A mechanical bird, resembling a robotic phoenix or a futuristic eagle, is shown in flight against a backdrop of misty, mountainous terrain. The bird has a metallic body with intricate details and large, segmented wings. The background features a dense forest of evergreen trees in the foreground and misty, rocky peaks in the distance. The title 'FIRST THOUGHTS' is written in a large, white, serif font, with horizontal lines above and below the word 'FIRST'.

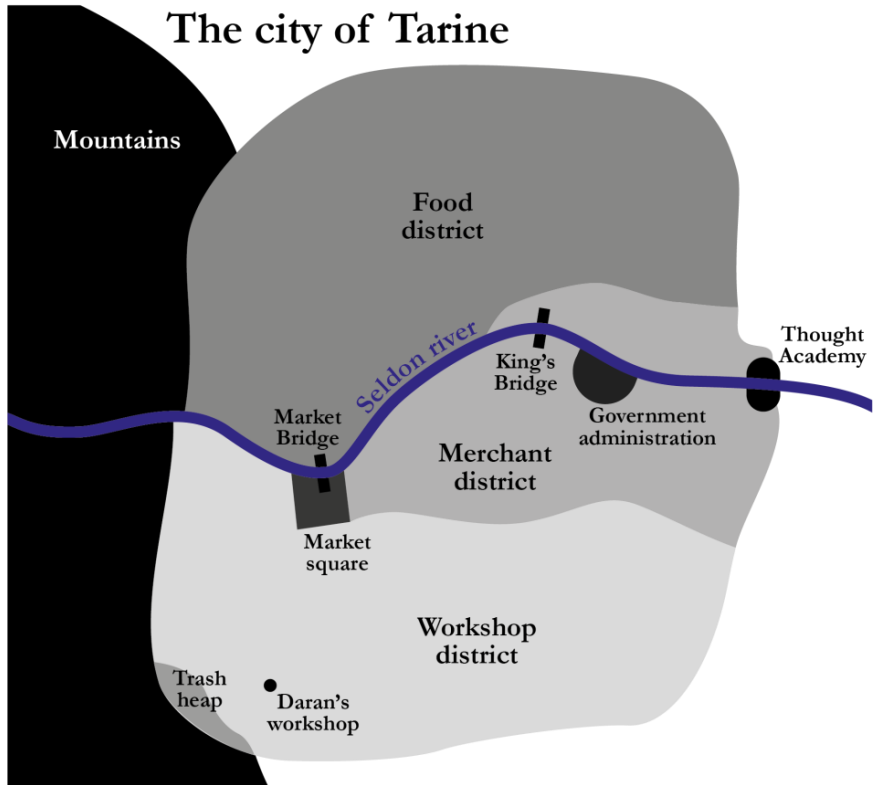
# FIRST THOUGHTS

H i l d o   B i j l

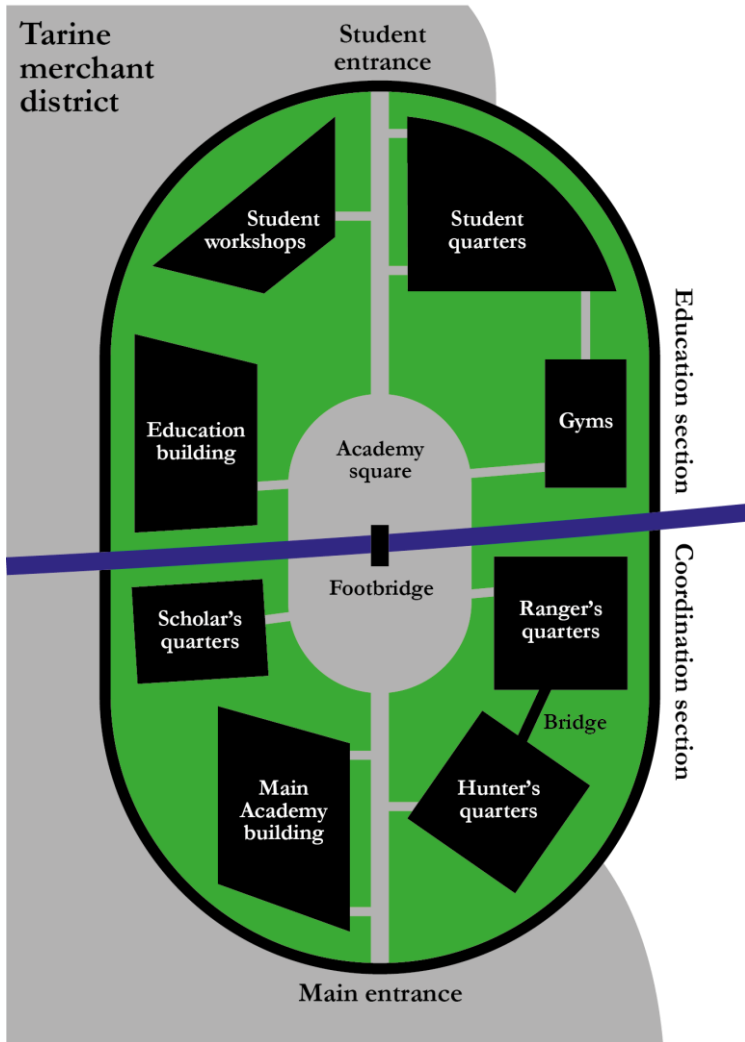
## Part 2 – Hidden thoughts

Against all odds, Daran has obtained a place as a student at the Thought Academy. While everyone expects him to fail, he only has two goals: prove them wrong and learn more about his family. But with fellow students harassing him wherever he goes, the chance he was given wasn't the fair chance he hoped it to be. And when a batch of thought cores gets stolen, he finds that both his goals have suddenly become a lot harder to accomplish, giving rise to the question: is this really the right place for him to be?

# The city of Tarine



# The Thought Academy





## Prologue – An inauguration into politics

“Nervous?” Kira asked.

Daran shook his head. “Why would I be? They told me it’s an informal ceremony. Something to make the parents of new students happy.”

But Daran had lost his parents, or at least, the persons that he had thought were his parents. That’s why he had asked Kira, his only friend that actually agreed with him joining the Thought Academy, to come along for the inauguration ceremony.

“You just want to get through this, so you can start to become a thinker,” Kira summarized.

“Yes, and so I can start to find my mother.”

“No need to let them wait then.”

Daran opened the door and walked into the ceremonial hall, only to stop dead in his tracks.

He had expected the hall to be nearly empty. After all, why would anyone come to watch his inauguration? But the hall was filled with several dozens of thinkers, and the three seats in the front of the hall, reserved for the leaders of the three departments, were all filled.

“Well, at least the Tharon isn’t here,” Kira joked. Indeed, the seat reserved for the head of the Thought Academy was empty. That wasn’t so strange though, since the Tharon was much too involved with politics to attend simple inauguration ceremonies. Yet the same could be said of the department leaders.

