

# 1

LIEUTENANT Commander Kris Longknife paused just outside the bridge hatch. She steadied herself, one hand on the bulkhead, the other heavy on her cane, waiting for the wave of dizziness to pass. The docs said these episodes should be getting fewer and fewer.

So far, the docs were bloody optimists.

Kris measured her breathing and fixed her eye on a hatch farther down the passageway of the Wardhaven Scout Ship *Wasp*, and thought, TIME, NELLY?

YOU'RE STILL TWENTY-ONE MINUTES EARLY TO RELIEVE THE WATCH, KRIS. ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

I'M FINE, Kris lied to her personal computer, acquired at a cost greater than several ships of the *Wasp*'s value.

YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE, PULSE, AND RESPIRATION DON'T LOOK FINE, Nelly pointed out.

AND TO THINK, THIS TIME THE BOMB WASN'T EVEN AIMED AT ME, Kris thought.

IT WAS, Nelly countered. IT WAS JUST THAT THEY WERE AFTER THE GUY WITH YOU FIRST, AND YOU SECOND.

Enough of this, Kris thought, let go of the bulkhead, steadied herself without the help of the cane . . . without *much* help from the cane . . . and marched onto the bridge of the *Wasp*.

A glance showed her that tonight's watch was double the norm for a scout ship . . . and huge for the merchant ship *Mary Ellen Carter* that the *Wasp* claimed to be.

Sulwan Kann, the *Wasp*'s navigator was Officer of the Deck. In her usual cutoffs and tank top, she, like most of the *Wasp*'s original contract crew, refused to let the added Marines and sailors now aboard make her drop her easygoing ways. Kris got a two-finger waggle toward Sulwan's brow for a salute. Kris returned a regal nod . . . as befitting the princess she was.

Still, the relief process went straight Navy. “I stand ready to relieve you,” Kris said. “What is the *Wasp*’s condition?”

“Situation normal, decelerating at .85 gees toward Kaskatos.”

“And the unknown?”

“The bogey is steady on her course. She will make orbit around Kaskatos at the same time and in the same space we do. What a coincidence.” The OOD and ship’s navigator tapped her command board, and the forward screen showed the star system, then zoomed in to show the two ships, the *Wasp* approaching Kaskatos from the system’s Jump Point Alpha, the unknown from the nearest gas giant.

“It could be just a local entrepreneur, harvesting reaction mass to sell to any ship that comes by,” Kris said.

“That would explain why it’s aiming to make orbit right at our elbow,” Sulwan said, raising an eyebrow.

Kris shrugged; out here beyond the rim of human space, the logical answer rarely was the right one.

“And if that ship is just a nice, hardworking merchant, why isn’t he on the horn, hawking his wares?” Sulwan added. That was a definite strike against the business hypothesis.

“It’s not like he’s got to worry about us buying from anyone else,” Kris said. Kaskatos *was* also silent as a tomb. Sulwan snorted. “They promote you, Princess, and suddenly you go all soft on us? I thought you Longknives were supposed to get more bloodthirsty as you went up the promotion ladder.”

Kris laughed. “I’m kind of enjoying nobody trying to kill me.”

“Then how come you got us out here fishing for pirates,” Chief Beni snapped from where he sat at Sensors. His uniform actually looked good on him. He’d lost weight and was wearing fresh khakis every day. Having an actual leading chief aboard the *Wasp* was definitely crimping his style. But even that couldn’t change his perpetual devotion to avoiding harm’s

way.

“Cause those are our orders,” Kris said. “Signed by King Ray himself.”

“Couldn’t you have told your grandpapa you preferred a nice quiet corner of the universe?” the chief asked.

“You’ve been with her longer than I have, Chief,” Sulwan said. “It seems her granddad wants her far away from him first, last, and foremost . . . and usually in hot water up to her pretty ears.” The navigator sank into deep thought for a moment, her finger tapping pursed lips. “Or is it she wants far away from him?”

“The feelings are mutual,” Kris grumbled. “Now, if I relieve you, will you show me some respect?”

“Never, but I would like to be relieved.”

“Have there been any communications in the last four hours from either the unknown or Kaskatos?”

“Not a peep,” Sulwan reported. “Per captain’s orders, we hailed both of them every hour on the hour. Not even a nasty word in reply.”

“Any signs of life, Chief?” Kris asked.

“Kaskatos shows power lines in use. It has thermal plumes around cities and large structures, just like you’d expect. There is some but not a lot of activity on the roads and rivers. There are people there. They just ain’t talking to us or to each other.”

Kris would have cursed the inventor of the fiber-optic cable if she knew his or her name. Many start-up colonies were skipping radio and jumping direct to cable. That left little radio communications to eavesdrop on. That people were willing to put cable on their basic survival list said something about conditions out here beyond the rim of human space.

Or what had been the rim of human space.

Kris almost laughed out loud at the stale joke. The Society of Humanity had broken up for many reasons. Still, at the top

of most lists was the difference between the staid . . . some might say decadent older planets, Earth and the like . . . and the more vibrant . . . some might say malcontents . . . out on the Rim. Earth said we'd found enough planets; colonies were a drain on money better spent closer to home. The younger worlds saw new colonies as places to make fortunes and get elbow room. The politicians haggled for years, couldn't solve the problem, and finally settled on splitting the sheets.

Six hundred planets went different ways . . . without a shot fired. Thanks be to any god involved . . . and a little bit of mutiny by one Ensign Kris Longknife.

