

Kris Longknife - Resolute

By Mike Shepherd

Kris Longknife has finally got herself an independent command.

Problem is, she's a Lieutenant and it's an Admiral's billet.

And the last occupant, a lieutenant, just retired after fifteen years in the job.

Hmm.

Oh, and when he heard a Longknife was his replacement, he retired all the reservist working for him.

Kris's command isn't just independent . . . it's solitary.

Lieutenant Kris Longknife's footsteps echoed off the walls of the space station. Kris had expected High Chance to be bustling with business. Instead it looked like a tin can, rinsed and ready to be dumped in the nearest recycle bin.

There was no sign of a welcoming committee from her new command ... Naval District 41. No sign of anything ... alive.

"They told me it was an independent command," Kris half whispered to herself.

"Did they mention it was solitary?" came from behind her.

Kris turned. Lieutenant Penny Pasley-Lien had been very quiet on the trip out to Chance. Penny was recently a bride and only slightly less recently a widow. Kris measured Penny's words for joke or serious, and found them balanced on a knife edge.

"At least there's no sign of an attack," said First Lieutenant Jack Montoya, in full battle armor – and paranoia mode. Now of the Royal United Sentient Marines, Jack formally had been in Wardhaven's Secret Service. The exact circumstances of his change in service was something Kris did not want to think about.

His uniformed presence at her elbow served as a too-present reminder that even though Great-grampa Trouble was well over a hundred years old, he was still very much trouble. Jack's M-6 assault rifle tracked his eyes as he surveyed the empty station. "No sign of anything," the suddenly-a-Marine concluded.

Kris had had enough of this blind man's ... or woman's ... bluff. "Nelly, *please* access the station's security system."

Nelly was Kris's pet computer. A half kilo of self-organizing circuits wrapped around Kris's shoulders, since the last upgrade, Nelly was plugged daintily and directly into Kris's brain. She was also worth about half of what this station cost. Maybe more, since this station looked much the worse for its lack of occupation.

"Kris, I can't," came back, almost plaintively.

“And why can’t you?” Kris demanded.

“Cause somebody turned this station off at the switch,” Chief Beni answered as Nelly got out a more accurate explanation that boiled down to the same. Nelly actually sounded huffy as she finished well after Beni.

This confirmed a growing suspicion that Kris’s electronic tech whiz Beni and electronic tech miracle Nelly were developing a sibling rivalry. *Just what I need.*

But she’d needed Beni’s technical wizardry for the last three months during her Training Command assignments. And she’d need him even more at Naval District 41. From the looks of things ... or lack of things ... she couldn’t afford to lose any one.

And life without Nelly was unthinkable.

As Kris was learning to do of late, she sidestepped the thornier problem and faced the immediate one. “So where is this switch?”

“That way,” both the chief and Nelly said. The chief was a bit slow to point since Jack had him in full space armor. Nelly flashed a light at the alley beside The Dragon Queen’s Chinese Take Out among the midstation shops.

Like everything else, it was boarded up.

Kris led her crew from the station’s Deck 1 with its usual gray carpets and unusual decorations. Just about every square inch of wall was a painting. The station looked like a art museum. Or maybe art studio. The paintings ran the full breadth of art history from primitive to impressionistic. Kris’s mother might have bought some.

Even the dim alley Kris led her three associates into looked like an artist’s day at the zoo.

It was hard to think of Jack as her subordinate for reasons that were becoming clearer every time the Marine first lieutenant gave her an order. And she’d learned at OCS never to consider a chief as anything less than God. Beni had weakened his case for divinity by failing to locate that bomb on Tristan and just barely spotting the one on Kaylia in time. Still, Kris was none the worse for the two assassination attempts, but she was definitely *persona non grata* in Training Command.

Hopefully, Naval District 41 would go better.

The elevator was in a blandly gray space that still stank of garbage. Jack looked like he wanted to test-ride it, but Kris got to the button first, punched it open and led right in. She took position at the back, daring Jack to haul her out.

Jack eyed her for a second like he wanted to toss her over his shoulder and lug

her back to *Pride of St. Petersburg*. He apparently thought better of it as Beni punched Three. Nelly announced the command deck was on three. They took off, Penny standing quietly in her own corner, seeming so much smaller than the beaming woman who said "I do" to Tommy such a short time ago.

The ride processed of fits and starts, with "I told you so" glares from one Royal marine. Kris stared at the ceiling, something she was getting very good at, until the elevator bumped to a stop.

Then the doors hung up halfway open.

Kris leaned over to peer around two male heads eyeballing a large open space dimly lit by one flickering light. Passageways headed off in various directions, some poorly lit. Others dark. Everything was painted a standard Navy gray.

Except for a splotch on the far wall.

"Looks like blood," the Marine lieutenant snapped. "Beni, why don't you have your weapon out?"

"Yes, sir," the chief said, drawing his service automatic.

"You Navy types keep back," Jack said to the senior officers present who were craning to get a look over his shoulder. "Beni, cover me," and the marine slipped through the door in full-assault mode.

Since his OCS had been abbreviated to just a Gunny Sergeant showing him how to wear the uniform without embarrassing the rest of the Corps, the Secret Service must have included SWAT drills in Jack's earlier training. The guy did look deadly and determined.

Kris figured now might be a good time to pay attention to his concerns. She pulled an automatic from the small of her back. It looked standard Navy issue. But she was one-of-those-damn-Longknives. Its magazine held three times the normal load of 4-mm darts.

Penny drew her own automatic, identical to Kris's. It had been a wedding gift, one of several Kris hoped would make Penny and Tom's life around her safer if not saner. Silly Kris, she hadn't wrapped a single gift for blowing up a battleship.

Kris swallowed survivor's guilt for the forty-eleventh time

Penny had not taken her eyes off the stain as she checked the safety on her automatic. "You sure that's not rust?"

"Navy, I told you to keep your heads down," Jack bit back. His M-6 snapping

from one hallway to another to another, as he tried to check every direction at once.

Chief Beni wiggled his growing gut through the stuck door; Training Command chow had been very good to him. He did keep his automatic at the ready... sort of. He frowned at the wall and its mottling. Ignoring the Marine, he sauntered over to it, dipped his pinky in the offending matter, smelled it, tasted it and then looked up.

“Yep. It’s just water and some rust.”

“It kind of looked like that,” Penny said, her voice half distracted. “Tommy would have been able to tell at a glance. He was good at things like that.”

Kris reached over to rest a gentle hand on Penny’s shoulder. “Yes, he was.”

“Well, thank all the gods in space it was just a bit of poor maintenance,” Jack muttered at full volume. “You can come out, Lieutenant, your Highness, Commandership. I hope you keep not needing the security chief you so eminently ignore.”

If Kris followed every instruction, order, or bit of advice Jack was authorized to give her that she was required by regulation to obey, she’d never set foot outside her bedroom at Nu House on Wardhaven. Some Naval career that would be.

But then, both Grampa Trouble and Grampa Ray, his Royal Kingship included, had known she’d keep right on ignoring half of Jack’s orders. Only now he got to nanny her through every square centimeter of space. And she’d been gulled into drafting him into his new authority over her. *Grampa Trouble, you are so trouble. And Grampa Ray, you’re not much better.*

Pulling herself up to a full six feet of regal majesty, automatic still at high port, and dredging the Imperial “we” up for impact, Kris smiled. “We appreciate your concern and rest assured that you will continue to spare no effort for the safety of our high and august person.”

Jack snarled, teeth showing but he limited his response to drumming his fingers on the barrel of his weapon in silent frustration. He’d been doing a lot of that lately.

“That’s the door to the Command Center,” the chief and Nelly said at close enough to the same time that only a computer could have told who spoke first. Kris was not about to ask Nelly which one had.

Computers were supposed to be scrupulously honest, but Kris wouldn’t bet an Earth dollar that Nelly still qualified for that virtue. Not where the chief was concerned.

As Jack took station to the left of the not air-tight door, he motioned the chief to the right. With his free hand, he waved Kris and Penny to spread out. Kris gave some

thought to the two bombs in the last three months and decided standing behind Jack and his wide, armored shoulders might be a good idea. She sidestepped to there; Penny stood behind the chief.

“Open it, Chief.”

Beni screwed up his face in a “Why me” complaint, courage not being one of his obvious virtues, but then did it. The hinges complained but the door opened better than partway before it screeched to a stop. The room inside was dark.

Rolling his eyes to the ceiling as if he might find a reason why such valiant effort was suddenly becoming his portion in life, the electronics wizard felt around inside the door with his right hand, keeping most of his body outside. With a click, flickering illumination lit up the space.

Kris edged out from behind Jack to get a better view. There wasn't much to see: silent workstations, overhead lights struggling to come on. Some succeeded. Others gave up and settled for dark.

“No boom,” Penny said, giving voice to all their thoughts.

“Chief, put those bells and whistles of yours to use for something beside paper weights,” Jack snapped. “Tell me something I don't already know about that room.”

Kris might be in dress whites for the change of command ceremony that seemed to be very much delayed, but she hadn't been totally lacking in survival instincts. Rigged in her hat, indeed every hat she now owned, were antennas that should let Nelly take the measure of every electron within several miles around her more active than those in a glass of water. NELLY, TALK TO ME.

