

H. HALVERSTADT



TOBY'S
CALL

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Toby's Call

H. Halverstadt



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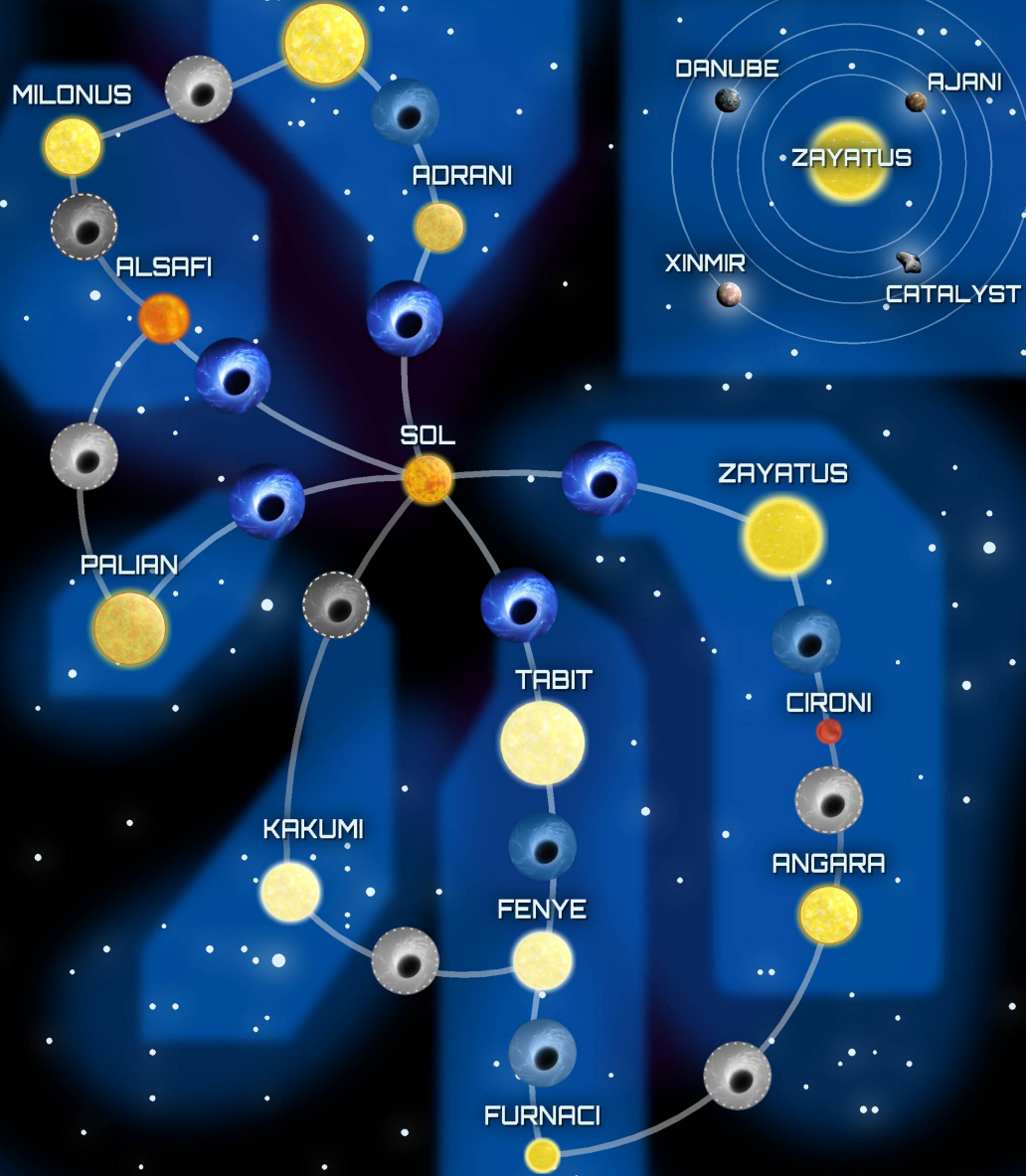
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THE ALLIANCE OF WORLDS

DATE: 3100

THEUBEN

ZAYATUS SYSTEM



GATE KEY



Primary Gate



Secondary Gate



Tertiary Gate



Gate Under Construction



Planned Gate

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Toby's Call

(Final Version published on Havok)



The water sparkled green at the far end of the Northwest Coast, a beautifully masked death trap. At least it was a break from the witch hunt playing on all the holocubes in town.

