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THE REINCARNATION RUN

A Settled Galaxy Novel

Raymund Eich



CV-2 Books • Houston

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In free fall inside *Midnight Angel's* #3 fuel tank, Landry Krieger sprayed cryofoam when the ship called him over his suit radio. In its smooth feminine voice, it said, "A man named Evanston Cha wishes to meet you."

Landry kept his finger on the sprayer's trigger. His other hand gripped the sprayer's barrel, like a soldier with a rifle. But unlike a soldier, he calmly passed the nozzle over the cured cryofoam already layered on the outer surface of the hideyhole. The fresh white spray glistened in the cone of blue-white light from his helmet lamp, in contrast to the creamy matte look of the cured layers already in place.

Everything uniform, precise. Should reach eight centimeters on this pass. One more coat of cryofoam after this one, then he could grow fuel tank shell over it—

Midnight Angel spoke again. "Landry, do you read?"

With his chin, he nudged the transmit switch inside his helmet. "I'm working, Angel." His voice sounded even more raspy than usual inside his helmet.

"It would be much simpler for us both if you would keep your mindlink connected while you're doing maintenance."

He rolled his eyes, then chided himself. Of his own free will he'd chosen a female persona for the ship's user interface. "What you don't

know can't hurt me, Angel. Is Emerson Chang waiting for my response?"

"No. And it's Evanston Cha."

"I'll turn on my mindlink when I'm done in here. You can remind me of his name then." He turned off transmission.

He finished coating the side of the hideyhole facing him. A few foam particles jetted past the hideyhole's left edge. The bouncing shadow of the hideyhole thrown by his helmet lamp against the tank's main wall alternately hid and revealed the particles. The foam bounced off the tank's gray liner, then scattered and disappeared into the dark, cavernous interior. When the sprayer stopped pushing him backward, the retaining lines pulled his body toward the hideyhole until they grew taut.

Landry stuck the strip of hook fabric on the sprayer to the mating patch of loop fabric on the thigh of his suit. Muzzle toward his face so the supply tube to the reservoir mag-clamped to the tank wall six meters from him would be out of the way of his arms. Then he slipped his wrist out of the sprayer's strap.

He checked his heads-up display. CO₂ recycler efficiency 98.4%. Waste collection capacity remaining 1206 milliliters. Suit maneuvering pack delta-vee 84 centimeters/second. All good. Plenty of time to keep working safely. He sucked a mouthful of protein goo and winced at the taste both sickly sweet and bitter with amino acids. A swallow of tepid water failed to wash the taste away.

Landry reached over his left shoulder with his right arm for the upper tether release button. His finger easily pressed it through the thin, flexible glove. The reel spun silently inside the tether pack for two seconds, then slowed as the adhesive tether came close.

Landry grabbed the slack meter of line floating behind his head. He eyed a spot on the tank wall that would give him a good view of the hideyhole's left side. Too far off and he would have to strain to reach the meter-by-two-meters surface of the hideyhole's side with the sprayer.

He flung the tether. Twenty centimeters off. He compensated for the position when he repeated the procedure for the lower tether. He ended up facing the hideyhole's left side smack in the center, but

canted at a ten degree angle.

Good enough. He looped the strap around his wrist, pulled it tight, and tugged the sprayer off his thigh. With methodical strokes, he sprayed a uniform coat of cryofoam on this side of the hideyhole. When complete, he checked the reservoir. Enough cryofoam left for the final pass. He could complete the insulation process now if he waited ten minutes for the foam to set on the other side.

He relaxed against the tether straps. He swallowed water and let sweat ooze down his nape. Eyes shut, he opened a transmission to Angel and asked her for some music, her choice. A slow and serene movement from a Haydn symphony played through his earbuds.

Landry smiled. Eight years together. She knew him well.

For a moment his smile flickered. Emer—Evanston Cha might complain about being kept waiting. And Landry wasn't the only spacejock docked here at Busted Flush—

Landry unclenched his fists. If Cha were in that much of a hurry, he would want Landry to take all the time needed to make the hideyhole undetectable. A zen paradox, if you wanted to look at it that way.

Landry didn't.

After the symphony's second movement, Landry disconnected his tethers and got back to work. Fifty minutes of retether, spray, repeat. His arms grew tired by the time he reached the left side. Splotchy lumps of foam bubbled on the surface. The lumps jutted less than two millimeters from the surface, according to the laser distance gauge he tugged off his left thigh. Within tolerance. The tank shell would grow over it. Still, not his best work. If a state security inspector pored over the inside of the tank....

He gathered up his tools and swung on one tether to the access hatch. Landry opened the recessed control panel and punched the code. Tiny flakes crumbled off the brittled edges of the plastic buttons. Another maintenance project, but he could put it off for two, maybe three more runs. He closed and locked the control panel. The outer hatch of the accessway silently opened while he used a battery-powered handheld suction unit to suck up the button flakes.

Cleanup accomplished, he pressed buttons on the sprayer reservoir's wired remote control strapped to his forearm. The reservoir un-

clamped from the tank wall and homed toward him on puffs of air.

One last glance showed the hideyhole, a flat, creamy-white bulge two meters by three. Tiny in the light-swallowing tank. Then he caught the reservoir by a handle jutting like a jug ear from its sleek plastic body. His other hand worked immediately, pressing control buttons for his maneuvering pack to cancel the reservoir's momentum.

He bumped against the tank wall over the control panel, but was close enough to the outer hatchway to reach inside and grab a handle. He shoved the reservoir through the hatchway and pulled himself in afterward. As short as he was, he still had to curl up a little in the airlock vestibule.

Landry took hold of another handle to steady himself. All his tools still with him? Check. Tools accidentally left behind on maintenance jobs had wrecked reactors and drives and destroyed ships. He closed the outer hatch, now sealing vacuum in the tank, but normally holding pressurized liquid hydrogen when under flight. He kept his gaze on the narrowing opening of the hatch. No loose tool or particle of dust escaped into the tank.

The light above the hatch turned from red to yellow. An icon of an upright rectangle with a curved line arcing off the top emphasized the hatch's status. A mechanical lock, the icon represented, if the ship-board encyclopedias he'd looked in one late night during the middle of a solitary run had been accurate. A fossilized piece of the early computer era, surviving unchanged over centuries.

Landry cycled the airlock. Air jetted in. His gaze was on the pressure gauge, but the numbers didn't seem as real as the pressure slowly pushing on his skin-tight vacuum suit.

Above the inner hatch, the light turned green. He took off his helmet. Inhaled air.

Only when he returned to full pressure did he ever notice, by contrast, how frigid the vacuum had been.

He went through the inner hatch into the access tube. After sealing the hatch behind him, he wound his way through the access tube to the maintenance pod. He undogged that hatch and went through into the part of *Midnight Angel* intended for long-term occupancy.

He shucked his vacuum suit and quickly slipped on boxers, gray drawstring trousers, and a black tee shirt. Then he took his time, running post-vacuum checks on his suit and helmet, the packs and add-ons, and his tools. Do it right and now, and you'll never have to do it in a hurry, later. He stowed the equipment, each piece in its assigned slot in the racks, and secured each one with a magnet or hook-and-loop fabric.