THE ONLY THING ACTIVE IN THERE ARE SEVENTEEN OVERHEAD LIGHTS. NO, SIXTEEN, formed in Kris's brain a full second faster than Chief Beni got the same words out. “Nothing ticking. Nothing tocking, Your Marineship,” the chief added.

Beni had never been what the Navy called “spit and polish.” His time in Training Command, bouncing from planet to planet with Kris and her team of hooligan Navy mosquito boats had not been a good influence on him. Clearly, Kris needed to have a counseling session with the young chief soonest. Either that or promote him to officer and have some old chief square him away.

Since the newly minted Marine officer ignored the chief's last remark and began a slow, cautious entrance into the Command Center, Kris assigned the chief's future counseling and/or promotion a low priority and returned to the problem at hand.

Where was her new command?

Jack and the chief did a quick search of the center. Kris and Penny, their automatics pointed at a nondescript overhead that didn't dare move, kept an eye on the wavering shadows in the several hallways leading off from the elevator. It was spooky, but the shadows stayed empty.

"I got something," the chief announced.

"What is it?" three voices asked.

"A letter."

"A letter?" Kris said.

"Yeah. On flimsy."

"Is it booby-trapped?" Jack demanded.

"No strings attached, and nothing but the minimum static charge to keep the letters on the page, sir. It's just a memo, addressed to the next CO. And it's laid out, each page, side by side, so you don't even have to pick it up to read it."

"What's it say?" Kris said, ducking her head inside.

"Ma'am, I think you better read this yourself," the chief said, sounding if anything, bashful.

Kris raised an eyebrow to Penny. If there was a dirty joke in human space that Beni would balk at sharing in mixed company, they hadn't heard it. What would make the young man unwilling to read them this message intended for Naval District 41's next Commanding Officer?

Kris stepped into the empty command center. *Her* command center. The air was stale like the rest of the station. No low hum of blowers. No human sweat. This was supposed to be the command center for several par secs of human space. It stood vacant, defending nothing.

Maybe five years ago, when the Society of Humanity's writ still held sway in human inhabited space, a planet might take such a risk. Not now. Not in today's worlds of battleship diplomacy. Someone was taking a huge gamble with their future.

Jack wasn't gambling with Kris's personal safety. Like a good Secret Service agent, he backed into a corner that gave him a good view of all three entrances to the combat center. It had seemed like such a good idea when Grampa Trouble suggested maybe Kris could use a Chief of Security on her new command.

She'd readily agreed. Too readily, it seemed. Only after the paperwork was cut

and a fuming Jack decked out in full dress red and blues and sporting a single silver bar of a first lieutenant, one very significant promotion below Kris, did he show up suddenly smiling. It seems that Grampa Trouble had taken him aside and walked him through the new regulations that came into play when a member of the royal blood was a serving member of the military.

As if there was more than one of Kris.

And suddenly Kris discovered that the chief of her security detail, no matter what his rank, could issue her orders. Tell her what she *could* and *could not* do!

It had been a rough trip out. It looked to be a rough command as well.

And that was before the skipper of the *St. Pete* commed Kris and told her that High Chance was only responding with automatics. No human voice. Nothing but the basics.

Beni and Nelly's scans showed only the most fundamental activity on the station. Solar cells feed battery back-ups and not much more. No reactor on-line. Just about nothing.

The skipper of the *St. Pete* balked at docking at High Chance under those circumstances, but Kris pointed out the contract he'd signed for her transportation. He could dock, therefore he *would* dock or face the legal assault a angry Longknife could throw at his company. Fuming, he brought his ship alongside the station, and, to his surprise, the automatics clicked into gear and hauled it in. The last thing Kris heard as she crossed the gangplank was that the *St. Pete* was even drawing reaction mass from the stations' tanks. And being charged for it. Some things were working. Some things always worked if you paid for them.

Like BuPers. Navy personnel always got assignments. Probably not the one they wanted, but, what with the fleet growing, there were always more vacancies than there were jobs to go around. Unless your father happened to be the Prime Minister and your Great-grandfather was the king, of sorts, of the hundred planet association that Wardhaven seemed to be leading.

"And don't forget that situation on the *Typhoon*," General Mac MacMorrison had reminded her at their last meeting.

"Situation," what a nice ambiguous word. It avoided the more specific and nasty word ... mutiny. Kris had actually taken a friend's half joking suggestion and hired a PR firm to come up with a better word for what developed on the *Typhoon*. Several large checks later, their report had been hardly worth a laugh. Probably because Kris hadn't felt all that much like laughing after the Battle of Wardhaven and the loss of so many friends. No, the *Typhoon* and mutiny were going to be tied closely with her first year in the Navy.

“Still having problems finding skippers willing to take me?”

“Afraid so. Commodore Mandanti put in a good word after your service in Squadron 8, but most of his friends are retired, like he was. And even his good word kind of leaves skippers wondering when you’ll decide you’ve had enough of being a good subordinate and head off for points unknown.”

Kris shrugged. “Training Command was working so well.”

“But no planet small enough to need Fast Patrol boats for its defense can afford the kind of security you need. And no one wants to be the planet that has to explain to Ray Longknife ... or Billy ... that you got killed on their watch. Sorry, your Highness, but once again, we need to find work for you.”

“What’s Sandy Santiago doing?” Kris said, with hope.

“You mean Admiral Santiago,” Mac corrected her. “I’ve got her straightening up some of the mess left behind by that little visit those six pirate battleships did on us.”

“Pirate battleships my eye,” Kris spat.

“You want to attack the Greenfeld Confederacy?”

“No,” Kris admitted. Wardhaven’s United Sentients and Greenfeld’s Confederacy were too evenly matched; open war between them would lead to all kinds of horrors. Which was why Greenfeld dearly wanted Wardhaven in a fight with someone while Greenfeld added this or that additional star to its black and red flag. Meanwhile, they skirmished around the edges.

“So Admiral Santiago doesn’t have a ship command at the moment,” Kris said. As a very junior lieutenant, Kris very much wanted to stay in the fleet, not get tagged as a staff weenie.

Mac shuffled flimsies, one of which was Kris’s resignation. They never had one of these counseling sessions without him having her resignation handy. “You adamant for a ship assignment? What would you think of an independent command?”

“Didn’t you tell me during an earlier one of these chit chats that Lieutenants don’t get independent commands?”

“I may have been mistaken. It happens occasionally, even to folks with stars on their shoulders. Ask your gramps.”

This was after Grampa Trouble pulled his “draft Jack” stunt and Kris wasn’t talking to either one of her grampas just then. She kept her face blank and said, “What kind of independent command can a lieutenant have?”

“How about a naval district?”

Kris frowned at the joke. “Aren’t those slots all Rear Admirals?” Kris struggled to keep her voice even. Lieutenants do not chide four stars. Even when the lieutenant is a princess. Especially when the lieutenant is a princess.

“That’s what I’d have said a week ago. But BuPers got this retirement chit from a lieutenant commanding Naval District 41.”

Kris didn’t know which to react to first. Lieutenant. Commanding. Naval District 41. She’d never heard of any such Naval District. She settled her face to bland and let Mac play this one the way he wanted to. After all, he did wear four stars. He ought to have some fun sometimes.

“We seem to have inherited 41 when the Society broke up. Earth hadn’t been paying much attention to it, except to cut its budget every year. I don’t think they’ve had anything but local reservists on the staff, except for this lieutenant commanding.”

“How did a lieutenant get command of a naval district?” Kris couldn’t sit on that question any longer.

“Actually, he was temporary acting. A captain assigned to Naval District 41 died in transit.” Mac shuffled his flimsies. “Next one wrangled a better assignment. They never got around to assigning anyone else, so this fellow put in his twenty and filed for retirement.” Mac looked up. “With us.”

“Retiring at twenty as a lieutenant?” Kris whispered.

“Says here he wants to run a chicken farm full time.”

“You’re thinking of sticking me out there for my twenty?”

Mac shuffled her resignation to the top of his stack again.

“Cut my orders.” Kris said.

“Besides First Lieutenant Montoya, do you want anyone else?”

“Lieutenant Pasley-Lien on Intel.”

“She’s still not fully recovered from her wounds.” The general said, raising an eyebrow. The physical wounds were healing. The mental pay for being alive at the cost of her bridegroom’s life would be a long time balancing.

“She did fine in Training Command. She needs work more than anything else.” And Longknives take care of those they break.

The general nodded.

“Does Admiral Santiago want Beni back?”

“Actually, she was hoping you could make a sailor of him. Any progress there?”

“Not much, but he is due for his chief’s hat.”

“A bit early, isn’t it,” the general said, and danged if he didn’t have another flimsy to check.

“Deep selection, but he deserves it.”

And so Kris found herself hundreds of light years away from home, clicking the safety back on her automatic before she holstered it and staring down at a set of flimsies written to her by a man she’d never met but who’s fate in life she might repeat.

To: Prospective Commanding Officer, Naval District 41
 From: Commanding Officer, Naval District 41, retiring.
 Subject: Change of Command Ceremony

There ain’t going to be one.

Sorry about that, but I had to do what I had to do while I could still do it. The reservists have served with me for a whole lot more hours than any of them ever expected to. They deserve the retirement I signed them into.

