

Kris Longknife – Undaunted

by Mike Shepherd

The Iteeche almost wiped out humanity.

For eighty years, the peace has been based on a very simple rule.

They stay on their side of the Demilitarized Zone, and we stay on ours.

Today, an Iteeche Death Ball crossed the line

and the guy in charge of it wants to talk to Kris Longknife.

Is this a trick?

Or does all human and Iteeche existence depend on Kris answering the call.

Lieutenant Kris Longknife sat in the captain's chair of the Wardhaven explorer ship *Wasp*, the unquestioned commander of all she surveyed.

Of course, she had the conn on the midwatch, and there was very little to survey; most of the *Wasp's* crew were sound asleep. Far from her sight, the scant midnight watch went about their duties, keeping the air cool, the lights on, and the ship decelerating at one gee on its established course. The only person in Kris's sight was Chief Beni. He studied the instruments at the navigator's position.

Most of the time, he fed his sensor data to the navigator. Just now, he took advantage of the quiet midwatch to see what she did with his input. He was also weighing his options to go to OCS, trying on an officer's shoes to check the fit.

All in all, it looked to be a very quiet and comfortable midwatch. HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN, NELLY?

HOW LONG HAS WHAT BEEN? Kris's pet computer, worth several ships like the *Wasp*, asked on the direct hookup into Kris's brain.

Nelly was usually ten steps ahead of Kris's own thoughts, ready to answer any question before the Navy lieutenant posed it. Kris put the surly reply down to attitude. Or more correctly "tude."

Kris *still* had a twelve-year-old girl on board. Or, more accurately, a certain girl held a ship, its crew, and one very uppity computer in thrall.

Content not to break the dim silence, Kris continued the conversation via the private link between her and Nelly. HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN SINCE ANYONE TRIED TO KILL ME?

OH THAT. SIXTY-THREE DAYS. DO YOU WANT THE HOURS, MINUTES, SECONDS, AND NANoseconds, YOUR HIGH-HANDEDNESS?

THAT WON'T BE NECESSARY, Kris said, to cut off more 'tude. It had been a nice two months without the occasional potshot or heart-pounding race for life.

Kris could get to liking this.

Of course, the whole time had been spent far beyond the Rim of human occupied space. Far enough out that she hadn't stumbled on even one Sooner world. Sooner farmers, artisans, and generally cantankerous folks saw no reason why they should obey distant Earth and not push out beyond the boundaries set for humanity by old men in suits. Kris found them kindred spirits to her own desire to have as much space as possible between herself and her closest relatives.

Still, where the law hadn't gotten to, often thievery, pirating, and slavery had.

Kris had spent the first two months of this cruise putting down a few of those problems. Done with the intrepid side for a while, she'd spent the last two months expanding the chart of mapped and usable jump points and letting her scientists research to their hearts' delight.

And not been shot at once.

Nice, that.

“How’s our approach to the next jump point coming?” Kris asked Chief Beni.

He shook his head. “It just took a zig away from us. I make it about fifteen thousand kilometers farther away. I would suggest . . .” He tapped the nav board several times, frowned at the results, and said, “. . . we reduce deceleration to .84 gee. That should put us there in twenty-two minutes . . . give or take one of Nelly’s nanoseconds.”

Apparently, the chief and Nelly were back to open hostilities.

Kris ignored that and worried her lower lip. Each of the jump points created by the aliens a million or two years ago orbited two, three, or more stars. That meant their apparent orbit around any one star was anything but smooth. And caused the occasional deadly bad jump.

Kris hoped this little wiggle meant only that the *Wasp* would arrive a bit late for the next jump. Actually, with everyone asleep, it really wasn’t a problem at all.

Kris glanced at the star map on the main screen. The *Wasp* had been working its way across the front of Wardhaven space . . . or to put it more politically correct . . . the 136 planets now negotiating to establish some kind of association under the leadership of Grampa Ray, King Raymond I to anyone not his great-granddaughter.

To the right of the *Wasp*’s search sweep was Greenfeld space, and the less said about that, the better for Kris’s day. To the left was the Helvetican Confederacy that, if Kris remembered something that had come across her desk, now included her friends on the proud planet Chance.

Above them on the star map, looming like a black hole, was the No Go Zone.

Nobody in their right mind went into the buffer between humans and the Iteeche. The fight to set that zone between “us and them” had almost driven the human race extinct.

Kris doubted any Sooner or pirate would dare violate that precinct of space.

Of course, the *Wasp* was getting closer to that zone. Kris would have to decide soon just how close she'd go. She chuckled to herself . . . putting a buffer around a buffer. But the price for a mistake along that boundary was too high, both for her crew and the whole human race.

Maybe it was already time to go farther out rather than any farther over.

