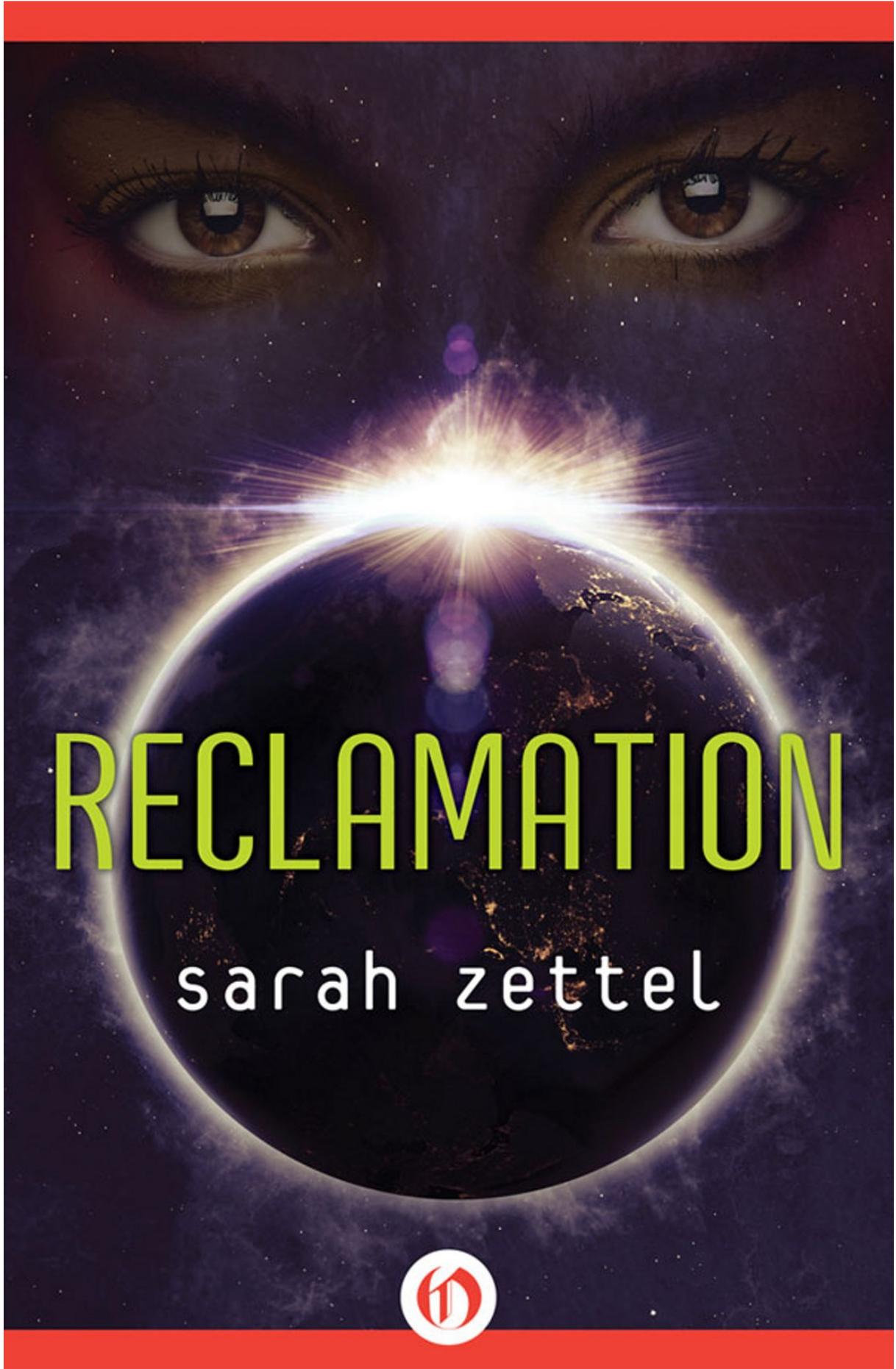


# RECLAMATION

sarah zettel





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# Reclamation

Sarah Zettel



This book is dedicated to my teacher, Mr. Thomas B. Deku.

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# Prologue

“WE’RE IN.” COMING THROUGH the cargo bay’s intercom, Hellea’s tenor voice sounded watery.

Burig let out a sigh that deflated his paunch to half its normal size. The arms on his chair tightened around his midriff to compensate. A split second later, the hum filtering through the sterile deck plates from the third level drive fell silent. Now, the *Alliance Runner* drifted on nothing but its own momentum and Hellea’s calculations.

A series of sharp clicks sounded from across the bay as Ovin opened all the restraint catches on her own chair and shoved its arms out of the way. Burig smiled. Ovin hated being strapped down. Already she was pulling out drawers and raising wire racks up around the thaw-out table, getting them ready for the equipment she would need to hang there if their find went into shock, or worse.