But when Kris took the *Wasp* out to find and map vacant planets in unexplored space, she got a big surprise. The Sooners. These folks hadn't waited for any politician's permission but struck out on their own. They picked up family, bag and baggage, and headed out to wherever they found a good place to "set" a while.

Just human nature doing what comes naturally. Simple solution . . . or so it seemed.

Unfortunately, the same human nature that cuts the Gordian knot also cuts throats. Where farmers and small business went, lawless people like pirates and slavers weren't far behind.

Those who go beyond the reach of law better either be a law unto themselves or prepared to fight for what they hold dear. If they didn't or couldn't, there was usually someone only too ready to show them the error of their ways.

That was where Kris and the *Wasp* and the two hundred Marines aboard her came in. And why she was covered with shipping containers and squawking the false transponder of the good ship *Mary Ellen Carter*, a week out from Brighton.

At exactly midnight, ship time, Kris announced "I relieve you," and Sulwan replied, "I stand relieved," and the formal transfer of godlike power took place. The *Wasp* was Kris's to command through the quiet hours from midnight to 0400.

At least the *Wasp* was hers to command unless the one true god of the *Wasp* showed up. Captain Drago was lord of all he surveyed on the *Wasp*. Of that there could be no question.

He had the signed contract to prove it.

Exactly how the *Wasp* went from Kris's bought-and-paid-for ship to a sovereign scout ship in the Wardhaven Navy was something Kris could track. How it happened that the crew continued to be private contractors paid out of black funds by Wardhaven's Intelligence Chief was a bit harder to follow.

Probably, Kris's great-grandfather, King Raymond I to most, had his little pinky finger somewhere in the mix.

So, Lieutenant Commander Kris Longknife commanded Patrol Squadron 10 and its half dozen corvettes. She could order Jack Campbell of the *Dauntless* and Phil Taussig of the *Hornet* to convoy duty, escorting honest merchant ships around the routes between the Sooner planets. She tasked the *Fearless* and the *Intrepid* to faking it as independent—and stupid—solo merchants like the *Wasp*, hunting for unregistered start-up planets like Kaskatos.

Still, aboard the *Wasp* herself, Kris was only a watch stander.

Or maybe the problem was that she was *still* a watch stander.

Like so much of Kris's life as a Navy officer and a princess, there was no precedent. She could worry about it, do it, or not do it.

For the moment, Kris stood her watch.

“Chief, aren't you due for relief?”

“I asked to put in my eight during the quiet of the night.”

“And the chief of the boat just let you do that?” If Kris knew anything of the *Wasp*'s new command master chief, Chief Beni was telling a boldface lie.

“He did, now that you mention it, have a problem with the idea. At first,” the chief admitted with a cough.

“At first,” Kris said.

“Then I explained to him that the unknown ought to be getting in range for us to find out some interesting things during your watch, and he decided to let me do things my way.” Chief Beni had been following Kris around the hooligan Navy long enough to pick up some bad habits along with a now-disappearing beer gut.

Command Master Chief L. J. Mong had spent a day aboard the *Wasp* before taking Kris and Captain Drago aside.

“This is an interesting setup you have here. Civilian scientists, Marines, contractors, and some newly arrived sailors. I understand I am chief of the boat. I think many people assume that extends only to the uniform sailors on the *Wasp*.”

Neither Kris nor Captain Drago had affirmed or denied that observation.

The chief of the boat’s grin grew tight as the silence stretched. “My grandfather told me that a wise man, given a rock, may use water to form it to his will . . . or a diamond drill. I have both in my footlocker, sir.”

Captain Drago had studied the short, thin whip of a man for a moment longer. “I will enjoy watching a true artist.”

And they had broken for supper. Kris and Drago to the officers’ mess, L. J. to dinner with Gunnery Sergeant Brown.

SHALL I SEND A NANO TO RECORD THEIR CONVERSATION?  
Nelly had asked on the direct link into Kris’s skull. Nelly, Kris’s pet computer, was worth more than all the ships in Patrol Squadron 10, and smarter than all the computers aboard them, with the exception of the eight personal computers she called her kids. More often than not, Nelly was well ahead of Kris.

After a moment’s pause, Kris had shaken her head. NO,  
NELLY, LET’S PASS ON THAT. I’M LOOKING FORWARD TO THOSE  
TWO SURPRISING ME.

NORMALLY, YOU DON’T LIKE SURPRISES, KRIS.

Nelly’s recent spate of surprises had caused some hard words and harder feelings between user and computer. Kris

recognized where Nelly was coming from and chose her words carefully.

NELLY, AT OFFICER CANDIDATE SCHOOL, I FIRST HEARD THAT MASTER CHIEFS AND GUNNY SERGEANTS ARE THE PEOPLE WHO REALLY RUN THE NAVY AND THE CORPS. I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY MEANT AT OCS. I'VE COME TO UNDERSTAND IT BETTER NOW. I SUSPECT, IF WE LET THOSE TWO OLD GOATS HAVE THEIR HEAD, THEY WILL SHOW US EXACTLY WHY THE NAVY NEEDS MASTER CHIEFS TO RUN IT.

IF HE IS HALF AS GOOD AS GUNNY SERGEANT BROWN, HE IS VERY MUCH WORTH STUDYING, Nelly agreed.

For the moment, on the *Wasp*'s bridge, Kris had other things to study. And, to be honest, she was glad to have her electronic expert sharing the watch with her.

