



**Jon
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**Deepening
Twilight**

Star Dynasty Saga
Episode Two

Deepening Twilight (Sample)

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*"The depth of darkness to which you can descend and still live is an exact
measure of the height to which you can aspire to reach."*

--Pliny the Elder

Prologue

The tenth engineer in a series of Draconian Imperial Chief Engineers in as many days knelt trembling before the terrible presence of his Emperor, Tyrant. The kneeling engineer wasn't especially bright, nor was he a powerful man. His predecessors had simply run out time. He remembered their terrified screams as they were dragged away to face Tyrant's wrath at their failure.

Unlike them, he had used his predecessors' progress instead of restarting from scratch and built upon it to achieve his goal. As it was, he barely had time to initiate his crude solution to the hated CSA Regent's Operation Sudden Eclipse.

On the day in which the evil Draconian Empire had sprung its surprise attack against their enemy, the Commonwealth Star Alliance, the young Regent had somehow turned what should have been a stunning victory for the Empire into a unsatisfactory stalemate. As an engineer, the man reservedly admired the woman's guile and skill in countering almost twenty years of planning with her audacious action.

Somehow the Regent had cut off all access to Ravenhold technology. In so doing, almost no communication, data transfer, or computer control was possible. Ravenhold technology was instrumental in almost every aspect of life in the quadrant.

The Draconians had pirated Ravenhold technology for years as the Empire snubbed invention or any technical skill as less than honorable. They preferred battle and conquest. They took pride in torture and murder. They ruled with utter domination

based upon fear. For the first time in Draconian history, the engineering profession was a point of interest to the Emperor. However, the new Chief Engineer did not welcome the angry scrutiny of his Emperor.

The Draconian Empire did not care if an engineer's background was electrical, structural, or any of the seeming myriad specialties in the engineering field. To most Draconians, an engineer was an engineer. Since Draconians always punished failure by death, the latest in the succession of Chief Engineers reflected that if the trend continued, there would be few engineers left in the Empire.

The Emperor's massive audience chamber fell silent as two powerful Wardogs, the evil equivalent of CSA Marines, escorted the latest tall, skinny Chief Engineer before Tyrant. They acted with disdain toward the Chief Engineer as if they escorted a doomed prisoner to his final judgment. The Chief Engineer wasn't sure they were wrong.

The audience chamber, like most of the Imperial Fortress, had been hewn from a volcanic mountain of onyx. Typhon, the Empire's planetary capital, a volcanic world with a constant low seismic rumble, accented by tremors that gave an odd tension to the environment that the Draconians found invigorating. They fondly called that low grating murmur the "dragon's beating heart."

Draconians worshipped Dragons. Their cities, planets and ships all bore dragon names. The Empire named the planetary capital for the most powerful of all monsters, the mythical Typhon, that had battled the Greek god Zeus. Likewise, the Draconians named Zu, the capital city of the Draconian Empire, for an ancient Persian fire-breathing beast, another type of dragon.

Tyrant's long throne room gleamed and flickered in the torchlight. The need for torches and fires for light, since Sudden Eclipse had disabled the power grid on the hot volcanic Typhon, made it even hotter. Now, only small, stand-alone generators provided power in isolated, fire prohibited locations.

The Imperial Guard lined the chamber in their black tactical armor. A huge carved onyx dragon curled around the Emperor's throne as if sleeping. Supplicants and toadies lined the long path from the massive iron doors to the gleaming black throne.

Tyrant watched the procession approaching his throne with a doubtful expression on his craggy face. Tyrant had faced a critical situation since loss of all networked

technology. His Navy had no way to control its ships let alone coordinate his massive invasion armada. The larger ships were too complex to operate without computer controls. Faster-than-light travel through Twilight Space had ended. The loss of technology disabled the quadrant's navigational beacon system. All communication except with the crudest short-range, hand-held Com units failed. Tyrant had no access to funds Com network controlled funds. For the first time in millennia, the vast cities of both factions were dark and silent.

Now the Chief Engineer trembled in fear as he felt Tyrant's spiteful glare upon him from the black Dragon Throne.

"Well, maggot, what have you to report?" Tyrant asked his quaking Chief Engineer, as the Emperor inspected his dirty fingernails.

The Chief Engineer heard the distinct, high-pitched whine of a blaster powering up. "We have had some success, Great One," he gasped hurriedly.

Tyrant leaned forward on the throne. This was the first positive news he'd received about the crisis. He knew, better than anyone, the Empire was on the verge of collapse from lack of his leadership. "Explain," Tyrant commanded in his bass voice.

The Chief Engineer gulped, his large Adam's apple bobbed nervously. He swallowed his fear and said, "We cannot restore the computer functions yet, Sire, but we have developed a viable work-around." The engineer nearly fainted as he felt Tyrant seething at him as he announced failure once again. He'd hoped he would be able to get out his full statement before Tyrant decided to kill him for his disobedience.

Tyrant eyed the skinny, chinless, string bean of a man dubiously. He seemed to distrust anything scientific. "What do you mean by 'work around', maggot?" Tyrant sneered impatiently.

"As you know, Majesty, we tried to bypass the security block within the technology without success, and removing it would not resolve the problem either. However, we have determined that we can operate most of these systems *manually*, Great One," the Chief Engineer explained.

He hurried on when he sensed Tyrant growing weary with his unsatisfactory explanation. "We can switch the control consoles to manual and order their operation

over hand-held Com units from a ship's bridge. The Ravenhold security block does not shut down most of the technology. It simply eliminates computer network control."

"I've seen some of this already, maggot. How is your solution better than having engineers standing by at each control station?" Tyrant hissed impatiently.

"As you know, Lord, there are insufficient Draconian engineers to man every control console. However, Great One, we have determined that one engineer can control any number of other people who could physically operate the stations at his command."

Tyrant seemed to get an inkling of the Chief Engineer's proposal. An evil grin spread across his face. His yellow teeth gleamed in the flickering torchlight of the Draconian Imperial Fortress huge audience chamber. Grasping the solid onyx arms of his black throne, he stood. He took two swift steps down to the kneeling Chief Engineer, grasped the trembling man by his chin, and lifted his face toward his own. Tyrant suggested with a sneer, "Could slaves perform this duty, maggot?" Tyrant's hot, foul breath blasted into the engineer's face.

"Absolutely, milord," the Chief Engineer gulped.

"Perfect, Engineer," Tyrant cooed. "Now get back to your lab and find a better solution. I must communicate with my ships."

"At once, milord," the Chief Engineer said, quickly shuffling away in relief.

Tyrant returned to the throne with a sly grin and ordered, "Send for the Imperial Slave Master."



Chapter One

Captain James Truelove conned the armed yacht, Tiara, through the far Rim sector of the Commonwealth Star Alliance. He was a tall, powerful man with gray-green eyes and light-brown hair in a short military cut.

For days, he and his wards had wandered in Tiara from space station to space station looking for a suitable ship in which to find safety for his small ship and her crew.

His plan was to join an innocent looking freighter with a hangar bay large enough for Tiara.

Tiara was a prototype ship designed and constructed at the Ravenhold Ship Works. She was stealthy, crammed to the brim with the latest, top-secret technology, and housed an Artificial Intelligence (AI) that made the ship a real part of Truelove's team. Truelove noted with interest how Tiara seemed to anticipate their needs. She also seemed to be adapting and growing as she shared their experiences. He'd noticed her responses weren't mechanical like most Com systems. She quickly picked up their vocal intonations and emotional emphasis and applied them to her own conversation.

The ship's appointments were luxurious by Truelove's naval standards. His own stateroom looked like a VIP suite more suited to a luxury starliner, and not a yacht of her size. Miya and Nathan's cabins were almost as luxurious. Tiara's designers had used every spare inch of space for storage compartments or to cram her high-tech systems out of sight.

Tiara's exterior was another oddity. Tiara's lines were smoothed to assist in making her stealthy. Her charcoal gray hull made her extremely hard to see in space. She was a sleek ship whose graceful appearance belied her powerful weapons and strong armor.

Truelove remembered Tiara awakening him when they dropped out of Twilight Space near the Orion Station on the first leg of their escape. They'd given the station a wide berth when they discovered pirates had overrun it. Truelove recognized the signs of battle. Blackened scorch marks and crumpled armored plating covered the station's hull. The Draconians had attacked the station and left it to their allies, the pirates. Wrecked ships still drifted around the blasted remains of the station. Pirates and raiders flew their gaudily decorated ships through the wreckage, firing at any loose debris.

Evidently, he thought, the pirates had been able to get a portion of the station back in action. Then he remembered Orion had a large maintenance bay for ships. The station was probably equipped with emergency power units, and the repair parts needed to enable the intruders to use it after the attack. They had docked an old rusty derelict at one docking port to serve as a new wing, replacing a damaged section of the station.

Truelove watched the pirates disgustedly through Tiara's zoomed-in scanner. Truelove was a decorated veteran of many battles in space and on land with a background in Special Operations. He noted no skill whatever in the pirates' crude maneuvers. If his orders hadn't taken precedent, he would have enjoyed demonstrating some real tactics on the thugs. However, Truelove had a new, untested ship, and a mission that precluded any delay.

The thought of taking the untried Tiara, with unknown flight and combat characteristics, into a desperate combat situation grated against everything in Truelove's military training. The more he considered the problem, the more intolerable it became. He'd just discovered a space station overrun with pirates. Who's to say the situation at the next station might not be worse? As Tiara's captain, the safety of the ship, his crew, and the success of their mission rested squarely on Truelove's shoulders. This responsibility Truelove clearly understood.

Truelove nodded grimly to himself and said, "Tiara, display the sector Nav map."

"Nav map displayed, sir," Tiara responded and the main over head monitor showed Tiara's position near the Orion Space Station.

"Is there a location nearby in which we can test your capabilities without attracting attention? It is imperative that no one see us." Truelove stated.

A green dot appeared near the edge of the monitor. "This is the center of the asteroid field known as the Quarry. No ship has successfully navigated through the field. The center of the field is a large open area which should be suitable for our tests, sir," Tiara said.

"Sounds like the eye of a hurricane," Truelove commented, picturing the asteroids swirling around the open space.

"Very similar, sir," Tiara agreed.

"How will we get in?"

"The center of the asteroid field is at the edge of my ability to determine a Twilight Space jump location for the Nav beacon. I have already scanned the asteroid field and can complete the jump to normal space safely."

Truelove looked at the distance from the Nav beacon to the asteroid field blinking on the Nav map. Most ships tried to jump within a few hundred meters of the beacon. He asked, "How long will the Twilight Space trip take, Tiara?"

"Twelve minutes, sir."

The distance was fantastic. Truelove felt the jump would be another test of Tiara's abilities. "Are you sure we don't need to be closer for the jump?"

Tiara responded, "Absolutely, sir."

"Execute the jump when you are ready."



Truelove stood on Tiara's bridge with Miya and Nathan. Through the forward blast screen, they could see the dimly lit asteroid field surrounding them. He addressed the his little crew, "Since the time that mankind took ships into war, every captain had to prepare his ship and crew for battle. Crews need to be ready to face any eventuality. Now we face that same challenge. It's my job to make sure we're prepared to face it.

"I've ordered Nathan here so that he can learn how a ship functions in battle."

Nathan grinned eagerly.

"I'll be ordering us to practice a number of emergency scenarios. It is important for each of us to know what we must do in a crisis. Remember, panic is a killer. We must think and act. Above all, when the Captain gives an order, you must follow it immediately."

He realized that Miya had little experience with ship's systems, and Nathan had none. He also understood their survival depended upon them knowing what to do when bad things happened. Even little Nathan might be drawn upon to contribute to the ship's safety. Truelove knew on ancient sailing vessels, the ships' boys served as powder monkeys, carrying powder cartridges to the cannons, or as nippers, who used short strings to nip the anchor cable neatly. Nathan was a little young, but he was intelligent and teachable, factors that more than compensated for his youth.

Using Tiara's graphics display of the ship's systems, Truelove reviewed each system's function with his crew. Nathan and Miya listened carefully as he outlined the ship's systems. He spoke about the ship's weapons, armor, and shields. Later, when

they could take the time during the long legs of their trip, he would cover the systems more in depth.

"Tiara," Truelove ordered, "Battlestations."

"Battlestations, aye, sir."

Nathan jumped in surprise when the ship's warning klaxon sounded angrily. The ship's lights turned red. The monitors around the bridge automatically switched to scanning, weapons, and displayed the status of the ship's systems.

Truelove raised his voice over the clamor and said, "Tiara, silence the alarm."

The alarm halted instantly, and Tiara said, "Silence alarm, aye, sir."

Truelove looked at Nathan who stared at the bridge in this strange new situation and explained patiently, "Nathan, I wanted you to know what happens when Tiara goes to Battlestations. When you hear that sound and see the lights change, you know we are going into battle. Tiara has my permission to automatically take us to Battlestations whenever we are under threat of attack."

Nathan asked, "Why did the lights change to red, sir?"

"That is so we can see what's outside the ship better, Nathan. All Tiara's exterior lights turn off, to make her harder to see, and the red lights inside cannot be easily seen through the blast screens." Truelove explained. He noted Miya's look of concentration and nods as if she were learning something new as well.

"When I'm in command, I'll take the command chair. If we are all here, Miya will sit in the co-pilot's chair."

"What about me?" Nathan asked with his hand raised.

"Sir," Truelove corrected.

"What about me, sir?"

"That's better. When we are at Battlestations, we should all make sure we observe the chain-of-command protocols."

Nathan looked at Truelove blankly.

Miya chimed in, "He means we have to call him, 'sir'."

"Oh," Nathan said and saluted. "Yes, sir."

"Aye, sir." Truelove corrected with a frown.

"Does your eye hurt, Captain Uncle James, sir?"

Miya hooted with laughter.

Truelove tried to recover some decorum and said, "In the Navy, we say 'aye' or 'aye aye, sir.' In the Army, they say, 'yes, sir.'"

"Why is that?" Nathan asked.

Truelove felt the conversation was drifting away. "It just is, Nathan. I believe your question was where your station is during Battlestations. Tiara?"

"The chair in Nathan's room automatically changes to a reclining command chair similar to the bridge chairs. It has a harness like yours. The monitor in his room will change to whatever the main bridge displays."

"Why can't I stay on the bridge with you and Miya?" Nathan whined.

"In a small ship, like Tiara, we need to be strapped in, Nathan. If Miya or I is not on Tiara, you can sit in the second seat."

"Really?" Nathan asked as a broad grin spread across his face. Then he remembered and said, "Aye aye, sir."

"Tiara, as you explain the process, execute weapons practice routine alpha."

"Executing weapons practice alpha aye, sir." The weapons screen turned from amber to green. They listened as something whirred on Tiara's outer hull, ending with a clunk. "I have deployed my four pulse cannon turrets. Now I will launch four target drones that simulate attacking ships." There were four whooshes as the target drones launched from the missile ports in Tiara's weapons pods.

"During practice, my turrets fire harmless photon pulses. The drones do the same. They are programmed to simulate the attack characteristics of various Draconian ships. This is the program's lowest or easiest setting."

The overhead monitor display split. The right half split into four windows. Each one displayed the status of a separate turret. The left half split into four windows with the drones' status.

"The display above you shows the status of my practice. It will show how many shots I take, how many shots hit their intended targets, what the percentage of hits is."

The starboard display blinked. "This display indicates how many hits get through to my shields. My program simulates the effect of those hits as they drain energy from shields as if we were in battle."

Truelove thought the explanation was a little over Nathan's head, but the boy would learn. He watched Nathan's scowling brow as the boy concentrated on Tiara's instructions.