Only then did he turn on his neuroanl interface's communication module. Thinking the words he wanted to speak now turned electrical impulses to his larynx into virtual speech to the ship's persona. [I'm home, Angel.]

His neuronal interface system induced his auditory nerves with her reply. [Did your routine maintenance job go successfully?] She 'spoke' the words *routine maintenance* completely in earnest.

[Yes.]

[Now, about Evanston Cha—]

[Not yet.]

Landry pulled himself, handhold by handhold, out of the maintenance pod and through Alpha deck's corridor 2. Two backup manual control rooms huddled dark and quiet along his path to ladderway 1-4. The backup controls rested now, waiting their turn to serve, though with luck they would never be needed. The loudest sound was a low thrum coming from the yottabytes of data storage units in the server rooms off corridor 3.

Landry descended the ladderway to Beta deck head-first. He used his neuronal interface system to dampen his brain's usual responses to free fall. Only a twinge of discomfort in his inner ear, and no nausea.

He emerged and pushed off from the sides of the ladderway down corridor 1. He grabbed the handle next to the door to room A, his cabin. Even though he was alone on the ship, he'd locked the cabin door when he'd gone into the fuel tank. Do it every time and you won't forget to do it when you most need it. He stared at the retina scanner, said his name in his rusty voice, punched in a numeric code that he punctuated by resting his pinky finger on the DNA sampler.

Four icons popped up on the door panel's display. Three green checkmarks appeared almost instantly. The DNA sequencer icon

needed two seconds to join the others. The door slide open immediately and in he went.

His cabin was one of the largest occupiable spaces on the ship. Thirty square meters of floor area, three meters by ten, with the same floor area whether the ship was under thrust in normal space or in the tachyonic bubble of faster-than-light drive. The door was on one of the long sides, near a corner. He went to the flip-down desk on that same long side, to what would be the left of the door when in tachyonic bubble drive. A simple thumbprint opened it. He found his pen, an antique thing that emitted a precise line of ink when one end was touched to paper. A tug separated the pen's magnetic clip from the desktop.

The paper lay upside-down under a magnetic disc the size of his pinky fingernail. He pulled the paper free and inverted it. His gaze scanned down lines of his blocky handwriting.

Remove old h.h.

Clear path to new h.h.

Form new h.h. shell

Under the last line, he added—

Insulate new h.h.

—and returned the paper to its upside-down position under the magnet. Landry put down the pen and closed the desk.

Clear text wasn't ideal—though few people could read, even the most illiterate secret policeman would recognize words and hand the paper to one of his superiors. But though Landry had heard of cur-sive, and something else called shorthand, he'd never found enough information about them to teach himself.

Maybe he only took a minuscule risk. He only logged his special maintenance work before he took on passengers who might need it, and destroyed the log when he completed the job. He always disembarked his prior passengers in another system before doing his work. The security forces in most places had little reason to care who left their jurisdiction and for which destination.

And in a pinch, the other end of the pen held a one-shot charge of a nanotech scrambler. Two seconds of exposure would turn information written in ink into an entropic smear of pigment molecules.

He tested the lock on the desk, then went to the opposite wall, near the liquor cabinet in the corner. He hooked the bare toes of his right foot under the arm of the couch. [I'm ready now, Angel. Give me the message from Evanston Cha.]

[Audio only.]

Landry's eyebrows rose. [Your choice or his?]

[His. Starting now.]

A male voice sounded in his ears. Landry's neuronal implant controller also translated the words into his language. The translation kept Evanston Cha's buttery tone and flat accent.

"Hello, Mr. Cry-ger." Landry winced at the mispronunciation of *Cree-ger*. "I represent a party that wishes to hire a ship for a private voyage. Your reputation suggests that the *Midnight Angel* might be an excellent fit for our needs. If your ship is currently for hire, please meet us to discuss the matter in person. Myself and at least one associate will be available at Sweet Eugene's, in the spaceport at deck 17, degree 280, each day from thirteen to sixteen o'clock until we hire a ship. Thank you."

Landry drifted in a faint air current coming from a vent in the floor. Other than butchering his name, Evanston Cha had handled the recording well. A "private voyage." No clue as to the intended destination. No whisper of rumor about the hideyholes Landry rigged inside *Midnight Angel* before each run.

[Soundstage analysis?] he asked Angel.

[Fragmentary words from nearby conversations. Ambient noises suggest forks on plates, coffee cups on saucers, a high-capacity coffee grinder, an espresso press, a milk steamer.]

[This Sweet Eugene's place he mentioned is a coffee bar?]

[According to public records, yes.]

[Does it have a reputation for privacy?]

[Reviews posted to the public blockchain rate it highly for discretion,] Angel said. [It has been certified free of monitoring devices in public spaces by the highest-rated privacy certification agency in the entire can-world of Busted Flush.]

[Thanks, Angel. What's the time now?]

[Fourteen-forty-two UTC.]

Another legacy, as ancient as the icon of the mechanical lock. Ships, stations, can-worlds, and other artificial habitats still used a 24 hour clock, all synched to one time zone on Earth, eighteen thousand light years away. Even some planets and moons with local days far shorter or longer than human circadian rhythms did the same. Landry shook his head at the leftover habits human beings had dragged through tachyonic bubbles to the stars.

He shook his head again to refocus. Over an hour to meet Evanston Cha and at least one other. No problem. At his closet, he shrugged on a black jacket of vat-grown leather and slipped his feet into pliable gray mocassins. He wriggled his toes against the jail cell of the soft shoes.

Landry took corridor 1 to the head. He rocked the light switch and floated in front of the mirror. Inside the medicine cabinet he found a squeeze tube of hair paste. A squirt in his palm and deft hands in his hair soon added a five-centimeter crest to his height. He wiped his hands clean with a disposable hand towel and dropped the towel in the recycling hopper.

Down the 1-5 ladderway to Eta deck. The passenger airlock was set in the floor off corridor 5. He checked the indicators. The vestibule held breathable air at pressure and the outer hatch was locked. In theory, while docked at a major spaceport, he shouldn't need to exercise full caution. The tube from the docks to the spaceport proper should contain breathable air too.

Should. In theory.

He opened the inner hatch, slipped into the vestibule. He sealed the inner hatch and repeated all the checks on the outer. When all was in order, he pressed buttons to record the exterior camera and microphone, then opened the outer hatch and went through.

A rigid tube, three meters in diameter and clad in white, extended from *Midnight Angel's* airlock to a wider tube ten meters away. Grab bars spiraled like DNA bases around the inside of the narrower tube from his ship. Opposite the mouth of the tube from his ship, red paint on the wall of the wider tube formed the word *Spaceport* with an arrow pointing to the right. Not needed now, with the communication module turned on and the spaceport's persona eager to beam directions directly to his brain, but again, better to have the painted sign and not

need it than the other way around.

[Call me if you lose my signal,] he said to Angel.

[Don't I always?]

