

Kris Longknife – Undaunted

by Mike Shepherd

Kris finally has the command she's wanted.

The Wasp is clear to roam space beyond the rim and explore virgin territory.

Except, other humans have gotten out there well before her,
and the problems they're creating could plunge humanity into total war.

One

Lieutenant Kris Longknife had been looking for a fight for most of the last week. Strange enough, not only had the pirates she was hunting laid low, but no one in all of human space had offered her the chance to cross swords, cross lasers, cross fire or even toss a few cross words their way.

This had to be a first.

Kris finished zipping up her shipsuit, and turned on Abby, her personal maid. For once, even she was beating a hasty retreat to her own quarters next door to Kris's.

Kris put an end to that. "We need to talk."

Any talk with Abby inevitably entailed cross words, often crossed knives, and, occasionally, cross fire.

Abby stopped in her tracks, and without bending her rigid spine even a fraction of an inch, glanced over her shoulder. "I've never known you to have problems getting a word out. What's been keeping you so quiet."

"I'm not quiet," Kris shot back in her defense, and realized just as quickly that Abby was, once again, counterattacking before Kris even got her own attack decently underway.

"All while I was dressing you, your Lieutenentship, Highness, and Longknifehood, you were silent as a statue."

Kris's repost sounded weak even to her. "Lost in thought."

"Well, when you find your way home, I'll be next door helping Cara with her school work."

"She's doing very well," Nelly, Kris's personal computer chimed in from where she rode on Kris's collar. The idea that Nelly, after her latest upgrades worth a major chunk of the cost of the ship they were riding in, was spending a hunk of her capacity helping a twelve year old girl catch up on her school learning was not what Kris wanted to hear.

“Thank you, Nelly,” Abby said.

“No thank you, Nelly. That is what we need to talk about. A warship is no place to raise a twelve year old girl.”

“The *Wasp* is not a warship,” Abby said with a sniff.

“Yes it is,” Kris snapped right back, her hands going on her hips. “The Wasp mounts 24-inch pulse lasers and sports SmartMetal™ armor. And we are out here, past the rim of colonized space trolling for pirates.”

“That is no never mind,” Abby said, her hands now on her hips. “I am the contracting rep. I initialed the contract and represent Wardhaven aboard the Wasp and I know there is nothing in the contract of this merchant ship that makes it a warship.”

“We’ve got a rump company of Marines.”

“And a whole lot of scientists and their equipment on board. This ship is covered with shipping containers.”

“We’ve got to look like a merchant ship if we’re going to get a pirate to take a shot at us. Any smart pirate would just sail on by a warship,” Kris said, voice raising.

“There you go, talking like one of those Longknives,” Abby snapped. “No wonder Admiral Crossenshield insisted I be his contract rep on the *Wasp*. And you better believe Captain Drago and half the crew breathed a sigh of relief when they found out you wouldn’t be in their direct chain of command.”

Kris started to point out that they were civilians and whatever relationship they might have with a Navy lieutenant, it wouldn’t be hooked to any chain of command. Certainly not any chain of command that a normal, sane Navy might have.

But Kris heard the creak of the door opening between her cabin and Abby’s, and a dark haired head with the hugest round eyes peaked in.

When Kris had first been introduced to Cara, she’d taken her for maybe eight, nine years old. The ship’s food had been kind to the girl, but she still didn’t look her full twelve years.

Except for those dark, lipid eyes Eyes that had seen so much and lost so much more. Eyes that young should not have that much old in them.

“Are you arguing about me, Auntie Abby?”

“No, honey bunch. Aunt Abby has these little talks with the princess regularly.”

“You’re not going to lose your job, are you? We won’t have to leave the ship, will we?” Cara struggled to just say the words, but they trembled at the end.

“My Cara, you don’t have to worry about that. Not one bit. The princess here can’t fire me. Her momma hired me and her momma’s gonna have to fire me.” Abby chuckled wickedly. “And this here princess wants to talk to her momma even less than you ever wanted to talk to Gamma Ganna.”

If it was possible for hugest eyes to get bigger ... they did. “Really.”

“Really. Trust me. Now you run along back and do some more of your schoolwork with Nelly.”