And they don’t deserve to be dragged all over space to fit into whatever plans you Longknives may have for them now that you’ve noticed that they’re here. Wardhaven and Earth ignored us for as long as it suited you. So now that you noticed us after I applied for my retirement, I figured I better look after my own. Bet nobody expected me, a mere lieutenant to exercise the full authority of a Naval district commander? Got you there.

NELLY, CAN I APPROVE THE REQUEST FOR RESERVISTS TO RETIRE?

PER EXISTING REGULATIONS, YOU MAY APPROVE RETIREMENT REQUESTS FOR ANY ENLISTED RESERVE PERSONNEL WHO HAVE MET THE STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS. AT LEAST, A NAVAL DISTRICT COMMANDER CAN, Nelly added.

But who’d have expected a lieutenant to do that. Well, you leave a lieutenant in an admiral’s job for fifteen years and he’s bound to notice options the usual J.O. wouldn’t.

And he is retired now. It is not like we can do something to him.

There were snickers from behind Kris. Chief Beni and Penny were looking over her shoulder. Jack looked about to bust a gut wondering what the message said that was causing such humor, but he manfully stood his watch.

“There won’t be a change of command,” Kris said for Jack’s benefit. “Seems the last CO also retired all his reservists.”

“No active duty?” Jack frowned.

“Not a one,” the chief chortled.

“At ease,” Kris growled.

Jack blinked, taking it all in, then shook his head. “You can’t command if there’s no one to command,” with much the same absoluteness that a child might say one and one is two.

“I am the commander of Naval District 41,” Kris said, letting that Longknife determination salt the words.

“It may get a bit lonely,” Penny said, glancing around, then settling into a chair at the table.

Kris wasn’t going to wait for any more nay saying. “Chief, activate this station. Let’s see what we have here.”

“All of it? I don’t think the solar arrays can.”

“If the chief will throw that main switch,” Nelly said, “I have developed a plan to activate the security system and other key subsets so we can determine if the station is safe.”

With a scowl at Kris’s neckline, Chief Beni went where Nelly said, threw a switch, punched some buttons and started doing his own version of waking up the station.

“Don’t activate the central power station,” Nelly said.

“We have to,” Beni shot back.

“Nelly, Chief, you two take it over there and argue among yourselves,” Kris ordered. “Penny, Jack, verify that we are alone on this station and it is safe and stable.”

“I have verified that you should be getting right back on that ship that brought you and leaving this station,” Jack snapped. “We are what, two, three jumps from Peterwald space since they took down the government on Brenner Pass. Kris, this is not a safe station for you. Not like this.”

But Penny backed her chair away from the table, spun in it and started initializing a workstation, bring it up as a security monitor. It gave her a quick report of ALL CLEAR. She then took it through a slower and more specific survey, ending with her eyeballing several locations around the station. "Everything looks as good as a place can be that's been powered down for the last, ah, three weeks, at least."

Jack looked over Penny's shoulder for a minute, doing his own check, lips going tighter as the moments passed. "Yes, yes, if you aren't bothered by a security system that doesn't ask you for any password when you wake it up," he growled, then turned to Kris. "So, it doesn't look like there's some hungry cannibals hiding out, waiting to roast you for dinner. Still, Kris, ah Princess, you can't mean to leave yourself hanging out here for any passing ship to take a shot at."

Jack had a point. A good one, as his usually were. But like most of his good points, it was not one Kris wanted to hear.

She gave him her best optimist smile. "Isn't there an old Navy tradition that says 'Don't give up the ship?'"

"This is a space station," Chief Beni said, helpfully, from where he and Nelly were still arguing how much juice they could pull. "Maybe it doesn't count."

Kris eyed the young chief. His lower chin ... and middle one too ... was quivering. He'd proven he could be plenty courageous when all hell was busting loose. He just didn't believe in getting in that position if he could avoid it.

Kris settled into a chair at the table. Nice simulated wood. Solid. Wide. Jack couldn't get at her without giving plenty of warning. She let the silence fill up. Penny was the first to notice it. She spun her chair around and returned to the table. Chief Beni and Nelly reached some sort of accord, and fell silent. The chief came to the table. Kris actually felt a more concentrated presence of Nelly in her head and on her shoulders. Jack finally double checked the safety on his assault rifle, laid it on the table and sprawled in a chair beside Penny.

"Well, Your Highness, it appears that you want to hold a staff meeting," he said. "Is it to seek advice or, as usual, to let us know what mess you're getting us into next?"

"The usual," Kris said with the best perky smile she could manufacture at the moment. Jack didn't look fooled. He kept drumming his fingers on his rifle.

"Look, we've got a Naval District to defend," Kris said.

"Does it need defending?" Penny asked.

That gave Kris pause. "Of course. How can you say that?"

“Well, just look at it,” Penny said, slowly turning her chair from one side to the other. The intel officer was mostly quiet these days. Withdrawn. But she wasn’t any dumber than she’d been when she said yes to Tommy’s proposal of marriage. “The place has been sitting here, unattended and getting along fine. It’s been ignored by Earth and Wardhaven since forever, and no one bothered it.” Penny shrugged. “I mean, Kris, if you want to have the command, I’m all for sticking with you, but, defend this place. Aren’t you getting a little carried away.”

Kris sat back in her chair. No, Penny wasn’t dumb ... and she’d seen straight to where Kris lived. But she hadn’t totally read Kris’s mind.

Or Nelly’s. JUST LET US FIND OUT WHAT LIES BEHIND MY NEW JUMP POINTS, the computer said, AND WE SHALL SEE WHO IS INTERESTED IN CHANCE.

YES, GIRL, BUT WE CAN’T GO CHECKING OUT ALIENS RIGHT NOW.

YES MA’AM. Nelly said obediently. Sort of.

Kris made sure her conversation with Nelly didn’t reach her face. Slowly she eyed Jack and Chief Beni. They looked pretty much in agreement with Penny. That was the problem when you worked with people you let become close friends. They knew when you were pulling the wool over your own eyes even before you did.

Kris really did want her own command. Even if it was just quiet Naval District 41. She let her breath out in a sigh. “Okay, let’s start over. Naval District 41 doesn’t look like much, but it’s mine, see. All mine. I’d like to see what I can do with it. That honest enough?”

“And if an half dozen Iteeche destroyers come loping through the local jump point ...?” Jack said.

“We head dirtside, rouse the locals to guerrilla warfare and hide in the deepest caves we can find,” Kris said.

“I can drink to that,” the chief said, raising an imaginary mug of brew.

Jack shook his head. “I don’t like it, Kris,” he said for the millionth time.

“You’re not paid to like it, Jack,” Kris answered for the millionth and first time.

“So we’re going to just sit here and play target?”

“No,” Kris cut in, letting her Longknife grin out to play. “I have no intention of just sitting anywhere. We’ve got buoys to tend, places to explore.”

YOU BET, Nelly said with as much of a playful grin as a computer was allowed. I

WANT TO SEE WHERE THOSE NEW JUMP POINTS LEAD.

DOWN, GIRL, ALL IN DUE TIME.

“You don’t have a ship, Kris,” Penny pointed out. “Not really. You don’t intend to use that cruiser for anything but show, do you?”

Kris had gotten a good look at the *Patton*, an Iteeche Wars era light cruiser, tied up to the station when the *St. Pete* was on approach. Her orders were not to commission the ship except for a major emergency. Her orders didn’t define what constituted a major emergency, but after a quick glance at the report on the old cruiser, Kris was pretty sure she’d have to be very desperate to even try to get the reactors going for that old bucket of bolts. The contractors who brought it out had slept in space suits ... something about no one trusting the ship to keep its pressure up. They’d been only too glad to be quit of the ship. They’d spent the trip out identifying discrepancies, not looking for them, just listing the ones that slapped them in the face. Kris ran the list and quit when it went past 400,000.

Some brilliant type at headquarters had come up with the idea that the people on planets might feel more safe in these uncertain times if they had a warship in their sky. Maybe other planets got something better, but clearly Chance had drawn the bottom of the barrel. No, the *Patton* was not a likely means of transportation for Kris and company.

Besides, Kris didn’t need a full fledge cruiser to check the jump point buoys, do the looking around she had in mind. No, something much smaller would fit her needs very nicely.

“We need a buoy tender. Nice little one.”

Penny shook her head. “I don’t think Naval District 41 is funded for a buoy tender, even part time. My record check show it hasn’t had one pass through for the last five years, then I quit looking. No way will the Navy assign one to us.”

Kris grinned at Penny. “So, we don’t ask the Navy for one. Ever leased a boat before?”

The intel officer relaxed into her chair. “That’s a relief. For a moment, I was afraid you wanted me to hijack one.”

“She’d never do that,” Jack said, face dead serious. “If there’s a ship to be stolen, she’ll do it herself.”

Kris shot Jack a glare but he just grinned back at her. Kris returned her attention to the Navy lieutenant. “All we need is a small merchant vessel with a hold large enough to haul a half dozen spare buoys out to the jump points. Obviously, it needs to

be jump capable. Bigger than our PF's, smaller than a corvette like the *Typhoon*."

Penny was nodding, but a frown was growing. "And you want me to lease it. With what?"

"Nelly, arrange a line of credit on my account."

