard’s project manager said. “Figured we’d better add a few scientists to our meeting.”

“Lieutenant Longknife told me about your not quite so smart metal,” the captain said, taking in the four new members. “You working on that?”

A woman leaned forward in her seat. “My team has been seeing what we could do with uni-plex since Princess Longknife arranged for us to get a sample of it.” Kris grit her teeth.

“How does it work around smart metal?” Dale said, getting right to the point. “I think my engine room is a good candidate for uni-plex if you can keep it contained. You can understand my captain’s reluctance to discover the bulkhead between him and space might have acquired a bit of this stuff the next time he changes ship.”

“Our testing hasn’t gotten that far,” the woman admitted with a sour frown directed at one of her subordinates.

“When will it?” Captain Hayworth shot back.

“Two weeks, sir,” the subordinate replied. “Two weeks to finish our testing. Then another week to produce five hundred tons of uni-plex. Say another two weeks working with you to design an approach to siphon out the smart metal and replace it with this stuff. Five weeks total.”

“Four weeks,” the engineer answered back. “You and I can be refining the process while you’re doing your testing. Maybe less if you can get us this uni-plex as it comes available. I’d sure like to test this replacement process one step at a time,” he told his captain.

“A lot of unknowns in this,” the project manager said, glancing at his wrist unit. “There’s also a matter of costs. These tests have already exhausted their cost centers. Who’s going to come up with the extra money?”

Captain Hayworth shook his head. “I’ll have to check on that. Who’s paying for this metal development?”

“Nuu Enterprises,” the project manager said and Kris nodded. Grampa Al was footing the bill for the work on Uni-plex both because he was still hoping to pin down who tried to kill Kris and, if Nuu Enterprises paid for the research, NuuE got all the profits. Grampa Al was such a warm-hearted type.

“Okay,” the skipper continued. “That gives me one week to get approval for funds, another week to get them transferred. I’ll get back to you in a week.”

“I’ll check with you tomorrow to see how it’s coming,” the yard man said with a smile that had the proper blend of predator and supplicant that a government contractor needed.

Meeting over, they started back to the ship. “Dale, you have any questions?” got a quick negated from the engineer. “Longknife, we might as well stand the crew down. Anyone who wants leave can have it. That includes you, Lieutenant.”

“I’ll be here keeping a good eye on the yard staff, sir.”

“I’d rather you didn’t. They never know whether they’re talking to a navy lieutenant, a princess or a major stock holder of Nuu Enterprises. Until I get money approved, I can’t risk someone taking one of your nods as a work order.”

“Sir, you’ve never expressed that concern before.”

“I’ve never had anyone at the yard call you princess before. I don’t know who this woman is and I don’t want problems.”

Kris didn't know how to answer that. "I don't need any leave, sir," she finally concluded.

"And we probably will need your 'special' relationship. Just keep your distance from that science crew. Now, don't you have a commitment tonight?"

"A ball, sir." Kris scowled. She'd hoped the test would take longer, give her a good excuse to be comfortably absent.

"Right. So why don't you head dirtside?"

"Sir, did my mother ..."

"No, the Prime Minister's wife has not taken to issuing me orders for you ... yet. But my wife did notice in the gossip columns that your absence at last week's Ball for United Charities was commented upon at length. So my personal computer, no where near as smart as yours, is now searching the social pages for what I suspect are your social duties. Lieutenant, we all have our responsibilities. So long as you insist on juggling navy duties with those of a princess, I don't expect you to short the Navy, but I can't afford to report to the Prime Minister or his lady every time you short the other."

"Sir, I *joined* the Navy. I got *drafted* into this princess stuff," Kris spat.

Hayworth actually smiled. "We all must bear our burdens, Lieutenant. The elevator is that way," the captain said, pointing Kris towards the trolley line that would take her from the yard to the central station hub and thence, to the space elevator down to Wardhaven.

Kris glanced at her wrist unit, which was faster than thinking "what time is it, Nelly?" "My mother will be happy to know I have four full hours to get gussied up for her ball. I'll tell her my captain shares her concerns for my social calendar."

"Or at least his wife does," Hayworth added as he turned toward the *Firebolt*.

Kris scrambled onto a passing trolley and plopped herself down in a vacant seat. She could spend the time in a pity party, not a bad idea with the mess her ship assignment was turning into. General McMorrison, the Chief of Wardhaven's General Staff said he didn't know where he could dump his least favorite billionaire Junior officer, Prime Minister's brat, now princess and, oh yes, mutineer. But Kris hadn't picked her parents! And she hadn't had much more choice in relieving her last skipper.

Still, Kris had asked for ship duty. Like every other junior officer, she wanted it in the worst way. And she'd gotten about the worst ship duty anyone could get. With the *Firebolt* tied

up to pier 8 going through change drills, the crew slept aboard the station ... and Kris slept at home.

At least in college she'd gotten to sleep in the dorm. Here she was a grown woman sleeping in the same room she'd had as a kid. It could be worse, at least Father and Mother lived downtown in the Prime Minister's Residency.

And for this I went to college and joined the Navy!

"Kris, would you like to go over today's mail?" Nelly asked out loud, bringing her owner out of her funk.

"Might as well. Anything good?"

"I deleted most of the junk mail. Financial reports have been filed. I will give you a synopsis Friday. There is a message from Tom Lien. I did not review it."

"Thanks, Nelly," Kris said with a smile. Tommy was the one friend she'd made in the Navy. Problem was, he was still on the *Typhoon* and she was now on the *Firebolt*. That was the Navy Way.

"Hi, short spoon," Tommy started, a laugh in his voice. "I've got some leave to burn." Kris knew just where she wanted him to burn it, too.

"There's this new planet, Itsahfine, out past Olympia. They say they've found some old ruins, maybe from the Three. Anyway, I've booked cheap space on a tramp starship, *Bellerophon*, and I'm headed out there for a week." Maybe Kris would take some leave. It'd be fun digging around in stuff left behind by the ancient races that built the jump points ... with Tommy at her elbow.

"This leave," Tommy continued, "I'm not going near a Longknife. With luck, no one will just miss killing me and I can actually relax." He was probably softening this with one of his lopsided grins, but Kris didn't have him on visual. She felt slugged in the gut. It wasn't her fault Tommy'd been too close during three tries to kill her. He'd only been at risk for two of them. Still, she couldn't really blame him for distancing himself from the Longknives in general, and her in particular.

"I am sorry that Tommy feels that way," Nelly offered. Her latest upgrade was supposed to make her a better companion. All Kris had noticed was that the computer seemed prone to arguing.

Kris shrugged. *I didn't exactly tell Tommy I wanted to spend my life with him*, she told Nelly. What could she expect.

A toddler, defying gravity with each improbable step hurtled by Kris, the string to a yellow toy duck clutched in his pudgy fingers. It followed him in fits and starts, quacking in his wake. The child rewarded its noise with happy laughs.

“Hold on tight,” Kris whispered. “That’s the only way you can hope to keep ’em close.” At home in her closet somewhere must be a speckled giraffe that had once been her inseparable pal. Would people talk too much if a Navy lieutenant/Princess suddenly started showing up with a clicking giraffe in tow?

Kris was drawn from further reveries by the elevator station. A ferry was in the final stages of loading. As usual, Kris headed for the observation deck while most people settled into chairs that let them ignore the fact they were dropping 20,000 kilometers in less than a half hour. Kris loved the view.

As she settled into a seat, a man in a Vice Admiral’s uniform sat down across from her. She started to rise, but he waved her down. Kris concentrated on staying out of his face by looking out the window. No view yet. The window reflected Kris’s face ... and the admiral’s. He was watching her. He looked familiar. Where?

Right. Scowling, Kris turned to the admiral. “I know with the crisis promotions are coming fast, but three months ago you were a commander. Rapid promotion,” she took in his ribbons and the rest of his uniform. No real information there, “even for the Intelligence Service.”

The man shrugged. “A vice admiral interrogating a mutinous ensign, even an ensign whose dad is the prime minister, might get people talking. I figured a commander was about the right rank. What did you think?”

Kris thought she’d had enough of this man’s games and let the angry Prime Minister’s daughter and billionaire speak. “I didn’t much like the topic of conversation no matter who was pushing it at me. I didn’t plan a mutiny. It just happened.”

“I know that now,” the admiral said, leaning back into his seat as the car began to move. “We’ve finished debriefing those who took your side against your captain and its clear you did nothing illegal beforehand. Some damn good leadership in some tough situations, yes. Few men

or women could have earned the trust and respect you did. And that fast.”

“Flattery from Naval Intelligence?”