Truelove noted Tiara carefully flashed an object on the screen when she referred to it with a technical term. He approved of Tiara's teaching technique knowing this would help both Miya and Nathan learn the vocabulary of ships and battle which would be invaluable during a crisis. The better they could communicate, they better chance of survival. He could imagine the nightmare of one them calling to him during a battle that the "dooickey thingy" was on fire.

Tiara continued, "I'm activating the practice drones now." The drone display turned red. The monitor on the port side the bridge flashed and indicated four red dots moving toward the green dot at the center of the display. "This is the tactical display. All attacking or enemy ships will be shown as red blips. I am the green dot in the center. Blips at the top of the screen are to our front. Similarly, blips to the right, left, and bottom are to the starboard, port, and rear."

Nathan raised his hand.

"Yes Nathan?" Tiara asked. Truelove wondered how Tiara detected Nathan's signal to ask a question.

"Tiara, in space the ships could be above and below us. How can we know if they are up or down?"

Truelove smiled, and Miya nodded as if she wanted to know the answer as well. Tiara explained patiently, "That is an excellent question, Nathan. Watch as I command the drones to move above us Nathan." They could see two of the drones through the forward blast screen disappear upward. The red blips changed from a circle to a diamond. A flag attached to the diamond with a number that rose steadily. The numbers stopped and the drones swooped down below Tiara's position. The blip flashed back to a circle then changed to a square with a similar flag.

"When they are above us, they are diamonds, and below us they are squares." Nathan said proudly.

Miya added, "So the number indicates how many . . . kilometers they are relative to our position?"

"Exactly, Miya, it's important to remember directions are relative in space. We can be maneuvering so that one second the enemy is above us and the next they are below."

Truelove thought the point had been made. It was time to see some action. "Let's let Tiara continue with the practice. If you have questions, I'm sure she can answer them later. Tiara, please continue."

"Aye, sir. The drones are at the extreme range of my weapons. Now they are moving toward me. We will fire at them while they fire at us. Although my weapons were calibrated at the Ravenhold Shipworks during installation, they need to be re-calibrated periodically. This is very important. Do you know why it is important for my weapons to be accurate, Nathan?" Tiara asked.

"So they can hit our enemies." Nathan answered easily.

"That is correct. Now the drones are firing and so am I."

They could see the blue pulses from Tiara moving out toward the drones. Red dashes of light streamed back at them from the drones. The drones swept steadily toward Tiara, who remained motionless. At optimum range, the drones turned to circle Tiara like the old stories of American Indians circling a pioneer wagon train.

Tiara continued as the statistic on the screens began to indicate each gun's accuracy. Tiara said, "As you can see from my first shots, my accuracy of fifty-two percent indicates my targeting scanner requires an adjustment."

Truelove saw the drones were shooting with about the same effectiveness.

"As I continue to fire, I am adjusting my targeting systems. Once I lock on to a target with a gun, that gun automatically tracks and fires at the target. Either until I am ordered to change targets, or the target is disabled."

Tiara's accuracy rose steadily until it leveled at ninety-one percent. The drones did not possess Tiara's sophisticated targeting scanners, but they were able to attain eighty-eight percent accuracy.

"Good," Tiara said. "Now I will initiate practice level bravo." The drones started to move independently, and Tiara began to maneuver. "Nathan would normally be in his own command chair. I'll be careful, but he should hang on to Miya's chair."

Miya glanced back at the boy. She said, "There's plenty of room for Nathan beside me in my chair, sir. Perhaps he can sit here during this practice."

Nathan looked at Truelove hopefully.

"Get in there, Nathan. Miya, try to get the harness on you both."

"Aye aye, sir," Miya and Nathan said in unison as the boy hopped up beside Miya.

Tiara's inertial dampers hummed as she pivoted to keep the drones to her front. They heard a whooshing sound from the port side and she seemed to slip to the right avoiding most of the drones' fire. Now the starscape spun wildly, and flipped upside down. Tiara swirled around behind the drones so that only one drone could fire on her. The other three were blocked by the trailing drone. Tiara's hits on the rearmost drone caused it to simulate the loss of power and drift away from the fight.

Tiara's scanner indicated three remaining drones in red. The drones fanned out into an arrow-like formation. Tiara slewed to the starboard to hide one of the three drones behind the forward drone. Two guns took out the forward drone. The other two targeted the starboard, rear drone. As soon as she eliminated the forward drone, all four turrets targeted the rear drone and Tiara kept sliding to starboard until the target drone blocked the port side drone. Tiara shot toward the failing drone and switched all guns on the last drone. The last drone streaked toward its doomed mate. Tiara seemed to pop up from the dead drone at the last second, blasting the final drone.

"Yeah, Tiara!" Nathan applauded and shouted, like a boy watching his favorite sports team score a goal.

Truelove was impressed. He knew the practice had presented little challenge, but Tiara had performed her tactics and maneuvers flawlessly. He'd also realized his approach to the practice had been much more fruitful for the crew, than if he had insisted on directing each phase of the exercise.

Miya and Nathan had shown sincere interest in the ship's systems and how they worked. Truelove admitted he, too, had learned some things about his new ship. He also had many questions to follow up with Tiara when they had more time.

Truelove let Tiara continue her practice at the next level, Charlie for “C”. With six drones arrayed against her, Tiara’s gyrations through space seemed impossible. Truelove realized she wasn’t limited to linear thinking ingrained in every landside pilot.

Truelove appreciated the fact that the ride in his command seat was exceptionally smooth in spite of the wild maneuvers. He observed that Tiara had adjusted the ship’s inertial dampers to compensate with the artificial gravity to coordinate with her maneuvers. Those systems groaned and whined from throaty vibrations he could feel through the deck plating to muted, high-pitched whines. He could tell when the next move was about to happen, because the systems ramped up suddenly just prior to the event like workers objecting to a difficult task.

Tiara dispatched the six drones in much less time, because she took no time to explain the functions.

“Excellent, Tiara,” Truelove said. “Belay the weapons exercise and recover the drones.”

Tiara responded to Truelove’s order.

“I want us to take some time to become more familiar with you and your systems. He reconfigured his control console and said, “Tiara, I have the helm.”

“The Captain has the helm, aye, sir.” Tiara responded.

Nathan asked Miya under his breath, “Why does Tiara repeat everything Uncle James tells her to do, Miya?”

“When the Captain or person in command gives an order, the person who carries out that order repeats it aloud and then performs it. That way there is no misunderstanding.” Miya said quietly as Truelove grabbed the joystick that had rotated out of a hidden compartment in the command chair’s armrest.

Truelove said, “Sometimes during a crisis or battle, it’s very noisy. It’s helpful to know if the order you gave is being carried out, Nathan.”

Truelove flew Tiara around the perimeter of the open space inside the asteroid field. He liked her quick response and yet the smooth feel of her flight systems. He slammed the thrusters to maximum. He could feel the power of Tiara’s thrusters, but Truelove doubted if the subtle change would have spilled his coffee.

“Tiara, this seems faster than normal military spec thrusters, but its hard to tell.”

“My thruster speed specification is fifty percent above military maximum, sir. It is designed for double the normal thruster time before recharging is required.”

“What are thrusters, Uncle James, sir?” Nathan asked.

Miya said, “I think I know this one. We covered some of the basics of ship operations at the Academy.”

“Please enlighten us, Miya,” James said as he pulled Tiara through a tight overhead loop.

“Thrusters are used to move the ship in any direction in space. If we wanted to escape a more powerful ship, thrusters would help us get away quickly. The engines will go farther and longer, but they take longer to get up to speed.”

Nathan thought for a moment. His dark eyes frowned and he said, “So thrusters are like rockets.”

“Yes, Nathan,” Truelove said, “in this case, when the rocket’s fuel runs out, we have to wait until it is recharged, before we can use it again. The thrusters recharge within a minute or so.”

Truelove allowed Tiara to glide while he launched a target drone. The drone’s thrusters pulsed it to a stop while it awaited orders. Using a quick blast of the thrusters forward, Truelove halted Tiara’s forward momentum. At the same time, he flipped the ship and pulsed the thrusters to give it way toward the stationary drone. He corrected Tiara’s trajectory so that they were approaching on a slight angle that would let them pass by within easy cannon range.

“I want you to see how to make a ship slide. This keeps your weapons pointed at the target while the ship moves in a different direction,” he said. Tiara glided along past the drone at an easy pace. However, Truelove moved the joystick and kept her nose pointed at the target drone.

He reversed course and performed the maneuver again while explaining, “This is just one of the many maneuvers that a pilot can use during combat to confuse an enemy. Most pilots think they have to fly their ship at the target in order to hit it. In space, that is not the case. This helps us because the enemy pilot also believes we are coming straight at him. He fires at our nose, and misses because. . .” Truelove paused.

Miya and Nathan answered, “We are sliding sideways.”

“Exactly, and his shots pass by us harmlessly.”

Truelove recovered the drone, and disabled his command console’s helm functions. Miya noted her console suddenly flashed on.

“Miya,” Truelove said, “You have the helm.”

It was evident Miya had never formerly piloted a ship in space before, but it was just as obvious she loved it. She deftly took the joystick that rose from its pocket in her armrest, and guided Tiara smoothly around the safe interior of the asteroid field.

Nathan watched her closely.

When Miya had taken her turn, she glanced at Truelove with a grin and nodded toward Nathan. Truelove nodded and touched an icon on his console. Miya’s joystick slid away and the one on Nathan’s side of the second command chair appeared.

“Nathan, you have the helm.”

“Wow, Uncle James, this is neat.”

Tiara wobbled at first as Nathan overcorrected, but soon they sailed smoothly across the wide space.

When they’d all had some practice time, Truelove said, “Tiara, secure from Battle Stations, you have the Con.”

Tiara responded as ordered. Truelove took them on a quick tour of the ship. He showed them where the basic systems were located. They found fire suppression and other life-safety equipment.

After the quick tour, Truelove felt more comfortable with proceeding on their mission. He said, “As much as possible, we’ll take more time later to learn more about Tiara. I think we’ve done a good day’s work today.”

“Can we have more practice time with Tiara, Uncle James?” Nathan asked.

“I’ll ask Tiara to include training on ship’s systems to your schooling, young man.”

“Yeah,” Nathan cheered.

“Tiara, put us back on course for the next starbase.”

“Aye, sir,” Tiara replied. A Twilight Space wormhole appeared directly in front of them through the blast screen.



Chapter Two

While Tiara slipped through the darkness of Twilight Space, Truelove considered the situation that had brought them to this remote location. The CSA Regent, Diane Ravenhold, had ordered Truelove to take her ten year-old son, Nathan, and his bodyguard-nurse, Miya Musashi to a safe place, far from the reaches of the Draconians.

Truelove remembered how the Regent had hidden her son from the public eye. He understood the boy had never known his mother's true identity, and he was commanded to keep that secret. It was a sad tale of a mother forced to exile her son in order to save him.

Nathan was an intelligent lad with large sad eyes. Truelove thought he saw the distinctive Ravenhold nose in the boy's appearance. In the short time they'd been together, Truelove and Nathan had grown close. He was proud to be Nathan's "Uncle James".

There was little for Truelove to discover about Nathan's constant companion, the mysterious Miya. The vast CSA intelligence files were amazingly silent. Truelove learned Miya had grown up on the raider world of Perdition. He realized her survival was a minor miracle. After somehow graduating from the CSA Naval Academy with honors, she'd had a short, but evidently distinguished, career in the Commonwealth Clandestine Operations as a spy. Truelove knew she had a background in nursing and childcare.

The small crew had established a routine aboard Tiara. Truelove was pleasantly surprised when Miya and Nathan had joined him for his early morning workouts in the cargo bay. Truelove lifted weights and performed his combat training moves, but Miya and Nathan practiced some form of martial arts.

Later, Miya worked with Nathan on his academic studies. Truelove noticed Tiara controlled Nathan's curriculum.

Truelove took time to review some of Tiara's manuals. He found her new engines, shield, and armor fascinating. He wanted to take time to put the ship through her paces, but feared attracting any attention this close to the recent Draconian invasion

armada. He didn't know where the Draconians were, but he knew they couldn't have gone far.

Meals weren't much of a problem. Tiara was a well-stocked ship. Her Auto-Chef system only needed the basic ingredient hoppers restocked from time to time. The AC could make passable meals. However, Truelove thought naming the system anything to do with the word "Chef" was a gross exaggeration. The crew could prepare their own meals in the galley, as long as they had fresh ingredients.



Several days later, Tiara crept up to the popular Crossroads Station. Strangely, Truelove couldn't detect any activity at what was typically the busiest station in the Texas Sector. Crossroads Station lay at the apex of several important tradelanes. It was usually lit up with its flamboyant exterior lighting and advertisements for its busy casinos, bars, and trading booths for almost any commodity.

Truelove and Miya sat in Tiara's comfortable bridge chairs with Nathan watching over Truelove's shoulder. Tiara's bridge was dark except for the light from the scanner and control monitors. Nathan's eyes watched everything eagerly. Miya had instructed Nathan in what to do should the ship go to battle stations. She looked at the boy encouragingly, and Nathan smiled widely.

Only the dim reflection of distant starlight off the metal surface of the station in the far distance indicated its existence. There was no traffic, no bright lights, and no evidence of power. . .

The thought of power reminded Truelove of something, he said, "Tiara, scan for sources of power."

"There are no active power sources aboard the station, Captain," Tiara responded.

"What about life signs?"

"There are no signs of life or any other activity, sir," Tiara said.

"Is there any damage?" Truelove asked.

"There is some minor damage, sir. The damage one would expect from a hasty evacuation and abandonment."

"Could Crossroads Station be a victim of Sudden Eclipse, Tiara?" Truelove asked.

"I was about to suggest that, sir."

Truelove thought about stopping at the station to investigate further, but there was too great a chance that someone would notice Tiara. No doubt, the station held many interesting things. He'd have to use a bulky space suit leaving Miya and Nathan alone. Truelove reasoned it would best to move on.

"Tiara, make a note of the station's situation. It might be worth coming back to someday."

"Aye aye, sir," Tiara replied.

Truelove continued, "Bring up the nav chart for this sector."

The map appeared in the bridge overhead monitor just above the forward blast screen.

"Please indicate our location." A flashing miniature Tiara appeared on the Nav map. Truelove nodded and said, "I see we've been heading for the Worm, Tiara. May I assume we're heading for Alaska?" Truelove asked, referring to Tiara's secret orders.

"Yes, sir," Tiara said.

Miya asked, "What's the Worm?"

Tiara highlighted in yellow a section at the edge of the navmap that seemed to corkscrew wildly in three dimensions over a long distance and eventually opened into the distant Alaska Sector in the Rim. "The Worm is a dangerous section of space that winds around inhospitable areas containing high levels of radiation and asteroid fields. The area is further plagued with rogue meteorites, pirates, and raiders."

Miya's jaws tensed at the inclusion of raiders in the list of hazards within the Worm.

"It looks like a maze, Uncle James." Nathan observed. His finger traced a squiggly path in the air."

Miya asked, "Won't it take a long time to travel through the worm?"

"Yes," Truelove answered.

"Why don't we use Twilight Space to go to our next destination?"

"Because we want to disappear, and we need to get to our next destination after Tiara's next set of upgrades are ready." Truelove explained. He leaned forward pointing at a flashing green indicator between Crossroads and the entry to the Worm. Truelove knew the indicator was another outpost. "What station is that?" he asked.

Tiara voice reflected her evident disgust, "That is the Last Starport, sir."

Nathan sounded excited and asked, "What's that?"