Landry pulled himself to the wider tube. Five meters wide and receding into the distance, this tube was only a branch off the main trunk of the docking tubes eight hundred meters away. A flange about eighty centimeters tall and eight wide jutted from the wall of the branch tube toward the tube's axis. A conveyor belt rustled along the side of the flange facing him. On his side of the flange, the conveyor belt rolled toward the main tube. More grab bars spiraled around the tube's wall. He started out by hand, grab and pull, grab and pull, listening for a periodic ticking coming up the conveyor belt from behind him. A set of handles, sticking out from the belt and growing closer.

He glanced over his shoulder. The spaceport's persona tried to help by saying [Transfer now.]

Good for passengers, but Landry didn't need it. He expertly timed his pull off a grab bar on the wall, then reached for a handle on the conveyor belt. His fingers closed around the handle's padded cylinder.

The conveyor belt whisked him along. Glances up and down showed he was alone in the branch tube. He passed the mouths of four access tubes arranged in two opposed pairs. One access tube, closed now, showed a circular white welt on the wall. The other three were deployed to other faster-than-light ships. He glanced at the names of ships and captains glowing on the viewscreens next to the tube mouths. All unfamiliar.

Just what he wanted. A new region of space, preceded by enough of his reputation to find work yet cool enough for him to go unbothered by security forces. If he didn't recognize the names he passed, those captains and crews likely wouldn't recognize his.

At the main tube, he let go of the conveyor belt's handle. The main tube was twelve meters across, with three conveyor flanges equally spaced around the tube's inner circumference. Each flange rose two meters and held a thicker array of padded handles. The conveyor belts sped by at twenty kilometers per hour.

[Would you like transfer assistance?] the spaceport asked.

Let the spaceport's software access his neuronal interface to nudge

his muscles to make the correct moves? Again, something for passengers... and despite the shirt-sleeve temperature inside the main tube, he shivered. [No. Thanks.]

Landry lifted his gaze. The nearest inbound conveyor ran over his head. He pulled himself closer, checked the speed of an oncoming handle, and transferred. His hand closed around padding. The belt's motion whipped his legs behind him.

He glanced both ways. No one behind him. Two passengers far ahead of him, specks near where perspective shrank the tube to the vanishing point. Six kilometers down a narrow tunnel to the spaceport. A cozy cocoon, a personal retreat from indifferent space.

[Angel, resume the music stream.]

The serene, precise sounds of the orchestra sounded in his mind's ear. His breathing slowed. His eyes drifted half-closed. He opened them once, when an onrushing beep heralded a crew of two heading outbound on the cargo conveyor with a bulky blue shipment cube two meters on a side. Probably five bottles of rare wine embedded in a cured crash gel. He nodded at the crewmen. They nodded back out of the camaraderie of spacejocks. The alert beep dopplered away. Landry relaxed for the rest of the eighteen minutes needed to reach the spaceport.

The end of the tube eventually came into sight. Landry stopped the music. The conveyor belt ended five meters from the tube's end wall. He let go of the handle. Momentum flung him at a stippled yellow surface on the end wall.

He curled up and hit the yellow surface with his shoulder and upper back. The surface gripped him with contact patches and flexed around him like the surface of a dense, viscous pond. It rolled him toward an opening in the outside of the tube. A ladder extended radially outward from the tube, toward the curved wall of another cylindrical space. The movement of painted signs and the roof of an elevator cage near the far end of the ladder showed the cylindrical space rotated around the tube. The tube ran along the rotation hub of, not just the spaceport, but the entire can-world of Busted Flush.

The yellow surface deposited him, like a bit of flotsam washed up on a gentle tide, at the ladder. He grabbed the top rung, then swung

his legs over. He settled his feet on the ladder. After a glance down showed no one was nearby, he jumped. He flexed his knees on landing, stopping on the rotating surface without bouncing in the weak spin-gravity. He bent over and tugged himself along from bright red grab bar to bright red grab bar, past the elevator cage to another ladder, and descended deeper into the spaceport.

Past spaceport operations and microgravity factories, the spin-gravity grew strong enough for him to move on his feet instead of his hands. Switchbacking escalators suspended in mid-air took him through a hydroponic garden. Landry pulled his arms against his sides and missed the cozy warren of *Midnight Angel*. Tomato vines and beanpoles climbed fifty meters up a shimmering 3d grid of carbon nanotube filaments. The greenery defused light from a plasma tube above him near the spaceport's rotation axis. A vine thick with white flowers exuded a scent, jasmine or honeysuckle, he couldn't tell them apart. Thick, too, felt the humid air. Winged robots like flying squirrels flitted from beanpole to vine, sniffing for unwanted insects and crushing those they discovered in mechanical jaws.

At the bottom of the hydroponic garden, Landry moved through levels of concourses lined with hotels, restaurants, nightclubs, gambling houses at about 0.5 gee. Glowing white globes suspended from the ceiling lit up a diverse crowd. He guessed most of the people around him were locals to the 53 Picis Pineae system. Baseline in appearance, primarily European-descended by way of the ancient United States and the mature colony on Trump's World, augmented only internally through neuronal interface tech. A few came from outside the system, some of them modified for their homeworlds, trudging the corridors with the help of powered exoskeletons or protecting their faces with goggles and rebreather masks.

Despite careful glances, no one seemed to be following him.

Level 17 pushed up on Landry's feet at 0.85 gee. Lighter than *Midnight Angel* when under drive. He worked his way through the crowd. A navigation app running on his neuronal interface controller guided him with voice commands along a circumferential corridor that seemed to run uphill. He enjoyed the mild burn in his quads.

When he passed the 260° signs flanking an emergency pressure

door, he took even more glances around. He ducked into the reception area for an office suite and let foot traffic flow past while he struck up a conversation with the receptionist persona. I'm sorry, sir, there's no Mr. Smith here. Mr. Steinholz is the only data import-export business I serve.

Landry entered Sweet Eugene's at 15:41. Dark spray-on paneling of a vat-grown walnut slurry and dim can lights in the ceiling gave a feeling of privacy. Puffy armchairs to his left, plastic tables and chairs to his right. People engrossed in low conversations. Two games of chess on holographic boards. Bar ahead, another room on the other side of a wide opening to the left. Same ambient noise Angel had picked up from Evanston Cha's recorded message. Landry expected the smells—coffee, espresso, chocolate, warm pastries—yet their intensity made his nose wrinkle.

He glanced around. No one looked his way. No secret policemen watched for him... but neither did Evanston Cha.

At the bar, a young woman with large green eyes, and a plaid headscarf tied over sandy blond hair, flicked her gaze down to his face, then up a little to his crest of hair. "What will you have?"

"Coffee. Black."

"Which one?"

"Which what?"

"Coffee. We have single estate beans from all three coffee-growing regions inside Busted Flush, plus a hydroponic-grown, genetically-engineered Blue Mountain-Kona hybrid from Thorstein Veblen, and an upland single estate shipped all the way up the gravity well from Ripper."

"Whatever is cheapest," Landry said.

The barista made a pout with thin, unpainted lips. "Your call." She looked up and to her left. Behind her, a robotic arm swung a paper-board cup under a spigot. A light near the spigot turned green. Steaming brown liquid trickled into the cup.