“Can you tell me anything more about our unknown, Chief?” Kris said, coming to study his board over his shoulder.

“It's a system runabout, Commander. Its power source looks like a GE matter/antimatter annihilation reactor. Power plant is an Evinrude Z-20 or a good rip-off. A bit small for the job, but we are way out back.”

“Anything waving at you ‘Hi, I'm a bad guy’?”

“Nothing so easy,” the chief answered. “Unless . . .” he added slowly, tapping his board and frowning at it. “I'm starting to maybe see something strange with the balloot.”

“What kind of strange?” Kris said, holding tight to the blend of excitement at his words and frustration at their slowness.

“Balloots come in lots of different brands and sizes. We've got one loaded forward on the *Wasp* in case that crazy captain of yours decides he wants to go cloud dancing with this merchant ship. By the way, Princess, skimming gas giants for reaction mass is not recommended for ships loaded with containers and glued together with string and chewing gum like the *Wasp* is just now. You need a ship small, and tightly wound.”

“Chief, I need an answer to the question you raised about

that balloot.”

“I know, I know, but I just thought you ought to know that the *Wasp* is rigged to do a gas-giant dive, but it’s not really meant to. Us having a nice quiet midwatch, I figured now would be a good time to mention it.”

“It’s mentioned! Now what’s strange about that balloot?”

“It’s veined, I think.”

“Veined?”

“Yeah, it’s got these lines running across it. I noticed them about an hour ago. They’re getting more and more pronounced.”

Kris stared at the visual image of the unidentified craft. Basically, it was a big bag with the bare hint of the runabout’s tail end sticking out from behind it. “I don’t see anything?” The chief tapped his board. The image grew to take in the entire forward screen. Kris still didn’t see anything.

“I said it’s just a hint of something running up and down and across the balloot. They come and go.”

“Nelly, can you make anything out?” Kris asked.

“If you go to infrared,” Kris’s computer suggested, and the screen changed colors as the examination slipped from the visual spectrum to heat, “you can just make out lines running across the balloot that don’t have quite the same temperature as the fabric behind them. They are slightly colder than the balloot and the reaction mass in it.”

“I was about to show her that,” the chief said.

“I know you were,” Kris said. The chief and Nelly were both experts in sensors. And often in competition.

Sometimes that was good.

Sometimes.

“There’s also a hint of the lines on radar,” the chief added.

“When you combine the hints on visual . . .”

“And infrared . . .” Nelly cut in.

“And radar,” the chief finished, hands flying over his board, “you get the same set of lines, and they come through better.” Now the balloot was clearly crisscrossed.

“Are they reinforcements to the fabric?” Kris asked.

“None of the balloots from any company in human space have them,” Nelly said.

“On a close pass to a gas giant, anything like that would disrupt the flow of plasma. They’d burn off. Might even burn up the balloot,” the chief added.

“So they were put on after the pass. Why?”

“Commander, your guess is as good as mine,” the chief admitted. Nelly seconded the human opinion with her silence.

Which left Kris staring at one lonely bit of information, which, balanced against the huge silence from all other sources, did not make her happy.

At the end of her four-hour watch, Kris knew nothing more than she had when she started. As Princess Kris Longknife, commander of Patrol Squadron 10, that really bothered her. However, as Officer of the Deck, a quiet watch was a good watch. As Kris was relieved at 0400, she tried to congratulate herself on having successfully stood a watch without starting a war or even firing a single shot. It was getting to be a very pleasant habit.

2

KRIS was in the wardroom later that morning at 0730. She spotted Penny, her intel lieutenant, at an empty table and joined her.

“How was your watch?” Penny asked.

“Uneventful,” Kris said.

“Unusual,” Penny answered.

“I’m trying to turn over a new leaf. No one tries to kill me. I try to kill no one. Did you have a chance to look at those news accounts I sent you yesterday?”

Penny gave Kris a wary eye. “Who is this Winston Spencer and why is he sending you news feed?”

“He’s written some good stories from the Navy perspective. Digs deep, so he usually gets more about us right than he gets wrong. You remember that news dump my brother, Honovi, gave us last time we were at Wardhaven that pretty much showed me that being out here on the Rim left me totally in the dark about what was happening back home? I’d prefer not to give my brother that kind of a club to beat me with. So I asked Spencer to send me stuff he found interesting. Admiral Santiago recommended him.”

Penny continued to eye Kris, as if weighing the words . . . and not finding enough truth in them. She had a lot of experience in the last three years listening to Kris tell the truth, or a small part of the truth, or a whole lot of bunk with a little bit of truth added in for spice.

Today, she made a face. “I guess I’ll have to settle for that until you let me in on the whole story.”

“What’s the matter? Doesn’t it at least sound plausible?”

“Oh, it sounds plausible. It might even be right. I just have this strange itch between my shoulder blades. Maybe my bra’s too tight. Then again, I’m working for a Longknife. It could mean blood and gore. I’ll just have to wait and see.”

Since treason wasn’t the kind of thing you discussed over breakfast in the wardroom of a commissioned warship, Kris changed the topic. “Have you found out anything about Kaskatos?”

“Not. A. Thing. I sent out requests for any data to both Greenfeld and Wardhaven sources. I actually got a couple of answers from Greenfeld planets nearby. All were negative. No

responses at all from our own nearest planets. It's clear that the official databases are null. What I wonder about is if a bit of informal snooping around would be just as fruitless?"