Burig shifted his weight so that the chair leaned him toward the intercom’s control board. He touched the VIEW key beside the flat screen set flush against the undecorated, blue tile wall. The familiar pattern of white spheres and gold lines that represented May 16’s system filled the too-small square. The *Runner* showed up as an out-of-proportion red dash floating between them. Burig rapped the image twice with his knuckle for thankfulness.

Ovin glanced curiously at him from between the forest of wires and monitor boxes she was building, but she didn’t say anything. The bay’s stark, white lights gave her profile a hard edge, despite her snub features. Burig tried to ignore her cool eyes. Instead he touched the CALL key for the bridge.

“Hellea,” he said toward the intercom, “how soon can you get me through to Director Dorias?”

“As soon as I set up a priority call for an open line,” came the reply. “Want it routed down here?”

“If you would.” Burig glanced past Ovin at the capsules. All of them waited dormant and dark in their racks, except the one humming and clicking gently by her elbow. “How far out are we?”

“This rate of drift, and all other things being equal, we’ll be putting in at Alliance Station in eight, maybe ten hours.”

“Thanks,” Burig said without any feeling. He shut the view screen off and swiveled the chair away from the wall. The restraints suddenly felt too tight around his waist. He thumbed the catches so the arms fell open to let him stand up.

“What’s the matter?” Ovin bent over the stacks of emergency gear next to the thaw-out table. Everything was switched on now, and at full ready. “Not soon enough for you?”

Burig leaned against the table and watched Ovin run through her checks. She kept her attention focused on the readouts as tightly as if she had a full hold and this was her first run. She had only stowed the loose systems that might be damaged in the event of a rough reentry into the system. Everything else had stayed up and running for the whole trip. Captain Notch had bawled her out about wasting power at the

beginning. Ovin had replied that if Notch wanted to risk the cargo, wanted to risk a life, he could drop the ship into a black hole, but he wouldn't do it by intimidating her.

Burig had hidden his smile. Nobody tried to tell Imeran d'or dyn Ovin anything about her specialty more than once. It wasn't worth it.

"I'm just going to be really glad when we can hand her over to somebody else," Burig said. "This is too close to contraband running for me."

"Got a flash for you, Subdirector." Ovin looked down at her charge. "This is contraband running."

Burig sighed again. From here, he could see through the polymer shell of the active capsule to the woman inside. The ragged patchwork she wore as clothing looked incongruous trapped under the network of tubes and wires that fed her drugs and nutrients and monitored her condition. The translucent blue of the tubes reflected against her clear, brown skin, making long pale streaks that ran perpendicular to the scars on the backs of her hands. A respiration mask covered her mouth and nose, but Burig couldn't see her chest move at all.

"Well," said Burig, not taking his gaze off the still figure, "it's not like she's really Family."

Ovin pursed her thin lips and watched the data on the support screens. Her trained eye picked out the details of heart rhythm, eye movement, respiration, and brain activity. "That's not what we're telling the rest of the Quarter Galaxy."

"Until we know what we've got and why the Rhudolant Vitae are so interested in them, we've got to say *something*." Burig stared at the screens. Technically, he knew what most of the symbolism stood for, but the jumble of letters, numbers, and colored lines kept flowing into fresh formations before he could make any real sense out of it. "This is not just another batch of cradlers' descendants who've forgotten how to bang the rocks together. I've got an itch in the back of my head about this. This could be the future of the Human Family we're carrying."

"Or its past." Ovin drew her fingers across the polymer right above the woman's cheekbone. "That place is crashing *old*."

Burig remembered the ragged canyon wall with the deep grooves wind and rain had gouged into the bare, rust red stone.

"Crashing's the word for it ..."

The intercom's chime cut off the rest of his sentence. Burig rounded the thaw-out table and perched on the edge of the chair just as the screen lit up again. This time, it showed the image of Director Dorias Waesc. Burig had never met him in the flesh, but whenever he saw the Director on screen he thought of Dorias as "the Medium Man." Dorias had a medium build, medium brown skin and hair, a face suggesting medium age, and a sense of humor that was moderately acute.

"Good to see you, Subdirector Burig," said Dorias. "How'd things work out?"

"Lu and Jay came through for us, Director," Burig said with more enthusiasm than he felt. "We got what we went after."

"How's he doing?" Dorias's image leaned closer to the screen as he tried to see across the room.

"She"—Burig slid the visual unit out of the wall and swiveled it around so Dorias could have a better view—"is knocked out in a life-support capsule."

Dorias frowned. "Was that necessary?"