His bill appeared in the air in front of him. Software in his neuronal interface controller found the most favorable exchange rate among the half-dozen cryptocurrencies he carried anonymously. He added the same amount in a tip. The barista's eyebrows rose.

"I'm here to meet someone. Evanston Cha."

"Don't know the name. Wait. I bet I know who you're talking about." She pointed to the opening to the next room. "Go through there, then to the right."

"How will I know him?"

"You can't miss them. 'Scuse me." She turned from Landry to a tall guy with lanky hair. "What will you have?"

Landry scowled up at the new arrival, who placed an order with an effortlessly deep voice. The robotic arm flexed to deposit Landry's coffee on the counter. He picked up the paperboard cup, cool to the touch, then turned away.

The next room resembled the first, except the synthetic wooden tables were darker and the armchairs had angled edges and rode on curved frames of polished alloy. He glanced around. Spacers, locals, tourists. He stopped at a glass-enclosed image, a black-and-white photograph of a hillside gnarled with coffee bushes. He sipped bitter coffee and studied the people in the room reflected in the glass. The roast of the beans left a charred taste in his tongue.

No secret police, as far as he could tell.

Three steps took him through a doorway with bare hinges painted the shade of cinnamon. He went through and stopped short.

A small room, where video animations of silly cartoon dogs in spacer garb peered down on six round tables. Most were occupied by groups of two or three, chatting obliviously. One beefy man with a downturned mouth looked up from his cup but didn't give Landry a second glance. A utility shaft in a squared-off pillar partially isolated a table in the far corner.

Two figures sat at the corner table. Backs rigid, hands folded on the tabletop next to clear cups of ice water. They both looked up from under black ruffs of half-centimeter hair. The hems of matching brown robes brushed the floor.

Yin-yang pendants dangled on steel chains over their chests.

2

Landry unclenched his fist. With his other hand, he raised the coffee cup to his mouth and took in the hot, bitter scent.

Religious nutters. Damn.

Everyone who lived off Earth was descended from fanatics, of course. In the early days of space flight, the costs to ship raw materials or finished goods from Sol's asteroid belt to Earth far exceeded the costs to extract resources or manufacture products on-planet. Even later, when spacers could burn unenriched hydrogen for interplanetary runs, and Ozols and Carvalho invented tachyonic bubble FTL drive, both of which made shipment across space cheaper, plentiful energy and advancing nanotech made extraction and manufacturing proportionally cheaper on Earth. No one could make a profit in space.

But what was a bug for businessmen was a feature for fanatics. Nanotech made it possible to establish isolated, self-sufficient colonies. Vast and harsh distances, with no reason for prospectors or tax collectors to come calling, made those colonies desirable for small groups strongly at odds with the mainstream. Cults set off to found their New Harmonies, New Zions, New Americas. To navel-gaze, build true socialism, practice the fourteen words, be still and know God.

Some of the cults vanished, yet many cults prospered, each on its own world. Over time, in most places, prosperity blunted fanaticism.

Until prosperity generated new cults and the cycle repeated.

Now, one of those cycles had intersected the straight line of his life.

He sipped coffee and willed tension out of his shoulders. Many of his customers were fanatics, after all.

But religious fanatics were the worst.

An urge to pivot and walk out of the coffee bar tightened his legs... till the crumbling edges of the airlock control panel buttons in tank 3 pushed into mind. He needed money soon. Further, the problem with coming to a sector where nobody knew him is that nobody knew him. His reputation would follow eventually, in copies of the blockchain stored in servers like those in *Midnight Angel*, but *eventually* might not come in time to pay the bills.

He knew how to cope with religious nutters. He didn't enjoy doing so for weeks or months at a time, but he could do it.

Landry lowered his cup and strode into the corner. The two men watched him with cautious expressions.

"Which one of you is Evanston Cha?" he asked. Their neuronal interface controllers would translate his speech.

They had neuronal interfaces, didn't they?

Both raised their hands to their chests, open left hand cupping right fist, and bowed their heads. "I am," said the one on the right. The warm voice and flat accent matched the voice from the recording. Though his surname sounded like it originated in East Asia, his brown eyes were rounder and his brown hair a lighter shade than those of the other man. "My brother in faith is Dallas DeJardin." Evanston Cha extended his hand toward an empty chair across the table from them. "Please sit, Mr. Cry-ger."

The repeated mispronunciation made Landry's teeth clench. "It's Krieger. *Cree-ger*."

"Our apologies."

Landry waited a moment, but Cha and DeJardin said nothing more. He pulled out the chair and sat. He rested his firm forearms on the table. "What service do you think I can offer you?"

"We understand you recently arrived in the 53 Picis Pineae system," said Evanston Cha. "We expect you are unfamiliar with Tao

Pacem.”

The name meant nothing to Landry, and why bother buying data when Cha and DeJardin were about to tell him, for free, more than he could ever want to know? “Dow Patch’em?”

“The faith of which we are priests is an ancient faith, founded on Earth itself, in the United States in the twenty-first century—”

Landry’s eyes rolled. *We have the only hotline to God in the entire galaxy, and our ancient pedigree proves it.*

“—fusion of practices from East Asian and Euro-American religious traditions,” Cha said.

Landry nodded knowingly. “Let me guess. The masses around you didn’t understand your beliefs, or is it that the leaders of the mainstream society saw your spiritual purity as a threat to their wealth and power? They oppressed you, you fled here....” He sipped coffee and read their faces over the cup’s rim.

DeJardin’s slanted eyes narrowed, but Cha didn’t rise to the bait. “That is a common trope in the founding tales of many colonies on many worlds. But it wasn’t the case for us. We did not combat any man’s opinion and we rendered onto Caesar. No, the reason our portion of our community departed Earth—”

Another knowing nod, but this time Landry kept his thoughts to himself. A power struggle inside the inner sanctum, the losers exiled to space and now proclaiming the lemons were sweet.

“—run a marathon, Mr. Krieger?”

“A what?”

“A marathon. A foot race of 42.195 kilometers.”

Over forty-two clicks? Call it forty times around *Midnight Angel’s* hull. On foot? He tensed his arms to make his muscles stand out. “My only workout is with kettlebells.”

“Kettlebells.” Cha looked at a blank part of the table, next to his cup of water. Looking up something through his neuronal interface. “An iron ball, flat on the bottom, with a handle on top? Common skills performed with it include swings, get-ups, cleans, presses, snatches? Judging by your arms, they are effective at building strength, yet they also have a cardiovascular component?”

“A swings workout gets my heart rate up.”

"Do you ever test the limit of your skill?"

Landry's eyebrows crinkled. "I don't know what you mean."

"You have a typical workout, I presume?"

"Two hundred swings a day, six days a week, in sets of ten with forty-five seconds rest between sets."

Cha cleared his throat. "From time to time, do you ever push beyond the typical workout?"

"Yes. Once a month I'll pick up a lighter kettlebell than I usually use and do as many swings as I can without stopping. Five-hundred-eight is my record. And one long trip, I did a challenge, ten thousand swings in a month. What does my exercise regimen, or running a marathon, have to do with Tao Pacem leaving Earth?"