"By the looks of it, that's our destination, Nathan." Truelove stated before Tiara announced a litany of dubious businesses for which the station was notorious. "Tiara, chart a course for the Last Starport and initiate the Twilight drive." Truelove briefly imagined all the questions from Nathan if Tiara insisted on listing the station's wild forms of entertainment.

"Aye aye, sir," Tiara replied, and the ship pivoted and slid away into the blackness.

"Let's hope we have better luck there." Miya stated. "Come on, Nathan, its time for your lessons."

"Do I have to?"

Miya guided Nathan off the bridge while Truelove grinned out the forward blast screen. A bright wormhole appeared in front of Tiara, and it seemed the ship was sucked into it at a fantastic rate of speed. Then space outside the ship went dark.



Truelove sat in the command chair out of habit. Tiara piloted them to her next destination without any need for direction. He sat staring out the forward blast screen at the empty Twilight Space. His thoughts were light years away.

Not a man who easily worried about anything, Truelove wondered about Nathan's mother, the Regent. Her plan provided for her short-term safety, but if any Draconians remained on Tranquility, their pursuit of the Regent would be relentless.

At least, her plan had greatly slowed down travel in the quadrant. From the Regent's briefing, he knew only Tiara retained the ability for faster-than-light travel. Passage took weeks and months instead of hours and days. Most ship's crews relied solely on the ships massive computers, called a Com system, to control them and

navigate. A few old salts and naval officers could still steer by the stars or dead-reckoning.

Truelove considered the men and women who served in the CSA Navy. If the old *Thunder*, the CSA destroyer from which he and Tiara's crew had escaped, was any indication, the Navy had had a bad time. He'd seen the increasing ferocity of the Draconians attacks over the last ten years during his service in CSA Fleet Operations in the Rim Sectors.

Then he considered the people who couldn't protect themselves from the Draconians. How would they fare? The corrupt media had systematically concealed the truth regarding the brutality of the Draconians from most CSA citizens. Now they would witness it firsthand. The common citizen had to survive the Draconians' attacks and do it without the benefit of technology or outside help. The Navy had sacrificed itself to reduce the invasion force.

Sudden Eclipse disabled most technology. People had been marooned. Many ships had crashed. Whole city blocks burned. Businesses had closed. Governments were in turmoil. Communication was impossible. Sitting in Tiara's super high-tech bridge, it was difficult to imagine life without the benefit of technology.

Later, Truelove was surprised to find that he stood in Tiara's galley with a hot cup of coffee. He'd left the bridge while he was deep in thought.



Tiara drifted in space at the edge of scanning range near the Last Starport. There was no evidence the war between the CSA and the Draconian Empire had reached the station. Ships came and went as would be expected for a remote station in deep space. Only an ancient, scarred starfreighter hung sadly at the mooring pier. Truelove thought the crew had probably abandoned the old freighter. He couldn't understand why the wreck hadn't been towed away to clear the mooring.

"James, we've been here for almost a day," Miya said, as if eager to move on.

"Relax, Miya, what's got you so keyed up?" Truelove asked.

"I hate waiting around. I know we're out here hiding, and it makes me tense."

"I thought you are a spy, Miya. Don't spies hide out?"

"I was just a rookie, James." Miya countered.

"A highly-touted rookie," Truelove corrected.

About that time, Nathan wandered onto the bridge. "What's a rookie?" he asked.

Miya rolled her eyes. Ignoring Nathan's hundredth question for the morning, Miya stomped off the bridge and said exasperatedly over her shoulder, "I need a workout."

Truelove watched Miya's receding back as she headed aft to the cargo bay. He thought he understood her edginess. He wanted to get on with the next leg of their journey, but hated waiting for the unknown.

"Aunt Miya and I already worked out this morning, Uncle James." Nathan stated with a hint of confusion. "Should I go with her?"

"No, Nathan. Miya needs to be alone for a while. Why don't you help me up here on the bridge?" Truelove explained, "A rookie, Nathan, is someone who is new to a job," he explained.

"Okay," Nathan said.

Truelove heard a loud shout from the cargo bay and saw Miya flash by the open hatch seemingly upside down. He watched her flash by a few more times. He couldn't remember her performing a practice session this aggressive, and wondered what she was doing back there. There were bright flashes of something long in her hands in those quick glimpses of Miya. With a shrug of his massive shoulders, Truelove turned to the scanning monitor and Nathan peeked over his arm at the display. "Now, let's teach you how to use the scanner, young man," he said.

"Neat," Nathan exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Let's practice on the old freighter over there. Now, zoom in . . ."

After a few pointers, Nathan quickly picked up the scanner basics. Truelove sensed the boy's innate aptitude and wondered if technology were in the Ravenhold genes. He could tell Nathan wanted to try on his own. Truelove stepped back and waved Nathan toward the console.

Nathan deliberately operated the scanner looking at the station and surrounding ships. Then he zoomed back in on the old derelict. He read the information aloud to himself. "Name: *Dove*. Type: Starfreighter, class six. Master: Torg Malvis. . ."

Truelove saw Nathan handled the scanner functions well and wandered to the forward blast screen to watch the light traffic in and out of the station. He planned how he could enter the station without drawing attention to his unique ship, Tiara.

Nathan droned on, sounding out the strange new words on the screen, ". . . Crew size: seven. Normal crew com-pli-ment: thirteen," Nathan sounded out the word slowly. "Ton-age: 50 K." He looked up. "What's a "K," Tiara?"

Tiara responded, "K means thousand, Nathan. The ship can carry 50,000 tons of cargo."

"Wow, that sounds like a lot. What's a compliment?" Nathan asked.

Truelove tuned out the conversation. Tiara would never tire of Nathan's profuse questions. He appreciated that the boy wanted to learn, but the constant questions grated on the adults' nerves. There was something in what Nathan had just said that bothered Truelove. He asked, "Nathan, what did you say the *Dove's* crew size was?"

Nathan looked down at the display and read slowly, "Crew size, seven."

"Does the ship's log indicate the *Dove's* cargo, Nathan?"

Nathan looked at the second column and read proudly, "Scrap."

Truelove looked back at the old freighter. He stood perfectly still for a few seconds. A trickle of sweat ran down his forehead from his temple, and Truelove looked like he was under a strain. In Truelove's mind, he worked through the steps of a plan to get Tiara and his crew to safety.

"Uncle James?" Nathan said as his smile turned to a look of concern when he saw Truelove.

Truelove sighed as he relaxed and said, "Tiara, scan that ship."

"I've scanned it already, sir."

"Why didn't you tell me it had a crew aboard?"

"I thought you knew, sir." Truelove thought Tiara sounded strangely indignant. "The ship is in very poor condition. It made barely enough credits on its last ten missions to pay the crew's wages. It's understaffed, and almost every ship system is on the verge of failure. I cannot permit you to take us on board that--"

Truelove interrupted Tiara impatiently, "Tiara, is the ship capable of space flight or not?"

"Barely, sir," Tiara said, "I need to be physically connected to the ship to provide and in depth report on the *Dove's* condition."

"Noted," Truelove said, "Please alert Miya to prepare for us to move to the freighter. She'll have the Con, I'll see if I can arrange passage on the. . ." He looked down at the scanner console for the ship's name that had momentarily slipped his mind.

"It's the *Dove*, Uncle James," Nathan offered.

"Yes, the *Dove*, thank you, Nathan," Truelove said. "Tiara, I'll rendezvous with you after the *Dove* departs. Take us to the unlit docking port on the starboard pier." Truelove turned around to face an angry-looking Miya who blocked his way with her hands on her hips.

"Just where do you think you are going, James?" Miya hissed.

For the first time, Truelove noticed Miya had twin scabbards on her back and the hilts of two swords protruded above her shoulders like the points of folded bat wings. He took a step back. Miya stood in her tabi boots, gloves, pants, a *gi* with a strange chain sash around her waist. She hid her long black hair her hood. Her whole ensemble was charcoal gray. He noted a matching gray pouch-like scarf under Miya's chin. He thought it looked like a mask. Truelove couldn't determine why Miya wore the strange outfit.

Miya's arched eyebrow and ominously hushed tone indicated Truelove's need for tact. He already knew Tiara's objections to the *Dove*, but now a new problem had surfaced. He knew, as the Captain, he didn't have to explain himself, but his relationship with Miya, Nathan, and Tiara wasn't purely military. They had to live together. Truelove didn't want to start his long journey on the wrong foot.

Thinking back over his comments to Tiara, he realized he'd treated the ship like person and expected Tiara to relay information to Miya. He should have done so personally.

"I'm sorry, Miya," he said. "I should've spoken to you first." Truelove instantly revised his plan to go to the Last Starport alone. We must go aboard the station to arrange our passage with the captain of the *Dove*. I don't want anyone to see Tiara. She'll rendezvous with the *Dove* after the freighter is well away from the station. I'll need you to get Nathan ready with a small amount of carry-on luggage. We want just enough to be convincing travelers."

Miya seemed mollified. She looked relieved to get away from the confines of Tiara.

James understood Miya's feelings, but warned, "Miya, we have a long slow trip ahead of us. The *Dove* cannot compare to Tiara's luxurious appointments. All indications are she's in very poor condition. That's one of the reasons I think she's perfect for us."

Miya looked like she wanted to ask why, but Truelove had been watching a small starliner approaching the station. He didn't have time for explanations.

"Tiara, scan that ship," Truelove ordered.

"It's a small starliner with limited armament. There are fifty-three passengers and crew aboard--"

"Excellent," Truelove interrupted. "I want to time our arrival with hers. We should appear to be a few more travelers from that ship. Miya, you and Nathan need to get into your traveling clothes. Tiara, how long before that ship docks?"

"You have an hour, James,"

"One hour, Miya. Make sure Nathan knows to keep his head down and says nothing. We want no one to identify us as we move through the station."

"I'll see to it, James," Miya said, and turned to make preparations.

"Tiara, I'll need directions from the unused docking pier to the *Dove* on my datapad. I'll be getting ready as well."

"Aye aye, sir," Tiara replied. "I do not like it, James." She objected, "That ship is barely operable. She could not survive a well aimed pistol shot, let alone ion cannon fire like the *Thunder* suffered."

"That's why she's a perfect hiding place. If anyone were looking for us, they'd never look at her," he responded soothingly.

"I'll not be satisfied until the team is safely off that bucket of rust at journey's end," Tiara worried aloud.

Truelove thought that sometimes a ship without AI would be a blessing. At least he wouldn't have to argue with it.

He said, trying to sound reassuring, "We'll be careful, Tiara."

"See that you do, sir," Tiara cautioned sounding stern.

Truelove left the bridge for his stateroom.



Chapter Three

Truelove stepped into the station's docking port with Nathan between him and Miya. He closed the hatch behind them and watched Tiara slide away. He noted that if he hadn't seen her interior lighting through the opening in her side, he wouldn't have noticed Tiara at all in the dark shadow of the pier.

The dusty docking pier corridor was empty, but Truelove heard the throbbing beat and the heavy bass of music through the thick bulkhead.

Truelove bent over and looked at Nathan, "Remember, young man, say nothing and keep your head down while we are on the station."

"Aye aye, sir," Nathan said seriously.

Truelove and Miya grinned at the boy. Truelove noted a cluster of passengers from the starliner coming their way through the hatch portal to the station's main promenade. "Ready?" he asked. "Let's go."

Truelove swung the heavy docking pier hatch open wide enough for them to squeeze through with their luggage, and they joined the tail of the travelers from the starliner that struggled through the thick crowd jamming the Last Starport's wide promenade. He saw he'd worried fruitlessly about blending in to the crowd. The people on the walkway surged back and forth like sea rollers as the crowd struggled to pass one way or the other.

Truelove immediately revised his impression of the promenade. Above his head, the corridor widened out to thirty meters with balconies on both sides, but eager merchants had built crude booths that encroached into the lower promenade and squeezed the path to one-third of that width. In some places, vendors had erected obstacles jutting further into the main aisle causing the heavy pedestrian traffic to surge like a giant caterpillar through the snaking path.

Bright flashes of light from the gaudy marquees and strobes, intended to attract the attention of onlookers, accented the dimly lit promenade. Truelove forged through

the throng holding Nathan's hand. Miya held her arm protectively around Nathan's shoulders while they jostled along the crowded station avenue.

Seeing the station lights in various levels of brightness, Truelove reasoned the station must have some portable power sources. A few seconds later, he spotted an old portable generator purring at the back of a smoky booth. The air was a bit chilly, and Truelove deduced the station's systems were not fully functional. He wondered how the nearly naked prostitutes survived the coolness. No doubt they had some small hidden source of heat in their plastiglass and scrap metal booths.

Blaring music from the numerous bars along the promenade assaulted Truelove, Miya, and Nathan. The deck throbbed with booming bass rhythms. Scantly clad hookers brazenly flaunted their voluptuous bodies at the handsome Truelove and young Nathan, then laughed derisively when Miya covered Nathan's wide eyes and glared at them angrily. They shouted angry taunts at anyone from whom they perceived rejection.

Hawkers boomed their tantalizing offers of incredible deals, riches beyond the dreams of avarice, pleasures to sate every whim, or the secrets of the universe. Some stood directly across the narrow aisle firing insults at their competition. Any eye contact immediately brought the traveler to their attention. Tiara's crew tried to keep their eyes on the surging crowd around them.

Truelove noted there were booths where merchants sold trinkets and cheap jewelry. Bars, bordellos, and casinos were scattered among the larger shops. Truelove hunched his shoulders to make himself look smaller to avoid attracting the attention of most of the Last Starport's denizens. They moved forward, purposefully ignoring the loud calls of the hawkers.

Notably absent from the station was the presence of CSA or station security. Truelove's sense of concern increased. With his practiced eye, he saw how the idlers and slackers that stood alone or in groups watched the travelers like a hawk watches a fat rabbit. Truelove noted that Miya's quick dark eyes watched them with a hardness he'd not seen before.

They were traveling along a section of promenade in which the many of the bystanders wore wild adornments on their heavily tattooed bodies. The stench of acrid

body odor assaulted them. Nathan pinched his offended nose. Truelove heard Miya's urgent warning in a covering cough, "Raiders."

Now the lack of security dawned on Truelove. He reasoned the station's CSA staff had abandoned it in expectation of the Draconian assault fleet. This had left the station open to for intrusion from raiders or pirates. That hadn't happened, but it was evident the raiders had found a convenient home among the rowdy inhabitants of the Last Starport.

Truelove worried he'd made a mistake in bringing his wards aboard. He decided the best way to reach the *Dove* safely was to assume the character of a person the raiders feared more than anyone. Changing his posture by drawing up to his full six-foot-three-inches, Truelove adopted an expression of pure meanness and disdain for the people around him. He flipped his cloak back over his right shoulder clearing the access to his blaster holster.

Truelove realized he'd adopted his new persona just in time as he felt Nathan flinch. A group of the smelly thugs barged their way through the confused travelers, knocking down an elderly couple directly in front of the shocked boy. The old woman cried out in pain as she fell to her hands and knees on the filthy deck of the promenade.

The thugs surrounded their victims and laughed, while the old man stooped to help his wife to her feet.

A greasy-looking man with a spiked ball on a handle that hung from his wide belt mocked, "Hey, Cutter, them strangers ain't got their space legs yet. Ain't that funny?"

"Yeah, Mace, maybe we can help them on their way. What do you suppose they'd pay for expert helpers like us?" his partner responded. Cutter looked emaciated. There were stains down the front of his worn shirt and pants. He wore a large machete.

"With the kind of safety we can guarantee, they'd probably be mighty generous. I'd say they'd give everything they had."

The rest of the starliner's passengers hustled to get away from the scene, but the thugs blocked Truelove and his wards' way.