Quenton, dressed in his yellow scholar uniform, nodded to Daran as the boy walked forward. When Daran reached the front

of the room, the head of education, an old scholar named Malroy, stood up. It was time for the formalities.

“Daran, we welcome you at the Thought Academy. You are here to enroll as a student?”

Daran nodded. “Yes.”

“Do you aspire to be a thinker and will you work hard to become one?”

“Yes.”

“Are you aware of the rules of the Thought Academy, and will you abide by them?”

“Yes,” Daran again said. He had read the whole list the evening before. It was a big collection of mostly obvious rules. *Don't destroy stuff. Follow the directions of thinkers. Don't hamper other students in their studies.* And so on.

“Are you aware of how to complete study modules?”

“Yes,” Daran answered again. Some thinker had explained it all to him that morning. The whole study was split up into tons of modules, each representing certain knowledge or a certain skill to be obtained. To complete a module, a student had to convince an authorized thinker that he or she had mastered the corresponding knowledge or skill. How that should be done – through written tests, through reports or through actual field work – depended on the subject.

“Are you aware that the results of your modules will be made public?”

Daran was hesitant on this one. The knowledge and skills of all thinker students – even of all thinkers – was publicly available. Apparently, this was so thinkers could know the strengths and

weaknesses of the people they worked with. It would improve cooperation. But Daran knew that all the thinkers that were present in the room, as well as various other people, would closely watch his progress.

“Yes,” he eventually answered, though he didn’t like it.

“Are you aware that insufficient progress will result in expulsion from the Academy?”

“Yes, if I don’t work hard enough, you’ll kick me out,” Daran agreed. He didn’t plan to let that happen.

“Very well,” Malroy said. “Then you are now accepted as a student at the Thought Academy. As a welcoming gift, you may choose . . . ”

Malroy hesitated, and a soft murmur rose up from the crowd. The old man quickly walked over to the three department leaders and in whispered voices they discussed something. Then he returned to his place at the front of the room.

“I’m sorry,” he continued. “Normally new students get to choose their first gizmo. However, for the first time we are accepting a student that already has a gizmo. Since you already have a gizmo, you will not be given a second one.”

Daran raised his eyebrows in surprise. *The first time?* he thought. *I didn’t know it was that special.* He nodded, not minding the exception. He was perfectly satisfied with Nilas anyway.

“Then I hereby conclude this ceremony. Think well during your – ”

“Wait a second,” someone interrupted Malroy. Daran looked around. It was the leader of the rangers, dressed in blue, that stood up.

“What is it Baltar?” asked the old man.

“I would like to call upon the rule which Daran just agreed on,” Baltar said. “Daran, how old are you exactly?”

“Fourteen,” Daran replied, wondering what this was all about.

“To be exact, fourteen years and three hundred and twelve days,” Baltar said. “At that age a student should have already completed quite a number of modules. In fact, you are so far behind that expulsion is unavoidable.”

Daran was shocked. Normally students would enroll at the Thought Academy right after finishing their public school, upon turning fourteen, but Daran was an exception. He wasn’t meant to study at the Academy in the first place. *Was this why they allowed me into the Academy? So they could kick me out right away?* He looked at Quenton and to his horror the scholar leader smiled.

“But I just started studying here!” Daran cried out.

“That’s irrelevant,” Baltar said. “The rules base the expulsion limit on age.”

At that moment Quenton also stood up. “Baltar, how many modules has Daran completed at this moment, according to your data?”

“Zero, evidently,” Baltar said, raising an eyebrow. “He has just enrolled. He hasn’t had time yet to complete any modules.”

“That’s not entirely correct. He already completed several modules before he enrolled.”

Daran looked up surprised. “I did?”

Quenton’s grin only widened. “Remember how you told me you repaired Nilas, how you then gained his confidence and also how you saved an entire family? By doing so, you convinced me

you have certain manufacturing skills, gizmo handling skills and ranger skills. You completed several modules on these subjects. These modules have already been filed for completion in our administration. Your study progress is still somewhat behind the desired schedule, but it's well within the margin."

Baltar's mouth was nothing more than a furious line on his face, but he kept it shut and sat down.

"Very well, then I now conclude this ceremony," Malroy finished. "Think well."

Baltar was the first to leave, quickly followed by the other thinkers. In the end, only Quenton, Kira and Daran remained.

"I guess not everyone is happy with my enrollment," Daran noted.

"Indeed," Quenton nodded. "Baltar isn't the only one who doesn't like having you here. Make sure not to get into any trouble and don't fall behind on your studies. I advise you to sign up for some group missions as soon as possible, as they require time to set up."

"I will. Thank you." The two youngsters then left the room.

"Quenton just saved me," Daran told Kira as they walked out of the building into the sun. "He anticipated Baltar's move and fixed things before Baltar had even said a word."

"You've got a good ally in him, but Quenton won't be able to pull you out of the fire every time, and from what I've seen, there are plenty of people eager to put you into it."

Daran couldn't agree with her more. "Then I'd better make sure they won't get that chance."

## Chapter 1 – The thinking begins

*And that's another module done*, Daran thought as he handed in the test to the examiner. She gave the boy a smile.

"You're really fond of theoretical analysis, aren't you?" she said. "This is what? The fifth test this week?"

"The eighth," Daran corrected. "I also did a few during the evening hours." He had started studying the subject only three days ago, right after his ceremony ended, and apparently he was quite good at it. He liked being able to describe and predict the world around him using numbers – how gizmos fly, how electrical systems work, how bridges can support heavy carts, and lots of other things.

"That's amazing," the examiner said. "You shouldn't forget to work on the other subjects as well though."

Daran nodded. It was a good point – one he hadn't thought of before. Doing the fun modules first would be nice, but it'd result in trouble later on. So he decided to go to the gym to practice some fighting skills – another mandatory subject at the Thought Academy.

The gym halls were pretty crowded. Many students were practicing hand to hand combat, sword combat, arbalest disarming and more, with a few hunters spread out among them giving instructions. Daran guessed he looked pretty lost, because one of the instructors came to him right away.

"First time in fighting class?" she asked. She looked kind for a hunter, with her blue eyes, curly black hair and smiling face, and though she seemed familiar to Daran, the young student couldn't

recall where he had seen her before. *Probably somewhere in the Academy hallways or so*, he guessed.

"Yes," Daran nodded. "What's the best module to start with?"

"Done any fighting before?" the woman asked.

"I've wrestled a bit with my brother occasionally," Daran said. *Or who I thought was my brother anyway.* "Does that count?"

"Not really. In that case, we'd better start with the most common weapon: a simple wooden stick. My name is Norema, by the way."

"I'm Daran," the boy introduced himself.

Norema led Daran to one of the further halls. On his way there, Daran saw a student and a gizmo battle a hunter. The fighters were moving so quickly, Daran couldn't help being impressed.

"Thinkers and gizmos have to work together as one," Norema explained. "This requires lots of training. But then again, that holds for every skill that's worth learning."

