

Kris Longknife – Mutineer

by Mike Shepherd

She could have been the campaign manager for her brother's election
like her father, the Prime Minister, wanted.
She could have been the empty headed debutante her mother wanted.

Instead, fresh out of college, Kris Longknife joined the Navy.

Now she's associated with marines
and rescuing a kidnaped little girl.
She's delivered food to starving people on a rain-soaked planet.
And just now, the skipper came on the bridge
and announced they're going to war with Earth.

That presents Kris a bit of a problem.
She *knows* that's not what her father wants!
Now what does *she* do?

ONE

“There’s a terrified child down there.”

Captain Thorpe’s baritone reverberated off the hard metal walls of the *Typhoon’s* drop bay. Marines, a moment before intent on checking their battlesuits, their weapons, their souls for this rescue mission, hung on his every word. Ensign Kris Longknife divided her attention; part of her stood back, studying the impact of his speech on the men and women she would soon lead. In her short twenty-two year life, she’d heard a lot of fancy oratory. Another part of her listened to her commander’s words, felt them roll over her, into her. It had been a long time since mere words had raised the hackles on her neck, made her want to rip some bastard limb from limb.

“The civilians tried to get her back.” Kris measured his pause. He came in right on the downbeat. “They failed. Now they’ve called for the dogs.”

The marines around Kris growled for their skipper. She’d only worked with them for four days; the *Typhoon* had sortied on two hours notice! Captain Thorpe had gotten them away from space dock, short half the crew and without a marine lieutenant to command the drop platoon. Now a boot ensign named Longknife was surrounded by marines with three to twelve years in the Corps, chomping at the bit to do something definite and dangerous.

“You’ve trained. You’ve sweated.” The captain’s words had the staccato of a machine gun. “You’ve drilled for this moment since you joined the Corps. You could rescue that kidnaped girl with your eyes closed.” In the dim light of the drop bay, eyes gleamed with inner fire. Jaws tensed; hands closed in tight fists. Kris glanced down; so were hers. Yes, these troops were ready, all except one boot Ensign. *Dear God, don’t let me screw up*, Kris prayed silently.

“Now drop, Marines. Kick some terrorist butt, and put that little girl back in her mother’s arms where she belongs.”

“Ooo-Rah,” came back from twelve hyped men and women as the captain slow marched for the exit. *Well, eleven hyped marines and one scared ensign*. Kris put the same angry confidence into her shout as she heard from the rest. Here was none of the calm, the cool of Father’s political speeches. Here was why Kris had joined the Navy. Here was something real; something she could get her hands on and make happen. Enough of endless talk and nothing done, she grinned. *If you could see me now, Father. You said the Navy was a useless waste of time, Mother. Not today!*

Kris took a deep breath as her platoon turned back to their preparations. The smell of armor,

ammunition, oil and honest human sweat gave her a rush. This was her mission, and her squad and she would see that one little girl got home safe and sound. *This child would live.*

As the memory of another child rose to fill her mind's eye, Kris stomped on the thought. She dare not go there.

Captain Thorpe paused in his exit march right in front of her. Eye to eye, he leaned into her face. "Keep out of your head, Ensign," he growled in a whisper. "Trust your gut. Trust your platoon and Gunny. They're good. The Commodore thinks you have what it takes even if you are one of those Longknives. Show me what you've got. Take those bastards down hard. But if you're as empty as your old man, let Gunny know before you funk out on us and he'll finish the mission. And I'll drop you back in your momma's lap in time for the next debutantes' ball."

Kris stared back at him, her face frozen, her gut a throbbing knot. He'd been riding her since she came aboard. Never happy with her, always picking at her; she would show him. "Yes, sir," she shouted in his face.

Around her, the troops grinned, figuring the skipper had a few choice words for the boot ensign, none knowing just how choice. The captain snickered. A scowl or a snicker or a growl was all she'd ever seen on his face since coming aboard. Was there a different crinkle to his eyes, a new up twist to his lips? He turned before she could read him better.

It wasn't her fault Father had signed all Wardhaven's legislation for the last eight years. She had nothing to do with her Great-grandparents splashing the family name all over the history books. Let the captain try growing up in shadows like those. He'd be just as desperate as Kris was to make *her* own name, find *her* own place. That was why she joined the Navy.

With a shiver Kris tried to shake off the fear of failure. She turned to face her locker and tried again to adjust the standard issue, size 3 battle spacesuit to fit. Six foot tall, and too small everywhere else was her usual requirements for a suit. She'd never had a civilian suit that didn't leave her plenty of room for her pet computer to conform around her shoulders and down her arms, but those suits weren't semi-rigid plasta-steel, a centimeter thick. Nelly, worth more than all the computers on the *Typhoon*, and probably fifty times as capable, was a problem in battle armor. Marines were expected to be lean as well as mean; nothing extra was allowed anywhere. Kris tried slipping the main bulk of the computer down to her chest. She didn't carry much there and most marine males seemed to be a bit bulky in that spot. Resealing herself in, she rotated her shoulders, bent, then stooped. Yes, that worked. She put on the helmet, rotated it until she got a firm click. With the faceplate down, the suit was a bit warm, but she'd been hot before.

* * *

"Krissie, can I have an ice cream?" Eddy wheedled. It was a hot spring day on Wardhaven and they'd run to the park, leaving Nanna well behind them.

Kris fumbled in her pocket. She was the big sister; she was expected to plan ahead now,

just like big brother Honovi had done for her when she was just a kid. Kris found just enough coins for two ice creams. But Father insisted that planning ahead included making things last. "Not now," Kris insisted. "Let's go see the ducks."

"But I want an ice cream now," came in as much of a wail as an out-of-breath six-year-old could muster.

"Come on, Nanna's almost here. Race you to the duck pond." Which got Eddy's feet moving even before Kris finished the challenge. She beat him, of course, but only by as much as a ten-year-old big sister should beat a six-year-old kid brother.

"Look, the swans are back," Kris pointed at the four huge birds. So they walked along the pond, not too far behind the old man with the corn who always fed the birds. Kris was careful to keep Eddy from getting too near to the water. She must have done a good job because when Nanna finally caught up with them, she didn't give Kris a lecture about how deep the pond was.

"I want an ice cream," Eddy demanded again with the single mindedness of his few years.

"I don't have any money," Nanna insisted.

"I do," Kris put in proudly. She had planned ahead, just like Father said smart people should.

"Then you go buy the ice cream," Nanna grumbled.

Kris skipped off, so sure she would be seeing them again that she didn't even look back."

* * *

There was a tap at her shoulder. With a shiver she turned to see a freckled face, and raised her face plate in time to be met with a "Need help, short fork?"

The drop bay was busy and noisy and her shiver went unnoticed. She managed the cheery "No way, wooden spoon," reply the infectious grin and challenge demanded. Ensign Tommy Li Chin Lien had been born to a family of Santa Maria asteroid miners. Rather than hang around that isolated world, he'd joined the Navy to see the galaxy, thereby greatly disappointing his folks, and per his great grandmother, his ancestors.

At Officer Candidate School, they'd passed hours swapping stories about how their parents had stormed and ranted against their career choice. Kris was surprised by how fast they become friends, one from super sophisticated Wardhaven, the other that crazy blend of Irish-Chinese that so much of Santa Maria's working class still held to.

Right now, Tommy waved his universal tester in Kris's face. Raised in vacuum, he distrusted air and gravity and viewed mud-raised people like Kris as hopeless optimists, dependent on him for the proper

paranoia toward space. Kris raised her left arm for Tommy to plug his black box into the battlesuit she'd been issued. While he ran his checks, Kris worked with Nelly, running her personal computer through interface tests with the command net. Auntie Tru, now retired from her job as Wardhaven's Info War Chief, had helped Kris with Nelly's interface, as she'd done with most of Kris's math and computer homework for as long as Kris could remember. Nelly lit up Kris's heads-up display with every report or screen authorized to a boot ensign on a mission ... and a few it was better the skipper did not know Kris had access to. Kris and Nelly finished about the same time Tommy detached his tester from Kris. She flipped up her face plate.

"Your camouflage adjustment is about five nanoseconds below optimum, but it meets Navy standards," Tommy grumbled. The Navy rarely met his expectation for perfection. "Your coolant system isn't all that far into the green, either."

"I'm more worried about my heater. It's arctic tundra where I'm headed, haven't you heard?" she grinned.

He refused to swallow his scowl for her attempt at a Santa Maria brogue. "And there's a bad gasket in there somewhere." They'd been over that one before; one of the battlesuit's jelly seals was a slow leaker, but every suit aboard had at least one bum seal. It was a bitter joke among the troops; good seals went to the civilian market; weak ones went to lowest bid government contracts.

"I'm not working the asteroids, Tommy. I won't be living in this suit for a month," Kris gave the standard reply the procurement chiefs gave her father. The Prime Minister of Wardhaven always accepted it. But then, he didn't do drop missions. Today, his daughter was. "I'll only be in vacuum an hour, two at the most. Sequim's atmosphere is good."

"Mud hen," Tommy answered in disgust.

"Space head," Kris shot back, giving Tommy one of his own trademark grins, then turned to the Light Assault Craft that would carry her and her squad. It was the minimum vehicle that could get you from orbit to the deck, not much more than a heat shield that doubled as a wing and a flip-on top that was just there for stealth. Then again, Kris had raced in smaller skiffs. "This check out?" she asked, serious once more.

"Didn't I test it four times?" Tommy grinned. "Didn't it pass four times? Your humble servant will get you there." Which only left Kris struggling to keep hold of her temper. The Navy trusted the marines to put their asses on the line, but not with the car keys. It would be Tommy's job to fly the two LAC's from the *Typhoon* in orbit to the ground, all except for two or three minutes when ionization took the two LAC's out of radio touch – and they'd be on auto pilot for that. All the while, Kris and her eleven marines were supposed to sit there dumb and bored. That was just one part of the approved plan she would like to change. But boot ensigns do not change plans that her skipper and his Gunny Sergeant like.

"Help me on with my kit," she told Tommy. Along the bay, the platoon members were paired up, checking each others suit, loading them up with weapons and drop gear. Corporal Santo went down Gunny's squad, Corporal Li checked Kris's. Gunny would re-check them, then Kris would three-check.

Kris's load was a tad lighter than her teammates since Nelly weighed in at half of a standard issue Navy personal computer while holding all the command, control, communications and Intelligence, C³I in military speak, that an ensign could ask for. Still, hanging from her armor or carefully stowed in her pack were rocket propelled grenades of many flavors, six spare magazines for her M-6, half rounds of non-lethal intent, the others real ones, as well as water, first aid and food. Marines never left home without lugging a ton of stuff. Fully loaded, again Kris rotated her shoulders, twisted her hips, checked the load if not for comfort at least for problems. She'd carried more backpacking through the Blue Mountains on Wardhaven during college vacations. Those carefree months of outdoor living was one of the reasons she was here.

Tommy eyed her as she as she did a deep knee squat and bounced back up. "You good for this?"

"Everything's in place. Not too heavy."

"You good for this business? Rescuing a kidnaped kid." The grin was gone; she saw what the Santa Marian looked like serious.

"I'm good for this, Tom. I've got the best small arms weapons qualifications on this boat. I've got the best Physical Training scores, too. The skipper's right. I'm the best he's got. And Tommy, I want this."

"Ensign Lien to the bridge," came over the ship's MC-1, ending any further questions. Tommy clapped her on the back. "The luck of the little people and God go with you," as he headed for the hatch.

"No spare seat for Him in an LAC," Kris shot back over her shoulder, another salvo in their long running debate. But Kris was already trailing Gunny, rechecking the fall of gear, reverifying weapons loads. She finished a second behind him.

He went over her kit and she went over his. He tightened one of her straps and growled, "You'll do, Ma'am." She found nothing to modify on him; she hadn't expected to. Gunny had practiced for this moment for sixteen years. That this was his first live-fire mission in all that time didn't seem to bother him or Captain Thorpe.