"Are you suggesting we need to build up our own contacts on the ground around here?"

"It would be nice to have some Baker Street Irregulars to snoop around corners for what the officials don't know," Penny said. "You do know who the Baker Street Irregulars are?"

"I read the required classics in school," Kris admitted.

"My dad introduced me to Sherlock Holmes when I was just starting to read. I loved them."

Kris changed the topic. "You got replies from Greenfeld officials?"

"Yes. They know we're out here, and, at least to the extent that they are answering my search requests, they are cooperating."

"I wonder how long before a couple of Greenfeld cruisers come looking for us?"

"Depends on whether any can be spared from using their sailors to patrol the streets of this planet or that one," Captain Jack Montoya of the Wardhaven Royal Marines said as he slid into the chair next to Kris. He arranged his breakfast plate, attacked his eggs and bacon, and waited for Kris to comment.

"So far, we've had this space to ourselves," Kris said.

"Not even so much as a warning to get out of their neck of the woods?" Jack asked.

Penny shook her head. "Not a peep. All the other ships of PatRon 10 have the same report. An occasional merchant ship, usually glad to see us out here, but no sightings of the Greenfeld fleet. Not so much as a tug."

Jack shook his head. "If this were my stomping grounds, I'd be out here marking my territory with something. Things must be really bad inside the fraternal order of Peterwald good

buddies to have the whole fleet tied up.”

“I think the Navy is the only power that the Peterwalds trust to enforce their sway over their planets,” Kris said. “Henry Peterwald got really lucky when he sent his daughter out to the fleet for an education.”

That Kris had provided a bit of that education the rest of the table was kind enough not to comment upon.

“Penny, are you getting anything more specific from inside the Greenfeld Empire? We all know it’s a mess, but . . .” Kris trailed off. She knew so little that she didn’t even know how to talk about how little she knew.

“Sorry, Your Highness, but this little minion is deep down a dungeon’s coal bin surrounded by black cats at midnight. Newspapers never have been all that trustworthy in Peterwald territory, and what with no one sure who’s going to come out on top, you can’t blame the media for not really wanting to stick their fingers into the ongoing catfights. Maybe Abby knows something from her informal sources?”

Abby, Kris’s maid, settled at Kris’s other elbow, her twelve-year-old niece right next to her. Abby really *was* a maid. Very highly trained and all. The problem was that she wasn’t *just* a maid.

On Earth, where Abby had started maiding, personal help was expected to do other things . . . like shoot back when their Ladies got shot at. Abby got quite good at that. She also found out from others of the help that she could make extra money selling information to the gossip media. Abby got very good at that, too.

Working for Kris Longknife gave Abby plenty of chances to excel at all of her many skills.

Usually.

“Why do I hear you people taking my name in vain?” Abby said. She normally got up on the wrong side of the bed, and today looked to be no exception.

Kris repeated the question. Abby was shaking her head before

Kris finished.

“No way, nohow am I wasting my hard-earned money on the rumors coming out of the Greenfeld Alliance. Best intel the info marketeers have even they admit is C-4. Secondhand idle rumors picked up by shady characters with only a passing acquaintance with the truth and that have dogs of their own in the fight. Princess, if you want me to waste your money on that untreated sewage, I’ll do it, but you’d be better served spending it on some trashy suspense novel.”

Colonel Cortez took this moment to join the breakfast club. He surveyed the growing silence with raised eyebrow. “My, aren’t we quiet today.”

“Not much going on,” Penny said.

“Good. Would now be a good time for me to put in again for a transfer out of the princess’s merry band of optimists to someplace safe and sane . . . like a Royal prison?”

Kris shook her head as she stood up. “Okay, boys and girls. Just because we’ve run into so many dead ends that it’s starting to look like a holiday, doesn’t mean that it is. Keep your eyes peeled. Our vacation will be over when you least expect it.”

3

KRIS’S vacation ended abruptly next morning.

She had paused outside the bridge coaming to let a tiny bit of nausea pass. This spell was the shortest she remembered, and in a moment she expected to march across the bridge to her station, swinging her cane with a jaunty air.

All she needed was a few seconds’ rest.

The speaker on the bridge crackled to life. “Freighter *Mary Ellen Carter*, vent your reactor to space and prepare to be boarded. Do this our way, and no one gets hurt. If you don’t, we’ll kill you all.”

Captain Drago’s response was not at all appropriate for

pirate ears . . . or princess's either. The captain vented a long string of four-letter words ending in "Where is that bloody Princess Longknife when I need her?"

"Here," Kris announced, as she entered the bridge, cane and legs moving with purpose, aiming for her battle station at Weapons with all speed and only a touch of light-headedness she tried to ignore.

The petty officer second class at Kris's station kept the targeting crosshairs on the now self-proclaimed pirate ketch . . . and her finger well away from the firing button.

That was Kris's business.

"Do something about that," Captain Drago said, waving a hand at the forward screen that the pirate now filled. "And don't let them make a mess on my ship."

"Will do, Skipper," Kris told the contract ship captain, slipping into the seat just vacated by the petty officer. Kris had gotten just enough of a glance at the pirate to answer the question she'd had about the ropes and cordage crisscrossing the ballot.

At the moment, three or four dozen space-suited cutthroats used the ropes as handholds, tie-downs, or wraparounds for their legs. The space suits had been painted up with frightening sights. Tiger mouths roared, skulls gaped, and heads dripped blood and gore from their cut throats.