“I like to think that truth is my business. Care to make it yours?”

Kris let her eyes rove out the window. The station with its piers and ships spun above her, then quickly receded as they fell away at one gee acceleration. She spotted *Firebolt*, still in its diminished form. Ship duty! Right!

“This a job offer?”

“Mac still doesn’t know where to assign you. You’re one of his many hot potatoes. He offered me the chance to solve one of his problems and one of mine. I can use someone with your skills and unique opportunities. Unlike Hayworth, I don’t mind you using your own pet computer.”

“For what? Does the Chief of Staff expect me to spy on my Father?”

The admiral rubbed his eyes with one hand. “Tact is not one of your strong points.”

“I’m not a spy,” Kris said. “Certainly not on my own father.”

“I don’t want you to be. Mac doesn’t want it either.”

Kris took that with a grain of salt. “So, what kind of job are you offering me?”

The admiral swept a hand out to the black of space and its unblinking stars. “The galaxy is a challenging place. It’s got the most dangerous critters in it. Man. It’s got people who want this or that, and frequently don’t want other people to have that or this. Latest news reports says Siris and Humboldt are this close to war,” he said holding two fingers a few centimeters apart. “As a princess, and yes, I know you hate the word, you can go lots of places an officer can’t or shouldn’t. You can learn and do things Wardhaven needs to know and get done. And I could help you as much as you could help me.”

Kris turned back to stare out the window. The drop car passed rapidly into the atmosphere, causing fireflies of ionization. The dark of space was rapidly replaced by the haze of atmosphere. Below Kris, spotted the bay Wardhaven City wrapped itself around.

When she rode the elevator up, on her way to Officer Candidate School, she’d been glad to be quit of the place. Now, having seen a few other places, Wardhaven looked mighty nice.

Did she want to protect it?

That’s why she put on the uniform. That and a wish to get out from under a father and

mother who left very little air for their daughter. That and a desire to save a bit of this, do a bit of that.

Which she'd done.

Did she want to let this man call the shots for her now?

It had to be better than the *Firebolt*, she reminded herself.

But the *Firebolt* was a job for Lieutenant j.g. Kristine Anne Longknife. Not the Prime Minister's brat, or the princess or the rich kid. This admiral, if that was what he was, wanted her for all the things about her that she wanted to escape.

She shook her head. "Sorry, Admiral, I've got this job. A ship depending on me. I wouldn't want to disappoint my captain."

"I doubt he'd shed a tear if you got new orders."

"Yes, but the Chief Engineer loves what me and Nelly do."

"My budget can get Dale a very good computer."

The bastard even knew the Chief Engineer's first name. "What is it about no that you don't understand?" Kris asked.

"Just wanted to make sure no was no," the admiral said, reaching in his pocket for an old-fashion printed business card.

Maurice Crossenshild
Special Systems Analyst
Call anyplace, anytime
27-384-212-748-3001

Kris eyed the card for only a moment. She'd never seen a fifteen digit phone number. Fourteen, yes. Fifteen! What did the two do? NELLY, YOU GOT IT?

YES.

Kris tore the card in half, then into quarters and handed it back to the man. "Not interested."

He gave her a crack of a smile. "Would not have expected anything less from you, but

Mac wanted me to try. Have a good evening. Maybe I'll see you at the ball tonight.”

“What rank should I look for?” Kris asked to his back, but, despite the sign flashing for all passengers to stay put, the man made his way out of the observation deck. AND THEY SAY I DON'T FOLLOW RULES, Kris snorted.

Harvey, the old family chauffeur, was waiting for her as she left the ferry. Jack, her protective service agent, was right beside him. “How'd the test cruise go?” the driver asked as her agent eyed the surroundings.

“Not good. Looks like we'll be tied up for the next month while they try something new,” she told him. “So I'm off early. Think Lotty can scare up a bite to eat before I have to dress for tonight's command performance?”

“And when hasn't my wife?” He said with a grin, then added softly. “Tru would like you to drop by when you have the time.”

Kris raised an eyebrow. Aunty Tru was retired now from her job as Wardhaven's Chief of Info War. Still, the honorary aunt had been helping Kris with her math and computer homework since first grade – and could cook up a fantastic batch of chocolate chip cookies.

But when Tru quit trusting her messages to the net, life did get interesting. “Why don't we drop by on the way home.”

Harvey nodded. The car, not a limo today, but just as armored, was in a reserved security lot, something new to the area around the elevator since the Society of Humanity self destructed and Wardhaven doubled its defense budget. Kris settled in for a quiet drive. Maybe she should review the engine room specs for the *Firebolt*?

“Test really disappointing?” Jack asked.

“We were so close,” Kris sighed. “Last benchmark, then bam, we're back to square one.”

“Frustrating,” her agent said, his eyes roving the traffic. Jack had a knack for being both security and confidante. There was talk that a princess deserved a full security detail. It would probably mean a promotion for Jack. For Kris, it would mean losing times like these. True, somebody – apparently a lot of somebodies – wanted her dead, but no attack had ever been made on Wardhaven. Besides a Navy junior officer couldn't move in a security bubble. Or maybe she just didn't want to.

At Tru's apartment complex, Jack activated the car's security system and followed Kris

and Harvey into the elevator. Tru had bought a penthouse when she retired. Her view of Wardhaven City wasn't quite as breathtaking as that from Grampa Al's lofty tower outside town, but it was still spectacular. More spectacular was Tru's hug.

"I didn't expect you to drop everything and come running just because your old Auntie Tru sent up a smoke signal," she said as she engulfed Kris in her arms. There'd been a time when all Kris had to hold on to was Tru's hugs ... and the bottle. Those times were long gone, but Kris would never pass up a few moments feeling safe in Tru's arms.

Hug over, Kris explained the test ended early.

"Problem?"

"I'm still alive. The ship's still in one piece. Nothing we can't work around. But it looks like Grampa Al will have a major market for Uni-plex.

Tru scowled at that. "I turn the evidence of an attempt to kill you over to him and his labs to figure out who did it. Instead, they come up with a whole new product line."

Kris shrugged. "If Al makes money off my attempted murders, I figure he'll make a fortune off what finally gets me." No one else saw the humor. "So, Auntie Tru, why'd you call in the Navy? Run out of marines?"

"Actually, it's Nelly I want."

Kris raised an eyebrow. Tru was responsible for most of the software on Kris's pet computer; Nelly could do things very few computers could. Still, Sam, Tru's personal computer, was probably one of those few. "We just upgraded her," Kris pointed out. "I thought Nelly and I were about as far out on the bleeding edge as you dared go."

"You are," Tru agreed. "The last time I ran diagnostics on Nelly's new self-organizing circuitry, she was, gram for gram, the best in her class."

Kris began drooling over the new, self-organizing computing jell the first time she set eyes on it. Akin to Smart Metal, this let the computer organize its circuitry at the molecular level as it went along, and modify it as needed. Kris wasn't sure whether she or Nelly was the most excited by it. "So?"

"Nelly is greatly underutilized. I wonder if you might like to put her excess capacity to work on a challenge?"

Kris had learned to cringe when Tru said "challenge." Yes, at six, Kris would do an

excited dance at the word. At fifteen, the thought of having the best personal sidekick at school was primo plus. But Kris was a serving officer. Having her computer go down didn't just mean a quick stop by Aunty Tru's on the way home from school for repairs and cookies. If Nelly had locked up today, the Navy might be missing a boatload of people.

"What's caught your fancy," Kris said, taking a step back.

Tru beamed, unrepentant. "Let me show you."

Kris knew the room they headed for. There were clean rooms, and then there was Aunty Tru's lab. There was no need for special clothes. The airlock into what had been a spare bedroom spritzed Kris with a thin fog of nanos that lifted off the grime and dirt of the day ... down to the five nanometer level. The work table along one white wall might be missing one of the latest gizmos for micro development. If so, the missing device was on order. What surprised Kris was the sight of a stasis box sitting in the middle of the table. Now that was overkill.

More surprising, Tru did not flip it open.

"Your Aunt Alnaba sent that from Santa Maria."

Great-aunt Alnaba was a real aunt, great-grampa Ray's youngest girl. She'd specialized in zenobiology and devoted herself to studying the artifacts the Three left behind on Santa Maria. She'd spent a lifetime trying to figure out bits and pieces of a technology so far beyond humanity's present level that could build jump points in space as highways across the stars. Grampa Ray had worked with Alnaba most of the last twenty years. He'd never met a challenge he couldn't handle. Kris grinned; cracking the technology of the Three and the present politics of humanity just might ruin Grampa Ray's perfect score. "What's in it?"