For the next few minutes, Kris did the job that Officers of the Deck did, checking to make sure that very competent people did their job as well as they always did. The reactor was well in the green. Reaction-mass tanks were still over 65 percent, so it would be a while before Captain Drago, the true monarch of this small chunk of space called the *Wasp*, would skim the surface of a gas giant to scoop up mass, or take the more sedate approach of heading for a space station to buy the water they heated in the reactors.

Kris glanced further into the daily reports. Sick bay had only two Marines in it, victims of a handball game that had ended with a violent collision. With no one taking shots at Kris, the Marines were also being spared the odd collateral damage of being too close to “one of those Longknives.”

It really was nice being so far from human space.

NELLY, REPORT SHIP'S STATUS, Kris said in her head. Her own board said everything was fine. Nelly's assessment would guarantee that nothing lurked deep below the surface, waiting to spoil Kris's otherwise-quiet morning.

In the blink of an eye, Kris was listening to ALL SYSTEMS WELL WITHIN THE NORMS. EVERYONE IS SLEEPING AS WELL AS THEY NORMALLY DO AT THIS TIME. CARA IS STILL UP PLAYING A GAME, Nelly added, addressing the precise status of the twelve-year-old whom Kris more than suspected was the most important person aboard the *Wasp* as far as Nelly was concerned.

SHOULDN'T SHE BE ASLEEP? TOMORROW'S A SCHOOL DAY.

I CAN JUST START IT A BIT LATE, AIN'T NO BIG THING.

Kris blinked . . . when had Nelly started using contractions? Or "ain't"? Nelly's computer-perfect grammar was supposed to be teaching proper grammar to a sixth grader!

Further thoughts on that were interrupted by the chief.

"We're coming up on the jump point in two minutes, Lieutenant. What are your orders?"

Kris weighed the first, and probably only, command decision she'd make this watch. "If we just sit here, everyone's going to wake up weightless," she mused. That was not a problem for the sailors and Marines. But a third of those occupying the *Wasp* fit neither of those categories. Kris had a large scientific contingent, and even a judge brought out of retirement and empowered to apply the law to anyone for anything Kris chose to dump in her lap.

Several of the boffins besides Judge Francine did not take to microgravity all that well. Usually, the *Wasp* was under way at one gee or tied up to a space station with something like normal gravity. How would they handle sleeping the next four hours in zero gee and waking up in it?

Kris knew the answer to her next question, but she asked the chief anyway. “We don’t have any jump buoys, do we?”

“As a matter of fact, I see four of them ready to launch on my nav board,” the chief answered, to her surprise.

Kris’s own copy of the nav station showed nothing, so she slapped off her seat belt and walked over to Beni’s station.

As she expected, it had extra space lit up. Kris recognized it . . . a defensive battle station.

Apparently, Sulwan Kann was ready to activate all the necessary defenses of the *Wasp* if she got into a fight. The woman truly was Captain Drago’s right-hand man.

Kris went down the left side of the nav board, finding armor, foxers, maskers—everything needed by a ship fighting for its life. Four of the foxer launching tubes showed blue. Beside them was a notation. JUMP BUOYS.

“I guess if we aren’t faking it as a merchant ship, there’s no reason not to launch the smaller ones,” Kris said. NELLY, ASK CAPTAIN DRAGO WHAT OTHER WEAPONS SYSTEMS THE *WASP* IS NOW CARRYING.

YES, MA’AM. I WILL ALSO SEARCH THE REPORT FROM THE LAST YARD PERIOD AND SEE IF IT TELLS YOU ANYTHING.

YOU DO THAT, Kris said. Four months out, and Kris still didn’t know just what her supposed command had hidden away in some corner storeroom.

“Zero grav in fifteen seconds,” the chief reported. Over the public-address system, a similar announcement went out . . . at a whisper . . . as the hour of the

morning called for.

Kris hustled back to her station and belted in. Once the *Wasp* was at a dead stop five clicks from the jump point, she ordered, "Flip ship."

Chief Beni rotated the *Wasp* smartly along her long axis. Now the bow faced the tiny bit of roiled space that was all that showed of the portal across seven light-years of space.

"Chief, send a buoy through the jump. Have it announce that we'll be following in five minutes."

"You think that is a good idea?" the chief asked. But he was grinning, and his attention was on his fingers as they went through the motions of launching the buoy.

"Weapons are full," Kris answered. Her command board had been extended to include everything important from the weapons board. She'd done that about fifteen seconds into the watch. She didn't expect to use the four 24-inch pulse lasers hidden under the *Wasp's* civilian brightwork, but . . .

Kris eyed Beni's back as he finished his prep. "What *are* you afraid of, Chief?"

"I work for this Longknife woman, ma'am. It pays for me to always be afraid, cause she never is," he said. But his grin got wider as he said it.

