

Kris Longknife - Daring

by Mike Shepherd

For this, Princess Kris Longknife was born.  
From this moment, her life will never be the same.  
But then, neither will all humanity, or any of the other intelligent space faring races we've found.

It was supposed to be a simple recon mission.  
"We come, we see, we run home quick," was how Kris said it would be.  
And the small light corvettes of PatRon 10 were perfect for the job.  
So why did the other three governments send battleships? Their biggest!  
And why did Grampa Ray, King Ray to most, send her the biggest bombs humanity ever made?

Now Kris has a decision to make.  
Billions, tens of billions will die either way.  
and Kris must decide who.

## ONE

Kris Longknife fought the shot-up controls of the Greenfeld Ground Assault Craft. It seemed bent on smashing itself into the rocky ground below. She would much rather stay in the air, putting more miles between her and the whoever it was who'd put so many holes so quickly in her borrowed air vehicle.

"Jack, get me some more controls."

"I've already flipped on the back-up stabilization and directional controls, Kris."

"Then find the back-up to the back-up!"

"I don't think Greenfeld puts more than one in any craft."

"What kind of cheapskate, death-happy crazies only puts one back-up system in a fighting vehicle?" cried Nelly, Kris's personal computer, and no help at the moment.

"Our newest ally," Jack grumbled.

The air vehicle fought Kris, flipping right, then left, but it put more rock-strewn ground between Kris and the apparent mining concern that had been the target of what was supposed to be a quick snatch-and-grab raid.

"Where did all that firepower come from?" Kris asked no one in particular.

"I think who or whatever we're dealing with is very, very trigger happy. And really paranoid, to boot," Jack answered.

"You can say that again," Nelly said.

A flash came from behind Kris. Her air rig chose to zig at that moment, giving her a fairly good view out of the left corner of her eye of the target. A laser beam winked out,

to be replaced by several more.

"Oh, oh," Kris muttered. "Admiral Krätz just got tired of messing with the problem and lazed it from orbit."

"God help us," Jack said. And very likely meant it for a prayer. The shock waves coming off the target were only seconds away from ripping their damaged ride to pieces.

"There's a swamp up ahead," Nelly said.

"I see it," Kris said. "I'm aiming for it." As much as she could aim this riddled bucket of lowest bid bolts.

She pancaked the craft into what looked like the softest mud bank in sight. They bounced, settled again, slid for a bit that slowly turned sideways.

Then the shock wave from 18-inch lasers pommeling a mine head hit them.

The Greenfeld assault boat flipped, and lost its stubby wings as it rolled and started coming apart.

As the cockpit was ripped from the rest of the craft, Kris grayed out but fought not to lose consciousness. As she struggled back to full awareness, one question kept running over and over in her mind.

*What am I doing here? What am I doing here?*

Then she remembered.

*Oh, right, I insisted on being here.*

## TWO

"You will not," thundered King Raymond the First, Hammerer of the Iteeche, Killer of the Tyrant Urm and Ender of the Unity War, (it was in all the papers) and presently Sovereign of the 173 planets in the United Society (or Societies, depending on your political persuasion). That royal claim was circumscribed by a brand new, if as yet not very tested, constitution.

Still, a recognized legend for the last eighty years, what Ray Longknife bellowed he expected to have done.

"Yes I will," said Lieutenant Commander, Her Royal Highness Kristine Anne Longknife, Defender of the Peace at Paris (even if it did involve mutiny), She who commanded at Wardhaven and presently Commander, Patrol Squadron 10. She'd had enough of her Grampa Ray running her around on a short leash and was ready to take her squadron and do what *she* thought necessary to save humanity . . . this time.

The space between them and the room around them took on a noticeable chill. Those forced to witness this intra-family squabble, which like everything the Longknifes did, was of near biblical proportions, did their best to gaze at the ceiling, desk, carpet . . . anywhere but at the two so committed to disagreement.