Tru did not open the box, but pulled a picture from her pocket. It showed a small square beside a penny for perspective. As wide as the penny was across, it was a bit thicker. "That is a piece of rock from the mountain range along Santa Maria's North Continent. We cut those mountains up pretty badly during the war against the Professor."

"Cut them up, hell. That Disappearing Box made them vanish, just vanish," Kris shook her head. "Navy tried for fifty years to figure out how that little box worked. Don't know any more now than they did the day it arrive in the lab."

"Yes," Tru agreed. "But maybe they're starting too high on the tech food chain. You have to know how to use a screw driver before you can take a clock apart. I don't think we've

figured out the Three's equivalent of a screw driver. A million years ago, we were using stone flakes for tools. Could that version of the human brain conceive of a screwdriver even if you put one in its hand?"

Kris mulled that idea over, could add nothing to it and waived at the stasis box. "So, what is that?" she repeated.

"A tiny part of the data storage that was locked up in those mountains."

"Is it active?"

"I don't know."

"What's it contain?"

"I don't know."

"What do you know?"

Tru grinned. "Nothing at all. The question is, what would you like to know?"

Kris eyed the picture, then the box. "How would we find out if this rock has any data stored in it that can be retrieved?"

"By trying."

"How?"

"Whatever we tried would have to be very sophisticated ... or maybe very simple. It would need to be flexible and willing to adjust to just about any requirement. I don't even know what kind of power this thing operated on. We'd have to construct different power sources, apply them very carefully and see if the mouse squeaks."

Kris rubbed her nose; Nelly was suddenly feeling very heavy on her collar bone. "Self organizing circuitry, huh."

"Self organizing. Very powerful, and very well integrated with its human. Your aunt Alnaba and her team tried several what you might call 'standard' approaches. You know, the big lab, working long hours, everyone looking over everyone else's shoulders. No results. Then she asked me if I had any ideas. I told her I did."

"And they were?"

"Ever read how the 'Professor' contacted your Grampa Ray?"

"It got kind of complicated. Biology was never my favorite science," Kris dodged.

"Mine neither. What I found interesting though, was the relationship between his

sleeping brain and the tumor growing in his skull. Do you have any idea how important sleep is?”

“Only when I’m not getting enough of it.”

“Newborn babies take in as much of this new and confusing world as they can, then fall asleep to absorb it all. Study, sleep, study, sleep. How many times did I tell you when you were in High School that a good night sleep was the best preparation you could do for a test?”

Kris chuckled, then, as honor required, gave her teenage response. “A test is a test. What you put on the test is what matters, not what you put on a pillow.”

Tru scowled as she always had, then shook her head. “My suggestion to Alnaba is that we put this in someone’s personal computer who could sleep on it. See what their computer and their sleeping mind can make of it.”

“So, you’re going to upgrade your Sammy with self-organizing circuitry.”

“Sadly, I can’t afford it.” So, why was Tru grinning.

“You didn’t come up with this idea about the time I sprang for Nelly’s last upgrade, did you?”

“No. Actually, I came up with the idea shortly after you first saw a computer with self-organizing circuits. You’ve never been one to pass up the latest computer whiz bang.” Tru’s grin was unrepentant.

“And where did I pick up this bad habit?”

“Yes,” Tru pouted, “but us old retired folks can’t keep up with every new bit of this and that. I’ve had to learn to live on a budget.”

Kris knew she was being finagled, by the one person in human space who knew where all her “fins” were to “agle.”

“Tru, it might be fun to crack some Three technology, but just three hours ago I was nanoseconds away from being blown to quarks. I can’t have Nelly down with a Three induced headache.”

“And you won’t. Sammy and I have come up with a multiple buffer approach that will keep what’s going on around the chip from slipping over into your main processing.”

“‘Will’ or ‘should?’” Kris demanded.

“Young woman, you really should talk to whomever was your teacher. You are far too

paranoid about modern technology to survive in this modern world.”

“That’s exactly whom I am talking to. I recall a certain trig exam where I ended up with nothing but my own ten fingers to count on when my pet computer got into a do loop chasing the value of pi.”

Tru chuckled. “You will agree, that was a learning experience.”

“Yeah, right! And one I never intend to repeat.”

“Why don’t you have Nelly look at the buffers Sam and I worked up?”

“Nelly?” Kris said.

“It might be interesting,” Nelly said slowly, as if inviting Aunt Tru to go on.

“Can’t hurt us to look,” Kris agreed. For a long minute she could feel the silence from Nelly as the computer concentrated on the data transfer and adjusted to the new systems.

“They go in very smoothly,” Nelly said, “and they include a new interface as well as three levels of buffer between me and the stone. I should be able to view anything going on in any one of the buffers and block it from causing me or you any harm. There is also a smart new recovery mode that would allow me to quickly bring more of my capacity on line if I did have a major systems failure and had to recover.”

“You want to try this?” Kris said, before remembering that “want” was not a word you used to a computer.

“I think it would be fun to find out how to build new jump points between the stars,” Nelly answered.

“Looks like Nelly has organized some interesting circuitry for herself,” Tru drawled. “Bet my Sammie would like to see the specs for them.”

“Yes,” came in a deep baritone voice.

“Enough, already,” Kris sighed. “Yes, I’d love it if we could build our own paths rather than being stuck on the ones the Three left behind.” The Paris system came immediately to mind; its scattered jump points almost got humanity into a war. And it wasn’t as if she and Nelly would be doing anything important for the next month. Why not do something extreme? Kris gave her aunt Tru a sigh. “You owe me for this one.” Tru broad grin was unrepentant. “So, what do we do?”

Tru flipped a button on the picture she’d been holding and it ran through a process for

implanting the stone onto Nelly's central processing area. "We'll use a different colored dollop of self-organizing gel. That should let it build not only connectors but any power supply conversion you need. Also, if we have to scrape it off Nelly, the color marker will help."

"Sounds okay," Kris said, then the skeptical part of her brain kicked in. "Where'd you get the money for the gel?"

"I won a small lottery pot." Tru said without looking up from arranging various tools and stasis boxes on her work table.

"Won or rigged?"

"Now didn't your dad say the last time he reauthorized the lottery that some of the money should go for research."

"Yes," Kris agreed slowly, wondering if Father had this in mind and not at all sure he didn't. What had Harvey said when Kris first began to question her aunt's lottery "luck." "A smart woman knows not to push it." No question, Tru was smart. Kris loosened her collar to take Nelly from around her shoulders.

"Keep your connection," Tru said. "We'll need rapid feedback from Nelly when we start this." The wire between Nelly and the back of Kris's neck was smart metal; it stretched out as Kris set her personal computer on the table. Kris knelt down to keep the distance short; the longer the wire, the narrower the bandwidth. The actual installation was over in a moment. The interfacing gel slid on easily. Tru told Kris how wide a bed the rock would need and Nelly quickly arranged it. Then Tru set the small wafer in place.

"There, now that didn't hurt." Her old auntie smiled.

"Isn't that what the condemned man said as the trap door snapped open," Kris said dryly. "Nelly, run full diagnostics."

"Already running," Nelly said. "Everything appears normal."

"And the chip?" Tru asked.

"No activity," Nelly replied in a low tech voice. "Excuse me while I initiated interface with the new gel."

"Oh, right," Tru said, biting one fingernail. Kris had never seen her aunt so excited.

"I am developing a project plan that will involve triple checks of buffers at every phase of activation of the wafer," Nelly said. "I do not expect to begin testing power sources before this

time tomorrow.”

“You can go faster than that,” Tru said, almost stomping her foot with impatience.

“And who taught me to take new things slow and carefully?” Kris shot back.

“Yes, but you never paid me any mind before.”

“Now I’m a mature woman,” Kris said, standing up to her full height. She didn’t exactly tower over Tru, but her three extra centimeters did come in handy once in a while. “And I have a ball tonight, command performance.”

“You could skip it. Tell your mom you were detained.”

“My skipper is now tracking my social schedule.”

“Your mother didn’t ...”

“No, but I suspect my captain very much wants to avoid a call from Mother. And if it does come he wants to be as innocent as possible.”

“Coward,” Tru said, but she was ushering Kris from the lab.

“Strange, those navy types, lions in the face of laser fire, but threaten them with society and they flee for the door.”

“Like a young woman I know,” Tru chuckled. “Well bring Nelly by tomorrow so I can check up on her. Sam and I may have some test ideas of our own. You’ll need to check in daily,” she said as Kris slipped out the door.