“Nelly makes learning fun,” Cara said, and closed the door.

“I make learning fun,” Nelly said with more glee than should ever be in a computer’s voice. “Wow.”

Kris plopped down in her desk chair. It didn’t have quite the effect she wanted. The *Wasp* was under an economic merchant acceleration of .85 g’s. She kind of floated into the chair. Abby crossed the room to sit on Kris’s narrow bed. Kris might be a major stockholder in Nuu Enterprises, but the *Wasp* was a warship and facilities were Spartan. Aboard the ship.

Now, the living conditions for the boffins was another thing. Professor mFumbo had taken it for granted that the containers were his to fill with scientific gadgets, quarters, separate recreation facilities for the fully tenured and the technical support. Same for the health club and spa.

Well, at least the Marines were making good use of the work out facilities. Good thing, with the ship doing a leisure and muscle weakening .85 g. cruise.

“Shall we finish this conversation ... at a dull roar,” Abby said, her voice just above a whisper. “I take it that you are not happy with the set up here.”

“When Grampa Ray offered me the *Wasp*, it ... it sounded like just what I’d dreamed of. A ship to explore the stars out beyond the rim of human space. A research team to study what we were looking at. A team of Marines and some 24-inch pulse lasers in case we needed to do something about it. What more could a girl ask for.”

Abby chuckled dryly. “It might be nice if we were actually doing that.”

Kris tried to chuckle, but it came out more a snort. “Who’d have thought that while Earth and the rest of humanity were arguing over spreading out or hiding from any aliens by staying home, some rim rats would just take off and do it all by themselves!”

]

The *Wasp*'s third jump had been into a system with an unreported colony. That had quickly led to three more and rumors of a dozen others!

"When do you think that king or your papa gonna answer your report?" Abby asked.

Kris just shook her head. Starting up a colony cost money. Lots of it. Someone was making a lot of unsecured loans to finance these new outposts of humanity. Someone was sponsoring the explorations that found habitable planets. That left a big question of who. And why!

Questions neither King/Grampa Ray nor Kris's father, the Prime Minister of Wardhaven, had answers for. And as if the "Sooners," as they called themselves, weren't enough of a problem, they'd attracted pirates.

Starting a year or two ago, about the time Earth and the rim gave up on making a go of the Society of Humanity, the tramp merchant ships that made irregular calls among the Sooners started disappearing. Two in just the last three months.

As much as the Sooners did not want to see a uniformed naval officer from Wardhaven ... and a Longknife to boot ... they were almost happy to see the Wasp and the hope that someone with the standing of the law was finally taking an interest in them.

Kris fidgeted. It was nice to finally be appreciated by someone, even if it was the Sooners who shouldn't be where they were. But it left her with a bunch of unhappy scientists whose exploration was on hold. And a crew waiting, waiting, waiting for the pirates to make their move.

"What's eating you woman?" Abby demanded.

"Nothing," Kris insisted, then noticed her right foot was tapping out a rapid tattoo. She froze it in place. Now her stomach wanted to spin.

"Don't you go lying to me, boss. I'm Abby. I know you, baby ducks." Her maid eyed Kris sideways. "You got your panties in a twist because those pirates won't come out a play with you."

"No," Kris insisted.

"What's it been, one, two months since someone took a potshot at you? Since you blew some very deserving rat away?"

"Something like that," Kris admitted, lamely.

"Kris, I think you're starting to enjoy all that fuss and feathers."

Kris had been warned by those who should know, experienced cops, old Gunny

Sergeants, that the rush could become as addictive as any drug. Was she hooked on being not quite killed? On doing the killing? She swallowed hard on the thought.

Abby shook her head. “Woman, get your head on straight. You got nothing to worry about on the *Wasp*. Don’t you think we can recognize those silly ass games your great-grampa plays that he thinks will keep you safe. Yep, he made me COR, but when hell’s a popping, Captain Drago’s going to be looking your way for orders. ‘Cause you’ll be there, at his elbow, and me. I’m gonna be under the bed holding Cara safe.”

That forced a laugh from Kris. Despite Abby’s constant claims to being a twice baptized and very devote coward, Kris was more than likely to be trailing Abby into the shoot-out.

“Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve got to help a little girl catch up on a whole lot of schooling. I don’t know what they were doing in those Eden schools, but it wasn’t teaching.”

“Worse than when you were in those schools?” Kris asked.

Abby just snorted. “And you thank Nelly for me. She’s a real good teacher.”

I AM A REAL GOOD TEACHER, Nelly chortled in Kris’s head.

YES, YOU ARE A REAL GOOD TEACHER, Kris agreed.

AND YOU SHOULD CHILL OUT,

GO TEACH THE LITTLE GIRL. YOU ARE NOT MY SHRINK, Kris said. Maybe it was time to quit upgrading Nelly every time something new came along. It seemed that every new addition to Nelly, no matter what it was supposed to do, just gave her more of an attitude.

I HEARD THAT. AND IT’S ‘TUDE. THAT IS WHAT CARA CALLS IT.

Oh Lord, now Kris’s computer had a real live teenage girl to show her the ropes. *What have I done to myself?*

Kris headed for the bridge. At least she’d get some respect there.

Two

Kris didn't make it half way to the bridge before Professor mFumbo waylaid her.

"When are we going to do some science?" he demanded in a deep bass voice that almost made the bulkheads vibrate.

"I understand that pirates have this tendency to kill or enslave the crews of the ships they capture," Kris said as matter-of-factly as she could. "Read it in the papers. Grampa Trouble says he even crossed paths with pirates once. Ended up one of their slaves."

"I believe it happened twice," mFumbo said, scratching his chin. "One really must wonder how smart someone is who made that mistake twice," he said, ambiguously, then smiled and moved to clarify his remarks. "I should have thought that any educatable man would learn quickly that Marines do not good slaves make."

kris allowed a smile only when he finally got around to saying just who was lacking in smarts. "So you can see how I might put a higher priority on killing pirates and leave some of the secrets of the universe to wait a bit longer."

"Regrettable. Very regrettable."

Kris managed to get three paces closer to the bridge, but the professor stayed right in step with her. "Ever wondered why we didn't spot these fuzzy jump points before?"

He raised an eyebrow as Kris came to a halt.

"I have been kind of curious," Kris admitted.

"I have been very curious," Nelly said.

"I should expect you to be, Miss Nelly," mFumbo said, with a slight bow toward Kris's neck where Nelly rode. More of a bow than he'd ever afforded Kris's princess status.

"It seems that it was only five years ago that all our work with the alien technology on Santa Maria finally paid off with an improved atom laser."

“I hadn’t heard that we cracked any of their technology,” Kris said.

“We didn’t actually. It was something we discovered ourselves while trying to unlock something of theirs. Anyway, we discovered different harmonics in gravity waves and a way to sense them with a tuned atom laser. It should lower the cost of atom lasers in time, but right now, they’re horribly expensive.”

“But the *Resolute* just happened to have one,” Kris said slowly, wondering just who had been jobbing who out at Chance.

“Yes. Interesting, that,” mFumbo said.

“So if we had fired up the Patton’s atom laser,” Kris said, a smile growing, “we would not have found the hairy jump points.”

“It was an old Iteeche war era cruiser,” he said, shaking his head. “No, not likely.”

SO I WAS WRONG. YOU WERE RIGHT. SUE ME, Nelly shot back to Kris alone. Where had that come from? What had Kris set herself up for when she let one little twelve-year-old slip of a girl on board? That girl had to go.

YOU WILL NOT SHIP HER OFF THE *WASP*. CARA IS MY FRIEND. CARA IS GOING TO STAY HERE AS LONG AS I DO.

And was that a threat, Kris thought, careful to keep it to herself.

But before Kris could say anything, Professor mFumbo apparently mistook the silence between them to mean he was free to go on to a different subject, “We’ve found out something interesting about these fuzzy jump points.”

“Yes,” Kris said. “What?” Nelly demanded.

“They don’t wander as much as the other ones do. Something about their harmonic nature allows them to stay closer to a single point. Either that or the fuzzyness around them helps us follow them more easily.”

“That should cut down on bad jumps,” Kris said.

“Very likely.”

