

Kris Longknife – Tenacious

By

Mike Shepherd

1

Rear Admiral Kris Longknife relaxed, enjoying the warmth of the sun on her oh-so-vibrantly alive skin. Two weeks ago she could have easily ended her days dead and frozen in the dark emptiness of space.

But, she'd won her battle. She and her command were alive and countless billions of ill-advised alien invaders were dead.

Now, finally, Kris was free to enjoy the beach with just herself and a smile. Oh, and a just as naked Jack, husband of less than a month, beside her.

It seemed like it had taken forever to get here, to take the third day of her interrupted honeymoon. A honeymoon should be a full month. That was why it had the moon thing in it, right?

Her honeymoon had been interrupted after one single lovely night. To Kris's way of thinking when she reported back to duty she was owed twenty-nine more days.

Kris was oh so keeping count

Now two days into the rest of her honeymoon, she was enjoying herself. And looking forward to another twenty-seven.

She deserved the break. It had taken Kris two weeks to shed all of her hats, as well as her clothes and inhibitions.

What wife needs inhibitions around a husband like Jack? was asked and answered with a smile.

For two long weeks she had been Commander, Alwa Defense Sector, Senior Executive Officer of Nuu Enterprises in the Alwa System and United Society Viceroy to the Human Colonists on Alwa and Ambassador to the Aliens. For two interminable weeks, she'd worn her multiple hats, burying her dead and tended to the living.

Collecting the wreckage of both human and alien ships had not taken long. Faced with possible capture, both sides had dropped their reactor containment vessels and blown themselves to atoms. Kris knew why the humans had; the aliens must be denied any scrap of information that could lead them back to human space on the other side of the galaxy.

But why are the aliens doing it too?

Five of Kris's ships had been blown to bits and had another ten had been bled heavily of their Smart Metal™ armor. Two of those losses had been from the six ships spun together from her twelve survey and ore hauling ships. Thank heavens Admiral Benson, commander Canopus

Station and its yard, as well as retired Musashi Admiral Hiroshi who commanded the Kure yard, had survived. Admiral Hiroshi had been wounded as the *Kikukei* struggled under heavy alien laser fire. Still, the two yards had already changed the four damaged warships back into seven ore carriers.

They now carrying asteroid miners back to their distant claims.

This made a lot of the people happy who reported to Kris as Senior Executive Officer of Nuu Enterprises in the Alwa System. When the mines shipped ore, the fabricators and mills on the moon made goods, both for war and for the budding modernization of the Alwa economy.

Sooner or later, there had to be a way to make money off the crazy Alwans. Some very savvy business people were pulling their hair out as they tried.

Kris, being Navy, would let them worry about that.

As Viceroy to the humans on Alwa, she'd been happy to report the success of the U.S., Helvetican Confederacy and Imperial Musashi Navy in defending their lives. Then, as ambassador to the Alwa Aliens, she'd been invited to address the Association of Associations.

That address had not gone well.

Kris came prepared with visuals, both of the gigantic alien base ship and one of the several hundred monstrous alien fighting ships. She also projected pictures from her battleboard of how the fight went.

Half the aliens in the sunlit plaza where they met stood in one silent huddle, eyes wide, arms, formally wings, showing their only reaction as they flapped nervously on occasion. The other half of the Association's members were mostly made up of older Alwans, who did a lot more flapping as they ran around the plaza. Their arms waved wildly, and their long necks ducked up and down as they ran together in small groups that formed and reformed to no pattern that Kris, or any other human, had been able to figure out.

KRIS, I'M TRYING TO FIND A PATTERN IN ALL THIS, BUT NEITHER I NOR ANY OF MY KIDS CAN SPOT ONE. Such an admission from Nelly and her family of supercomputers was unheard of, but not to be unexpected. Biological diversity could introduce such random factors to defied rational analysis.

What came next was more rational, but no less surprising.

The Alwans had a serious debate.

For Alwans, that meant putting on wild displays of motion and plumage, what they had left of it. The Alwans may have started as birds, but they hadn't flown in several million years and feathers now were quite vestigial. Still, the plumage was colorful and made for some rather bright displays.

Among these Alwans, particularly the ones Kris knew as Roosters, all this dancing around and flapping resulted in no actual harm. No doubt among the southern clans, the Ostriches, there would have been some heavy chest butting, maybe even a head kick or two.

When it was all over, the plaza emptied in a blink.

"What just happened here?" Kris asked her Granny Rita.

"Damned if I know," the old woman replied. Rita was the titular head of the human colony for near on eighty years, a survivor of the Iteeche War as well as a marriage to Kris's Great-grampa Ray, known better to most as King Raymond I of the United Society.

She turned to one of the Alwans who worked with the humans, and, using Nelly's translator, repeated her question about what just happened.

Bringer of Harmony Between The People and the Heavy People waved her own arms in

what almost came off as a human shrug. “They have agreed to disagree. They will take this back to their own Associations. There will be much more dancing and posing. Then, who knows what will happen? Maybe we will see different elders at the next Associations of Associations.”

And if the news reports were true from the Sharp Eye View, Alwa’s main news network, the debate in the local associations were going long, loud, wild . . . and just about as inconclusive.

Kris was only too willing to let them do their arm waving while she spent her time on the beach.

Kris reached for Jack. She found him, fondled what she found and let her smile grow into a happy leer as he responded to her.

“Wife, won’t you let a man rest?” Jack said with a groan that failed to reach below his belly button.

“But you seem ready for more. I’ve learned that you men need a lot of rest, but . . .” Kris said with a pout that she knew had too much eager smile in it.

Her husband reached over and caressed her closest breast. “Hmm, the wife does seem willing, and, it appears the husband is recharged.”

“Kris, are you decent?” came from the bowl where Kris had put both her computer, Nelly, and Jack’s computer, Sal, so the two supercomputers, easily worth as much as any of the warships in orbit, would not get sand in their self-organizing matrix.

“Nelly, what does it matter to you? And why are you interrupting my husband and me,” Kris demanded.

“I don’t care what you two humans do with your time. I’m enjoying working on some refinements to the new Smart Metal they’re producing at the lunar mills, but Penny wants to know.”

“Why?”

“Because she and Mimzy are coming up the beach, and the view from Mimzy says you don’t meet the normal human standard for decent.”

Kris grabbed for the sarong provided by the hotel and lay it over herself. A glance down showed that it had merely added color to her skin and hid nothing. Jack doubled over the sarong he had worn from their cottage, but it really did no better.

Kris tossed the spare towel over his lap.

“I’d rather you cover up a bit,” was his response. “No doubt, Penny has her boyfriend, Lieutenant Izuka, with her.”

Now Kris did glance down the beach. Yep, Penny, one of her recent Maids of Honor and her boyfriend, sidekick, and fellow intelligence officer, but from the Musashi Navy, were coming up the beach. He was well behind Penny and making a studious effort to keep his eyes anywhere but where Kris and Jack were.

“Nelly, tell Penny to go away. I’m on my honeymoon.”

“She says that you’ve gotten more of a honeymoon than she ever got and you sent her off to find the alien home world and have been avoiding her ever since she got back.”