They entered a big hall which was mostly occupied by beginners. Luckily there was still some space to spare. Norema grabbed two wooden sticks and handed one to Daran, after which they started practicing. The hunter taught Daran all the basics, of how to stay balanced, of how to deflect strikes and of how to use an opponent's momentum against him.

Slowly the day came to an end, and when Daran eventually left the gym, he felt like his body had taken enough hits for the rest of the year. In other words, he was determined to go again the next day. He did wonder why Norema had spent so much time with

him, when there were plenty of other students struggling as well, but he didn't mind. He had learned a lot.

The sun was nearing the horizon, so Daran hurried out of the building. He had promised Nilas to go for a flight and he didn't want to break that promise. He was crossing the footbridge over the Seldon river, heading to the hunter's quarters, when he heard a loud bang up ahead. It came from the main Thought Academy building, which Daran had broken into only a week ago.

*It's none of my business*, Daran thought as he continued his way. He arrived at the hunter's quarters, climbed up the stairs to the aviary, opened the door using the key he had received earlier that week and walked out onto the roof.

As always, Nilas greeted him enthusiastically. Daran patted the bird on his head. He did a quick inspection, checking if all parts still looked alright. Being satisfied, he climbed onto Nilas' back and was just about to take off when something or someone flew into him and knocked him off. Together, they rolled over the floor.

Daran got a glimpse of his attacker. It was a big four-legged gizmo. Instinctively, he tried to protect himself and threw the big lump of metal off of him, only to be attacked by another gizmo. This one was quickly dispatched by a stroke of Nilas' wing. Daran finally managed to get up and was planning to jump on Nilas' back when a voice called out, "Don't move!" The boy looked in the direction of the voice, and for the umpteenth time that week he was looking into the barrel of a gun.

Three hunters were standing in front of him, all pointing their weapons at Daran. *This is sooo not good*, he realized. There was no



way he could get out of this, so he raised his hands while telling Nilas to back off. One of the hunters moved forward and not all too gently cuffed Daran's hands behind his back. They then dragged him all the way out of the hunter's quarters and into the main Academy building, dropping him off into an interrogation room.

Daran sighed and was just sitting down when he heard a discussion outside the room. It sounded like there was some kind of disagreement. Then Quenton entered with a stern look and said, "Come with me."

And again Daran was led through the Academy's hallways. This time it was a bit gentler – he just followed Quenton – but behind him were still two hunters who were probably there to make sure he wouldn't suddenly run off. *Like I can outrun anyone with my hands tied behind my back*, he thought.

Finally they reached Quenton's office and Quenton gestured for Daran to sit down. The scholar then closed the door, leaving the two hunters outside. Lost in thoughts, he paced around the office.

Daran leaned forward across the table. "I know people here aren't very fond of me, but I think –"

"Daran," Quenton interrupted, more to silence the boy than because he already knew what he was going to say. He sighed, walked around the table one more time and finally sat down opposite Daran.

"Daran, I need to know: did you break into the main building again?"

Daran was appalled. “What?! No! Of course I didn’t. Why would you think that?”

“Oh, for thought’s sake,” Quenton cursed. “First of all, someone broke into a locker in the same way you did last week. Secondly, people saw you hurrying towards your gizmo right after that. You were just about to take off!”

“And was I carrying stuff with me?”

“I know you’re smart. Smart enough to ditch it before getting caught with it.”

Daran sighed. “If I’m so smart, then why would I ever use exactly the same method twice?!” he called out in exasperation. But Quenton’s words had made him think. *After I heard that explosion, I should’ve expected them to come looking for me. It’s so obvious now, but I missed the signs then. I just didn’t see.*

He remembered the resolution he’d made earlier that week. *I was going to understand what goes on in the minds of the people around me.* He had already failed it now. *Keeping a resolution is harder than I thought. It takes time and practice to get it ingrained in my system. I simply need to keep my eyes open and think. So let’s start thinking now.* And when Daran put together the clues, the whole situation suddenly seemed a lot more obvious.

“You know,” he said, “it doesn’t take a lot of thought to see someone likes to frame people.”

“So tell me straight to my face you’re not behind this.”

Daran looked Quenton right into his eyes and said, “I did not steal these thought cores.”

This seemed to satisfy Quenton, until suddenly the scholar looked up surprised. “Who said anything about thought cores?”

“Isn’t it obvious? If someone’s trying to frame me, they’d try to do things as similar as possible to what I did.” Daran rolled his eyes. “So when are you going to open your eyes and accept that I’m not behind this?”

“I already believe you Daran,” Quenton admitted. “The problem is that I also need to convince the others of this. That, and find out who in Kantara *is* behind this theft.”

“Oh, we can narrow that down,” Daran said. “First of all, no one left the Academy, or even tried to, except for me.”

Quenton looked up surprised. “How do you know that?”

“Well, I know you’re checking all exits, and due to recent events that now also includes the airspace. How else would you’ve found me so fast otherwise? And since everyone is so keen to blame this on me, you have no idea who else to blame it on. So, you didn’t find anyone else that has tried to leave the premises.”

“Alright. So no one has tried to leave the Academy. But what does that mean?”

“It means that whoever stole those thought cores feels comfortable inside the Academy. He can afford to hide them and smuggle them off the grounds at a later time. It must be someone that comes here more often.”

“You mean the Academy staff?”

Daran shook his head. “No, it’s not just basic personnel. After all, the thought cores need to be stored in a place which the thief feels safe about; a room which he owns and which few other people ever visit. It’s either a bedroom or a personal office.”

“That leaves only students and thinkers,” Quenton concluded. “Both would risk a lot by stealing thought cores.”

Daran nodded. "Indeed. So the thief must've been pretty sure he would get away with it. It means he knows the building layout, as well as the exact time when no other thinkers would be around. And since it was the main Academy building that got robbed – "

" – it wasn't a student," Quenton finished.

"Exactly," Daran confirmed with a smile on his face. "Whether you like it or not, you've got a spy in your Academy. It should be fun to find out who it is."

"Fun isn't the word I would use," Quenton said. Only then did he see the look in Daran's eyes. "You're not thinking of going after him yourself, are you?"

Daran stifled a laugh. "Don't worry," he said. "I first have a mother to look for. Finding a spy doesn't fit in my schedule."

"Oh, that's right," Quenton suddenly remembered. "I asked around a bit at Nolan's friends, to see if I could give your search a head start."

This sparked Daran's curiosity. "Did you find anything?"

To Daran's disappointment, Quenton shook his head. "Hardly anything at all. Of course Nolan had some friends, but even his oldest friends only got to know him near his graduation, which was after you were born. No one knows a thing about Nolan's time before that."

"So that's a dead end," Daran said. "But surely there must be some records about that time?"

This appeared to give Quenton an idea, as the thinker suddenly stood up. "Actually, the Academy does keep extensive records. Access to the record halls is restricted to thinkers though."

Quenton then looked at Daran. The boy was sitting slumped down in the chair, with his hands still cuffed behind his back. It gave the scholar an uneasy feeling. He walked over and unlocked the restraints.