"Please," the old man begged, "we're just poor travelers--"

"Shut up, grampa," Cutter shouted, "I say you got credits. Now hand them over or you ain't getting any older."

The old man looked around in desperation for station security to intervene. Instead he saw the hungry leers of the gang surrounding him.

Miya thrust Nathan behind her and stepped back. She swept the sides of her cape over her shoulders, exposing her ninja outfit underneath. She murmured to get Truelove's attention, "Watch it, James. These people are raiders."

"I see it, Miya. You know what to do." His glance at Miya told Truelove that Miya understood. He said under his breath, "Tiara, Battlestations, prepare to receive orders for attacking this station."

Aboard Tiara's bridge the consoles flickered to life. Three monitors showed the views from Truelove, Miya, and Nathan's implants. Her hull thumped as four turrets rotated into position to fire. She moved toward the station. "Understood, Captain. Executing Battlestations aye, sir." Tiara's voice responded quietly in their ears.

Truelove stepped up behind the two thugs hovering over the elderly couple, placed a powerful hand on each thug's shoulder, and squeezed mercilessly. Cutter and Mace sagged in agony as their collar bones snapped. The sound of the breaking bones sounded like pistol shots on the promenade. They fell to the knees before the older couple. Truelove stepped back a pace with his hand on his blaster.

Mace grunted, "Who's trying to mess with--" The words froze in his throat when he looked up at the angry giant standing over him.

Truelove snarled, "You maggots are blocking my path. If you got business with these pilgrims, take it up out of the way, like any thug with a brain learned the first week on the job. You idiots are going to make me miss my appointment while you play patty-cake out here."

Truelove noticed Miya was holding several star-shaped bits of metal between the fingers of her right hand while she clutched Nathan against her side. She was watching the crowd that had pulled away to make room for the action. A glance spared for the crowd denoted their looks of excitement. He saw the elderly couple now limped away down the corridor as fast as they could go.

Truelove's blaster appeared in his fist, and his large combat knife flashed down under Cutter's throat.

An awed murmur swept through the crowd, "He's a Wolf."

Miya heard the comment and, understanding hissed, "They think you're a Wardog, James."

Truelove thought for a moment. He, too, had heard the fearful murmur. His ruse was working. A Wardog Wolf would intimidate any raider. He bellowed, "Now, do I get to my appointment without further delays, or do I have to thin the herd here? It seems a bit overcrowded for my likes anyway."

The crowd suddenly found the action around the big man wasn't so interesting anymore. The promenade quickly returned to normal leaving a wide path for Truelove and his party. Truelove watched as Cutter and Mace crawled away to a dark corner.

Truelove turned to Miya and said, "I think we can move on without being bothered." He holstered his weapons.

"I thought you wanted to keep a low profile, Wolf," Miya stated quietly when they were well past the excitement.

"May I assume I can stand down from Battlestations, Commander Wolf?" Tiara mocked.

"We're back on plan, ladies." Truelove stated, "Sometimes you need to be flexible."

"Ah, flexible is it?" Miya said wryly. "I don't believe they taught us that in the Academy."

"You're getting the benefit of my years of experience." Truelove said.

Miya rolled her eyes, "If all else fails, blast them to pieces, sir?"

"You're such a quick study, Miya." Truelove complimented.

They passed the station commodity exchange, which held samples of trading stock available in the station's holds. Agents bickered with ship's captains and buyers to buy and sell items in bulk. There were barrels of beer, refrigerated containers of Texas longhorn beef, various grains, and minerals. Several hard cases sat playing cards in the corner of the exchange. Truelove recognized mercenary pilots available for escort duty.

Noting his path on his datapad, Truelove guided Nathan and Miya down the side corridor to the *Dove's* berth.



At the *Dove's* docking port, a short, stocky older man with a bushy gray beard and mustache impatiently shouted orders at one of the station's longshoreman who drove a grav-lift. "Hey, mule, get that container aboard already. It's scrap, it ain't eggs."

There was a loud screech from the far side of the cargo bay. "You," the stocky man boomed, pointing a thick finger at a loader who had just scuffed the side of the *Dove's* cargo bay with his rusty container, "better not scratch my ship again. Use your good eye when you're driving that thing. It sounds like you're driving by ear." In a slightly quieter shout he grumbled disgustedly, "Rookies."

The stocky man's beady eyes were everywhere. Truelove noticed the man had spotted them approaching as soon as they entered the freight corridor. When it was evident the strangers intended to come aboard the *Dove* he bellowed at someone inside the cargo bay, "Hey, Rip, tell Captain Torg we got visitors."

Truelove watched the stocky man, who looked like a dwarf with his cap in his dirty fist, and his wide fists on his hips. He had no doubt the little man was the king of the *Dove's* cargo bay, and the little man knew it as well.

The little man swept a squinting eye over the strangers. Truelove waited for some indication from the man as to how to proceed.

"Well?" the dwarf shouted.

Truelove realized the man was hard of hearing. "I'd like to see the Captain," he said in a normal voice.

"We ain't got any bees and capstans, son," the man shouted back. He scratched his head in confusion. "Tourists," he shouted, shaking his head.

Truelove grimaced. This was going to be harder than he thought.

As he considered his next move, Nathan barked a laugh at the funny little man, and Miya shushed him. Her hood fell back with her sudden movement, exposing the tiny woman's pretty face and long black hair.

The cargo master's beady eyes lit up, and he smiled. "Well now, ma'am," he said in a much lower tone with a broad smile of approval. "I'm Charlie Hobbs, the *Dove's* cargo chief. Welcome to the *Dove*, can I show you to the Captain?"

Miya nodded, smiling sweetly.

"Come along then," the man said, and offered Miya his thick arm. Charlie headed into the ship with his nose high, like a band leader. He turned to Miya and said, "I ain't really hard of hearing. . . Well maybe a little." He winked at her conspiratorially. He frowned back at Truelove and asked Miya, "What's he want with bees and capstans anyway?"

Miya gave a trilling laugh that echoed up the steep ship's ladder to the *Dove's* bridge.

Nathan grinned up at Truelove and said, "I like him, Uncle James."

"Must be a bright kid," Charlie said.



Truelove followed Charlie Hobbs onto the old *Dove's* bridge. Captain Torg Malvis stood watching them while scratching a thick finger through his grizzled white beard. Truelove found it easy to envision the huge sixty-year-old bear of a man as a Viking prince with shoulder length blond hair now turned snowy white. Torg's worn face showed wrinkle lines at his gray eyes that hinted of a wry sense of humor.

Truelove was a big man at six-foot-three inches, but Torg was almost six inches taller. In spite of age and a large stomach, it was obvious the old man retained some of his former massive strength. Truelove guessed Torg had grown up in the merchant service. Tiara's file indicated Torg was the *Dove's* longest serving master. Captain Torg was the sole owner of the tired old tub.

Truelove gave the *Dove's* bridge a professional appraisal. Most of the control consoles were powerless. The bridge was dirty and, like everything else he'd seen in the ship, needed a coat of paint.

The two veteran spacers looked each other over.

Charlie Hobbs indicated Truelove and bellowed, "Captain, this here gent wants to speak with you. I got to get back to the cargo bay before them louts tear up something." Charlie patted Miya's hand and bowed. "It was good to meet you, ma'am."

"Thanks, Mr. Hobbs," Miya said sweetly.

As Charlie left the bridge, Truelove held out his hand to Torg, "My name is James Truelove, Captain. If you're heading into the Worm, I and my party would appreciate a lift."

"Well, sir," Torg said, "the *Dove* is no luxury starliner, and we don't usually take on passengers. I'm sure you can see the *Dove* is in no shape to take kids, Mr. Truelove."

"My thoughts exactly, sir," Tiara said dryly in Truelove's ear.

Torg continued, "Frankly, I wouldn't want to take the responsibility for your safety." Torg's expression of genuine worry touched Truelove.

"Captain, I wouldn't expect my group to be a burden on the *Dove*. I thought I could offer my services as a licensed ship's engineer. My associate, Miya, is the boy's guardian and tutor. She is a practicing nurse." Truelove pointed at his wide-eyed ward. Nathan was eagerly inspecting the new environment. His dark eyes gleamed with excitement. Truelove continued, "Nathan might be a candidate for the Captain's cabin boy, sir."

Nathan looked up at both men hopefully.

Captain Torg smiled and patted the boy's head. Truelove noticed Torg's eyes widened eagerly at the mention of having an engineer aboard. Truelove offered, "That is, if your ship's engineer doesn't mind the help, sir."

"Ahem, yes, the *Dove* is currently without the benefit of an engineer, Truelove." Torg said in his smooth bass. Torg seemed to be making up his mind. Suddenly, he held out his meaty hand to Truelove, "Welcome aboard. I'll have Rip find you cabins in the crew's quarters."

As they were leaving the bridge, Truelove turned to Torg and asked, "Captain, I have a small yacht I've been working on in my spare time. I wonder, sir, if you could accommodate another small ship in your hangar bay?"

"A yacht, you say? Well now, we haven't had a shuttle in the *Dove* for many a year. I can't vouch for the condition of the hangar bay, Truelove. You bring your bonnie yacht aboard, but you'll have to clean up the hangar bay yourself," the Captain agreed. "You'll find the hangar in the aft of the ship above the cargo bay. Where is this yacht, sir?"

“It’s parked in high orbit just outside space dock, Captain. When you’re ready to leave, I’ll lead us to it.”

Torg considered whether this man was trying to smuggle illegal cargo, but quickly discarded the thought. He’d wager the man had never done anything illegal in life. “I’ll hail you on the ship’s Com when we’re ready to depart.” Torg said. “Right, then. You best get started.” Torg spoke to the pilot, “Rip, show Truelove to the hangar bay.”

“Okay.” Rip said. “Come on.” Rip left the bridge without looking back to see if anyone was following.



Chapter Four

Now that they were aboard the *Dove*, Truelove began to have second thoughts about his decision to come aboard. The old freighter was in every bit as bad shape as Tiara had indicated.

Truelove found the hangar bay as directed. Turning on the high bay lights, he found the floor was a jumble of debris and abandoned or forgotten equipment. Realizing time was short, he laid his jacket and dress shirt on the least dirty crate he could find and went to work clearing space for his ship. His military training couldn’t accept the chaos of disorder. He thought that even the poorest ship could be neat and clean. He determined to make the hangar bay an example to the *Dove’s* crew.

Using an anti-gravity mover and the cargo hauler, Truelove quickly shuffled around enough junk to make room for Tiara. He stacked the crates and undamaged packages of obsolete shuttle parts neatly along one bulkhead. Parked neatly along the opposite wall of the hangar bay was the old ship’s maintenance equipment. Using the loader, he gathered the piles of debris and trash and dumped them in the unused trash hoppers, careful to separate the metals from the trash as the old hoppers indicated. Any scrap of metal could be useful in an old tub like the *Dove*.

After a few minutes, he looked up to see Miya and Nathan helping with the cleaning. Miya was showing Nathan how to pick up trash and put it in the big trash bins while she swept up small piles of debris the loader couldn’t reach. The boy was wearing

gloves much too large for his hands to protect him from the filthy trash. Two hours later, they were sweating and filthy when Captain Torg's deep bass voice boomed over the hangar bay com, "We'll be departing space dock in twenty minutes, Truelove."

Looking around the greatly improved hangar bay, he nodded approvingly, knowing he needed to do much more, but he didn't have the time. Truelove called Miya and Nathan over. "You both did a good job. I couldn't have done it without your help," he said with a smile, patting Nathan on the shoulder.

"It's still dirty in here, sir." Nathan's high voice stated matter-of-factly, "Do you think Tiara will mind staying here, Uncle James?" the boy said sounding worried.

"I'm sure she'll understand, Nathan." Miya assured the boy.

"We can try to fix it up more a little later, Nathan," Truelove responded. "But let's get cleaned up now. I need to see Torg, and dinner will be served in the ship's galley soon." They hurried back to their newly assigned quarters. Truelove could tell Miya had cleaned up his room and laid out his clothes before she had joined him in the hangar to help get it ready for Tiara's arrival. He took a quick energy shower and changed his filthy clothes.



Truelove arrived on the bridge of the *Dove* as Captain Torg gave the order to disengage from space dock. Captain Torg turned to Truelove and asked, "What are the coordinates of your yacht, Truelove?"

Truelove referred to his datapad and rattled off the tri-axial spatial coordinate. Captain Torg turned to his pilot, Rip, and nodded. The eager young man turned and entering the coordinates on his Navigation station, guided the old ship away from the docking bay smoothly. A few minutes later, the *Dove* idled at the given coordinates. Truelove entered a security code on his datapad and watched as the response flashed back.

"I don't see any ships on the scope, Captain," Rip, the *Dove's* young pilot, announced. Truelove couldn't reveal that Tiara would be difficult to find under normal circumstances, and the *Dove's* ancient scanner couldn't hope to detect her stealthy profile even when she wasn't in stealth mode.

Captain Torg looked over young Rip's shoulder at the scanner and grunted, "Umph. Nothing. I hope pirates didn't steal the boat."

Truelove watched his pad for a second more and responded, "She's already aboard, sir."

Torg's surprise turned quickly to suspicion. Looking at his new crewman with a stern look, he noted the hangar bay hatch light on his command console had just switched from green to red, indicating it had been open. He said, "Now just how in Hanna's name did you do that, mister?"

Truelove smiled guiltily and answered with an apologetic tone, "Sorry, sir. I piloted her remotely from the bridge."

"Listen, young man," the bearish Captain grumbled, "I don't want any damage to this ship because your high-tech wiz bang goes off half-cocked and wipes out the hangar hatch." Truelove was sure Torg was worried that the slightest incident could result in disaster for the old rust bucket.

"Ship's secure for space flight." The Rip interrupted when his screens indicated everything was normal.

Truelove's face reddened with embarrassment at Torg's public reprimand. Sagely keeping his thoughts to himself, he answered deferentially, "I'll be more careful in the future, sir."

"See that you do," the old Captain said dismissively. His tone changed to genuine curiosity. "Maybe I should take a look at this yacht of yours."

"I'd be honored, Captain," Truelove answered quickly, taking the proffered olive branch. He made a mental note to make sure he didn't permit Tiara to do anything in the future that would bring unwanted attention to her. He hadn't considered that allowing the ship to pilot itself into the hangar bay would cause such a fuss.

Captains and crews had strange ideas about what was acceptable. All crews were different, and, until they accepted a new crewman, everyone was suspicious. He had to warn Tiara to respond like any other ship, unless circumstances required her unique abilities. "Give me a few minutes to get my ship secured, Captain, and I would be happy to give you a quick tour."

Watching his engineer closely, Torg nodded, and Truelove left the bridge.

When he was alone in the corridor, Truelove said aloud, "Did you hear that, Tiara? From now on, we must be more careful on this ship where your technology stands out like a beacon. A ship is a hot bed of superstition and rumors, and ships' crews talk. We need to hide you for now. We need no link between our ties with the CSA and our destination. This old freighter will provide a most unlikely hiding spot while we continue on to our final destination."

"I understand, sir," Tiara responded in his ear.

"Please prepare for a tour by Captain Torg," Truelove commanded, realizing he'd thought of Tiara as if she were a person. He'd have to be careful not to expose her unique abilities as he performed his duties in his new role of engineer on the *Dove*.

"Captain," Tiara announced, "I've established an interface with the *Dove*. Her ship's systems are . . . not well, sir." She sounded doubtful.

Truelove smiled to himself and said, "That's why I'm here. It might be helpful for you to catalogue your findings, and I'll begin working on the most serious repairs in order of priority."