“Ouch,” Jack said.

Kris lost her smile. Penny did have a claim on short honeymoons. She and her bridegroom Tommy had enjoyed only one night before they’d followed Lieutenant Kris Longknife into a hopeless and desperate fight to save their home planet. They’d won through, but the last shot from a dying battleship had skewered their tiny fast attack boat. Tommy had

made a heroic leap that shoved Penny to safety and left him pinned in the wreckage. Kris made one of those horrible calls you do in a fight that saved most of their lives . . . but cost Tommy his.

That Kris had been silently in love with Tommy long before he met Penny only added to the pain.

That, however, was an old scar. It had nothing to do with Kris being too busy to see Penny during the last two weeks and choosing her honeymoon over something Kris was sure could wait.

“Is there any chance you will give me another week?” Kris asked, through Nelly.

“Nope,” came back quickly. Down the beach, Penny didn’t even hesitate as she made her way through the soft sand toward Kris.

Defeated by her own subordinate, Rear Admiral Kris Longknife stood to meet the lieutenant commander. She wrapped the sarong around herself several times, resulting in her almost becoming decent. Beside her, Jack did the same, his being wrapped at the waist while Kris’s started at her oh so small breasts that her husband seemed very satisfied with so Kris was doing her best to be satisfied with, too.

Jack’s sarong failed to hide a certain bulge, so he sat back down and settled the extra towel in his lap.

“We’re decent,” Kris grumbled in resignation.

Penny and her fellow intelligence officer labored through the soft sand to stand before Kris. Masao was ever the dutiful gentleman. He spread a towel and the two of them settled their khaki-clad bodies cross-legged on the cloth.

Without preamble Penny said. “You sent us to find the alien home world. I think we did. You really need to see it.”

2

Kris studied her friend. The short sleeves of her khaki uniform showed pale skin starting to burn.

“Are you wearing any sunscreen?” Kris asked.

“I told her she needed sunscreen,” Lieutenant Iizuka said, “but she insisted on charging out here as soon as we arrived.”

“It can wait,” Penny snapped.

“Let’s adjourn this meeting to the veranda of our bungalow,” Kris said pointing to where she and Jack were staying.

“Kris, you can’t put me off.”

“I’m not putting you off,” Kris snapped, “I’m just moving this meeting to someplace where you won’t be laid up for a week with sunburn if it goes more than say, fifteen minutes.”

“Okay,” Penny said and stomped her way through the sand towards the nearest shade. Kris followed, leaving the men to collect the blankets, towels and computers.

At the bungalow, Kris offered Penny a seat at their breakfast table, then excused herself

to dress. Jack soon joined her. Both of them chose the most covering of the clothes provided by the inn, rather than their uniforms. For Jack it was a pair of shorts and a three button shirt; for Kris it was a muumuu. Both took the time to reinstall their computers. For Jack, it was just a harness that settled easily on his head. Kris, however, had paid to have Nelly jacked directly into her brain. She removed the plug that had kept sand out and plugged a wire from Nelly back in.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH were the first thoughts that formed in Kris's head. I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT FORGET ME.

NEVER, NELLY.

THAT'S NICE TO HEAR, had more sarcasm in it than a computer should be allowed. However, Nelly had been upgraded way too many times to keep count since she had been given to Kris before the first grade. One of those upgrades had included a fragment of a storage device left by the three alien races that had built the highway between the stars two million years ago.

Now, Nelly was just plain Nelly. Obstinate, outspoken, an atrocious joke teller, and the one item that could possibly rival Jack as the most important thing in her life. SHALL WE GO SEE WHAT PENNY HAS FOUND?

I ALREADY KNOW, KRIS. MIMZY TOLD ME. I'VE JUST BEEN WAITING FOR YOU TO FIND TIME TO LOOK INTO PANDORA'S BOX.

Which was Nelly's none too gentle way of reminding Kris that she and her kids could handle a lot more data a whole lot faster than mere meat mortals.

Kris settled Nelly in her usual place below her collar bone, raised an inquisitive eyebrow to Jack, who gave a slight shrug, and together they returned to the veranda. Iizuka Masao had rustled up two more chairs from somewhere, and the four took their own corner of the table, Kris sat with Jack on her right. Masao settled on her left, leaving Penny the position directly across from Kris.

That was a bit of a surprise. Kris had expected Penny to take the place at her left hand. Clearly, Penny wanted to confront Kris head on. Mentally, Kris notched up the category of this meeting from Best Friends' Get-together to Official Staff Meeting; maybe even Staffer has a Major Bone to Pick with Boss.

Kris raised an inquisitive eyebrow, and waited for Penny to start. It was, after all, her dime.

"You sent me to search five or six systems and see if one of them might have the night sky that we've found on the overhead of all the alien ships we've examined. See if it might be the home of the alien raiders we've been fighting." Penny said, without preamble.

"I know I got back just in time to see you win a hell of a fight with one more of those alien raiding clans. I know you're busy. But I also heard that there were three alien warships watching your latest fight and they're likely observers from three more of those huge clans. You know and I know that there's another fight coming. We don't know how long it will take them to get their act together. Okay, fine, you have a lot on your plate. I can understand it. You're one of those damn Longknives, but you're just a Longknife. Not God."

Penny paused for a moment, "But Kris, I've seen shit that I really think you need to see for yourself. You need to see this stuff and dig deeper than I was able to with just one ship and me looking over my shoulders and ready to run if anyone or anything said 'boo'."

Penny again paused in her pleading, and Kris considered what she'd heard. Yes, she'd sent Penny off in a knocked-together warship with half its lasers aimed aft so she could shoot while she ran. And yes, Kris had more questions than she could catalogue about the aliens.

The damn things would not say a word when hailed. Heaven knows, Kris had tried and tried again to open communications with them. Their response was to try to kill her every time and when they failed, they made sure that every last one of them died.

These aliens were frustrating Kris's long-held belief that any problem could be talked out if you just tried hard enough. She knew that was Father, the Prime Minister, speaking in her head. As a politician, he firmly believed what he had taught his daughter at his knee.

But the great politician Billy Longknife had never met these bug-eyed monsters who, very disappointingly, looked more like humans than any race we'd come across so far in space.

"Okay, Penny," Kris said with a sigh, "what did you see that is so important you've dragged me and Jack off that lovely beach?"

Penny held up a finger. "First, we found a planet that was sanitized right down to bedrock. Best we could tell, it had been hit with atomics and rocks so hard about a hundred thousand years ago that we couldn't find any sign of life. Maybe there are some. Maybe a virus or two survived, but we couldn't spot them in the time we dared take or the probes we sent down.

"Oh, and we left the probes down there. We couldn't risk being contaminated by stuff we couldn't spot. What they found was no water. No nothing. No life at all as best we could tell."

"Are you sure it ever had life?" Jack asked.

"Under all the hammering, it sure looked like there had once been river beds," Masao put in. "We clearly made out ocean beds. We found the remains of coral reefs and we think we found fossil remains of fish and other aquatic life, but to prove it we would have needed better sensors on our probes than we had. That is why we really think there needs to be a second expedition to look that place over, fully equipped and soon."