“Well, I guess we can make an exception,” he then decided. He sat back in his chair, wrote a note and passed it across the table. “This gives you permission to access the non-classified parts of the Academy records, but it’s only valid for tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” Daran said appreciatively.

“Now get out of here,” Quenton said, gesturing for the door. “I’ll deal with the formalities.”

Daran opened the door and was just walking out when he heard Quenton call his name. The student turned around in the doorway.

“One last thing. I forbid you to try and find that spy, or to even mention him. Is that clear?”

Daran nodded. “Crystal clear.” *I’ve got something better to do: finding my mother.*

## Chapter 2 – A successful failure

When Daran got back to his room, a note had been delivered. He quickly opened it.

*To Daran from Justin.*

*A group mission has been arranged for you. Report tomorrow morning at ten hours at the mission control room. Preparation is not necessary.*

Daran frowned. He had mixed feelings about these group missions. He'd heard some really interesting stories about them, where thinkers came up with the most fascinating tasks. However, a group mission would also require working together with other students, and that was something he wasn't looking forward to.

Determined to be at his best the next day, Daran decided to sleep early. He put Quenton's note on his desk and headed off to bed.

The mission control room turned out to be a set of rooms in the education building. From there, all student missions were organized and coordinated.

One by one the students dropped in at the briefing room. Behind the table sat a scholar who introduced himself as Justin.

"Welcome everyone," he said when all five students were present. "For four of you, this will be your very first group mission. For number five," and at this point Justin was looking at the boy

sitting to Daran's left, "it will be the first mission in which you are in charge. I expect everyone in this group to listen to Meradis here and to follow his instructions. Is that clear?"

The four first-year students all nodded obediently.

Justin appeared satisfied. "You now have five minutes to get acquainted, after which I will explain the details of your mission to you."

One by one the students introduced themselves. Meradis appeared to be a third-year student. By the way he spoke, Daran noticed he was nervous about this mission. To Meradis' left sat a small boy named Posak. He introduced himself as coming from a very rich merchant family, which came across to Daran as cheap boasting, but to his surprise it appeared to impress the others. Further down the line sat Firo, whose story of boasting sounded even more over the top. On Daran's right sat a quiet girl. She only introduced herself as Roxeta, told the others her family name and left it at that. Then Daran realized it was his turn.

"My name is Daran – "

" – of no family," Firo directly cut him off. The quick interruption caught Daran off guard. He looked to Meradis and then to Justin for a reaction, perhaps some support, but none appeared to be coming.

Instead, Daran boldly decided to spice things up a bit. "My name is Daran, son of Nolan." Now Daran was the only one not taken by surprise.

Firo was the first to regain his composure. "Yeah right," he said. "You just read that name in a newspaper somewhere. Really convenient, to claim to be the child of a thinker that just died."

Daran was about to counter by yelling he really was Nolan's son, but he held back. *There's no use trying to convince someone of a theory he does not want to believe*, he reasoned. Instead, he simply said, "Believe what you will. I'm Nolan's son, whether you like it or not."

They continued to stare at each other, until Justin finally said that the mission would begin. "Normally we do the briefing here, but this is a slightly different group mission. Will you all follow me?"

The scholar led them out of the education building towards the student workshops, until he stopped in front of what appeared to be a small storage room.

"The mission is quite simple," Justin told the group. "I need to get into this room, but there is no key for this door. It's your job to get me inside."

"That's all?" Meridas asked.

"That's all you need to do," Justin confirmed. "There are a few constraints though. During your mission, you may not ask other students for help, you may not use Academy tools and you may not spend more than eight kantas. In fact, that's all the money you have available for this mission." The thinker handed Meridas a couple of coins. "If there are no more questions, then you may begin. You have three hours. Then I'll return to this place to see if the door is open." And after those words, the thinker walked off.

The first thing Meridas did was take a few step backs and throw his shoulder into the door. As Daran expected, nothing happened. The door was made of solid wood, was sunken into the doorframe and opened outward.



*Really funny, Daran thought. I've had this problem before, and I failed to solve it last time. Well, Meridas is in charge now. Let's see what he comes up with.*

After several tries, Meridas gave up his attempts to break into the door. "Since we can't use the tools here, we need to find someone who can break it open for us. Firo, Posak, Roxeta, take the money and go into the city. See if you can find someone that is willing to break open a door for only eight kantas. If you need me, I'll be somewhere around here."

"And what do I do?" Daran asked.

"Well, I don't want you with the others or you'll scare people off," Meridas said with a tone which to Daran's amazement didn't even have a sign of malice. "Just go and get an axe somewhere, in case we need it."

"And how do I do that without money?" Daran asked.

"I don't care. Steal it. That's what you do, right?"

Daran's mouth dropped open, but instead of replying he merely sighed. *This is going nowhere.* "I'll see what I can do," he eventually said.

"Fine. Now go! We only have three hours."

Quickly the three freshmen ran off, followed by a lot less hurried Meridas. Daran stayed around for a bit to make a quick inspection of the door and the room, checking whether Meridas had missed something, but that proved not to be the case. Then he ran off towards the city. He decided to go to Magnus first. The old parts trader would be able to help him out somehow.

Magnus was delighted to see Daran. "How are things going at the Thought Academy?" he wanted to know.

“Quite alright,” Daran said. “Actually, that’s why I’m here. Do you have an axe which I can borrow for a few hours?”

“Ah, a group mission,” Magnus guessed. “And you may not use Academy tools. What’s the task at hand?”

“Break open a door,” Daran told the old man, as always impressed by his deduction skills, but Magnus shook his head.

“That’s not the mission.”

Daran frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Thinkers don’t tell you what you should do. They only tell you the goals you need to reach. They don’t instruct you to break open a door. They just tell you to get to the other side. You have assumed for yourself that you need to break it down. But do you?”

“Well, how else can we get on the other side?”

“Other entrances?”

Daran shook his head. “There are none. Not even a window.”

“A spare key?”

“Not present.”

“A general master key then?”

“Very unlikely. The lock appeared to be handmade.”

“Handmade? It might be easy to pick it open then.”

“Lock-picking? But I don’t know how to do that.”

Magnus smiled. “Don’t worry. It’s not that hard for most hand-made locks. You just need to know how a lock works. Most locks have several pins which need to be put in exactly the right position for the lock to turn. In fact, that’s what a key does. Your job now is to put those pins in the right position yourself, without a key.”

Magnus then went on to explain several ways in which this could be done for several different kinds of locks. He took a book from a shelf and showed Daran some very helpful pictures. Less than an hour later, Daran already felt like a locksmith.

“Fine,” the boy finally said. “Now all I need is some lock picking equipment. I don’t suppose you have a set nearby?”

Magnus shook his head. “Sorry, I don’t pick locks on a regular basis, though every workshop should have the tools that you need.”

“But that’s the point,” Daran noted. “I can’t use Academy workshop tools.”

Magnus snorted. “And the Academy workshops are the only workshops you know?”