"A challenge, you said. A very good word. So it was with our forebears on Earth. We had a comfortable place to follow the Way of Peace. But some of our people wanted a challenge. We wanted to test the limits of our ability to follow the Way of Peace. And we found it in the 65 Simulacri Plagae system."

Landry had studied star charts during the six-month flight here to 53 Picis Pineae, usually while sipping his second and final glass of bourbon after the ship had dropped out of its tachyonic bubble for the night. "A small red star? Twenty light-years from here, higher above the galactic plane and a little further rimward?"

"That is it," said Cha.

The charts labeled the stars with political information. Landry squinted at his cup. He didn't remember the name of the government at 65 Simulacri Plagae, but he was pretty sure it wasn't Tao Pacem.

"What challenge did you find at 65 Simulacri Plagae?"

"Gisele."

"Pretty lady?"

"A runaway greenhouse world. An atmosphere of 98% carbon dioxide and aerosolized sulfuric acid, smothering the surface at 150 bar and 600°."

"Like Venus, in Sol system."

"Almost exactly, but for being tidally locked to the star."

"What did you do with your runaway greenhouse world?"

Cha sipped water. A single swallow made his Adam's apple bob.

"We terraformed it."

Landry blinked, then chuckled. "You didn't want to pay more for the settlement rights to a habitable world?"

"No. We could have afforded the settlement rights to a world with a breathable atmosphere and no life more complex than photosynthetic bacteria. Just as you could have followed your normal workout on the day you set your personal record of non-stop kettlebell swings."

"You wanted a challenge." Landry shrugged.

"It took our people decades to transform Gisele. But transform her we did." Cha lifted his chin. His eyes took on a dreamy look. "Seas of brine, hills of diamond, hills of rust. Sea life engineered for high salt, forests engineered for thin soil. Our cities and farms now cover five percent of her land area, and almost all of the zone of perpetual twilight. Twenty million of us live there now."

"Congrats." Landry took a deep drink of his cooling coffee. "Where do I come in?"

Cha's face sagged. "Later in the story. Have you heard of the Union of Reason?"

The other's words jarred something loose in Landry's memory from his reading on this region of the galaxy. "An interstellar republic, four or five star systems. Including 65 Simulacri Plagae."

"Thirty years ago they conquered us."

Landry sniffed out a breath. "If you want war, prepare for peace?"

DeJardin's gaze stabbed at Landry, but still the priest said nothing, merely shifted inside his brown robe.

Cha spoke like the most patient teacher Landry'd ever had. "We are peaceful but we are not pacifists. We possessed defenses in orbit and on the surface. We fought effectively until the Union's forces neutralized our defenses through subterfuge."

"One of your people betrayed you?"

Another glower from DeJardin. Calmly, Cha said, "A few of us—twenty thousand out of our twenty million—dwelled outside the 65 Simulacri Plagae system at the time, and about five thousand more fled from Gisele before the Union cemented its control of all spaceports on the surface. For thirty years, the Union has dominated our world and the vast majority of our people."

Cha rustled his robe and lifted his chin again. "The time has come for us to return and liberate Gisele."

"You would need an FTL ship to do that." Landry took a final drink of his coffee and clattered the empty cup on the table. "But *Midnight Angel* lacks room for twenty thousand people."

"Only seven of us will undertake this journey."

"Seven people will overthrow what you claim is a tyranny?"

"One man is a majority, if he follows the Way of Peace. And the Union of Reason is most assuredly a tyranny."

"When it comes to politics and religion, I don't have a dog in anyone else's fight." Landry kept his gaze on Cha and DeJardin. "Seven passengers. The two of you, the husky guy in civilian clothes between here and the door, and who else?"

Cha's eyebrows jolted. He shifted his gaze to the beefy man with the downturned mouth drinking coffee alone. DeJardin kept his dark, slanted eyes locked on Landry's face.

"How did you know?" Cha muttered.

"I've developed a nose for trouble," Landry said. "I'm glad you took at least enough precaution to have an undercover guard nearby. It makes me think you have a clue. Now answer my question. Who are the other four?"

"I can't say."

Landry snatched his empty coffee cup from the table and pushed back his chair with a scrape over the synthetic wooden floor. "Then I can't take the job."

Cha extended his hand from the sleeve of his brown robe. "Mr. Krieger, please—"

"Let him go." Dallas DeJardin spoke with precise enunciation. "We can sift through the available pilots for one that's a better fit."

Landry crumpled the empty paperboard. "I'm the best pilot you can find."

"Perhaps you are, but you might still be a poor fit for our needs."

Landry leaned on his hand against the back of his chair. "I don't think you have a clue what your needs are."

DeJardin scowled. "Krieger, you have expressed contempt for our faith from the moment you entered the room."

"You're perceptive. But it's nothing personal."

"Do you think all who seek the divine are fools?"

A steel hatch slammed shut inside Landry's mind, closing off parts he lacked any desire to see. "I've seen religious fanatics do stupid things because they thought God would protect them. When He doesn't, and they pay the price for stupidity, I normally wouldn't care. But when someone's on my ship, their mistakes can get *me* killed."

DeJardin peered at Landry, but seemed to accept Landry's statement at face value.

Cha beckoned Landry to sit again in his chair. "Mr. Krieger, please, let us continue to talk."

With a ponderous shake of his head, DeJardin said, "Brother, we can rummage up a pilot more aligned with us."

They played a good cop-bad cop routine.... but Landry decided to play along. He sat and asked, "I will need the names of all seven people who'll be travelling to the destination system."

DeJardin folded his arms. "Why?"

"I do not transport anyone fleeing criminal law enforcement in the departure system. Busted Flush has a nice spaceport. I might want to come back here someday."

Cha bowed his head. "I assure you, all seven of us have clean records and no warrants—"

"No assurances. I need names I can feed into search engines. Or no deal."

Cha drew in a long breath. He glanced at DeJardin, who returned a flat stare. Cha then turned to Landry. "When do you need this?"

"By the time I leave this place, if I haven't said no by then."

"I will give you those names at that time. Verbally or through encrypted low power radio between our neuronal interface controllers?"

"Encrypted," Landry said. "Use my public key from my profile when we get to that point. Now describe the destination system."

"65 Simulacri Plagae is much like 53 Picis Pineae, or Sol itself. Rocky worlds, including a runaway greenhouse world, inside the frost line, and gas giants outside the frost line where originally they formed. Gisele, our world, is inside the inner radius of the habitable zone. Too close to the star for an FTL ship to approach—I'm sure you understand

the physics behind it better than I do.”

Landry had a potted speech about how faint tidal stresses of the magnitude induced by an orange star a billion clicks away could destabilize a tachyonic bubble and rip a ship out of FTL travel. “I’m sure I do.”

“Our destination is a can-world like Busted Flush, orbiting the largest gas giant outside 65 Simulacri Plagae’s tachyonic bubble exclusion zone. The gas giant’s name is Belichick. The can-world’s name is TSP-1, Terraforming Support Platform 1.”