Beside him, Penny nodded agreement, before continuing her own debriefing.

"But it was the planet in the next system, just one jump away, that I really think you want to see," she said.

"Why?" Kris asked.

"Because it has the aliens on it."

"You got to see them?" Jack asked, incredulously.

"You weren't supposed to risk getting that close," Kris said.

"We didn't risk anything. The big bad aliens weren't home, but their kind of aliens were on that planet," Penny said.

"You're not making sense," Kris said.

"She is," Masao put in, defending Penny, "she just needs to explain it more slowly."

Penny threw her friend a look that told Kris a lot more than she needed to know about how the relationship between them was going. Penny appreciated the protection but did not want any help. Kris's old friend was still trying to come to term with the fact that the men she loved always seemed to die. For Penny, giving her heart to any man would be a long, hard journey.

Apparently, Masao was still willing to wait.

Penny blew out a long breath. "There were no alien ships in orbit around the next planet. There were no space stations, no satellites, no reactors or radio communications. It looked like an empty planet. But as we got close, it started to come alive.

"There was an atmosphere and oceans. Vegetation covered the land, at least in most places. Radar mapping showed several places where it had been hammered by asteroid strikes. Small ones, not extinction events. Also, there was one huge plain of glass. Radioactive, too.

Something had been hit hard by atomics.”

“You think it was attacked from space?” Jack put in.

“From our place in orbit, it was impossible to say, but it sure looked like it had been hit hard some hundred and ten thousand years ago, give or take a few millennia,” Penny said.

“It was what was *on* the glass plain that caught our attention even before we sent probes down. There is a pyramid of granite rock right in the middle of the plain.”

“A pyramid?” Kris and Jack said together.

“No question but that it is artificial,” Lieutenant Iizuka said.

“What’s in it?” Kris asked.

“We have no idea,” Penny said. “There seems to be a door, but it was locked down tight.”

“Couldn’t your nanos get in?” Kris asked.

“Kris, whatever we sent down there we were leaving there and we didn’t want to leave any high tech stuff. That meant no Smart Metal. That meant what went was pretty big by nano standards. Yes, there was a door, but we didn’t dare drop anything that could get through the door seal. Oh, we tried with what we had, but that is one tightly sealed door. Nothing we dropped could get a look in.”

Penny paused, “But that was only one of the things that left us wanting to get a better look. There were aliens. At least I think they were aliens.”

“Did you get a DNA test?” Jack said.

“A very basic one. Again, we didn’t dare drop anything too sophisticated,” Masao said. “But it was the different tribes down there. Once you got well away from the plain of glass, there were some pretty sophisticated hunter-gatherers. I think there was even some farming. They had stone-edged weapons and were hunting some real big stuff.”

“But not close to the plain,” Penny said, taking back over the story. “The small hunting groups there were really primitive. Bare ass naked, not that the climate was all that cold, but still. No tools but some wooden spears and clubs. No stone chips. They had to make due with small game or scavenge stuff the large carnivores had chewed open.”

“Why the difference in skill sets?” Jack said.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Penny answered.

“What happens when the two tribes meet?” Kris asked.

“I wish I knew, but it didn’t happen while we were there. Kris, we could only stay in orbit for two, three days. There were two jumps into that system, besides the one we came in, and if one of them started coughing up alien monster ships, we would have ran. But if all three got active at once . . .” Penny let that thought run free.

Kris didn’t much care much for the situation either.

“If we go back there, we’ll need to put warning buoys at all the jumps, maybe even detach a ship to drop off buoys for the next three systems out from those jumps.”

“So it couldn’t be a small expedition like the one that rescued the *Hornet*’s crew,” Jack said.

Kris nodded, but her thoughts were already chasing down another rabbit hole. “Have your boffins been talking to other boffins?”

“They’re scientists, Kris,” Penny said, sounding irritated. “Of course they talk. While you’ve been busy putting out fires for two weeks and enjoying married life, all the boffins have been talking about is our expedition. However many ships you take, there will be more than

enough boffins begging to fill them up.”

“And if I’m going to go, I’d better go soon,” Kris said, throwing Jack a sorrowful look. “No telling when those three alien clans will start getting frisky.”

“We’ve got a ship out replacing the warning buoys that got shot up during the recent unpleasantness,” Jack said. “It’s also stretching the warning net to eight jumps out, giving us two extra layers.”

“That’s nice,” Kris said, not really feeling all that well about it. She’d used up just about every trick she had to win the last battle. That her next set of attackers would know how she clobbered this last bunch meant she’d have to cobble together a whole new strategy for the defense of Alwa.

She’d barely managed to patch together this last one. What could she possibly do next time?

One day at a time, she reminded herself.

Kris stood.

“Okay, Jack. You owe me another twenty-seven days of honeymoon.”

“Aye, aye, wife, Viceroy, Admiral, bosswoman.” he said, saluting with a broad grin.

“I’m sorry, Kris. I didn’t mean . . .”

“Yes, you did,” Kris said, cutting off Penny’s apology. “And it needed to be done. Okay, it’s back to work for me and you. You’re going back. Not in the *Endeavor*. This time we go prepared for a fight. I’ll take what’s left of BatRon 1,” Kris decided. Would six ships be enough? Maybe she should pull in another couple to bring it up to a full squadron.

“Did you two bring a car big enough for four?” she asked Penny.

“Yes.”

“Fine, we’ll ride back with you. Jack, time to put on our game faces, or at least a uniform. After you,” she said.

To Kris’s great sorrow, Penny and her boyfriend stayed waiting just outside the cabin door. There was no way to stretch the delightful morning with one last quickie.

Kris used the drive back to rehash Penny’s report. Nothing new, either exciting or terrifying, was added to her set of challenges. Penny and the *Endeavor* had played mouse at a cat’s convention that never got called to order, thank heaven.

The star-studded ceiling of one huge auditorium in the blasted alien base had shown what looked like a particular night sky. It had been repeated in the largest room of the monster warship that Kris had captured intact while rescuing the crew of the *Hornet*. In that fight, Kris had disabled their reactors. She’d hoped to get prisoners. Instead, the aliens opened every hatch to space, killing themselves.

Kris’s scientists were still trying to make sense of the alien machinery and gear. Someone had actually forwarded a report to Kris suggesting that maybe we shouldn’t worry so about the aliens digging information out of our computers. Their technology looked nothing like ours, assuming we were guessing right about what they used for navigation and fire control.

That's what the word meant. Aliens were, *ipso facto*, alien to our way of thinking.

However, based on Nelly's assessment of the ceiling and projection of where and when that night sky might have sparkled down on a planet, Penny had been dispatched to look at six star systems.

The first three of had showed nothing of interest. The next looked thoroughly beaten up. The fifth was full of questions. Penny had not gotten around to the sixth, but raced for home. She arrived only to find home in the final desperate moments of a battle for survival that had cost the life of tens of billions of aliens and left the human colony on Alwa, as well as the Alwans themselves, with precious time to prepare for the next attack.