Toby kicked a rock and made sure to stay high on the jetty, well away from the water. Farther out to sea, a school of salmon headed for the nearby river, only to be scattered by the arrival of a harbor seal. It grabbed one and was about to swim off with its prize when two giant, dark red tentacles grabbed it with strong suckers and forced it down under the water.

He shook his head. *This bay used to be safe to swim in. Now three people are dead. When I find out who...*

Squid or not, the bay was beautiful. He had felt drawn to it after that rejection notice from Espada-BioBay. He had really hoped he would land that job. At this stage of the Danube settlement, there weren't a lot of marine biologist jobs open.

Toby stepped back from the water's edge just as a bottlenose dolphin popped up, droplets dripping down its shiny gray-blue snout.

"Blue, why are you here? I don't want you to be eaten." He tapped his AI and waited as it turned his words into clicks and whistles.

The dolphin pulled herself up and whistled back. Toby waited again for the wrist unit to translate. "We stun big squids. Human hurt. You come."

His eyes widened. *Why would a human be in squid waters?*

"There aren't any boats here."

"Call skybird."

“Call the Air Rescue? This isn’t another game, Blue?”

“Not game. Call skybird. Human hurt.” The dolphin pointed her shiny nose out to sea. “Big rock.”

Toby tapped his wrist unit twice. “Emergency call, Danube Air Rescue. There’s a dolphin reporting an injured human on a rock at sea near this location.”

A woman’s voice responded back. “We have confirmed your coordinates. Please stay at your location so we can ping your wrist unit. Do you have any other information?”

“No.”

“Thank you.” The connection terminated.

The dolphin whistled again. “Come. Now.”

“Blue, the Air Rescue said I should stay here. The helicopter will come faster than I swim, and *it* won’t try to eat me.”

“Too slow. We help. Leap comes.” Another dolphin popped up a few meters away and hastened toward them.

They’re going to tow me? “My translator will have to stay here.”

“Agreed. You come.”

After peeling off his jacket, socks, and shoes, Toby removed his wrist unit and earpiece, laying them on a nearby rock. At least the copter could locate it. In the water, Blue and Leap positioned themselves side by side.

Toby jumped. As soon as he had a hand on each fin, they were speeding through the water, the salt spray stinging Toby’s face.

They approached a large rock, about a meter high. On the edge was a small, partially shattered boat, the word *BioBay* just visible on its hull.

As they swam closer, Toby saw an unconscious man, up to his waist in water and sinking, slumped against the rock. Beyond him, a phalanx of dolphins faced off against a half-grown giant squid, its rich colors visible a few centimeters under the surface.

The pod parted. As he swam in, Toby felt the whoosh of a suckered tentacle just missing his leg, and adrenaline

propelled him to the rock in seconds. The gravel stabbed his bare feet, but he ignored it. He grabbed the man from behind across the chest and hauled his almost-deadweight to the top of the rock. They were safe from the squid here. Squid couldn't tolerate open air.

When Toby waved off the dolphins, they scattered, the squid chasing after them.

Toby shook the man's arm. "Hang on, sir. Help is coming." An ID tag fell out of his shirt. It had a name, title, and a picture: *Espada, BioBay Seeding Team*.

The man blinked and moved his head. "Conn."

"What?" Toby clapped the man's shoulder, but he jerked away as if in pain. "Con what? Come on, keep talking to me!"

The man opened his eyes. "Conn. My name." He lifted his left arm a few centimeters. "Ow!" He grimaced.

"Conn Espada? Son of the BioBay CEO?"

Conn squinted at him. "You should have let me die."

"Nobody deserves death by squid."

"I do."

Toby pushed wet brown hair out of his eyes. "How could you think that?"

Conn turned and waved toward where the squid had been. "This ... would have been justice."

The pieces finally made sense. "You were the one who seeded colossal squid alongside the pygmy."

Conn nodded.

"Half the population of Danube wants you for murder."

"I know."

"What happened, man? Were you drunk?"

"Not drunk. Grieving. My mother was dying. I should've given the job to someone else."