"I wish I could donate my auto-repair system to the *Dove*, Captain. My estimates indicate the repairs will take you forty-nine-point-three years. Of course, if you don't take time to sleep, the repairs might only take forty years, but that doesn't include any additional repairs that might be needed as the ship naturally wears out."

"We'll do what we can," Truelove said, shaking his head. "We only need to get to the next star system safely, and I need to make sure no one sees you for a while. Make sure your systems appear off-line while you're parked in the hangar bay."

"Aye aye, Captain," Tiara replied tersely in his aural implant.

"Let's suspend the use of the title 'Captain' until further notice, Tiara. I don't feel like a Captain. Besides, if anyone were to hear that title, it could cause some questions that I'd rather not try to answer. You may address me as *James*."

"Title change noted, sir."



Old Captain Torg stood in the corridor hatchway looking at the oddly sleek ship in his hangar. He slowly walked forward and ran a hand along Tiara's smooth side.

Walking around the smaller ship with Truelove beside him, Torg inspected everything about her. When they had circled the ship, Truelove entered a command on his datapad, and Tiara opened her main hatch. The side of the ship opened silently, showing the neat interior.

“Please enter, sir,” Truelove offered.

Captain Torg seemed to be impressed with Tiara. He looked at his engineer with a new level of respect. Moving inside, he noted the neatness of Tiara’s galley and cabins. Truelove invited him to the tiny bridge with its twin seats. Torg stood behind his new engineer as he sat in the pilot’s seat and turned on various systems. After explaining a few of the ship’s design features, he asked Tiara to welcome the Captain.

“Welcome aboard, Captain Malvis,” the female voice responded. Most ship’s computer interfaces were male voiced. Truelove could see the old man liked the touch.

“Please address me as Torg,” he ordered without thinking. “She sounds like a fine lady, Truelove.” The old captain grinned. “Take good care of her, and she’ll take care of you,” he stated prophetically.

“Thank you, Captain,” Tiara responded warmly.

Truelove showed Torg the crew cabins and engineering compartments.

“Reminds me of my first ship,” Torg reminisced. “She was a fine craft. The *Dove*’s not a bad ship, mind you. She’s just a bit tired, like her Captain. Nevertheless, there’s something special about a small schooner, like Tiara. I’ve never seen a design like this in a ship.” Torg indicated the hull as they disembarked. Her gangway closed silently behind them and Tiara sat elegantly in contrast to the *Dove*’s rusty hangar bay.

“It’s a prototype design, Captain.” Truelove said truthfully. “There’ll be some more modifications before I’m done, sir.”

“Lad,” Torg said, lingering at the hangar hatch in the corridor with a last look back at Tiara, “I think she’s beautiful.” He nodded happily. “And you’ve done a grand job on straightening up my hangar bay. I don’t know how you could’ve gotten her in here otherwise. I need to start a campaign to get the old girl spruced up a bit. I wouldn’t want your bonny ship to feel too uncomfortable.” He turned and walked with a lighter step back to his own bridge.

“I like him, sir,” Tiara commented when the old man had disappeared.

“So do I, Tiara. So do I.”



Chapter Five

The next morning was Truelove's first day as the *Dove's* engineer. He stepped into the *Dove's* hangar bay and felt as if he'd gone back in time. He decided to tour the ship and take stock of his new project.

The *Dove* was an unremarkable tramp starfreighter, too small and too slow to draw much attention from good business or bad luck. She was an ancient ship with an outdated hull style. With a long, fat cigar-shaped hull and a wide vertical fantail, the *Dove* looked like a large, pregnant guppy. None of her exterior paint remained, leaving the pitted and stained hull mostly rust-colored. There were accents of carbon blacking and oil streaks from the various exhaust ports and thruster vents. Unidentifiable white stains drooled from her exterior rivets like bird droppings on a sadly neglected statue.

Inside the *Dove*, rust and corrosion had replaced most of the paint on the steel bulkheads and deck. What little nondescript paint remained was peeling. He walked down the *Dove's* main corridor. A few of the loose deck plates squeaked annoyingly.

He passed a hatch that no longer closed. The heavy hinges were sprung. Truelove wondered incredulously how the crew had sprung the 1/2 inch thick steel hinges. Many of her light fixtures no longer worked making her interior spaces cave-like. Lamps had burned out or the power had failed. Some flickered hauntingly. Others glowed like the dying embers of a campfire.

There was an offensive odor about the old ship. Truelove knew every ship has its distinctive smell. The *Dove's* was a combination of burnt oil, singed electric components, and rancid bilge water. Truelove could name at least four failing systems that would result in such a combination of aromas. He knew the *Dove's* rust and loose deck plates were the least of his worries. If any one of those four systems failed, everyone aboard would die a slow, painful death in space.

Truelove avoided the cargo bay. He already knew it smelled like a garbage dump. Scrap dealers notoriously passed along scrap contaminated with . . . He avoided finishing the thought as his stomach gave a lurch. He had enough on his mind.

The engine bay had a picturesque layer of fog about two meters from the deck. Truelove knew it wasn't fog. It was smoke. At least he knew where the burnt oil odor originated from now. Truelove shook his head. When he'd opened the hatch to the engine bay, it had squealed from disuse. Evidently, the *Dove's* crew avoided the engine bay, hoping for the best.

He stood on the metal ship's ladder from the high catwalk down to the engine deck listening to the complaining engines. There was a low rumble of the badly-tuned ion drives accompanied by the medium throb of worn-out bearings. A chorus of medium high-pitched howls warbled from blowers and fans. Squeals of loose belts and the whistles of leaking hoses topped off the aural assault. Truelove withstood the cacophony of sound for a few minutes, then he donned his hearing protection. The heavy earphones muffled all but the most concussive sounds.

The *Dove's* engines looked *old*. He'd seen old engines before, but these were real museum pieces. What was that carbon-pitted thing in the corner? It was the size of a large coffin with heavy, frayed cables connected to thick brass nuts at the far end.

Truelove saw the edge of a nameplate under the layers of oil film and paint on the old coffin. Using his pin-knife and thumbnail, Truelove scraped his way down to the stamped information on the nameplate. Most of the lettering had worn away before he was born, but he could make out "M_rk O_e Twi_ig_t Dr_ve" followed by "R.I." Truelove straightened in amazement. This was a Mark One Twilight Drive manufactured by Ravenhold Industries. That meant it was the first production model of the Twilight Drive. Twilight Drive was about one-hundred years old. How old was the *Dove*?

The main keelson lay beneath the deck plates between the drive engines. The massive steel member supported every one of the ship's heavy structural steel ribs. In the space where the deck plates were missing, Truelove spotted a corroded green brass plate riveted to the massive keelson. Truelove rubbed his thumb across the line of type. He couldn't read the hull number, or the shipyard, but the Hull Laid Date was almost eighty-five years ago. The *Dove* was a museum piece.

For the first time in his life, Truelove doubted if he were equal to the task he'd taken. He wondered again if Tiara was right. Should they just go on alone? No. He couldn't abandon the *Dove's* who now relied upon him to keep them alive. Truelove took a deep breath and headed wearily back up the ship's ladder to the steel catwalk that connected with the main ship's corridor.

Getting his bearings in the old ship, Truelove stepped carefully into the dimly lit engineering section to look for tools. Turning on the sole bare light bulb dangling pathetically over the dented workbench, he soon discovered, as with everything else on the *Dove*, her engineering bay was sadly lacking. He found an assortment of broken-tipped screwdrivers someone had abused as chisels and pry tools. The socket wrenches were badly splayed and equally useless.

He forced stuck drawers open to find rusty tools with broken handles, bent shafts, and loose heads. The only undamaged tools were the wrenches that didn't fit anything on the *Dove*. Truelove's hope for making any significant repairs sagged with each disappointing discovery. The lowest point of the day was when he found the ship's sledgehammer under a pile of oily rags. The sledgehammer's head was loose and the handle badly splintered. "They even broke the sledgehammer," Truelove exclaimed aloud in disbelief.

Truelove held the wobbly-headed sledgehammer wondering what to do with it when Charlie Hobbs wandered into the engineering bay. "Hey," he shouted happily, his colossal voice echoed around the bay, "you found the sledgehammer. Great job. Rip lost it down here last month. It's the best tool in the *Dove*." Charlie grinned through his bushy beard and mustache. "You mind if I borrow it, Truelove?" Charlie asked deferentially.

"Help yourself, Chief," Truelove offered magnanimously. "Keep it."

"Really?" Charlie asked. "Thanks. You ain't so bad for an engineer."

"No problem." Truelove said numbly. He'd just given away his "best" tool.

A downcast Truelove returned to Tiara hoping that her outfitters had included at least some basic tools in the wall locker marked "Tool Crib" in her cargo bay. There was no way they could anticipate that Tiara's Captain would need tools to fix an ancient starfreighter.

He twisted the tool crib locker hasps and tugged the flawlessly brushed alumiplast doors open. Miniature lights inside the tool crib energized automatically when the doors opened. On the black carpet-lined walls, hung a full set of tools for Tiara's maintenance. The shipwrights had secured each tool in its custom-made foam niche with a label under each tool.

"This is unbelievable," he breathed in relief. Then he looked down in the corner of the locker to find a worn, oil-stained leather tool pouch marked "Truelove." Beside that familiar item was his alumiplast tool locker lashed to the tool crib floor.

He remembered fondly when he'd proudly purchased this his first tool locker. Fresh out of the Academy, Truelove's first assignment was on the old CSA corvette, *Terror*. The then Lieutenant Truelove had served as the *Terror's* engineer and first officer.

"Oh, wow," he groaned through his emotionally choked throat. His eyes teared up. Once more, he was amazed at the Regent's attention to detail. He opened the tool pouch and found a note in the Regent's flowing hand.

*James,
Knowing our plan to find an old freighter, I took the liberty of including your tools, thinking you may need them. If you find this note, then it was worth my efforts to retrieve them for you. Use them with my best wishes.*

-DR

Truelove's emotions overwhelmed him for the moment. During all the bustle of preparing for Sudden Eclipse, the Regent had taken time to think about what he might need. He sniffed and wiped his runny nose on his dirty blue engineering jumpsuit sleeve.

Tiara's voice spoke softly in his ear, "Is everything all right, James?"

Her gentle tone reminded him of the Regent. He cleared his throat and choked, "Yeah, Tiara, everything's just fine now."



Chapter Six

A few days later, down in the engine bay, Truelove had finally finished tuning the *Dove's* engines. They now hummed in perfect harmony. The smoky fog was gone, and most of the chaotic mechanical orchestra no longer played. He could actually stand to be in the bay for a few minutes without hearing protection. However, Truelove wondered if the burnt oil smell would ever clear out. He decided not without a lot of cleaning and a good airing out.

In the rest of the ship, Torg was good to his word and encouraged the ship's crew to start cleaning up the *Dove*. The Captain released the little paint they had in the storage locker, and soon the old ship stank of paint, as various crew members recoated their quarters after years of neglect. Miya and Nathan painted Tiara's hangar. Miya enjoyed teasing Tiara by acting as if she were going to spill the paint on Tiara's pristine surface.

Unfortunately for Truelove, there were few spare parts. The *Dove* had flown too many light years beyond any normal life span for a ship of her design. Her current freight was a load of scrap metal and obsolete ships' parts bound for the planet Promise, which was anything but. The ship rattled constantly with all the loose and broken metal and alumiplast scrap filling her hold.

Truelove worked hard and seemed to be everywhere. At first, he discussed his repairs with Captain Torg prior to beginning them. Before long, the ship was operating better than it had in years, and Torg told the younger man to continue his repairs without approval. Torg's confidence in his new engineer had grown each day. "But," Torg added, "make sure we aren't stuck without engines or an environment."

Truelove turned slowly away and with a wry smile joked, "What did you say the engine looked like, Captain?"

Torg waved him back to engineering, chuckling in his beard. The old Captain looked less anxious to Truelove than he had when they first met.

Truelove and his charges always took their meals on Tiara, and the crew seldom saw Miya or Nathan. After a few weeks, the crew got used to the odd aloofness of their

new crewmates and accepted their behavior. As long as Truelove continued to contribute to the betterment of the ship, no one would question him or his living arrangements.



The *Dove* was cruising, if you could call it that, faster than she had in years. Truelove and his wards had grown accustomed to the monotonous life aboard a starfreighter traveling at space normal speed. Many times Miya took Nathan out into the *Dove's* hangar bay to play around Tiara. They seemed happy to have the additional space.

Miya continued teaching the boy various forms of martial arts of which she was a master. Starting the exercises early helped the pupil develop better natural responses. Nathan's lithe young body and sharp mind grasped the lessons quickly, and she was proud of his progress.

Nathan was equally quick in his scholastic achievements. Tiara's training curriculum provided a series of lessons that Nathan could study at his own pace. She varied the curriculum to keep his quick, inquisitive mind engaged in his studies. They all noted Nathan's proficiency in learning about the ship's systems from Tiara.

While Tiara worked with Nathan on his schooling, Miya took time to work out, keeping her battle skills well-honed. They soon established a comfortable daily schedule.

As the *Dove's* engineer, Truelove surveyed the old freighter's systems. She was a sturdily built ship, but had lacked proper care for many years. Her primary systems remained barely operational, many of the support systems were no longer functional, and this placed a greater strain on the remaining operational systems. Truelove had reviewed Tiara's list of work needed on the old ship. He noted the items he could repair without parts, and the list was short. He'd found the instruments he needed for calibrating the ship's power generators and main energy couplings aboard Tiara. He'd start there.

Five days later, Truelove wiped his greasy hands on his stained coveralls and smiled, satisfied as the *Dove's* massive generator hummed happily for the first time in

many years. The lights throughout the old tub no longer flickered with the vibration in the ship, and she was quieter now that the deck plates weren't rattling. His eyes were sunken with fatigue, but he just stood leaning on the engineering bay control dais watching the screens – watching for an alarm indicating the wreck of his hard work by a newly broken ancient part.

Five minutes after Truelove brought his first repairs on line, the huge shaggy head of Captain Torg thrust through the engineering manway. "It sounds mighty quiet in here. Too quiet," Torg joked.

Looking up, Truelove saw the big man's eyes were smiling. "What's the matter, Torg, can't sleep?"

"All you fix and repair boys are the same. You aren't happy unless you're tinkering with something. I've lived twenty years with those rattles and groans in this old tub. How am I supposed to sleep in this quiet? It just isn't natural," he said with a grin.

"I'll bet you'll get used it, sir," Truelove responded.

Torg nodded good-naturedly. "Speaking of sleep, you look like you can use some, man. Sounds like she'll hold together long enough for you to get some shuteye. I'll call you if something comes up. Better hit the sack for a few hours. Good job," Torg said in appreciation.

Truelove nodded tiredly. "Captain, I'd like to look at the scrap we're hauling, maybe I can find some stuff to help me fix up the old girl. I'll be sure to replace any good junk I find with some more seasoned junk from old systems."

Torg nodded in agreement, laughed heartily, and repeated his order for the engineer to get some rest.



Over the next few weeks, Truelove's progression with the *Dove's* repairs seemed to impress Torg and his crew. Truelove got a sense of satisfaction from seeing the crew's amazement of his broad maintenance knowledge of the ship's systems. It had been years since he'd used his engineering skills, and he rediscovered the contentment he received from solving problems.

At first he'd found a surprising amount of materials to help repair the ship in the scrap. It seemed like every day he found a new treasure mixed in among the junk in the *Dove's* hold. He began taking stock of the piles of scrap and found a veritable treasure trove, still useable by the old ship. Since scrap was a commodity sold by weight, the broken equipment and systems he pulled out of the *Dove* easily replaced the mass he used for repairs.