Did Kris dare haul off a quarter or more of her defense so she could answer questions she didn't yet know how to ask? And if she didn't find out something about her enemy, would they and humanity find a way to stop the killing before one or the other was annihilated?

Once again, Kris found herself with few answers and a whole lot of questions.

She contacted the people who made the next level in her way too small chain of command and began scheduling meetings.

The first meeting was already waiting for her at the end of the drive. Ada stood on the shady veranda of Government House, Granny Rita at her elbow. Officially, Granny Rita was Kris's great-grandmother and retired. Any position she might hold was purely emeritus. Officially, Ada was the chief executive of a human colony of nearly two hundred thousand. However, Kris had made the mistake of giving Granny Rita a decent computer. Since the old gal got on net, she never missed out on anything interesting.

And to her, everything was interesting.

Ada was also not one to beat around the bush. "You think you've found the nest of these varmints that want to kill us?"

"We think so, but it doesn't look anything like Earth," Kris said and let Penny repeat her brief.

"That so far past strange, I don't know what to say about it," Granny Rita said, and left Ada with nothing else to do but shake her head.

"So, you're going to go exploring," the colonial chief added.

"It seems like a good idea, and I think we have time for it right now."

"Your absence won't stop work on getting us farming, fishing and other gear. Or defensive preparations, will it?" Ada asked.

"You'll keep doing what you're doing," Kris said. "Our fabricators on the moon and mines on the asteroids will keep producing the things you want. You'll hardly miss me," Kris said dryly.

Ada smiled at the lie. "I'll touch base with that Pipra Strongarm woman and see what she can do to speed up our own efforts to get more land irrigated and under seed, more fish hauled out of the ocean and more hunting parties into the deep woods for some real red meat. Good Lord, but what I'd give for a nice rare steak."

"Wouldn't we all," Kris agreed.

Kris had thought that fighting aliens was her worst problem. Then she discovered that Alwa and the human colony had been living on the raw edge of starvation, surviving from one crop to the next and enduring empty bellies if the rains didn't come on time. If Kris wanted to fight her fleet, she'd first have to find enough food to feed it. Initial steps had already been made. Matters were improving.

It would, however, take a whole lot more before Kris could take her food supply for granted. And she was hoping, preferably soon, to get more reinforcements.

How would she feed *them*?

“You talk to Pipra,” Kris said. “You have first call on boats, trucks and anything you need to complete the new viaduct. Then we’ll try to manufacture some tractors to help with the planting.”

“When do we get the fourth reactor off the old *Furious*?” Granny Rita asked.

The *Furious* was Granny Rita’s old ship from the Iteeche Wars, the last survivor of her CruBatRon 16. It had languished in orbit for eighty years. Now one reactor was powering both colonial and Alwan electronic equipment and changing how they all lived. Two were powering moon fabricators so that their own reactors could be switched to ore carriers, and may have included some of the reactors blown to bits with the *Proud Unicorn* and *Lucky Leprechaun*, who hadn’t been all that lucky.

“We’re working on that reactor,” was all Kris could say. “It was cannibalized to get the other three going. We’ve ordered parts from our fabricators on the moon, but they don’t have specs for those items in their data bases. It might be easier to just build a new thermonuclear reactor for you than get that one back up and running.”

“And what about spare parts for our working one,” Ada said. “And the two you stole for your moon bases? If you don’t have spare parts for the fourth one, you don’t have spare parts for them either.”

“I could be wrong,” Granny Rita said, “but I don’t think she wanted you asking that question. They can damn near make anything they got the specs for, but if they don’t have the specs, making something is well nigh impossible, ain’t it great-granddaughter of mine?”

“Nothing’s changed in eighty years, Granny. The time it would take to haul the part out of one of the working reactors and get its specs, replace it, make it and install it may just make it easier, in a few months, to replace what you got here.”

“If we’re a priority,” Ada said with a nasty look on her face.

“Ada, eating is just about the highest priority we’ve got,” Kris said. “Trust us, you’re a high priority.”

“Just so long as it stays that way.”

Glad to have that meeting over with no blood on the floor, Kris and her team headed for the dock and a captain’s gig that had lately been promoted to admiral’s barge and a ride up to Canopus Station.

Admiral Benson, retired once and reactivated recently to a commodore’s job, was waiting for Kris as her honorary barge pulled into the landing bay.

“I’ve got good news and bad news for you. Which do you want first,” the old sailorman said.

“The good news,” Kris said with a shrug.

“We’ve got twenty-three of the big frigates ready to answer bells if you need to fight.”

“Twenty-three!” Kris said. “But we had thirty-three left after you spun four of the emergency war wagons back into merchant ships? Where are the other ten?”

“That’s the bad news. Even the ships that survived took hits, hits that burned off their Smart Metal. We had some ships come in with nothing but a thin hull membrane keeping space out. If the fight had gone on for a few more broadsides, we would have lost them.”

“That wasn’t in your report a week ago,” Kris pointed out.

“I was busy spooling out what was left of the four frigates we spun together from eight merchant ships. You notice we only got seven back.”

“I was wondering about that,” Kris admitted. She’d wondered about it, but asked no questions. “What about the new Smart Metal coming out of the foundries on the moon?”

“Ah, yes, *that* metal,” the yard manager said. Kris did not like the sound of the way he said it.

“Is there a problem with it that no one told me?”

“No. No problem. Not actually, but some of us are worrying a bit about problems down the road. Right now we’re kind of pushing the safety margins to get that metal out of the mills. It’s not the same stuff that came from the foundries back in human space that was originally spun into the ships. Simply put, it doesn’t meet the standards that Mitsubishi Heavy Space Industry sets for the stuff.”

“It’s better,” came from Nelly at Kris’s neck.

“That’s what some folks think,” Benson said, with a hint of a shrug, “but it’s different. That may be good. It *could* be bad.”

“So when you finish beating around the bush, what are you going to tell me?” Kris said, tiring rapidly of this conversation. She had not given up her honeymoon to dance around the barn with anyone.

“No skipper wants to have a ship that’s half Mitsubishi standard and half local stuff,” the yard boss said. “Some are willing to fight a ship with the new stuff. Many of them won’t have a ship at all without this metal. What we had did pretty well in the fight. There were no apparent failures. Anyway, ten of the ships that were skinned the worst have been drained to refill the ships that suffered the least damage. That means we’ve got ten ships tied up to the pier with hulls and internal walls that are egg-shell thin.

“Once we get metal from the moon, we’ll spin it into them and pull out the original stuff. With the basic structure and matric already in place, the new metal should flow in quickly. It won’t take nearly the time to refill the ship that it took to spin it out. We’ll recover the original Smart Metal from the first nine and likely refill the tenth with it.”

“How long will this take?” Kris asked.

“That depends on how long it takes the mills to cough out the Smart Metal, which depends on how long it takes the raw materials to get back from the asteroid belt which depends on when the miners get the mines producing.”

“So you’re telling me that you haven’t the foggiest idea,” Kris said.

“Not even a guess,” the now re-retired admiral admitted.

“And if I was to take eight of the good ships off to visit the ancient home of the aliens?”