Kris locked eyes with her Grampa Ray. He scowled back, a scowl he'd been practicing for a hundred years. Kris didn't try to match him, scowl for scowl, but met his gaze with a rock solid blank stare that promised no flexibility on her part.

Neither one blinked.

It got kind of boring.

So Kris checked out General Mac McMorrison's new digs. He'd been promoted

from Wardhaven Chief of Staff to Chief of the Royal U.S. General Staff. The republican blue rug and frayed blue curtains were gone, replaced by a royal red. The new curtains even had gold tassels. The couches that held Kris's staff had also been reupholstered in red and gold stipes.

Kris would never have guessed Grampa Ray was so into red.

The king himself sat in a large visitor's chair next to Mac's desk. Why did Kris suspect that chair was only brought out from against the wall when the king came to call. Mac sat at his desk. To his left in a normal-sized visitor's chair was Admiral Crossenshield, the head of Wardhaven Intelligence.

Or maybe U.S. Intelligence, now.

Royal Intelligence?

It was hard to tell what to call anything in this changing world.

What hadn't changed was the unholy trinity, as Kris had taken to calling them. Today, they'd hollered for backup. Kris's other legendary Great-grampa leaned comfortably on a bookcase to the king's right.

Oh! Kris almost broke eye-lock with her royal grampa. Atop the bookshelf was a fancy something-or-other. Was that a field marshal's baton? Had Mac gotten a promotion for taking on the new royal pains of commanding 173 different planets military as they somehow merged into a unified command?

Kris would have to ask Mac . . . but not now. Not while she and her Grampa were locked in a battle to see who could avoid blinking the longest.

Retired General Tordon cleared his throat in his place by the bookcase. The king glanced his way, and so did Kris. Trouble to his enemies. Trouble to his friends. Double trouble to his superiors. Whenever one spoke of the Longknife legend, it was rare that Ray and Trouble were not mentioned in the same breath.

He was Grampa Trouble to Kris. She'd learned the hard way to expect trouble when she saw him coming.

"You know," Trouble began almost diffidently, "it's an ancient and respected

custom that when a superior expresses a preference, it's treated as an order."

Kris greeted that gambit with thoughtfully pursed lips . . . and a glower of her own.

The retired general soldiered on in the face of Kris's rejection. "When a king gives an order to a lieutenant commander, the officer's response normally is 'Yes, sir, Your Majesty.'"

"Yes, sir, yes, sir, three bags full, sir," Kris said under her breath, for the entire room to hear. When it was clear her message was received by all, she added. "Just like you always did, Grampa Trouble?"

Grampa's lips showed just the hint of a smile as he turned to his king and shrugged. "She's our kid, Ray."

"She's an undisciplined brat," came back in a royal growl that any old lion would be proud of.

Kris locked eyes with her royal grampa and prepared to renew their unblinking war. To keep from being too bored, she used her peripheral vision to check out how her own team was taking this little family unmeeting of the minds.

Abby, Kris's maid and occasional spy seemed unbothered by it all. She studied the coffee table/comm display between their couches as if she might somehow decant whatever secret it had lately displayed.

Across from her, Lieutenant Penny Lien-Pasley likewise eyed the table. She was Kris's intelligence analyst, interrogator and, by right of her upbringing by two cops, usual contact with the police, a frequent and inevitable part of any visit Kris paid to a planet. Right now, her eyes were also fixed on the low table between the couches.

Beside Penny sat Colonel Cortez. As a result of having led a hostile planetary take down that Kris had defeated, he was her prisoner. Since she'd put him on her personal payroll, he was her tactical advisor and principal ground logistician. He'd last begged to be returned to prison . . . any prison . . . rather than risk the crossfire at another Longknife family confab. Today, he calmly studied the ceiling.

Closest to Kris, and in the direct line of fire between her and her royal grampa, sat

Jack. As her Secret Service agent, he'd sworn to take a bullet for her. With her spending more and more time away from home, Grampa Trouble's suggestion that she draft him into a Marine captain's uniform and head of her security had sounded like a good idea. Only after he was in uniform did Grampa Trouble let drop that, as the Security Chief for a serving member of the blood, Jack now had authority to countermand any order of Kris's that he considered a risk to her safety.