"Launch the buoy, Chief," Kris said dryly.

"Aye, aye, Lieutenant. Buoy launched."

Now they waited for five minutes. Around Kris, the ship continued its somnolence. The engineering watch checked in to ask if they'd be needing to put on a

full-gee acceleration anytime soon, were told to expect it, and went back to tending their teakettles.

The minutes dragged by, Kris did a second and third check to make sure the 24-inch lasers that the *Wasp* officially didn't have were at full charge. They were and continued to be.

Much to Kris's relief, Captain Drago did not appear to summon a full bridge crew and take her command away. Kris wasn't quite sure why that would bother her, but she knew it would.

Five minutes gone, Kris ordered a short burst from maneuvering thrusters and the *Wasp* edged through the jump.

Kris felt only slightly disoriented as her ship was yanked from one star to another one seven light-years farther from Earth. With only a blink, she studied her board.

There was the jump buoy. Farther out, some thirty thousand kilometers, was a ship.

Then a laser blew the jump buoy to bits.

“Jinks ship,” Kris shouted. “Raise armor.”

“Jinksing pattern two initiated,” Chief Beni answered, and the ship shot up, then left, then up again. “Shields up.”

Kris mashed her commlink, ignoring that her call for armor had once again been changed to “shields up.” “Battle stations. Guns,” Kris ordered. “All hands. Battle stations. Guns.”

That done, Kris concentrated on aiming her lasers up the rear end of a very strange ship. A ship unlike any ship she’d ever seen—except on vids.

An Iteeche Death Ball was breaking toward Kris’s jump point, its vulnerable engines wide open to the *Wasp*’s lasers.

That was stupid. You could say many things about those four-eyed bastards, but the Iteeche were never stupid.

Kris’s shield took a hit. Smart Metal™ vaporized to ablate away what heat the metal was not able to spread quickly to the entire shield and then radiate into space.

“There are two more ships out there. I make them cruisers,” Chief Beni reported. “Greenfeld cruisers from the way their lasers are heating up. Your Highness, I think they’re the ones firing at us. Or at least shooting at the Death Ball and missing.”

“I think you may be right,” Kris whispered. On her board, two twin batteries of 6-inch lasers heated up on one cruiser as they discharged. The Death Ball dodged right, left, up, down. The armor that had opened like an umbrella in front of the *Wasp* took another glancing hit.

KRIS, WE HAVE TO SHOOT THOSE GREENFELD BASTARDS, rang in Kris’s head.

Kris didn’t have time to make a note of Nelly’s new vocabulary. NO, NELLY, WE ARE NOT GOING TO FIRE AT THE CRUISERS. I WILL NOT START A WAR TODAY.

BUT THEY’RE ENDANGERING CARA. I’VE GOT THE LASERS SIGHTED IN. I CAN HIT BOTH OF THEM.

The lasers were rock on, Kris noted. WE ARE NOT SHOOTING, NELLY.

WE HAVE TO. FOR CARA!

Kris’s hand had been rising almost without volition since this silent conversation started. Now it moved like the lightning strike of a viper, depressing a tiny portion of the computer that hung at her collarbone. Kris hadn’t pushed the off button on her computer since the first grade, when her teacher required her to take a math test unaided.

The surface of the computer gave way with unfamiliar ease. And Kris found herself with a shrieking silence in her skull.

“Captain on the bridge,” Captain Drago announced as he shot through the open

bridge door, still pulling on his pants. "What's the situation?"

Kris drew in a breath, to gain herself a moment to think and to add some noise to the silence between her ears. Focused on the world outside herself, she snapped. "We're taking stray shots from two Greenfeld cruisers shooting at an Iteeche Death Ball. Chief, put me on guard channel. Ship's computer, what was the frequency we finally used to make contact with the Iteeche?"

"I've got it. You're on," Chief Beni said, hitting a button on his board.

Captain Drago bounced off the overhead, aimed himself at Beni's usual station, and grabbed a handhold on the chair as he cinched in his belt . . . apparently content to leave the rapidly developing situation to his . . . whatever Kris was to him.

Kris would have liked to stand and glare at the forward screen, hands on hips, but the *Wasp* had no constant course. She stayed seated.

"This is Princess Kristine Longknife on the Wardhaven exploration ship *Wasp*. Greenfeld cruisers, check fire. You are missing the Iteeche Death Ball and hitting me. I repeat, check fire."

One cruiser fired its four forward 6-inchers just as the *Wasp* dodged up, left, up and right—and got singed again.

"Damn it," Kris snapped. "You keep hitting me, and I'm not even in a direct line with the Iteeche."

"Our sensors show you are," someone from a Greenfeld cruiser snapped back. "So get out of our line of fire."

"I'm going right," Kris announced.

The Iteeche, Kris noticed, immediately went right as well, not letting Kris open up so much as a kilometer more lateral displacement.