“There wouldn’t be enough left here to spit at an alien scouting force.”

“Thank you, Admiral. I find myself wondering why I’m here and not back lying on a beach enjoying the sun,” Kris said.

“I ask myself that on a regular basis,” the old ship driver said with a smile and a nod as he went his own way.

“Where’s Pipra Strongarm?” Kris asked Nelly.

“Waiting for you in your day quarters on the *Wasp*. Captain Drago wants to see you, and so does Abby.”

Officially, Abby was Kris’s maid who did her hair and made her look lovely for balls and other social events. In fact, Abby could shoot as well as any Marine and had saved Kris’s life too

many times to count.

Trying to school her face from an I'm-going-to-bite-your-head-off scowl to I'm-the-boss, tell-me-the-truth bland, Kris headed for her next set of meetings.

Abby was in the passageway outside Kris's quarters.

"You want to see me?" Kris said as she and Jack came to a halt in front of Kris's erstwhile domestic.

"It don't seem to me that you're going to need your hair done for any balls on this alien home planet. Anybody after your skin is going to be doing it with monster warships, not assassins. I could be wrong, but it looks to me like your latest promotion has kind of done me outta my job."

"I'll never fire you," Kris said, none too sure where this conversation was going. That was not an unusual state of affairs whenever Abby finally condescended to a serious talk with Kris.

"I've been working with Pipra Strongarm for the last month when you didn't have nothin' for me to do, you know."

"Idle hands are the devil's workshop."

"I don't need no idle hands to be working for him," Abby said.

"So, you want to stay here with Pipra and try your hand at business. Tell me, is it you or that brat of Nelly's around your neck that she wants?"

Abby had inherited one of Nelly's kids. The maid's relationship with Mata Hari had been off and on. Apparently it was on at the moment and didn't involve any sneaky stuff.

Then again, Kris would never bet against sneaky stuff where Abby and her computer were concerned.

"She likes us both," Abby spat. "The degree I earned back on Earth was in business management and Pipra is finding it hard to put together a staff that understands the mess we're in."

"And you have survived around one of those damn Longknives long enough to know just how bad the messes can be," Kris agreed.

Abby cast Kris a look. "You have to admit that this mess kind of outdoes your usual."

"It does," Kris agreed. "Who else will be wanting to stay behind?"

Kris would bet Wardhaven dollars to donuts she knew the answer to her question, but she wanted to hear it from Abby.

"Sergeant Bruce has gotten his next stripe. He's a gunny now, working dirtside as much as up here. Whoever Jack leaves in charge here will need the help of at least one of Nelly's kids. Cara will also stay with me. Her fourteenth birthday is coming up and while she still thinks of herself as the first member of the Marine Corps Auxiliary to the *Wasp's* Marine detachment, Pipra and the boffins are seeing that she gets a good education. And we are using Dada for stuff on the business side."

“Nelly, do you have any problem with this?” Kris asked.

Nelly had had definite problems with the idea of one of her kids being handed off to a business tycoon, either the head of Mitsubishi Heavy Space Industry or Kris’s Grampa Al. Especially Grampa Al. Survival, however, made for different decisions.

“I have no problems with Mata working with Ms. Strongarm. She shows a refreshingly creative and ethical approach to our situation. I’m glad to see Dada doing more than playing computer games with Cara and being an educational device. I’m also glad to see her being brought up to speed with more complex challenges. Kris, we’ve already discussed this and I agree these three should stay behind and help where they can.”

“I figured you had, Nelly,” Kris said. “Otherwise, Abby would not have known how and when to just happen to run into me and present me this proposal. Okay, Abby, you’re still my employee, and don’t forget that, but for now, you’re on loan to Pipra. Have fun and charge her all the market will bear in consulting fees.”

“I wouldn’t charge a penny less,” Abby said, and stepped aside.

Kris and Jack were finally able to enter their quarters.

Some people might find it hard to think of a ship’s stateroom as home, but for Kris, her quarters on the *Wasp* was the closest she’d come to a home since joining the Navy and doing her level best to get ship duty. Her day quarters were quite spacious. Clearly, with her ashore, someone had shrunk her night cabin down to next to nothing. Wasn’t it nice having Smart Metal™ that you could push around with an app?

An app that had caused a near revolution in what the crew could do with their quarters.

Kris and Jack had been neither the first nor the last to merge their quarters and set up housekeeping together, official or otherwise.

With no shore stations to ship anyone to for punishment, and no one to replace them with anyway, discipline among the Sailors and Marines on the far side of the galaxy from the nearest human space was . . . delicate. When contract personnel and the scientists aboard began using an app to open doors between quarters, it had brought on a Navy leadership challenge way past epic proportions.

Kris had followed the Navy Way of handling it. She’d convened a committee of senior chiefs and ships’ executive officers and told them to fix it. After a sleepless night of gnawing at the problem of commanding a lot of young, healthy and unattached troops who might die at any moment and would have to depend on each other for their own survival, the Alwa Defense Sector had written its own fraternization policy.

It had survived the test of its first battle. Kris could only hope her innovative approach to human relations in the crucible of war would continue to hold together.

Pipra was already seated at the conference table that dominated Kris’s day quarters. As usual, Kris’s desk was clean, though she suspected her inbox had reports and messages stacked up past the virtual overhead.

Before Kris could settle into her chair at the table, Pipra was reeling off problems at the mines, fabricators, mills and everywhere in between. Jack gave Kris a smile and a shrug before he took their small travel bags and disappeared into their quarters. Quickly back, he gave Kris a jaunty wave and allowing that he would check in on the Marines

while Kris attended to business.

As he left, Captain Drago sauntered in. Had he planned for moments like this when he arranged for Kris's admiral's cabin to be just off his own bridge? The first time Pipra paused for a breath, he asked Kris, "You enjoy your vacation?"

"Too short. When can you get the *Wasp* underway for a month-long voyage of exploration?"

Pipra glanced at what she was about to read from, and put it aside. "So you *are* going to do this crazy visit to the alien home world I've been hearing about."

"Since I didn't know I was going to do this crazy thing until six hours ago, I'm intrigued that you knew about it before I did," Kris said.

"Well, everyone knew that your scout ship was back and it found the alien home world. You being one of those damn Longknives, I figured you'd be chasing off after it."

"First, I'm your CEO, not a damn Longknife," Kris said, but softened it with a smile. "And second, from what our scout found, the home world has been abandoned by the alien space raiders for some time."

"Then why are you going?" her senior vice president shot back.

"A good question. So you don't think I should go?"

"No, I didn't say that. Information is power. Knowing where these crazy, blood-thirsty whatever's came from might tell us something. I'm just wondering if now is the time to do it?"

"And a better time would be?" Kris asked.

"There won't be a better time or a worse one," Captain Drago put in. "You pay your money and you take your chances. Me, I figure sooner is better. My best guess is those alien observers will need time to report back. Then more time while they think about what they saw. With three huge clans thinking on that, it may take them quite a while to decide on anything."

"There may be only one person who matters on each of those base ships," Kris said.