Chapter Seven

Truelove noticed Varla Young, a young crewman who helped move cargo and performed routine cleaning, had paid close attention to his efforts. All the crew was appreciative of Truelove's work, but Varla seemed especially fascinated. She'd asked him questions from time to time, and he patiently explained the various processes to the inquisitive young woman.

One day, Torg called Truelove into his cabin and stated, "I can't tell you how happy I am at the work you've done on the *Dove*, Truelove. Nevertheless, I want to make sure you've got enough help. Some of the stuff I've seen you working on is too big for one person. I noticed Varla Young has shown a real interest in your work. Do you think you can use her as a helper and maybe teach her the fundamentals of ship engineering?"

Truelove thought for a moment. It had been a long time since he'd had a ship to care for. Working on the *Dove* reminded him how much he missed the satisfaction one received from doing a job well and seeing the results. Engineering on this old tub was a challenge, but it was rewarding. Torg's suggestion was more than just a thought. The old man was offering him a chance to become a real part of the ship's close community. It only took a moment for the younger man to make up his mind.

"I'll be glad to give her a chance, sir," Truelove responded.

"I'll send her to you at the end of shift," Torg said, ending the conversation.

"Oh, I didn't realize there was a shift end, Captain." The engineer smiled.

“I forgot to tell you. You don’t get one.” Torg chuckled, “Thanks, Truelove. However, all jokes aside, the old girl is running better every day. I just figured, with help, you could do more, and maybe get someone trained enough to keep watch and give yourself a break.”

Later that day, Varla met Truelove eager to start her new opportunity. The engineer discussed his expectations with his new recruit. He was amazed how easily his dialogue returned to the old quotes and lessons he gave to his engineering crews in years past on the Commonwealth ships he served.

Varla was a small woman in her early twenties with raven black hair that hung below her shoulders. Not exactly pretty, but she had an earthy attractiveness and a well-endowed figure for her slight size. Varla was used to hard work and was deceptively strong.

Truelove taught Varla how to use her scanner and other tools, and spent hours training her in the fundamentals of engineering and maintenance as they worked together.

He watched his engineering station’s display of Varla’s scan and noted the main bridge monitoring systems no longer functioned. He sent the cadet engineer on her next area of assignment and investigated the problem with the bridge Com systems. If he could get them working, he wouldn’t have to spend so much time in engineering watching the ship’s systems. He knew the Captain would be only too happy to do so for him, while he focused his efforts elsewhere.

An hour later, Truelove peered into a small, dark hatch of the junction where the bridge Com conduits ran back to engineering. A horrible smell emanated from the newly opened hatch. On a sour smelling ship filled with obnoxious fumes and clouds of steam and smoke, this odor was worse than anything else. He called Varla on the engineering Com channel. She answered brightly and said she’d be there in a moment.

When the smell from the dark hatch hit the young woman, she nearly vomited. “What’s that?” she coughed.

“A mix of dead space rat or rats, ionized electrical conduits, and a good helping of burning poly-hydraulic fluid, I’d guess,” responded Truelove placidly, as if savoring a

cooking stew. “I need you to get an environmental suit and see if you can squeeze in there with a light to clean up that mess.”

Varla’s white face looked at him with incomprehensible horror at his easy-going directive.

Truelove explained, “Hey, someone’s got to do it, and I can’t fit in that hole. That means you, girl. Besides, you’ll learn a valuable lesson. This is why we’ve got to make sure all the power conduits remain sealed unless we’re working on them. Space rats love to nest in the warmth near the power feeds, but they also like to chew on the soft hydraulic hoses, too. Next thing you know, we got ourselves some tasty rat stew.”

Truelove grinned, knowing he was exaggerating, but the indoctrination of new engineers was a time-honored tradition. He jokingly thought why should he should mess with the tradition of making the rookie do the nasty work?

Varla was game. She donned her smelly e-suit and climbed into the hole without complaint while Truelove directed her work. He shut down the power to the junction. No one noticed because it hadn’t worked for a while anyway. When Varla crawled out with a disposal bag filled with the residue of fried rat-gunk, Truelove directed her to throw it in the waste recovery bin, stow her suit in its maintenance locker, and hit the showers. She was done for the day. As she wriggled out of her tight suit, Truelove re-activated the bridge C&C system.

Captain Torg nearly jumped out his seat on the bridge when his bridge monitor suddenly flashed to life. Truelove knew this was the first time in months he could see what condition his ship was in, and amazingly, it wasn’t as bad as the last time he saw it on the monitor. Torg called down to Truelove immediately. “Hey, nice job on my monitor, Truelove, but you nearly scared me to death. Next time, give me a warning. I’m not used to the old girl working this good.”

Truelove responded dryly, “I’m sorry I interrupted your nap, sir, but I can’t take the credit for this one. Varla deserves all the glory.” He smiled at the bedraggled figure removing the sweaty suit. She looked up with a grin. A streak of unidentified goo streaked her pretty chin. She happily finished struggling out of the suit and headed for her quarters, oblivious to her sweat drenched, smelly body.

Over the next few weeks, Truelove and Varla worked doggedly through his plan to overhaul the *Dove's* systems. The ship's crew became used to the sudden power outages, loud bangs, and prolonged hammering, suddenly ending in pristine silence and another ship system quietly humming back to life for the first time in years.

Varla was a fast learner. She was adept at understanding the engineering systems. The ship's engine purred whenever she made an adjustment. Truelove kept her training schedule aggressive and challenged her to keep getting better. He encouraged her thoroughness and her questions about how things worked. It had been a long time since he had had such an adept pupil.



Chapter Eight

The slow, boring trip through the Worm wore on. Miya and Truelove shared their morning coffee in Tiara's comfortable galley, and Miya complained to Truelove, "I wish we had some weapons and a place to do target practice."

"I miss my daily practice sessions, too, Miya. I haven't had time to fix up a place, and we don't really have any weapons, other than those I was able to scrounge from the *Thunder*."

"Oh," Miya remembered, "I have a brand new Mark IV Blaster given to me by the Regent when I started taking care of Nathan." Miya jumped up from the small galley table and returned quickly with a beautiful wooden box. Opening it, she proudly showed James her new weapon which lay gleaming in the galley lights in its black velvet molded cradle.

Truelove picked up the state-of-the-art sidearm, gazing at it in appreciation. "This weapon is a proto-type, Miya, and it's silenced. I see the power settings are marked with a higher than normal output. Look at this," He indicated the longer than usual hand grip, "It's been modified to accommodate a larger energy clip to supply the greater power, but the weapon still has an excellent balance."

He stopped speaking and examined the special weapon closely. He listened to it and shook it a couple times, then laid it admiringly back in its case and continued his

evaluation. “That pistol is equipped with Steady Aim Technology, Miya.” He smiled. When he realized she wasn’t aware of the technology he explained, “A tiny gyroscope keeps the weapon steady, even when you’re moving. It’s not enough to bother you, but helps keep your aim true.

“We could also use the two or three weapons I took from *Thunder* to do some practicing, Miya. I guess I’m just missing my gun collection and didn’t want to think about it.”

Truelove had invested many years developing a collection of unique, state-of-the-art, and antique guns and kept them in pristine condition, being a highly-skilled weapon smith. He had to abandon his precious weapons when they fled the capital. There was no room on the escape craft for all his weapons and hardware.

Tiara interrupted, “Sir, I haven’t bothered you with this information because you’ve been busy, but I do have an armory.” Both professional soldiers looked at each other with amazement.

Truelove was the first to respond, “By all means, show us.’

“Please come to my cargo bay.”

Miya, Truelove, and Nathan entered the bay, and a lighted panel they hadn’t noticed before activated. As they approached, Tiara opened twin panels on her small cargo bay wall. Inside was a small room, a cube about four meters per side, with the latest military rifles and blasters clamped securely on the rack within. Carefully labeled parts cabinets contained spare parts and ammo. Large cases clamped to the floor contained rocket launchers with various ordinance.

Truelove and Miya inspected the small but powerful armory and expressed a real appreciation for the excellent weapons. The rear panel of the small armory parted in the middle and both sides slid open silently into the walls, exposing another secret room. It was richly appointed with wood paneling and lined with techni-glass cases lit to display a dazzling array of weapons. Specially built stands secured over one-hundred exotic weapons of Truelove’s gun collection, each labeled and gleaming in the high intensity light as if they were expensive jewelry.

At the end of the armory hall was a well-lit workbench with all of Truelove’s weapon smithing tools neatly stowed on the wall behind it. Carefully labeled spare parts

lay in separate bins in the drawers built into the walls. Various types of ammunition were stored in especially secure wall lockers to avoid any accidental discharge of the dangerous projectiles.

“The Regent was well aware of your interests in weapons and had your collection transferred to my armory, with a few additions from the Ravenhold private collection, before the rest were stored away in a secret bunker in the Ravenhold complex,” Tiara explained.

Truelove, Miya, and Nathan stood gazing in awe at the incredible display. With deep appreciation for the fine craftsmanship, Truelove noted the careful arrangement of the display, then discovered two exciting new additions.

“The Regent specially selected these two for you, sir,” Tiara explained as he stared at the new additions to his collection. “The pistol is the original Mark I Blaster named *Victor*, serial number 00001, carried as a personal sidearm by Victor Ravenhold during the Rim Raider incident a hundred years ago. The Ravenhold Blaster’s historical value is inestimable.”

Truelove reverently picked up the ancient sidearm of Nathan’s forbearer. As soon as the weapon touched his hand, he had a sense of *déjà vu*, with a vision that some day Victor’s great-great grandson would one day own the precious gun once again. He glanced down at Nathan who was looking at the old gun as if it were treasure. “What do you think, Nathan?” Truelove said handing the boy the weapon carefully, after checking the charge to make sure it was empty.

“It’s beautiful, Uncle James.” Nathan said turning it over in his hands.

“Always remember, a weapon is not a toy. It is a tool. It must never be pointed at anyone, unless you mean to use it. Always consider every weapon loaded, that way there can be no surprises. It’s best to keep them loaded, so that you are never surprised as well. Too many people have been shot by ‘unloaded’ weapons.”

Nathan looked up at his uncle with a look of awe, and Truelove read the boy’s mind.

Truelove asked, “How old are you, Nathan?”

“Almost eleven, sir,” Nathan answered hopefully.

“That’s about how old I was when my dad started to teach me how to use a gun. Remind me to teach you after your next birthday.”

“Yes, sir,” Nathan exclaimed enthusiastically, handing the precious weapon back to Truelove.

Truelove secured the ‘Victor’ back in its niche and lifted out the gleaming new sniper rifle with interest.

Tiara explained, “That is a new Victor Romeo Silenced Sniper Rifle commissioned by the Commonwealth Clandestine Operations. It, too, is serial number 00001. Unfortunately, because of the Regent’s plan, production of the weapon ceased immediately, and all copies and plans destroyed, except those in my memory core. Again, sir, this is truly a unique weapon.

“Both your rifle and Miya’s blaster are DNA keyed. No one else can use them. If you choose to change access to the weapons later, I can accommodate your wishes.” Tiara concluded her explanation, “The Regent spared no expense and personally supervised the design of my armory to meet your needs.”

“I hope she knows how much I appreciate the gesture.”

“I’m sure she does. She took great delight in providing this surprise for you.”

Nathan studied the fantastic weapons displayed like jewels under the bright lights of the plastiglass cases. He pointed at each pistol and rifle, sounding out the strange names, “Eagle, Python, Worm-burner.” Nathan gazed in delight at the fancy gold, silver, and platinum filigree on a few of the ceremonial weapons.

Truelove and Miya turned to leave the fabulous weapon collection when a hidden drawer slid open from the sidewall. The long drawer held a custom-made matched set of ninja-to swords.

“Oh my,” Miya exclaimed with her hands cupping her cheeks.

“Wow,” said Truelove in awe.

Tiara explained, “Miya, the Regent appreciates your incredible sacrifice for her. You gave up a promising career to serve her. She hopes these swords will inaugurate a new vista of adventure for which, she believes, you’ve been prepared. Perhaps someday, she hopes you will find an *osheigo*, or disciple, worthy of your precious current swords.”

Miya carefully lifted a *ninja-to* sword from its foam-form resting place.

"I am directed to encourage extreme caution when handling these swords, Miya." Tiara cautioned. "Ravenhold Industries researched the ancient art of samurai sword making to fabricate these swords. Although they used the best technology, the swords were hand-made by a master swordsmith. The final sharpening of the blades attained a cutting test of twenty."

"I thought the cutting test maximum limit was eighteen." Miya stated.

"It was." Tiara agreed without further explanation.

Miya nodded, understanding the swords were exceptionally sharp. Just the weight of the blade on unprotected skin would cause a severe laceration.

Truelove appreciated the beauty of the blade. He saw the engraved dragon on the blade. "I thought samurai swords were longer."

Miya corrected, "This is no samurai sword, James. It is a *wakizashi* blade mounted on a *katana* handle. The *wakizashi* sword length was something less than twenty-four inches, which is the length of these.

"I noticed the handles looked long for the sword. Is that for two hands?"

"Sometimes," Miya said, "and sometimes as a ruse, James."

"Ruse?" Truelove asked, picking up the scabbard that was longer than the sword. The end of the scabbard popped open revealing a hidden compartment in the tip. Miya reached across him and snapped it shut. She placed it back in the case.

"Anyone looking at the handle might think the wielder had a longer, samurai sword or katana," she explained.

"Why would anyone want a shorter sword?" Truelove asked, he couldn't understand why anyone wanted a sword when a perfectly good blaster did the job quicker from a greater distance.

Miya dragged her hungry eyes from her sword and looked at Truelove like a mother patiently fielding too many questions from an inquisitive child. She said, "I can think of many reasons, James. I'll name a few if you promise to stop asking questions so that I can enjoy my gifts. I didn't quiz you about all those ancient firearms you collect."

"Sorry, Miya, I'm just intrigued."

"I'm sure all will be revealed in due time."

James wondered what she meant by that, but avoided asking the question.

"In the mean time, one would use shorter swords if they weren't a giant with bulging muscles and a tiny head." Miya grinned.

"Hey," Truelove objected.

"Or, one might want a shorter sword for closer work where a longer sword could be an impediment. Or, one might use shorter swords if *she used more than one sword at a time.*"

"You use two swords, Miya?" Truelove asked stepping back from her.

"I'd say that's your job to discover, Captain." Miya said. "Evidently you know less about me than I do about you. Tsk Tsk." Miya clicked her tongue with mock disgust. As Miya moved to place the sword back in its case, she twirled the sword expertly on her palm. The dragon image etched on one side merged with a depiction of a female warrior with stabbing swords on the reverse of the blade.

James noticed the light playing on the blade as the image blurred to appear as if the warrior was slaying the dragon. She placed the *ninja-to* back in its form.

Then Miya spun the second sword. The female warrior appeared to riding the dragon with her swords raised in triumph.

"What do those symbols mean?" James asked pointing to the beautifully etched characters flanking the images.

Tiara answered, "The first sword reads *Ryuujin* or Dragon god or dragon king on the dragon side and *Koroshiya* or killer on the side with the female warrior. The second sword reads *Ryuujin Okami* or Dragon Mistress.

"So one sword is named the Dragon Slayer, and the other the Dragon Mistress," he interpreted in admiration. "I think the Regent expects great things from you, Miya."

Miya reverently returned the swords to their case and closed it.

Truelove looked at Miya with renewed respect, and determined to research her background more as soon as he had time. Evidently, he'd missed something interesting in his review of her bio.

Nathan had watched the adults and the weapons with eyes sparkling in excitement.