"Let's drop, team!" Kris called to her loaned platoon.

With a shout of "Ooo-Rah" the two squads turned in unison to face opposite bulkheads and board their two Light Assault Crafts. Kris went down the line of her squad one more time, checking their restraining harnesses, the arrangement of their gear as they settled into their low seats in the LAC. All read-outs showed green, still Kris gave each a good hard tug – that webbing was the only thing holding her troopers in. Satisfied, she settled her own rump onto the low composite seat in this minimum spacecraft and stretched her legs out ahead of her, careful to avoid the control pedals. Beside her, the legs of the tech seated behind her surrounded her. Kris had once tried a toboggan. Mother had refused in horror when Kris asked to take a ride down hill. That toboggan was roomy compared to the LAC.

She rechecked to make sure her harness was firmly attached to the LAC's narrow keel, checked again to make sure none of her gear was out of place, then pulled the canopy down and felt it click into place. Like so much of the LAC, the canopy was paper thin; it added nothing more than stealth to the

craft. Only their drop suits would protect Kris and her troops from the vacuum of space or the heat of reentry.

The control stick began to rotate between Kris's legs. That would be Tommy running tests. Still the sight of it moving brought back good memories of some damn fine stick time of her own. She wiggled in her seat and felt the light craft respond to her movements. Bigger than a racing skiff, but just as sweet.

Kris banished those distractions by replaying the drop plan in her mind as she waited. These kidnaping sons-a-bitches had a simple plan. They'd snapped up the Sequim General Manager's sole child during a school outing, then dragged the poor kid off to the northern wilderness before anyone knew what had happened. *Ignore the child's name ... much too familiar. Only pain there.* Quickly Kris returned to tonight's problem. The approaches to the kidnapers' hide-out were long, difficult, dangerous – and booty-trapped! So far, the bad guys had outsmarted – and killed – too many good people.

Kris ground her teeth; how had cruds like these gotten their hands on some of the most sophisticated traps and countermeasures in human space? She could understand the traps; humans now frequented planets with very nasty critters. And while she had never hunted big game herself, she was looking forward to this hunt for the most dangerous game. What frosted her was the legal bunk used by specialty stores to excuse their sale of measures and countermeasures that were only going to make her job damn dangerous tonight. Normal people didn't need electrocardiogram jammers. Why would any good citizen need a decoy device to simulate a human heat signature? Blast it, her suit was warm; sweat was already running down her back.

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The day was so hot, the ice cream melted even as Kris trotted toward the duck pond. Kris paused just long enough to give both ice cream cones a quick lick, then felt guilty. "Eddy, I've got your ice cream," she called as she hurried on. She hurried so much that she was well out of the trees and half way across the vale to the pond before the wrongness of it got through to her. Kris came to a slow halt.

Eddy wasn't there!

The man with the corn had fallen, half in the water. The ducks gathered around him to pluck at the fallen grain.

Two lumps of clothes doted the vale. In her nightmares that night Kris would recognize them for agents who had been with her for years. But right then, her eyes were riveted on Nanna. She had fallen down. Her arms and legs splayed around like a rag doll. Even at ten, Kris knew that was all wrong for a real person.

Kris began to scream. She dropped her ice cream cones as she tried to cram her hands in her mouth, bite down hard on knuckles hoping the pain would wake her from this bad dream. Somewhere behind her, a voice shouted into a commlink. "Agents down. Agents down. Dandelion is nowhere in sight. I repeat, Dandelion is missing."

* * *

A flashing red light grabbed Kris's attention. "You did it again," she growled at herself as she yanked her thoughts back to the problem at hand. Around her, the drop bay ran through decompression. Air gone, Kris and her troopers breathed only what their drop suits provided. Kris checked all her readouts. Her suit was good, as good as Navy issue got. So were all of her troopers. "Good to go," she reported.

With a thump to Kris's rear, the LAC fell into silent, black space. Tommy let them drift for only the moment it took Kris to get a good look at the *Typhoon*, her smart-metal hide stretched thin to give the crew individual rooms and spin gravity while in orbit. Her bow and stern proudly painted with the blue and green flag of the Society of Humanity. Then the LAC came alive; the stick moved as Tommy guided both LAC's into reentry.

Well, if Tommy was doing the work, Kris could use the time to check the ground situation once more. "Nelly, show me the real time target feed," Kris sub-vocalized. The hunting lodge filled Kris's heads-up display. Several dozen human shadows showed on the infrared detection. Six or eight moved around the building . . . all in pairs. Per the guarantee provided with every human heat decoy sold, there was no way Kris was supposed to know that only five real humans were moving. Thank God the manufacturers had so far stuck to the pledge of silence the government had extracted from them.

For ten years, no bad guys had tumbled to the fact that 98.6 degrees was only the *average* human temperature. This late at night most people's body heat was slipping down into the 97s and 96s. In the six upstairs rooms of the lodge, the heat signatures of six little girls lay chained to their beds. Two gunmen sat at opposite ends of the hall ready at the first sign of rescue to dash into the one room that held the kidnaped girl and kill her. Thanks to the sensors on the fifty gram Stoolpigeon hovering 1000 meters above the log cabin, Kris knew there was only one gunman – and which room held the terrified girl.

Terrified! Kris ground her teeth, looked out of the LAC to rest her eyes on the planet revolving slowly below her. She tried to do anything but touch the nerve that took her again into her little brother's grave. At least these kidnappers had not buried their victim under tons of manure with a damaged air pipe the only lifeline to the world for a six-year-old kid.

At school, Kris had overheard other students talking, saying that Eddy was dead hours before her parents paid the ransom. She didn't know the truth of that – there were some reports she just couldn't read, some media coverage she could never sit through.

What could never be ignored for a moment were the what if's. What if Kris hadn't gone for ice cream? What if the bad guys had had to take down Nana and Eddie *and* Kris? What would a wild ten-year-old girl have done to their plans?

Kris shook her head, willed away the images. Stay there too long and tears came. A spacesuit was no place for tears.

Kris focused on the planet below. The day terminator lay ahead, changing the green and blue

cloud-shrouded globe to dark – darkness and storms. A surprise night drop needed thunder to cover the sonic booms, darkness to hide your approach, night to make guards inattentive.

Kris smiled, remembering other planets she'd watched from orbit, a fast racing skiff under her. And her smile slid into a scowl as the memories she'd been struggling to hold at arms length for a week came flooding back.

* * *

Father vanished from Kris's life the day after Eddy's funeral. Off to the office before she awoke, he was rarely home before her bedtime.

Mother was something else. "You've been a little savage long enough. Time to make a proper young lady out of you." That didn't get Kris off the hook for winning soccer games for Father or showing up for his political parties. But Kris quickly discovered "proper young ladies" not only went to ballet but also accompanied Mother to teas. As the youngest at any tea by twenty years, Kris was bored silly. Then she noticed that some women's teas smelled funny. It wasn't long before Kris got a chance to taste them. They tasted funny, too ... but they made Kris feel better, the parties go faster. It wasn't long before Kris found what was being added to their tea ... and how to raid her father's liquor cabinet or mother's wine closet.

Somehow, the drinking made the days endurable. Kris didn't even care when her grades took a nose dive. It didn't matter; Mother and Father only frowned. Other kids at school had fun things like skiff racing from orbit; Kris had her bottle. Of course, the bottle, and the pills Mother's doctor prescribed to help Kris be more ladylike, did not help her soccer game. The coach shook his head and sidelined her as much as he could. Harvey, the chauffeur who took her to all the games, just seemed kind of sad.

But Harvey was grinning the afternoon he picked Kris up from school late. "You're dad's invited your Great Grampa Trouble to dinner tonight. General Tordon is on Wardhaven for meetings," Harvey added before she asked. Kris spent the drive home wondering what you say to someone straight out of her history books.

Mother was in a snit, overseeing dinner preparations herself and mumbling that legends should stay in the books where they belonged. Kris was sent upstairs to do homework, but she staked out the balcony, reading with one eye and watching the front door with the other. Kris wasn't sure what to expect. Probably someone ancient, like old Ms. Bracket who taught history and seemed dry and wrinkled enough to have lived it. All of it!

Then Grampa Trouble walked through the front door. Tall and trim, gleaming in undress greens, he looked like he could destroy an Iteeche fleet just by scowling at them. Only he wasn't scowling. The grin on his face was infectious; Mother was right, he was totally inappropriate for a "proper legend." And at dinner, the stories he told. After dinner, Kris couldn't remember a single one of them, at least not completely. But during supper they were all funny, even those that should have been horrifying. Somehow, no matter how bad the odds were or how impossible the

situation had been, Grampa Trouble made it sound terribly funny. Even Mother laughed, despite herself. And when supper was over, Kris managed to dodge Mother until she excused herself for her whist club. Kris wanted to hang around this wondrous apparition forever. And when they were alone and he turned his full attention to Kris, she knew why kittens curled up in the sun.

“Your dad tells me you like soccer?” he said, settling into a chair.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Kris answered seating herself ladylike across from her Grampa and feeling very grown up.

“Your mom says you’re very good at ballet.”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Even at twelve, Kris knew she was not holding up her end of the conversation. But what could she say to someone like her Grampa?

“I like orbital skiff racing. Ever do any racing?”

“Naw. Some kids at school do,” Kris tasted excitement. Then she remembered herself. “But Mother says it is much too dangerous. And nothing for a proper young lady.”

“That’s interesting,” Grampa Trouble said, leaning back in his chair and stretching his hands upward. “A girl won the Junior Championship for Savannah last year. She wasn’t much older than you.”

“She wasn’t!” Kris stared wide-eyed. Even from Grampa, she couldn’t believe that.

“I’ve rented a skiff tomorrow. Want to take a few drops with me?”

Kris fidgeted in her chair. “Mother would never let me.”

Grampa brought his hands to rest on the table, only inches away from Kris’s. “Harvey tells me your mom usually sleeps in on Saturday. I could pick you up at six.” Later Kris would realize that Grampa Trouble and the family chauffeur were in cahoots on this. But Kris had been too excited by the offer just then to put two and two together.

“Could you?” Kris yelped. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been up early on her own. She also couldn’t remember the last time she’d done something that wasn’t on Mother or Father’s To-Do List. She couldn’t remember because to do that would be to remember what life was like with Eddy. “I’d love to,” she said.

“One thing,” Grampa Trouble said, reaching across the table to take her small, soft hands in his tanned, calloused ones. His touch was almost electric in its shock. His eyes looked into hers, stripping away the little girl that faked it for so many. Kris sat there, with nothing but herself to hang on to. “Your mother is right. Skiff racing can be dangerous. I only take people riding with me who are stone cold sober. That won’t be a problem for you, will it?”

Kris swallowed hard. She'd been laughing so hard at Grampa Trouble's stories that she hadn't stolen a drink at supper. She hadn't had one since lunch at school. Could she go through the night? "It won't be a problem," Kris assured him.

And somehow she made it. It wasn't easy; she woke up twice crying for Eddy. But she thought about Grampa and all the stories she had overheard from the school kids about how fun it was to see the stars above you and ride a falling star to earth, and somehow Kris didn't tiptoe downstairs to Father's bar.

Kris made it through that night to stand at the top of the stairs and look down at Grampa Trouble so magnificent in his green uniform, waiting patiently for her on the black and white tiles of the foyer. Balanced careful as ever she did in ballet class, Kris went down the stairs, showing Grampa just how sober she was. His smile was a small, tight thing, not at all the open faced one Father flashed all his political friends. Grampa's tight little smile meant more to Kris than all she'd gotten from her father or mother.