Captain Drago dismissed that thought with a wave of his hand. "Even in a dictatorship, there are currents of opinion that have to be considered. I never heard of a system that didn't have competing power blocks that had to be weaseled and browbeaten into doing something."

"I hope you're right, Captain, because I'm betting that that's the way it is. Please ask Commodore Kitano to drop in at her earliest convenience. I'm going to steal her squadron, what's left of it, and leave her with the hot potato of Acting Commander, Alwa Defense Sector."

"I don't think she'll be too bothered by being left behind. Her *Princess Royal* is one of the ships that took so much damage that it's tied up to the pier awaiting more Smart Metal."

"It is?"

"Yep."

"Skipper, we've got action at one of our close in systems," came from the bridge.

Drago trotted out of Kris's quarters. She followed him, with Pipra at her elbow.

"How could the aliens jump into one of the systems so close?" Pipra asked.

"They couldn't, not the last time we saw them," Kris said grimly, wondering just how much of a fight she could put up against whatever was headed her way.

"Talk to me," Drago ordered his bridge crew.

Old Chief Beni was on sensors. "The reporting buoy is in the next system. It jumped immediately into ours to holler a warning. The receiving buoy ducked back into the other system to gather more information."

"The next system? Didn't we make a long jump into that system and use it to slow down in before jumping into this system?" Kris said, trying to keep Pipra from panicking. Maybe keep herself from panicking, too.

"Did the reporting buoy say anything about the arriving ships?" the captain asked.

"No sir, it just reported ships in the system," the chief answered. "It didn't say which jump they used or how many of them there was. A reactor shows up and it jumps in and reports. We're lucky it was the next system out or we'd be having all kinds of delays for the information to travel across the system by speed of light. If it's the sixth system out, it might take us a couple of days to even know it happened."

"The good news and the bad," Pipra said with a nervous laugh. "It's close enough to not make us bite our nails while waiting. And, if it's bad news, we won't have to worry too much before it kills us."

The skipper scowled at the business woman, but said, "Chief, when will we get an update?"

"The second buoy is supposed to jump back into our system and give us a report in five to fifteen minutes, depending on how much it's learning. Sir, it's already happened. We're just waiting to hear what the automatics did hours ago."

"Yes, Chief, I know," Captain Drago said, not enjoying the reminder.

"Report coming in," Chief Beni announced. "Fifty-seven groups of reactors have been identified. They match standard human production models."

Kris turned to Pipra. "It appears that our reinforcements are arriving early."

Pipra, with no need to appear fearless in the face of the Sailors on the bridge, leaned back against the bulkhead and let out a long sigh of relief. "Give me a minute. I'm not sure my legs will support me."

"When you feel up to it, we have further problems to juggle. Food, general production, and rearmoring ten of my plucked chickens."

"Yes," Pipra said, a bit breathless, "and it looks like we'll have the time to do something about all of those."

"Food," Kris said, remembering that her salvation also meant more mouths to feed. "More ships mean we need more food. I hope they brought along their own supplies. Chief, can you tell me how many of those reactors are warship types and how many are freighters?"

"No ma'am. Sorry, but I can only tell you what I'm told and they're busy telling me what we ordered them to get fast and easy. If you want a specific question answered,

I can send it off. It will likely take twenty, thirty hours to get an answer. More than likely, if you just wait, you'll get the answer in a couple of hours, anyway."

The retired chief had one of those looks on his face that senior NCO's used for particularly dumb questions from officers.

"No, Chief. No rush. Just tell me what you know when you know it."

"Will do, Admiral."

Back in Kris's day cabin, Pipra was on her phone, telling her chief associates that help was coming. If information was power, it was a power whose Sell By date could be very short.

Kris settled at her conference table and drummed her nails for only a few seconds before her business subordinate rang off and got down to work.

Rear Admiral Kris Longknife and her acting, Commodore Katano, watched the reinforcements pop into the system from Kris's flag bridge on the *Wasp*. The flag bridge and Kris's day quarters were the same space made different only by Kris's frame of mind. If she was stuck in a meeting, it was her day quarters. If she was commanding a fleet or a battle, it was a bridge.

Either way, the sign on the door said ADMIRAL'S QUARTERS.

The *Wasp*, like the other ships of Battle Squadron One, was in the final stages of getting underway for their voyage of discovery to the alien home world.

BatRon 1 was down to five ships, what with the *Constitution* lost and the *Princess Royal* and *Resistance* tied up awaiting new armor. To bring it up to a full eight, Kris was borrowing the *Wasp*, her own flagship, and the *Intrepid*. Also, despite her initial intent, she'd added the *Endeavor*, now loaded with low tech jump point buoys and designed to shoot just as much while running as chasing.

Commodore Katano would be left with fifteen experienced fighting ships under her command, now organized into three reduced squadrons.

Together with Jack, Penny and Captain Drago, they watched as the ships allotted to the Alwa Defense Sector grew.

Kris had thought long and hard about departing before the reinforcements arrived. She'd made the call to stay. What these ships were sailing into deserved a greeting from their commander.

And besides, who would miss a chance to see the fleet come in. It was quite a sight. As well as full of surprises.

The first into the system was a big surprise. "That's the *Odin*?" Jack asked no one in particular as the first blip appeared on Kris's battle board.

So Nelly gave an answer. "She reports herself as the flag of a squadron of frigates from the Scanda Confederacy. The *Odin* is followed by the *Thor*, *Loki*, *Frigga*, *Brage*, *Heimdallr*, *Hodur* and *Baldur*. There are two merchants tailing them, the *Valhalla* and the *Sisu*."

"The Scanda Confederacy isn't in King Raymond's United Society," Penny pointed out.

"And they're only four planets," Nelly added. "That's a lot of ships from so small a confederacy."

"Somebody wants in on the fight," Jack said. He may have started his career as a Secret Service Agent, but he'd spent the last five years with the Marines. He'd come to understand the need of some to be there when there was a fight brewing, no matter what

the odds.

“The merchant ships are Smart Metal,” Nelly reported before Kris asked.

Good. More ships to convert from starship to system cargo hauler. It would be a downgrade for the crew, but it just might decide whether they lived or died.

Another set of pips appeared at the jump. No doubt they arrived several hours ago, but the report was only now reaching Kris’s command above Alwa.

“The *Phantom* reports she’s the flag of a squadron from New Eden,” Nelly reported as the jump began to spit out more ships. “*Voodoo, Banshee, Daemon, Vampire, Werewolf, Fury* and *Fire Drake*. They’ve got the *Proximus, Mary Allen Carter* and *James Nathan Carter* trailing them. It looks like a repair ship and two supply ships. All Smart metal.”

“Somebody’s either got a sense of humor or has been reading too much fantasy,” Commodore Kitano muttered.

“Kris, there’s something strange about those warships,” Nelly reported. “They’ve got double the capacitors for their lasers. And their lasers are giving Chief Beni readouts that don’t match anything in our database.”

Kris couldn’t help but notice that when Nelly couldn’t verify the signature of a ship, it was Chief Beni’s problem. However, this might be more of a problem than just a database slip.

“Is this an alien sneak attack?” Kris quickly asked.