Penny shook her head. "Kris, didn't you learn anything from all the flack you got from the Navy for using your personal computer for Official Business. Just because they've given up telling you that you can't have Nelly do this or that ..."

"I should hope so," Nelly cut in.

"But renting your own ship for Navy business ..."

"So we don't tell them and it won't bother them."

"What they don't know won't hurt us," Jack sighed.

"You're catching on," Kris said.

"Lorna Do is the next port of call for the *St. Pete*?" Penny said, getting lost in thought. "I guess I could rent something."

"A six month wet lease," Kris advised. "Include a crew. From the looks of things, we're going to need one."

"For buoy tending," Penny said.

"And other duties as I may assign," Kris added.

"Don't tell them a Longknife is involved or no one will take the contract," Jack added dryly.

"You really think so," Penny said, then seemed to think better of it and nodded. "Yeah, you're right. I don't think I'll mention who I'm working with."

"You going to send her alone," Jack said, softly.

Kris didn't need the hint. Left all on her own, Kris wasn't sure Penny would survive a long trip. "I'll send Abby along to make sure no one hassles you," Kris said. "I won't need her to gussy me up for balls. Things ought to be pretty quiet here."

"Things *are* pretty quiet here." The chief pointed out.

"Wonder how long that will last?" Penny said.

“At least five or ten minutes,” Jack said.

“Folks, this is a back water. Nothing ever happens at Chance. That’s why they gave me Naval District 41.”

“Yeah. Right,” came from Kris’s three nominal subordinates.

* * *

Kris watched on the station’s screen as the *Pride of St. Petersburg* boosted out of orbit. Abby had been hired by Kris’s mother to be a personal maid but she hadn’t complained about being sent off with Penny. Kris was no longer surprised by anything Abby did. Or didn’t do.

“I wonder how many steamer trunks she’s got with her this trip,” Jack asked no one in particular.

“She brought twelve aboard,” Kris said. “I was looking forward to seeing how many she rolled off the *St. Pete*.” For some strange reason, Abby always had a better idea of how much trouble Kris was headed into. The number of steamer trunks following Abby rather regularly ... and accurately ... foretold how many rabbits Kris would need to pull hats out of to get free of whatever mess she ended up in.

Kris kept telling herself she needed to have a talk with Abby, but somehow the time was never quite right for such a sit down. Maybe, if Naval District 41 was as quiet as claimed, she and Abby could finally have that heart to heart talk.

Kris turned away from the screen, rubbed her hands together and smiled, an optimistic little thing that she rarely got to use. “Let’s see what we have here.”

Six hours later, she kind of wished she hadn’t.

She started with the *Patton*. Or those parts of the ship not closed off with doors marked “DO NOT OPEN. LOW PRESSURE BEYOND.” That eliminated a major chunk of the ship from review.

On the bridge, Kris could only shake her head. “I was very glad to see the *Patton* and the rest of Scout Squadron 54 show up at Paris when she did. The reserve crew’s work to get her moving must have been nothing short of heroic.

“The *Patton* helped you?” Jack was one of the few people cleared to know exactly what happened when the Wardhaven and Earth fleets gathered at the Paris system to sign the devolution agreement that formally dissolved the Society of Humanity ... and didn’t go to war over it. Kris’s part in that was still much debated by those in the know.

“Yep, it turned out Grampa Trouble served on the *Patton*, a long time ago. He and Great-gramma Ruth honeymooned on it.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Must have been in better shape.”

“Not as Grampa tells it. They were attacked by pirates once. The skipper ordered a broadside and the ship did loop de loops instead. A system board had been installed backwards.”

Jack shook his head. “Well, it doesn’t look any better now. Your orders frock you up to commander if you commission her.” He arched an eyebrow. *Does he really think I’m that rank happy?*

“I think I’ll live longer if I stay a lieutenant.”

“Finally, something we can agree on.”

Nelly wanted Kris to power up the sensors on the boat, see if Kris could locate the putative extra jump point out of the system that the data on Nelly’s bit of rock from the Santa Maria mountains seemed to show. Most of the navigation instruments had red flags draped on them. OUT OF ORDER.

GUESS WE’LL HAVE TO TAKE THAT LOOK ANOTHER TIME.

Nelly wasn’t buying that answer. BUT DOES IT MEAN OUT OF ORDER OR JUST THAT THEY WERE PICKING UP MY JUMP POINT AND DIDN’T KNOW HOW TO READ IT?

DOWN, GIRL. THE SHIP HAS NO POWER. THE STATION’S BARELY ON. YOU’RE TIME IS COMING. PATIENCE MY DEAR.

PATIENCE MY NONEXISTENT ASS! Was Nelly’s unladylike response.

Kris found herself biting her lip to control a laugh.

“Want to let me in on the joke?” Jack asked.

“No, just me and my insubordinate computer. Nelly is not behaving.” Jack accepted the explanation with visible doubt.

The rest of the station was shipshape and abandoned. Kris checked two auto guns. They were locked down locally, ammunition belts removed. If she wanted to defend this station, she’d need them reactivated. And people to monitor their fire. The station had close-in defense lasers. Kris didn’t have the juice to power any of them up. So long as the station was on solar cells, it could operate. To become a going concern, it needed its fusion reactor on line. Three people could not run a reactor even if they were trained to do it. None of Kris’s were.

"I could run it if you want me to," Nelly offered. Jack and Beni both looked relieved when Kris declined the offer.

Kris found her quarters as Commander, Naval District 41. Somehow in the quick turnaround of the *St. Pete*, Abby had slipped one of her steamer trunks up to Kris's room. Just one, and it held only Kris's uniforms and personal effects.

Jack found a trunk in his quarters, or at least the quarter for the District's never used Deputy Commander across the hall from Kris's. His trunk also had Beni's duffle bag on top of it. The chief settled into the room next to Jack's, a nice one officially designated for VIP guests. Jack and Beni arranged enough security along the corridor to satisfy themselves that neither needed to maintain a watch through the night.

Kris left them to worry about that, set Nelly on watch, and slept the night through.

She awoke early the next morning to find that the station had continued its routine journey around Chance, there was still air to breathe and no cannibals had nibbled her toes. Finding a set of fresh khakis in the trunk, Kris showered, dressed, and went looking for something to eat. That last lunch on the *St. Pete*, while nicely cruise ship huge, was a distant memory.

She found a mess large enough to seat a hundred, a kitchen fit to feed a similar mob, and a pile of combat meals gathering dust. One had been opened. Apparently the chief, quick to point out he was a growing boy, had done a bit of culinary exploring yesterday. Kris got a small coffee pot going, and soon found Jack at her elbow. Showered, shaved and in undress green slacks, khaki shirt and tie, he frowned at Kris's food choices.

"No one ever died from field rations," Kris reminded him less he invoke some security regulation to leave her famished.

"Yes, but no one ever called them food, either," he said, filling a coffee mug from Kris's first handy work. "Hmm, Your Highness, you can boil water."

"Suborn crews, steal armed vessels and boil water. Not a bad résumé."

"Between just us, just how long will you keep this up?"

An honest question deserved an honest answer. She decided the scrambled eggs could warm without her attention, took her own mug, and settled across the table from her Security Chief. Keeping a table between them was getting to be a habit. At the moment, if Jack decided to throw her over his shoulder and carry her off to someplace safe ... there really wasn't anyplace safe to go. Still, it was a good habit, and Kris maintained it.

"I don't know, Jack. Believe it or not, yesterday took me by surprise."

Jack nodded. "So you were making it up as you went along."

"Who'd have thought," but Kris stopped herself before she rehashed their yesterday. Today looked to be a bigger problem ... and they were going to have to face it.

Jack seemed to be doing a good job of mind reading. Or maybe he'd been around her enough to know her usual pattern of problem solving. "So, what do we do today?."

"Eat first, I hope," Chief Beni said from the door. He hadn't shaved and was still in a worn sweat suit proclaiming "Go Navy." "If you can call that eating. Remember, Your Princessness, I joined the Navy cause they ate better." He scowled at the meal warming. "So why are we eating grunt food?"

"Cause it's all that's available," Kris pointed out.

Beni drew his own cup of coffee, and sat down. "This station has twelve different restaurants. Everything from New Chicago Pizza to Retro Cantonese."

"All closed," Jack reminded him.

"Yeah. How do we fix that?" Kris asked.

"If you feed them, they will come?" the chief asked.

"More like if we have work for them, they will come, and then they have to eat," Jack corrected.

"So why ain't there nobody working here?"

"If I knew the answer to that," Kris said, getting up when Nelly suggested her eggs might be done, "I'd be a whole lot happier commander." They ate, dumped the leavings in a trash bin they would need emptying soon, and were no further toward a solution to their problem.

"Well," Kris finally said, "if there's no one here to answer our questions, I say we go where someone is. Three hundred clicks down there's plenty of folks. Must be someone willing to talk to us. Tell us the local score."

"There's a bit of a problem, boss," the chief said.

"There's a shuttle. Nelly check before I marooned us here."

"Yes, ma'am, there's a shuttle for us, maybe a dozen."

“We’ve got reaction mass,” Jack said.

“Yes, sir. *St. Pete* quit fueling when they got a look at the price. Said they’d fill up a Lorna Do.”

