

Chapter 1

Her Royal Highness, Admiral Kris Longknife slid into the back seat of the provided government limo. Jack was already there. He held out an arm and she slipped into a hug, then kissed him hungrily on the cheek. He turned his head and she ended up kissing him fully on his lips. Her tongue begged entry and he let it slip in to meet his tongue. For a long minute, they played together.

Finally, Kris had to come up for air.

“Really bad day?” Jack asked.

“Horrible.”

“I heard the budget came out.”

Jack, being just a lieutenant general, wouldn't see anything for a day or two. Maybe more. Her Royal Highness, Admiral Kris Longknife took the full brunt of the budget battles, naked, ugly and soonest. She was the type commander for battlecruisers. It was a bureaucratic job. She didn't get to command anything; she just got to do the budget and write policy and doctrine for the use of the new type of warship.

Write policy and doctrine that was still unapproved after five years of her pushing it uphill like cooked spaghetti.

“Yeah, the budget is out. I can't talk about it, but you better take me to bed early and do all kinds of things to me or I'm going to start blowing things up tomorrow.”

He kissed her again, and Kris began to relax under his loving attention. With every breath she took, the tension of the day slipped out of her. Evenings and nights like this were what made her days bearable.

She was actually starting to feel loose, loved and wonderful.

“Incoming missile,” Nelly said from Kris's collarbone. “Defenses activated.”

Kris threw herself forward into the car's foot well. Jack landed heavy atop her, doing his best to cover every part of her with his body.

Nelly, the Magnificent Nelly as she told anyone who would listen, had been a gift to Kris on her first day of school. Rather than buy a shiny new one each year, Kris had upgraded her familiar one. Nelly had been upgraded more times than Kris could remember. One of those upgrades had involved a bit of data storage from a multi-million-year-old alien supercomputer. Now Nelly argued with Kris and told horrible jokes.

She also synced in with any network around Kris.

Currently, the car's anti-missile defense system was operating way beyond specs as Nelly acquired the incoming missile, slaved the laser just coming up from the lid of the trunk to its

target, and fired.

The laser hit the incoming missile a good two hundred meters from the limo, but a mess in motion tends to stay in motion. The laser kept the missile in its sights, spitting out a burst of coherent light sixty times per second. Nelly and the laser converted the incoming missile into a collection of junk flying in loose formation.

It was that junk plus flaming rocket fuel that splattered itself on the back window of the limo.

The window, in fact the entire limo, was made of Smart Metal™. It was all programable matter that Nelly had totally control over.

As directed, the window thickened up even as it bowed inward under the pressure of the hit. Some parts of the rocket, either its motor or its warhead, likely both, caught fire. Nelly added more matter from a cylinder under the middle seats, using its contents to strengthen the window even as it built a much larger laser on the top of the limo.

The defensive sensors had tracked the incoming rocket and backtracked it to its point of origin. Nelly took a look at the launcher, found no civilians near it, and shot back.

The launcher took it on the nose. The front of the rocket launchers barrel got hit with just enough energy to warp the metal of its barrel, but not enough to destroy any evidence the investigators might turn up.

Nelly had a lot of experience responding to attacks with just enough force to prevent more while still leaving something for Special Agent Foile and his team to go over.

The attack had been too fast for the driver to initiate evasion action. Jack was pulling himself off of Kris before she really had a chance to do much more than contemplate her fate. Here she was, a princess, an admiral, and a Longknife. She'd spent the last five years of her life at a nice, unthreatening duty and still somebody wanted her dead.

Or did they?

Was that missile attack intended to kill her or just get her attention?

She and Jack dusted off their uniforms and settled back in their seats. By now, the back window was back to being a clear expanse of glass, just as clear and undamaged as any other car on the road. Nelly would never allow Kris's limo to look bad.

Whatever chunks of the missile that had survived the laser and its self-immolation were now packaged and boxed up in the trunk ready for transport to the Secret Service lab.

Kris and Nelly had developed quite a routine. One they'd gone through way too many times.

"Who do you think that was from?" Jack asked, trying to be casual.

"Hard to tell," Kris answered just as matter-of-fact. "The Peterwalds aren't after us anymore. Now we're allies. There may be a few factions in Greenfield that still have their nose out of joint, but I don't see them doing anything to get me mad."