“So what are we going to find behind these jump points? New territory opened up toward the end of the Three’s time,” Nelly said pensively, “or the center of their civilization, held together by the latest jump point technology?”

“A very good question that I can do nothing to answer while the princess here is busy chasing miscreants. Or maybe I can.”

“Or maybe you can?” Kris asked, wondering what sort of trap the professor had set for her.

“Since the jump points are more steady, we think we can send an automated probe to do an initial look behind them. You know there is a hairy jump point in this system?”

Kris admitted that she did.

“If we could send a remote probe to check out the other system, we could have it waiting here for us when we return and maybe save ourselves some wasted time.”

“But merchant ships don’t launch probes. If a pirate ship enters a system and sees us and a probe in it, it will be a dead giveaway that we aren’t what we’re trying to fake.”

“Yes, but if you held off launching the probe until just before we jump out of this system ...”

“And since you’ve already readied the probe?”

“Yes, there is that matter,” the professor admitted, his hands open, palms up, in polite supplication to Kris.

“I’ll tell Captain Drago that you want to launch a probe,” Kris said.

“Thank you very much,” Professor mFumbo said and headed in the opposite direction from Kris.

Kris watched his retreating back. New technologies. Not so much us cracking the secrets of the Three alien cultures that built the jump points, but us discovering this or that on our own as we bounced our heads off the lock box of their still unfathomable knowledge.

Well, humans learned many ways.

No, human scientists learned. Others, like pirates, might upgrade their equipment. But the pirates Kris hunted weren’t all that different from the cut-throats the Romans put down in the ancient Mediterranean Sea.

“Two minutes to zero gravity,” the *Wasp’s* MC-1 announced as Kris entered the bridge.

“Morning, Lieutenant,” Captain Drago said.

“Morning, Captain, any unknowns in system?”

“The answer is the same as it’s been the last two days. No, ma’am, though of course a hostile could have entered the system from the other jump point an hour ago and we’ll

be another half hour finding out.”

Kris repeated the old joke. “Captain, you really should do something about that speed of light lag time.”

Drago gave the same answer. “Isn’t that a more proper job for those unemployed boffens of yours rather than this only slightly reformed pirate.” And it was true that the bridge crew of the *Wasp* did look more like pirates than respectable sailors. From the captain’s purple coat, gold earring and white bell bottoms to his navigator in cutoff shorts and tank top, the crew appeared delightfully reprobate.

And the *Wasp* had started life as a pirate ship. She now smelled much better. The crew might be flamboyant, but hygiene was a daily concern. And being the best former sailors Wardhaven’s spy master had ever contracted for, they knew their job backwards and forwards.

Especially the 24-inch pulse lasers the *Wasp* didn’t officially have.

“Ah, Professor mFumbo tells me the project is impossible. Something about relativity.

“Oh, speaking of the good doctor, he has a probe he wants to launch.”

“So he told me,” the captain said. “I told him if it was okay with you it was okay with me.”

“Hm,” Kris said. “I told him about the same thing, but I don’t remember him mentioning you.”

“He must have been an impossible child to parent,” Sulwan Kann muttered from her place at the Navigator’s station.

“That assumes he had parents, a fact not in evidence,” the captain muttered.

“Is there any problem with launching this probe of his just before we jump?” Kris said, trying to stay on topic. Despite his approach to getting their okay, if it was safe, the scientists deserved some research.

Captain Drago nodded. “I’ve had my crew check out the probe. Separation should be no problem. It won’t get underway until we are far from here. We’ll do it.”

“Weightlessness in ten seconds,” Sulwan announced. Kris scrambled for her station to the far left of the captain where she could keep an eye on offensive weapons and sensors.

At zero, the *Wasp* cut all power and did a flip to put the bridge head on as it drifted to a halt a thousand meters from where the jump point roiled in tortured space. To the

naked eye, nothing was apparent, just a small section of space where the stars seemed to shine a bit strangely.

“Audrey, you got the nav beacon loaded.”

“It’s in Drop Bay 3. The scientists’ gadget is in 4.”

Kris didn’t ask about Drop Bays 1 and 2. If Jack was half the Marine she expected him to be, two Marine assault crafts were standing by. Fully manned and ready ... and armed.