Truelove decided he needed to spend more time teaching the boy. With the *Dove's* improved operation, he could take the time. Truelove thought for a moment. "I'll have to ask Torg if we can use the hangar bay for a practice range. It looks like weapons won't be a problem anymore," Truelove said with a wide smile.

Miya was happy to see Truelove relax a bit.



Nathan's eleventh birthday was another opportunity for the bored crew to celebrate. It was the largest party the boy had experienced. Ernst baked a cake and Nathan received a number of small gifts from the crew. Nathan's friendly and helpful manner made him the darling of the *Dove's*.

True to his word, Truelove included the boy in his weapon practices. Nathan took his new responsibility of handling a weapon seriously. He learned how to field strip a blaster and shoot it safely.



With the Captain Torg's permission, Truelove and Miya setup a demonstration of their weapons skills. The Old Man eager agreed with little to do for entertainment on the long trip. Truelove and Miya planned a special day and invited the whole crew to watch. Truelove realized he and Miya had much to do. They had a show to prepare, they needed to bring their skills up to date, and they only had two weeks before the event.

As they discussed their plans for the event, Truelove said, "You know, Miya, in ancient times there used to be weapons demonstrations where people could watch expert marksmen demonstrate amazing skill with various weapons. Of course, the weapons manufacturers sponsored the marksmen as a way to display their wares for sale. Nevertheless, many of the stunts were amazing feats of skill and daring."

"Do we have to limit ourselves to blasters, James?"

"I think we can use any hand weapons as well. Are you thinking of demonstrating your new *ninja-to* swords?"

"I'm not sure the target drones can withstand my swords." Miya smiled and asked, "Have you been studying up on ninjas, James?"

“Yes. I also found your secret mission on Zu impressive. I’ve never known of anyone who actually made it to the Draconian Empire’s homeworld. I’m honored to work with someone who faced Tyrant, Miya.”

“That’s something coming from a Star of Valor veteran.” Miya said.

“I’d hate to think that’s the best we’ll ever do. Let’s hope we have even greater victories in the future.”

“I say we should give the *Doves* something to remember, James.”

Truelove felt his skin prickle with anticipation, he remembered the old tales of great marksmen making incredible shots.

“What about me, Uncle James?” Nathan asked. He’d been listening to the adults with eager excitement. Nathan had only had two weeks of weapons practice, but he was doing well.

Truelove reasoned Nathan might participate, as long as he practiced and was well-supervised, but he wanted other input. He asked, “What do you think, Miya?”

“I think we can set up a few targets for Nathan. Perhaps his demonstration will encourage others to join us. What are your thoughts, Tiara?” Miya asked.

Truelove considered how far they’d come in including Tiara in the day-to-day decisions. Tiara always seemed to be the most protective of Nathan.

“I have noted Nathan’s progress. He is careful, follows the rules, and is safe. I agree a simple demonstration is acceptable.”

Nathan grinned and cheered.

“We’ll give you ten stationary targets and ten shots, Nathan. You should practice several times before our demonstration.” Truelove said.

“I will, Uncle James,” Nathan said enthusiastically.

Truelove hoped the demonstration would encourage the *Dove’s* to take responsibility for their personal safety. He thought they relied too heavily on the past fact that they weren’t worth the effort for a raid. He knew the Draconians and their cronies had no compunction against attacking an easy target like the *Dove*. They’d murder everyone aboard, after they’d tortured them.

Truelove had an uneasy feeling that his time grew short, but that made no sense. The *Dove* had a long way to go before they exited the Worm. He couldn’t shake his

feeling of desperate urgency. He stood as if frozen in place, while he let his subconscious mind search for the answer that seemed to drift, just beyond the horizon of his thoughts.

Miya's quick eyes missed nothing. She saw Truelove pause for several moments with his jaw muscles quivering. He looked like he was working hard. When he relaxed, Truelove shook his head in disappointment.

Miya and Truelove finished their plans for the demonstration, and Tiara said, "Perhaps I could offer a suggestion."

"Go ahead," Truelove responded, wondering what help the ship might have for a weapons demonstration unless she was suggesting a demonstration of her own capabilities. *That would never happen.* He wanted no one to know about Tiara, if possible, and wondered how long he could keep her a secret aboard the *Dove*.

Tiara explained, "I'd like to contribute my ability to program the holographic array on the targeting system. I could direct the show behind the scenes, so to speak. No one would ever know, of course."

Truelove glanced at Miya who shrugged her shoulders and nodded.

"Sure, Tiara," Truelove said sounding relieved. "It's just one thing we won't have to worry about."



Truelove set up the target range in the hangar's clear space alongside Tiara. He toted the military spec Ravenhold Mark XII Targeting System from Tiara's armory. Its meter square and half-meter high alumiplast case had rollers on one end, and a collapsible black handle extended from the green camouflage case' opposite end. Truelove laid the case on its side at the rear of the hangar and knelt to activate it with the keypad on its exterior.

Truelove stood as a low hum from within the case initiated a second before upper side panel split in the center, like an ancient roll-top desk, and both halves slid down into the sides. A pyramid shaped object rose smoothly from the case. The top of the pyramid reached one meter above the hangar deck.

When the pyramid fully deployed, a special camo-colored datapad slid from a slot facing him, which Truelove retrieved. He recognized the system's remote control. The special datapad was twice the size of a regular datapad. It performed all the functions of a ship's targeting system, except it controlled the prism-like holographic projectors built-in to the sides of the pyramid. He performed the system test. The screen scrolled through the functions as each element activated and verified performance. Truelove watched the baseball-sized ports in the pyramid's sides hiss open. The gray sphere of a target drone lay just inside, awaiting deployment.

The targeting system had an internal power source and could provide realistic holographic settings, pre-programmed target drones, or a combination of both. The range master used a remote control to select various programs, or practice scenes. Since the system could alter the hologram's scale, the range offered the appearance of greater distance than the hangar bay afforded. However, unfortunately, it couldn't duplicate the true physics involved in a long-range sniper shot.

Truelove shut off some of the lights in the end of the hangar bay where the targeting system operated so they wouldn't interfere with the holographic array's control of the scenes. He programmed the scenes he and Miya had planned into the datapad.

Miya arrived to inspect the targeting system. "So this is it?" she asked as she bent over the strange pyramid.

Truelove explained how the system worked, and they walked through each practice scenario. Tables and chairs were setup for the crew, another table held each marksman's choice of weapons for the demonstration. They set the energy weapons to the non-lethal "Target" selection. This setting assured that no one could get hurt and used a minimum of the weapon's energy, permitting longer practice sessions.



Chapter Nine

Captain Torg stood before the seated Doves facing the shooting range with Miya and Truelove standing behind him. He said, "A while ago, Truelove came to me to request permission to setup a shooting range in the hangar bay so he and Miya could

practice. As you can see, I agreed, but I asked our resident marksmen to give us a demonstration.”

The crew knew Torg had dreamed up something with Truelove, but they had no idea what. A twitter of excited whispers rippled through the surprised crew.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to introduce to you for our afternoon’s entertainment, Miya and Truelove,” Torg said.

The crew applauded politely, as if they didn’t know what to expect.

Truelove and Miya waved, and Truelove walked forward to address the *Dove’s*, “Welcome, my friends.” Truelove’s easy manner and total lack of nervousness seemed to impress the crew.

“Our world is changing. With the loss of technology, life is more difficult.” Truelove said, noting several people nodded in agreement.

“One of the things we can no longer take for granted is our safety. It’s imperative that we provide our own security. From now on, if attacked, we can’t expect outside help. We can’t expect mercy. Surrender is not an option. So, with no one else to rely on, we must determine to protect ourselves in any way possible.

“One of the ways we can protect ourselves is with weapons. We wanted to give a demonstration of our weapon’s skill today. However, it’s important that each of us knows how to use a weapon safely. If everyone knows how to protect themselves, we are all safer.

“We hope our demonstration will encourage you to want to learn how to protect yourself. If, after our demonstration, you want to know more, Miya and I will show you how to fire a weapon safely. For those of you that know how to fire a weapon, we offer a chance to practice with us in the future.”

These comments seemed to confuse the crew. They expected to be entertained, but Truelove talked about safety. However, his serious expression and his reputation for success seemed to impress them, and they listened carefully.

“Every marksman needs to keep in practice. Using weapons is a skill and maintaining any skill takes practice. We’ve invited you here for your enjoyment to witness our practice today.

Since people first started using weapons, they found enjoyment in watching skilled demonstrations of their use. Today we hope you'll enjoy find our demonstration entertaining." He turned to Miya and said, "Ladies first."

Truelove wore his gray civilian pants with a matching tunic. Under the tunic, he wore a white sleeveless t-shirt. His boots were spotlessly polished, and his clothes fit perfectly. His tunic fit loosely, concealing his muscular physique.

Miya wore her favorite black ninja outfit without the hood and mask. No one had ever seen the strange garb before. Truelove thought it was a testament to her strength of character that she felt confident enough to do what felt right. Then he realized he'd done the same thing. Both of them had chosen the clothes in which they felt comfortable. Neither wanted the distraction of wearing something out of character.

Miya picked up her blaster and said, "This is the Ravenhold Industries Mark IV blaster with special combat modifications. This afternoon I will demonstrate the fundamentals of good shooting. . ."

Miya explained basic firearm safety, and the proper stance and aiming techniques. The targeting system activated at her verbal command, and Miya held her fire at the drones as they launched from the pyramid. When all four drones had cleared the launchers, they zoomed in a circular pattern above the launcher. The drones had a glowing red stripe around the vertical and horizontal axis. Miya lifted her blaster calmly, and with four evenly spaced shots, she scored a hit on each drone. Her shots were bright green tracers that streaked like a bright line from the end of her blaster to the drones.

During the applause, Miya checked her blaster. Tiara announced through her ship's exterior intercom, "Beginning level two." Except for Captain Torg, the spectators looked about the hangar, seemingly wondering where the strange female voice had come from.

Four more drones rose from the pyramid launcher and joined the four hovering high above the deck. They began flying in a crisscross pattern. The glowing orbs made a figure eight in the air above their heads. Miya fired, hitting a drone as it streaked through the center of the eight, and the pattern changed before she could fire again.

The new pattern looked like a chrysanthemum, only the pattern's center point remained constant.

"Aw," someone objected, evidently hoping Miya could hit more drones.

Miya shifted her stance. She concentrated on the dizzying pattern, and her gloved thumb switched the blaster from single fire to full auto. Miya pulled the trigger. She timed the blaster's auto-fire with each drone's entry into the center-point. In seven quick shots, Miya hit seven drones.

Truelove noted Miya's weapon had held perfectly still during the firing. The blaster's steady-aim feature worked well.

Miya's amazing shooting and the simulated explosions of the drones with their bright flash looked like fireworks going off in the darkened hanger. The crew applauded enthusiastically as Miya ended her first set.

Feeling the pressure of Miya's excellent start, Truelove came forward with his blaster at the ready. He said, "Tiara, level six."

He and Miya heard, "Level six aye, sir," in their ears.

Miya complained under her breath, "That's not the program, James."

However, Truelove couldn't respond. The eight target drones were moving in completely random patterns. He pulled out a second blaster from its holster. Tiara added more four more drones to the mix. They popped out of the launcher while Truelove cut loose at them with both blasters blazing. A holographic counter on the wall began counting the score.

Miya stepped up to her table and pulled a second blaster. She shouted, "Tiara, reset the score. Give us each one-hundred targets, high score wins."

Truelove's score returned to zero.

"Hey," He objected loudly.

"What's the matter, James? Can't take the competition?" Miya taunted.

Tiara precluded any rejoinder from Truelove as she said, "Begin firing in . . . three . . . two . . . one."

Suddenly the wall behind the targeting system transformed into a storefront from the Old West Era of cowboys and gunslingers. The drones settled from their evasive maneuvers into holographic niches and shelves and took the holographic forms of

period targets like bottles, cans, candles, and old hurricane lamps. Four more drones launched for a total of sixteen and joined the storefront shooting gallery.

The spectators applauded wildly at the amazing transformation of the plain gray metal sides of the hangar bay.

It was a shooting extravaganza. The master marksmen's blasters thrummed continuously. The tally on the scoreboard rolled up speedily. Truelove's score was the first to twenty, and the crew cheered. He was more used to shooting with both hands. He knew Miya preferred her swords. Nevertheless, she was quickly mastering the rhythm of shooting with one hand while sighting with the other.

At twenty-five hits, he noticed she had gone from ten to twenty. Laser blips blazed from the blasters toward the replica targets.

While Truelove shot holographic bottles and cans that crashed and spun away realistically, he absently noted Miya's shots hitting in a standard grid pattern. He gave a sly grin and shot the next targets in her sequence, disrupting her pattern. He chuckled as he kept firing. Now those drones would be out of sync with the others when they reset and returned to the gallery. Miya wouldn't be able to shoot them in order.

Miya learned quickly. She began shooting targets at random, removing any advantage to either shooter. "Thanks for the tip, James." Miya stated smugly.

"It was a pleasure," he said.

As the drones took a hit, they returned to the launcher, reset, and launched again to an empty spot in the gallery. Tiara activated another holographic counter labeled Shots Taken.

Both shooters neared ninety hits. With only twenty shots remaining, Truelove ordered, "Tiara, increase drone speed by thirty-three percent."

It was Miya's turn to object with a shout of, "Hey!"

When the score reached a tally of one-hundred hits, Truelove had beat Miya by two hits, and their shots taken were dead even.

Truelove grinned wickedly at Miya, who scowled back, her dark eyes flashing. He had no doubt there would be repercussions. However, the crew had enjoyed the competition immensely. They leapt from their chairs surrounding the shooters with excited congratulations. The well wishes of crew seemed to mollify Miya.

For a change of pace Truelove and Miya gave a display of classic ranged fighting attacks. They both threw knives at elastimold targets Truelove had made.

Truelove threw his large combat knife. With a flick of his thick wrist, he buried the huge knife's tip an inch deep in the block of elastimold.

While the big steel knife was still quivering, Miya threw five star-shaped *shuriken* in a star pattern around the knife. It sounded like one heavy thud followed by five lighter thuds in rapid succession. The Doves went wild. Torg slapped his big knee and laughed heartily. Young Nathan smiled happily and enjoyed the adults' praise for his Uncle James and Aunt Miya.

They called Nathan up to the ready line. Miya helped him prepare while Truelove explained, "We wanted to include Nathan in our demonstration. Nathan has practiced with us since his eleventh birthday two weeks ago. We hope Nathan's example will encourage all of the Doves to join us when we set up the range each week."

Nathan stood at the line with his blaster in a classic, two-handed stance. He wore his shooting glasses and hearing protection. Ten drones floated, motionless, eight meters down range in a line about even with his eye level.

"Shooter ready?" Tiara asked.

Nathan barely nodded, keeping his eyes on the targets. Truelove knew the boy had built a mental image of the targets, as he had been taught.

"Fire," Tiara said with finality.

Nathan started at the left and shot deliberately but continuously. He kept the blaster steady, moving only enough to center the next drone in his sights. As he hit a drone, it remained in place, but went dark. Nathan hit each drone with ten well-timed shots. When he finished, the ten drones flashed and returned to the targeting system. The Doves applauded Nathan's perfect score. Miya helped him remove his safety equipment, and Nathan joined the spectators with many head rubs and pats on the back.

For the next set, Truelove shot ten targets with a hand blaster using the quick draw method. The lighted target drones simulated explosions with one long rolling rat-a-tat like a snare drum.

Miya performed a masterful trick shot using a blaster rifle and mirrors. Since the shot was energy, a mirror would reflect a shot. Using her black ops training, Miya shot four targets through two mirrors, so that the targets were in a “U” shape from her. She performed the trick using Tiara like a building. Although she said nothing, Truelove felt certain Tiara wasn’t pleased at being a prop for target practice.