“So.”

“There’s just enough anti-matter in the shuttle’s motor to boil the reaction mass we need to land,” the chief grinned. “Unless we can fill up dirtside, if we go down, we stay down.”

Kris took a moment to absorb that before turning to Jack. “I *really* want to meet this Lieutenant Steve Kovar. I have *got* to thank him for the wonderful condition of the command he’s turned over to me.”

An hour later, they boarded a small Boeing shuttle. It was on standby mode drawing from the station's power to keep juice flowing to the anti-matter containment pod. Kris had just enough power to break out of orbit and glide to the port outside Last Chance. She set those coordinates into the nav computer and let herself grin. "Landing this will be no strain."

"Assuming we don't run into traffic on the way down," Jack said, slipping into the co-pilot's seat and bringing up a report on traffic into and out of Last Chance.

"Looks like they're coming up on a solid hour of no business," Kris said.

"Assuming there's no one else dropping in unannounced," Beni said, standing between the two of them. "My old man would whap me horrid if I flew into some place with no flight plan."

"Yes," Kris agreed, "but where's the fun of telling them we're coming. They might bake a cake."

"Order out the anti-aircraft defenses," Jack muttered. "You're really going to surprise them?"

Kris knew the rules, but she was tired of being on the receiving end of all the surprises this trip. If there was going to be another, she would do it. Besides, with all her skiff racing, no question she could put this puppy down just fine. A glance at Last Chance's airport showed plenty of fields around it. Kris measured the risk she was taking, found it low enough for her, if not for Jack, and checked the rest of her board. Everything showed green. "Strap in, Chief, we're headed down."

"Is it too late for me to get out and walk?"

"It was already too late when you said, yes, you'd work for this woman," Jack said, cinching his seat belt in tight.

Fifteen minutes later, Kris had the shuttle on final approach. No one at the port had called her, but she decided she'd better check in. "Last Chance Space, this is

Navy shuttle 41, I'm on final approach for a dead stick landing on runway 090. Is there any traffic I should be aware of?"

"Navy shuttle 41, you got power for a go around?"

"Negative on that."

"Then I guess we better not have any traffic in your way. You're lucky we're in an after lunch slump in business. Give me a minute while I redirect a freighter."

"Thank you, Last Chance Space."

Exactly one minute later, the tower came back on, and gave Kris wind, temperature and barometric pressures.

"Ah, that's not what your automatic station is broadcasting," Kris said, adjusting her instruments.

"Everyone local knows that station is off, and makes their own adjustments. You being Navy, I figured you might not know."

Beside Kris, Jack studied the heavens as if they might hold some hidden wisdom. What Beni was muttering wasn't fit for a princess's ears. But an experienced Navy princess found it rather mild compared to what she wanted to say.

"Thank you for the update. We're two minutes out."

"We'll get a tow for you. Have your credit card handy."

Now Kris did say a very unprincesslike word.

She set the shuttle down smoothly; the brakes were uneven, but they slowed to a stop just past a bright yellow tug. Halted, Kris opened the window and waved the tug in. It came, but stopped in front of the shuttle and did nothing. Kris waited for a minute to be hooked up to power and a tow. Then another minute. Outside, nothing happened.

"Ah, I think they're waiting to be paid," Beni stuttered.

Kris snapped off her seat belt and headed for the hatch, aft. Jack followed, whether concerned for her safety ... or the tug crew ... he didn't say. Kicking the hatch open almost made Kris feel better. She quick marched into a dazzling sunny afternoon. The two fellows lounging in the tug's front seat seemed to be enjoying it. "You planning on parking me right here in the middle of the runway?" she demanded.

The younger of the two, a long tall drink of water with an unruly shock of blue

hair sporting worn coveralls, looked about ready to run. The other fellow, bald, scruffy white beard, and more substantial if not downright round, held onto the steering wheel of his tug and fired right back. "We don't move you until we run your credit card. Navy credit's no good. Operations chief says she's got enough unpaid chits from the Navy."

"Just how much has the Navy been ignoring this place?" Jack muttered softly. Which gave Kris pause enough to eye the well worn tug, overdue for a paint job. She scuffed the concrete runway. It was solid, but in need of recovering. *This is Naval District 41's territory. Not Wardhaven, Lieutenant Longknife*, she reminded herself.

Reassessment over, Kris reached for her wallet, went past the official Naval District 41 charge card she'd been required to oh so formally sign for and pulled out her own. When Kris signed for the District card, she'd asked what her limit was. The procurement agent 3/c said that depended on the appropriations approved for her district. All effort by Kris or Nelly to find out what that magic number might be had failed.

Kris offered her personal ID and credit chit to the tug driver. He fed it into a remote on his rig without even looking at it. At least he didn't until the remote beeped happily and approved the charge. Once the card popped back out, the driver did give it a solid look. "You this Kris Longknife?" he asked.

"Usually. On my good days," Kris answered.

"Boss, you know who she is. Don't you ever watch any vids but racing and football?"

"Nothing else worth watching," the boss said and elbowed the kid out of his seat. "We don't have all day. Let's get this thing off the duty runway."

"But she's ... She's..." The tall fellow seemed to have developed a stutter.

"Just another flyguy."

With the shuttle hooked to the tug, the two piled back into their seats. "Is there a crew truck coming for us?" Kris asked.

"Nope."

"Can we ride in with you?"

"Nope, seats are full."

"Can an old chief hitch a ride in on your back bumper?" Beni asked, not interested in a long hike to the facilities.

“Suit yourself, Chief,” the driver said. “If you’re not too proud, the rest of you can share the bumper. Or walk.”

Jack offered Kris a hand up, not that her six feet needed all that much of an up. Still, it was nice of him. It also reminded her that she was a princess and serving commander of Naval District 41 and it would be undignified to screech at a tug driver.

And might upset the locals if she killed him.

The drive to a tie down slot was sedate. Their shuttle was exiled to one well away from the terminal. After making sure it was secure, the driver offered them a ride to the operations center, a delapidate building with a very threatening windssock hanging limply in the center of a patch of brown grass.

“You better settle up your bill with the port manager,” the driver warned as he dropped them off. Inside she found flies, a desultory ceiling fan and a middle aged woman behind a counter. Kris approached, then cooled her heels while the woman finished a game of solitaire on her old fashion computer.

“So they did send us a Longknife,” she said, not looking up.

“Just a young one,” Kris countered.

“A Longknife is a Longknife. The old ones are doing you. The young ones are dreaming of when they’ll be big enough to do you. Which one are you?” she said, looking Kris’s way. The eyes held Kris. Whether the frumpy outer show was real or fake, the eyes were a piercing blue that cut deep. There was ice around them, too. They took Kris in, weighed her to the last milligram and found her ... worth keeping an eye on. She leaned back from her computer and kept those eyes locked on Kris.

“I’m Kris Longknife,” the Navy lieutenant said. “I commanded at Wardhaven.”

“You are that one,” the woman nodded slowly in agreement. She let that hang in the warm, summer-filled air for a moment before posing her next question. “And I am Marta Torn. What brings you to our neck of the backwoods?”

Kris had a dozen answers to that, but none got past the woman’s eyes. “They didn’t have any other job for me. I think they’re hoping I’ll hang around here, get bored and resign.”

The woman snorted. “I think you just told me the truth. But it will serve as good as any lie. Nobody’ll believe that.”

Kris shrugged. “None of them ever crossed Billy Longknife.”

“That’s the fate of every kid hatched, Honey. Mommy, poppy are never happy

with you. Happy the parent who finally realize the kids are their own best judge of what's good for them. God help the kid who gives in and lets mommy and poppy rule."

"Any chance you could talk to my mother, father about that?"

The woman laughed, a big one that started low in her chest and reached all the way to her eyes. "If they ain't listened to you, what makes you think they'll listen to me?"

"Speaking of listening ... or talking where talking's not all that wanted, I'm kind of the new commander of Naval District 41 and it's going rather strange. You wouldn't happen to know where I could find Steve Kovar and have a little talk with him?"

The woman tapped her computer. "He should have been here by now. It's Tuesday afternoon, so he's driving a cab."

"I thought he'd be running a chicken ranch?"

"He does, and cabbies, too. You can ask him about that. I think I just heard the cab pull up."

The front door of Ops opened and a short fellow in jeans and flannel shirt walked in. His red hair was long and his beard shaggy. "You got any baggage?" was his only question.

"Only a one day hop, down and back," Kris said. "You will see that my shuttle is refueled," Kris said back to Marta.

"I guess your card is good for it," the Ops manager agreed." Steve gave the woman a raised eyebrow. "She's using her own card. No Navy IOU from her."

Steve shook his head ruefully and turned for the door; the Navy had to hurry to catch up. The cab had four doors in front. About halfway to the rear, it turned into a pick-up. Well, this was the rim; everybody worked.

Kris settled in the front seat beside Steve, Jack and Beni shared the back. The former commander of Naval District 41 took off, spilling a monologue about the crops in view. "We export the most prized single malt whiskeys this side of Old Scotland. Or the new one. And our wines are highly prized as well. We also grow several modified crops for feed stock to the pharmacy industry. Chance is proud of its trade balance. We import only the critical items needed for our growing industry. Fifteen of our twenty largest cities have their own fusion reactor. The others are making use of our natural water power."