“Launch the beacon,” Captain Drago ordered.

There was a slight rumble through the hull and then the nav buoy came in view on its way to the jump point. Bigger, blockier than a government beacon, this one looked to be using fifty-year-old technology. Just what a merchant skipper might use to probe a strange jump point and not damage a slim profit margin.

The jump buoy held station off the jump point for a few moments while a few more tests were run, then powered up and disappeared through the jump. Sulwan started a clock. At two minutes she’d take the *Wasp* through after the buoy had announced to anyone listening that they were coming through.

In nearly four hundred years, there had only been one instant of two ships using the same jump point at the same time, coming from opposite directions. The resulting mess had cured humanity of ever wanting to do that again.

Inside human space, every jump point had two buoys assigned to it. Out here, Kris and Captain Drago were improvising as they went along.

“Ten seconds until we jump” Sulwan announced.

and the jump buoy reappeared before them. “A ship will be coming through the jump in fifteen seconds,” it announced.

“That wasn’t the message I put on the buoy,” Sulwan said.

“Helm, reverse thrusters. Maximum power.”

“Reverse. Maximum. Captain,” the woman at the helm repeated, jamming the reverse thrusters knob all the way back.

“Helm, steer right fifteen degrees, down thirty degrees.”

“Right fifteen. Down thirty degrees, aye Captain.”

And Kris's inner ear started doing slow rolls as her gut was slammed hard against the buckle of her seat belt. The *Wasp* shed all forward way and took off backwards. But even as her body went through the required contortions, Kris kept her eyes on the forward view port. The screen stayed blank for the longest time.

Then a ship twice the size of the *Wasp* materialized as if from out of nowhere to loomed over them.

Three

“Engineering, give us everything you’ve got for reverse,” Drago said into his commlink. “Helm, keep us backing, but do not reverse ship. I will not give them a shot at my engines.”

“Aye sir. Get out of here but protect the engines.”

While Captain Drago handled his ship, Kris eyed the other. On screen, it looked like a medium size merchant. A bit big for a tramp freighter, doing catch as catch can business between the small ports on the rim and beyond. Still, its long central spine was loaded with containers. Forward, it broadened into a bridge and housing arrangement for the crew. Amidship was a disk containing whatever cargo didn’t do well in vacuum, and possibly some passengers. That was where the Wasp had its 24-inch pulse lasers. Aft was the engineering spaces, a rectangle for the fusion reactor, plumbing for the magnetohydrodynamics generators and huge bell-shaped plasma engines.

“Sensors, is that a single reactor,” Kris asked Chief Beni, her own man, who was running that station just now.

“Looks that way, ma’am,” he muttered, then did something to his board. “but I’m still looking.”

Kris slaved her board to his. Beni might be leadership challenge on liberty, but with anything electronic he was a wizard. Just now, he used only passives, listening but making no noise that would tip a pirate’s hand that the Wasp was anything but a soft, defenseless carrier of wood and drawer of water.

Then again, a pirate would be doing its own best to look as innocent as a lamb ... and hide the wolf beneath. At the moment, they were even in the lamb department. Or one might actually be what they claimed.

“Hm, ain’t she a might bit underpowered with a single Westinghouse 1500 series reactor?” Chief Beni mused to himself, and jacked up the gain on a couple of his short range sensors. “Seems like there’s a whole lot more neutrinos coming out of that single reactor ... and they’re spread out over a whole lot more space. Those engineering

spaces looked a bit luxurious for just one teapot. Skipper, I make two Westinghouse reactors. And expect they're 2200 series at that. You got a wolf trying to fake it in woolies."

"Damn," Captain Drago said.

"Straight," Kris added.

"Your orders, Your Highness."

So King Ray didn't know these people nearly as well as Kris did. And this bunch had no problem following *this* Longknife into the mouth of hell. In a fast countdown to a fight, Drago wasn't looking to Abby, he was asking Kris.

She swallowed the first thing that came to mind ... Let's kick some pirate butt. Instead, Kris muttered a much more sedate, "Let's make sure someone like Helvetia isn't also trolling for pirates. Wouldn't want Grampa Ray faced with a media blitz 'cause two good guys shot each other up."