Three hours later, Kris was suited up and strapped into the front seat of a skiff when Grampa Trouble hit the release and they dropped away from the space station. Oh, what a ride! Kris saw stars, so close she could almost touch them. The temptation came to pop her belt, to drift away into the dark, to fall like a shooting star and make whatever amends she could to dead little Eddy. But she couldn't do that to Grampa Trouble after all the trouble he'd gone through to get her here. And the beauty of the unblinking stars grabbed Kris, enveloping her in their cold, silent hug. The pure, lean curves of skiffs on reentry were mathematics in motion. She'd lost her heart . . . and maybe some of her survivor's self-loathing.

Mother was actually pacing the foyer when they came in late that evening. "Where have you been?" was more an accusation than a question.

"Skiff racing," Grampa Trouble answered as evenly as he told jokes.

"Skiff racing!" Mother shrieked.

"Honey," Grampa Trouble said softly to Kris, "I think you better go to your room."

"Grampa?" Kris started, but Harvey was taking Kris's elbow.

"And don't you come down before I send for you." Mother enforced Grampa's suggestion. "And what did you think you were doing with my daughter, General Tordon?" Mother said coldly, turning on Grampa.

But Grampa Trouble was already heading toward the great library. "I think it best we finish this conversation out of earshot of little pitchers with big ears," he said with all the calm Mother lacked.

"Harvey, I don't want to go to my room," Kris argued as she and the chauffeur went up the

stairs.

"It's best you do, little friend," he said. "Your mother's been stretched quite a ways today. There's nothing to be gained by you pushing her any further."

Kris never saw Grampa Trouble again.

But a week later Judith came into her life, a woman Grampa Trouble would probably have enjoyed meeting. Judith was a psychologist.

"I don't need a shrink," Kris told the woman flat out.

"Why'd you throw the soccer game last month?" Judith shot right back.

"I didn't." Kris mumbled.

"Your coach thinks you did. Your dad thinks so too."

"How would Father know?" Kris asked with all the sarcasm a twelve-year-old could muster.

"Harvey recorded the entire game," Judith said.

"Oh."

So they talked, and Kris found that Judith could be a friend. Like when Kris shared that she wanted to do more skiff racing but Mother would have kittens at the very thought. Instead of agreeing with Mother, Judith asked Kris why Mother shouldn't have a kitten or two? The thought of Mother with a kitten made Kris laugh, which needed an explanation, and before they were done Kris had come to realize that what Mother wanted wasn't always the best, and that the mother of a twelve-year-old girl should have kittens occasionally. Kris went on to win Wardhaven's Junior Championship to the Prime Minister's delight and Mother's horror.

* * *

"Get out of your head," Kris growled in Captain Thorpe's voice and yanked tight on her restraining harness, a life-affirming act that now came naturally to her.

Then Kris's stomach shot into her throat as her lander turned dervish, spinning to the right as the bottom dropped out from underneath her and the still-blasting thrusters rose above.

"What the hell?" "Who's driving this bus?" rattled in her ears as Kris grabbed for the wildly gyrating control stick. Aft, Corporal Li restored discipline with a "Pipe down."

The stick fought Kris, refusing to obey. She punched her commlink to the *Typhoon*. "Tommy, what the hell is going on?" Her words echoed empty in her helmet; her commlink was as dead as she and

her crew would be if she didn't do something – fast.

Mashing the manual override, Kris took command of her craft. With hardly a thought, her hands went through the motions needed to dampen down the spin and pitch. The LAC was heavier, slower to respond than a skiff. But Kris fought it ... and it obeyed.

"That's better," came from one of the grateful marines behind her. Unless Kris figured out fast where they were and where they were going, this momentary "better" just meant they'd be less shook up when they burned on reentry.

"Nelly, I need skiff navigation and I need it now." In a blink, the familiar skiff routines took form on her heads-up. "Nelly, interrogate G. P. S. system. Where am I?" The LAC became a dot on her heads-up, vector lines extended from it. She'd been accelerating rather than decelerating!

"Corporal, get a line-of-sight link to Gunny's LAC."

"I've been trying ma'am, but I don't know where he is."

Her computer could probably tell Kris where the sergeant should be with respect to them, but Nelly was doing her best to plot a course that would win Kris another championship.

They didn't handout skiff trophies just for hitting that dinky ground target. They expected winners to do it in style: be on the dot, use less fuel, take less time. Kris gulp as her heads-up display filled with the harsh challenge ahead. The LAC was out of position and lower on fuel than any skiff she'd ever flown in competition. It would take every ounce of skill Kris had to land her marines anywhere within a hundred kilometers of one terrified little girl.

Kris had raced for trophies. Tightening her grip on the stick, she began a race for a little girl's life.

TWO

Kris acted more on trained instinct than rational thought. Her right hand firmly on the stick, she first stabilize the craft. That done, she spared a second for Nelly's search to get Kris and her marines down safely. Thank God she'd kept Nelly and refused the standard issue computer with all its Navy limits. "Nelly, get our present co-ordinates from GPS. Use the hunting lodge for a target. Now, give me a low risk flight plan." Nelly did it in hardly a second; it would get them down safely – but on fumes and fifty clicks past the lodge.

Even as Kris adjusted her deceleration burn to fit that trajectory, she snapped, "Alternate flight plan. Assume I can bleed off an extra twenty percent of my energy aerodynamically. How much fuel would that leave me?" Kris had to have a cushion. In competitions, each skiff had a two minute separation between the one ahead and the one behind. Today, Gunny's LAC was somewhere off to her right, no more than ten kilometers – probably less. That might be an acceptable safety margin if Tommy was flying both of them to their drop point, but not now, not with Kris careening all over low orbit

"Nelly, add in assumption that I need a hundred kilometers north separation from Gunny's LAC." In a blink, Nelly modified the latest flight plan, but the result flashed red – even assuming Kris cut her orbital burn to the bone, there was no way she could aerodynamically dissipate enough energy. She'd have to overshoot the target by a good hundred clicks.

"Assume twenty kilometers displacement," Kris reordered; her first S curve would have to be away from Gunny's LAC. Nelly quickly generated the requested flight plan; Kris could make it. However, a yellow button on the heads-up flashed a warning. Her fuel reserve would be below competitive standards; she would be disqualified.

With a rueful shrug for the machine's concern, Kris said "Do it, Nelly," and settled in for the ride of her life. Very early Kris learned that every computer generated course could be improved upon by a human. To take home those trophies scattered around her room, she'd saved a little fuel here, a little more there, always on her own.

"Sir, I mean ma'am, I think I see the sergeant." Corporal Li's voice was a series of nervous squeaks and cracks.

Kris was rooted to her machine. Her hand had merged with the control stick; her rear was part of the heat shield and wing's fabric. Kris's eyes might as well have been the angle of attack, gee meter and

speed gages. To break concentration now would be agony. "Where, corporal?"

"Off the starboard bow, two, no, two-thirty, ma'am, low one, one-thirty. I think that's him. Ma'am."

Kris risked a glance. Yes there was a LAC, a bit ahead and below her, still breaking just as she was now. "Try to raise Gunny," she ordered and went back to flying a miracle.

"What I'm getting is all broken up and crackling, ma'am."

"Right." Kris kicked herself. "His engine ionization is between us." A moment later it was time to terminate the burn. She rotated her craft, placing its heat-shielded nose to the atmosphere and got ready to ride it down. Li made several more attempts to contact Gunny, but LAC Two was still breaking, pointing its ionized exhaust at them. Kris told him to stow it as the nose of her LAC began to wrap itself in dancing light.

Now came the hard part. Here a good skiff driver made up for the fuel she'd saved – if she did it right – and dropped her boat on the dot. Diving, Kris plunged her craft quickly – and hot – into the atmosphere. Then she put the LAC into gentle – or maybe not so gentle – S curves to bleed off that extra energy. Kris gaged them through narrow eye slits. She had to keep the heat shield between the searing ionized airflow and her very burnable body. Cut the curve too tight, and hot gasses would take her – and her marines – heads off. Cut it too loose, and she'd overshoot by kilometers. Kris had learned these moves when it was only a game – and when she flew one of the best skiffs built on Wardhaven. Now Kris honked her craft over on first one side, then the other – a craft she knew nothing about.

Kris had preflighted this rig. No trained pilot put her butt into an air vehicle without first giving it a thorough check-out. But she had never flown it! She recognized the manufacturer's name emblazoned on the cockpit. They had a reputation for building good boats, but once in a while their quality control hiccuped. Kris's stomach twisted into knots as tight as her grip on the stick. Was this LAC one of their good ones, or was there a hidden flaw buried somewhere in the keel, on the wing support? If Kris pulled too many gees, risked too much heat, would she break its back – send them all tumbling to a fiery death?

Kris forced herself to complete calm, the better to feel every groan, every moan from the crafts's tortured structure as she pushed it to its limits. Behind her a marine broke into unfamiliar prayer, thanking his Creator for the food he was about to receive. "Someday we'll all laugh about this," Kris muttered on hot mike. If we live, she added only for herself.

The LAC was hot. Despite the shielding, Kris could feel the heat through her suit, rising up to warm, then scorch her rear. The gage confirmed it; she was well into the manufacturer's red warning zone. Out of the corner of her eyes, Kris measured the extra bend in the over-stressed wing and growing flutter along its super-heated trailing edges. The LAC's flight had turned into a sluggish waddle through defiant atmosphere, worse than any skiff she'd flown..

Still, Kris demanded more. She was above her approach path. Kris nosed her craft over, picking up speed – and heat – as she dropped like the proverbial lead brick. On path, but now too fast, she muscled her heavy lander into S curves as tight as she had ever dared on a skiff, bleeding off energy,

adding to her heat. Kris fidgeted in her seat as her skin cooked. The temperature readout, confirming the complaints of her own flesh, passed deeper into the red. But not too far, not if there were no surprises hidden in the structure of the craft beneath her.

"Ah, ma'am," Corporal Li whispered softly in Kris's earphone, "my check-back says your suit is awfully hot. You want to switch the blower and chiller to high, ma'am?"

Kris came back to herself just long enough to make the adjustments. Damn it, her suit back home would have done that automatically. But service suits were intentionally dumb, as a Gunny Sergeant at OCS had drawled. "You don't want them doing nothing without your permission when unfriendly folks are shooting and all hell's broken loose around you."

"Can you still see Gunny?" Kris asked Li.

"I think he's still out there ma'am, but it's kind of hard seeing with all these fireworks going on around us."

"Anybody sees Gunny, give a holler," Kris said, concentrating on her controls.

"Yes, ma'am," came back in several-part harmony.

It seemed like forever before the temperature gauge started to edge down. Kris tried to get a G.P.S. report on her location, but she was still surrounded by too much ionization. The LAC's inertial guidance system insisted they were about where she wanted to be and Nelly agreed. With a deep breath, Kris leaned back, tried to unknot every muscle in her body – and discovered it was a real kick flying this thing.

"I see him." "There he is," chorused behind her "There's Gunny, ma'am," the corporal confirmed.

A quick glance showed a falling star off to their right maybe thirty kilometers, if Kris could trust her own judgment. With LAC Two in sight, Kris let out a sigh of relief and put her stick over to bank closer. As she planned, Kris was sub-sonic and about three minutes out from the target. She had enough fuel for a few seconds of cruise if she needed it, but with a self-congratulatory grin she knew she wouldn't. A moment later, Kris spared enough attention from the flight controls to aim her helmet and its line-of-sight antenna at Gunny's craft.

"Gunny, please advise the *Typhoon* that LAC One has successfully reentered." Kris waited a slow five count for a reply, then began to repeat her message.

"Roger, One. I have you on visual. Report your status," was Gunny's reply.

"I lost my uplink to the *Typhoon*. Can you patch me through to Captain Thorpe?"

"I'd better. Ship's been screaming for you."

Kris gritted her teeth and prepared for another nice talk with her least favorite military person. She hadn't long to wait. "So glad you could fit us into your busy social schedule," Captain Thorpe's voice was the ice of space. "Report your situation."

"I lost my up-link, sir. Lowest bidder, I presume." That was the skipper's perpetual beef, that and budget cuts. "Gunny is patching me through to you. We are in position to execute the recovery, Sir."