Toby paused for a deep breath. "This bay is my haven. I wanted answers—justice, somehow—but not prison, like the others."

Tears filled Conn's eyes. "You're kinder than the rest."

Maybe I'm not. He hadn't wished harm on Conn, but he had referred to whoever did this as an idiot more than once. Hot shame filled his cheeks.

"Don't listen to them, Conn. Everyone makes mistakes. The sperm whales will eat the squid."

Conn's pupils went unfocused. "No. The whales are delayed. Space shipping problems."

"The dolphins! They might be willing to help. They can stun squid if they work together."

Conn's eyes widened just as the helicopter appeared above them. A black-haired woman in an orange uniform dropped from it and pointed a medical scanner at Conn. "Looks like you're in bad shape. Hold still." She immobilized Conn's arm and put him in a harness.

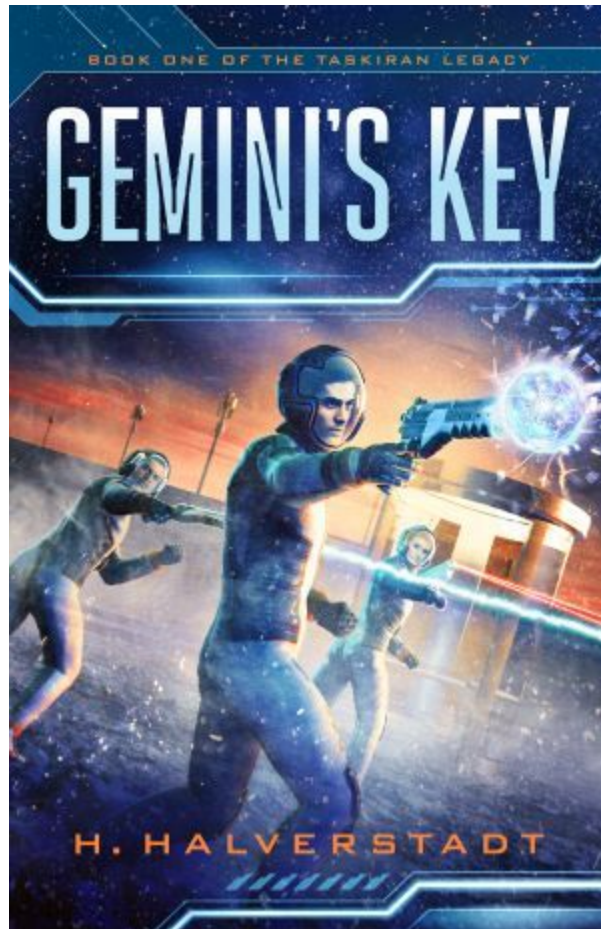
She turned to Toby. "Be right back for you."

In the copter, Conn ignored the medic and motioned to Toby. "Name?"

"I'm Toby. Toby Galanos."

"Toby, thank you. Can I persuade you to work for BioBay?"

If you liked Toby's Call, turn the page to read the first chapter of Gemini's Key for free!



Truth has a price.

Reid Taskiran has spent ten years overcoming obstacles on a quest to clear his dead father's name. The Taskiran family was admired until charges of treason against his father echoed across the galaxy—and caught Reid in its net. Though legally cleared, the court of popular opinion still labels him a traitor. He's traveled to a newly terraformed planet, hoping to win a Wormhole Guild internship that will provide access to an exclusive Guild asteroid.

And the keys to family secrets.

When a cyborg claiming to be a family friend makes him an offer he can't refuse, Reid discovers his only chance to

uncover the truth risks his entire future. But as the investigation leads Reid down a twisted labyrinth of intrigue, conspiracy, and danger, he encounters a destiny he never saw coming—one that will challenge everything he believes.

Pursued by a deadly foe, Reid races to find out what happened.

If he can't, the next body might be his.

Gemini's Key



Chapter One

“You’ll have fifteen Standard minutes to figure out what’s wrong with the wormhole device and fix it, and don’t expect the AI to rescue you. You may ask it to run tests or commands, but identification of the problems and solutions must come from you. As in your practice runs, you may address the wormhole AI as ‘Gildar.’” Reid Taskiran watched Guild Member Nolan finish writing the instructions with his stylus on the holographic whiteboard and cast a baleful gaze over his shoulder at his intern candidates. Nolan turned to them and crossed his arms. “Any questions so far?”