Burig shrugged. “It was how we got her from Jay. I thought it’d be easier to leave her in there until we got someplace that might require a little less explanation than an intersystem ship.”

Dorias did not look convinced. “She is a volunteer, isn’t she?”

“That’s what Jay says.” Burig tried to read what was going on behind the Director’s eyes. “Is there a problem?”

“No,” said Dorias. Burig was pretty sure he was lying. “You’re what, five hours out, six?”

Burig shook his head. “Eight to ten.”

Dorias rolled his eyes. “All right. I’ve had a request from Madame Chairman to keep you on the line until you get in-system, so I hope you and your relief are feeling talkative.”

Bung looked across at Ovin. Her mouth tightened until it was nothing but a thin, straight line.

“Expecting something to go wrong?” Ovin called toward the screen.

“Always,” said Dorias. “It’s part of my job.”

*Like anybody on May 16 is going to be able to do anything about it,* thought Burig.

Dorias must have read his mind or the set of his jaw. “And if anything does go wrong, maybe we can’t help, but we’ll need to know about it as soon as it happens. We don’t want to risk losing an emergency burst to interception.”

“By the Vitae?” Burig asked.

“Who else?” said Dorias calmly.

Burig mouthed “told you,” toward Ovin. The entire project had been padded with excessive caution from the beginning. The *Runner* had been registered as an independent cargo ship. Except for Ovin and Burig, it was crewed with contract fliers from half a dozen disparate systems, none of which called themselves Family. May 16 had been watching Vitae movements nonstop from the moment they left dock. All normal. There hadn’t been even a twitch in the *Runner*’s direction. Despite that, Burig couldn’t bring himself to believe they were home and clear yet.

“So,” said Dorias, settling back, “what did you think of the Realm?”

“The Realm?” Bung’s eyebrows rose.

“MG49 sub 1,” said Dorias. “Its people call it the Realm of the Nameless Powers. Didn’t Jay give you a history lesson?”

“That’s Cor’s job,” Burig reminded him. “She was out playing native. We didn’t get to hang about to say hello.” He rubbed the back of his neck as he realized how harsh his words sounded. “We didn’t stay grounded very long. That place ... it’s not exactly easy to get off of, you know. Especially with the number of eyes and ears the Vitae’ve got in orbit. Has there been any ...”

The shrilling of the ship’s alarm cut through his sentence. Reflex jerked Burig’s head up.

“Blood ...” he croaked out the syllable just as the world shuddered.

Burig’s shoulder slammed painfully into the wall. He gripped the edge of the seat reflexively to keep from being thrown to the floor. Ovin dropped herself into her security seat, fastening the belts down and locking the struts into place so she’d stay within arm’s reach of the capsule.

The ship jerked back and forth for a bad moment before the regulators kicked in again. The racks jingled and rattled and three of them collapsed. A dozen different alarms sounded and the ship's voice came from every direction. Hull breach, hold evacuation, engine shutdown. Burig's head spun.

*What in the God's name's happened! We hit an asteroid? What ...*

"You're being boarded!" shouted Dorias.

"How'd you know?" Burig punched up the view from the hull cameras. Over the back of the ship's pitted hull hung a black, unmarked cylinder with its nose buried in the *Runner's* side.

Ovin's eyes went round. "Who ..."

"It's the Vitae." Dorias's voice cut across the visual.

The screen blurred and cut to black.

"Couldn't see where they're coming in ..." Burig hit the CALL key to the bridge, and hit it again.

"Tai is on her way," reported Dorias's voice from the intercom. "Going to intercept them at the airlock ... blood, blood, blood ... They're cutting in through the cooling tanks!"

Burig's gaze jumped to the wall in front of him. *How like the Vitae*, he thought ridiculously. *Go straight in. No fussing around with airlocks where someone might be able to slow you down ...*

"Suit!" shouted Ovin a split second before the breach alarm blared inside the bay.

Burig made it to his feet. The outside image flickered back into place on the intercom. All he could do was stare at the unmarked ship with its nose stuck into the *Runner's* flank. A thin, silver ribbon of coolant rippled into the vacuum, dispersing in a flurry of sparkling crystal.

Two points of pressure slammed against his back, knocking some wind out of his lungs, and sending him stumbling toward the cargo bay door. "Suit, Burig!" bawled Ovin.

Reflexes honed by years of drills let him yank the locker open and start shoving himself into the pressure suit, despite the trembling that threatened to overwhelm him. Ovin twisted her helmet sharply, left then right, to lock it into place. Her fingers, blunted by the white gloves, stabbed Burig in the collarbone and rib cage, closing down his seals for him just as Tai, in her own suit, shoved open the hatch.

"Ditch the find!" Tai yelled into her transmitter loud enough to make Burig wince. "And get outta here!"

"No!" Ovin shouted back.