Someone on the bridge snickered at Kris's familiarity with a man everyone else knew as King Raymond of the United Sentients.

And somewhere on net came a "Damn, one of those Longknifes *can* grow up." It sounded familiar."

"That you, Jack?" Kris asked Captain Jack Montoya of the Royal United Sentient Marine Corps who now commanded the rump company aboard.

"Not me, ma'am, not a chance. Though I do admit sympathy for the conclusion."

Further discussion was suspended as the ship looming over them opened communication channels. "Hello stranger, this is *Compton Maru* out of Orama. What ship are you and where you from? Where you bound?"

Captain Drago took the commlink. "This is the *Lucky Seven Horse* out of Hampton and I'll tell you where I'm bound when you tell me where you been."

That elicited a laugh, much as Kris expected. Profits were razor thin out here and a good way to go broke was to follow in the wake of another ship, trying to sell your cargo in an already satisfied market or buy up cargo that had already been shipped.

Kris might be Navy and Drago ... whatever he was ... but they'd spent enough time in bars among merchant captains to learn that much of the trade.

The laughing voice became serious. "You tell me something interesting, then I'll tell you something more interesting."

“Sounds fair,” Drago said. “Our last stop was Magda’s Hideaway.” It really had been. “They took all our agricultural implements and were still hungry. They didn’t touch our heavy machinery. Somebody got there first.”

“That little burg ain’t growing anywhere near as fast as its founding fathers thought it would. If they ain’t careful they’re going to get overextended on their loans,” the voice from the larger freighter observed.

Kris let them ramble; and took the ship above her apart layer by layer – as much as passive sensors allowed. If the ship had lasers, no capacitors were charged. Dead in space, the ship was no longer running plasma through its engines. Its only power source was a trickle off the racetrack of hot plasma. That kept the ship’s main battery charged.

“Could you power a laser directly from the main storage battery?” Kris asked the chief.

“You shouldn’t be able to, ma’am,” was the answer she expected. “Power cables aren’t designed for that surge. However, a small 3-incher might dribble something out. Couldn’t pierce much ice armor, but then, we’re just a thin skinned merchie.” He said with a wicked grin.

A knife might not be much, but in a fist fight, it could run the table. But a guy pulling a knife in a gun fight was in for a surprise. A big one.

“Where you been?” Captain Drago asked.

“We’re just coming back from Xanadu,” the other claimed.

“Trying to trade among those crazies?” Drago said.

They’d already learned about Xanadu, the supposed home of the Abdicators. They were a bunch of nuts that insisted all humanity had to go back to Earth and hide from the coming alien hordes that would wipe us out. They’d been noisy forty years ago, then had gotten kind of few and quiet. Kris now knew why.

By some twisted logic, the leader of the Abdicators had moved all his followers far out beyond the rim. Supposedly to hide. Considering how insanely crazy their beliefs had been before, Kris was none too sure she wanted to know what they’d become after being out on their own for half a century.

“They may be crazy, but they have money. They bought everything I had. I’m hauling my containers home empty except for some with wines and proto-pharms they sold me. If you got the range, they’re a good place to drop by. Where you headed?”

But whoever was doing the talking over there must have figured he’d done enough

babbling to distract the captain of the *Lucky Seven Horse*.

On Kris's board, a capacitor appeared, going from green to yellow to red as it sucked power from the ship's main battery.

"Evade," Kris shouted, but Nelly had already activated a jinks pattern in the helm. The *Wasp* danced left, right, up, down, and a feeble 3-inch laser burned empty space.

"What the hell," came from the other ship on an open mike, then it went dead.

A red wash in the engineering spaces showed both reactors on the other ship coming to full life, over powering whatever cover they had been hiding behind. The pirate ship shot away from the jump point, following a twisting course that danced its engines in and out of a direct shot from the *Wasp*.

A half dozen laser capacitors went from not there to yellow to red as they sucked up a charge.

Then the sensor board got hazy.

"They're trying to jam," Beni observed, did something to his board and some of the jamming went away.

"Shields," was Kris's next order.