There was a long pause. Kris could imagine Captain Thorpe reviewing the reports pouring into his bridge, weighting each one carefully to see what would make a certain Ensign Longknife's life the most miserable.

"I see that you are, Ensign." There was a shorter pause. "Ensign Lien, can you acquire control of LAC One?"

"Negative, sir," came back quickly. "Our downlink to LAC One is toast. I can not fly that vehicle."

"Then we go with plan B," the captain said tersely.

And Kris broke into a grin.

* * *

Kris showed up at the planning session with the Captain and Gunny loaded with options to find the skipper grinning from ear to ear. "I knew those tight wade civilians would holler for the dogs. I pulled in every chit I had to make sure we were ship they got. Now we do this job right."

"No problem, sir, we'll show the fleet and those terrorists that the Typhoon is the best," Gunny chortled.

Kris was no respecter of kidnapers. She'd attended part of the trial of her brother's murderers. Add the IQ of all three of them together and you still needed a negative number. However. "Sir, those terrorists have plenty of specialty gear," Kris pointed out. "They've wiped out three rescue attempts."

"Those were civilians. Now they face marines." Gunny's voice was deadly cold.

"A bunch of unshaven terrorists can't stand against what the Typhoon is bringing to this party," Captain Thorpe said with confidence and laid out his plan. A stealthy night approach would let the marines do a drop right on in the kidnapper's front yard. The trigger pullers could pop their chutes and go straight to work. Kris swallowed hard and pointed out that a similar approach had been used in the last hostage rescue. She thought she left hanging clear in the air the question do we dare try the same on guys with this much tech. She might as well have saved her breath.

"It worked, didn't it," Gunny snapped. "Five bucks says we beat the time, drop to last shot, of the Cardinal's landing party for that hostage incident on Payallup last year."

"I already bet the Cardinal's skipper a case of scotch we do," Thorpe grinned. Faced with that kind of confidence, Kris swallowed her own reservations. The three did a thorough review of all the recon feed. It showed no problems for a close in jump; the skipper approved Gunny's close jump. And Kris said "Aye aye, sir," like a good boot ensign ... and went hunting for Tommy

* * *

But if Kris jumped now, her bird would make a very noisy hole in the tundra, sure to wake the sleeping beauties below. Kris had half expected orders to keep flying the LAC and let Gunny lead the platoon. Apparently the Navy truly was adverse to heavily armed marines wander around without an officer present.

"Plan B it is, Captain," Gunny replied on net. Kris echoed him, all grin out of her voice.

Captain Thorpe cleared his throat. "One last thing before we break this link. I am required to remind you marines that this is not a slap dash, search and smash mission. We have been invited by Sequim to assist their police forces. As such, you will operate under local law enforcement procedures. I expect you to take prisoners, not come back with a load of bodies."

Kris keyed her mike, "You heard the skipper. Those bastards have the right to face a jury of their peers. Then the people of Sequim can hang'em." The troopers growled happily at that bit of information. Kris had done the search; Sequim had yet to ratify the capital punishment clause in the Society of Humanity's Human Rights Declaration. Kris's father had almost lost his chance at the Prime Minister's job because of the tactics he used to delay Wardhaven's ratification of that same clause just long enough for Eddy's murderers to hang. Strange, Kris could never think of little Eddy suffocating. But she had no trouble with his murderers dangling at the end of a rope.

Done with talk, Kris did a quick check on the hunting lodge. The Stoolpigeon still circled. Its sensors reported all quiet. "Sergeant, does Ensign Lien have me on sensors?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Tell him to tuck you in close behind me. I'm heading for the pond five clicks north of the target."

The pause was short. "Ensign Lien says LAC Two will conform to your movements."

That would take some good flying. This was, after all, a dark and very stormy night. Kris aimed to set the LACs down in the shallows of a pond near the hunting lodge. From where she was at 20,000 meters, she could make out two or three nasty looking storm cells between her and there. "Nelly connect to the local weather satellite." Interesting, the LAC's up-link to the *Typhoon* was hashed, but Kris's own civilian commlink worked fine.

The weather feed let Kris plot a series of descending curves around the most dangerous of the storm cells. Still, the last 15,000 meters was bumpy. Rain lashed at the canopy, blurring Kris's vision; her racing helmet would have been crystal clear. All the complaints about standard issue equipment served up

by the lowest bidder took on hard meaning as she peered into the darkness, trying to make out something before that something made a very big hole in her. *Father, we have to talk.* From behind her, marines provided a chorus of groans, grumbles and, in general, wishes to get this damn thing on the deck.

Kris's altimeter claimed 1000 meters between her and sea level when she broke out of the slop. More importantly, the Arctic tundra was supposed to be no higher than 650 meters around here, leaving Kris to do the happy math. However, the topo maps of the area reported enough hills, trees and other exciting terrain features to make Kris wish she could dare a couple of radar sweeps. With bad guys as well equipped as this bunch seemed to be, she doubted they lacked a radar detector, or even a few radar-homing missiles. No, using radar anywhere above their horizon was a dead giveaway. Death in this case was spelled with a little girl's name.

Kris put her craft into gentle circles, each one lower, keeping her LAC just above stall speed. Corporal Li reported LAC Two out of the last squall and right behind them, three maybe four kilometers back. Kris grinned; at least if she put her squad into a hill, Gunny would avoid their funeral pyre. Half of them would still arrive to take on the kidnappers.

Right on schedule, Kris's low light system detected the snag she'd chosen for the start of her landing way. Her LAC touched water, hissing from residual heat, tossing spray as it bled off the last of its speed. She put the stick over as the craft started to settle. A moment later, she came to a jerking halt on a narrow, sandy beach.

"Corporal, pop a night light for Gunny." Kris said. As the canopy rose above her, she hit her restraint release. Throwing her legs over the LAC's side, she vaulted to the ground. Wow, was she pumped, a rush beyond any race. She opened her faceplate and drew in a deep breath, laden with the perfumes of water, night and living things. It felt wonderful to be alive and breathing. She studied her squad as they stamped their feet, checked their weapons, brought their systems up.

"Okay, crew, we're down. I know a little girl who could use a hug about now and some bastards who need a hard kick in the ass. Let's do it."

The five marines returned grim, determined nods.

I'm coming Eddy, I'm coming.

THREE

Gunny's LAC slid to a stop on the sandy beach ten meters from Kris. As Gunny and his squad readied themselves, Kris hiked over to them, stepping over driftwood and a half eaten fish thing – and had Nelly beam Approach March B to Gunny.

Long before the call came for the *Typhoon* to drop everything and jump for Sequim, Kris had been following the kidnaping; it was the number one media event this month among the rim worlds. The betting in the wardroom had been two to one that Sequim would holler for the Navy when the second attempt went bust. Kris had put the bets down more to hope than expectation. Then the third local effort to storm the cabin ended with two of their best trackers taking a dive off a 100 meter cliff into raging white water. That, fifteen clicks from the cabin, was the closest the local police got. Kris figured the Navy would get a call, but she never expected the *Typhoon* to answer it, or that she'd lead the platoon. But as an old commander growled at OCS, "Ours not to reason why, ours but to do and then fill out the paperwork."

So Kris had spent every waking moment for the last four days either preparing her platoon or planning this assault. Gunny and Captain Thorpe wanted a fast drop and grab so Kris prepared for a fast drop and grab. Still, one of Father's Rule One's was always to have a back up in your hip pocket. With little spare time on her hands, she drafted Tommy to help look for Plan B.

* * *

"That tundra looks mighty rough," Tommy said, studying the Stoolpigeon feed of the front yard they were to drop in.

"It's summer time. Tundra gets messy. The computer says it's within standards. Don't you trust the computer's standards?" Kris asked with a nudge in Tommy's ribs.

"Nope," Tom answered without looking up. "If I or someone I trust haven't fed the computer the numbers, why trust it."

"So you trust God, but not computers."

"And didn't my grandma Chin tell me to?" he answered, without so much as a blink.

"Find me a back door to this place," Kris said.

"I could set the LAC's down on this pond and you could walk in from there," Tommy pointed out.

Kris had been studying the pond, and the ground between it and the hunting lodge housing the kidnapers. "These woods show as much electronic noise as these other places where the civilians got themselves dead." Kris had memorized the electronic signatures of the three different spots civilian rescue teams had died. Their bodies were still there; no one would to

risk bringing them out.

“But isn’t the swamp kind of quiet, I ask you?”

Kris pursed her lip, studying the mud and muck. Unlike some city kids, Kris had no illusions about how nice Mother Nature was in the raw. She’d split her last summer at university between running brother Honovi’s election campaign and hiking the rugged Blue Mountains of Wardhaven.. “Just the kind of place some lazy hoods might not bother with.”

“But marines, and certain dumb boot ensigns like to play in the mud,” Tommy grinned, and got elbowed in the ribs ... hard this time. But the point was made; there was an exit from the landing site. It took Kris another half hour to put all of Plan B in Nelly’s memory.

* * *

Now she laid out a soggy line-of-march to Gunny. He nodded. “Tough, but nobody joined the Corps for easy.”

Kris signaled her tech specialist. “Hanson, sniff the route I fed to your heads-up.” It was 10:00 p.m. by Sequim’s 25.33 hour clock, and going from gray, stormy day to dark even this far north, when Kris’s two squads headed into muck up to their waists. The going was slow. Battlesuits kept the icy water out, even as the camouflage systems struggled to match the suits against the ever changing backdrop. One poor marine’s suit gave up; head to toe he was sand yellow no matter what background he waded through. The suits kept the water out but armor was thin insulation against a chill as cold as Gunny’s heart. And whether the water was up to their waist or below their knees, each step still buried their boots in mud up to their ankles. To make matters worse, gnats or some local equivalent, developed a taste for them. Kris slapped her face plate down as her troops followed suit. Breathing became slow as they sucked against filters designed for nasty things a lot smaller than a gnat.

As twenty-three hundred hours approached, Kris’s tiny command was back on hard ground. She signaled a break while she, Gunny and her tech examined the woods ahead. The trees here stood thirty meters tall, their greenery perched high on bare, scaley trunks much like the Earth evergreen forests that had so quickly spread across the Blue Mountains of Wardhaven’s temperate region. But unlike Earth stock, these evergreen’s needles ended in barbs. Kris’s briefing didn’t say how allergic her troops were to whatever was in those barbs and she didn’t want to find out. “Keep buttoned up,” she ordered.

While the others rested, Hanson searched the woods for any sign of human life, booby-trap, or general discomfort. The Stoolpigeon swept low, adding its contribution. “There’re a few big things here and here,” Hanson advised, overlaying his sensor reports onto Kris’s map. “Probably nothing we can’t handle, but it would make for a more exciting night than my recruiter ever promised, and mixing it up with party animals is bound to get the neighbor’s talking.”

Kris marked them on her teams charts with a “No Go,” and asked what else. That got a shrug. “Plenty of medium to little stuff. For the local furry residents, this is the time of year to make hay.”

Kris dismissed him with a “Thanks.” *I’m coming Eddy.*

The break seemed to have refreshed her troops; Kris’s legs had gone from screaming to just

hurting. *I got to spend more time in the workout room if I'm going to hang with marines.*

Around her, the night was deepening into solid dark. She was right on her schedule. Kris and her troops moved silently among the shadows of the sparse undergrowth. The techs kept a lookout for human presence, but it was nature that got them. The rain had left everything with a sheen in the fading light – and slippery. Twice, a marine went down. One was just embarrassed by her fall; the other ended up activating the pressure bandage at his suit's ankle. He continued with a limp and teeth gritted against the pain.

Half an hour later, Kris hand signaled another halt about a 100 meters before the trees petered out. While her troops settled in, she and Gunny inched forward carefully to get a personal look at the doors they'd come to kick in.