“You understand I can only take you to TSP-1. That’s good.”

“We know FTL pilots usually prefer to stay out of stellar exclusion zones and leave insystem travel to ships of other design.”

“Once you disembark, I insist you remain hidden until I have boosted away from TSP-1 and reentered FTL drive. After that, you can do whatever you want.”

Cha nodded. “We intend to be cautious even after you leave the 65 Simulacri Plagae system. We know the Way of Peace will not shield us against all threats.”

“Speaking of threats....” Landry shifted his gaze to DeJardin, playing a hunch that the latter knew more about security matters than did Cha. “Are the hostiles expecting you to make this journey?”

“No.”

“You’re certain?”

“Yes. We know the U—the hostiles, as you term them, are concerned about the Tao Pacem exile community in this system. They have agents here in Busted Flush who watch us. We also know they have attempted to infiltrate our main community, which is terraforming the local runaway greenhouse world, Sandy Silence.” DeJardin emphasized his next words. “None of their attempts have succeeded.”

“You think.”

DeJardin rolled his wrists, turning his palms up, then back. The gesture brought Landry’s attention to DeJardin’s chewed fingernails and cuticles. Looked like this zen priest wasn’t very zen. “We are highly confident, but only the Divinity knows all.”

“Do you have more questions for us?” Cha said.

“Yes. How pervasive is security in the destination system?”

"They monitor incoming ships the moment they leave FTL drive."

"I guarantee they monitor them when they're in FTL, too," Landry said. "Keep going."

"They record fingerprint, retina, facial structure, and voice print information and take DNA samples from all debarking passengers, then query various databases with those samples. They scan unloaded cargo for indicators of human presence."

"The hostiles are thorough." Landry scratched his chin. "How many of the seven passengers are in their databases?"

"Two. However, the other five have parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, or grandparents in the DNA database."

DeJardin and Cha looked old enough to have been born on Gisele. Which made it likely the other five had been born here in the 53 Picis Pineae system.

"Do you have to hide just your names and positions in the Tao Pacem community," Landry asked, "or must the hostiles not even know that you're members of the community?"

DeJardin sipped water. "My brother in faith and I will change out of our robes and restyle our hair to pass a visual inspection. Before we leave Busted Flush, the two of us will undergo modifications to our facial structure, genetic markers, and the like to pass a more pervasive inspection."

"We've told you all you need," Cha said. "Haven't we?"

Landry mulled the question. "You have."

DeJardin peered at him. "We have questions for you."

"Ask them."

"What brought you to our region of the galaxy?"

"I've never been caught, but too many security forces from too many governments have thick files on me. Fortunately, they tend to silo their data rather than share it with other governments."

"I see. One of your passengers, the journalist who escaped New Wesley, says your ship contains places of concealment—'hideyholes,' he quoted you as calling them?"

Landry vigorously shook his head. "I don't talk about past passengers or any internal details of *Midnight Angel*."

"If you would, it would increase the chance we would hire you."

DeJardin's brown eyes drilled into Landry's face.

Landry crossed his arms over his chest. "Then hire someone else. And increase the chance the hostiles catch you."

DeJardin eased back with a creak of his chair. He and Cha turned to each other, making it obvious they discussed something through their neuronal interfaces.

Landry unfolded his arms and rested his hands on the table. His mind, augmented by algorithms running in his neuronal interface controller, raced through the calculations. Twenty light-years to 65 Simulacri Plagae in a ship the size of *Midnight Angel* meant about fourteen solid days in FTL. Double that and add a few days for downtime while the ship vented and radiated waste heat into normal space. Add two or three days in normal space to boost from Busted Flush to the edge of the exclusion zone and the same amount of time to decelerate to the spaceport at TSP-1. Five and a half, maybe six weeks.

His algorithms calculated how much hydrogen he needed to power the reactors and the drive and downloaded the local market price. Add in docking fees, replenishment costs for consumables beyond *Midnight Angel's* ability to recycle, time and materials for dismantling the old and building the new hideyhole, and his profit margin—

Six weeks with religious fanatics?

Landry increased his profit margin by 50%. Time-and-a-half would make their presence on his ship a damn sight more tolerable.

And if he asked them for more than they were willing to pay, he would be content to lose their business.

The two priests in unison turned their heads to Landry. "What is your price?" asked Evanston Cha.

"Four-point-four million galaxycoins."

Cha winced as if stricken with sudden heartburn. "Four-point-four? That's a large sum."

"It takes a lot of hydrogen to fill the tanks."

DeJardin peered at Landry. "How much are you paying yourself? Three hundred thousand? More in six weeks than the average person earns in five years?"

"You get what you pay for. I don't haggle. Four-point-four."

Cha extended his hands across the table. "Mr. Krieger—" He took care with the pronunciation this time. "—we are on a mission to liberate twenty million—"

"I don't haggle," Landry said. "Four-point-four. Up front."

"Up front?" Cha asked.

"Did your translation software glitch on you? Yes, up front. I'm not spotting you my fuel costs. Four-point-four. Take it or leave it."

The two priests shared another glance. Cha took a deep breath, then bowed his head. "We accept your price."

"Then I might agree to be your pilot."

DeJardin scowled. "Might? What are you holding back, Krieger?"

"I have some very particular rules that you must agree to follow before I let you on my ship. First, when you're on board, absolutely no communication with anyone over your neuronal interfaces. No external voice radio or wireless handheld computers either. You can use your voice to speak to one another and to me. My ship is also wired with a dedicated set of send/receive units—I call them 'telephones'—" His mouth slowed down to form the archaic word borrowed from ancient English. "—you can also use."

"Why?" Cha asked.

"Because *Midnight Angel's* persona would receive and log any radio transmissions you might make. And because spaceport officials don't need a warrant to interrogate her."

DeJardin squinted at Landry. "Will you permit us to bring on board any personal effects?"

"Forty kilos per person. Nothing with a datestamp or timestamp from within the past year." No, Mr. Inspector, a passenger left that behind months ago. "No chemically or electrically powered weapons. No blades longer or wider than my index finger." Landry held it up for emphasis.

Cha frowned. "We will be unarmed, but we order new garments from the assemblery every three months."

"Do I have to tell you what to do? Hire someone to hack a false date into the internet-of-things chips in each item you'll bring on board." Landry flicked his gaze between the two priests. DeJardin nodded slightly, showing he understood Landry's concern, but could

DeJardin communicate that concern to his fellow priest?

Landry focused on Cha. "I'll check all your items when you're on board and anything I deem a security risk gets thrown in the recycler. Do you understand? This is not a game."

Cha extended his hands. "Of course, of course." He laid on the buttery warmth of his voice more thickly than usual. Which meant he didn't understand at all.

Landry scratched his chin. If Cha posed a security risk, and if DeJardin couldn't rein him in—and where did the other five passengers fall on the spectrum? The easiest answer would be *no*.

The crumbling edges of the control pad buttons came back to him.

Transporting a group of naive religious nutters past security as stringent as the Union of Reason's gauntlet at TSP-1 would do wonders for his reputation in this region of the galaxy, too.