"We can't let the Vitae have it!"

"No." Ovin's steady voice carried more weight than Tai's shout ever could have. "No one's committing murder in my bay!"

The ship's voice droned on, calmly reporting the hull breach, the tank breach, the coolant drop.

Burig's jaw clenched. The *Runner* was already dead. He was probably already dead in his tracks. The realization broke a fresh sweat on his brow. The only thing left to do was to keep the Vitae from getting their hands on what the Family had found.

*She's not really Family*, he told himself firmly as he pushed past Ovin. Ovin shouted something, but Tai grabbed her shoulders and dragged her toward the airlock.

Burig stretched his hand toward the main power feed for the support capsule.

Behind him, metal screamed and shattered. Burig's feet flew out from under him, propelled by the rush of freed air. The deck smashed against his back, splashing a wave of coolant across his faceplate.

Burig rolled onto his knees and tried to scabble to his feet. Above him, a human figure in a red pressure suit climbed out of the flood of coolant gushing through the tear in the hull. The alarms shrieked. Ovin and Tai shouted. Burig couldn't even stand. Two more suited humans waded out of the broken tank.

The invader lifted a half-meter-long stick from its belt. A twin bore down on Ovin and Tai. The first bent toward Burig. Burig swung his arm. The invader blocked it almost casually and knelt on his chest. The stick had a razor-edged blade on the end. Burig could see it clearly as it flashed down toward his throat.

Burig gagged on nothing at all. His lungs burned and his arms flailed randomly, splashing coolant across his faceplate. The invader stood up. Burig clutched at his helmet lock. His hands dropped away and a grey haze swam in front of his eyes. There was nothing to breathe and no strength in his arms and the God knew where Ovin was and all he could do was watch while the invaders typed the release code for the support capsule and waited for the rack to retract its hold on their find.

*How did they know about her?* Burig thought. *How in the name of the God did they know ...*

With his eyes wide-open, Burig died.

# 1—Haron Station, Hour 06:23:48, Station Time

*A million years ago, someone, somewhere, looked up at the sky and said “I will go there.” With that, they launched a cradle full of their own kind into the sky. Eventually, distance and history claimed them and left us here. We rise. We fall. We bicker and we make peace. We create our own children and our own cradles. We find our own kind and we lose them again.*

*Of ourselves, this is all we will ever know.*

Alda of Jorin Ferra from “Concerning the Search for the Evolution Point.”

ERIC BORN WATCHED HARON Station’s hull rise. It filled the bottom half of the view wall with an ungainly conglomeration of gold and steel blobs. The scene jiggled slightly as the docking clamps took hold of his ship and hauled it into place over the airlock. Behind him, the common room’s terminal chimed twice to indicate an incoming message. Through the doorway that led to the bridge, he could hear the precise voice of Cam, his android pilot, delivering the ship’s maintenance requirements to the station’s docking authorities.

Eric ignored both sets of noises and kept his eyes on the view wall. Another ship, a massive smooth-edged thing, drifted up from behind the bumpy horizon that the station created. Even without magnification, Eric could see the scarlet-tailed comet emblazoned on its side.

*Well, he thought. You’re here and I’m here. I just wish you’d tell me what’s going on.*

The terminal chimed again. Eric sighed and dropped into the overly padded chair in front of the communications board. Impatiently, he skimmed the introductory message displayed on his ship’s secondary terminal.

HARON STATION WELCOMES THE *U-KENAI* INTO DOCK AND EXTENDS FULL GREETINGS TO OWNER SAR ERIC BORN. ACCESS TO ALL STATION PUBLIC SYSTEMS AND AREAS APPROVED FOR UP TO ONE HUNDRED HOURS. TWO MESSAGES HAVE BEEN TRANSFERRED INTO YOUR SHIP’S HOLDING MEMORY. APPROPRIATE DEDUCTIONS HAVE BEEN MADE FROM YOUR ACCOUNT.

Eric glanced at the itemized deductions and typed in his approval code. Then he touched the RECEIVE key and the first message took shape on the terminal’s screen.

As Eric suspected, it was from his employers, whose ship had just arrived. The recording showed a blurry, grey background and in front of it stood Ambassador Basq of the Rhudolant Vitae. At least, Eric assumed it was Basq. He’d seldom seen more than one Vitae at a time, and although they appeared human enough, they all had been white-skinned, hairless, and wrapped in billowing, red robes. Eric always thought of the Ambassador as male, but the delicate bones and thick draping of cloth made it impossible for him to be sure.

“Sar Born,” said the image, “please confirm your arrival time to the Vitae receivers. I will meet you at Data Exchange One to discuss your assignment.” The

message blanked out as abruptly as it had begun.