The hunting cabin was a two-story log structure; the few small windows gave a good idea of just how cold the winter months were around here. A steep-roofed veranda covered the front and the back of the house. Infrared showed a half-dozen man-sized heat sources scattered front and back. However, night vision scopes showed only two of the six supposed guards to have a real human body to go with the heat.

Kris brought the Stoolpigeon in as low as she dared, five hundred meters above the house. Get too close, and even stealth gave a radar return. With two gunmen outside, Kris wanted a solid lock on inside target locations. Four in-house heat targets showed temperature variations. Kris opened her faceplate and whispered "Six targets." Gunny nodded.

For fifteen minutes Kris studied the six as they slept. Only one, the guy on the back veranda, showed any action, and that was merely to clomp inside to visit the head. In the house, three men seemed pretty solidly asleep in beds. A fourth man, on the upstairs landing, the appointed executioner if any effort was made to rescue the girl, never moved from his chair.

"Pretty unprofessional," Kris observed. Negotiations had dragged out for a week, the main sticking point a starship willing to take them wherever they wanted to go. No captain wanted to have anything to do with these bozos.

"If we'd followed my plan, my squad would have taken these duds before they even knew we were here," Gunny growled.

With a shrug for what might have been, Kris waved Hanson forward to examine the three hundred meters of cleared ground circling the lodge. From five hundred meters, the lowest they dared risk the Stoolpigeon, it had identified nothing interesting about that plot of land. Up this close and personal, Hanson quickly spotted the hum of several low powered batteries.

"What they powering?" Gunny demanded.

"Working on that, Sarge." Not fast enough for Gunny, he ordered his own tech forward. Both took a few more minutes of fiddling with their sensor suite before Hanson let out a low whistle. "Hyper low

power lasers,” he whispered. A moment later, he had the frequencies. Kris adjusted her laser defense system and found herself looking at a cat’s cradle of beams, criss-crossing the field but only rising twenty-five or thirty meters. Nothing on the Stoolpigeon would have spotted these things unless it buzzed the field – and that was against policy! *Damn! These fellows knew too much and were way over-equipped. Who the hell staked them for the up-front costs of this job and was telling them what to do!*

Then again, Sequim was a rich planet and its manager had a wide range of investments in its wealth. Kris wondered who he was meeting with tomorrow to borrow the millions demanded to ransom his young daughter’s life. Kris, raised the daughter of a cynical politician herself, expected there would be many offering help ... for “minor” considerations. Kris frowned; she’d never thought about who offered to loan money for Eddy’s ransom and what collateral was demanded. Interesting thoughts ... for later.

Hanson was still busy; he grinned when one of his sensors started blinking in several varied colored sequences. “I got residue from the out-gassing of C-12 and soft plastics,” he whispered.

“Let me see that,” Gunny barked softly and grabbed the instrument from the tech’s hands. He frowned at the gadget, batting it on the side once, then studied it some more. Finally, he glared at the field. “I don’t see any digging out there. Didn’t see any from orbit. Don’t see any now.”

“Mark 41 Chameleon land mines?” Kris suggested.

“They aren’t issue yet,” Gunny snapped. “They just started up production!” His words slowed as what he “knew” was possible fought with what he saw. “Damn, if these sons-a-bitches have that kind of pull?” He left the rest unsaid.

“There’s mines out there, sarge,” Hanson said with surety.

“Rigged to the lasers or just pressure?” Kris asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine, ma’am, but I’d bet both.”

Kris took a good smell of the marshy tundra ahead of her. Rubbing her eyes, she studied the sky. Cloud cover was thick, but there was a graying light to the south. Dawn was an hour away. True, these fellows had a tendency to sleep until well after the sun was up, understandable when the sun was only down for three or four hours. Still, the guards were more restless come daylight. And a single noise would change a sleeping watchman to a shooting one – with enough daylight to see what he was shooting at. Kris needed to get herself and ten fit marines across that last three hundred meters and get them across fast.

Kris backed into the woods to face her team. “Whose laser spotters are bust?” she asked. A few moments later four very embarrassed troopers acknowledging that the gear they’d so carefully nursed into operation in the loading bay was now dead weight. Kris’s one bit of luck was that both her limper and her sand yellow were among the laser blind; she’d only have to leave four behind.

“You four are my fire support team.” That however, was only the start of Kris’s problems. The two

millimeter darts of the M-6 came in two flavors. One left you dead. The other was Colt Physer's best efforts at a sleepy bullet, a round with non-lethal intent. The M-6 did not have cartridges. Once the range finder established the distance to the target, it automatically squirted an appropriate charge into the chamber. Still, there was a problem with sleepy bullets. If you put too much energy behind a dart, it shattered bone, artery and brain. At three hundred meters, the low power sleepy dart was very subject to wind drift. The odds of it hitting anything were way past bad.

"Gunny, have the two best marksmen among those four load sleepy darts. The other two load live ammo." Gunny handed out firing orders with deft hand signals. "If things get interesting, Gunny or I will say who and what gets fired." Kris told them softly, then decided it was time to make her own pre-fight statement. "Remember marines, we're here as cops. These kidnapers have a right to face a jury of their peers. But Sequim still has the death penalty. We bag'em. They hang'em."

With a happy growl, the marines mounted up. Gunny's fire team led, reduced to him and his tech. Behind him followed in single file his corporal and a shooter. Kris led her squad off, Hanson with his gadgets ahead of her. Corporal Li and a trigger puller brought up the rear.

Gunny's tech went first, using her satchel of magic tricks to tell those following when to step high to avoid laser beams, when to edge right or left away from mines. Kris eyed one mine as she passed it. Its surface was a perfect match of the tundra surrounding it. At fifteen centimeters across and rising slowly to maybe one centimeter high, it left no shadow. It was, however, developing one tell tale. The summer sun had warmed it. It now sank two or three millimeters into the tundra. Kris looked around. Now that she knew what to look for, she could spot a half dozen. No footprints, though. That was what she'd looked for from orbit; footprints on the fragile tundra. They must have dropped these from a chopper. Again, more expenses. Who was footing the bill for this?

Kris badly felt the need for a shower, some coffee and someone to talk over what had been thrown at her in the last few hours. There were patterns here, patterns that eluded her.

Eddy didn't need patterns solved. Eddy needed rescuing.

Kris concentrated on the problem at hand. Hunched down, halfway across a three hundred meter mine field, she discovered a whole new meaning for naked and vulnerable. She watched her step. She watched the Stoolpigeon's feed for action in the house. She watched the sleeping guards for any hint of wakefulness. Occasionally, she remembered to breath.

Reentry had taken what seemed like a year. Kris aged centuries crossing the tundra in front of the lodge. When finally she was close, Kris signaled Gunny to take his squad around back; the front door was hers. It gave her a direct run at the central staircase and the upstairs gunman. Kris wanted her battle armor over that terrified child's body ten minutes ago. Whatever happened in the house after Kris got to the kid, harm would come to that little girl through Kris's dead body.

Kris's luck ran out ten meters shy of the lodge. One of the sleeping beauties roused himself for a head visit. In his ambling, he wandered in front of the lodge's one picture window.

“Marines, we got action in the house,” Kris whispered into her mike as the guy stopped in front of the window to scratch.

“We start this show on my count. Gunny, you take down the back and pacify the downstairs. My squad will take care of the front and the upstairs.” She pause for questions – just as the thug in the picture window yanked up his gun and went fully automatic at them. “Fire support, get that guy in the window. Corporal Li, you get the sleeping guard on the front porch before he wakes up. Hanson, blow us a hole.”

“Doing it,” Hanson whispered, stuffing the end of a line charge into his grenade thrower and taking aim at the front door.

Behind Kris, Corporal Li’s private took rounds, full in the chest. The force threw her a good five feet. She landed on a mine and got more air time.

“Fire in the hole,” Hanson shouted. Kris hit the deck while her tech’s grenade launcher went off with a whoosh, lobbing a charge at the front door and draping a line charge between here and said door. The door blew in; then like failing Christmas tree lights, the charges on the line behind it went off. Most just went pop; three set off mines. Waiting just long enough for the explosives to blow, Kris dashed for the door. She was on it before it finished falling in.

Kris struggled to catch her balance as she hurtled into the living room. The stairs were ahead of her. She could not see the upstairs gunman. Off to her right, one man collapsed under a hail of fire from across the yard even while another man rolled off the couch, gun coming up.

Kris wanted the upstairs gunman, not this one. The nice thing about keeping company with marines was that one of them was always behind you, always on back-up. Ignoring the gunner, Kris raced for the stairs, gun up, magazine switching to sleepy darts. *Eddy, I’m here!*

Halfway up, the sleeping gunman came in view. The racket was bringing him awake. His eyes popped open wide as he saw Kris’s gun aimed right at him. His hands came up. Maybe he was going for his gun. Maybe he was just trying to fend off her fire. It didn’t matter. Kris shot.

Darts stitched up the man’s chest, throat and face, knocking him over backwards. Kris reached the top of the stairs, did a hard left and headed for the middle bedroom. Scream after scream came from that room; there was no question where the hostage was.

Kris hit the door and bounced off.

Hanson was right behind her. He slid to his knees at the door, jammed a wad of explosives in the lock, covered it with a flap of armored cloth, and ducked his head.

The door blew open.

Kris was moving before the explosion finished. That wasn’t possible, but later she’d swear she did. She flew in with the door, did a quick scan with her rifle to the right and left, then dashed for a tiny

figure in torn jeans and a filthy green sweater. The girl was sitting half up in bed, yanking at her restraints and screaming at the top of her six-year-old lungs. All Kris wanted to do was hug the child to her chest but there were rules in situations like these. She dropped to the floor. Something small and nasty looking was attached by wires to the bottom of the bed. "Hanson, we got a bomb here."

Her tech slid to a stop on his knees while Kris did a further check on the room. What looked like a school backpack had been reloaded with clothes and other junk. Kris decided it could be ignored for a moment. Otherwise the room was as bare as its wooden floor, light green walls and tan ceiling permitted. No closet. Kris turned back to the howling child just as Hanson finished his examination of the monster under the bed.

"Bomb, rigged to the restraint. I pop them, it goes boom."

"Disarm it," came from Corporal Li as he entered the room trailed by his trigger puller, much the dirtier but apparently no worse the wear from her encounter with live rounds and mines.

"You okay," Kris asked the private.

"She's fine," the corporal answered for his gunner. "Landed on the mine flat on her back. It she'd stepped on it, it would have blown her foot off. As it was, it only tossed her around."

"Remind me to tell HQ their mines suck," Kris grinned.

"I'm ready to clip the leads on this thing," Hanson said, bringing them back to a child who hadn't quit screaming. "If this doesn't go well, it would be nice if we had some armor between the kid and this bomb."

Nothing would harm this girl. Kris gauged how much the little girl was bouncing around under restraints and slid herself onto the bed, between the ragged blanket and the child. As Kris wrapped her arms around the girl, she stopped crying, though her breath came in short, choked gasps. "Nobody's going to hurt you now, honey," Kris whispered in her ear.

"Nobody?" the child said with a hick-up.

"Nobody," Hanson assured her. "Now, everyone back in the hall." Once the corporal and private were gone, Hanson sighed. "I think I got this right," pulled his face plate down and slid under the bed.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Kris waited. Nothing still happened. Then Hanson was getting back to his feet, raising his face plate and grinning like the man who broke the bank at Harrah's. "Don't just stand there," Kris snapped, "cut the girl loose."

"Yes, ma'am." Hanson said, producing clippers.

Li and his gunner were back, forming a wall between the outside world and their little girl. Kris raised her face plate. "The Marines are here, honey. You're safe. Nobody's going to hurt you." The girl

took it all in, her face sheet white and frozen, her eyes darting from one marine to another. As Hanson freed the child's arms, the tension in her tiny muscles began to loosen under Kris's hug as she tried, really tried to believe what this stranger said. Finally free, the girl rolled over and wrapped herself around Kris, buried her face in the hard battle armor and gave herself over to deep, wracking sobs. Ensign Longknife held her, protected her, and mingled in some tears of her own. Tears from a navy Ensign who'd saved a stranger's child. Tears from a ten-year-old who'd failed to save a brother.