THREE

The drive home was quiet. Kris's efforts to involve Nelly in anything were met with "Is this activity essential?" in that low-tech voice that showed Nelly was otherwise busy.

At Nuu house, Harvey excused himself to park the car. That was strange; he usually left it in the entrance's wide circle drive. When Jack tried to go with him, Kris knew something was amiss. "Jack, stay with me. If something goes wrong with Nelly's new installation, I might need a hand."

NOTHING WILL GO WRONG WITH ME, Nelly shot back.

QUIET, Kris ordered silently.

"I thought you trusted your Aunt Tru," Jack muttered.

"Never can be too safe."

"Now I know something is definitely wrong with you," Jack growled through a smile but followed her into the foyer. The black and white tiled spiral swirled to the center of the room. The large library off to the right was dark and quiet, no longer a military command post for her Grampas Ray and Trouble.

King Ray had taken over a major hotel downtown for his court while the politicians debated how much of a palace he really needed. Grampa Ray would have been happy in a two bedroom townhouse, but since the politicians of eighty planets had talk him into some kind of kingship over their cobbled together United Sentients, he was having fun needling them with a full court press. Or a press for a full court.

Her Grampa Trouble was offering advice “purely as a consultant” to several planets as they struggled to form their own defense forces and meld them with the new United Sentients’ total force. That left Nuu house so empty it echoed.

Except that standing at the foot of the stairs was a stranger. The woman, in a severe gray dress cut long and buttoned at the neck, stood, hands folded. She was Kris’s height, maybe a bit shorter, but she held herself so rigidly upright it made no difference. “Princess Longknife,” the woman said. “I am your new body servant.”

Kris eyed the woman without slowing. Her face was free of make-up; her jet black hair coiled in a tight bun. *She’s going to give me a make-over? She needs one herself!* “It’s Lieutenant Longknife,” Kris shot back, “and I don’t need any servants.”

“Your mother disagrees.”

“Add one more to the myriad of things where we differ,” Kris said, adjusting her course for the stairs to be as far from the woman as possible. The woman let Kris pass, but followed her up as silent and near invisible as Jack, until Kris turned on the second floor landing to take the stairs to her third floor room.

Clearing her voice, the woman said, “Your quarters are now on the second floor.”

“I’ve been moved!” Kris said low, one foot on the stairs up.

“Yes. Your room was too small for your new responsibilities. I have rearranged you in a second floor suite.”

Kris turned to face this new problem. “You moved me without asking!”

“You have a ball tonight. There is much to do and no time to waste. Harvey suggested this suite.”

“Harvey’s in on this.”

“His wife, Lotty, agreed.”

Which meant everyone living in Nuu house was backing this interloper. Drastic actions were called for. “Jack, shoot this trespasser.”

Her security agent pursed his lips as he scratched his head. “Don’t think I can. They took that paragraph out of my job description last month after your old man freed the slaves.” He offered his hand. “I’m Jack Montoya. I didn’t get your name.”

“Abby Nightingale,” the woman answered, then lowered her voice. “I was hired from an

Earth agency. Did this planet just outlaw slavery?”

Kris started to bark a laugh, then realized this poor woman had traveled a hundred light years to take a job on a world she knew nothing about. Could Kris have ever done that?

“Rest assured, we are as modern as Earth in all our conveniences and vices,” Jack told Abby, adding power to his words with one of his gentle smiles.

“They told me that when I signed the contract,” Abby said.

“But you never can tell around the wild rim of human space,” Jack finished.

“Were you expecting your Princess in a fur bikini?” Kris snapped, feeling less sympathy in the light of all Jack’s concern for this new woman.

Abby looked Kris up and down. “I had hoped her hair might be in better shape. Show me your nails.” Abby ordered, took two quick steps, reached out and held Kris’s fingers up to the light. “I guess it could be worse. At least you don’t bite them.”

Kris yanked her hands back. “I like me just the way I am. I don’t need someone wasting their day making me who I’m not.”

Abby had no answer for that, or let Kris have the last say. Kris started to stomp down the hall to an open doorway on her right. Abby cleared her throat ... and pointed to the left. Scowling, Kris followed the intruder. The door she opened was to one of the guest suites. A large sitting room opened to two smaller rooms, one a bedroom, the other a study that was in the process of being converted into a dressing room. Already its walls were hung with dresses that Kris did not remember buying. In a small corner hung her uniforms.

“I’ll start your bath,” Abby said.

“I can handle my own shower,” Kris shot back.

The woman paused in the doorway to a very luxurious bath. Turning to Kris she said. “You have pretty much handle things on your own for most of the last ten years, or so I’m told. You have a full schedule as an active duty naval officer and as a political show horse, otherwise known as princess. I think I can help you if you will give me half a chance.”

Kris shrugged; the woman was stubborn. Maybe the best way out was through. Let the woman do what she was going to do anyway and find out for herself just how little Kris needed a ... what, a mother hen. Mother had never been much of a mother; it might be interesting to see what this Abigail was good for.

While water ran in the next room, Kris disconnected from Nelly and settled her on the dressing table. The computer had been silent through all of this, intent on navel gazing or Aunt Tru's project, or maybe just too smart to get involved.

"Harvey says he'll bring up a supper tray in a half hour," Jack called from the sitting room. At least someone was giving her what she wanted. Defiantly naked, Kris strode into the bath. Abby offered her a hand into the tub; Kris ignored it and kept her own balance as she put a foot in. The water was warm. Very nice. As Kris settled in, Abby poured an aromatic liquid into the tub. Once Kris was in place, and an pleasant "aah," had escaped her, Abby turned on the jets.

Kris's one experiment with jets and bubble bath had been a disaster. Whatever Abby used just turned into a pleasant, low foam. With gently pulsating water caressing her, scents relaxing her, Kris leaned back, but refused to let the moment waste away. Finding out what made this interloper tick was suddenly high on Kris's list of things to do today.

"So, what made you want to be ..." Kris could think of several descriptions of Abby's duties, all sharp with put downs. She settled for "this?"

"Have a job, rather than living on Earth welfare?" Abby said through a smile with too much teeth.

"That wasn't what I said."

"No, but isn't that what you rim people think. Decadent Earth where everyone just parties."

"Earth couldn't be the power it is if everyone was just looking for the next party," Kris snapped. She'd risked her life to keep Earth and the rim from going to war. If anyone respected Earth's power, it was her.

"Harvey just brought up the mail," Jack called. "Where do you want it?"

"Mail, as in snail?" Kris called back.

"Two rather large packages. One weighs about *ten* kilos. Don't think even Nelly could handle that in storage."

"Put them on the dressing table. I'll look at them later."

"Okay," Jack said. "I won't peek." He hurried past the bath door, a box under one arm, a large padded envelope held up to block his view through the door. Damn. Kris wouldn't mind if

he took a peek once in a while.

On the way out, Jack did toss a unrepentant smile her way. Unfortunately, all there was for him to see was froth and suds.

“Nice guy,” Abby said, eyeing the door after Jack passed.

“Yep,” Kris agreed. “Hand me a towel. Let’s see what the mail brought.”

Abby did, and didn’t try to interfere with Kris drying herself. As Kris stepped from the tub, Abby wrapped her in a lush terrycloth robe. “Where’d this come from?”

“After your mother’s description, I told her I needed a budget for essentials and for your wardrobe.”

“So you’re spending my money.”

“You really should spend a bit on things that matter rather than frivolous things like your personal computer.”

“Nelly saved my life today, and a boat full of shipmates. Nelly is nothing frivolous.”

“Your mother’s words, not mine.”

“If you want to survive around me, you’ll learn not to quote my mother.”

“So I noticed, now sit down, your hair needs washing.”

“I washed it this morning.”

“I dare say you got it wet. Have you ever heard of conditioner. You know, that stuff that smells good.” Kris found herself maneuvered into a chair beside an oversize washbasin. Before she could react, Abby had her hair sopping wet and was massaging in something that smelled like strawberries. Hair washing had never been so sensuous when Kris did it herself. By the time Abby was drying Kris’s hair, she was almost willing to admit this Earth woman might be worth whatever Mother was paying.

Settled at the dressing table, Kris eyed her mail. The heavy box was from Grampa Al. Kris ignored it, strongly suspecting it held a first production sample of Uni-plex. The envelope was more intriguing. It’s “from” address was Earth. “This must be for you,” she told Abby.

“It’s addressed to Ensign Longknife,” Jack said from the door where he and Harvey were waiting expectantly.

Kris pulled her robe tighter around herself and swivelled the chair to face them. “So what is it?”

“We don’t know. Will you open it, woman,” Harvey snapped.