Nobody took him up on his offer. The hazards of the merciless testing algorithm nicknamed “Death by Wormhole” were well known. Half of the internship candidates had already been eliminated from the Wormhole Guild internship competition, and more were sure to follow today. Reid cast a sympathetic glance over at the most recent victim of Nolan’s scorn, a short guy from Danube who had been compared to slime mold this morning. He pushed the black VR gloves and mask to the side and prepared to run through his pre-test mental checklist. It wasn’t like Nolan could give the intern candidates much advice anyway, even if he wanted to. All the simulations were different.

Nolan surveyed his classroom like a carnivore choosing its next meal. “This test is about problem solving and teamwork. You have already been given all the information that you require to solve these problems. You will make your

attempts in pairs.” He motioned to the two-seat testing tables on the other side of the room. “Find your chair.”

The group stood and started moving towards the testing area. Reid walked along the row of blue tables, looking for his name on the holographic display. Carras, Mangal... He found the one labeled Taskiran, plopped into the chair, and inspected the other name. Pelletier. He sighed. Leon Pelletier, the lone candidate from Vivari, came over and sat down. His dark brown hair contrasted with a very expensive looking green skin dye job that Reid could never hope to afford—not without a Guild job, anyway.

Reid ignored him and examined the tiny black hairs on the back of his hand in minute detail. *Come on, Taskiran, you can do this.* He hadn’t made it through college and two years of academic competition just to wash out as a candidate and be sent home. Reid had no intention of being denied entry, again, to the Guild asteroid where his father died. *That won’t happen. I’ll get in, somehow.* He wasn’t going to end up like Grandfather, a slave to his heritage.

Leon saw the name on Reid’s uniform and snorted. “Taskiran? Whoever assigned these seats must not like me. Don’t mess it up for me.”

Reid shook his head. “Is there anyone you don’t argue with?”

Leon grinned. “Who’s arguing? We’re just having a conversation.”

Reid rolled his eyes.

“Like I said, don’t mess it up for me.”

Reid turned back to the desk and ignored him.

“I saw the way the arrogant old goat talked to you during the lecture series. It’s not my fault that he hates you. Why did you even bother applying?”

Reid considered telling him that it was none of his business, but that wouldn’t solve anything. Besides, with all the media coverage Leon must already know.

Leon took another swipe at him. "It's a wonder that you even got through the security check at all, with your history."

Reid's eyes widened.

Leon smiled as if he had hit asteroid gold and pounced. "You almost didn't, is that it? That's why Nolan doesn't like you? Can't say I blame him."

Reid's mouth tightened. *What a piece of orbital waste.* He forced his fists to relax, massaged the tightness from his hands, and reminded himself that he needed to work with Leon, at least for now. "We should be reviewing for the mission."

"Nice deflection." Leon bent over his review screen.

Reid straightened up for a second. Holocams were mounted on the wall. Grandfather, with his contacts, would have access to the recordings. He wasn't going to punch Leon anyway, but the cameras were a nice deterrent. He shook his head, exhaled, and bent over the panel again, but was interrupted by the arrival of Guild Member Nolan.

He peered over Reid's shoulder at the randomly selected test module number, 126, and said, "Unlock." The AI on Nolan's wrist beeped green, and the box flipped open. Nolan's biometric Guild ring flashed white as it authorized him to enter something on the touchpad. When he was finished, the box closed itself. The screen now showed scenario 247.

One of the blue-uniformed journeymen had come over from the right, and his eyebrows lifted when he saw the display.

"But that's—"

"An approved testing module for this unit."

The journeyman took a deep breath and dropped his gaze.

"Yes, sir."

Reid turned to face them. "Those assignments are supposed to be random."

Nolan sneered at him. "I have discretion to change it if I want. If you're good enough to get into the Guild, this

should be no problem.”

Reid scowled. *This is a setup.*

The journeyman moved to the front of the room. “Two-minute warning. Prepare to enter virtual reality.”

Leon watched the exchange in silence, and then faced Reid. His eyes shot daggers.