"Send me the names," Landry said. "If the local authorities won't mind them leaving, I might—might—agree to take you on your private flight to the destination you mentioned for the price I told you. I'll come back here by sixteen o'clock tomorrow with my decision. Be prepared to leave seventy-two hours after that."

DeJardin shook his head. "We need more time for the modifications we spoke of earlier."

"Ninety-six hours? Four days."

"That's sufficient. We'll see you tomorrow, Mr. Krieger." DeJardin sounded like he wouldn't mind if Landry stood them up.

The feeling was mutual, but business was business. "The names?"
"Sending now."

A moment later, after running an antivirus scan, Landry's neuronal interface controller popped them up in a text window overlaid in his field of vision. *Evanston Cha, Dallas DeJardin, Barstow Gonzalez, Fulton Hawgood, Mansfield Nguyen, Solace Wu, Rogers Steinholtz.*

Landry pushed back his chair. He stood up and lifted his chest. "Till tomorrow." He strode out of the room, taking a glance at the beefy man with the downturned mouth sitting alone near the door. The man's clothes were crisply pressed and he tapped his thumbnail against his teeth rather than glance up at Landry with his round, amber eyes. Gonzalez, Hawgood, or Steinholtz? His facial features

showed too-little trace of Vietnamese ancestry for him to be, what was that final name again? Nguyen. Pronounced *Win*?

He tossed his empty coffee cup into a recycling hopper, then thumped his right fist against his thigh. He'd learn how to pronounce their names if he took the job.

The money would be good. They didn't blink at the profit margin he demanded for himself. But the money might not be good enough if the Union of Reason imposed harsh security measures at the destination.

And the money might not be good enough to tolerate religious fanatics for six weeks.

First, though, he needed to check their names. Through his neuronal interface's communication module, he made a secure query to Busted Flush law enforcement. He fed in the names, then added a general query for any followers of Tao Pacem wanted for crimes.

Nothing for the names. Nothing for any Tao Pacem followers. Squeaky clean, at least in dealing with the outside world.

What hidden bad habits would they reveal if he took them on his ship?

There was an easy way to avoid dealing with them. Turn them down, find a data importer/exporter, and fly off with the servers loaded with local products, 3d soap operas, texts of obscure philosophy, mystery novels, petabytes of raw science data, or something else created or generated by someone on Busted Flush. He would have to put off some maintenance, but he wouldn't starve.

Landry made his way now through level 10, past restaurants and hotels at 0.5 *gee*. He needed to pay better attention. He glanced around the crowd. Nobody—

Wait. That modified man, goggled and masked, the bald scalp above his fringe of brown hair glistening in the warm white light of the ceiling globes. He'd been behind Landry for a while. All the way from level 17?

Landry's heart thudded. He ducked into a gambling house. Fifty galaxycoins gave him enough chips for five plays at the pass and come lines at a craps table. The dice tumbled along paths curved by the rotating spaceport's Coriolis force. A wheeled robot with a bright, lip-

smacking female voice brought him a cup of coffee just as the shooter sevensed out and the table's articulated arms raked in Landry's last chips.

He sipped coffee and checked the gambling house's crowd. The modified man hadn't followed him in. Landry dropped his coffee cup into a recycling hopper and went back out on the concourse. He stretched and looked both ways as if undecided where to go. The modified man wasn't to the left, on the path to the escalator up. To the right? A man who looked a partial match, bald with a brown fringe of hair, walked away from the gambling house. The back of the man's head lacked any straps for goggles or a rebreather.

Landry exhaled. Worth losing fifty galaxycoins for insurance. He set off for the escalators.

No one seemed to follow him. He went up the first escalator, through the hydroponic garden, then switchbacked for the second one. He glanced over the side, then into the vast airy space. He straightened his head and studied the treads of the escalator. Humid air enveloped him. The jasmine or honeysuckle scent reached his nose. Drip irrigators trickled like the inside of a cave. A robot's wings slapped the air to his left.

He reached the top of the second escalator and lifted his head. He stopped short.

Three men stood in a semicircle on the landing, between Landry and the next escalator up, clad in various styles seen in the concourses below. In the middle of the semicircle stood a tall man wearing khaki cargo pants and shirt. Ancestry mostly European or Euro-American, with a mole on his right cheek. He fixed on Landry his green eyes, set close together like the eyes of a bird of prey.

In a voice sounding moist with phlegm, the green-eyed man said, "We want a word with you."

3

Landry spun away from the three men. Away from the bald man with the brown fringe of hair coming up the escalator behind him. He gripped the landing's railing between two hair-thin cables suspending the landing from the ceiling. Despite a pit in his stomach, he eyed the nanotube filaments holding up the vines and stalks in the garden. If he jumped and grabbed, the filaments would slash his fingers and palms to the bone. Only a few days in the hospital. If the filaments didn't slice all the way through his hands and send him tumbling—

His frantic gaze caught motion. A pest-control robot flitted past. "Traveller's aid! Traveller's aid!"

The robot landed on a vine, then turned around and jumped closer. Two more skimmed through the humid air toward him.

"You have no need to call for robotic witnesses," said the green-eyed man in his phlegmy voice.

The three robots perched on a tomato vine. Their claws wrapped all the way around. The stalk trembled with their weight. Each robot aimed its pair of unblinking camera eyes to Landry. Parabolic dish ears pivoted to listen.

He turned then. The four men corralled him into a corner of the landing, blocking both escalators. Not Busted Flush spaceport cops. Any cop with jurisdiction here would have overridden his call for the

pest-control robots. "I'll be the judge of what I need," Landry said.

"You are unexpectedly belligerent," the green-eyed man said. "Perhaps you compensate for your short stature by doing so, much as the small dog barks at the large dog who would otherwise ignore him."

Landry's chest puffed out.... until the word *unexpectedly* echoed in his mind. "Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Phipps. My associates and I are sojourners here, just as you are, Mr. Krieger."

"You think pronouncing my name correctly will win you any favors?" he said. Sweat trickled down his neck while his mind raced. They knew his name. Security forces from hundreds of light-years away?

No. They watched Cha and DeJardin. His visit to the Tao Pacem priests had brought him onto their radar. They'd overheard him correct the mispronunciation of his name.

How much more had they heard?

"We have no need to ask you for favors, Mr. Krieger. To the contrary. We wish to extend a favor to you."

Landry's gaze darted over the three unnamed men. They stood in ready positions, arms free at their sides, knees slightly bent, weight on the balls of their feet. To Phipps, he said, "Next time, call my ship."

"Yes, the *Midnight Angel*. Registered eight years ago in a spaceport over Rand's Gulch, a notorious flag-of-convenience planet. Your ship's provenance before that is unknown. As is yours, Mr. Krieger. Though we have our guesses."

Maybe they hadn't overheard. Maybe they'd watched him since he docked.

Maybe that was worse.

Landry said nothing. With a thought, he instructed his neuronal interface controller to clamp down on his autonomic nervous system's reactions and maintain his poker face.