"I got that briefing on the way out," Kris said.

“Yes, but no briefing gives you the smell of the thing. The pride in the workmanship,” the man pointed out. “Look around.”

Kris did; they were coming over a slight rise. Behind stretched fields of grain. Almost lost in them was the tower and two long runways. Ahead, in a shallow bowl, was the city of Last Chance, stretching along both sides of the wide An’Ki River. There were tall buildings, none as tall as those on Wardhaven, but still, the city compared with several of the smaller metropolitan centers back home.

“Looks nice,” Kris said. “Why name it Last Chance?”

“It was intentional. Place like Greenland back on Earth, Greenfeld with the Peterwalds, are intended to fake people into thinking they’re headed for a great place to live. Folks that settled Last Chance didn’t want those kind. They wanted folks looking for a challenge. Willing to fight a planet for their future. Our population’s over a hundred million. We’ve got no unemployment to speak of. We like it here.”

That hadn’t been in Kris’s briefing. Oh, the raw numbers, yes. But the attitude. Hmm. Something to think about.

“How do you like my station?” That question still showed pride of ownership even if he wasn’t interested in taking Kris for a change of command tour.

“Very clean. Very ship shape. Very empty.”

Steve laughed. “Yes, I imagine it is very empty.”

“You know, anyone could have come along and grabbed it. You’re just two jumps from Peterwald space now that the Greenfeld Confederacy pressured Brenner’s Pass into joining them.”

“Yes, but no one did until you came along and took it.”

“It’s a Wardhaven command.”

“Is it? Ask Marta Torn back there how long it took her to get payment from Wardhaven for my chits. Ask any merchants I wrangled supplies from.” There was raw anger behind those words.

Kris chose to watch the road. It had widened into four lanes as they passed through a residential area, and needed the extra lanes for the amount of traffic sharing the road with them.

“Where we going?” she finally asked.

“I figured on dropping you on the mayor’s doorstep. Ron Torn, you met his mom

back at the port. Let him handle you. We don't have a planetary government. Each city has a mayor and takes care of itself. Kind of like the classical Greeks."

Kris recognized the reference. "Those city states didn't do so well when the Persian Empire took an interest in them."

"But they did fine up until then. And seeing how small we are, and how much we've been ignored by all the empire builders, we kind of figure we can keep on keeping on. At least we did until we found ourselves entertaining a Longknife brat." He softened that with a wry smile. A very small smile.

"If I understand your defense posture," Jack said from the back seat. "It's to make like road kill in the ditch and hope no vulture takes an interest in you."

Steve glanced over his shoulder. "I should have expected a Marine to put it that delicately. But yes. You got it in one."

"It won't work." Kris said.

"Says you. Tell it to the mayor. You'll like him. He's even less likely to buy what you're selling than his mom."

While Kris absorbed those twists, Steve pulled out of traffic to an unloading zone in front of a tall building of concrete and gleaming glass. Waiting for her was a tall fellow in slacks, a long sleeve white shirt and sweater vest. He studied her with his mother's blue eyes and looked uninterested in buying anything she was selling ... the standard face of an opposition politician. He let her open her own door. Once she and her team were on their own feet, he offered her his hand.

"Hi, I'm Ron Torn, mayor of Last Chance."

Kris did the introductions of her own crew.

"You hungry," the mayor asked.

"You bet," the chief cut in. "All we had for breakfast was those ration boxes someone left out. And for supper, too."

Steve joined the group. "Any of you know how to cook?"

"Peanut butter on toast," Beni said. Jack shook his head.

"Jack says I boil water very nicely," Kris offered.

Steve looked hurt at the skill level of his replacements. "I guess I'll take the chief over to The Old Camp Store. They've got travel chow that are a step or three above

Army issue.”

“I’m yours,” Beni said, arms open wide.

“Get some fresh eggs,” Jack said. “It can’t be all that hard to scramble a few.”

“And fresh coffee,” Kris added. “And bread and cold cuts. I can make a sandwich.” Beni started looking very poor as the list lengthened. “Nelly, give the chief a credit voucher,” got a happy smile from him. Steve rolled his eyes. But no one made any nasty comments about a helpless damsel in distress. Maybe she’d outran her princess label.

Kris and Jack followed Ron into the office building. “Nice city hall,” she told him in the spacious foyer, cool in black marble floors, gray granite walls .

“We only rent space here. Not even a whole floor. Chance is death on big government. Keep the beast small and out of the way. ‘Nothing important is ever done by government.’”

“You don’t look like the type to settle for something that doesn’t do anything,” Kris said as they entered the elevator.

“My family curse. Great-grampa was central to raising Chance’s troops for the last campaigns of the Iteeche Wars. Folks just kind of expect a Torn to go into government. I think they leave it to us.” Kris didn’t see an opening there to talk defense and decided to put it off for a while. Going hard from the start hadn’t gotten her anywhere with the lieutenant. Maybe polite chit chat would show her a better opening.

The mayor’s office was on the thirteenth floor. “We get a discount for taking that unlucky number.”

“Why didn’t they skip it?”

“I think they liked the idea of our address starting with 13.” Ron said, opening a door for Kris. The small waiting room held a woman at a computer, some chairs and a table covered with readers. The mayor led Kris and Jack into his own office.

The view from Ron’s corner office was spectacular. As he offered Kris a chair she said. “I’m surprised a government that has so little respect gets such a grand view.”

Ron waved Jack toward a chair. “I think the business folks want me to see what they’re doing. Admire it. Be intimidated by it. Which do you think?” Again those blue eyes were on her, now with a hint of a smile at the edges. Was it for her, or the sardonic twist of their conversation. Hard to say.

“You must have some tax base?” she said, turning the topic to something Billy Longknife’s daughter would. Something neutral they could talk about. She wanted to keep him talking about his world. Not her issues. Not for a while.

“Yes, there’s a small tax on imports. Not exports, mind you. But if we buy something off planet, I get my milligram of flesh. Tells you how much we want to be self sufficient.”

“It can’t be enough for essential services,” Kris said, taking in the view and measuring it against what she knew of the cost it took to support a place this size.

“Fire department is mostly volunteer, with a few full time folks to hold it together for the rest. Same for the police, though we don’t have much crime. What with near full employment, most everyone is too busy to bother with stealing from their neighbor. Again, I do have a few full time members of the constabulary. Most are older folks, the kind of grandma or grandpa types who can settle disturbances with a stern glare and a few reasonable words.” Ron’s eyes broke from Kris to sweep the vista of his city. “It may look big, but we are pretty small town in our attitudes. It’s embarrassing if your kid gets in trouble, more trouble than Grandmama expects,” he said, with a wink for Kris. Then he shrugged.

“There’s a lot to like about Chance. Wear out a pair of shoes here, and you’ll never leave.”

Kris glanced down at her nearly new shoes. “That what happened to Lieutenant Kovar?”

“Didn’t he tell you his story?”

“It didn’t come up. We were discussing other things.”

Ron raised an eyebrow at that. The crinkle around his eyes got thoughtful. “Maybe I shouldn’t tell his story. Then again, maybe my mom knows his story better than he does.” There was a pause. Kris let the silence hang.

“Mom says he was a real hard charger when he came out here. Not bothered at all to find that he was the only officer here beside the captain. When that captain retired and left before his replacement got here, Mom says he was really tickled to be acting commander of his very own Naval District.”

Ron must have read the question in Kris’s eyes. “No, not strutting around making a big thing of it. Steve’s too serious to let rank go to his head. No. But serious as a heart attack about doing a good job of it. Because that was what the next commander suffered on the last leg of his trip out here. They brought him off the boat on a stretcher, and then wheeled him right back on board. Question about when he’d recover kind of left the command up in the air for, oh, six, nine months. Then they appointed a new boss for 41. Who wrangled new orders while in transit. I think the

Jonah curse was already pretty plain to see. At least for anyone not here on Chance. Somehow, Earth got busy with other things and never did bother appointing a new commander. Glitch in the computer. Who knows?”

“And Lieutenant Kovar just sat here and did nothing?” Kris could understand a year or three. But fifteen?

“Well, there was a lass. Lovely girl. My mom’s youngest sister. She seemed to make his exile quite survivable.”

Those blue eyes smiled at Kris. Edges nicely crinkled. Lips full. Was he offering to soften her exile. Did she really want to keep knocking her head against all the stone wall people put in the way of her Navy career? That was not a question she needed to answer today. Time was something she had plenty of. But no reason not to answer one question. NELLY, IS RON MARRIED?

CHANCE CENTRAL RECORDS SHOWS HIM UNMARRIED, KRIS. BUT I SHOULD POINT OUT THAT MY REVIEW OF THE FILES SHOWS THAT THE LAST MARRIAGE ENTRY IS DATED OVER A YEAR AGO. BIRTHS AND DEATHS ENTRIES ARE UP TO DATE AS OF YESTERDAY, BUT OTHER DATA IS BATCH ENTERED AT SPORADIC INTERVALS.

Right. Whenever they can get a volunteer to do it.

Kris realized she was letting the conversation sag, and not on a note that she wanted to emphasize. She grabbed for something and her mouth opened on, “And he wasn’t bothered by the lack of active duty personnel assigned to District 41?”