Reid put on his virtual gloves, walked into his VR pod, and pulled his mask on. The pod doors made a chuffing noise, then cut off all outside sound, and he was able to see through the eyes of the maintenance robot he would be controlling. They were inside a virtual replica of a small Guild transport. Leon’s iron-gray robot was a short distance away, leaning on an orange wall. The small, oval windows were still black, but he supposed they would be more informative once the test got going.

He didn’t have to wait long. Nolan’s nasal voice announced, “Test commencing,” through the speakers, and the simulation roared to life. The lights on the small ship’s control panels blinked, and the screen showed a small piece of the city-sized hulk that was the hollow, round wormhole apparatus. The wormhole was in its resting position, so the tiny, glowing spherical rift left open for data transfer wasn’t even visible from the ship.

The dock of the control section was only about ten meters away, its bulky frame sprayed with silvery, atomized iridium. They were close enough that he could see the large “A” on the pod bay doors. “A” for Alpha. If this were the real wormhole, the alpha side would be in the system of his home star, Zayatus. He batted away a slight pulse of homesickness. He was “inside” the virtual representation of one of the robots that performed all tasks inside the wormhole apparatus. Reid checked that he had full control of his robot and turned to Leon’s robot avatar. “Ready?”

“To be your partner? Hardly. Let’s get this over with.” Leon gestured at the door as it opened, and they walked from one simulated artificial gravity into another. It was an expensive

VR pod, one that could handle gravity fluctuations. Sevan would have loved this pod. He tried to imagine Sevan being here with him instead of Leon but failed.

The wormhole ring was massive. This close, it appeared to have only a slight curve inside. Reid and Leon walked slowly past steel-colored doorways, containers and panels, alert for anything that would tell them what was wrong. Unlike the practice scenarios, nothing unusual presented itself. He glanced at his bare wrist and swallowed his frustration. The test required he keep his AI, Evans, in a transmission-proof locker.

He went over to the wave guide information panel and motioned Leon over. “The heat signatures seem to be fine.” They weren’t cracking. That would be an obnoxious problem, but at least he would have known how to handle it.

His partner arrived at the visual screen of the wormhole seconds later. It displayed the glowing opalescent swirls from the graviton emitters and could transfix the careless. Reid forced himself to evaluate the pattern instead of appreciating its fearsome beauty, but Leon beat him to it.

“No shudders or pulses. I don’t think the graviton emitters are our problem.”

The pattern was mesmerizing, but Reid refused to let it conquer him. “Agreed.”

Leon moved over to the nearby laser frequency screen. “These seem to be fine too. I don’t see any obvious problems. This is your fault, Taskiran. If it were anyone else, the professor would have given us an easier one. We’d probably be well on our way to the solution by now.”

“It’s not like I chose to be born a Taskiran. You play the hand you’re dealt—and anyway, we haven’t checked this one yet.” Reid moved his robot down the hallway to the spectral emissions panel and saw the problem at once. The gamma and x-rays were over five times their normal levels, and all the infrareds were at least four times optimal.

Blast it to asteroid shards. Did you think the AI would tell you, Taskiran? He turned to Leon's robot and yelled, "Over here!"

The robot lumbered over. Reid took off at a run for the antimatter tube. Leon sprinted close behind him, dropping almost every curse word Reid had heard on Vivari and some he hadn't.

They arrived in less than a minute at the antimatter tube that stabilized the wormhole. The vertical gray structure was twice as tall as his human-sized robot. The light pattern! Normally the row of golden lights that ran all the way up the tube continued a constant, beautiful rhythm for the rest of the wormhole to dance to. Now it was faint and slow. Fading fast.

Leon stared at the tube with wide eyes. "That's going to cause cascading instability! The wormhole will try to open early!"

"We have to find a way to fix it. I'll turn up the antimatter converters. That'll buy us some time and might stabilize the opening sequence. You figure out how long we have." Reid turned the dial in the middle of the antimatter tube to maximum, and the golden lights slowly approached their former glory. He jogged to the screen. "Gildar, please inform Control that we have a potential energy pulse emergency. All ships are to exit the wormhole area immediately at a right angle to the entry vector."

The AI's cultured voice blossomed in his headset.

"Acknowledged. All ships are directed to exit the wormhole path."