It also didn't fire.

"The four-eyed bastard is going right with you," the Greenfeld cruiser reported.

"And it hasn't fired on you since I got here," Kris pointed out. "Has it fired on you at all?"

"Well, not exactly, but it's Iteeche, and it's outside their empire. That makes it a target."

Kris was aware that the Greenfeld commander was quoting one interpretation of the Treaty of the Orange Nebula. Grampa Ray always insisted the proper reading was that you could return fire if one of them shot at you.

And Grampa Ray was a signatory to that treaty on the human side.

Kris never expected to argue the fine points of treaty language over charged lasers. But there seemed no better time than the present.

The *Wasp* put on a half-gee acceleration. Sulwan, in her usual cutoffs and tank top but barefooted, was now at Kris's weapons station. She brought it up as nav.

Kris unsnapped her seat belt and took four steps toward the screen. Behind her, Captain Drago, chest bare, slipped into his seat. The bridge stations were filling up.

Kris played the only card she had.

"Cease fire, or I swear to God, if you hit me again, I, Princess Kris Longknife,

great-granddaughter of Ray Longknife, will fire on you. And I hit what I aim at. Just check your file on me.”

There was a long pause. A glance at Chief Beni’s station, now fully devoted to sensors, showed the Greenfeld ships putting a full charge to their main batteries. They were eighty thousand kilometers out; the *Wasp* was well past their accurate range. The Iteeche Death Ball was a long shot, even at thirty thousand clicks closer.

No wonder their shooting was so far off.

“Yeah, we understand you,” finally came, as a Greenfeld Navy officer’s face filled the main screen. “What do you intend to do with your four-eyes?”

“Talk to them if I can,” Kris said. “Escort them back to their territory no matter what.”

Definitely, the Iteeche had to go back to Imperial Space. If he was one of their Wandering Men, the lawless types who’d started the Iteeche War, the crew of this Death Ball would not like that. The Iteeche attitude toward Wandering Men was similar to what humans felt toward pirates, but without the warm and fuzzy, feel-good side.

“Do you want us to stand by in case the four-eyes cause you any trouble?” the Greenfeld captain asked.

“I think I’ll have an easier time talking to him if the folks who chased him across this system kind of moseyed along, don’t you, Captain?”

“Captain,” someone said offscreen, and the screen went blank. Kris didn’t move, expecting the interruption to be short.

Behind her, Captain Drago and Sulwan exchanged whispered words. A sailor

arrived with a shirt, and Drago quickly put it on, along with the purple coat he wore far more often than either his merchant skipper's greens or reserve Navy captain's blues.

"Lieutenant Longknife," he said dryly, "when will I leave you in charge for a moment and *not* come back to find that you have started a war?"

He had no idea how close his hyperbole was to right on, but Kris tried to reply with her usual banter. "I haven't started a war . . . yet," Kris insisted through unmoving lips, keeping her eyes focused on the blank screen.

Since it stayed blank, she ventured a further response. "I may have just stopped Greenfeld from getting us into another Iteeche war."

The captain said nothing, but Kris could almost hear him rolling his eyes at the overhead.

The screen blinked and came alive again.

"It seems that I have other orders that I must take care of at the moment. If you do not mind, I will use the jump you just used to make my way home."

"I will accelerate toward the sun," Kris said. "Before our closest point of encounter, I will rotate ship and protect my engines. You may do as you please."

"Until we meet again, Princess Kristine Longknife of Wardhaven." Coming from the captain, it sounded like a threat *and* a promise.

"Sulwan, put on one gee," Captain Drago ordered. "Aim us in the general direction of the sun for now. Princess, what do we do with *your* stray Iteeche?"

Kris started to shrug.

“Hope he follows her home,” came from Marine Captain Jack Montoya as he entered the bridge.

The captain, as the commander of the rump Marine company aboard the *Wasp*, was under her command. As security chief of a serving member of royal blood, Kris had to do what he told her where her security was involved. That made for an interesting chain of command.

It didn't help that he was as handsome as she was plain. No, as she thought herself plain. He'd made it clear . . . in an officially proper way . . . that what he saw when he looked her way was beauty.

Kris chose to ignore the confused place this was taking her. She had enough problems, and today was only forty-six minutes old.

“Ship's computer, can you raise the Iteeche?” Kris asked.

“Contact is being attempted. The *Wasp* is sending the contact signal King Raymond I used that led to the initial talks at the Orange Nebula.”

“And?” Captain Drago asked.

“No reply.”

Captain Drago frowned for a second. “Ah, Princess, why are you talking to my ship's computer and not your Nelly?” Nelly was notorious throughout human space for her superiority to other computers, personal or otherwise.

“I had to turn her off,” Kris admitted.