"Matching your surname against manifests of historical colonization missions," Phipps said, "suggests that you may be native to—" He ticked off names of planets and can-worlds with manicured fingers. "—New Comal, One Tree Hill, Schwarzerd—"

A deep part of Landry's mind wanted to betray him by widening his eyes or squeezing even more sweat out of his skin, but his neuronal interface controller suppressed it.

"—Bocephus, Not Zion, A Miracle of Rare Device...." Phipps dropped his hands to his side. "Where you are from is not important. What is important is your line of work."

"I eke out a living carrying data, mostly blockchain and reputation log entries. I haven't a clue why you think that's important."

Phipps sniffed out a breath with a total lack of humor. "Most men in my line of work would find your feigned ignorance frustrating. I find it amusing."

"I can tell," Landry said. "Can you fill me in on whatever ignorance you think I'm faking?"

"Agamemnon Washington."

The autonomic nervous system clamp stifled a show of annoyance. Journalists. Worse passengers than religious nutters. At least Washington had been. Not in flight, when he bent Landry's ear with tall tales and drank most of his bourbon, but after, when he thought himself safe.

"I remember him," Landry said. "The best data sale I ever made was smuggling his sensory recordings away from New Wesley."

The skin over his jaw turned clammy. Coffee in his stomach turned to bile. Were they from the winning faction on New Wesley, sent to consolidate power by executing the spacejock who'd helped an enemy escape?

"He made another data sale," Phipps said, "after he somehow turned up safely on New Wakanda. A memoir of smuggling himself past New Wesley's security on board your ship. He told an intriguing tale. Data precautions. Hideyholes. Your odd habits of listening to music a millenium old and drinking two glasses of bourbon every day."

"Makes me think his sensory recordings from New Wesley should've been labeled as fiction."

"Other evidence corroborates Washington's memoir. Numerous governments in that part of the galaxy have amassed dossiers on you. Some have entered into a data-sharing agreement. An agreement to

which we are a party.”

“Four guys in a spaceport not their own?” Behind Landry, the tomato vine rustled, probably one of the robots maintaining its balance. “You must’ve conned the hell out of the other parties to let you join. But since their dossiers on me must be as false as Agamemnon Washington’s tall tales—”

“We are agents of the Union of Reason,” said Phipps.

The autonomic nervous system clamp again shut down Landry’s reaction. “I saw that name on a star chart. You guys are, what, twenty, thirty light-years out of your jurisdiction?”

“We know you entered Sweet Eugene’s on level 17 about two hours ago. We know you took your cup of joe into a back room. We know that in that back room were two priests of a religion called Tao Pacem.”

Landry scowled past Phipps and the other members of the goon squad. “There were two guys in brown robes over in the corner, come to think of it.”

“If I ask if you went all the way down there to meet them, you will give me a defiant non-answer, so I will not bother asking. The obvious explanation for your trip to Sweet Eugene’s is that the priests of Tao Pacem want to use your ship to infiltrate one or more Tao Pacem operatives into the 65 Simulacri Plagae system.” Phipps raised a smooth hand to forestall anything Landry might say. “We will now extend you the favor I mentioned earlier. I offer a word of advice. Decline their request to hire *Midnight Angel*.”

“Since I didn’t talk to them, that’s easy. Thanks.” He took a half-step toward the escalator going up.

Phipps and the goon squad stayed in place. “I do not say this lightly. If you hire out your ship to them, we will catch them. And you. We do not punish criminal wrongdoers. Instead, we correct their antisocial tendencies through brain engineering techniques, and then they are free to go. In your case, your tale of scraping up a living by transporting blockchain and reputation data from system to system would become the truth.”

“Criminal wrongdoers? The charts say 65 Simulacri Plagae is Tao Pacem’s home system and most of its followers still live there. You

guys made it a crime for people to go home, and for a spacejock to take them?"

"It is a crime to disseminate superstitions on worlds and in settlements governed by the Union of Reason."

Landry blinked. "You'd arrest me if *Midnight Angel* popped out of FTL near one of your conquered worlds with some religion's scripture on my servers?"

"No. We would arrest you if you transmitted that religion's scripture to a world we govern. Or, more to the point, if you debarked priests of that religion from your ship into a spaceport we govern without alerting us of their vocation."

"So I can transport the priests of Tao Pacem if I hand them over to you."

Phipps whistled. "You surprise me, Mr. Krieger. I had not expected you to see reason. We could make such an arrangement."

"You think I want to make a deal with you?"

"I suppose betraying one or more passengers would ruin your reputation among your potential customers. But a reputation is like any other property: salable for the right price. One hundred thousand galaxycoins?"

"I think you mean 'thirty pieces of silver.'"

Phipps blinked his close-set green eyes. "That's an archaic phrase. How did you come by it?"

"I read a lot. Not much else to do while I'm, you know, listening to millenium-old music and drinking two glasses of bourbon a day." He saw another chance to goad Phipps. "You didn't pause a beat to look it up. How did you come to know that phrase?"

"I also am well-read."

A laugh burst out of Landry. "You're all like that, aren't you? There's a part of yourself you hate so much that you won't admit you have it, but you will zealously condemn that same part of everyone else."

"You're also an amateur psychologist," Phipps said.

Landry chuckled. "If you've seen as many worlds as I have, it's so obvious. The person obsessed with ethnic purity had a wog in the woodpile a few generations back. The person who crusades against

alcohol drinks a bottle of vodka every night in private. The person who condemns sexual license has a private server encrypted with terabytes of pornography. And if there's a particular fetish he condemns most of all, all those terabytes reflect it."

His voice phlegmy, Phipps asked, "What part of myself do you think I hate, Mr. Krieger?"

"A god-shaped hole in your mind."

"Beliefs in gods are chains restraining the human race. It is our mission to liberate human minds from those chains."

Landry rocked up on the balls of his feet. "And who, or what, gave you that mission?"

"And you're an amateur theologian. You're a veritable jack-of-all-trades, Mr. Krieger." Phipps traced the tip of one manicured finger over the mole on his right cheek. "My prior offer still stands. I'll even double it. Two hundred thousand galaxycoins. And upon delivery of the priests of Tao Pacem to my colleagues in the 65 Simulacri Plagae system, the Union of Reason will top off *Midnight Angel's* hydrogen tanks at no charge to you."

"Tempting. If the guys in the brown robes had asked me to transport them there."

Phipps shifted his weight back. The three goons adjusted their positions, ready to move. Landry bent his knees and made his hands into loose fists at his sides. If they moved against him, he'd go for Phipps' throat as quickly as he could.

"Your needless defiance does grow wearisome after time," Phipps said. "I have extended you a favor by warning you, and a second favor by expressing our willingness to work with you. Both the warning and my offer will not be repeated. To accept my offer, send an encrypted message to me care of the Union of Reason Space Force Recruiting Office on level 15, degree 85. My public key."

Phipps pushed a plain-text string of gobbledygook across the landing. Projected into Landry's vision by his neuronal interface controller, the public key floated in midair like a coil of spiky red pasta.

With a thought, Landry scanned it for viruses, then transferred it to a sequestered computer memory tucked under the skin of his arm.

"The offer stands until you meet the priests of Tao Pacem. At that