Daran realized the old man had a good point. Figuring time was running short, he thanked the former parts trader for the lesson and quickly ran off to the place he used to call home.

He opened the door a bit and glanced inside. Luckily, only Kira appeared to be present. Daran waved. “Is Tobin anywhere around?” he whispered.

“Daran!” Kira said, happy to see him. “No, he’s out for the day to buy some raw materials. Come on in!”

“I just came by to borrow some tools,” Daran told her. He quickly explained the mission he was doing and which tools he needed.

“Sure,” Kira said. “Just bring it all back before Tobin comes home. I’d rather not explain why some of the tools are missing.”

“He’s still angry with me?” Daran asked. He hadn’t expected his brother, or nephew depending on which story proved true, to be the type to hold such grudges.

Kira nodded. “He feels betrayed. I don’t think it’ll pass any time soon.”

Daran dropped his eyes disappointedly. “So how is he holding up besides this? Getting over the loss of his parents?”

“Somewhat,” Kira said. “He likes the work, so that helps. Though during the evenings he sometimes just disappears and he refuses to tell me where he’s going. Says it’s none of my business. Does he have any strange hobbies or so?”

Daran shook his head. “Tobin’s hobby is the workshop. I have no idea where he’s going.”

“Well, I’ll just wait until I know him a bit better,” Kira decided. “Maybe then he’ll tell me more. But then again, I haven’t told him about my chores for the Thought Academy either.”

“Oh, yeah,” Daran remembered. “The punishment for stealing those thought cores. What are they having you do?”

“Oh, cleaning mostly,” Kira said. “It’s not exactly fun, but it’s alright, and it’s interesting to see the inside of the Thought Academy, instead of only looking up at the walls.”

That reminded Daran of his mission. “I’ve got to run,” he told Kira. “I’ll bring back the tools as soon as I can.”

With a nod, he ran out the door, back on his way to the Academy. Luckily, he was still well on time. He arrived at the door with a quarter of an hour to spare.

Daran was eager to try out his new skills. He shoved a screwdriver into the lock to wedge it open a bit. Then he started

picking the pins one by one. It turned out to be much harder than he thought. A few times he had to start over because he didn't apply the right amount of pressure. After quite a while he managed to successfully pick all the pins and turn the lock. *Amazing, the things you can do with a screwdriver.* Daran just stood up and let out an exuberant sigh when Meridas came walking in.

"Where's the axe?" he directly asked.

"I didn't get any," Daran said, somewhat annoyed with the group leader.

"I told you to get one!" Meridas yelled. "Why can't you follow orders?"

Then the other three students came walking in. They were breathing quite heavily. *They must have been running a lot,* Daran reasoned.

"I'm sorry," Firo said. "We couldn't find anyone willing to come over all the way to the Academy for only eight kantas."

"Well, then you just haven't looked hard enough!" Meridas said. "What am I supposed to do now?"

It was at this point that Justin dropped by. "Time's up," he said. "Did you manage to open the door?"

"Well, no," Meridas stammered. "It's because these kids can't follow orders!"

This offended Firo. "We did what you wanted! But it wasn't possible!"

At that point Justin noted Daran, who still had a screwdriver in his hand. The thinker raised one eyebrow slightly. Then he walked over to the door, turned the handle and gently opened it.

Meridas stopped his furious exclamations mid-sentence. “How did ... what ... I don’t understand.”

Daran shrugged. “I picked the lock.”

This caused Roxeta to giggle softly, but Meridas was less amused. “So you have burglar skills too? I should’ve known.”

“I think the best place to discuss all this is back at mission control,” Justin interrupted. “If you will all follow me?”

Some time later the five students were back where everything had started. One by one they gave an account of their activities. First of all, Firo told them how the three students had asked around in the workshop district whether someone would break open a door for them at the Thought Academy for only eight kantas, but no one took them seriously. Then Daran explained how he went over to a friend’s place to learn how to pick a lock. Finally Meridas simply confessed that he had done nothing useful at all during the duration of the mission, believing the freshmen would be able to find a solution to such a seemingly simple problem.

“So let me summarize,” Justin said. “Meridas, you gave your team members orders which they couldn’t accomplish. You didn’t keep track of how they were doing. You didn’t even do anything to solve the problem yourself. Please give me one reason why I should let you pass a module.”

“If they simply would’ve done what I told them to, then the door would be open!”

“But they didn’t. They couldn’t. And part of a leader’s tasks is to know what your team members can do and what they cannot do.”

“Then how else should I have solved this?!” Meridas asked, sounding almost desperate. “Not everyone here is a seasoned burglar.”

“There are plenty of options. Ask a lock manufacturer for advice. Use the Academy library to read up on locks. Or if you really want to destroy that door, then just hire tools from someone instead of asking him to come over. There are plenty of options. So I’m sorry, but I cannot sign any module off for you.”

Justin then turned his attention towards the other students. “Firo, Posak and Roxeta. This wasn’t exactly an educative experience for you, was it? You didn’t experience what it’s like to work in a functioning team, nor do you know what it’s like to complete a mission. You don’t even know what it’s like to fail a mission, since in the end the door was open. For this reason, I cannot let you pass any of the modules either.”

The students didn’t take this news very well. “But we just followed orders!” Firo exclaimed. “What else – ”

“That’s my final thought,” Justin cut him off. Then he turned to the last remaining student. “And finally, Daran.” At this point Justin paused for a bit. Daran moved forward in his seat, eager to hear what the thinker had to say. After all, he had just solved the entire mission on his own.

Justin looked Daran straight in the eye. “I don’t think I’ve ever been more convinced to fail a student than I am now.”

In that instance, Daran’s hope of recognition got shattered. Pretty much every part of his body suddenly slumped down, and all he could think was, *What?*

Justin's gaze was still straight at Daran. "You decided to ignore orders and go out on your own. You didn't inform the team leader of this, nor anyone else from your group. And even when you solved the problem on your own, you still did not tell anyone. You clearly don't understand what it means to be part of a team."

Daran was shocked. He didn't even know how to reply. It was just unfair! *I solved the entire mission!*

"I have no more thoughts to share on this matter," Justin said. "You can all subscribe for new group missions in the normal way. I hope you have learned from this experience." He gestured for the students to leave the room.

Only in the hallway did the students manage to find their voices again. "This is all your fault!" Firo said, pointing his finger at Daran.

This appalled Daran. *Why in the world do they blame me?* "Well I'm sorry for completing the mission!" he yelled back.

"You should be!" Firo shouted in return. "If you hadn't, we'd at least have completed a failed group mission module."

"Well, next time I'll make sure to mess up as badly as you did!" With those words he turned around and, fighting back tears that he felt shouldn't have been there in the first place, he left the building.



### Chapter 3 – Learning about people

Daran was frustrated. With the Academy. With the students. With the mission. Everything. Realizing he needed to cool down a bit, he went to check out the student workshops.