“Off?” Jack got out first. “You don't ever turn Nelly off!”

“She had the Greenfeld cruisers sighted in. Was ready to fire on them. Something about protecting Cara. It was either let her start a war or turn her off.”

Kris eyed said cruisers as they reversed ship and began decelerating toward the jump point. They’d still be going at a pretty good clip when they passed through it. That was their problem.

“Nelly also was using ‘ain’t’ and ‘bastard,’” Kris added.

“You really need her to have that talk with your auntie Tru,” Jack said.

Kris sighed. “She’s way overdue.”

“Yes, Princess, but what do we tell this Iteeche? ‘Follow me.’ Captain Drago asked.

“No,” Kris said. “Not unless your ship’s computer knows the proper form of the pronoun ‘me’ or we might insult whoever that is and start a war on that alone. Nelly and I did a term paper in Iteeche just for fun my senior year of high school. ‘Course, Nelly had to translate it for the teacher. We got an A.”

“We need a translator just now,” Jack said. “You willing to wake Nelly up?”

“Not while we’ve got Greenfeld cruisers in our sky,” Kris said. “Captain, can your computer say something like ‘Follow in our wake.’” Examination of shattered Iteeche cadavers had hinted that they were a lot more recent in their transition from sea to land. Grampa Trouble got away with saying that to the first Iteeche shipload of negotiators.

The ship computer found that line in some history and sent the message. There was no reply, but the Death Ball altered course and accelerated at one gee toward the sun.

Sulwan modified her course to swing her engines out of a direct line of fire from the cruisers and kept the one gee acceleration.

Kris reached for a workstation and held on steady as her inner ear took a while to adjust to the twisting course, made worse by the occasional jinks up, down, or over.

Sulwan was not a trusting soul. Not with Chief Beni reporting that the cruisers had fully charged lasers.

Through all this, the Iteeche Death Ball followed the *Wasp* like a stray puppy followed a four-year-old kid dropping hot-dog bits of encouragement. Was it pure chance that its course also increased the distance between it and the cruisers?

And edged kind of behind the *Wasp*.

Captain Drago studied his board, seemed satisfied, and said, "Lieutenant Longknife, you are relieved as Officer of the Deck. Please get off of my bridge."

"Captain, I'm your gunnery officer. If someone on the *Wasp* is to shoot at those Greenfeld cruisers, it should be a serving Wardhaven officer," Kris said, turning to a vacant bridge station and tapping it in three places. It started lighting up as an offensive-weapons control station.

"One of the few things you and I agree upon," the captain said, and mashed his commlink. "Lieutenant Pasley, please report to the bridge."

Which Penny did, five seconds later. "I was already on my way," she said as she slipped into the station chair at the weapons board before Kris could.

Kris scowled down at the other active duty Navy officer on the *Wasp*. "What's that leave me to do?" she mumbled to herself.

“The hard stuff,” Captain Drago said, making a shooing motion with both hands. “I’ll handle the Greenfeld cruisers. They only outnumber and outgun us. They’ll never outclass us. You need to make friendly with your pet computer. I really feel the lack of her input. Oh, and there is that Iteeche. Screw matters up with them, and we’ll only wish the Greenfeld cruisers had blasted us out of space with their first shot.”

THREE

Kris would have much preferred a straight-up fight with a pair of Greenfield cruisers. Tough odds, but manageable.

The Iteeche Death Ball was a greater threat . . . with the ambiguity of a ticking time bomb. It might go off now. Or later. The only certainty was that it would go off and make a mess of her entire day.

And she was facing the Iteeche without Nelly. She'd never headed into a fight with one arm and one leg in a cast. Or just flat cut off.

What a mess.

Well, few things didn't get better when shared. Kris mashed her commlink. "Will the princess's staff please report . . ." No, with the Iteeche in the mix, this was no time to call a meeting in her boring conference room. "to her Tac Room." There, that had the proper lethality for a council of war. It was the same room, but it had deadly all over it.

"You drop in, too, Captain, as soon as those cruisers are out of our sky," Kris told Drago as she left him to his own and full devices.

“Will do, Your Highness,” Captain Drago answered, with just the right nod to her royal status from his aloof post as contract captain of this not-supposed-to-be warship.

Kris headed for her conference/Tac Room.

Chief Beni was there first. The wall to Kris’s left as she entered now matched the main screen on the bridge. At a glance, Kris could see how the dance was going as the Greenfeld cruisers made their way out, and the Iteeche Death Ball edged in close.

Kris breathed a sigh of relief even as a part of her brain screamed “What’s wrong with this picture?”

“You’ve got to be nuts to be glad to see human cruisers leaving even as an Iteeche gets closer,” said Colonel Hernando Cortez, formally of several military organizations and at the moment Kris’s prisoner and employee. That combination, along with the display, pretty much summed up Kris’s efforts to be a good Navy officer.