Kris knew this was deadly serious, but she had a barely controlled urge to offer the pirates candy and tell them their Halloween costumes were worth all the work they'd put into them.

She shook off that whimsy as she surveyed the rifles, pistols, machetes, and poles with gleaming hooks at the end of them that the freebooters were waving with bloody intent.

This was no time for a joke.

I COULD HAVE TOLD YOU THAT, Nelly put in.

NOT NOW, Nelly. "Chief, talk to me about those boarders."

From his station at Sensors, Chief Beni shook his head. “Their suits are not armored. Hardly any two of them are the same, except for a couple of dozen emergency suits. You know, the kind you find under your seat on a civilian shuttle. No telling how old they are. The paint jobs look nasty, but if you ask me, I think most of the paint’s there to patch up the holes.”

“But if they get aboard my ship . . .” the captain began.

“They won’t,” Kris cut him off. “Captain Montoya, are you watching all this?”

“From the drop bay, Commander. I’ve got four of my best sharpshooters in each of the four LACs. We’ll be ready to launch as soon as the sailors get the canopies off them.”

The LACs weren’t going planetside this trip; the canopies would only block the aim of the Marines. And keep the pirates from seeing just how much of the wrong stuff they’d bit into.

“I’ve also got Marines in armored space suits at every entry hatch on the *Wasp* ready to either defend or step outside and sweep up our overly optimistic revenue collectors.”

“At the moment, they aren’t using the scam that they’re government officials,” Kris said, though they could quickly fall back on it the instant Kris and Jack’s Marines blew their pirate business to shreds. What Kris would do if their leader started waving the credentials of a customs officer or drug-enforcement-inspection warrant was something she’d think about when it happened.

“Jack, let me know when you’re ready to launch,” Kris said.

“*Mary Ellen Carter*, you are not venting your reactor,” the pirate pointed out. “That’s not smart.”

“LACs away on my mark,” Jack announced. “LAC-1 . . . mark. LAC-2 . . . mark. LAC-3 . . . mark. LAC-4 . . . mark. All LACs away.”

“Running won’t do you no good. The planet below is our country,” the pirate growled, as the LACs came in view and

were mistaken for evacuation pods.

“We’re not running,” Kris said, mashing her commlink.

“Pirate off our starboard beam, this is the Wardhaven Armed Corvette *Wasp*, and this is Commander Kris Longknife. Cut your engines and throw your weapons over the side. Surrender peacefully, and you can plead your case to a court. Keep this noise up, and we’ll reduce you to ash. Guns, run out the lasers.” There was a slight motion on the ship as the four 24-inch pulse lasers were run out of where they hid under the *Wasp*’s merchant paint job.

The sight must have been appalling to those hanging on to the balloot. Machetes quit waving, pistols and rifles just kind of hung there in midspace.

“Good God, what’s a Longknife doing out here?” came over a live mike among the pirates.

“I don’t know. Let’s get out of here.”

“We can’t outrun them.”

Suddenly, the pirate ketch took off at full power.

Unfortunately, it was still aimed right at the *Wasp*.

“Get us out of here,” Captain Drago demanded.

“I’ll try, Skipper,” Sulwan replied from the navigation station.

“But they’re awful close.”

“Shoot ’em, Longknife!” he demanded.

“They’re too close,” Kris answered. “I can’t bring the lasers to bear.”

The *Wasp*’s lasers all were pretty much limited to targets straight ahead of her. Kris could swing the ship . . . This close, whatever she did would be a mess.

“Collision,” she shouted into her commlink. “Prepare for collision.”

And Kris remembered she hadn't yet put on her own seat belt.

The petty officer second class grabbed at Kris's waist as the two ships came together.

The collision point was well off both ships' centers of gravity. The balloot filled with reaction mass did a passable job as a bumper, absorbing some of the force, spreading it out.

And sending both ships reeling away from each other in drunken twists and spins.

For someone with a working inner ear, it was bad. For Kris, not yet recovered from her last session as the duck in a shooting gallery, it was worse.

Kris's vision went gray, with the weirdest pink and purple polka dots. Her recently enjoyed breakfast, fortunately light, got an eviction notice and left hastily.

The petty officer must have seen it coming; she had a burp bag over Kris's mouth before Kris knew she needed one.

On the forward screen, cameras still tracked the pirates and their perils. Several were knocked loose from the balloot. A few collided with the *Wasp* and grabbed handholds. Several did not and began what would be short-lived careers as independent satellites.

And, of course, there was one guy in every crowd who couldn't get with the program.

One pirate had a rifle and intended to use it. He brought his weapon up to take aim—something not easily done with his standard-suitgloves and helmet.

You had to respect his commitment. Three Marine sharpshooters in the LACs showed him all the respect his folly deserved. They put him under fire even as he struggled to make his senseless move.

The pirate's shot went wild. The rounds from three different Marines cut through the bull's-eye that was his heart. Six streams of pulsing blood jetted him away from the pirate craft,

twisting and spinning his quickly freezing body.

The other pirates followed this display of Marine accuracy and gently shoved any weapons they still had off into their own orbits.

“Jack, can you and your Marines police up this mess?” Kris asked, wishing for some water to clean out her mouth. The petty officer must have qualified at mind reading because she had a water bottle at hand.

“Don’t expect we’ll have any trouble, Commander,” came back from Jack, as Kris added a mouthful of filthy water to the burp bag and handed it to the second-class with a grateful smile.