Above Kris, three marines kept guard, guns out, grins proud. "Way to go," Corporal Li cheered. "Way to go," Hanson echoed. "God Almighty, God Almighty," the private repeated.

"House secure," Gunny reported on net. "Tech verifies no deadman switch. One bad guy dead. Five are cuffed and sleeping soundly. A few of the sleepy darts were at mighty close range. Some of these guys could use medical attention."

Kris sniffed, then managed to stand without the kid losing a square centimeter of body contact. "Very good, Gunny."

Kris blinked her commlink to full local net. "This is Ensign Longknife. The hostage is safe. Repeat, the kid is unharmed. Five bad guys are in custody, some injured. Request emergency medical backup. Warning, the ground around the target is mined. Do not land until we disarm them." Kris got acknowledgments from a half dozen police nets and the *Typhoon*.

Kris looked down into red rimmed eyes looking up at her. She hugged the girl tight. *You are wrong, Mother. The Navy's not a waste of my time. Some days are worth more than anyone could ever pay.*

FOUR

In a game simulation, Kris would have popped the Game Over button about now and gone out for pizza. In the real world, it's not over until it's over, and this one was far from over.

The girl, so fragile and light in Kris's arms, mumbled "Edith" when asked her name. Right, that had been somewhere in Kris's briefing, but it was too close to Eddy for Kris to dare remembering it. From the way Edith clung to Kris, you'd think they shared a heart. At the moment, Kris wouldn't deny that. The private threw the upstairs gunman over his shoulder. Corporal Li and Hanson kept close to Kris and Edith as they worked their way downstairs. No one wanted to lose the girl to some surprise now. The private plopped his sleeper down in the living room next to two others. All showed blood where darts had hit them; two bled freely. One shivered in apparent shock. Two awake prisoners huddled on the couch, hands taped behind them. A pool of blood in front of them showed where one body had been taken out back.

"Who's in charge," Kris demanded.

The two conscious ones glanced around as if just noticing the room. "Martin," one muttered. The other pointed at the shivering sleeper. Gunny retrieved a wallet from that one and opened it. Martin had an Earth driver's license and social ID. Earth! What was an Earth crook doing out here? This situation was way past strange.

But Kris had pressing housekeeping problems. "Folks," she told her prisoners, "there're land mines out there. I want them turned off. Who has the key?"

They just stared blankly at Kris.

"Get me their ID's. I want to know who we've got. Specialist, can you wake up our sleeping beauties?"

Hanson stepped over to the supine forms, gave each a shot, then started rocking the first one with his foot, rifle in his face. "Wake up, dude. You're in a world of hurt," Hanson smiled down cheerfully. His subject came awake with a cough, opened his eyes, took in the gun muzzle, and did his damndest to roll away. That only put him hard up against the next terrorist's back. The tech got down and in his face. "Who controls those mines?"

"Martin. He has the codes," he answered, eager to please.

Efforts to wake Martin only sent the heavy set man from drugged sleep into out cold. “This one’s got a bad heart,” Hanson reported. “He needs a hospital or we’ll lose him.”

Gunny stooped to go face to face with one of the recently awoken sleeper. “Where does Martin have his codes?”

“In his ‘puter. I swear they are.”

The tech patted down Martin and pulled a banged-up and aging wrist computer off him – liberally covered with blood. The tech tried to wipe it clean on his battlesuit, but armor was meant to keep blood in, not wipe it away. He ended up wiping it on the couch before trying to turn it on. No activity there.

“He was fingering it when I darted him,” Gunny growled.

“I think he wiped it,” Hanson concluded. Kris had learned long ago that nothing in storage was ever quite gone, not if the right people went after it with patience. She took the computer and slid it into her pouch as she studied the field through the gapping door. Four of her marines were on the other side of a too live minefield. Kris would risk no one now that Edith was safe. In theory, her techs could clear the field, but mines had no friends, and Kris was not about to see one of her crew hurt even if a mom and dad were airborne, headed this way.

“This is Ensign Longknife. I have no way of turning off the land mines. Anyone on net have any assets for clearing mines?” Several police nets gave her a negative. As Kris mulled her unacceptable options, her net boomed.

“This is Captain Thorpe of the *Typhoon*. We’re inbound, thirty seconds out from the hunting lodge. We’ll take care of that mine field. I suggest everyone dirtside get under cover.”

The troops around Kris exchanged puzzled glances. Hanson shook his head. “The captain ain’t gonna do that. Please, somebody tell me he ain’t gone and done that. My gear’s gonna be all over the place.”

“He’s thirty seconds out. I think he’s already done it.”

Kris shook her head. “He wouldn’t. Not with me dirtside.”

“I think he has, ma’am,” Corporal Li chuckled.

“Let’s do what the skipper said,” Gunny growled. “It’s gonna get noisy and messy here abouts in a few seconds.”

While her troops got their prisoners headed for the back room, Kris made a quick call to her fire team and ordered them back ... way back. Then she eyed the brightening sky through the front window, eager to see what was coming. The manual said the smart metal of the Kamikaze class ships could

restructure themselves in several different ways. She herself had changed the *Typhoon* from general travel to orbital mission, but that was done all the time. To change a starship into a air-capable vehicle ... now that would take some rearranging.

The clear blue sky let go with a high pitched scream. Kris spotted a white contrail off to the southwest, headed her way in the morning light. She wondered how you made a house safe when a starship landed next to it; not an evolution covered by any book she'd read at OCS. "Gunny, pop the windows out, break the glass before it shatters."

"Right, ma'am."

While her team went rapidly through the house, Kris scrounged several blankets and wrapped Edith in them. "There's going to be a big noise. Don't worry. I've got you. Nothing can hurt you now." The child looked up at Kris with wide accepting eyes, then, if it was possible, snuggled closer.

Kris stationed herself next to a window to keep an eye on things both inside and out. The roar outside went from loud to painful; Kris lowered her faceplate. Looking like a winged bird from hell, the *Typhoon* was aiming for the field in front of the lodge, coming in at about 400 knots. Half its engines were pointed down, now. The over-pressure out there was going to be nothing short of hellish. Kris held Edith tightly against the wall, assuming that her cowboy of a captain had calculated the full impact of the ship and mines on the house. What if he hadn't? Kris had a vision of the cabin's giant logs reduced to kindling and prayed the skipper knew what he was doing.

"See, didn't I tell you," one of her marines pointed, "don't it look like a Klingon Bird of Prey. Right out of the comic."

The *Typhoon* wasn't a hundred meters up when the first mine blew. Its explosion would have gone unnoticed in the racket, but Kris spotted the splash of water and mud that didn't fit the regular air flow from the *Typhoon's* engine blast. Then another and another mine added it's pop to the display. Water, mud, bits of vegetation and rock went flying every which way, none even close to the *Typhoon*. Kris had seen enough, "Everybody down."

Reluctantly, her troops obeyed. With her back to the log wall, all Kris could think of was the mess the heat was making of the tundra. Summer had softened the top dozen centimeters or so. Now, hot rocket exhaust was digging two or three meters into the frozen earth, melting everything, turning it into a slurry and throwing it far and wide. Kris hoped whoever owned this place wouldn't mind. If someone got stuck doing an after-the-fact environmental impact statement and mitigation plan, Kris knew who was high on Captain Thorpe's list for the duty.

Outside, the scream of rockets changed to a settling whine; Kris risked a glance. The ground steamed and roiled in a broad slash as the *Typhoon* settling onto a dozen thick landing gears well away from the last mine. Police choppers would be wanting to land next; Kris turned to her team. "Gunny, have the techs police up the area. If there are any mines left, explode them. Start with the veranda."

The two specialists had their satchel of techno-tricks out, checking the door before they opened it.

“Here’s one.” “Here’s another,” came back to her before they’d gone two paces.

“Crew,” she waved at her marines, “let’s gather for a prayer vigil in the back room while our friends bless our dear departing mines out front.”

“Yeah,” a corporal grinned, “a mine is a terrible thing to waste.”

“Keep that up, and these prisoners are gonna sue us for marine brutality.”

“Where’s my mommy?” Edith put in.

“She’s coming, honey. Just a few more minutes.” Kris sat Edith on the kitchen counter while Gunny kept the prisoners in another room. Kris pulled her ration pack out, rummaged through it for a candy bar and gave it to the girl.

Edith studied it, her mouth twisted in a reflection of the conflict within. “My mommy told me never to take candy from strangers.”

“Honey, I’m not a stranger,” Kris laughed. “I’m a marine.”

“Hard Corps,” Corporal Li agreed.

“All the way,” the other trigger pullers chimed in.

Edith must have agreed. She attacked the candy bar with zeal. Kris rummaged through the rest of her ration pouch hunting for anything else the girl might like. The work out front was regularly punctuated by booms as exposed mines were set off by charges. Kris took several calls from police helicopters asked when a landing pad might be ready. The eighty crew of the *Typhoon* had no explosives experts to contribute to the two marine specialists, much to Captain Thorpe’s disgust, so everyone waited while Kris’s two worked.

As the booms got further from the house, Kris took Edith back to the front room. From the door they watched the marines at work. Sniffers picked up the scent of explosives in the swirling mist of steam and exhaust. The marines would toss a package of explosives at the exposed mine, back off and detonate their charge. That usually was enough to explode the mine as well. The few that didn’t respond to the treatment were marked and left for later handling by a real bomb squad. This informal approach to field clearing finally yielded a large enough space that Kris ordered one specialist to drop back and set up a transponder for the first chopper.

Two minutes later, three rotor craft orbited the clearing; Kris ordered the mine hunt to pause. One chopper swooped in to quickly deposit a team of explosive experts before lifting off again. These volunteers from a local mining consortium turned to helping the marines. As soon as the pad was clear, a second helicopter flared in for a landing without asking permission.

There was no question who it brought. A woman and man bolted from it. Edith let out a whoop

and Kris almost lost her. Kris held on, trying not to fight, and amazed at how strong a six-year-old could be when she wanted to be. The woman Edith's scream identified as "Mommy, Mommy," raced across the field, slipping and sliding until she was covered with mud, and dashed up the steps to the lodge, the man not two steps behind her. The child that before had seemed bolted to Kris's hip flowed into the mother's arms. There were tears and hugs and all kinds of blubbing as the three of them lost themselves in each other.

Kris had cried her tears; she turned back to the lodge, quickly found her prisoners under Gunny's less than gentle care and got them organized to move out. When next Kris stepped onto the veranda, the rejoined family was where she'd left them. A large chopper now occupied the single helipad, its engines spooling down as it disgorged a dozen men whose uniforms and hard eyes identified them as cops. Kris edged the family to the far corner of the veranda, then brought her prisoners out under heavy guard. The three, still locked in a hug, spared no notice for the kidnapers. The leader of the police force took in the handcuffed walking four and the half-carried fifth with a hard glare, as if already measuring them for coffins.

"There's a dead one on the back porch. We need to exchange any paperwork?" Kris asked, "or do I just turn them over to you."

"I'll take them off your hands, ma'am. You want paperwork, I can scare you up some. We're kind of light on that stuff out here," he said, not taking his eyes from the prisoners as they were quick marched off. "I understand one of them needs a doc."

"The wobbly one," Kris pointed out.

"He'll make it," the cop growled.

"Well, they say he's the bossman," Kris said with a wave at the other prisoners. "I'd like to hear what he has to say."

"He'll be talking real soon." Now the cop grinned. "I suspect we can get them all talking. Get them glad to talk."

Leaving Kris wondering what other parts of the Society's Declaration on Human Rights Sequim hadn't gotten around to ratifying yet. Kris had other problems. "Gunny, have your squad police up our gear. Otherwise, don't disturb the crime scene."

"Yes, ma'am," he saluted.