“Oh if Father or General Mac could see me now,” Kris said.

“They’d laugh their heads off,” Captain Jack Montoya said as he followed Kris into the room and took a glance at the board.

As Kris’s former Secret Service agent, he’d sworn to take a bullet for her. Now, as the chief of her security detail and commander of a Marine detachment, his job was no easier, nor with Kris’s attitude toward “secure,” any more survivable.

“What you folks gone and done to get me out of bed,” said Abby, presenting herself in a fluffy housecoat, curlers, and huge slippers with rabbit ears on them. Occasionally an Army Reserve intelligence officer, this early in the morning Abby was clearly filling the role of Kris’s maid and born-again coward.

“We got company,” Kris said.

“I hope they’re nice folks that their mommas taught to mind their manners,” Abby said, scowling at the strange symbol on the display. “What’s that?”

“An Iteeche Death Ball,” Jack said. “It followed the princess home.”

The colonel showed honest fear. Abby’s half-open eyes were suddenly quite open.

“Can we keep it?” came from the other pair of wide-open eyes, peeking around the Tac Room’s door.”

“Cara, what are you doing up?” Kris asked the twelve-year-old softly. She was in a pink nightshirt that displayed the gyrations of the latest preteen heartthrob. At least the sound had been broken in the wash . . . or so Abby claimed.

“Well, there was all that noise,” Cara started, “And then you shouting Battle whatever, and people flying down the halls. I knew they wouldn’t let me on the bridge,” the youngster admitted, quite indignant, as she edged into the room. “But if something really fun happens, you always come here. So I waited, and you all came.” She ended with far too bright a smile for this ridiculous hour of the morning.

“The young woman is a first-class observer,” said Professor mFumbo, leader of Kris’s technical and scientific team. With no other observation, he settled into his place at Kris’s table, not at all surprised to be sharing it with a child.

Or . . . if the tenured professor was pressed to express an opinion on the matter . . . *another* child.

Kris glanced at Jack. He wore a poleaxed smile as he shrugged. How could a

twelve-year-old girl have the entire ship eating out of her hand? Kris did not have fond memories of her twelfth year. She'd crawled into a bottle to escape the mourning that was tearing her family apart after little Eddy's death.

It appeared that fate had decreed that Cara's twelfth year be as good as Kris's had been bad. Then again, Kris would not swap for Cara's first eleven years.

Kris stifled a yawn and weighed the option of having the child banished to bed. She found the odds of her entire retinue joining Nelly in mutiny far too high.

So she concentrated her attention elsewhere. "We have about an hour before the Greenfeld cruisers exit the system. Call it a hunch, but I'd bet dollars to doughnuts that this Iteeche gets a whole lot more talkative once we're alone."

"Do Iteeche often get more talkative with you, Your Highness," Colonel Cortez said, "when you are alone?"

"Don't know all that much about Iteeche," Abby said, "but I've known a man or two to act that way."

"What do we know about the Iteeche?" Jack asked.

"A lot less than we knew an hour ago," Kris said bitterly.

Jack raised a sympathetic eyebrow at that, but most just stared blankly. "I had to turn Nelly off," Kris said plainly.

"Why?" came from around the table. Except for one twelve-year-old who jumped to her feet and began insisting at the top of her voice that, "You can't do that. You can't. You can't. You can't."

Kris waited until Cara stopped for a breath, then snapped, "I turned her off because Nelly had dialed our lasers in on the Greenfeld cruisers and was about to blast away. Not even Nelly can declare war on Greenfeld. We've all sweat and bled too much to keep that peace."

Deep silence, even from Cara.

"Why?" Professor mFumbo asked softly in his deep voice.

"Nelly was afraid Cara might be hurt by their lasers," Kris said.

Deeper silence.

"Just how much does Nelly know about the Iteeche?" Jack said, finally breaking the silence.

"She holds all the research I've done on the Iteeche since the fifth grade," Kris said. "Oh, and she can speak Iteeche . . . at several levels. Imperial to equal. Imperial to inferior. Warrior to warrior. Warrior to superior, and merchant to superior, inferior, and equal."

"The language is that hot on who you are?" Abby said in disbelief.

"And you better get it right, or you can get suddenly dead," Kris growled. "Grampa warned that every Iteeche of any rank carries a sword and is only too quick to use it on anyone who flubs their grammar."

"No trade pigeon or something like that?" Colonel Cortez asked.

"Several Iteeche and human prisoners served as translators for both Grampa and the head dude the Empire sent to talk to him. Several took sword strokes, and one

lost an arm for blunders in grammar. Or maybe it was what they said. Hard to tell.”

“And Nelly knows the language,” mFumbo said.