Kris strapped herself into her station chair as she considered her next problem. For some reason, Kris’s ears were happiest when her fanny was firmly strapped to something. Especially now that the *Wasp* was in zero gee.

A zero gee that Sulwan announced was acting on a ship now steady in orbit.

It was nice of other people to solve Kris’s problems. Now it was time for her to solve a few herself. “Penny, can you and the chief raise me someone dirtside with even a tiny bit of authority?”

“We can try,” the Navy lieutenant said.

Five minutes later, they had someone on the radio.

“

I’m freeholder Annam son Jendon,” the deeply tanned face on the main screen said for identification. “Only reason I have my own radio station is because I have got this pond we occasionally use for a backup lander drop.”

“What’s wrong with the main airport?” Kris asked. The largest town on Kaskatos did have a port with a ten-thousand-meter runway, but it had yet to say a word or show a beacon or light.

“Ma’am, you have to understand, Lander’s Rest has had a lot of folks dropped on its runway lately. I can’t really say whether or not the place is just busted up or unwilling to take another empty belly. It could be both.”

“What’s the situation on Kaskatos?” Kris asked.

“Ma’am, I really don’t feel comfortable talking on an open radio. The powers that be spread the word real fast when you showed up at the jump point that it wouldn’t be smart to make any signals to you. Now that you done for the pirates, I’m willing to talk to you, but there’s no telling who’s listening and what offense they might take. I’m just a farmer trying to keep flesh and spirit together in times gone bad.”

“Would you mind if I dropped down and talked with you?” Kris asked. “I’ve got a couple of containers aboard of famine biscuits. Taste can be monotonous, but they do keep body and soul alive.”

“Thank you, ma’am, I don’t mind if you do,” he said, then added in a soft whisper. “I just wish you hadn’t mentioned the food on the radio. I expect I’ll be getting visitors besides you.”

4

SIX hours later, Kris was in undress whites and strapped into a longboat, shuttle to non-Navy types, as it dropped away from the *Wasp*. Jack was beside her, in khaki and blues, and studying his battle board. Kris paid attention as he moved a stylus over the map it now showed.

“Last pass we dropped the four LACs, sixteen Marines total. We’ve got an observation post with a sniper on this hill on the far side of the lake. I’ve got a second one covering the south side of the lake near the dam and its road. The third one covers the approach road from town. Nobody comes to visit Mr. Jendon without us getting a good look.”

“It’s Mr. Annam,” Kris said. “son Jendon actually does mean he’s the son of his father, Jendon.”

“I see your getting more information about this place.”

“The fourth LAC dropped Penny and Chief Beni right in Annam’s lap.”

“They giving you much information besides what order the name goes in?”

“Not really,” Kris said, cinching in her belt tighter. “Just that it is bad down there. Worse than Penny has ever seen.”

“She wasn’t with you during the Olympia Humanitarian Mission?”

“No, she ran into Tommy after that.” There, Kris could say his name now without a shiver.

Jack turned back to his board. “I’ve split first and second platoons between the four longboats. Famine biscuits fill up the rest of the boat’s cargo.”

“Hello, fellow pilgrim,” Kris muttered, “we come bearing stale bread and loaded M-6s. We’re here to help you.”

“Cause we’re the only help you’re going to get,” Jack finished.

The longboat dropped free of the *Wasp*, and Kris found herself occupied with the unheard-of priority of keeping her stomach from embarrassing her.

Kris had survived a lot of botched assassination attempts. She had considered herself a survivor of the last one when she checked out of the hospital. Recovery, however, this time, was turning into a process with no end in sight.

Annam’s lake gave plenty of room to land, but the actual landing was at a T-shaped wharf. That only left room for two longboats to unload at a time.

Jack ordered the two shuttles with first platoon to dock first and unload their Marines. The other two shuttles held in the air as long as they could before settling onto the lake and staying out in its middle. Lieutenant Stubben, the lone surviving officer of the original company, deployed first platoon and checked in with Penny. Only then did Jack let the last two shuttles, with him and Kris, come alongside the pier, swapping places with the first two.

And second platoon was well into its deployment before

Jack got out of Kris's way so she could exit the craft.

"Didn't I read somewhere that the senior exits a vehicle first," Kris snarled through a smile . . . just in case there was a local watching.

"I seem to remember reading that somewhere, too," Jack admitted easily, without appearing to draw any conclusion from it that might apply to their situation.

Kris led her never-subordinate security chief out of the longboat. Marines were still trotting off the wharf from both shuttles. Coming out to meet Kris was Penny in whites and a thin man with salt-and-pepper hair. His clothes were worn shorts and a plaid shirt, his feet sported woven sandals. His hand was out to shake, but his smile was thin, and his eyes were clearly skeptical.

"Why are you here?" were the first words out of his mouth.

"We bring food," Kris said, shaking his hand. That wasn't really an answer to the question. Still, Kris hoped it was a welcome opener.

Behind Kris, a work detail of Marines removed bags of biscuits from the longboats and stacked them on the wharf. Kris waved at the gifts. The freeholder nodded, then turned, and, as the last of the Marines trotted from the pier, a stream of civilians broke from the dozen outbuildings in sight.

Penny's eyes said "I warned you," as Kris took in the oncoming humanity. Clothes ranged from the wreckage of finery to rags that barely maintained civilization's minimum for public decency. Not that anyone noticed. People moved with a minimum of effort, shuffling forward as if each step might be the last they could manage.