Captain Drago was on his feet and headed for his bridge.

“Hold it,” Commodore Kitano said. “There was talk of a new 22-inch laser before we left. They were totally different, not just up-rated 18-inchers like our 20-inch lasers. They had teething problems. If what we’re seeing are those big guns, they’re going to look weird to us.”

“Reactors are straight up human construction per our analysis,” Nelly reported.

Drago came back to the table, but stood behind his chair.

Another new squadron was coming in.

“This one’s from Pitt’s Hope. It shows clear U.S. recognition signals,” Nelly reported. “And it has those same strange guns. *Battleaxe* leading *Broadsword, Scimitar, Saber, Arrow, Longbow, Claymore* and *Grenade*. All standard make U.S. reactors though. They’re trailed by the *Artifex, Appleleaf, Orangeleaf* and *Cherryleaf*. I make them out to be another repair ship and three supply ships.”

“Let’s hope they didn’t stint on the food.

“Oh, we got a big one,” Nelly announced. “It reports itself the *Portsmouth* out of Pitt’s Hope. It appears to me that we have another addition to Canopus Station.”

“With all these ships to park, let’s hope so,” Kris said.

She made a quick call to Admiral Benson. “I think you have another extension to your station.”

“So I noticed. I sincerely hope whoever is skippering the *Portsmouth* is as good as Admiral Hiroshi was with the Kure Docks.”

“You might want to get with Hiroshi and coordinate with the new fellow,” Kris

said.

“Was already planning on it,” the admiral said, and Kris rang off.

And yet a fourth squadron came through the jump.

“This one is from Yamato,” Nelly reported. “The flag is *Mikasa*, followed by the *Asahi*, *Hatsuse*, *Yakumo*, *Idzumo*, *Iwate*, *Asama*, and *Toikiwa*. Those are the warships. There’s also a *Tyogei*, likely a repair ship since there’s no maru after the name and the *Kamoi Maru*, *Kinugasa Maru* and *Kinagawa Maru*. Supply ships most likely. Ah, Kris, are Musashi and Yamato on good terms? Should we brigade the two squadrons together or keep them apart?”

“No doubt we’ll find out soon enough,” Kris said.

“Hopefully, you’ll find out before you leave,” Commodore Kitano muttered loud enough for all to hear.

“There’s another huge dockyard size ship coming through,” Nelly reported. “The *Sasebo Maru*. Yamato has a Sasebo Navy Ship Yard in orbit. This might be another yard for us.”

“If we double our ships, we need to double our yards and docks,” Kris said, standing. “The only question is, do we put it in a trailing orbit or hitch them on to us here. Nelly, ask Admirals Benson and Hiroshi for a report on those two options plus any more they want to present.”

Yet another group, this time four ships, came through.

“Kris this is a division from the Esperanto League, they’re non-U.S.. Their flagship is the *Miela*, that translates as honey sweet. The next three are *Karesinda*, *Dezirinda* and *Spirita*, meaning caressable, desirable, and witty.”

“Strange names for warships,” Jack said.

“After the Iteeche War, the League passed a law that no warship could have a ‘distressingly combative name,’ Nelly said.

“So they managed to pass a bill authorizing warship construction,” Kris said, trying not to chortle at the political implications, “but not a bill to change the naming law.”

“The next should be the last,” Nelly announced, and the jump promptly gave up six more. “These are from Hispania, a U.S. member. The *Libertad* is the flag, followed by the *Federaciaon*, *Independencia* and *Union*. They have two supply ships, *Minnow* and *Korallo*. That’s it, Kris. Forty new warships, twenty-four with those strange lasers, two new yards, three repair ships and twelve supply ships.”

“Not a bad haul,” Captain Drago said. “Especially considering what we’re down to after that last dust up.”

Kris nodded as she thought through her presents . . . and the challenges inherit in her good fortune. She turned to Captain Drago. “I think we’ll be using your Forward Lounge for another meeting. Have Mother MacCreedy lay in a goodly supply of that hooch the Alwan’s drink.”

Captain Drago made a face. “That stuff is almost undrinkable. It’s only virtue is the alcoholic content is so high that after a few sips, you don’t care.”

“That’s all she’ll serve for our extended staff meeting. Let’s introduce our new arrivals to the vagaries of Far Station duty sooner rather than later.”

“You’re a hard taskmaster, Viceroy,” Captain Drago said, “but very likely a smart one.”

“Also, Drago, please send this message to the arriving fleet. ‘Thank you for coming. You’re more than welcome. We won a fleet action three weeks ago, but, no doubt, there is another one coming. If any of your merchant ships are carrying mining supplies, please divert them to one of the mining stations along your route for unloading. Detach a warship to escort them there and down here immediately after. Commander, Alwa Defense Sector sends.’”

“I’ll have it dispatched immediately,” Captain Drago said, then he paused. “Why have the merchants escorted? There’s no hostiles anywhere near us.”

“No, but if the merchants get to talking with the locals, they may find out that those that come here stay here, and decide to make a run for it. The escort is to shoot their engines out if they try to run, but we won’t tell them that unless we have to, now will we?”

“No, ma’am, we won’t. There are times I forget I’m serving with one of those damn Longknives. Then you remind me.”

“Yeah, ain’t it the pits,” Kris said, and turned back to her desk. Damn Longknife or nice one, she had three hats to wear and a lot of work that needed redoing in view of the new arrivals.

“Commodore Katano. We need to reorganize the fleet again. Pull enough ships out of the other squadrons to form five divisions.”

“If we spread the fifteen ships into five divisions of three, we won’t have any combat ready squadrons.”

“That’s a risk we’ll have to take. Each veteran division will be assigned to one incoming squadron. The Helvetians get the Esperanto and Hispanic contingent. Commodore Miyoshi’s division will work with the Yamato squadron. I don’t know who to team together on the others. Maybe during our first meeting in the Forward Lounge we can find some folks that know each other.”

Kris paused to pull her thoughts back to what her mouth was saying.

“The point is that we have to retrain and restructure these new ships to fight the way we fight. You remember the first drill when you tried to follow one of Nelly’s jinksing patterns without enough steering jets and your ships weren’t battened down for the hard lateral gees.”

“I remember it all too well,” the commodore agreed.

“You can pull ships’ maintainers out of our plucked chickens to help them make the necessary mods before you run them out for a drill.”

“You’re being nice to them.”

“If I’d known it, I’d have been nice to you. I was learning how to maneuver large ships in formations the same time you were learning it.”

“We all learned a lot.”

“And these new folks have to learn it too, but fast. Match battle experienced ships with newcomers. Have them compete to get ready. Have the ships that make the grade drink the beer of those that don’t.”

“That assumes we have beer.”

“How much you want to bet me those newly arrived supply ships have some good drinking whisky, beer, saki, you name it. When they discover there won’t be any more of that until the next crop comes in, a bet backed up with that will be a whole lot better training aid than them getting knocked around a bit.”

The commodore chuckled. “I’m starting to see why you Longknives are legendary.”

“You’re starting to see why we’re still alive. And some of those who follow us as well.”