"You better not forget to turn that antimatter down." Leon gestured at the console. "It'll bust if you don't, and it's an expensive repair."

The antimatter tube was an expensive fix but breaking it wouldn't kill anyone. The energy pulse, though—that was a different story. Possibilities raced through Reid's mind. "How long do we have to fix this thing?"

“Four Standard minutes.” Leon stood in front of the prediction screen. His robot’s hand leaned on the console. “Maybe the other side is having a power issue.”

“The simulation won’t let us ask. I don’t think that’s it, though.”

“Your being related to Frederik Taskiran doesn’t make you right.”

“No, seriously, I don’t think the data supports it.” Reid addressed the AI again. “Gildar, run the prediction model to see if matching the power fluctuations will solve the problem.”

Gildar’s voice resonated in the air. “Matching the power fluctuations will not resolve the issue.”

Leon turned around. “Great. We’re still going to get hit with an energy pulse, genius. Got any other ideas?”

“Hold on a minute.” Reid raced through the many mental photos cataloged in his brain. A visual memory was sometimes as much of a curse as a blessing. “Here it is. Page five hundred and sixty-four of *Advanced Wormhole Theory* says that a binary star system nova can cause a minor gravitational wave that can destabilize the graviton matrix. Gildar, have any gravitational waves arrived?”

“Affirmative. The pulse arrived one point two Standard hours ago.”

“Was graviton compensation initiated?”

“Affirmative.” Gildar’s voice continued to be relaxed, and it was maddening.

Reid exhaled and put his hands on his hips. *That should have fixed it!* “Gildar, was graviton compensation initiated on the other side of the wormhole?”

“Negative. Graviton compensation is down for repair on the beta side. Repair will be finished soon. Incoming wave has been exceeding this station’s compensation capacity for one point one Standard hours.”

Reid paused. “That means that it could cause a gravity pulse when it opens, suck the ships in and vaporize them?”

“Affirmative.”

The dial next to the screen moved from orange to red. The center of the wormhole on the screen started to distort. The AI’s voice rang out serenely. “Gravity pulse imminent in ninety-nine Standard seconds.”

Leon swore again.

Reid raced to the screen. “Control, inform all ships and nearby installations to raise radiation shields to maximum. We’re going to burp the wormhole. Gildar, turn off the wormhole radiation shield and let the excess radiation drain off.” The radiation dial slowly turned from red to orange to yellow to green. Reid drew a deep breath. “Reinstate the radiation shields.” He was about to start rehearsing his wind down checklist when Leon decided to have more fun.

“I bet you still radfried some of those ships. Good thing there weren’t real people in them, they’d all be dead.”

“The only thing radfried around here is your brain. My calculations say their shields are strong enough. Even if they aren’t, anything is better than joining a plasma cloud.”

Leon snorted. “Typical Taskiran. Does it make you happy to order people around?”

“Sure. Happy now, wormhole bait?” Reid tried to go back to the checklist.

“Is that why your father committed treason? Pretty sorry excuse for a Taskiran, especially when he drank himself to death.”

Reid tried to hold back but failed. “My father was innocent! He’d been dry since before I was born.”

“Maybe you didn’t know him as well as you thought you did. The reporters were convinced.”

“They were wrong. You would understand if you knew him.”

“Nothing you can ever prove.”

“Someday, I will.”

Reid wanted nothing more than to get out of this space, and Leon seemed just as impatient. They were almost to the transport when they heard the loud popping noise. Reid felt

the blood drain from his face. He turned and yelled, “Decrease antimatter to normal!”—but it was too late.

One of the antimatter channels had already failed.

Reid rounded the corner at his robot’s best approximation of a run and had to dial down his vision to shield his eyes from the brightness assaulting them. There was no rhythm anymore, just a continuous beam of golden light running up the front of the tube that could no longer be regulated.

The smooth voice of the AI cut in. “Failure of primary antimatter channel initiating. Superconductors overheating, failure imminent. Imposing safety protocols to prevent antimatter release.”

The virtual reality scene continued for a moment more and then it, and Leon, disappeared.

For a full five minutes Reid leaned on the VR unit wall in blackness, unable to absorb what had just happened and grieving the certain consequences. Eventually someone rapped on the door. He raised his visor and got on with reality.

