

RECRUITS

RENEGADES

T H O M A S
L O C K E



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The back roads of Virginia had always been Landon's best friend.

In the months after his father died, Landon had started escaping the world by driving out here. It was incredible just how empty the Virginia countryside could be. The world smelled sweet as the first dawn. Out here, he could pretend his mother wasn't hiding from life inside her prescription haze, that he wasn't suffocating in his community college classes, that he really could look forward to something better.

And finally, at long last, it did appear that he could. Look forward. Anticipate. Think of a future that was bigger than just getting by.

For one thing, his uncle, the senator, had offered him a gig as an intern. With pay, no less. Starting in eight days.

For another, he had been accepted at UVA. All his CC credits transferring. Scholarship. Not quite a full ride, but hey.

Landon had already given his notice to FedEx and was at

three days and counting. Then he was moving into his uncle's garage apartment, spending a summer in Georgetown, working the Hill, learning what it meant to breathe the heady air of Congress in emergency summer session.

There were two hours left to his eleven-hour shift. Landon had been at it since long before sunrise. Quick stops for breakfast at five thirty and lunch at eleven. His shoulders and neck and back were aching, but in a good way. He didn't even mind the grainy feel behind his eyeballs or the way the truck's cab was filled with the ripe smell of a long, hot day. Because he was saying goodbye. Not to the roads. He would always be coming back here. Hopefully someday to live. No, Landon Evans was saying farewell to somebody else's idea of a life.

Suddenly three people appeared out of nowhere, standing beside the road, looking straight at him. Then a strange-looking woman pointed something at his truck.

Two seconds later, Landon's motor died.

Sean Kirrel suffered through the most boring class ever.

Current Events and Future Trends. Each situation introduced by a list of wars and crises not even the planets involved still remembered. And taught by a professor named Kaviti. The name fit the guy perfectly. Kaviti was a pompous bore.

He paced across the front of the class as he droned, "Currently on the minds of the Assembly is Cygneus Prime. Its history is marred by almost constant strife, which they claim is now behind them. The leader of the largest fief on Cygneus Prime at the onset of the Second Interplanetary War was

Aldus, known to his loyal subjects as Aldus the Great and to his foes as the Butcher. Thirty-seven years ago, he defeated the last remaining opposition and established a governing council that rules the entire system, with one small exception known as the Outer Rim . . .”

Students at the Diplomatic Institute on Serena were called Attendants. Sean hated the word. It made him feel like a student in a school for glorified servants. Which, of course, was the intention. In truth, even Sean knew that much of his dissatisfaction had nothing to do with the school or his classes, and everything to do with Elenya. Their breakup had been eight months ago. His helplessness and her absence filled him with a restless pain that only heightened his dislike of this place.

“The latest Cygnean conflict began as a dispute over the mineral-rich world known as Aldwyn . . .”

Professor Kaviti was one of the most highly decorated members of the Diplomatic Corps. Not to mention a Justice in the Tribunal Courts and an alternate voting member to the Assembly Parliament. His second day in class, Sean decided Kaviti had suffocated his enemies with facts as dry as old bones.

Professor Kaviti liked to pick on Sean. And he was not alone. A segment of the faculty resented his presence. Sean had been sent here after less than sixty days as an initiate. Most Attendants arrived with five to ten years of Assembly schooling under their belts, then endured a rigorous examination process. In Sean’s case, the Institute had been *ordered* to take him. By a planetary Ambassador and the founder of

the Watcher school, no less. The fact that he and Dillon had saved an entire world from alien invasion only heightened this group's desire to find fault. There was no question in Sean's mind. Kaviti intended to down-check him and kick him out.

Kaviti's drone swam into the background as Sean picked at the open wound in his heart. He mentally replayed the argument from seven months ago, the last time he had managed to talk with Elenya. Actually, *talk* was probably not the right word to use. She had shouted, he had begged, she had left, end of story. She was gone now, off on some research assignment she would not discuss. Elenya had also told Sean not to come visit, which had pleased her mother to no end. The last time Sean had stopped by their home, the woman had actually smiled as she bade him farewell.

Sean was so lost in the misery of love gone bad he almost missed the Messenger's alert.

The first *bong* resonated through the classroom like a musical punch. After the second and third, Dillon popped into view. Which was almost comic, since Sean was pretty certain Dillon had no right to use the Messenger's calling card. Sean's twin brother was a cadet at the Academy, the military arm of the Human Assembly. The twins shared a contempt for the Messenger Corps. The Messenger's know-nothing existence was too close to the bureaucratic lifestyle that had framed their parents' world.

But Sean did not grin at his brother for two reasons. First, he would have gone into serious debt for any reason to leave Kaviti and his class behind.

The second was Dillon's expression. As grim as his uniform.

Dillon threw the teacher a parade-ground salute. “Apologies for the interruption, Ambassador. But Attendant Kirrel has been summoned.”

“Summoned?” Another thing about Kaviti was his ability to dismiss with a sniff. It was claimed that, years after graduating, classmates of the Diplomatic school still greeted one another with an elongated snort. “By whom?”

“That is none of your concern, Ambassador. Sean?”

“See here! Just one minute, cadet!”

But Sean was already midway up the aisle. He asked his brother, “Where to?”

“Treehouse. Go.”

“Already there,” Sean replied. And he was. Bang and gone.

Dillon arrived an instant later. The air became compressed by his brother’s tension.

Sean demanded, “What’s the matter?”

“Landon Evans, remember him?”

“Sure. Carey’s cousin.”

“He’s been kidnapped.” Dillon pointed at Sean’s closet. “Change into civvies. Jacket and tie. Hurry.”