The moment he stepped into one of the workshop rooms, he was impressed. All the equipment was of high quality. *You can build some really awesome stuff with this.* But what impressed him even more was the incompetence of the people working with the equipment. On one side of the workshop, some boy was using a hammer to bend a metal tube, while the right tool for the job was only a few steps away. On the other side, a girl was trying to drill through a sheet of metal with the wrong drill bit. Daran wondered what would be destroyed first. The sheet or the drill bit. The subsequent clang indicated it was the latter.

An exasperated cry drew Daran's attention. In the back of the room, a young student with curly brownish hair threw whatever he was working on across the workshop. It landed near Daran's feet. When he picked it up, it appeared to be a screw driver attached to some kind of clumsily built wooden mechanism.

"I think you dropped this," Daran said, handing the workpiece back. Only then did he notice the small gizmo. The way in which it impatiently ran all over the workbench, picking up and sorting the wood chips, reminded Daran of a squirrel. "You're making something for him, aren't you?" he asked, gesturing at the highly energetic creature.

“Yes,” the boy said softly. “He’s an adaptable gizmo. Apparently, you can make extensions for him and in no-time he’ll learn how to use them. The problem is ... well ... ”

“You don’t know how to make the extensions,” Daran completed.

The boy nodded. “I figured I’d try wood since it’s supposed to be easier to work with than metal, but I can’t even make something as lame as a basic screwdriver extension with it.”

“No wonder. You’re using a human-sized screwdriver. It’s almost bigger than your entire gizmo!”

The student looked at Daran with a look that clearly said, *Thank you for reminding me.*

“You know what, why don’t we make an extension together? I can teach you some metal-working techniques while we’re at it.”

At this point, the boy finally managed to crack a smile. “Really? That would be great! What kind of extension do you have in mind?”

“I don’t know,” Daran said. “You’re saying the gizmo will quickly learn to handle even complicated extensions?”

The boy nodded. “That’s what they said when I got him.”

Daran smiled. “In that case, I’ve got an idea. Why don’t we make a lock-picking extension for him?”

“Now that sounds like a lot more fun than turning screws.”

“Perfect. Let’s get to work then. I’m Daran by the way.”

“I’m Eveni, and this is Eragos.” Upon hearing his name, the gizmo stopped running and turned his head around.

“Hi Eragos,” Daran greeted him. “We’re going to turn you into a burglar.”

Daran walked back to his room late in the afternoon with a smile on his face. He had made his first friend at the Academy. *Apparently, to make friends, I just have to help people out,* he reasoned.

He also had gotten to know the Academy workshops, including all procedures. Eveni had told him about material budgets. Every time a student collected materials to build stuff, these materials were subtracted from his budget. Luckily the budget was big enough to build just about anything, as long as you didn't screw up too much.

Daran entered his room and slumped down into his chair. *This has been a long day.* Only then did he notice the note he had left on his desk. It was the note giving him access to the Academy records. *But only today.* He snatched the note and hurried out of the room, only to run into Eveni.

"Hi Daran," the boy said. "I just wanted to ask whether you might possibly to want to have dinner together."

"Oh, sorry, I can't. I'm a bit busy now," Daran replied.

Eveni dropped his eyes. "I see. I get it. It's okay."

Daran was surprised by Eveni's reaction. *Why did he say that?* But then he figured it out. It surprised him. *And I thought I was having trouble making friends.*

"No, you don't get it," Daran said. "Walk with me." He set off at a brisk pace towards the main Academy building, where the archives were located, with Eveni trailing behind. "I'll tell you what's going on. You know who Nolan is, right?"

Daran glanced around to see Eveni nod.

“Well, I believe Nolan was my father. I want to find out more about him, as well as look for any trace who my mother might be. The only way to do that is to access the Academy records, but I only have permission to access it today.”

“Oh. So that’s why you’re in a hurry,” Eveni said.

“Indeed. They close in less than an hour and there’s still a lot to figure out. In fact, I could use some help. Have you got time? We can have dinner afterwards.”

“Sure! I’d love to help out,” Eveni said, now with a big grin on his face.

Quietly they walked on for a while. Then Daran noticed Eragos, climbing along Eveni’s back onto his shoulder. The small creature was wagging his newly designed tools like a tail.

“So how’s your gizmo doing? Is he learning to use his new extension?”

“Yeah, he’s really enthusiastic!” Eveni smiled. “He is practicing on every lock he finds.”

“Oh, not everyone will like that. You do need to teach him which locks to pick and especially which locks not to pick.”

“Why should I teach him that?”

“How else will he learn? You know, the Thought Academy isn’t only about creating thoughts in here.” Daran playfully knocked Eveni on the head. He continued by swooping up Eragos from Eveni’s shoulder and petting the creature. “It’s also about creating the right thoughts in here.”

At that point they arrived at the record halls. Upon showing Quenton’s note, they were quickly given access to several big

storerooms housing dozens of cabinets, each filled with tons of boxes.

“We’ll be closing in just over half an hour,” the keeper said as she left the two boys to their own devices.

They glanced around, a bit lost. “So, where do we start?” Eveni eventually asked.

“We’re interested in Nolan’s last two years as a student. Why don’t you check out his exams? I’ll see if I can find his name in other student records from that time.”

Quickly they started searching. It turned out to be a more daunting task than Daran had imagined. The boxes were dusty and heavy. The paper was old and fragile. The handwriting was faded and hardly legible. For a while Daran was losing hope, until he finally found Nolan’s name scribbled in some document. “Disciplinary tasks,” the title read. Daran realized what it meant. *Punishments.*

As he turned the page, Nolan’s name was mentioned another four times, and six times on the page after that. *Whoa, he got into more trouble than I did.*

The document made note of the pranks Nolan used to pull. ‘Making a gizmo shaped as a doorstep, that raised itself briefly whenever someone tried to step over it.’ ‘Teaching gizmos to constantly run in circles around their own thinkers.’ ‘Having a tiny and nearly invisible gizmo project a high-pitched sound at a thinker for two days in a row.’ *Wow, that’s brilliant!*

Then, after turning another page, all these pranks suddenly ended. *Year 553, month three*, Daran noted. *That’s less than a year before I was born.*

The box didn't appear to have any further references on Nolan, so Daran walked over to Eveni. "Found something?"

"Yes I have," Eveni smiled. "Exams, project evaluations, everything. I didn't know so much was recorded."

"So what've you got?" Daran asked curiously.

"Initially, Nolan was quite the problem student. He barely passed his modules. Teachers said he was talented, but he just didn't use his talents."

"And things changed in year 553, month three," Daran guessed.

Eveni nodded. "You are absolutely correct. Nolan suddenly started working hard. His grades shot up and the number of modules he completed every week doubled. He graduated in the same year, in month twelve."

"Exactly when I was born," Daran noted.

"You think there's a connection?" Eveni wondered, but Daran shook his head.

"No. Nolan didn't know I existed. My birth wouldn't have changed a thing. But things might be different nine months earlier."

"You think the same events that caused you to ... well ... exist, caused him to study harder?"

Daran nodded. "What else could it have been?"