Eric gave a small, wordless growl of irritation. He'd spent the past thirty hours scrambling to get four separate projects to the point where they could even be understood by some other Contractor, let alone finished by them. Then he'd had Cam almost burn out the *U-Kenai's* third level drive to get to Haron Station, and he still didn't know what was so urgent.

*What can't you discuss over the lines, Basq?* Eric keyed in confirmation of his arrival at Haron and his ability to be present at Data Exchange One in an hour. *Haron Station rebalancing their accounts without the Vitae's permission? Or am I just going to go steal some files?*

Eric's two specialties as a systems handler were being impossible to stop and impossible to trace. The combination guaranteed him some of the more ... interesting assignments the Vitae had to hand out. He didn't mind the clandestine work, and he was grateful to have employers who didn't ask too many background questions, but he liked to know what was going on so he could get ready for it, whatever it was.

He touched the key to bring up the next message. Plain lines of text printed themselves across the screen. A flood of address information spilled out and Eric raised his eyebrows. This one had come nearly all the way across the Quarter Galaxy.

Finally, the heart of the message came into view.

FROM: SAR DORIAS WAESC OF THE CITY OF ALLIANCES, LANDFALL PLAIN, MAY 16  
ERIC: AS SOON AS CAN, GET A LINE OPEN TO THE UNIFIERS. CONTACT DR. SEALUCHIE ROSS. THE RE ...

The message ended abruptly.

*Blasted antique station.* Eric hit the CONTINUE key. A new text line formed.

TOTAL TRANSFER COMPLETED

Eric glanced at the time display in the lower corner of the screen. The hour he had given himself to get to Data Exchange One didn't leave him much slack time. A message from Dorias, though, was a rare occurrence. What was rarer was the message not getting through in one piece. There was only one systems handler who was better than Dorias, and that was Eric.

He looked at the clock again. *Might be time to at least start to find out what's happened.*

Eric reached for the keys, but before he could issue the first command, the receiving light blinked green.

"Now who?" Eric tapped the light to get an ID for the sender. The screen added the words AMBASSADOR BASQ OF THE RHUDOLANT VITAE to the display.

"Garismit's Eyes." Eric keyed the line open and shifted his features into his professionally cheerful expression.

The screen lit up and it might have been the recording playing over again. Basq held the same stance against the same background.

"Good Morning and also Good Day, Ambassador," said Eric. The greeting was one of the few formalities that he knew was used by his employers. Their culture was one of the many things the Vitae kept to themselves. Eric had never been able to decide if they were full-fledged xenophobes, or merely paranoid. Neither attitude made much sense, since their civilization existed by providing skilled labor to most of the Quarter Galaxy. "I sent my arrival time as soon as I docked. Did you get the

message? The station seems to be having trouble on the lines ...”

“I did receive your arrival time, Sar Born”—Basq’s voice was a smooth tenor, undisrupted by emotional inflection—“but the assignment is urgent and we require your presence immediately. A transport track has been cleared for you. Please proceed to the pickup kiosk.”

*So much for slack time. “I’m on my way, Ambassador.”*

Basq’s silence passed for assent and the screen faded to black.

“Cam!” Eric called as he got to his feet. The *U-Kenai* was a well-made, comfortable ship, but it was so small, Eric had activated its internal intercom only half a dozen times in the five years he had owned it. Shouting down the hall was easier.

“Sar Born?”

“Leave a complaint with Haron’s Mail Authorities. I’ve got a partial message here. I want the rest of it, or a refund.”

“Yes, Sar Born.”

Eric reached into the drawer below the console and pulled out one of the thumbnail-sized translation disks that he kept there.

*No way to know who I might have to talk to for this*, he thought as he slid the disk into place in his ear. Eric had only managed to learn one of the languages spoken around the Quarter Galaxy, and he still had trouble with that one sometimes. It was only a minor handicap, however, since most people who worked with offworlders wore their own translators.

His palms itched. He’d worked for the Vitae for six years, and he’d never seen them in a hurry before. They were usually far too organized for that. It was a standing joke that the Vitae did not permit emergencies. They interfered with the schedule.

*Seems to be the day for exceptions*. He checked his belt pouch to make sure his identification and account access cards were all there. He had the feeling that this job, whatever it was, was going to take awhile and he didn’t want to be caught locked out of any of his accounts.

Eric undid the console’s stasis drawer. He eased his tool case out of its holder and checked the contents. The delicate probes, virus cards, and line translators all lay snug in their compartments. After a moment’s consideration, he hung the spare diagnostics kit on his belt beside his card pouch. *Better be ready for anything*.

He ordered the terminal to hold Dorias’s message in storage and, case in hand, walked out the *U-Kenai*’s arched airlock into Haron Station.