But it was the children that grabbed at Kris's heart. They stumbled forward on bony legs, their bellies distended. Children weren't the only bellies stretched in that grotesque lie. Many of the women who held a child's gaunt hand were hardly in better shape than the children beside them.

"We try to distribute what food we have evenly," Annam said, as if somehow he might expiate the sin that had allowed

this to happen. “We try, but the gunmen come and demand food. We’ve hidden what we can, and if we have warning, we try to hide in the woods,” he said, even as he shook his head. “But there is so little.”

Kris had expected that the locals would haul the food away from the wharf. After all, each bag was only ten kilos.

Some of those approaching would probably be able to help. Some, but not many.

“Jack, we better carry a load of these out to the landing. If people have to walk out on the pier, there’s going to be pushing and shoving. Someone’s going to drown.”

Jack was already issuing orders as he trotted for the longboat that had brought them. Up the way, Marines who had last come ashore turned about and double-timed back the way they’d come. At the door of the longboat, Marines paused in the stacking of sacks and looked ashore. Mouths got thin as sergeants ordered men to grab some food and double-time for the beach.

Kris took the load of the first Marine that reached her, sent him back for more, and jogged as fast as she could for the end of the pier, praying that dizziness would stay away for a few minutes. She still carried her cane, but there was no time to use it.

Kris got to solid ground about the same time the first refugees reached the pier. She pulled the string like the instructions said, and the bag easily came open. “Grab a handful to eat now, then go help the Marines carry the food ashore.”

Eager hands emptied her first sack. There was pushing and shoving, but Kris just leaned into it. It wasn’t anything that a well-fed person couldn’t handle. Penny came up on her right. Annam on her left.

“Don’t push. Don’t shove,” he shouted. “There’s plenty for all. Those of you who can, take some back for the others. Those of you who are strong, help unload the bags on the T-head.”

The raw need of the hungry was strong. Their panic was

so close to the surface, pleading from empty eyes. Desperate hands reached out from mothers or fathers, grasping for something for themselves, or their children.

The Marines arrived and gently, carefully, edged the crowd back. Back from the water. Back from the few giving out handfuls of biscuits and full bags. The Marines could have driven the crowd back with rifle butts. Instead, they moved them with a shove here, a gentle word there. When a woman turned away with a couple of biscuits for her family, a Marine stepped forward into the hole.

Other Marines worked their way into the crowd, urging people to form lines. To leave room for people who had something to move to the back. When some young thugs knocked over an old woman and grabbed her handful of food, two Marines materialized as if by magic. The thugs went down hard.

From the crowd, another youth helped the old woman up while others saw that the woman's food was handed back.

"There's plenty for everyone," Gunny Brown shouted.  
"Just wait your turn."

"We've got a whole shipload of food in orbit," another Marine added.

"Commander, we got the first two longboats empty," came from the lead longboat pilot on net.

"Take them back up to orbit. Reload."

"Half and half, Marines and biscuits?"

"No," Kris said, empty of food and turning for more. A heavily loaded Marine was just coming up behind her. She grabbed a couple of bags. "Drop the rest here. Go get more." The private did.

"What kind of load?" came again from the pilot.

"Jack, can we distribute just one platoon among the next four shuttle loads and leave room for more food?"

Kris's security chief was busy distributing food at her elbow. "That's acceptable," he said, "just so long as we keep one shuttle on the deck to get you out of here."

"We'll have two," Kris pointed out.

"Better."

Kris handed over a full bag to a man pleading for his family, who were too weak to walk. Maybe he was lying, but he looked barely able to stand. "Shuttle 3 and 4, launch for orbit. Return as fast as you can. Bring down one squad of Marine reinforcements each and as much food as you can carry."

"Aye, ayes," came back at Kris, and the two empty shuttles moved from where they bobbed in the lake to takeoff position.

A second squad of Marines returned from wherever they'd been posted for defense, slung their rifles, and joined in the food-distribution work. Around Kris, things were no less hectic and desperate, but order had taken hold, and the hungry throng sensed that there really was enough food for everyone. Now they waited patiently for their turn.

Kris stepped aside for a Marine to take her place, then tapped Jack, Penny, and Mr. Annam. "Can we talk now?"

"Yes. Yes, now would be a very good time. May I invite you to my home?" the farmer suggested.

Kris suspected that was a formal invitation. "Yes, I would be grateful for your hospitality," she answered, using the words Nelly suggested. The plantation owner smiled with satisfaction, folded his hands, and gave Kris a little bow.

The crowd parted for them as Mr. Annam led them to the big house. That was a clearer sign of respect than Kris could have asked for. She hoped it cut both ways.

In the cool shade of the house's veranda, Mr. Annam slipped out of his sandals. Kris removed her shoes, and her team followed suit. Inside, they were offered seats in wicker chairs, and a woman quickly offered cups filled with a thin tea.

"This is my wife, Pinga. Without her careful husbandry of

our meager resources, few would have lived to eat your gifts.”

“My husband is too kind,” said the short woman, wrapped in a colorful cloth. But she settled into a chair at his right and smiled at Kris. “If my husband has not thanked you for your generosity, then let me assure you that you and your men will have an eternal place in our hearts and in our prayers,” she said, folding her hands and bowing her head.

“Thank you,” Kris said, and found herself folding her hands and bowing in like fashion.

For a moment.

“How bad is it?” she asked, head coming up.