“About as good as anyone in human space. Definitely better than anyone aboard this ship, professor, unless you got a specialist I don’t know about.”

The ebony-faced man shook his head. “My understanding of our survey mission was that the Empire was one place we would steer clear of.”

“That was mine, too,” Kris said. “But it seems to have steered for us. So ignoring our linguistics problem for a moment, do you have anyone among the boffins who could run some diagnostics on my trigger-happy computer?”

The professor had both hands up, palms out, and was shaking his head well before Kris finished. “Miss Longknife, I have several computer experts who dream of being present when the real breakthrough in artificial intelligence finally comes. Many of them look upon you and your experimentation with your personal computer as a possible source for just that awaited day. But no, none of them would dare touch what you have around your neck. Several of my boffins are attempting to duplicate what you’ve done with your Nelly, but none of them have to date invested either the time or the money that you have. To put it succinctly, Nelly is your computer . . . and your problem.”

“But we need Nelly if we’re to avoid some Iteeche taking our heads off for a misplaced modifier,” Jack said with a wry grin. “Your Highness, you do have a tendency to open your mouth and start a war with anyone across the table from you.”

“Thank you so much for your vote of confidence,” Kris said, and finished with a most sincere, “I will try to avoid going down in history as the cause of the Second Iteeche War.”

“I’m just trying to keep you alive, Princess,” Jack said, denying her the last word.

“It seems we need to turn Nelly back on,” mFumbo said.

“But how do we keep the little darling from shooting from the hip the next time she thinks Cara’s in danger?” Abby added.

“I didn’t mean to cause trouble,” Cara said. She’d been sitting very quietly in her chair, doing her best to be small. What with her latest growth spurts, she was almost as tall as her aunt Abby. Small was not something she did easy. “Maybe if I said something to Nelly,” Cara offered.

Leaving the future of her ship and its crew, along with the rest of humanity, in the hands of a kid did not make Kris’s bunny jump. Not even a little.

“Let’s think about that for a while,” Kris said, and changed the subject. “Without Nelly, what do we know about the Iteeche?”

“Not much,” Colonel Cortez said, “except they are very good at killing humans.”

“Were, eighty years ago,” the professor corrected.

“You think they’ve gotten less efficient?” Cortez asked.

“I know we’ve gotten better at killing our fellow humans,” Jack said.

“On that topic, may I toss in something?” Chief Beni asked.

“Toss away,” Kris said.

“As I go over their ship, I’m not getting anything in the higher frequencies where

our Smart Metal™ gives off a kind of background hum. The Iteeche are doing a very good job of jamming almost everything, just like my grandpa said they did back in his war, but they're not jamming up there, and they are not humming themselves in those frequencies."

"Are you telling me that they don't have Smart Metal™?" Kris asked. "Can we score one for us hairless monkeys?"

"Seems that way," the chief said. "And there's something else, Your Highness, and I hope you won't be upset with me."

"Why?" Kris asked. She'd learned long ago with this team that it was unwise to dispense general absolution too quickly. They were oh so good at coming up with interesting variations on what other people thought impossible.

Almost as good at it as her.

"When we jumped into this system and our buoy like vanished immediately," the chief started.

"Yes," Kris said, wondering how long this story would take.

"I had a visual on the Iteeche, and a gravity bearing from our new atom laser. But they didn't agree. You being kind of busy, I chose the gravity bearing since it put the Death Ball off our bow, but the visual said it was dead ahead."

"That *might* explain why the cruisers were shooting our way," Kris said.

"And missing the Iteeche," Jack added.

"That's what I thought," the chief said. "Anyway, when we got our laser- and

radar-range findings, they supported the visual. I didn't change the board."

"During the war, our ships had the devil's own time," Kris said, "hitting the Iteeche ships. They never seemed to be where our sensors said they were."

"I hadn't heard about that," Colonel Cortez said.

"The Navy wasn't all that interested in sharing its problems with its sister service," Kris said.

"But you can't hit something you can't range properly," Jack pointed out.

"You can if you fire full broadsides carefully spaced," Kris said. "That's what they did in the later fleet actions, firing carefully organized salvos to cover everything. And we finally started hitting things in all the wrong places."

"And this never got out?" Abby said.

"You want to tell all the folks back home," Kris said, "that your Navy is firing blind cause the Iteeche can do magic tricks and make their ships disappear."

"I see the problem," the colonel said.

"It wasn't exactly secret after the war," Kris said, "but it didn't make it into any of the popular history or vids, where most people got their education. But our new gravity sensors, the ones we're using to find the fuzzy jump points, can find them," she said, with a grin.

"Meaning that the Iteeche are maybe seven feet tall, not ten," Abby said.

“Ma’am,” Colonel Cortez said, “the Iteeche *are* seven feet tall. My daddy measured quite a few of their bodies after he’d killed them.”