So Kris did. But a look inside didn’t tell her that much. She poured the contents out on her dressing table, next to Nelly. The men came to peer over her shoulder.

Harvey was the first to grasp what they saw. He let out a low whistle. “Is that what I think it is?”

Abby picked up a heavy gold and jewel encrusted pendent. “One of my employers,” she whispered, “was very proud of her ancestor who died in the Iteeche Wars. This hung in her living room beside a portrait of her great-grandmother. It’s the highest award Earth can give, the Order of the Wounded Lion.”

“It’s awfully big for a medal,” Kris said, puzzled.

“You don’t wear the Order like other medals, young woman,” Harvey reproved her. “This sunburst goes on your uniform breast pocket, or for really formal occasions, you wear the sash and use the medal to clasp the sash at the waist. Don’t they teach you junior officers anything these days?” he grinned.

“Nope,” Kris grinned back, “we J. O.’s pretty much waste all our time on engineering, battle tactics and similar trivia,” she said examining the gold medallion. The highest award Earth could give. Wow. And when was the last time it was mailed out in a brown wrapper? *Damn it, I worked just as hard to earn this bobble as anyone who got it hung on them in a rose garden. Will everything I do good be swept under the rug because I’m one of those Longknifes? But Lordie, if I screw up ...*

“What did you do to earn this?” Abby asked.

“If I told you, then Jack truly would have to shoot you,” Kris dead panned. To Kris’s surprise, Jack nodded.

Abby frowned briefly at the put off, but picked up the blue sash and took it to a cream dress hanging against one wall of the dressing room. Unlike the monstrosities Mother chose, this one was of a conservative cut: strapless, pulled tight at the waist before flowing out smoothly to floor length. While the “in” fashion might range from shapeless sacks to damn near naked, this was always appropriate. “You can wear the sash over the shoulder,” Abby said, “and pin it here, under the opposite arm so that it flows smoothly across you. I think that would be best,” the Earth woman told Kris. The men nodded agreement.

Kris sighed. Like a large blue arrow, it would point straight at the empty space in the dress where most women had breasts. “I will be wearing my uniform tonight.”

Abby frowned at the corner that held the items of navy issue; battle dress, khakis, whites, and the standard formal evening dress of a junior female officer. She pulled the formal from the line up and held it next to the cream dress. One was appropriate for a fairy princess. The other was just flat dowdy.

The uniform’s white, floor-length skirt was cut from the same design as millennia of gunny sacks. Kris had chosen the blue wool blouse that had the tight choker neck, thereby avoiding any hint of décolletage. Miniatures of her few medals were already in place. Abby looked back and forth between Kris and the standard dress uniform. “The colors are not your best,” she said as she chewed on her lower lip.”

“The colors are established Navy wide,” Kris answered back.

Abby laid the Wounded Lion’s blue sash across the blouse. The light, watermarked blue of the sash and the dark blue of the blouse could only be said to fit because a thousand years of valor and service said they did. Abby shook her head, opened her mouth. Kris cut her off. “That is what I am wearing tonight.”

Abby turned to Harvey and Jack. “Do all military uniforms seek to make a woman look so ...”

“Unappealing,” Jack offered.

“Yes.”

“It seems that way,” Harvey agreed. “Women are there to do a job, not flirt,” the old trooper growled.

“But the men look so dashing in their uniforms,” Abby said.”

“An historical anachronism left from days past,” Kris spat. “We women, however, have all the advantages of the modern era.”

“Or error,” Jack put in with one of his patented grins.

“Supper is ready,” Nelly spoke up, still in a low tech voice, startling Kris. “Harvey, Lotty wants you downstairs to pick up a tray. Will you men be eating in the kitchen?”

“Looks that way,” Jack said, and the men left Kris and her new mistress of the wardrobe to dress. Having won on the most important point of debate that afternoon, Kris let Abby do as

she pleased. Pampered, made-over and perfumed, her short, blond hair wound around her head in a confection that Kris never would have attempted, she was dressed in less than an hour. Nelly was back around Kris's shoulders, a second reason to wear the uniform, before she and Abby crossed swords again. Abby returned with the diamond and gold tiara Mother had bought at some overpriced rummage sale. "Perfect for a princess," Mother gushed.

As Kris did then, she said, "I'm not wearing that."

Abby started to say something, looked at Kris and seemed to think better of it. "What will you be wearing?"

"Right beside that in my jewelry box was a simple silver circlet, standard issue for any woman junior officer in formal dinner attire."

"Not that!"

"Yes that."

Abby glanced at the tiara, then eyed the circlet. "A princess should wear a tiara."

"That is a tiara. Says so right in the dress regulations. Tiara, formal, junior officers, female."

"Do senior officers wear something nicer?" Abby said, trading the diamond concoction for the navy issue.

"Yep. They get nicer and nicer until admirals are wearing something pretty fancy."

"And are very old," Abby said with a sour frown on her face.

"Horribly old," Kris agreed.

Tiaraed and sashed, Kris made her way carefully down the stairs in heels twice as high as she normally wore ... which also were prescribed in regulations. Maybe Abby had a point, whoever designed this outfit sure hadn't put her physical comfort or appearance a very high priority. Was the uniform regulations development bureau the last place in the navy where a woman hater was allowed free reign? Jack, now in a tux, stood at the bottom of the stairs.

"You going to catch me when I fall?"

"Looks like it."

"You could come up here and help me stay on these heels."

"And get spiked by one. Sorry, not in my job description."

"Seems like your job description is getting kind of short."

“Yes, isn’t it,” Jack said, stepping aside as Kris left the stairs behind her. Harvey brought a monster limo to the front drive. Abby helped Kris arrange her skirt in the back seat.

Harvey got the limo on auto pilot, then turning to take in Kris. “That sash does brighten up a dull outfit,” he drawled. “By the way, can a Wardhaven officer wear an Earth order?”

“Oh my gosh!” Kris was learning a princess did not use the “S” word in public and should practice not using it in private. She reached to unpin the sash.

“I checked,” Harvey grinned. “Earth, being an ally of Wardhaven ... in some small thanks to whatever you did or didn’t do at the Paris system ... their orders are authorized.”

“Harvey, you could have told me that in the first place!”

“Yes, but then we’d have missed that look on your face.”

“What look?”

“Oh, part shock, part dismay, part ‘Oh my God, I’ve screwed up again!’ It’s very becoming on you.”

“I did not think I’d screwed up again.” Kris settled for appealing only one of the three charges from her oldest friend.

The ball failed to match the excitement of its preparation. Kris passed the usual chatter with the usual suspects. Didn’t these people have day jobs to tire them out? Her older brother Honovi was at Father’s right hand, like a good junior member of parliament, understudying the master. Since there was no immediate political need to paper over their feelings about her career choice, Kris and the Prime Minister ignored each other.

Mother could not be ignored.

“What do you think of Abby?” was the woman’s opening gambit.

Kris took a step back and opened her arms to show off her uniform. “I only fired her twice as she was getting me ready.”

“You can’t fire her. I’m paying for her. I had hoped she would at least put you in something presentable.”

“That would require firing her three times in one night.”

“And I was so looking forward to her dressing you in something that would remove my daughter from the top of the fashion police’s ten worst dressed list,” Mother sighed.

“Have your fashion *policia* send me the citation, Mother. I’ll file it among my dust

bunnies.” Kris moved along as Mother launched into a diatribe to the woman on her right.

Grampa Ray made the required appearance, and was mobbed by both favor seekers and eligible matrons looking to end his long years of widowerhood. Nothing like the chance to be queen of eighty planets to gather every social climber within light years. A few were presently married, but clearly willing to trade up. King Ray made his way through the bejeweled crowd as a jungle scout might pass through a trove of bothersome flies. But he noticed who he wanted and that included Kris. He raised an eyebrow at the sash and medallion.

“Accessories make the outfit,” Kris said. Fashion gossips might ignore the Wounded Lion; people like Grampa knew better.

“Earth is grateful you saved their bacon,” Grampa Ray grinned, “and their battle fleet,” he added with one of his tight, warm smiles that anyone would risk their life for.

“There really wasn’t another option,” Kris said; her eyes suddenly watery, she settled them on the deeply carpeted floor.

“Been in that horrible position myself a few times,” King Raymond answered. “Lousy situations to be in. But the survivors make for nice company.” Kris was half way home before she lost the glow from that moment.

“Kris,” Nelly said, “I have a collect call I think you should accept it.”

“Who is it?” Kris quit taking collect calls early in her high school years. It was amazing the people who wanted to talk to a Longknife and expected her to pay for the privilege.