And Jack had a pretty broad definition of what constituted Kris's safety.

They were still working out their differences.

And Kris was now a lot more careful about any suggestion coming from Grampa Trouble.

Today, even in the holy of holies, Jack's head swivelled slowly, eyes searching for anything that might physically harm Kris.

Grampa Trouble cleared his throat again. And again, that got his king and Kris's attention.

"You know, Commander, when one is given a mission a couple of hundred light years out in space, normally, you don't show up at home with your whole squadron."

Kris nodded. "You have a good point," she admitted to Grampa Trouble, before rounding on Grampa Ray.

"I completed your mission," she spat.

"Already?" came from the king in what sounded like a royal yelp.

*Have I really surprised him?*

"Done, completed, finished," Kris said. "You ordered me to take care of the budding pirate problem out on the Rim of Peterwald space without getting any complaints from the newly crowned Emperor Harry."

The newly officialized King Raymond nodded.

"I captured three pirate schooners, one freighter and a skiff. I liberated one potential pirate refuge and took down a main base. I also put out of business fifteen thousand hectares of drug plantations and liberated twenty-five thousand slaves. Oh, and

you didn't get one whimper from your new, neighboring emperor, did you?"

Kris eyed Field Marshall Mac.

"Not a word from him," he said.

"I'm just guessing on this, but I think we'll split the two planets. Kaskatos will likely apply for membership in United Society. The Greenfeld Empire will get Port Royal, and they are welcome to it," Kris said.

"All that in three months?" Grampa Trouble whispered. There might have even been a touch of respectful awe hidden away in there.

Kris kept her eyes locked on Grampa Ray. "I'm sick and tired of draining swamps and dodging alligators. I want to get on to something really important."

"Um," the king said. Exactly what Kris considered "Really Important," was too classified to discuss among even this small group. From the glance around that Field Marshal Mac gave the others, even he apparently hadn't been read into this one.

Mac opened his mouth to say something, then froze.

He struggled for a long moment to keep a look of horror off his face. When he finally got words out, they were full of horror. "Two. No three. Make that four super battleships just jumped into our system, using Jump Point Gamma."

The last time six super dreadnoughts jumped in system using that jump point, they'd threatened to blast Wardhaven down to bedrock if it didn't surrender.

"What are they squawking," Grampa Trouble asked, standing bolt upright like an old fire horse who heard the alarm bell and couldn't stay out to pasture.

"They're Greenfeld," Mac said.

King Ray and Grampa Trouble paled. There was much bad blood between the Longknives and the Peterwalds. Neither one breathed, waiting for the next shoe to drop.

"Oh, good," Kris said, clapping her hands like any four-year-old at her birthday party. "Vicky Peterwald talked her dad into letting her come, too."

All four of Kris's team now rolled their eyes at the ceiling.

Four sets of very senior eyes locked onto Kris as their mouths dropped open.

### THREE

King Raymond, being the legend that he was, recovered first. He was half out of his seat as he shouted, "You told Vicky Peterwald about our meeting with the Iteeche!"

"What?" said Mac. The Field Marshall apparently *was* the only one in the room who didn't know about that very secret meeting.

He turned to Crossie, the Intel chief who whispered, "I'll explain it later."

Kris didn't dare wait to defend herself, but jumped right in, talking over them. "I did not," she snapped, keeping her seat.

"Then what's Henry Peterwald's daughter doing riding four battleships into Wardhaven space," the king demanded. Half up, half down, he was clearly torn between his options. With reservations, he settled back in his chair.

"She wants to come with me to find out what's gobbling up Iteeche scout ships and not spitting back so much as an atom," Kris said.

"You *told* her!" Grampa Ray repeated the accusation.

"I did *not*," Kris repeated the denial.

"Then how does she know?" Grampa Trouble asked, kindly breaking Kris and her other grampa out of an endless do-loop of accusations and denials.