“But we’ve got Smart Metal™ and a new gravity sensor in our atom laser. We can go places they can’t even see, and we’ve got a whole new metal to protect our hides,” Kris said. “Abby, dump all this to a message pod. As soon as the Greenfeld cruisers get out of my sky, send it back to the jump. Use your best codes, ’cause the cruisers will likely intercept the message when it’s broadcast across the next system.”

“Right, Your Highness. I imagine Admiral Crossenshield will be a mite bit delighted to hear about this. Might even up my pay if I kind of forget to include this in my general report on what you’re up to,” Abby said, heading out and wrangling an arm around Cara. “Come on, Baby Duck, I will not have you falling asleep no matter who’s your teacher tomorrow.”

“But this is exciting, and you never let me have any fun.”

The door closed firmly behind the two, and Kris found herself smiling along with the rest of the team at the familiar dialogue from her youth.

Kris turned from the screen and eyed her team. “It’s nice to know that we may have a few surprises up our sleeves,” Kris said.

“Considering that we only have two sleeves, and they have four,” Professor mFumbo said, “don’t bet too much on that.”

“Good point, professor,” Kris replied. “Now, does anyone have any idea about who we are dealing with? Are they representatives of the Empire, or Wandering Men who have broken all allegiances? And is there any way for us to tell between the two?”

Eighty years ago, that had started the trouble between the two species. The

Iteeche's first contact had been with human pirates who accepted no law. Our first contact had been with Iteeche Wandering Men, who accepted no rule and were under a death sentence upon capture by any Imperial forces. There was a lot of shooting first before anyone thought of asking questions.

By the time the Society of Humanity realized the mess it was in, the bad blood between the two species didn't invite conversation. No one who was part of that war wanted to think about all the years of bloody massacre and prisonerless battles that it had taken before cooler heads were finally allowed to attempt negotiations.

In the end, both sides agreed to ignore the other. At the time, the No Go Zone seemed large enough to assure the necessary separation.

It had worked for eighty years.

Why had the Iteeche come out now? Did they feel it was time to examine the standoff between them and the humans? If so, it hadn't started out all that well.

"It's not as if they violated the No Go Zone," Colonel Cortez said. "We are light-years from it. They might just be doing the same thing we're doing. Looking around for worlds they could settle."

"Kind of close to us," Jack pointed out.

"Only because we're getting kind of close to them," mFumbo pointed out.

"Chief, put up a star map," Kris ordered. "Iteeche red, human blue, No Go Zone purple."

It appeared in place of the solar system map that showed the Greenfeld cruisers no more than five minutes away from their jump point. Human space spreading out in

all directions, but here it squeezed to the right and left of Imperial Space, flanking the No Go Zone. Human planets had grown from 150 to over 600 in the last eighty years. Still, the Empire had claimed over 2,000 planets eighty years ago. Even if the Empire had grown at its usual slow, dignified pace, humanity was still way outnumbered.

“So folks, what do you think?” Kris asked. “An Imperial ship, exploring like us? An illegal, looking for a place to hide from justice? Or something else?”

Around the table, Kris was greeted with shrugs. Jack pulled a coin out of his pocket and offered to flip it.

“You’re a lot of help.”

“Who’s a lot of help?” Captain Drago asked as he entered.

“My brain trust,” Kris said, standing.

“Well, the system is ours. I’m willing to bet this fellow gets more talkative real soon.”

“Right, but is he one of their pirate types or an explorer ship like us?” Kris asked. “Jack was about to flip a coin.”

He did. “It’s heads. What’s that mean?”

“That your coin is no better at guessing our future than the rest of us,” Kris said.

“Well, if you asked me,” Captain Drago said, “whoever is over there is a smart ship handler. There haven’t been a lot of course changes. He’s got a good set of sensors, knows what we’re doing, and does what he wants to do. No bobbling the course. We’ve also got some visuals on him. Good paint job. Not a lot of dings and

dints in his hull. Somebody knows how to drive a ship. Or at least cares enough about his boat to keep someone working to make it Ship-shape and Bristol fashion.”

“Not something pirates are known for,” Kris said.

“If you want my money, I’d bet on an Imperial,” Captain Drago said.

“And I’d never bet against you,” Kris said.

“Captain, we’ve got a message coming in from the Iteeche,” Sulwan announced over the captain’s commlink.

“Where do you want to take it, Lieutenant?”

Kris considered her options: here, or the bridge. Of course, she could offer him a glass of wine and a chance to share a bubble bath with her naked body.

Come to think about it, that had never been tried during the long and bloody effort to stop the fighting . . . and the Iteeche were supposed to be partial to water.

“The bridge,” Kris snapped. “It was where I turned Nelly off, and if I’m going to risk turning her back on, there’s no better place than there.”