And she hated herself for it.

A slight bulge on the nose of the *Wasp* hid one of her two innovations. On order, Smart Metal™ deployed like a huge umbrella, rotating as it went. It both hid the ship behind it and provided a defense against lasers.

During drills, Kris had first ordered, "Raise. Metal," or "Raise. Defenses." Someone on the back of the bridge had whispered, "Shields. Up." quoting from a long running space opera. The bridge crew had a good laugh, but from then on, no matter what order Kris gave, the answer from Defensive Systems was always, "Shields. Up."

"Shields. Up," now answered Kris. No one laughed.

"Keep backing ship," Captain Drago ordered. "Guns, let me know when you're fully charged."

That was the *Wasp's* other secret. For three hundred years fusion reactors produced the plasma that rocket motors streamed out to move the ship. That plasma, on its way to the engines, passed through magnetohydrodynamic coils that generated electricity for the ship and its weapons.

The *Compton Maru* getting underway, risked the exposure of its vulnerable engines because otherwise it couldn't charge its lasers.

The *Wasp* backed up, using only its maneuvering engines. By all rights, it couldn't charge its pulse lasers off that dribble of plasma. But on Kris's board, the four laser capacitors were rapidly moving from green to yellow, headed for full red. Thanks to new science and a recent refit, the *Wasp* stripped electricity directly from the plasma flux in the reactor.

The times they were a changing. And this pirate was about to find out.

Then Kris got her own surprise. The *Compton* sprouted a shielding umbrella from its own bow. This one had a leaping tiger on it. Its jaw's agape, its claws dripping blood.

"Aggressive type, aren't they," Sulwan observed.

"Let's see if they can walk the walk," Kris said, mashing her commlink. "Ahoy, *Compton Maru*. This is the *USS Wasp*, and I am Lieutenant Longknife, Wardhaven Navy. You just fired upon me. Dump your core and prepare to be boarded."

"You can go to hell," shot back in reply, but in the background there was a startled cry of "Not a Longknife." Followed by "Shut up."

The two ships circled each other. Captain Drago kept the *Wasp* pivoting on its long axis, nose always to the *Compton*. The pirate, for her part, did her best to open the range while keeping her engines covered.

The range was point blank. Hand grenades in a broom closet.

But the *Wasp* stood between the jump point and the pirate, giving her only lousy choices. She could turn and run for the jump point across the system, giving Kris a easy up-the-kilt shot at her reactors. Or charge the *Wasp* hoping to slip past her into the jump point. Or fight it out.

"The hostile's lasers are fully charged," Chief Beni said.

"Any idea how strong they are?" Captain Drago asked.

"I'd guess 5-inchers. And weak for that," the chief said.

"Your Highness, what are your orders?"

Kris thought about that for all of a second. "He's not getting away from us, Captain. If he wants to dance, we dance, but he can't run."

"Yes, ma'am. Weapons are on line. They are yours, ma'am."

The exact nature of the *Wasp's* registry might be subject to debate. What Captain Drago and Kris had quickly agreed upon was her weapons policy. Laying aim and closing the firing circuits would be done by a serving Wardhaven officer. One must respect international law ... even if it was with a wink and a smile.

Lieutenant Kris Longknife, Wardhaven Navy, aimed Battery 1 for the tiger's mouth. It was about the right distance out from the bow's center to have the bridge behind it. Of course, if they were rotating their ship behind the shield, like Captain Drago was rotating the *Wasp*, burn through on the shield might hit anything – or nothing.

"Pirate ship *Compton*, this is your one and only warning. Dump your reactor or I will fire on you," Kris said, voice cold with death.

Silence answered her.

"Prepare to change jinks pattern," Kris announced. "All hands, prepare for radical evasion."

On the bridge, people cinched in already tight seatbelts. "For what they are about to receive, may we be truly grateful," some wag muttered.

"Pirate ship *Compton*, I will fire on you at the count of three," Kris said into her commlink.

Obscenities were her only reply.

"One," Kris said. NELLY GET READY TO IMPLEMENT RADICAL EVASION ON MY MARK.

READY KRIS.

"Two," MARK!