"*He* told her," Kris said, and pointed at Admiral Crossenshield, the chief of Wardhaven, or maybe all U.S. Intelligence."

"I did not," he snapped, with sincerity so refined and polished it might actually pass muster of, say, a kindergartener.

Both of Kris's grandpas scowled as they eyed the man who was supposed to find out other peoples' secrets and keep their own. From the looks of them, Crossie's sincerity

had not passed *their* smell test.

"I didn't tell her about the meeting," Crossie insisted.

"No, you just sent her a video of the whole get-together," Kris snapped.

"You've seen it?" Grampa Trouble asked.

"Vicky showed it to me," Kris admitted. "I let my team view it after she did."

"What makes you so sure it came from me?" Crossie demanded.

From the glowers around the room, including her own staff, that was considered a valid question.

"I'm in it," Kris said. "The king and Grampa Trouble are in it." They nodded agreement. "Jack's in it." At her request, the king had allowed Jack to remain when everyone else had been ushered out.

"The Iteeche are in it." Humanity and the Iteeche Empire had fought a six year war that almost made humanity extinct. Just ask any veteran. Kris had only recently discovered that Iteeche vets of that war felt the same way. That the humans had almost made the Iteeche's extinct. After twenty-five years of being told one story, Kris was still struggling to absorb the other viewpoint.

"The only person who was in the meeting that wasn't in the vid that Vicky had was you, Crossie. Me thinks you did edit things a bit too much."

Now it was the admiral's turn to frown. "I may have out thought myself on that one," he admitted, and admitting to the edit, allowed that he was the guilty party.

"So, Crossie," the king said with a tired sigh, "why isn't my most important secret a secret anymore."

The head of black ops, white ops and all the rest in between didn't seem at all embarrassed to be caught red handed going against his king, and luring the daughter of his strongest opposition in human space into some sort of game.

And probably gaming Kris as well.

She hated being played by Crossie.

Usually she refused to get involved in his dirty tricks.

Problem was, today, the two of them seemed headed in the same direction.

Which left Kris wondering if she needed to make a hard right turn.

Oh bother.

While Kris spun those thoughts through her own head, Crossie was doing his best to spin his own defense.

"You and I both know this is the worst kept secret in human space," Crossie said.

"Walk into any pub in the capital here and I'll bet you money that half the tables in the place are discussing whether or not you met with an Imperial representative."

"They're arguing the case," Trouble pointed out. "They don't know. Big difference."

"The difference was big enough that your pet project of naming us United Sentients fell through," Crossie countered.

That got a wince from the king.

"You and I agree, we can't bring up the problem of Iteeche scouts disappearing without a trace while all we have is their own word. Your granddaughter here wanted to go do some exploring herself. You sent her to chase pirates instead. Sorry to say, the pirates didn't provide her all that much of a distraction." He gave her a respectful nod.

Kris returned a proud grin . . . showing plenty of teeth.

"Now she wants to take a swing at whatever is going bump in the night under the Iteeche beds. If a Longknife goes out there hunting bug-eyed monsters and finds something, how much of human space will believe her? Her word alone. If Kris Longknife and Vicky Peterwald come back saying they found something . . .?"

"Assuming whatever they find doesn't follow them home, nipping at their heels." Grampa Trouble said darkly.

The king shook his head. "Last time I checked, I was the king, and nobody has asked me if I want my granddaughter rummaging around under the galactic inner springs to see if anything bites her," he grumbled.

That took Kris aback. Then again, Grampa Ray, seventy years ago, when he was

the President of the Society of Humanity, had pushed through the Treaty of Wardhaven. Under that rule, humanity had slowed down its expansion to a more reasonable pace, colonizing most of its known sphere before pressing on to explore and people a new layer.

The argument for that kind of measured pace had seemed logical after our first wild exploration had brought us up against the Iteeche . . . and a bloody war.

Was Grampa Ray wanting to keep at that measured pace?