“My grandfather told me tales of famine on Earth and when he fled the Iteeche. He prayed that my young eyes would never see what his old eyes had seen. Now I know all too well what he saw. Maybe worse.”

“What is your crop situation?” Penny asked.

“Our land is rich,” Pinga said. “We can get three crops in. Rice, barley, millet, wheat all grow here fast enough for a spring, summer, and fall crop.”

“But that is not enough to feed all those who flee to us,” the husband added.

“We have switched most of our land to potatoes. Before, we only grew them for vodka, which sold well on New St. Petersburg. You know of that planet?”

Kris did. It was one of Greenfeld’s most populous industrial centers. They liked their vodka there. She nodded.

“Sadly, New St. Petersburg knew all too well of us. People from there doubled, then redoubled our population. Then doubled it again and maybe again,” Annam said.

“At first, those who came here tore at our heartstrings,” Pinga said. “They had nothing but were willing to work. We were glad to take them in. Thank heavens we did. Those early arrivals expanded our crops and made it possible for us to help

the next and the next who came.”

“And warned us when the bad ones arrived,” Annam said.

“Bad ones,” Kris echoed.

“The ones with guns,” Pinga said, voice sharp with disapproval.

“We were sharing all that we could. They laughed at us and demanded the best, and all of it.”

“I quickly gave them what they wanted,” Annam said. “The net by that time was full of the tale of what happened to those who did not give.”

“We did what we had to do to save body and soul,” Pinga agreed.

“I’m sure you did,” Kris said, leaning back in her chair.  
PENNY, IS THIS ALL NEWS TO YOU? Kris asked via her computer link through Nelly and her kids

SORRY TO SAY, YES IT IS KRIS.

AH, CREW, I KNOW IT’S NEAT TO HAVE THIS NEW TOY FOR TALKING AMONG OURSELVES VIA OUR COMPUTERS, came clearly in Jack’s voice, BUT DON’T YOU THINK THESE FOLKS DESERVE THE COURTESY OF BEING INCLUDED IN OUR CONVERSATION?

“Mr. Annam,” Kris asked, “have you heard anything about the conditions on New St. Pete?”

The plantation owner raised his hands to heaven. “I wanted to know as little about the goings-on there as I could. I thought they knew nothing about us, but I guess you cannot get the tiger drunk without its knowing where the good stuff comes from.”

“I told you so,” Pinga was quick to point out.

“Those who came to us first were the merchants who sold my products. I thought when I took them in that I had rolled up the carpet behind me. Unfortunately, others knew, and they told still others.”

“It’s the gunmen I’m curious about,” Penny said. “We don’t know much about what is happening in Greenfield territory. Maybe even less about New St. Pete, but some of our analysts insisted there were a lot more criminal elements in the mix than the intelligence estimates allowed for.”

“Something tells me even they were lowballing it,” Kris said.

“And if Mr. Annam and his people are dealing with the criminals who had to flee St. Pete . . . ?” Jack said.

“What’s left behind must be even worse,” Penny concluded. Kris shrugged. “But that is Vicky’s problem.”

“Commander Longknife, Captain Montoya, this is Staff Sergeant Bruce. We got company coming.”

“What kind of company, Sergeant?” Jack asked.

“I make out forty-five trucks driving up the road from town. They’re averaging about fourteen clicks an hour. ETA at our roadblock is seventeen minutes. Hey, Nelly, this new computer gives me real numbers.”

“I told you so,” Nelly said on net and to all present.

“Are they armed?” Jack cut in.

“First couple of trucks appear to have a general collection of rifles and pistols. Looks like the sort of stuff you could use to set up a nice museum of ancient firearms, sir. Beyond that, there are not a lot of long guns showing.”

“Kris,” Jack said, looking her straight in the eye, “now would be a good time for you to get out of here.”

Kris made a face. She hated the idea of running. Even more, she hated the look on the faces of the farmer and his wife, like she’d kicked a puppy and was leaving it alone beside the road.

But she wasn’t supposed to be in the middle of a shoot-out. Not with half Jack’s company still in orbit.

Kris prepared to follow her security chief.

Then everything changed.

“Uh, this is the pilot of Shuttle 1. We got a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Jack asked, giving Kris the evil eye as if somehow, in some way, she was responsible for whatever came next.

“We, uh, thought we’d get ready, just in case we had to make a run for orbit. Just like I guess you want us to do now.”

“And,” Jack snapped. “Pilot, tell us today, not next week.”

“Well, we needed water for reaction mass. So we started pulling lake water into our tanks.”

“And you caught a fish?” Kris suggested.

“No, Your Highness. A fish we could have handled. No, they got a lot of water weeds growing around the wharf here, and we sucked them into our intakes. Locked them up something terrible.”

“The other longboats made it to orbit,” Jack snarled.

“Yes, sir. They pulled water into their tanks while they were out in midlake.”

“Can you get the weeds out?” Kris asked.

“The copilot and some Marines have been trying to do it for the last five minutes. We really sucked it up there, ma’am.”

“So we aren’t going anywhere,” Kris concluded.

“It sure looks that way,” the poor pilot answered.

Kris stood. “Thank you for your hospitality,” she said with a prayerful bow to the couple. Then she turned to Jack. “Captain, Lieutenant, looks like we better start walking over to Sergeant Bruce’s roadblock.”

“It does look that way,” Jack said, activating his battle

board and beginning to arrange his way-too-few troops.