"And?"

"I have no idea, Jack. If it's anything like the other five attacks in the last three months, we'll find that the launcher was overage and surplus. It was sold off to a reputable dealer to be demilitarized and reduced to its base metal and chemicals. How any of them got out of the

proper channels is still something Foile is investigating. Everyone involved has the highest security clearance.”

“Don’t most spies have high security clearances?”

“Yeah. It goes with the job,” Kris answered, and snuggled up next to Jack. He put his arm around her, but the feeling was gone. It’s hard to be sexy when you’ve just been reminded that someone wants you dead.

They’d been driving around in this camouflaged tank with two Marines up front ever since someone took a pot shot at Kris’s brand new car nearly five years ago. She had been driving Jack and Ruthie to Main Navy. She and Jack were going to work, Ruthie was headed for another day of daycare close by so Kris could breast feed her when the need arose.

Maybe not for the baby’s needs, but Kris’s full boobs.

The hidden road side bomb had blown in Jack’s side of the car and they’d flipped over twice before coming to rest. Ruthie’s safety seat, designed by Nelly, worked perfectly; the infant thought it was great fun. The safety equipment on the car kept them in place as they rolled over and over. The explosion caved in Jack’s door, dislocating his shoulder and breaking an arm.

On investigation, Special Agent Foile and his reinforced team concluded the explosives used in the bomb were overage and did not explode at full force.

Kris and Ruthie followed Jack to the hospital, waited while he was set right, then rode home in an armored limo with two Marines seated in the front seat and a Marine gun truck traveling fore and aft of them.

It was Nelly that suggested they replace the existing limo with one constructed of Smart Metal™ that she could manipulate in a split second. After the limo survived three attacks without any of its passengers any the worse for the wear, the Marine gun trucks were dispensed with.

Or maybe not. On occasions, Kris caught sight of Marines in some of the cars in traffic around them.

Today, she and Jack took a while to get into the normal flow of their ride home. Usually Kris would debrief Jack on her day, then he would share his. They did their very best to arrive home with their minds cleared of the day’s wreckage and both of them ready to devote time to themselves and two rambunctious darlings.

Ruth was rapidly approaching her sixth birthday and was becoming quite the young lady, when she wasn’t climbing trees and getting into mischief with the neighborhood kids. Young John Junior had just turned four and did his best to keep up with his big sister. The poor fellow had the scrapes and bruises to show for it.

Kris had the Marines drop them off at the front portico. Even from outside, Kris could hear Johnnie’s happy giggles. Ruthie was shrieking in delight. Clearly, the kids were enjoying themselves. Jack opened the door for her and she got ready to be hit by two boisterous, small cannon balls.

Both darlings were in the middle of the foyer, swinging around as if on a merry-go-round. A merry-go-round created by the four arms of an Iteeche!

Granny Rita would have pulled her automatic and shot the Iteeche dead. She, and any other veteran of the Iteeche War were on a hair trigger where this four legged, four armed, four eyed species was concerned. They remembered when the Iteeche would have driven the humans to extinction, but for their sacrifices.

Kris, however, knew different. While spending a couple of months with an Iteeche representative from the Imperial Court, she'd discovered that the Iteeche War veterans on the other side were absolutely sure that they had saved the Iteeche from the genocidal humans.

It had been an enlightening experience for both of them.

But seven or so years back, desperation had driven the Iteeche Emperor to send an envoy to King Raymond I. The Iteeche were losing exploration ships and feared what was lurking out in unexplored space. Kris's circumnavigation of the galaxy had been the result of that . . . as well as her discovery of the alien raiders.

Quite by accident but with full intent, she had started a war.

All those thoughts flashed through Kris's mind as she watched an Iteeche swing her kids around, holding them both tightly in his arms.

"Ron, is that you?" Like all humans, Kris had trouble telling them apart since all of them looked the same. Kris had learned the Iteeche had the same problem with humans.

"Yes, Princess Longknife, I have again the honor of meeting you face to face," he said, still swinging the kids, but using that strange Iteeche neck to keep himself face to face for most of the twirls.

The kids were screaming "Mommy, mommy," with glee but making no attempt to stop their own fun as they continued to fly a good six feet off the floor.