Kris turned to Corporal Li. "Our squad will retrieve the LACs. I want to personally do the break down on our boat's commlink. Nobody touches it before me. Got it?"

"In spades, ma'am. No bloody squid's gonna get by with sloppy work that damn near fries me and mine." It was nice when leaders took a personal interest in their people's work. Kris did a slow look around, found everything under somebody else's control, and followed her corporal.

It took Kris a while to collect the troopers who had provided fire support from the woods; they'd gotten way back when the ship came over. With them, she headed for the *Typhoon*. At the gangway, a corpsman was waiting to take over the limper. Right beside the medic stood Captain Thorpe himself, grinning like a pirate as he surveyed the results of his landing approach.

"Damn good, if I do say so myself."

"Yes, sir," Kris agreed. "I need to pick up the LACs. Can I sign for a hovercraft?"

"Your marines too lazy, Ensign, for another walk in that swamp you took them through."

"No, sir. Just thought you might want everyone back aboard before the sun gets too high," she answered. If she had gone straight for the landers, he'd be damning her for wasting time making mud pies. Kris was getting used to being damned if she did and damned when she didn't.

"Take number two hover, and make it quick," Thorpe ordered, then added as if as an afterthought, "Well done, Ensign."

Kris saluted and lead her squad back aboard. No surprise, turning the *Typhoon* into a landing ship had shuffled a lot around inside. However, Nelly quickly showed Kris where Hovercraft Two was docked. Kris used a second gangway to slip back out, no need going through Thorpe's idea of motivation twice. She found the right patch of skin, gave the order over the ship's net and watched as a hatch slowly opened, lowering the hovercraft from its travel bay. In another three minutes, Kris had checked it out and mounted up her team. The corporal drove, Kris seated next to him. In the back seats the marines let loose with whoops and shouts as they shot away from the *Typhoon*.

As the corporal dodged trees and bounced over rocks, and the celebration in back got louder, he leaned towards Kris. "Thanks for getting us down, ma'am. I figured us for fried. I don't know many officers who could have done what you did. Getting us down was about all I was hoping for. Getting us down where we could help that little girl. Well, ma'am, you may not be a marine, but I'll Semper Fi with you anytime."

"Thanks," was all Kris could manage. *Father, you are wrong. A won election isn't the greatest feeling in the world.* Kris doubted she'd ever feel more pride that she felt at this moment from her subordinates' praise. Better than medals any day.

The LACs were where they'd left them. While three marines loaded Gunny's in the bay of the hovercraft, Kris and Li gave their own lander a once over. The commlink was still as dead as horse cavalry. "Go easy," Kris said as the three troopers lifted this one much more gently and deposited it in Hover Two.

"Yeah, be a bleeding shame to knock what's wrong with it back right," one private observed. Kris chuckled; just because they were marines didn't mean they were dumb ... just, well, marines. The trip back was slower. By the time they reached the *Typhoon* a cargo hatch was open in the ship's skin so they drove right into the loading bay. Tommy was waiting, test kit in hand.

“Ready to tear into this piece of crap?” Kris asked, as she dismounted.

“Nope,” he said, relaxing against the bay door, “thought I’d get some air.” He waved his tester. “Which LAC was yours?”

Kris had the marines unload it, then dismissed them; Tommy went straight to work. Kris found her locker and doffed her dropsuit. She would have loved a shower, but had no idea where one was in the reorganized ship. She settled for putting on yesterday’s khakis. As she finished changing, Tommy waved her over to gaze with him into the innards of her cockpit. “What can you tell me about my bum commlink?” she asked.

“That my heart quit beating when you went off line,” he said. Kris wasn’t sure if that was just Santa Maria’s Irish talking, or if Tommy was actually flirting. She dodged the question by ignoring him. He went on, “There’s a recall out on the commlink. Subcontractor got ahold of a batch of non-spec parts, but they initially passed inspection, both his and the contractor ... or so the paperwork says. Let me check this one.”

With the cover off, the inner workings of the cockpit stood bare. Kris didn’t need Tommy’s magic tester to find the problem; the circuit board he pulled showed scorched plastic. “Any way to know if that’s just dumb luck or if someone tinkered with the board?” Kris asked, giving full rein to the paranoia she’d learned at her father’s knee.

Tommy squinted up one eye as he glanced her way. “Who’d tinker with it? It’s depot level maintenance.”

Kris sighed, stood and leaned against a closed locker. She eyed the parts laid out before her, trying to make sense of what she saw. Had a random distribution of bum parts almost killed her and her marines? And then saved them!

“What’re you thinking?” Tommy asked, squatting beside her.

“That I ought to debrief my team,” she said to no one in particular. “Didn’t one of the books at OCS say something about critiquing an action, that talking things through will soften post traumatic stress if anything stressful happened. Think almost frying on entry qualifies?”

“Gamma Chin and the ancestors would,” Tommy agreed.

“Thing is I’m feeling a tad stressed myself. Real soon, my father and I need to have a long talk about the procurement practices of his government,” she said. Then something hit her. “If that damn part was on recall, why hadn’t it been replaced?”

“We didn’t have a spare. Squadron Six’s supply officer promised me a replacement in three days. We sortied on day two.”

“Luck? Right. You know, Tommy, I think I need to do something to change my luck. Any suggestions?”

“Have you tried leaving milk out for the little people?”

“I think I’ll have a beer myself,” she muttered. “They can have any I spill.”

“Good by me,” the leprechaun beside her grinned.

Before Kris could say anything more, both their commlinks went off, doing their level best to beep their way through the bugle notes of Officer Call. Captain Thorpe had a very old notion of military decorum and motivation. Kris and Tommy hit both their commlinks at the same moment, so they were treated to the same message, in stereo.

“Sequim’s General Manager requests the presence of all ship’s officers at a reception being given at his residence at 1930 local time. The *Typhoon* will lift for Sequim’s main space port at 1700 local. Uniform of the day will be dress white.”

Kris took a whiff of herself, decided she didn’t like it, and went hunting for her quarters. With a little luck her dress whites wouldn’t look too bad after being trundled all over as the ship remade itself. Somehow, Kris suspected, her luck had been busy elsewhere this morning.

FIVE

Kris was right. Though her locker and wardrobe had managed to move themselves into the stateroom that Kris now shared with Chief Bo, Kris had no idea where the contents of her desk and lock box were. Hopefully they'd show up tomorrow when the ship got back into orbit. As expected, Kris's uniforms looked like they'd been put through a wringer. "The girls have an iron in the main room," Chief Bo said as Kris surveyed the wreckage.

Under the ship's normal configuration, Kris and Bo occupied separate staterooms at the opposite end of "the temple," that space where the Navy housed its "vestigial virgins." This was someone's bright idea of how to keep men out of the enlisted women's sleeping quarters. Kris assumed it worked; she'd never bothered to catch any males making the run in or out of the spaces the enlisted women shared two to a room, or, more often, one to a room thanks to the *Typhoon* being below even the skimpy peacetime crew authorization. Since it was work hours, Kris didn't feel the need for a coughing fit before entering the enlisted women's area. The iron and its board were easy to spot, and despite theatrical levels of shock and dismay among her fellow cadets at OCS that a Longknife would iron her own uniforms, Kris had gotten the hang of it quickly.

At 1630, Kris joined the nine other ship's officers in the hulking shadow of the *Typhoon* as a line of vehicles arrived to take them to the reception. The captain and XO shared a limo; Kris and Tommy piled into a reasonably clean all terrain rig.

At the General Manager's residency, the officers arranged themselves in rank order before entering a crowded, wood-paneled ballroom, lit by several crystal chandeliers that would have been right at home on Wardhaven but seemed a bit out of place on a start-up world. Captain Thorpe in dress whites resplendent with rows of medals led his officers toward a formal reception line, civilian men in brightly colored formal wear, women in floor length gowns from last year's Paris designers. As the most junior members of the *Typhoon's* crew, Kris and Tommy made sure no one got behind them. That didn't last very long.

"Longknife. Kris Longknife? That was you in that skiff this morning!" Kris looked around for the voice; she didn't recognize it. A young man in a maroon tux and a drink in both hands headed for her. He looked vaguely familiar.

"Recognize me?" he beamed.

Raised on politics where everyone was your best friend, at least until the door closed behind them,

Kris had plenty of experience watching Mother or Father fake eternal friendship. “Long time, no see,” she said, taking the offered drink.

“Hey, Anita, Jim, you have to meet this girl. Come on over. This has to be the woman Edith says saved her.” At that shout, the receiving line disintegrated just as Captain Thorpe extended his hand to the General Manager. Leaving the skipper’s hand waving in empty air, the man and woman at the head of the line headed for Kris, with everyone else only a step behind.

“Are you the woman who rescued my Edith?” Behind the sequined gold lamé dress and expensive coif, Kris saw the woman who slugged through muck to her child this morning.

“I led the ground assault team,” Kris answered, trying to avoid letting her small area of responsibility impinge in any way on Captain Thorpe’s overall command.

“I told you there was a Longknife flying that skiff, didn’t I,” Kris’s unidentified friend went on. “She beat the pants off me two years running at college. I’d recognize those smooth curves anywhere. Ought to, I studied them damn near every night. Can’t tell you how glad I am to see you again.”

Beneath that umbrella of continuous chatter, the mother introduced herself as Anita Swanson, wife of Jim Swanson, Sequim’s General Manager and sister to the magpie. A servant was dispatched to wake Edith who had gone to bed early, under protest, at not being allowed to come to the party. Through all this, Captain Thorpe stood ignored at the elbow of Jim Swanson’s powder blue tux. Watching the red rise on her skipper’s neck, Kris did what she’d better do if the entire crew was to be saved from a miserable week, month, and year. “General Manager Swanson, may I present to you the commander of the ship that saved your daughter, Captain Thorpe.”

Jim Swanson turned to shake the captain’s offered hand. “I want you to know that as the planetary leader of this colony, I have recommended Ms. Longknife for the Distinguished Flying Cross. I may not be the aficionado of skiff flying that my wife’s brother Bob here is, but I want you to know that I’ve never seen the skills that this girl put into her skiff flying this morning.” Kris started backing up, looking for a convenient place to hide. Mr. Swanson sounded like one of those politicians who knew just enough about the military to make it really miserable for anyone he took an interest in. “We were watching on the secure hook up you provided us, Captain. I was hardly breathing when your skiffs started their drop. Then this kid’s skiff takes off doing loop-de-loops and even I can tell it’s burning reaction mass in all the wrong directions. How much did she have left when she got down?”

“I will have my executive officer look up what the fuel situation was on *Ensign Longknife’s Landing Craft Assault*,” the captain said, emphasizing that it was no racing skiff Kris flew that morning. “The skill Ensign Longknife displayed today,” the skipper continued with a nod in Kris’s direction, “was in the highest tradition of the service. However, Mr. Swanson, the DFC is out of the question. That is a combat medal, sir.”

“And those kidnapers weren’t more heavily armed than anyone the Navy’s come up against in years?” Mr. Swanson observed dryly.

“So it seems, sir, but we were here in support of a police matter, not a military combat drop.” Even Kris, just getting used to being a subordinate, could read the captain’s cut off as clearly as a brick wall. However, Kris had witnessed several of her father’s failed conversations with military types. This had all the markings of a massive one.

“I should think, Captain Thorpe, that as the skipper of the good ship *Summer Morning Breeze*, you would be happy to have one of your crew recommended for a distinguished medal by the senior political official on a rapidly growing colony planet.”

Oh boy, Kris glanced around for a place to hide. As the daughter of a Prime Minister, this might be fun to watch. As a very junior officer at the center of all this attention, she’d gladly forego the honor. The ship out at the space port might be the Fast *Response* Corvette *Summer Morning Breeze* to the politicians who paid for her, but she was the Fast *Attack* Corvette *Typhoon* to the officer who commanded her. Kris had heard several variations on both names among the enlisted, but they didn’t count. She’d heard her father say, after a long, bitter budget battle that he’d call a ship any damn thing he needed to get the votes to fund it, and if the votes were for *Warm, Cuddly Koala Bear*, by damn, he’d have a nice little old lady commission it that. What the navy officers chose to call it once they took possession was their own damn business.

