GEMINI'S KEY

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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.

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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.

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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.

CHAPTER TWO

Reid dragged the tiny gray drone over to the chute on the side of the building, shoved in in with more force than was necessary, and listened as it ricocheted down the long recycle tube. It was the fourth he'd found in the last two hours. This morning's rainstorm had knocked more drones than usual out of the sky above Peak City. He'd been able to pull them out of several places that were out of the reach of the cheap retrieval bots. At least he had been able to beat the more sophisticated bots to these. One of them had been on top of a pile of stones, another one in a puddle of mud.

He took a deep breath and adjusted the lightweight oxygen concentrator that covered his nose and mouth. Two hours early. If he had been let out at the regulation time, the other candidates would have beat him to at least two of those. Not that it made him feel any better. At least being outside, alone, was better than having people around when he needed to think.

The flat, round, black unit on his wrist that housed his AI beeped green. Reid raised his eyebrows. "How much, Evans?"

A genteel robotic voice sounded in the end of the silver earpiece that circled his ear. The earpiece had been a gift from his father on his thirteenth birthday. Evans had been a gift, too— from his grandfather when Reid was three. "Fifty-five point fifty-two credits. The recyclebot says Print-A-Drone thanks you for returning it for recommissioning." Evans' programming was still doing well, thanks to diligent updates, but the wrist unit that housed him had taken a beating over the years. Maybe once he had a real job, he could afford something newer.

Thick clouds were massed above Reid's head, but it wasn't raining yet. He hadn't seen any more drones, but there still might be some recyclables here and there. He mentally paged through the odd places where he had found fallen bot parts. It wasn't as good as some of the recycle he used to find on Danube, but credits were credits. He paused for a minute as the meeting with Nolan replayed in his mind, shook his head, and returned to the partial anesthesia of work. *Just get through the pain without flaming anyone, Taskiran. You can figure out the plan tomorrow.*

To his left, something moved. Several figures emerged from the ground level airlock that intersected with the fifth floor of the Vivari Entomology building. Floors Five through Nine projected up out of the mountain like a tulip from an underground bulb. Peak City was for the most part

underground due to oxygen levels, but the luminous lower oxygen cloud gardens on the surface were usually balm for his soul. *Except on days when I've been unceremoniously kicked out by a…* He took a deep breath and tried to channel his anger into something useful. Something to focus on would be helpful. Drones didn't seem to be doing the job.

Reid leaned on the building, waiting for Sevan, and tried to drink in the peace and serenity of the evening. The unnatural calm after the storm mirrored his own feelings. The anger subsided, leaving emptiness. Not good, not bad, just… empty. The emptiness was his friend. It allowed him to put his feelings aside and see solutions. He wouldn't have been able to burp the wormhole without it.

Years of his life wasted because of a petty Guild Member. His father might have told him that he should be feeling sadness, or grief, or something like that, but only anger surfaced. Anger at what, he wasn't sure. Nolan? Himself? He pushed the anger away, and it seeped downward again, awaiting a better time to emerge.

The clouds were close, floating a short distance above the mountain plain. They weren't dripping water now, but they would soon. Rows of dew-strewn plants stretched over the ground as far as the eye could see, intersected by the occasional airlock to the fifth or sixth floor of a building that originated far underground. In the distance was the edge of the mountain rim. A slight breeze shuffled his hair as it moved the cool, humid air. He sorted through the plant pictures in his memory. Pineapple. Those other bushes might be mulblueberries.

For a moment, an image of the garden on Danube that he had tended with Dad flitted through his mind. Reid would have given anything to turn back time. Grandfather tried, and his teachers had been kind, but only Dad had always been there for him.

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Reid had been waiting for at least ten minutes before he spotted Sevan Fielding-Valencia emerging from the Vivari Engineering building. Sevan was chatting with his classmates as they exited the airlock, but soon moved towards the tree-shaded porch that had been their after-hours meeting spot for the last five weeks. Sevan paused, and gently picked up a red bug that had landed on the jet-black, arrow straight strands that just covered his ears. He placed it on his sleeve and inspected it from several angles before shaking his arm to make it fly away. He turned and saw the look on Reid's

face. Sevan's nose and mouth were covered by the oxygen concentrator, but the laughter in his face had faded. He came a few steps closer. "Rough day?"

Reid kicked a small rock with his boot. "How'd you know?"

Sevan smiled. "I haven't been taken in by that stoic act for years now. Want to talk about it?"

"No." Reid leaned on the teak tree. The tan bark had deep grooves in it from wind strain. Reid rubbed his itchy shoulder on the tree in silence, and then leaned back and tilted his head up. Green fronds greeted him. Yesterday they had waved in the breeze, but in today's calm they refused to move.

Sevan sat on a nearby rock and waited.

Reid turned his examination to the dirt under his feet. "Remember how I told you about 'Death by Wormhole'?"

"You failed?" Sevan nodded and clapped Reid on the back.

Reid shook Sevan's hand off. "No! I passed! Or at least, I should have. The professor gave me the worst problem that he could, and I still solved it… but my partner couldn't keep his mouth shut and distracted me at a critical moment. I should have let it go, but I couldn't—it was too personal. In the end, I missed something important, and the Guild Member spaced me. Now I might never get to Catalyst."

"You think he was unfair?"

"Yes, but I can't prove it. I did do something stupid, and Nolan was right to count it against me. But I burped a wormhole! That should have counted for something. And Leon was a lot more unfocused than I was."

"You just said the Guild Member was right." Sevan countered.

Reid's back straightened. "Right? He was right to count it against me. I didn't deserve to fail!"