While the marksmen reset the range for the next demonstration, the hanger lights came up, and the *Dove’s* cook, Ernst, served the sausage sandwiches he’d prepared with cold beer and dehydrated milk, provided for Nathan by Tiara. The atmosphere was festive, and Nathan watched his aunt and uncle with pride. It was the first time most of the crew had seen so much of young Nathan. His open, intuitive nature coupled with his intelligent, polite speech made the likable youth a welcome addition to the crew.

During the short interlude for refreshments, the crew took time to inspect the weapons arrayed on the tables. Truelove and Miya explained the various weapons to their inquisitive friends.

After the break, it was Truelove’s turn to go first. He held his sniper rifle at the ready. For his next set, he planned to run through a typical shooting range tactical situation where he faced raiders in different venues. He stepped up the ready line and ordered, “Tiara, execute Truelove Alpha.”

The scene in front of Truelove shifted to the early morning hours on a desert planet. The holographic projection displayed a section of a wrecked destroyer on the planet’s surface. It was a Draconian destroyer with its bow completely covered by tons of rock. Mean-looking Draconian Wardogs stood or walked guard duty. Truelove felt a strong sense of déjà vu from the scene’s realism.

The range audience applauded and cooed to the wondrous projection. Because of the crew’s enthusiastic praise for the holographic set, Truelove hadn’t notice Tiara’s lack of a verbal response to his order.

The holographic scene remained frozen as the range system beeped three times to indicate the activation of the tactical situation. Truelove stood transfixed, while the

Wardogs seemed to come to life. He felt himself transported back in time ten years prior when he'd been in a situation similar to this.

Truelove realized with chagrin that on that occasion he was hiding behind the cover of boulders in a Ghillie suit. Now he stood in the open wearing street clothes. That was when Truelove heard a surprised grunt from the nearest guard, followed by voice bellowing, "Intruder!"

"Uh-oh," Truelove groaned. His memory was about to take a wild turn.

Searchlights from the destroyer swung around to bathe the area around him. He had just enough time to hear the gasps of horror from the Doves behind him before the Wardogs bracketed his position with tracers. *Tiara didn't say anything about the drones shooting back.* He noticed the tracers kicked up holographic dust around him as he dove for the deck.

Six guards poured shot after shot at Truelove. He rolled to the right, brought his rifle in line on the guard behind a spotlight. Truelove's sniper-rifle pulsed and the guard went down, followed by the crash of glass. The spotlight smoked and burned out. The hangar echoed with the destroyer's loud alarm.

Truelove heard another worried chorus of uh-ohs from the Doves, behind him. Then a hoard of Wardogs vomited from the Draconian destroyer's aft cargo hatch. Truelove had eliminated the second spotlight, but he couldn't expect to handle the mass of Wardogs charging his position.

"Miya," Truelove bellowed.

"Yes, James?" Miya asked, as she carefully inspected her fingernails.

"I could use a hand here," he said, perspiring freely.

Truelove shot three more stationary guards while Miya walked over. The hoard raced toward them, firing as they came, looking like a porcupine with lasers.

Miya stood with her feet spread shooting both blasters at the oncoming hoard. James left his rifle on the deck, and drew both of his pistols. They fired continuously without a shot wasted, but as soon as one Wardog was down, another raced from the destroyer.

Miya asked, "How many of these do we have to shoot?"

“I once figured there were over two-hundred crewmen on a Firedrake destroyer.” Truelove said as he focused on shooting two Wardogs.

“Firedrake?” Miya asked, shooting the closest Wardog.

“Yes, the Draconians name all their ships after dragons. A firedrake is a type of dragon, Miya.” Truelove said sounding testy as he shot several more Wardogs.

Miya asked, “Tiara, when did you plan to end this scenario? I don’t recall it in our plans.”

The scenario ended suddenly and disappeared from the hangar with the echoes of the bellowing Wardogs and blaster fire. Only the range scoreboards, hidden by the holographic scene, remained showing Miya, two hits ahead.

“That’s real nice, Tiara,” Truelove said.

The range audience’ cheers drowned out Truelove’s comment.

Truelove was sweating profusely, and he shucked the gray tunic, folding it neatly and placing it on his weapons’ table.

The Dove’s excited cheers ended suddenly at the appearance of Truelove’s impressive physique bulging through his sleeveless t-shirt.

“Oh my, Lord,” Lizbeth, the Dove’s elderly housekeeper, moaned.

“Gracious,” Captain Torg admired.

Rip looked at Truelove hunched over his weapons. The man’s back was as broad as a sledgehammer’s handle. “Wow,” he said in awe.

“Yes indeed,” Madison Winger cooed with a faraway look.

The older Doves looked at the beautiful Com officer. It was the most emotion she’d expressed since joining the *Dove*. They gave each other knowing smiles.

“Holy mackerel,” shouted Charlie Hobbs. “We got us a Titan on board.”

Miya heard the low murmur behind them and noticed Truelove’s massive chest. She’d gotten used to seeing Truelove’s amazing physique during their trip. He always wore baggy clothing so there was little opportunity to admire his physical attributes. She looked back at the wide-eyed Doves and said, “James, I don’t think the crew is ready for this much Truelove yet.”

“What are you—?” he looked back at the crew and then down at his exposed chest and shoulders. “Oh,” he said, grabbed his tunic, and shrugged into it. “Sorry.”

“I don’t think they minded, James. It’s just that you keep your body hidden with baggy clothes. People don’t realize how big your muscles. . .”

“I don’t workout to impress people, Miya. I do it to give me an edge—”

Miya smiled and said, “It gives you an edge all right.” She looked back at Madison who seemed to be the most disappointed that Truelove was covering up. “All sorts of edges,” she said under her breath.



When the demonstration ended, the Doves applauded loudly. After the demonstration, Truelove and Miya offered the crew a chance to shoot a few targets under direct supervisor. It was a happy day on the *Dove* that helped break up the tedium of the long space flight.

Afterwards, Captain Torg shook Miya's and Truelove's hands with a big smile. “I don’t know who you really are, and I don’t care, but I want you to know I feel a lot safer with you two on board.”

Truelove smiled back at the old man and said, “Who? Us? Why, Captain Torg, we’re just a humble engineer and a nurse.” Miya smiled, nodding.

Captain Torg left the hangar shaking his shaggy head with a deep bass chuckle. “It was the *Dove*’s lucky day when I brought you people aboard. ‘Bread upon the waters,’” he quoted.



One of the results of the shooting demonstration was the incorporation of Truelove’s team into the *Dove*’s crew. Although they met everyone during the course of the day, Truelove was surprised at the small number of people who made up the crew. Then he realized the crew of a freighter would normally be small in order to maintain profits, and the *Dove* couldn’t be too profitable hauling a load of scrap. The small crew of the *Dove* was a salty mix of inexperienced newcomers who were learning the ropes, and old-timers who were too slow, too tired, or too set in their ways to compete in a better class of ship. They were a typical mix of crew you’d expect on a tramp star freighter.

Truelove had met the cargo master, Charlie Hobbs, the sprightly old man whose loud voice completely overbalanced his diminutive size. Charlie's hearing loss resulted from many years of service around loud, motorized equipment without proper hearing protection.

"Rip" Engle piloted his first starship. Rip was a local hotshot mag-speeder racer on his small home planet. He'd grown bored with the slow pace of life in his farming community. Instead of joining a circus or the military, Rip had found a place on the *Dove*.

Normally, Captain Torg had piloted the *Dove* alone as he Conned the ship. Torg was glad for the break, knowing young Rip would find another berth at the end of their trip through the Worm. Rip thought his good looks would impress the few women on the crew, not realizing most of the women on a ship were more interested in what a man could do than how he looked.

The cook, Ernst Helmig, was a roly-poly little man with chubby cherub cheeks, and a jolly laugh that seemed to jiggle his whole body like gelatin. Only in his kitchen, which Ernst kept neat as a pin, was the little cook protective as a bulldog. A new crewman learned quickly not to complain about the meals within earshot of Ernst.

Nathan immediately made a fast friend with the chubby cook when he thoroughly enjoyed the sweet tarts Ernst had baked. Truelove and Miya were amused because they knew Nathan had little chance to eat any sweets in the protected environment of the palace, where the Regency dieticians frowned on sweets for youngsters as if they were poison.

Lizbeth, the ship's housekeeper, usually worked nights when everyone else was asleep. She was a heavysset older woman who knew her trade. She knew the old *Dove* like it was her child. She had a quick wit, and a sharp tongue, but she was loyal and loved her old friends who traveled with her in the ship.

Varla Young was another new crewman who'd helped Lizbeth with housekeeping and did odd jobs around the *Dove*. She was a short, attractive young woman whose open sincerity made her seem more attractive than she appeared. Varla took her new job as engineering apprentice seriously, and tried to learn everything she could about life aboard a starfreighter.

Truelove couldn't help but notice Madison Winger, the ship's new Com officer. Madison was the only true standout in the Doves. She seemed reserved, but her incredible beauty and grace was undeniable. Madison didn't fit the mold of the *Dove* at all. After more consideration, he had to admit neither did any of the *Tiara's*. His focus on the weapons demonstration didn't permit Truelove to give the interesting Com officer much thought.

Each of the *Dove's* crew held several positions and took turns to help cover during off shifts and empty positions. He looked around and noted the absence of a ship's doctor or medic, affirming, once again, the old *Dove* had barely enough crew to operate.



Chapter Ten

Truelove's life on board the *Dove* moved into a steady pattern based on maintaining the old ship's systems. He and Varla kept up a daily process of checking, adjusting, and repairing systems along with her engineering training. He established a prudent preventative maintenance system that immediately reduced the breakdowns and gave them more time to focus on major repairs to make the ship better for everyone.

Each morning, Truelove and Miya set an early physical workout routine. He liked using free weights and the standard military exercises he'd performed since he was an academy cadet, and she used ancient martial arts practice forms.

Nathan yawned sleepily and followed them out to their exercise mats in the hangar. Seeing the adults working out, Nathan took his normal place beside Miya. Truelove paused at the end of his one-hundred sit-ups, wiped his perspiration with his towel, and observed Miya and Nathan move with precision and grace. The boy had learned well. Nathan's balance was excellent. He didn't wobble like many novices, but kept the momentum of each move going smoothly to maintain its natural flow. Truelove smiled at them, then he remembered Miya and Nathan had worked together for some time.

Truelove turned his attention to Miya. Her shiny black hair accentuated her flowing motions as she moved from one martial arts form to another. Miya had a supple, well-proportioned body, with well-defined muscles, but not heavily developed. Truelove noticed she practiced a strange form of martial arts that seemed to be an artistic mix of various disciplines.

Miya's black *gi* was a stark contrast against the white practice mat. However, when she moved between Truelove and Tiara's dark gray hull, she almost disappeared. Only her bare face, hands, and feet were visible. Thinking a moment, he realized what came to mind as he watched her, a *ninja*. She finished her set and picked up a towel, dabbing the moisture from her face and neck as she walked over to Truelove. "I think Nathan is doing well, Miya. Good work in training him."

"He has a natural ability, sir," she commented with an enigmatic smile.

They watched the boy continue to the end of the set and bow. They both clapped, and Nathan grinned, embarrassed, not realizing they were watching.

"Let's get cleaned up and head to the galley for breakfast, Nathan," Miya directed.

"Ernst said he would make my favorite today," the boy said eagerly, "Pancakes!" he shouted excitedly as he ran back to Tiara.

"What form of martial arts are you using, Miya? I've been around a lot of martial arts, but I don't recognize it."

"It's just something I picked up at the CCO. I guess I've used about all of them, plus invented a couple, but this one is pretty good," she said, trying to deflect his question.

He shook his head thoughtfully, but didn't buy it. "It must be some kind of secret, then." He stood, towering over her, and looked into her eyes.

She didn't miss his attempt to intimidate her into telling, "You could say that, sir."

"Well who's going to know if you told me? We're out here in the butt-end of nowhere."

She just smiled, slipped on her footwear and disappeared into Tiara, following Nathan.

Shaking his head in amusement, Truelove picked up the mats and workout equipment and stowed them in their storage locker.



Not the end

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Other books by Jonathan Hancock:

Sudden Eclipse (Star Dynasty Saga Episode One)

When the beloved leader of the Commonwealth Star Alliance, Traveler Ravenhold, dies in an unfortunate accident, his wife, Diane, refuses to accept the evidence. Her secret investigation uncovers her husband's assassination at the hands of the CSA's enemies, the Draconian Empire. Further, the grieving widow learns of a massive plot to overthrow her own government. The only good news the new Regent learned on that fateful day was that she was pregnant with their first child.

The strong-willed Diane Ravenhold develops a counter-plot to save the Alliance. While the Draconians amass ships and troops at the border for their attack against the CSA, Diane builds a team to execute her plan. With the ancient hatred the Draconians held against her family, she knows that she must take extraordinary measures to save her son and the CSA.

84,442 words, approximately 338 pages

Avenging Storm (Star Dynasty Saga Episode Three)

After Captain James Truelove and Miya capture a secret Draconian base known as the Hydra, they discover the Draconians are enslaving CSA citizens to operate their machinery. They learn of the wide slave trade flourishing within the sector. Before Truelove can continue his mission to his secret destination, he must try to save the slaves, stop the slavers and pirates that plague the area.

Truelove, Miya, Nathan, and Tiara find they face a growing challenge and a deadly enemy they hoped to evade awaiting them beyond the Hydra.

105,526 words, approximately 422 pages

Deception's Tempest (Star Dynasty Episode Four)

James Truelove sails into the Alaska Sector with his new bride, Madison. They seek the first destination in his mission from the late Regent. The honeymoon couple face exciting new adventures and challenges as they near the border of their enemy, the evil Draconian Empire.

While he continues to build a new force to counter the terrible scourge against the Commonwealth Star Alliance, Truelove discovers the surprising truth about the Draconians. The risks are high, but the reward is the safety of the sector. He faces his greatest threat yet. For the first time, Truelove takes the battle to the enemy's doorstep.

133,630 words, approximately 535 pages

Winds of Change (Star Dynasty Saga Novel Episode Five)

The saga continues as Admiral James Truelove's nephew, Nathan, now a teenager, faces his first adventure. While Tiara completes her exciting upgrades, Truelove, Madison, and Miya search for Nathan when he is lost in the ominous Mohave Sector. Truelove takes the fleet into the sector to find the dead Regent's son.

Nathan Talon, alone for the first time in his life, must use all of his training and knowledge to survive. To make matters worse, the Draconians discover that the Regent's son survived and make an all-out search for the young man. Its an action-

packed adventure which brings, Nathan, the Draconians, and Admiral James Truelove together in an epic battle.

88,438 words, approximately 354 pages

ORIGIN

Five thousand years ago, a master hunter stalked the most fearsome beast known to man, the dreaded Leviathan. The world renowned archeologist, Dr. Judith Walker, discovers the fossil of the beast, but the indisputable evidence that disagrees with today's scientific consensus calls her faith in the Theory of Evolution into question.

When news of the fantastic find spreads through the scientific community, Dr. Walker, and her team are thrust into a web of intrigue exposing a global conspiracy to hide evidence of the Earth's true origin. Dr. Walker faces threats on her life, terrorist attacks, and the loss of her professional reputation as she and her team discover earth-shaking evidence sure to impact the popular opinion surrounding the origin of mankind. An ancient evil seeks to destroy Dr. Walker and her work. Can she survive to tell her story?

99,945 words, approximately 400 pages

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