“A Miss Pasley is calling from the starship *Bellerophon*.”

“*Bellerophon*? Should I know that ship?”

“It is a tramp, mixed cargo and passengers. Tommy took passage on it, you may recall.”

Kris had forgotten. “I accept the charges.” A system voice told Kris she would be debited for a price that made even Kris’s eyes widen. Miss Pasley, whoever she was, had slapped a very costly priority on her message. Kris undid the top buttons of her choker collar so Nelly could project a holo vid of the call.

A young woman, long, straight blond hair falling to her shoulders, came up. “Miss Longknife, or Princess Longknife,” she said nervously, “you don’t know me. But I know Tommy Lien, who says he’s a good friend of yours. He told me that if anything strange happened to him I should call this number.”

The woman glanced off camera. “I think something has happened to Tommy. He wanted to see the ruins on Itsahfine. We were studying all the stuff about them in the ship’s database. He even had stuff he’d picked up, so I know he intended to go to Itsahfine. But he’s not going there.

“The *Belly*, that’s what we all call the *Bellerophon*, made a stop to refuel or maybe shift cargo here at Castagan 6. A guy came up while Tom and I were talking, said he was Calvin Sandfire and had to pass some words with Tom.”

“Tom left me and I haven’t seen him since. The ship’s left the station and we’re on our way to Itsahfine. I’ve asked all the other passengers and no one has seen Tom. I’ve called him on net but he doesn’t answer. I checked with the purser but he says Tommy’s room is still his and he won’t do a search. I think he thinks I’m just chasing him. But I think Tom left the ship with Mr. Sandfire. Maybe it’s nothing, but I thought I ought to let you know that I think something strange has happened to Tom.”

Kris went over the message quickly in her mind as she told Nelly to save message. “What do you think,” she asked Jack.

The secret service agent rubbed his chin. “When you’re free and unencumbered, you can change your priorities very quickly. Maybe Mr. Sandfire made him a better offer than crumbling relics of the Three. Maybe he was from Santa Maria and had a message for Tom from his family.” Jack shrugged. “It could be a lot of things that don’t add up to bad.”

“Or it could be bad,” Kris said. “Nelly, do a search on Mr. Calvin Sandfire. Start with Santa Maria.”

“Already working,” Nelly said, her voice back to its usual sweet self. Tru would have to wait a while longer to crack the rock chip and the Three. “I am also searching on Wardhaven, Earth and Greenfeld.” Wardhaven was home to Kris. Earth was Earth. Greenfeld ... well that was a totally different can of worms. With luck, Nelly would draw a blank there.

“Also Nelly, check ships registries for a Mr. Sandfire.” Of course, that would tell them nothing if Mr. Sandfire was getting the use of a ship by leasing, renting, stealing, hijacking or any of the other myriad of ways that people had of getting around starship ownership while acquiring needed mobility.

The problem with having readily available information about a hundred billion people on

six hundred planets is learning patience while it was converted from “readily” to “available.”

The long silence of the drive home was broken “Mr. Sandfire is not in the Santa Maria database.”

No surprise there.

“Mr. Sandfire is not a registered owner of any starship.”

“You couldn’t expect things to be that easy,” Jack said.

“Mr. Calvin Sandfire is the owner of Ironclad Software™ registered on Greenfeld,” Nelly reported five minutes later.

“Oh shit,” Kris moaned. There were times when even a princess had to say what she had to say.

“What should I know about this fellow?” Jack said.

“He’s not already in your official reports?”

“Nope, but you have this way of not letting my agency know of all the people that want you dead.”

“I don’t think Mr. Sandfire has tried to kill me ... yet,” Kris said, giving Jack a cheery smile. He didn’t look at all mollified. “He is reported to have paid off the man that added a heart attack to the last meal of my previous squadron commander, Commodore Sampson. His software was what Sampson used to keep the ships of AttackRon Six at the Paris system from hearing their attack orders were bogus.”

“Oh shit,” Jack echoed her.

Harvey didn’t bat an eyelash as all those answers to his questions about Paris. “Well, at least he’s far away from us.”

“For now, at least,” Kris said. Jack eyed her, but Kris offered no further comment, and Jack said nothing.

FOUR

Kris drummed her fingers on the dressing table while Abby got her hair down. “Search on ships that docked at Castagon 6 a week before the *Bellerophon* and get their passenger lists.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Nelly.

In sweat pants and tank top, Kris joined Harvey and Jack in the sitting room, now an intelligence center. One wall proved to be a screen. It now showed what they knew – not much. Lotty arrived; no one was in danger of starving tonight or going without caffeine.

As Kris settled into a lounge, Nelly announced the search of shipping to Castagon 6 was negative. Only the *Bellerophon* had docked there in the last week. “Why do I find that hard to believe. Nelly, Tru has this way of getting better information about shipping. Check with Sam.” Nelly made a call.

Sam suggested the list of ships jumping to a port often showed more traffic than the list of ships the port said arrived.

The morning sun streamed through Kris’s unused bedroom before Nelly completed a much broader search. Done the other way around, it seemed that the yacht *Space Adder* had jumped from Turantic 4 with the destination of Castagon 6 two days before the *Bellerophon* arrived. The *Space Adder* was back at Turantic two days after Tom’s ship left. Ah, the bits of information in the public domain databases ... if you just didn’t get misled by the easily doctored answers.

Lotty arrived with breakfast as Kris sat silently organizing her day. She should report to the ship. It was Saturday and she didn't have to, but the captain usually put in half a day and Kris tried to match him. She stifled a yawn and reviewed what Nelly had sifted out of the mass of information available. The wall screen was now full; down one side was a chronology. While Kris had found out about Tom's travel plans and interruptions only in the last twelve hours, it had been longer in the doing.

Tommy had messaged her before boarding the *Bellerophon* five days ago. Being a thrifty, underpaid junior officer, his message went stand-by and had been bumped from the quay several times in its transit through two jump points from High Cambria to Wardhaven. Kris wondered if that was Tom's way of ensuring he was well on his way before she could do anything.

Miss Pasley's message had farther to go but had spent Kris's money going faster. Tommy apparently had left the *Bellerophon* a bit more than two days ago. Which meant he'd arrived at Turantic late yesterday while Kris was passing social chit chat with a thousand of her father's closest friends. Kris slowly munched one of Lotty's high fiber muffins while absorbing the time flow.

A second section was now a stellar map, showing the planets important to this drill. The *Bellerophon's* trip from High Cambria to Itsahfine involved four jumps, but only one stop, that at Castagon 6. The round trip from Turantic to Castagon was just two jumps. Wardhaven to Turantic was a three jump trip along well traveled trading lanes.

"Nelly, do me a full political work-up on Turantic." Until recently, human space was human space and a study of The Society for Humanity supposedly told the tale. Growing up sharing a dinner table with her father had given Kris an early realization that what the high school civic's teacher called United Humanity was full of factions that the Prime Minister regularly had to juggle to get anything done. Now those factions were independent associations and star maps needed not just lines for shipping lanes but different colors to show where the customs inspectors lived and maybe, just maybe, a battle fleet might be making motions toward another color on the map.

She lit up Earth, the mother of this whole mess. The first two hundred years of human outreach had colonized the Seven sisters, and then the forty plus step-sisters, as wags named the

next sphere. Nelly colored those planets Green, the color of The Society of Humanity back before the Unity War, then immediately added in black the hundred planets that had made up Unity. NO, NELLY, THAT'S HISTORY. SHOW GRAMPA RAY'S UNITED SENTIENTS IN RED. The map changed; a lot of the black went to red, but so did some of the green: Pitts Hope, Lorna Do. Surprise for Earth. The red also included the colonies Wardhaven had sponsored in the last eighty years. Still, the red and green were less than a quarter of the six hundred worlds now inhabited by humanity.

PUT PETERWALD'S FACTION IN BLACK. A fifty world chunk of the rim formed a dark cloud, centered around Greenfeld. It seeming to reach out to block Wardhaven from further expansion. Hamilton and its five colonies lay between Turantic and Peterwald's holdings. THERE'S NO BAD BLOOD BETWEEN TURANTIC AND HAMILTON, Kris told Nelly.

ONLY THE USUAL TRADING RIVALRIES, the computer agreed.
Kris eyed the wall screen, searching for how she and Tom fit in.

"Kris, you have a collect call coming in."

"Who from this time?"

"Tommy."

"Accept it!" Kris shouted, bouncing to her feet. Jack and Harvey were maybe half a second slower shooting from their places on the couch, the long night's exhaustion forgotten. Abby sat quietly in the straight back chair she'd set in a corner. She might have actually gotten some sleep for all she'd contributed to the night's conversations.