The dock’s corridor was empty, except for a pair of dog-sized cleaning drones polishing scuff marks off the metallic deck and walls. Haron reserved frills like carpeting and wall coverings for its residential levels. Eric’s reflection in the polished walls showed a spruce, alert man whose permanent slouch had much more to do with low-ceilinged corridors than a lack of self-confidence. His curling, black hair had been combed back ruthlessly. His grey shirt, loose trousers, and soft-soled shoes were all well made, but strictly functional.

Eric stepped around the drones. Over their whirring brushes, he could hear the staccato bursts of voices, the arrhythmic tread of booted feet, and all the other miscellaneous noises created by too many people in an enclosed space.

The safety doors at the end of the corridor pulled aside as he reached them. All at once, the still, station air filled with the smells of sweat, perfume, soap, and

disinfectant and the babble of half-translated voices. People from a thousand light-years' worth of climates and cultures crowded the warrenlike hallways, intent on accomplishing the business of their lives.

There was even a gaggle of snake-bodied, long-limbed Shessel in seamless, vermilion atmosphere suits forcing a wriggling path between the humans.

Eric stayed in the threshold to give the Shessel a few extra centimeters to get past him. He folded his arms respectfully as they threaded their way by and received a slow nod in return.

It never ceased to amaze Eric how much easier it had been to make himself learn the Shessel's courtesies than it had been to learn the ways of the other humans around him. The Shessel looked so different, it was easy to accept that their manners would be unlike anything he knew, but the other humans ... in spite of the spectrum of colors and shapes they wore, they had looked so much like the People, he had expected them to act, in most ways, like the People.

Actually, he had expected them to be a bit more barbaric, having never lived under the laws of the Nameless Powers.

Eric felt his mouth bend into a small smile as he remembered his own naïveté. He'd never even considered they might have separate names for themselves. In the Realm, they had just been "the Skymen."

"Coming through!" Eric called, and the shifting crowd gave ground reluctantly. He shouldered his way between a pair of cold climate women in jumpsuits and a gowned and veiled man who was at least ten centimeters taller than he was. At last, he reached the transport track.

A thick crowd milled around a cylindrical kiosk that supported a screen posting the transport schedule. The snatches of conversation that Eric made out did not sound happy. He soon saw why. One of the four-seater "mini-boxes" waited near the kiosk, blocking the track. The screen on its door read RESERVED. Until the box moved, no public transport could use the track.

Eric ignored the scowls as he pressed forward to type his station account number on the board below the screen. The mini-box's door lifted open. He folded himself into the seat and let the holding arms swing into place. The door closed and beneath his feet, the track cranked into life. The box trundled forward a few yards and, with a sharp lurch, began the long, slow descent into the main body of the station.

Haron was an old facility that had been not so much designed as thrown together over a series of decades, which made for narrow corridors, rich histories, and easily crowded facilities. One of the few things the engineers had done correctly from the start, as far as Eric was concerned, was separate the automated traffic from the foot traffic. The box shafts snaking through Haron's piecemeal construction provided bone-rattling transportation, but it was better than trying to fight the pedestrian crowds in the maze of corridors.

Besides, the transit boxes carried comm terminals. Eric slid the board onto his lap and propped the screen back. He keyed open a line to the mail banks. If Dorias's message was important, he might have left an extra copy in coded storage. No matter how skilled the sender, communications across light-years were tricky and there were lots of opportunities for scrambled data.

Entering his ID produced the heading MESSAGES WAITING with nothing

under it. Eric called up the account log. Except for the two messages relayed to the *U-Kenai*, it showed no activity since his last trip in. Eric pursed his lips and requested the original receipt time for the message for Dorias.

NO MESSAGE RECEIVED FROM THE ENTERED ADDRESS

*What?* The box jostled him as it settled onto the level track and started backing up. Eric keyed the request in again, more slowly this time.

NO MESSAGE RECEIVED FROM THE ENTERED ADDRESS

Eric drummed his fingers on the edge of the board. Only two things could have happened. One, Dorias had erased his own tracks. Dorias had a lot to hide, but he wasn't given to unwarranted panic. If he thought there was a chance that either he or Eric was being watched, he'd bounce the message around the net, drop it in the account, and wipe the trail. But he'd also check to see that it had arrived intact. In fact, he'd take precautions to make sure it had.

The other possibility was that somebody had tapped Eric's account and erased the message.

But if that was what had happened, why had they left anything for him to read at all?

*What if they were wiping the file right when it got sent to U-Kenai?* The thought left a chill in the back of his mind.