It had only taken two nasty incidents before the Prime Minister learned to keep careful track of who he was talking to and call the ship by the appropriate name for the listener. Mr. Swanson was about to have such a learning experience.

“Is that her? Is that the ‘arine that came for me?”

Said learning experience was forestalled as a tiny form in a white night dress with pink ribbons dashed into the room. Kris found herself gazing down into familiar wide blue eyes. This time, there was no red rim from tears. The face had been washed and was about as angelic as a six-year-old ever got. Edith now had a cuddly Teddy Bear in tow. Her mom bent to pick up Edith, but the girl made a beeline for Kris.

Handing her untouched drink off to Tommy, Kris stooped, starched uniform crinkling, to swoop up the child. Edith gave Kris a hug that had to be worth all the medals the Navy ever minted. “You have a beautiful little girl, here,” Kris said to mother and father. “It was my pleasure to return her safe and sound to you. I know I speak for my marines, and the entire ship when I say it was our honor and joy to see her in your arms.”

That drew a unanimous round of applause.

Made unsure by all the noise, Edith decided she wanted her mother’s arms around her. As Anita took the girl from Kris she muttered, “If only all such horrible things ended so happily.” Then the mother blanched. “You’re Kristine Longknife, you lost your . . . Oh, I’m sorry!”

Breath went out of Kris like she’d been kneed in the belly. It was so easy to handle people and their fights. Thanks to Father, she had plenty of experience there. But solicitous people, people who

thought they knew the pain she'd been through. That was more than daunting. Steeling herself to put on the required face, Kris nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I'm that Kristine Longknife. And I am very glad that your family's ordeal ended very different from mine."

Anita seemed at a lost for words, her husband stepped in. "I think we're about ready to serve dinner. If Edith is ready for Miss Lilly White's party, Nurse can take her back to her room and the rest of us can discuss matters further over dinner."

Edith left with backward waves for all. Kris excused herself, claiming restroom necessity. There was an exit just past the ladies' room; Kris took it. Outside, the air was warm, but an evening breeze cooled the expansive grounds of the General Manager's mansion. Hands stiff at her side, Kris fought to organize the emotions ripping at her gut. That was what Judith said. Know the dragons coming at you out of your darkness. Name them if you wish, but get familiar with each and every one of them. Some were easy. The captain she knew.

He needed his ship and the authority it gave him. He needed control of his domain. If he hadn't chosen the Navy, he'd be a senior manager by now, maybe running his own business. But he'd chosen the Navy because it did Important Things that Mattered!

Kris understood Swanson as well. He was Building Things! People looked up to him for what he Did. Someday, they'd put a statue of him in the planet's capital, when it had an elected legislature and full membership in the Society of Humanity.

The Captain and the General Manager were Very Important People – and Kris had watched her father take the likes of them apart, leaving them bleeding career-wise and begging for help. Yes, Kris knew big men like these could be made very small.

So why was she in the Navy where Thorpe could order her to risk her life using two-bit equipment to rescue Jim Swanson's daughter because he hadn't funded his own police well enough to do the job?

Because today I did what I couldn't do when I was ten. Today I saved Edith. If only I had been there to save Eddy. There it was. Still the survivor's guilt. No matter what she did, she'd always be alive and the little boy she was supposed to take care of would always be dead.

A knock at the door yanked Kris out of this all too familiar round of self flagellation; Tommy stuck his head out. "Thought I'd find you here. You should get back, they're about to officially seat us and you don't want to make a grand entrance?"

"Already made one today. Think I'll save the next one for tomorrow."

"By my ancestors count it's already two today. And yes, even the wee people would be saving up the next one for several tomorrows from now."

Kris gave Tommy the grin his mixed up mythology deserved and slipped back into the dining room before the movement to the tables was so pronounced as to make her absence noticeable. Kris was

seated well away from the head table, although Bob, the magpie brother-in-law somehow managed to seat himself next to her. That settled the table's conversation on skiffs. Kris found that if she played it right, she did little of the talking. Magpies did have their benefits.

Late in the meal, a marine brought message traffic for the captain. The officers grew silent at something so important it required the old formality of the captain reading a flimsy, though talk among the civilians continued undimmed. Captain Thorpe signed the receipt, then pocketed the message. The officers would learn about it in the captain's good time.

When Mr. Swanson stood to lay more profuse praise on them, the captain asked if he might say a word. As the skipper rose, he pulled the message flimsy from his pocket. "The *Typhoon* has been ordered back to base," he said curtly, glancing around the room. "Due to the failure of the President and the Senate to arrive at a budget resolution, all ships of Fast Attack Squadron Six will stand down for a three month storage period. Officers will be placed on half pay. Enlistments that will be up in the next ninety days will be processed immediately. I regret to say that all requests for reenlistments have been declined at the highest level. We will be raising ship at oh six hundred tomorrow." That said, the captain sat down.

"That's impossible," Mr. Swanson sputtered. "The Senate and the President agreed on the full Navy bill. That's what my contacts on Earth informed me."

The captain did not stand, but his command voice carried to the farthest corner of the room. "You are correct, sir, as far as your information goes. However to fund the full appropriation required an increase in taxes. The rim got the Senate to pass it. The Earth-born President vetoed it. While we are authorized to write enough checks to operate the Navy, Treasury lacks the money to cash them all. Rather than kite checks into next year, the Navy Department is ordering a stand down." Thorpe paused for a moment before adding, "Be glad your daughter was kidnaped *this* month. Next month there wouldn't be a ship to respond."

Mr. Swanson stumbled back a step, as if hit by a wayward asteroid. The captain wasn't exactly correct. Supplemental appropriations were available for emergency activity. Indeed this entire response might be debited to that account, leaving more money to cover Naval operations, but Kris was not about to correct her captain. On that note, conversation around the room limped on. Ten minutes later Captain Thorpe asked the hostess's leave to depart and the ship's officers left as a group. As the door closed behind Kris, the civilians' conversation took off like thunder. She could easily imagine the topic.

The Executive Officer was waiting for Kris as she crossed the quarterdeck. "Ensign, a moment."

Kris stayed with him as the other officers went to their quarters; he said nothing until they had the space to themselves. "Captain Thorpe has forwarded a recommendation that you receive the Navy Marine Corp medal for your life saving effort today. Swanson was kind enough to provide us with a copy of his write up." Kris nodded, but the XO wasn't finished. He stared off, across the port to the city lights of Port Swanston, Sequim's largest city. "I hear Sequim is trying to get Wardhaven to finance some new mines along their asteroid belt. Got to look nice, him putting the daughter of Wardhaven's Prime Minister in for a fucking medal," he spat.

Stunned at the hatred in the XO's voice, "Yes, sir," was all Kris managed to sputter. She'd risked her neck to save a kid's life, not for a medal, and all anyone could see was that she was one of *those* Longknives. Dismissed, she stumbled through the unfamiliar passages to her room, slammed the door behind her, then pounded on it a few times for good measures.

"Don't think that door will be bothering anyone for a while, ma'am," a quiet voice drawled in the darkness.

Kris whirled, the dark of her room showed nothing. "Lights, dim," she ordered, trying to keep the emotions strangling her throat from turning her voice into a series of squeaks. The overhead came to life, casting low light around the rearranged quarters. *Right, I sharing a damn room with Chief Bo.*

"I'm sorry, Chief, I forgot. I'll be quieter. Lights, out," Kris ordered, to hide herself.

"Lights on," the chief said as she threw her covers aside and sat up in bed. Worn pajamas were missing the two top buttons, and the pants were cut off at the knees, revealing more wrinkled yellow skin than Kris wanted to see as the old chief settled cross-legged on the lower bunk.

"Honey, you look like you been rode hard and put away wet," drawled the small, oriental looking woman. The question, Don't you want to talk to your auntie Bo? was left hanging. As far as Kris was concerned, it could hang there until it strangled. She turned to her locker, to get her Pjs and to hide her face.

Her locker wasn't there.

"Damn it, where is everything?" Kris exploded.

"Scattered around the ship, as best I can tell," the chief answered easily. "You know, ma'am, I don't think they quite have the hang of rearranging the ship in flight. At least this time, we didn't space anyone."

Kris was kicking her way along the panels under her bunk, hoping a door would pop open. Mainly just kicking. "They haven't actually spaced anyone during a reconfiguration," she said, then added, "have they?"

"The Navy has its stories, and old chiefs do love passing them along to the young'uns. Like today. It'll make quite a story, boot ensign goes out, saves a squad of jarheads with some fancy flying, then saves the whole damn platoon when she flies them over the mine field Gunny and the skipper were enthusiastically planning on dropping them into. Great story. So tell me, why you look like somebody stole your puppy?"

"XO says the skipper is putting me in for the Navy Marine Corps medal."

"Hell, dearie, everyone on the boat knows that. Skipper ordered it about ten hundred this morning."

“He’s not doing it because Sequim’s General Manager wanted to put me in for a medal?”

“No ma’am.”

“Then why’d the XO,” Kris started to form the question, then stopped. Never ask a question you already knew the answer to was the Prime Minister’s rule one.

“I expect the XO is riding you. Like the skipper is, maybe was. Wants to know what you’re made of.”

A panel flew open at Kris’s last kick. The drawer was upside down; underwear cascaded onto the floor. Kris pulled a pair of gym shorts and a college sweatshirt from the pile, shoved the rest back inside and stripped quickly. When she turned to the sink, toothbrush in hand, the chief was still eyeing her. “Why you here? If you don’t mind the question, ma’am?”

“I wanted to do some good,” Kris said, smearing paste on the brush. “Think I did, today,” she said, jamming the brush in her mouth to cut off further discussion.

The chief shook her head. “My sister wanted to do good. She joined the Salvation Army. In case you didn’t notice today, the good you did for the little girl is gonna mean some things very bad for the guys that grabbed her.”

“They’re getting what they deserve,” Kris spat through the toothbrush.

“Right, you’re one of those Longknives. But trust me, honey, the bad guys ain’t always going to be so deserving or so obvious. Navy shoots what it’s aimed at, no questions asked, no answers sought. Politicians like your daddy point us. You sure you want to be out here on the tip of the spear with the rest of us folks with smelly feet?”

“I joined,” Kris said, rinsing out her mouth.

“So did every mother’s daughter snoring out there in the bays. Some joined to get out of that mother’s house, or father’s. Some joined to dodge a marriage, or the law. There are a couple out there earning money for college. They’ll be the first in their family ever to get one of those diploma things. Every girl out there knows why she joined. Why did you?”

“I said I joined so I could do some good,” Kris snapped.

“And?” Chief Bo wasn’t going to let her off that easy.”

“Would you believe I wanted to get away from home, too?”

“Maybe,” came with a raised eyebrow.

“No, I’m not some poor little rich kid, damn it, who had to join the Navy to get any attention. I had

the Prime Minister and his Lady's attention. God did I have their attention. So much of them, there was no room for me. That's why I joined the Navy. To find a little space for me. To find a little air of my own to breathe. That a good enough reason to join your damn Navy?"

"Maybe," Chief Bo said, reaching for her covers and stretching out on her bunk. "Good enough reason to join. Not good enough to stay. Let me know when you figure out why you want to *be* Navy."

"Why are you Navy?" Kris snapped.

"So I can have these fun late night girl talks with you young officers, and still get a good night sleep in my own rack. Lights, out."

In the dark, Kris could hear the chief rolling over, and in only a moment, she was snoring, leaving Kris to sort out a day that was more full than most months back home. Kris tried to organize all that had hit her in the last thirty hours, but quickly found that all her mind wanted to do was spin past the day in a blur. Kris measured her breath, slowed it, and in a moment, exhausted sleep found her.