A section of wall screen changed to show the phone call. There was Tommy, looking disheveled, his skin so pale his freckles stood out like warning lights.

"Kris, I need help," he started, no lopsided grin today.

And the screen went blank.

"Nelly, where's the rest of the call?" Kris yelled.

"It was cut off at the source."

"Where was he calling from? Rerun it!" Kris demanded. Nelly reran the call, freezing frame just before it cut off. Kris stared into Tommy's eyes, trying to plumb them for fear, terror, new found freedom. The face just looked tired.

"Talk to me about the call, Nelly?" Kris ordered.

“The header file has been damaged, apparently in an attempt to retrieve the call,” Nelly said. “The call was made from High Turantic Station about six hours ago, real time. The exact location of the phone is lost, but it was on the public systems in the station’s dock section.” A schematic of a standard, class 5 station appeared.

“Not much to go on,” Jack muttered.

“Six hours ago, Tom was on Turantic and needed help,” Kris snapped. “That’s enough for me.”

“Enough for what?”

“To get a search going,” Kris said, pacing the floor.

“Turantic is twelve light years away. Six hours by priority mail,” Jack pointed out.

“So, call in some chits. You’re a cop, aren’t you? Get some of the brethren off their duffs and out looking for Tom.”

“Kris, we’re personal security. We don’t do kidnappings.”

“Your agency was all over the dopes who snatched Eddy,” Kris snapped, mad enough not to choke on the name of her six-year-old brother who died under a pile of manure.

“Eddie was our subject. Tom is not.”

“And would anybody snatch Tom if he hadn’t gotten too damn close to me?” Jack’s face was a professional mask, no answer there. “Nelly, get me Grampa Ray.”

Jack’s eyebrows raised at that, but he turned away and retook his place on the couch, folding his hands and eyeing Kris like she had some lessons to learn.

“Hi, Kris, what you doing up so early on a Saturday after a ball?” Grampa Ray smiled from a section of wall.

“I kind of have a problem, Grampa,” Kris answered, then filled him in. His smile worked its way into a worried frown as she told him of Tom. When she finished, he nodded.

“I remember him, a good young man.”

“He’s been my right arm too many times.”

“This isn’t going to be easy, Kris.” When a man like Grampa Ray said things weren’t easy, they weren’t. “Turantic isn’t part of United Sentients. They’re playing a coy game, holding aloof and avoiding commitments to any of the sides taking shape. Kris, a year ago, when we were all good citizens of the Society, I could make a phone call as a private person and half of the

cops on Turantic would be hunting for Tommy. Now, I'm a king," Ray said ruefully, fingering his brow that at the moment was in need of combing, "and I have less leverage."

Kris glanced at Jack. He was shaking his head, a "I told you so" look all over his swarthy features.

"We have an embassy there, don't we?"

"Wardhaven's business residency was renamed an embassy, but, hon, we're all having to relearn a lot of stuff about separate and equal from the history books."

"I'd appreciate it if you would call who you can and see if they have any way of getting cops out looking for Tommy." NELLY, SEND GRAMPA A COPY OF TOMMY'S CALL.

Grampa focused on something off screen. Kris could hear Tommy's few words over the line. "I see," Grampa frowned.

"If he hadn't gotten messed up with one-of-those-damn-Longknives this would never have happened to a kid from Santa Maria," Kris pointed out.

"He's from Santa Maria. Then he's not a US citizen."

Right! Santa Maria, halfway across the galaxy, hadn't joined anyone either. "He's a serving officer on a Wardhaven warship," Kris pointed out. "That has to count for something."

"Some folks have been arguing that we ought to give dual citizenship in cases like that. This could get very mixed up."

Kris nodded with understanding, but kept Grampa hostage with her eyes. For the first time in her life, Grampa was the first to flinched away. "I'll make some phone calls. There's bound to be somebody who knows somebody who owes them a favor."

"Thanks Grampa."

"Stay close, Kris. I'll get back," and Ray ended the call.

Stay close, Kris reflected. If she did, would that help Tom? She weighed Tom's prospects, hanging on the razor's edge of what Grampa Ray maybe could do. She was in motion before she actually decided to act. There *was* no alternative.

NELLY, GET ME CAPTAIN HAYWORTH. The skipper of the *Firebolt* was at his desk aboard ship; he glanced up. "Lieutenant. You going to be late today? That ball go long last night?"

"Sir, a personal matter has come up. I would like to take that leave you offered yesterday." Behind Kris, Jack was back off the couch. Harvey cleared his throat noisily. Kris

had long ago learned that from an NCO, it was as close to a scream of disapproval as you got. She ignored them.

“Don’t see any problem, you’ve got the time coming. I was hoping you might use your back door access to get some Uni-plex for Dale to mess with but we can survive a week without it.”

Kris glanced at the box from Grampa Al on her desk. She could drop it off when she went through the station. Then again, Uni-plex had almost killed her once. She was headed, unarmed and unaided, into someone else’s plan for her life. Might a wild card come in handy? “I’ll get you some next week, sir,” she promised. “See you then, and thanks for being so understanding.”

The captain smiled. “You’re doing a tough job juggling a lot of stuff, Lieutenant, and doing it well. See you in a week.”

“And why are you taking leave,” Jack demanded as Harvey roared, “Just what do you think you’re doing, woman.”

Kris took a deep breath, full of familiar smells. This was the house she’d grown up in. Nuu House. The home of the Longknives. They did what had to be done when there were no alternatives. Of course, she was headed off to a corner of space where Longknife just might be the word for target. Kris expelled the familiar air and took a step toward Jack, a first step down a dark unknown path. She chose her words with care, no need to whip up a worse storm than her decision spawned. “I’m going to apply some personal oversight to make sure Tom doesn’t gets lost in the shuffle.” NELLY, WHEN’S THE NEXT SHIP LEAVING WARDHAVEN FOR TURANTIC?

“Damn it, woman, are you blind?” Harvey shouted.

“You are walking into a trap,” Jack said softly.

I HAVE BEEN CHECKING CONSTANTLY SINCE LAST EVENING, Nelly said. THE FREIGHTER BRISBANE’S BUSTARDS LEAVES IN AN HOUR. THE LUXURY LINER TURANTIC PRIDE SEALS LOCKS IN THREE HOURS.

THANKS, NELLY. SEE ABOUT SPACE ON THE TURANTIC PRIDE. “Yes, Jack, I know I’m walking into a trap.”

Harvey threw up his hands. Jack stood his ground. “Then why go?”

“They caught Tommy in a trap he wasn’t looking for and, for crying out loud, had no

reason to expect. He wasn't walking, he was running away from those-damn-Longknives. Still, he got caught in a net meant for me. Don't you see, Tommy's been turned into bait in a game he wasn't prepared for and can't survive. And yes, I pray to every god available that this bunch is smart enough not to leave him under a ton of manure with a busted air pipe like they left Eddy.

"Their damn trap was good enough to catch a poor kid from Santa Maria on holiday. I don't think they've made a trap yet that can catch a major Nuu Enterprises stock holder, a Prime Minister's daughter, and yes, damn it, a Princess of the eighty planets of United Sentients.

"They caught themselves a mouse. Let's see how their little trap handles a madder than hell lioness."

"Great sound bite," Jack drawled. "Don't you think they've thought of that, too?"

Kris shrugged, not amused by how easily he deflated her dramatics. "They haven't got me yet. I doubt they'll do it this time. There's a ship leaving for Turantic in three hours. I'll be on it."

"You can't do that," Jack said.

"I'll start packing," Abby said, standing. "Harvey, I'll need four self-propelled steamer trunks. I assume there are a few of them around this place."

"I'll get them, but I still say this is a bad idea."

"You're not coming," Kris told Abby. "It'll dangerous."

The woman turned to Kris – and a small needle gun appeared in her hand, aimed right at Kris's heart.

"Where'd that weapon come from?" Jack demanded, stepping in front of Kris.

"I've carried a weapon since I was twelve," Abby said, making said weapon vanish as smoothly as it had appeared. "Have you forgotten, I hale from Earth. You've heard of our quaint native customs, the drive by shooting or gunning down every customer at your friendly, neighborhood, fast food outlet?"

Jack was no longer reaching for his gun as he edged closer to this surprise package. "Jack, please don't come any closer. You look like a nice guy and you're probably well trained in hand to hand. I don't have any of those fancy colored belts, but the kids I grew up with taught me how to survive on bad streets and to hurt you fast."