“Maybe the chief should answer that one. Chief,” he yelled.

The door opened in a moment; the woman who’d been occupied with the computer asked, “What you bellowing about, Mr. Torn?”

“The Navy here wondered how it came to pass that all Steve was honchoing were reservists. You, being the Chief of Personnel up there for so long, I thought you might give her your take on why he put up with all your lip and back talk.”

The woman, only slightly shorter than Kris, and with middle age helping to fill out her curves, shook her head. “The real question is why I put up with your lip,” she said, but she came in, Jack leapt to his feet to give her a seat, which she took with full nobility, leaving the Marine to hold up a wall.

The chief put one leg up on the desk, then crossed the other pants-suited one over that one and leaned back comfortable. When Ron did the same, Kris made to imitate them, and almost went over backwards in her chair.

“Oops. Sorry,” Ron said. “You got the bad chair.”

Kris got herself balanced upright, back to prim and princess. And made a note of just who rated comfortable chairs from Ron ... and who didn't.

"I don't think the lieutenant noticed what BuPers was doing to him, not for a while. A couple of permanent party shipped in after him. Other folks shipped out. Then more shipped out and no one came. And the budget would come through with more in the reserve account for active days and less in the active duty account. Come second year, when we were down to just four permanent and him, he and I had a long talk about what we saw going on. I told him you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, especially when no one's offering you a sow to de-ear."

"What did the lieutenant say?" Kris asked.

"Something about how did they expect him to defend a whole sector of space with nothing but part-timers." That was a sentiment Kris could agree with. But it sure didn't sound like Steve the Taxi Guy that she'd talked to this morning. Then again, ten years can change anyone. Or wear them down.

"What did you do?"

"The rest of us part-timers ratcheted up our ball game. Had to when all four of the active duty types shipped out together. The real bitc..., ah problem was that they didn't allow for us to recruit any new reservists. Leastwise, not to start with. Fill the hours, but do it with the same old hands. Something about saving on training. We did what we could. And some of us had kid sisters, little brothers that maybe tagged along and took up some of the slack. You know, you can learn a whole lot about operating a 6-inch laser in makie-learnie fashion."

Kris wasn't sure she'd like to trust her defenses to someone who'd picked up their laser training monkey see, monkey do. Then, no one was offering her anyone with any kind of training.

"You said 'at first.' That changed?"

"Yeah, right about the time you and Earth split the sheets, they let us know that anyone who wanted to join up was only too welcome. By that time we old hands were kind of sour on all things blue, and we also noticed that things were more than a little bit hot in this place or that. You must have noticed. News stories tended to mention that you were there."

Kris nodded as innocently as facts allowed.

"So I told my kid sister that if she wanted to join and get paid for what she'd been doing, I'd tear her arm off and beat her over the head with the bloody stump." The chief eyed the ceiling. "I recall my objections to my sister were the gentlest of several we all made. Anyway, I called everyone's attention as to how all of us were coming up on

retirement about the same time.”

“And you all went out together,” Kris said.

“Most of us joined together. During that long peace we sure as blazes didn’t join to fight anyone. No, we joined for the friendship, and we quit as friends.”

“And the volunteers just did it for the friendship, too?” Kris said. Just how altruistic was everyone here?

The chief and Ron exchanged glances, the kind thieves do late at night over beers. “Friendship, helping out big sis, and Steve did manage to pay them a bit under the table,” Ron said.

The chief was grinning from ear to ear. “Every morning down on Chance, the lieutenant would fill the shuttle’s tank with reaction mass. Up at High Chance, he’d unload all but what he needed to get home that night. We all did it. And sold the reaction mass at a premium to ships going through. The proceeds paid a stipend to our volunteers. Worked great.”

“No accountants ever noticed,” Kris said dryly.

“Nobody from any headquarters ever came by to check the books,” the chief grumbled.

“Ah, this might not be the best approach for you, Your Highness.” Ron said. There it was, the princess thing was back on the table. “I understand that you recently had trouble about using your own money on a relief mission. This informal staffing solution definitely wouldn’t pass anyone’s idea of a smell test.”

“I’m glad we agree on that.”

“However, my mother said to tell you your shuttle is topped off on reaction mass. Please unload the extra mass to the station’s tanks to the account of High Chance Welfare and Aid Fund, a certified charity here on Chance.”

“And you think that is legal?” Kris paused before asking Nelly for her opinion.

“Defense personnel are authorized to render aid to certified charities, per 18 U.S.C. 8525. I am prepared to stand up and swear in any court of law that this is such, my mother serving on the board of said charity,” Ron said, the crinkle back around those blue eyes. No question, these crinkle was for the game.

NELLY, IS RON A LAWYER?

HIS LAW DEGREE IS FROM THE PUBLIC NET. Public net degrees didn’t get a lot of

respect. Still, they were recognized before the bar as equal to anything from Earth's near mythical Harvard. She might not hire Ron to present her case, but she'd definitely be glad for his testimony.

"Nelly, do everything you can to set up legal barriers between me, my command and the High Chance Welfare and Aid Fund."

"Doing that, Kris."

"So that's the other head you sport," Ron said.

"Very helpful on things like this."

"Well, tell me, are you as hungry as your chief?"

"Breakfast was abbreviated."

"At least the part we risked," Jack said.

Everyone stood. "Well, I know a great place for a steak dinner. Maybe a bit more. And our local civic theater is doing a revival of Gilbert and Sullivan, I think this month's feature is '*HMS Pinafore*.' The reviews say the humor has aged well. Would both of you care to join me? I have three tickets."

For someone who had not filed a flight plan, Kris had the very strong suspicion she was very much expected.

Dinner proved that Chance's beef industry was easily the equal of any, certainly Wardhaven's. Ron ordered one of the local wines, but made nothing of Kris sticking to water. Jack praised the vintage lavish enough for both of them. Dinner was down to the bones well before time for the local theater, even if it did have an early curtain, "So all could be early to bed and early to rise."

But there was a live band and a full dance floor even at this hour. "Folks with desk jobs have to get their exercise somehow," Ron offered as he stood and reached for Kris's hand. She humored him, but found no reason to regret the move; Ron was a fine dancer. He, unlike so many "official" partners Kris had survived, did not endanger her toes. After two dances, Ron handed Kris off to Jack with a smooth motion that came so suddenly and seemed so natural that Kris found herself dancing with the Marine lieutenant.

"I guess it's not fraternizing," she said as they went into the second dance.

"It's quite public and certainly above board," Jack said. "And so much more modest than the last time."

Kris frowned at the reference, then remembered the rescue mission on Turantic that involved passing herself off as a working lady of the night and Jack as her trick. Of several possible replies, Kris chose, "All in a day's work."

"If you work around Longknives," Jack agreed.

"What are you two talking about?" Ron asked as he cut in near the end of that dance.

"Top secret stuff," Kris said darkly.

"Right," Ron agreed, taking Kris into his arms. "If you told me, you'd have to kill me."

"No, draft you," she said, laughing.

"As a citizen of Last Chance, a sovereign polis of Chance, I am not subject to your laws be they drafty or otherwise."

"But you are subject to current events, Ron."

"Every day we get out of bed, Longknife, we take a risk," he said, twirling her out to arms length. Then he pulled her back close. "Your idea of my risks and mine are seen from different perspectives. What do you say we avoid this argument tonight?"

They did for another dance, and then he passed her back to Jack. "Should I ask what you two were talking about, or is it top secret? And remember, you already drafted me."

Kris accidentally stepped on his toe, marring his Marine perfect shoeshine. After that, they just danced. Kris spent the better part of half an hour on the floor, being passed between the local man and her official protector. When Ron called time for the theater, her feet didn't even hurt.

The local theater was pure amateur. Still, the sets were well done, several of the leads had good voices and they seemed to have a clear eye for what they wanted to do with the ancient comedy. Kris was not surprised when she was gently nudged in the ribs at the reference to making admiral by polishing up the handle on the front door. She elbowed Ron right back.

To her surprise, she didn't even get a raised eyebrow at the line about the junior partnership being the only ship she ever did see. Apparently Ron had done his homework. That was good for him, because she'd planned to do major damage to his kneecap if he didn't respect her ship time.

But Kris didn't make any defense when Ron added his own emphasis to the

stage's reference to never thinking of thinking for herself at all. Her hard won independence from the Longknife shadow, and the voluntary surrender she had finally chosen to make to her name and the legends attached to it was not something she could explain in a whisper during a libretto.

Intermission came with Kris wondering at the fate of women who had to struggle against arranged marriages, and doing her own measuring of the difference between her mother and the captain's leaning on his daughter. No wonder the humor stayed with us. Some things hadn't changed nearly enough for one girl.

Ron suggested they get something to drink at intermission. Jack maintained his careful two steps behind her, and three hundred and sixty degrees of concern. The two of them were the only ones in uniform and, though the khakis might have blended in with dust, they didn't blend well with the suits and dresses tonight. Ron had failed to mention that theater was an occasion for showing yourself in style.