Eric mentally replayed the partial message. *As soon as you can, get a line open to the Unifiers.* "To the Unifiers," not "to me." Which was really strange. The Alliance for the Re-Unification of the Human Family normally did not want anything to do with anyone who worked for the Rhudolant Vitae. They held up the Vitae as the main stumbling block to their ideal of an "indivisible family of all those who trace their lines back to the Evolution Point." Eric had never gotten around to asking why Dorias had taken up with them. Dorias was a lot of things, but he was only human when he chose to project that image from his home behind the terminals.

"Arrival in three minutes," said the comm board. Eric pushed the board back into place. No time to check on any of this. All he could do was get through whatever the Vitae had for him as fast as possible and get back to the *U-Kenai*. From there, he could get a line to the Unifiers, and to Dorias, in relative safety. If necessary, he could crack Haron's system open and find out who was playing games with him.

He had to work to keep that grim thought from showing in his expression as the mini-box opened and let him out in Data Exchange One.

The exchange was a relatively open courtyard. Circular work terminals, each big enough for five or six people to sit around comfortably, sprouted out of the deck plates. Curtains of blurred light shrouded eight of the tables, allowing whoever had rented them to work in privacy.

Eric searched the edges of the court until a flash of scarlet caught his eye. Ambassador Basq of the Rhudolant Vitae sat stiffly at the terminal farthest from all three pedestrian entrances to the exchange.

"Good Morning and also Good Day, Ambassador Basq." Eric gave the full greeting before he moved to sit down at the terminal.

"Good Morning and also Good Day, Sar Eric Born," Basq replied. "I trust you have freed yourself for our project."

Eric studied Basq's smooth face, trying to find something new in it, a hint of

anxiety or eagerness. “It took some doing. At least two of our clients are going to be filing complaints about their deadlines.”

Basq didn’t even blink. “That was expected. Their contracts will be reassigned. All deadlines will be met. Are you ready to come with me?”

“Of course,” Eric said. “Which lines should I open?” He touched his fingertips to the power key for the terminal. The closest work pad and screen lit up, ready for his identification. From here, he could reserve intersystem network space for up to twenty-seven hours. It was an expensive maneuver, but it did guarantee his ID instant access to major data cores.

“This assignment will not require the networks.” Basq stood. “When you are ready, Sar Born.” His robes brushed Eric’s shoulder as he strode past.

Rebellion flared briefly inside Eric. Abrupt orders from the Rhudolant Vitae were nothing new, nor were assignments where the information was doled out on a need-to-know basis, but this had already been a long day.

“Ambassador”—Eric snatched up his case and hurried to catch up with Basq—“if this doesn’t require the nets, why are you contracting me? I’m a systems handler. It’s what you’ve got me on staff for.”

Basq didn’t even break stride. The other pedestrians moved in tight knots and bundles, stepping between each other wherever they could find room. Basq ignored them like he ignored Eric. He walked in a straight line as if he expected the crowd to get out of the way for him, and because the crowd recognized him as Rhudolant Vitae, it did. Almost no one liked the Vitae, but even the Unifiers, who vilified them, could not ignore them.

Eric bit back a curse. “Ambassador ...”

Basq stopped in front of a sealed door set into one of the blocky module junctures. Haron had a number of special sections reserved for the really high-paying customers. More than one of them was cut off from public traffic to accommodate differences in environment or security requirements.

Basq faced Eric, tilting his head back until he looked Eric square in the face with his pale, round eyes.

“Beyond this door, you are in Rhudolant Vitae space, Sar Born. Our laws are operative here. Breaches of confidence, security, or duty will be prosecuted according to our laws. Because you are in ignorance of most of our legal system, you will be warned when and if initial transgression occurs. Before we go any farther, do you understand and accept this?”

Eric imagined he could hear the sound of his temper fraying. “Ambassador, I need to know what my assignment is before I agree to undertake it.”

“Do you understand and accept the terms I have given you?” said Basq.

Eric gripped the handle of his tool case. This was just about enough. Someone was playing with his accounts until even Dorias couldn’t get a message through. The Vitae wanted him for something possibly extremely illegal, which was all right, and totally unknown, which was not. Part of him said get back to the ship and get out of here.

*Calm down, he told himself. I can at least find out what this is about. If I don’t like it, I can still walk.*

*I’d like to see even the Vitae keep me in if I want out.*

“I understand and accept your conditions,” he said out loud.

The door slid silently open.

The corridor on the other side looked no different from the dock corridor, but it felt different. Eric’s joints and inner ear picked up subtle shifts in pressure and gravity. Their readjustment registered as a dispersed discomfort.

Once his body finished the transition, Eric found himself savoring the feel of the new atmosphere. The gravity was heavy enough for him in here and the air was a little warmer and a little damper than the usual station atmosphere. In fact, it was almost comfortable.

Their footsteps made no sound on the metal floor. Eric could hear the lights hum overhead. If there was anyone else in this section, they hid behind the featureless doors lining the corridor’s walls.