"It was a tumultuous time," Eveni noted, knowing the history. "Students from the lower classes were pulling a lot of pranks. So when the head of the Thought Academy, the Tharon, was killed in a prank gone bad, they installed the rule that only kids from wealthy families could join the Academy."

Daran frowned. He wasn't aware of that. "Was that one of Nolan's pranks?" he wondered.

Eveni shook his head. "No, it was by some girl named Tamar."

"Maybe she was a friend of Nolan."

"Could be. But how do we check that? It's not like they keep track of friendships."

At this point Daran smiled. "Not exactly, but I know something that's close enough. Follow me." He led Eveni to the stack of boxes he had just plowed through.

As they got there, the record keeper called out, "It's time! We're closing!" but Daran shrugged the comment aside.

"If they were friends, then they must've pulled a prank together. Let's see if their names are listed together in the punishment records."

Quickly Daran browsed through the names, looking for people that had received 'corrective tasks' together with Nolan. Only one name consistently showed up, but it wasn't Tamar. "Donato," Daran said. "Ever heard of him?"

"No, but I'll look him up." Eveni hurried back to his set of boxes when the record keeper entered with a stern look on her face.

"Sorry, we're still cleaning up," Daran said, trying to stall. As slowly as he could, he started lifting the boxes back onto the shelves. When he was finished with his own boxes, he went over to help Eveni with his. A few minutes later, they were outside, walking back across the Academy square.

"So what did you find?" Daran eagerly asked.

“Donato was very similar to Nolan, except that he didn’t change. Even after month three of that year his grades were bad, and a few months later he dropped out of the Academy.”

“So he didn’t become a thinker,” Daran summarized. “This Donato guy might be the only one who really knew Nolan as a student. I have to find him. Do you have any idea where he might live?”

Eveni shrugged. “He could be anywhere. And if Donato isn’t a thinker, then you have to access the city records instead. They keep track of where all the ordinary people live. Non-thinker people I mean. But of course access is restricted for students.”

“Let’s see if they can make an exception to that.”



## Chapter 4 – Different ways to fight

Daran blocked another strike aimed at his head. He shifted his stance and attacked again from a low angle, only to find his attempt parried. Immediately he went back into a defensive posture, just in time to deflect a direct attack at chest level.

“And stop,” Norema said. “Good job. That completes another module. You control the basic techniques quite well.”

“So what’s next?” Daran asked.

“Practice,” was the simple response. “Lots of practice. At the moment you still need to think about your moves. They should become second nature. What you need is a sparring partner. If you want, I can set you up with one.”

“That would be great,” Daran said. After having met Eveni, he was eager to meet more fellow students.

“I think I know just the right person. He’s a bit more experienced than you, but that’ll give you the chance to learn. I’ll go get him.”

Norema left the room and Daran went over to his bag to fetch his water bottle. A moment later Norema returned, and trailing behind her was Firo, accompanied by his gizmo. Both students appeared to be surprised to see each other.

“Let me introduce you guys,” Norema said, but Firo interrupted her.

“We’ve met,” he said, as he put his gizmo on a leash and chained him to the wall. Then he picked up a stick.

The boy had a suspicious look on his face. *Mostly anger*, Daran noticed, but he also saw a glimmer of a smile. *I don't think I'm going to like that part.*

"Well then, let's begin," Norema said. Immediately Firo attacked, and Daran barely managed to raise his stick in time to prevent a major headache.

Where Norema would've allowed Daran to set up a counterattack, Firo definitely did not intend to give him that chance. Relentlessly he pressed on. For a while, all Daran could do was block, deflect and occasionally dodge, and still he often couldn't prevent Firo from landing a hit on one of his less vulnerable body parts. His hips and thighs were rapidly filling up with bruises.

Daran considered giving up, but he immediately dismissed the idea. He wouldn't give Firo the satisfaction, and so he fought on.

Slowly but steadily, he began to see a pattern in Firo's attacks. The boy always kept his distance from Daran, trying to hit his opponent with the tip of his stick. *It's the part of the stick which moves the fastest, and thus hurts the most.* But it also represented a weakness.

Daran blocked a swing coming in from his right. Next up came a strike from the left. *Predictable.* He jumped out of its way and immediately closed in until he could smell Firo's breath. At this close range, Firo's swings would be useless. Yet more importantly, Daran's quick move surprised his opponent. For a moment Firo was confused. Daran was not.

With the back end of his stick, he hit Firo in his stomach. The boy nearly doubled over. Daran then brought his stick around to

his other side, hitting Firo in the back. This would've sent the boy flying forward, were it not that Daran had lifted his leg. Firo tripped and crashed into the floor.

"And stop," Norema said. "I think that's a good first sparring session. Whether you guys have more of them later on is up to you. Now you should both head to the showers."

Daran nodded. He wasn't eager to wait for Firo to get up, so he quickly grabbed his bag. He glanced over his shoulder to Firo's growling gizmo. The short-tempered creature had been trying to assail him ever since the sparring began. Luckily it was still leashed. Daran gave it a wide berth and quickly left for one of the dressing rooms. To his relief, Firo didn't follow him there. *Good. He took a different room.*

After a quick shower, Daran looked at his hips. They were already filled with blue and purple spots. *I may have won the fight, but I definitely didn't come out of it unscathed.* He decided to practice even harder in the days to come.

When he had packed up all his stuff, he left the gyms, eager to get dinner at the food hall. As soon as he stepped outside though, he was surrounded. Five boys and the same number of gizmos circled around him. Among them was Firo, who apparently had skipped the showers altogether. Firo's friend from the group mission, Posak, was also there.

*This isn't good,* Daran thought. He felt his heartbeat rising. "Brought some friends along?" he asked, trying to reduce the tension.

"Just some more people who think you shouldn't be here," Firo said.

“Mind if I pass through?” Daran said, trying to walk past Firo, but the boy pushed him back into the circle.

“Yes I do. I mind you being here and I mind you going anywhere that’s not the exit.”

Someone shoved Daran from behind, which sent him right back towards Firo. Firo again pushed Daran, and pretty soon the student was nudged all around the circle. Daran had trouble to remain standing. He felt a tug on his leg and noticed that Firo’s gizmo had grabbed hold of his shoe. With a metallic clang, he kicked it aside.

“You keep your hands off my gizmo!” Firo said furiously, and with a quick swing of his fist he knocked Daran to the ground. Before Daran could recover, his attackers started kicking him. Trying to protect his face, Daran rolled himself up into a ball. The kicks just kept on coming. For a few excruciatingly long seconds, he didn’t have a clue what to do. Then darkness suddenly enveloped him.

“Aaaahh!” one of the boys yelled out in panic as the light returned. A soft thud followed. A moment later, two other students were swept aside. Daran looked up and saw a familiar shape. *Nilas*.

Quickly he got up. Only Firo and Posak were left standing. Posak looked confused, but Firo stepped towards Daran with fists ready. Not frightened anymore, now that Nilas was covering his back, Daran moved forward and hit Firo full in his face, knocking him to the ground.