Kris let the fun continue as she tried to puzzle out what an Iteeche of the Imperial Court was doing in the foyer of her house giving her kids the most fun ride of their young lives.

For the near ninety years since the war ended with the Treaty of the Orange Nebula, hammered out by Kris's great grandfathers Ray Longknife and General Trouble, the two species had kept their distance. Kris had thought that included no contact until Ron showed up knowing a lot more about present human politics than isolation should have allowed.

Of late, the Iteeche had shared their unique way of getting many times the power from a given reactor as humans got, and we had shared the secret of Smart Metal™. You could find a tiny Iteeche colony on several space stations building critical defense projects.

But none had ever come down to a human planet. The risk was just too great.

Make that no Iteeche until one decided to give Kris's kids the wildest swing ride of any kid in human history.

Kris cautiously covered the distance to Ron and the children. Only with mommy at arms' reach did Johnnie turn his attention from Ron to her. On the next turn, he reached out to Kris and grabbed a hold of her outstretched arms.

Kris hugged him to her breast as he giggled happily.

A moment later Ron swung Ruth right at her and she managed to reach an arm out to pull the six-year-old in. Ruth switched from her delighted scream to, "Mommy, mommy, isn't Mr. Ron

great? He can make us fly!”

“Yes, your Uncle Ron is the bestest fun ever,” Kris replied, giving Ron the full family honor. “How long have you been flying with your Uncle Ron?”

“For hours and hours,” Johnnie put in. His four-year-old mind was having trouble with the concept of time.

Oh, for the simple life of a little kid.

“He can swing us longer than you or Daddy,” Ruth added. “And higher, too.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to see how long he can stay,” Kris said. “Will you stay for dinner?”

“Yes, if you are so kind. I had my driver drop off a container of my preferred food with your kind Mrs. Lotty, but if you would prefer I dine on your food, I can manage that. We have found an enzyme that allows us to process even your burned food.”

“There is no need,” Kris said. “I think we’ve raised the kids to be open to different experiences. Let’s see how they handle this one.”

“New ek-pher-ience” Johnnie said, adding a new word to his often-mangled vocabulary.

“Experiences,” Kris gently corrected. “Nelly, how long until dinner?”

“Mrs. Lotty,” Nelly said from Kris’s collar bone, and giving Lotty the cook her new formal title, “will have dinner on the table just as soon as the short people can wash their hands.”

“Well, let’s wash our hands, then,” Kris said, and Johnnie set to wiggling out of her arms. She set him down, and both he and his sister galloped for the nearest downstairs bathroom. Kris followed, with Jack and Ron right behind her.

“So, what brings you to Wardhaven?” Jack asked.

Kris stood in the door supervising from a safe distance as water and soap flew with the enthusiasm that only children can bring to the work of getting themselves clean. Behind her, the conversation between Jack and Ron continued.

“My Emperor has decided that the ocean between our two races has been too great for too long. He wishes to open full trade between us. That, of course, well require treaties to assure that the relationships between us is rightly established and in good order. We do not want to repeat the chaos of our first encounters.”

“No,” Jack said, most emphatically. “We don’t want that again.”

“Then we will need a human presence at court, to establish those terms and to help when matters get complicated, as you humans say.”

“Your grasp of standard is quite good,” Kris said, glancing back as the kids now were toweling themselves dry.

“I have been given one of your best personal computers,” he said, tapping a tiny broach on his chest. “I know it is not as good as your Nelly,” he said, giving Kris a smile that now looked better than a grimace. “It runs the language program Nelly developed very quickly and well.”

“It certainly does,” Nelly put in.

“So,” Jack said, “your Emperor wants to set up full diplomatic relations.”

“Yes, we have studied your practice of exchanging ambassadors. The concept of having someone in the court to stand in the place of a ruling equal is most strange for us and no doubt there will be the strong possibility of misunderstanding.”

“You’ll need someone very capable,” Kris said, as the kids raced by her, clothes damp in several places, but they were now very, very clean and most hungry.

“Yes, we will need someone very special,” Ron said. “That is why my Emperor has asked your King to send a very special emissary. We have asked for you, Princess Kris Longknife to be that emissary.”

“That is very interesting,” Jack said, most circumspectly.

It was good he did, because Kris was too intent on swallowing a response that would be most inappropriate for her children’s ears.