The corridor dead-ended in what looked like a small waiting area with three straight-backed chairs clustered around a square table. One more of the blank doors was set in the farthest wall.

“You can leave your kit here.” Basq gestured toward the table. “It will be taken to your quarters for you.”

*To my what?* Eric pulled up in mid-stride.

“Ambassador”—Eric kept the case in his hand—“this is well beyond the limit. I need to know what you want from me. Now.”

“You will do as you are instructed for as long as you are instructed,” Basq said.

Eric’s frayed temper snapped abruptly in two. “Not for this treatment.” He turned on his heel and started for the main door.

A wave of pain shot through the soles of his feet. He screamed before he knew what he was doing and crashed to the floor on hands and knees.

“You no longer have the option of leaving our service,” said Basq before Eric’s stunned senses could recover themselves. “That was your first warning.”

Fury and confusion roiled inside him. Eric hauled himself to his feet, panting. The floor, he realized, must be wired somehow, but whatever had hit him had completely missed Basq. A dozen illogical insults and exclamations chased each other through his head.

“Why are you doing this?” he finally managed to croak.

“That is not your concern, Eric Born.” Eric did not miss the fact that Basq had dropped the honorific.

*Dorias, was this what your message was about? Was Basq the one who tried to erase it?*

“You will hear your instructions now.” Basq made an imperious come-hither gesture.

Eric took a deep breath and flexed his hands. He took one step toward Basq, then swung his whole body around and bolted for the door.

The pain toppled him before he was even halfway there.

His shoulders hit the floor and the pain seared through them. His teeth and eyes clenched shut and tears streamed down his face as he choked on his own screams.

The release was like a blessing. Eric lay where he was, unable to do anything to silence the sobs spilling out of him. With each degrading sound, his anger built. When he could finally raise his head to look at his impassive captor, he knew it all shone in

his eyes.

The expression on Basq's face didn't even flicker. "This treatment will not kill you, Eric Born, but it will seriously traumatize you if you require it to continue."

Shaking, Eric got to his feet. He mopped the sweat and tears off his face. "What could possibly be this important to you?"

Basq moved to the door and traced a pattern at shoulder height on it. A portion of the surface cleared away to reveal a square of clear silicate. He stood aside so Eric could have an unobstructed view.

*Easy. Eric made himself breathe deeply. Need to take this easy. I'll get out of here somehow and then this hairless barbarian better look to his skin. I just need time.*

Eric bent down and peered through the little window, using the wall to hold himself upright. The room beyond was airy by station standards. A long table held a pitcher and an empty plate and a stack of what appeared to be artwork folios. Next to them were scattered the pieces of a partly completed woodblock puzzle. A sunken pool of water big enough for bathing steamed in the far corner of the room across from a thick sleeping mat. The corner to the right of the door was curtained off.

His fresh confusion barely had time to take root before the curtain drew back and a woman in rags and patchwork stepped out of the alcove. A strip of coarsely woven, black cloth hid her hair completely. A poncho made of greased patches covered a shapeless tunic of undyed cloth belted with a strip of worn leather. More leather strips bound her thick leggings and straw-soled sandals.

The woman glanced at the door and Eric got a full look at her face. Dark, calculating eyes slanted above her high cheeks. The skin on her face and throat had been roughened by exposure to harsh weather. Her jaw had a determined set. She made no gesture toward him, however, and Eric decided this must be a one-way window.

After a moment, the woman shook her head and strode to the pool. She squatted down next to the steaming water and extended her hands. Jagged, white lines crisscrossed her dust-colored skin, making a pattern of uneven squares.

Eric felt as if he'd been struck hard in the chest. He remembered, all too clearly, when his hands had borne their own marks. His were elaborate blue-and-green swirls curling from his fingertips to his wrists. Bright, gold circles shone in the centers of his palms. He remembered how shaky they felt when he stood in the streets of Tiered Side with the night's freezing rain spattering against them and the Skymen with eyes like ice and milk told him he'd be free....

Eric jerked his head back to stare at Basq. "She's from the Realm!"

"We require you to act as translator and cultural liaison for us," Basq said. "Beginning immediately. There has already been too much delay."

He looked back through the window. The woman sat at the table now, fitting pieces into the puzzle. He squinted toward her hands, looking for a trace of gold on the palms. There was nothing, just bare, brown skin.

"But ..." he began incredulously. "What do you want with a Notouch?"

Basq tapped the translation disk in his ear. "That term is not coming through."

"A nothing. A pariah." Eric searched for an explanation. "There's a caste system in the Realm. A strict one. "That"—he pointed toward the window—"is the bottom of the heap. They aren't even allowed residence in the cities. If you were looking for