Or did Grampa just not want a certain Kris to be the one putting her head in the potential lion's maw.

The room fell silent. She suspected everyone here was trying to draw out the unusual meaning of the king's revelation that blood might actually be thicker than water.

Kris was still struggling to manufacture a reply when the field marshal once again put his hand to his ear. "Two Swiftsure class battlecruisers just came through Jump Point Beta. They say they're from the Helvetican Confederacy and on official business. They want to know if Princess Kristine is still here?"

"Crossie, how many copies of that damn meeting did you send out?" the king demanded.

"Several," the admiral admitted. "I didn't think I'd get many responses."

"I think you just got another one," Mac said.

"Who?" came from several of the seniors in the room.

"Two Haruna class battleships have jumped into the system. I don't remember the last time we had a visit from Musashi."

"Not since the war," Grampa Trouble said.

"I take it you sent them a copy," the king said.

"I just wanted them to know what was going on. I didn't actually expect them to come all this way."

"Your Highness, I have an incoming message for you," Kris's personal computer spoke from where she rode just above Kris's collar bone. Nelly, very upgraded, very

expensive, and very much no longer a compliant, obedient computer, was being nice today.

"Who's it from, Nelly?" Kris asked.

"Rear Admiral Ichiro Kta aboard the MS *Haruna*. He would appreciate an appointment, at your convenience, to meet with you concerning certain matters. Oh, ma'lady, Rear Admiral Max Channing sends his compliments and also requests a meeting with you at your conveniences. And Rear Admiral Krätz sends his compliments and says Her Royal Highness, Grand Duchess Vicky is dying to dish the dirt with you on how she got permission to charge off on this mad hatter idea."

"He didn't say that," Kris said.

"He did. His very words. Cross my heart," Nelly answered.

"What have we created?" King Ray asked the overhead.

Grampa Trouble scratched his right ear while not struggling very hard to suppress a grin.

"You two families have been at each others throats for years. Maybe two girls . . ."

left all sorts of possibilities unsaid.

Kris herself wondered what kind of bridges she and Vicky, two Navy officers, might build between two families that had been hating each others guts for almost a century. She was pretty sure that Vicky's dad paid the kidnappers who killed Kris's little six-year-old brother when Kris herself was ten. She was also fairly sure several of the recent attempts on her life could be traced, if not to the old man's door, then at least to his next door neighbors.

Was it possible for Kris and Vicky to bury the hatchet between their two families?

And survive the experience?

Kris was willing to give it a try.

While keeping a careful eye on her back.

To her two great-grandfathers, Kris gave a noncommittal shrug. "Nelly, send my regards and compliments to all three flags and tell them . . ."

Now it was Kris's time to do some quick math. "It would take a good three days for all the different squadrons to finish

their approaches to High Wardhaven Station. Crossie, you invited them. Can you arrange to have them all docked somewhere close to the *Wasp*?"

"I can do that," he assured her.

"Then, Nelly, tell them that they should feel free to call on me one hour after the last of them ties up."

"I'm doing that, ma'lady,"

"Ma'lady?" the king said.

"Yes. Nelly is studying etiquette and protocol," Kris said.

"A gal's got to know how to fit into polite society," Nelly announced for herself.

"A polite computer," Crossie observed. "I wonder how that works."

Kris was glad that none of the black-hearted seniors present extended that observation to the logical conclusion. The difference between tact and diplomacy and bald face lying was often a thin line. Kris was having to watch that line very carefully now with Nelly.

Not for the last time Kris wondered if that last upgrade to Nelly had been all that good of an idea.

And not for the last time, she told herself that Nelly was Nelly and her life would be a whole lot less fun without her pet computer/BFF.

Maybe if she kept telling herself that, it would get easier to believe it.

With a regal, if a bit limp, wave of the hand, King Raymond I dismissed Kris. By Kris's own count, there were still a whole lot of issues hanging fire between them.

Still, she took the dismissal and moved out.

With luck, he'd be in a better mood the next time they butted heads.