Jack backed off a step but his hand was out. "I'll bother you for that weapon. No

stranger goes armed around my primary.” Jack’s words were soft, but nothing hid the steel in them.

Abby eyed him; the moment stretched. Then Abby blinked and the tiny weapon was again in her hand. She handed it to Jack and turned to Kris. “If my last employer had listened more to me than her overpaid security, she’d still be alive and I wouldn’t be employed so far from home. You really should read my resume.”

“My mother hired you.”

“That shouldn’t keep you from reading up on the woman standing next to you.” Abby tapped her wrist unit. “There, now your computer has it. Enjoy the read.”

“No time now. I’ll catch up aboard ship.”

“Fine. Now then, young woman, if you plan to come the enraged princess ... in something more than a fur bikini ... you will need me. I will take care of your needs, and, trust me, I can take care of myself.”

“How good are you at dodging short range rockets?” Jack drawled. Abby frowned at that.

“I didn’t know you’d learned of that attack,” Kris said, heading for her dressing room, Abby right behind her.

“I may be slow, but I’m not inept. Harvey,” Jack called after the retreating chauffeur, “bring up both of my bags.”

“Bags?” Kris echoed.

“Yep. I knew sooner or later you’d rush off planet for something and I’d get dragged along. I packed one bag for a cold planet, one for a hot. Which is Turantic?”

“Who said you’re going? This is just me taking a vacation.”

“Yeah, right,” Jack said, turning away and starting to talk to either himself or his communications center. At the moment, Kris would not have bet an Earth dollar which.

“It would be easier to maneuver through stations and customs,” Abby offered, “if all our luggage, his two bags and mine, were in trunks bearing your diplomatic immunity.”

“Didn’t know I had any, but that sounds reasonable. Nelly, tell Harvey we’ll need two more trunks,” Kris said, feeling very much in command of a very muddy situation.

Abby busied herself around the dressing room until Harvey returned, leading a parade of self-propelled steamer trunks, each big enough to carry Kris comfortably. Abby crammed them

full of every kind of dress, gown, suit and accessory Kris'd ever heard of or even heard intimated. Kris had never worn foundation garments, but Abby packed several. She held up two Kris took for girdles. "These are fully armored with the latest Super Spider Silk. You can bow, bend, stoop, even breathe in them ... and they'll stop a four millimeter slug."

"Get them at a rummage sale from your last employer?" Kris asked, then realized the question could be taken wrong.

"No," Abby seemed unfazed. "She was six sizes up from you."

"Oh, you could protected us both in one.

"Sorry, princess, but I wont be that close when someone starts shooting. That's what that good looking guy is for."

Kris took the conversation away from that good looking guy. "Pack the Order of the Wounded Lion. It'll impress the locals."

"Don't count on the hicks recognizing it, but it's big and shiny and ought to dazzle a few," Abby said, folding it into a trunk bins. Kris checked Grampa Al's package. It did hold ten kilos of virgin Uni-plex. Kris hefted it. *What could I use this for?* She had no idea, but the fact she asked the question seemed a solid argument for taking it. Abby said nothing when Kris handed it to her, just tied it to the bottom of one trunk.

An hour later they were packed; Abby had even produced one fur bikini, without explanation. Harvey handed over the wands controlling the trunks. "I'll get a car."

Jack reappeared to escort them downstairs. Normally light on his feet, he seemed a bit heavy. He'd probably visited the house armory and was packing enough to demolish a small army. "Abby, how did you get your little friend through security? he asked. "We thought we had Nuu House as tight as a brick."

"Santa Maria has a flourishing business in ceramic air rifles, guns and similar protective devices," Abby said without looking back. "Most shoot a metal dart. However, for a bit more, you can buy very effective ceramic ammunition."

"Thought so. Kris, you might want to put this in your pocket." Jack handed her a small automatic, either the same or twin of the one Abby had produced. Kris held it up to examine.

"That's the safety," Abby pointed out. "Well protected so you won't accidentally knock it off. I have a spare holster."

“Where were you carrying yours?” Jack asked.

“No man’s business,” Abby shot back, and produced a new copy of the weapon Jack had confiscated. While the two glared at each other, Kris slipped the weapon in her pocket; Abby would show her a better hiding place later.

They got to the elevator seventy-five minutes before *The Turantic Pride* was due to lock up. Seemed like plenty of time to spare ... until Kris spotted two men in brown raincoats hustling toward her. “Your people?” she asked Jack

“My boss’s boss,” Jack answered, “and Grant, *his* boss.”

Way too much officialdom for this to be good. Kris kept her pace up and course steady for the boarding gate. Behind her, the luggage’s electric motors complained.

“Ma’am. Ma’am,” came breathless from behind Kris. At the gate, she paused to let them catch up while Abby took the trunks through. There seemed to be more trunks behind the maid than when they left Nuu House, but Kris was too busy to do a recount.

“Princess Kristine, you can’t do this,” The more out of breath, Senior Agent Grant insisted.

Kris glanced around the elevator station wide eyed. “It looks like I am. Why, yes, I think I am. Abby, any problems?”

“None at all.”

“Yes there is,” the not Grant agent insisted. “Security, that bag needs rechecking.”

The woman behind the check station took in the agent, and the badge he waved at her, glanced at the trunk, then at Kris, then smiled. “I got the picture of its contents in storage, sir. The computer says it’s safe. My eyeball says it’s safe. It is safe, mister. Right, Lieutenant Longknife.”

Kris smiled at the woman who’d cleared her through security every morning for the last three months. “You bet it is, Betty,” and followed her trunks through security.

“Ms. Longknife, you must reconsider,” the senior agent said, following Kris through the check point.

Alarms went off.

More uniformed people with automatic weapons than Kris thought the terminal could hold converged on their security station. Now both agents waved credentials, but that didn’t

slow down the fast approaching, heavily-armed horde.

Kris flashed a smile at Betty, “The young one’s with me. He’s carrying and has all the permits you could dream of.”

Betty took a close look at Jack’s papers, pushed a button and motioned him to walk slowly through the detector. She whistled as she took in her monitor. “Man is he carrying. Lieutenant, if I was you, I’d stay on the nice side of that one.”

“Sometime she actually does,” Jack said.

The other agents finished resolving their failure to announce their armed status before hand. As the small army back peddled toward their stations, the senior agent turned again to Kris. “Ms. Longknife, you must not do this.”

Kris kept walking. “You might consider getting to know me better before you start giving me orders,” Kris said, twisting the conversation in a misdirection. “You may call me Lieutenant. You may address me as princess. I am not a Ms.”

“I’m sorry,” one said. “Yes, Lieutenant,” the other agreed. “We aren’t ready.” “We don’t have a security team for you,” they said, stumbling over each other verbally. “We need more time!” they both got out together.

“There isn’t more time,” Kris said, stopping at the door of the ferry to let Abby and the trunks proceed her on board. Kris suppressed a frown as she again came up high in her trunk count, but the pause put Jack at her elbow as her noisy problems once more approached.

“Then we won’t let Jack go without back up,” the senior agent said, playing his ace.

“Fine. I’m twenty-two years old and a serving naval officer. I am of age to decline your protection. Nelly, register my declination.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Grant gasped.

“She’d dare, Grant,” Jack said. “She dares a lot.”

“Because you’ve never built the proper relationship of authority,” Grant snapped back.

“I suspect no one in authority has ever developed a proper relationship with me,” Kris smiled through teeth.

“You could send along a team on the next ship, or whenever you have it together,” Jack suggested.

“That’s not a good idea,” Grant said.

“It looks like the best available,” Kris said. Departure was announced in thirty seconds. All people were advised to stand clear of the white line. Kris glanced down; the white line was a meter thick; she and Jack stood in the middle of it. She sidestepped to the edge of the line inside the ferry. The junior supervisor gently elbowed Grant to safety on the outside.

“We’ll have a back-up team on the next ship. With a senior supervisor,” Grant shouted.

“Not anyone senior to Jack, I hope,” Kris smiled as the doors began to close. “Otherwise I’ll have to have my personal computer register that declination of services we talked about and then you can explain to my father, the Prime Minister, just why I don’t want you around. Or maybe to King Raymond.”

“You’re a brat, you know,” Jack said through unmoving lips.

“No. I don’t recall anyone telling me that ... to my face.”

“And you, being naturally hard of hearing, never heard it whispered behind your back.” Jack said, shaking his head.

“I am not hard of hearing.”

“And you’re not properly belted in, Lieutenant.”

“Are you going to hound me this entire trip?”

“Only every minute.”

If it wasn’t for poor Tommy out there in trouble, this had the makings of a fun trip.