The *Wasp* shifted from a soft right climb to a hard left drop that left Kris's stomach somewhere a dozen kilometers away in the cold vacuum of space.

Where it was being fried by three laser beams from the hostile.

"Fire One," Kris said as she closed the firing circuit for the first of *Wasp's* pulse lasers.

The mouth of the tiger glowed, then fumed, and finally gaped as the *Wasp's* laser burned through the shield. To the void behind it. Yep, the ship was rotating.

And now it also started to jinks.

NELLY, EVALUATE THE EVASION PATTERN.

IT IS A BASIC ONE. I AM ALREADY FORECASTING IT.

Kris aimed her second laser for opposite the ragged hole in the shield that was already healing itself, blocking out the view of what lay behind it, ship or void.

At the last second, Kris played a hunch, changing her aim to the right paw of the tiger and fired.

The paint boiled off in a nano second, leaving the shield to burn and buckle. Thinner now from the loss of metal to Kris's hit and the effort to patch it, burn through came quicker.

And raked the ship hull behind it before Laser Two winked out.

"*Compton*, you are hit and your shields are failing. Dump your reactor and we will board and offer assistance," Kris said.

"Never," was the one word reply.

And six lasers reached out for the *Wasp* from the wounded pirate. They were not so strong as Kris's ship's 24-inch pulse lasers, but at this range, a hit by anything could slice the *Wasp* in half.

The ship jinked away from four of them. The fifth one spent itself on the shield, boiling a few kilos of Smart Metal™ off.

The sixth one raked *Wasp* aft of amidships but missed engineering. At least the lights did not dim nor did the reload light on Battery 1 slow its rapid climb from yellow toward red.

"Damage Control," Captain Drago demanded.

"Containers open to space. We're working on them."

Captain Drago turned to Kris. "Can you get this over with? I like my ship the way it is, not holier than thou," he said dryly.

"Firing 3," Kris said. This time she had Nelly widen the focus of the 24-inch laser, raking a major portion of the shield. Damaged, it was now too thin to do much more than hide the bow of the pirate, providing a fan to cover the bare rear of the bridge.

As 3 winked out, all pretense at a shield vanished. The pirate spun on its long axis in full view. But not giving up.

Its capacitors began to recharge. A thin wisp coalesced to cover the bow. The tiger

was back, a raised paw, the middle finger elevated in the universally recognized insolent salute.

“Some folks just don’t know when to quit,” Kris said.

“Leave us alone,” boomed from the commlink. “You get out of here or a lot of people are going to die.”

“You’re going to die,” Kris pointed out.

“We got the crew of two ships on board. You shoot at us again and we’ll see just how much vacuum they can breath.”

“Oops,” Kris and Captain Drago said at the same time.

“Kris,” Nelly said, “Unless they’ve changed their rotation, I know where the bridge is.”

“Target it.” A red pipper began to circle the flimsy shield. Not, to Kris’s surprise focusing on the raised digit but somewhere around its toes.

The longer Kris waited, the more the chance that they might change their rotation. Kris mashed Battery 4’s firing circuit.

The laser slashed through the spinning cover. Section spun off into space. There, revealed for all was the bridge.

But only for a fraction of a second as the 24-inch laser opened it to space, slagging human flesh, instruments and gear.

“Surrender now or my next laser will hack your reactors’ containment fields to bits,” Kris ordered to anyone who might still be listening.

“What about their prisoners?” Sulwan asked.

“We have only their word that they have them,” Kris said, keeping hard eyes on their target.

“You’re a hard woman,” Drago said. “I hope you’re right.”

So did Kris.

Then the cores of the two reactors dropped out into vacuum and the *Compton* began to coast along its last vector.

“We surrender. You can board us. We won’t fight you,” was spoken by a new voice.

“I hope for your sake you don’t,” Kris answered. “We’ve got a Marine company that could use a spot of exercise.”

That got no reply.

“Captain Montoya,” Kris called to Jack.

“Standing by,” he answered.

“Prepare to board the pirate as soon as we come along side and match their speed and vector.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am.”

“Captain Drago, please place your ship alongside that derelict.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Hot dog. More prize money,” came from the wag in the back of the bridge.