Reid and Leon sat silently in the two brown padded chairs in front of Guild Member Nolan’s desk. Reid wasn’t sure he could change his expression, even if he wanted to. He felt like he was made of stone, a pillar barely supporting the hopes and dreams of the past ten years. Almost half his life. Leon glanced over at him, curled his lips into a scowl, and looked away.

Reid tried to focus on something else. He watched the professor in silence. Nolan’s fingers tapped softly on the brown desk as they met his vapor-thin white holographic keyboard. His massive silver Guild ring, with the multicolored wormhole holo over a large black stone, shimmered in the reflected light from the lamp in the corner.

Nolan finished with the file on his screen and turned first to Leon. “You didn’t discover the answer, but you did use the decision tree we taught in class. If you had been given one of the other scenarios, I’m sure you would have found the solution. You also did remind your partner that he would need to turn down the antimatter. You pass. You are dismissed.”

Leon smiled slowly, gave a mocking wave, and left as quickly as his legs could carry him.

Nolan turned his attention to Reid, a faint smile playing on his lips. “You did solve a very difficult problem, Reid, and that is a credit to you. Unfortunately, you allowed personal feelings to interfere with your care of an expensive piece of equipment. If that had not been a simulation, it would have been a very expensive repair. The Guild instructs me to weed out that sort of carelessness before it gets to Catalyst. I trust you understand why I can’t permit you to continue.”

Reid scowled. “You know I should have passed. No one’s had to burp a real wormhole in a hundred years! How many of the other candidates could have solved it?”

Nolan didn’t answer.

Reid shook his head. “Leon harassed me constantly. If he hadn’t, I wouldn’t have forgotten to reset the antimatter. He passed because of me! You passed him. There’s no reason not to pass me too.”

Nolan blinked for a moment and cleared his throat. “I recognize that you showed unusual understanding and have noted it in your file. If you really want to be part of the Guild, I suggest that you find employment somewhere for a few years. If your employers are willing to write letters attesting to your carefulness and responsibility, you may appeal to be considered again, but you will have to start the entire two-year competitive process over. Your lodgings and food will be covered, of course, through the end of the internship cycle next week, and your passage home to

Danube at its close will naturally be included also. The Guild wishes you well.”

Anger clouded Reid’s vision as he strode out the door, almost bumping into the doorframe. *Unusual understanding.* After burping a wormhole, that was it? What was he going to do now? Without a Guild internship, how could he get to Catalyst? The truth of his father’s death lay just beyond his reach.

And the distance had widened into a chasm.

In a small, sparsely furnished room, a blond, sharp featured man removed his wrist unit and set it on an office shelf. A white mist of light blossomed above it and eventually turned into a white tiger. Both the blond man and the tiger were silent for a moment as the tiger studied him.

The tiger broke the silence. “You have news to report?”

“The kid got himself kicked out of the Guild competition.”

The tiger’s smile was fearsome, showing all his sharp teeth. “How considerate of him. Killing him would be unfortunate and cause its own problems.”

The blond man didn’t reply.

“You’re disappointed, Sorn?”

Sorn shrugged. “End of task, I assume. Will you be needing my services when he goes back to Danube?”

The white tiger raised its eyebrows. “Keep watching and we’ll see. He’s surprised me before. I never thought he would make it into the internship final round.”

“What about the capper?”

“He doesn’t even know the capper is here.” The tiger paused for a moment, lost in thought. “The Guild’s secretiveness can come in handy. Even if he did know, they’d never let him in. He’s disgraced himself.”

Sorn nodded, and the white tiger disappeared.

Author's Note

I hope you enjoyed the first chapter of Gemini's Key! I had so much fun writing this story. You can find the rest of Gemini's Key here: <https://books2read.com/GeminisKey>

I'm hard at work on the Gemini's Key sequel. If you'd like to be notified when I have something new out, the best way to do that is to sign up for my newsletter. If you got Toby's Call by signing up, you don't need to do anything- and when my short story Tumult's Edge is finished, you'll get that for free too!

You might also enjoy my author page, www.hhalverstadtbooks.com. In addition to my books, you can find reviews of clean fantastic fiction for all ages. Feel free to contact me using the contact form on my site. I love hearing from readers. I have to get back to writing now, but I hope to hear from you soon.

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