The refreshment line was an ambush, but not one Jack could protect her from. They joined the back of the line, and were immediately mugged by three elderly folks leaning on canes and proudly displaying lapel buttons earned for valor in the Iteeche Wars. Kris spotting them as they closed on her at a fast hobble. Of late, her father had been using her to meet with that wing of his party, a portion of his constituency that, until the present troubles, had never been his strong suit.

Kris smiled, and froze that smile as the white haired woman on the right said, "What you going to do with that wreck they got swinging around our space station?"

"Now Mabel, that's no way to talk to the woman," the bald man on the left said, spruced up in a suit two sizes too large for his sparse form. "Not if we want anything out of her."

A more substantial man, hobbling on two canes between the two, now showed that he could manage without either. He elbowed both of them. "You two hush." He squinted at Kris, now leaning on his canes. "Lieutenant, isn't it?"

"Yes," Kris agreed.

"We hear that you have an old Iteeche War General class cruiser docked at High Chance." He paused, but his watering eyes fixed on Kris and held her.

"Yes," Kris said. "The *Patton* is a veteran of all three of the Iteeche wars, as well the Unity war. I understand she helped put down the pirate outbreak after the Unity war."

"Good ship," the woman muttered.

"Bad ship. She can't even hold air," the left man snapped.

“Oh, I’ve been aboard her. She holds air. At least part of her does,” Kris made quick to point out.

“But does she smell like a fighting ship?” two canes asked.

That was about the last question Kris had expected. She paused for a moment to reflect on the smell of the *Patton*, then to compare it to the blend of ozone, air conditioning, motor oil and human sweat that Kris had come to expect of a working man-of-war. She shook her head.

“That’s what I expected. She’s dead. Lost her soul,” the left man said sadly.

“Well, she hasn’t had any people to loan her their souls since we were kids,” the woman pointed out.

“There’s no chance your planning on fighting her are you?” the man with two canes asked.

Ron had deserted Kris, moving ahead with the line toward the order counter. Jack was still at Kris’s rear, guarding her from the wrong dangers it seemed tonight, and snickering softly at the question. Kris apparently let the question hang there too long, because the white haired woman took a stab at answering it.

“There is no way this young woman could fight that ship. The second reactor is deader than my late husband, and the main propulsion system has two engines bad out of seven. No doubt the laser capacitors won’t hold a charge. And she’s got no crew.”

So much for the brilliant idea of some desk-bound commando back at Main Navy that putting a ship in orbit around every planet would make its people feel protected. “We were kind of hoping to keep that a secret,” Kris whispered.

“Maybe from someone born yesterday,” the man leaning on two canes snorted. “Not from us old maintainers of warships.”

“It’s been a long peace,” Kris said as her only contribution to a conversation that was headed she knew not where.

“That’s what bothers us. Kids aren’t learning anything about our wars in school,” the woman snapped.

“Don’t know what they’re teaching them these days,” the man on the left added.

“We aren’t going to be around forever,” the man in the middle added softly. “We have great-grandkids we’d like to show what it was like to fight an Iteeche Death Sun, to close with a Burning Star knowing half your squadron wouldn’t be coming back.”

“Not like they see in those vids they make now days.”

“All kissing and boom boom shoot’em up,” the woman finished.

“I certainly agree with you,” Kris said.

“Good, then you won’t mind us doing some work on that cruiser of yours.”

“Not like we could do it any harm.”

“Any worse than it is already,” the three shot at Kris in rapid succession.

“We have grandkids that need to put in civic duty hours to graduate from high school. Why not have them do them with us. Listening to our stories.”

“We could show them how to get a ship into fighting shape.”

“My grandson has a couple of his buddies working on their engineering degree in power systems. They’d love to fix up the reactors on that bucket. It would look great on their résumé.”

“Or so Mabel keeps telling him.”

“I bet we could get that old tub in good enough shape for a trip out to the moon and back. We could.”

Kris held up her hand, to slow the machine gun-fast patter. These old vets wanted to fix up *her* warship for some pleasure cruises. No. “You want to turn the *Patton* into a museum!”

“Yep.” “Pretty much.” “You got it, Lieutenant,” came back.

“It’s not like you ever planned on commissioning her and taking her out for a fight,” Jack whispered softly behind her.”

“But that was suppose to be a secret between the two of us,” Kris whispered back. The three oldsters in front of Kris grinned from ear to ear.

“It’s not just us that want to work on your ship,” two canes offered, careful to use the “your” where the ship was concerned. “There’s fifty, sixty of us old farts chomping to get our hands on that bit of history, scrap of our youth, if you don’t mind me putting it that way. It’s not just our kin alone that will be working on it. There’s several high schools, and not just those around Last Chance. We could do it up nice.”

“And put some fight back in the old girl,” the woman added with a far away smile. “Just cause she’s old don’t mean she don’t still have some fight in her.”

“Mabel, don’t scare the lieutenant. Ma’am,” two canes added quickly, “we’re old, but we ain’t fools. We just want to fix up the old boat. Nothing more.”

Kris nodded, not risking words. Kris had been finding humor in the idea of these old folks painting the *Patton* and maybe putting some of the circuits back in working order. But Mabel’s words had struck an echo, a reminder of enthusiastic volunteers Kris had led out against battleships. Those wonderful optimists had fought, and, too often, died.

No, Kris was not interested in a bunch of superannuated vets and their adoring great-grandkids turning the wreck of a ship into a false facade that would crumble on them when put to the test. Well, there was one quick way to squelch this. “Nelly, as the Commanding Officer of Naval District 41 am I authorized to accept the donation of labor and equipment in the performance of my official duties?” A quick no should end this.

“Your Highness, you are.” Nelly said simply.

“What! NELLY, THAT’S NOT THE ANSWER I WANTED.

SORRY ABOUT THAT. YOU ASKED ME. YOU SHOULD HAVE ASKED ME BEFORE YOU DRAFTED JACK, BUT YOU WOULD NOT EVEN LET ME GET A WORD IN EDGEWISE. “Your Highness, as a member of the royal family, you are authorized to accept donations of labor and products for the defense of the realm and for historical purposes. It is not for me to say which covers the offer these fine people are making, but it does fit into one of these options in 10 U.S.C. 21215.”

“Let me guess,” Jack said from behind Kris. “A new reg.”

“Promulgated after the attack on Wardhaven,” Nelly added. “It seems that several of the donations of equipment, even the ones that were intentional, were not legal.” Was Nelly sassing Kris for some of the more piratical ship acquisition she’d made in her three days of sweating before that battle?

Ron returned with sodas for Kris, himself and Jack. His timing was perfect for catching the final offer of the vets ... and Nelly’s take on current events. The crinkle around his eyes and lips looked potentially terminal. He handed Kris her drink. “I’d heard of the famous Nelly, but I hadn’t really believed the stories. Is that what we all have to look forward to in a couple of more years?”

“Not if I have Aunt Trudy reboot her,” Kris scowled.

“She is always threatening that,” Nelly said primly. “She never does. And I personally think Aunt Tru and her own computer are enjoying me too much to ever let Kris harm me.”

“Some day I’m going to let Tru wear you for a week. Then we’ll see what you’re

sounding like.”

“You could not survive a day without me.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Ron said, “but there is a motion on the table to let these fine people donate supplies, and work for the repair and maintenance of a warship in Chance orbit. Considering how concerned Lieutenant Longknife is about Chance’s defense, I should think she would jump at the chance to improve them. What say you ma’am. We need a decision.”

“Ron, the *Patton* is not a warship. It’s a wreck looking to happen. It is not contributing anything to your defense.”

“Then let us turning it into a museum,” two canes shot back.

“You want our people to be more aware that the universe out there is a dangerous place,” Ron pointed out so reasonably. “What better way than to have these old veterans passing along to our young the true stories of what they faced.”

Kris did not like being manipulated. Father did it. Mother did it. And Grampa Trouble had just done a superb job of it. She wanted to take this bunch and tell them to stuff their idea where the sun didn’t shine.

“And if we’re working on the *Patton* up on the station,” two canes added, “we’ll need food, things like that. Tony Chang has agreed to reopen his New Chicago Pizza and the Chinese Waffle House for us. I understand you’re living on tight rations.”

Kris glared at Ron. “I didn’t tell them,” he insisted.

“I ran into your chief at the Old Camp Store,” the white haired woman said. Surrender did not come easy to a Longknife. But clearly, this was one of those times when surrender was an option, and best done quickly.

“We,” Kris was careful to use the royal pronoun, “are glad to graciously accept your donation towards the common education of the youth of your planet.” Education. Not defense. Never would Kris let that ship sail into combat.

The rest of the play went quickly. The guy got the girl, or maybe it was the other way around, and Ron drove Kris and Jack to the port late that night. He turned on the runway lights and did not try to kiss Kris good night but he did surprise her.

“Hank Peterwald never would have let those people mess with a ship of his. But then, I’d never expect to see him out here with just a hulk.”

“You know Hank?” Kris got out.

“I had a scholarship to Peterwald University on Greenfeld. Took classes with him. You are not at all what I expected.”

NELLY?

YOU DIDN'T ASK AND YOU WERE BUSY AND HOW WAS I TO GET A WORD IN?"

Kris got the shuttle back to orbit and safely docked. She left the men to put away the groceries and got to her room before the shakes started. *I spent the day with a buddy of Hank's.* What was the real story of this planet? And where was a ship when she needed it?