"Cool your plumes, Reid, just pointing out the obvious. What are you going to do? Appeal?"

"There isn't anyone to appeal to. Nolan's decision is final. The Guild Master could overrule him, of course, but my chances of meeting him are smaller than my chances of meeting Chancellor Grenar. But I'll figure something out. I always do."

"You never met the Chancellor at those fancy DaniSet events your grandfather made you go to?"

"No, apparently, he has actual work to do, like running Danube. He has no interest in charity balls. Can't say I blame him. They were suffocating."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm still thinking about it." Reid gestured towards the path. They made their way to it and headed back towards the city. "How was your day?"

Sevan's grin lit up his face. "I got picked to be on the design team for the new dung beetle! Everyone wanted that assignment. I'm not sure why they want me to do it, but it sounds fun."

"You deserve it, Sevan. No one loves bugs more than you."

"Oh, I'll bet there's someone."

Reid pictured the multicolored beetle anatomy holo that used to hang above Sevan's bed in his Rivertree Prep dorm room. "I'm not so sure."

A butterfly flew over and landed on Sevan's finger.

Reid smiled under his concentrator. "What's that one called?"

"*Danaus vitreii*. It's named after stained glass. See how the wings are almost a transparent yellow, with thick black borders in between the panels?"

Reid sighed. "Will we never get rid of religious names? I thought that here, at least, we would be free of their influence."

Sevan shrugged. "You know, churches aren't the only places that have stained glass, right? And I think the only ones that use stained glass anymore are those ancient ones on Earth. Influence, please. You don't have to like them, but don't pretend they have the reach they used to."

Reid rubbed his eyebrow, and bushy fibers resisted his fingers. One black hair came off and sat on his fingers for a half-second before being flicked away. "Ideas can have a longer reach than people."

"Maybe. If I ever go to Earth, I might visit some of those ancient buildings. There don't seem to have been that many since, oh, around the time of the AI Wars."

"Maybe that's because there are just fewer religious people? It's not like the Alliance is intolerant." Reid tilted his head to the side.

"Some planets are more tolerant than others."

Reid shrugged. "There's a limit to how tolerant reasonable people can be of religious oppression."

Sevan shook his head. "Just because one of them almost ruined your life doesn't mean they're all like that."

"Two of them."

"Okay, yes, his father too. But some of them are decent people."

"You know that personally?"

"No, I've just heard that. They're just people, Reid. They can't all be bad."

Reid grimaced. "Thanks to them, most of the galaxy thinks I'm ocean scum."

Sevan didn't answer.

Reid took a breath and let it out slowly. "When I meet more than two who aren't, I'll think about agreeing with you. In the meantime, I think our History of Religion class had it right—appreciate the contributions of religious people without forgetting what happens when they have power."

Sevan gazed out at the beautiful landscape surrounding them. Even though they were right above the underground city, there were very few people out. "When do you think Vivari will get its population drawdowns from Earth?"

"I don't know. I guess it depends how fast they want independence from Alliance control. Xinmir must have really hated their Alliance governor—they met their population requirements in record time. I'm not sure why, though. He was doing a decent job. Ajani took longer."

"I thought that was weird too. You would think the first one would populate faster. Remember what our Alliance history teacher said? Rabbit Picture Lady? I can never remember her name. She said Ajani had more applicants than it could take."

Reid laughed. "That's true. I think she said Xinmir had a reasonable number of unskilled applicants but recruited hard for the skilled ones. Maybe independence sooner was part of the reason."

"I—" Sevan broke off to watch two girls about to pass them on the path. Both wore intern uniforms for Vivari Engineering. One had turquoise skin, shoulder length blonde curls and blue eyes. The other had somewhat longer chestnut tresses and hazel eyes.

Sevan smiled. "Hi, ladies. Care to join us for the evening meal?"

The hazel-eyed girl rolled her eyes. The blue-eyed one raised her eyebrows and looked from Reid to Sevan and back again. Reid wouldn't mind a date either. His family name was likely to sabotage this effort. But it certainly never hurt to try. They weren't Guild candidates. If they went to a bot café instead of the intern cafeteria that the Guild shared with Vivari, he might be able to get to know them before Leon's gossip interfered. He smiled at the girls. "I know a great bot café in town. We'd love to take you there."

Sevan nodded his agreement.

The brunette paused and regarded Reid with more interest—that is, until her wrist unit beeped yellow, and her earpiece appeared to say something in

her ear. "Ugh. I don't date traitors." She turned and stalked off, her friend hurrying after her.

Reid didn't bother protesting this time, but it still stung. When his father was alive there used to be plenty of girls eager enough to know a Taskiran… until they found out that he didn't

have the credits they thought he did. It was a good thing he hadn't wasted his time. He had bigger things to think about. There were plenty of decent girls around, and eventually he'd find one. One that didn't mind being asked why she liked a "fallen icon" and being tailed by reporters. He shook the thoughts out of his head. He had more important things to think about, like what to do with his life. It might be a while before he had time for anything else.

Sevan was unfazed. "I'm sure there'll be some friendly ones at the cafeteria."

"I think I'd rather go to a bot café, even if it's just us."

"Your cafeteria pass will still be good until the ship leaves. I'll be fine, but are you sure you have credits for anything else?"

Reid pictured Leon holding forth, telling the tale of his humiliation earlier that afternoon again and again. He could take Leon in a fight, no question—but that would only ensure that the whole galaxy heard about his failure. He started down the path and motioned Sevan to follow. "I had some time to kill, and I picked up enough recycle to afford to go out. We might as well have some fun tonight. Tomorrow I should tell Grandfather. I'd rather he heard it from me."