Kris finished a few minutes later with Commodore Kitano and sent her on her way. Admirals Benson and Hiroshi were next on her meeting list. They’d already established contact with Portsmouth and Sasibo. Yes, they were yards and both admirals present agreed they should hook into Canopus Station.

“There’s some risk putting all our eggs in one basket,” Admiral Benson said, “but there’s advantages to keeping the fleet together. If we grow much more we’ll need a second base to avoid congestion, but we’re not there yet.”

“Can you make sure they match the station without denting anything?” Kris asked.

“I did it fine,” Admiral Hiroshi said. “They can too. Besides, we’ll put the pilots aboard them that docked me. First I’ll hitch Tomiyama’s Sasibo yards to me, then Benson can hitch the Portsmouth yards to him. Two days after they arrive, we will be in fine shape.”

Kris liked to hear that.

Which left her with the business side.

Pipra had enough on her plate to keep Kris busy until the cows came home, as the young woman put it, or, at least, until the fleet arrived. There were supplies to distribute among the mining concerns, plans to convert the new arrivals into system freighters and production schedules at the fabricators and mills to balance.

Putting agriculture, fisheries and the basic industries that supported them as first priority was nice, but it left raw materials and production facilities underutilized. A bit of juggling and you got a bit less food produced, but reactors moved along the production line with more Smart Metal™ and electronic goodies that tied the colonials and the Always tighter into a seamless net for survival.

Kris watched Pipra go through several iterations of resource allocation before they settled on the best use of everything.

“You know,” Kris admitted when they were done, “If we keep this up, I’m going to develop a serious respect for what you do.”

Pipra only smiled softly at Kris’s half complement. “Well, I’ve already developed a serious respect for what you Navy types do. It would be nice if I got as much respect back from you and yours.”

That put Kris back in her chair. She kept saying that they were all in this together. She said it, but she didn't really mean it. The Navy was always first in her mind's eye. But the Navy would be fighting bare ass in space if it wasn't for what these industrial workers and managers were doing for them. From her father's knee, she'd learned to mouth the platitudes of all for one and one for all, but she'd never really believed it.

There always seemed to be someone who was more equal than others.

Now, with enough hats on her own head to give anyone a migraine, Kris was having her nose rubbed in the truth of what she'd said.

"Thank you, Pipra. I think I needed that bucket of cold water in my face."

"I didn't mean to give offense," Pipra said, then changed her direction. "You're one of the best bosses I've ever worked for. I don't want you taking me wrong."

"I'm not," Kris said, trying to take the pressure off the woman across the table from her. "I really mean what I said. Working with you is making me see things I thought I saw, but was blind to. I know this is tough on you. Tough on all the folks you've got working for you. I can't promise anyone a bed of roses, but I can say that I see how all of us: Navy, miners, production workers and management, are making this happen. And that we'd all be dead without each and every one of us."

With that, Pipra packed up her brief case. She left just as Jack was coming back from his long day's work. They went out for a quick bite, then shared a shower and a very warm bed.

Tomorrow would come all too quickly. Jack made it easy to fall asleep.

As Kris was preparing to head up to the Forward Lounge and meet her new ship drivers, there was a knock at her door.

“Enter,” she said, hoping Pipra hadn’t stumbled onto an even better way of merging their limited resources, but the two commodores that entered her day quarters were strangers to her.

“I am Commodore L’Estock of Pitt’s Hope,” one said.

“And I am Commodore Shoalter of Eden,” the other said.

“And we have a present for you,” the first finished for them.

That told Kris that the two senior U.S. commanders most recently arrived from home were paying her a call, formal or otherwise, but not much else. L’Estock handed a small package to Kris. Not at all happy at the game they were playing, but curious still, Kris opened the box. Inside was a blue flag.

She shook it out. It had three white stars. Wrapped in it were the shoulder boards of a vice admiral. There was also a pair of papers. One was rather lovely calligraphy and signed by Grampa Ray. No, this was definitely the signature of a very kingly King Raymond I. It proclaimed to all present her right to wear the rank of a vice admiral. The other were the formal orders fleeting her up to the three star rank, while keeping her pay grade at a lowly captain’s.

Buried in the small print was her delegation of authority to fleet up people to the rank of rear admiral and below. Fleet them up, but not give them any extra pay.

The bigger surprise was that she could do this for anyone serving in her theater of operations, be they U.S. or otherwise. Apparently, at least some people were taking the need to defend against the raiders seriously enough to forget who was in whose alliance.

At least on far Alwa Station.

Kris read it all, then glanced up at the two grinning officers. “They crammed a lot into one small page. I assume you knew about this.”

“Since the King called us in for a conference before we left, most definitely yes. Copies of that are in the mail bag for all of your subordinate commanders: Musashi, Helvetian, whatever.”

“It’s nice to know we were appreciated, even if you didn’t know if we were alive or dead when the orders were written,” Jack said, reading over Kris’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” she said. “Now, thank you very much. If you’ll leave us alone for a moment, we’ll join you as quickly as we can in the Forward Lounge once we attend to some minor details.”

If anything, the two officers’ grins got bigger. They must have heard about the

new fraternization policy; neither had batted an eyelash when Jack joined them from Kris's night quarters.

Alone, Kris held the new flag and shoulder boards. Three stars, and she hadn't even completed her sixth year in the Navy. Yes, they were only good in theater. Once she returned home, like Cinderella, she'd turn back into a captain at best, maybe even a commander. Still, even for one of those damn Longknives it had been quite a ride.

"You want to do the honors for me?" Kris asked.

"I think it's often the duty and joy of the spouse to do this," Jack admitted. It took him only a moment to remove her old boards and put on the new ones. He's had experience getting her uniform ready for her when she was in the shower just as she had done the same for him. At least those times when they hadn't been showering together.

"I think I got that right," he said, and gave her a kiss. It wasn't exactly a peck, but it wouldn't have any flower girl suggesting they "get a room." It seemed just right from a brevet Colonel to a newly frocked Vice Admiral.

"Shall we go?" he asked when they broke chastely.

"No, there are a few things that need to be done. Nelly, promote Commodore Katano immediately to rear admiral. Jack, I want you to organize all the ships' Marine detachments and the colonials into a brigade. Which makes you a brigadier general."

He grinned at that.

Kris hurried on. "Tomorrow, promote the other three commodores to rear admiral and restore Benson and Hiroshi to their previous ranks with seniority in theater dating from tomorrow. Is there anything else I need to think of?"

Jack said nothing. Nelly paused, and then added, "I assume you're creating four task forces with rear admirals commanding?"

"Something like that, Nelly."

"Who gets to choose who fills in as squadron commanders behind the promoted commodores?"

"Cut a set of orders authorizing the task force commanders to propose to Admiral Kitano the fleeting ups to commodore in my absence. We'll let them fly while I'm gone and then I can finalize them."

"If you'll have Jack pull the promotion papers out of the document generator, you'll have something to give Admiral Kitano tonight. I didn't quite go in for the full calligraphy like the king, but I did it up right."

"Thank you, Nelly."

That done, Kris adjourned herself for the Forward Lounge.