“Hey!” a low voice shouted out. “Stop that right now!” Finally Daran took the time to look around. Hunters were running in

from all directions. Quickly they separated the students, and before Daran could utter another word, all six boys were ushered towards Malroy's office.

"Okay, tell me what happened," the head of education said when all students were seated in front of him.

Daran opened his mouth to explain everything, but Firo responded sooner. "We were just hanging out when Daran had his gizmo attack us." The boy used a tissue to wipe some more blood from his nose. "He then tried to break my nose."

"That's not true!" Daran shouted out. *Don't these thinker students ever speak the truth?*

"Well, Daran, what's your story then?" Malroy asked, but from his tone Daran knew he wouldn't believe much of it in the first place.

"Firo and his friends were waiting for me when I left the gym. Firo knocked me down and they started to kick me. Nilas came to save me. Without him I would've been in the hospital by now."

Firo rolled his eyes, clearly signaling to Malroy that Daran was making things up.

"Well, I have two different stories, and to be honest, I don't care which one is the truth. You were all in a fight, so you'll all get to face the consequences. Kitchen duties for three months. No exceptions."

Daran's mouth dropped open from the unfairness of it all. He wanted to reply, yet Firo again beat him to it. "But what if he sends his gizmo after us again?" the student asked. "I can't feel safe around here with that *thing* still roaming about."

“Fair enough. Daran, from what I’ve heard, you’re well ahead with your gizmo handling modules anyway. You are hereby forbidden to have contact with your gizmo for three months as well. That’s my final thought. I want to hear no more of this.”

“But Firo – ” Daran started, but he was cut off mid-sentence.

“Enough. Everyone, get out of my office.”

One by one, the students walked or hobbled out of the room. Just before they went separate ways, Daran glanced one last time at Firo. The student gave him a snide smile.

Daran clenched his fists as despair welled up within him. It took a lot of effort, but he turned around and quickly ran off, before anger overtook him.

That evening, Daran went up to the aviary for the last time. He walked over to Nilas’ shelter. As always, the bird was happy to see him, though this time he was a bit puzzled by Daran’s sad look.

“Nilas, I’ve got some bad news,” Daran started. “I’m forbidden to have contact with you for three months. That means no repairs, no flying and not even talking.”

Nilas made a confused squeal, not understanding what was going on.

“I’m sorry,” Daran said, a tear slowly sliding down the side of his nose. “I’ll see you in three months though. We’ll go flying then.”

Daran gave the gizmo one last pat on his head and then turned around and walked away. A hunter was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. Daran gave him his key and his watch and, with his head slumped down, he staggered off towards his room.

## Chapter 5 – Different ways to help

“Daran, sit down,” Quenton gestured as the boy entered his office. “What can I do for you?”

Daran decided to be direct. “Can I get access to the city records?”

Quenton leaned back in his chair and frowned for a brief moment. Then he asked, “Why do you need access to the city records?” The question sounded quite normal, but Quenton’s initial frown told Daran enough. The scholar wouldn’t like to give Daran access, and now he was looking for an excuse to deny it.

Daran decided to stick with the truth. “I’ve found a name of an old friend of Nolan’s. I’d like to look up where he lives.”

“You think he might know who your mother is,” Quenton finished. Daran nodded. Quenton then bent forward and put his arms on his desk, his eyes firmly locked on Daran.

“Daran, I’d really like to give you access, but I can’t. Access to city records is only for special circumstances. Giving access would show a huge amount of trust. Currently, with you getting into fights and all, that trust just isn’t there.”

“But I didn’t start that fight!” Daran blurted out. “It was Firo!”

Quenton calmly nodded. “I know. You didn’t strike me as the type that would go up against five students on your own. But it doesn’t matter. Like it or not, this is about what everyone around us thinks. If I’d give you access, it would seem as if I’m rewarding you for getting into a fight. I can’t let that happen.”

“So what should I do instead?” Daran asked, throwing his hands up wide in frustration.

“Simple. Don’t get into fights. Prevent them in some way. If you give others reason to believe you’re a good student, you allow me to approve your requests every now and then.”

*Preventing fights?* Daran thought as he left the office. *That’s definitely easier said than done.*

*Maybe Magnus has some good advice,* Daran figured as he walked through the city towards the former parts trader. As expected, the old man was reading a book in his favorite chair.

“Hi Daran! How’s all the thinking going?”

Daran sighed. “The thinking is going well enough. It’s just ...” He was looking for the right words.

“The other students are harassing you, and yesterday that escalated into a fight. You don’t know how to deal with that yet.”

“How did you – ” Daran started to ask, but then he thought, *He must have seen the bruises and thought on from there.* He nodded, only now realizing how much the man was correct. “They even took Nilas away from me!”

“Why don’t you tell me from the start what happened?”

And so Daran did. During his story, the unfairness of it all crept under his skin. He felt a tear fighting its way out of his eye. He tried to squeeze it back in, but that attempt failed. Eventually a few more slid down his cheeks. All the while, Daran kept talking.

When he was finished, Magnus silently nodded. “So now they’ve shoved the responsibility to stop those fights onto you. It doesn’t sound like these thinkers got any better on their judgment in the past couple of years. How were you planning to do that?”



Daran shrugged. "I don't know. If Firo just waits for me somewhere and starts a fight, then I can't really avoid it, can I?"

"Then I guess you have to prevent him from wanting to start a fight with you in the first place."

Daran snorted. "Yeah, how would I ever do that?"

"Suppose that all the things that he does to you are also done to him. Do you think he would still hurt you then?"

Daran thought about it for a bit. "Well, no. Every time he would hit me, he'd be worried about what would happen to him. So you're saying I should take revenge?"

"No!" Magnus immediately replied. "Taking revenge is stupid. It just leads to you guys hurting each other more and more. No, you have to make sure that whatever he does to you is also exactly done to him. Definitely nothing more, and preferably also nothing less."

"But I lost my gizmo because of him!" Daran blurted out.

"Which means ..." Magnus waited for an answer.

"That I need to make him lose his gizmo as well. But how do I do that?"

At this point Magnus smiled. "You're smart. I'm sure you'll think of something."

Daran had pushed aside the matter for now and decided to spend the rest of his day on homework. He was back in his room at the Academy, lying on his bed reading a book, when there was a knock on his door. After calling out "Yeah?" Eveni entered.

"Daran, I need your help," the boy explained.

Daran put aside his book and sat up. "Sure. What is it?"

“Have you already done the gizmo handling module on basic gizmo thought processes?”

“No. I was planning to do that in a few weeks. Why?”

“Well, there’s a class for it, and it’s given only four times a year, and – ”

“You just missed it.”

Eveni nodded with his eyes turned downward. “I really need this module. If I don’t get it soon, I’ll be too far behind and they’ll kick me out. I don’t know what to do.”

“Why don’t you just get the book for that module out of the library? That’s what I always do.” Although there regularly were classes for most modules at the Academy, Daran had never really been fond of any classroom session. It’s not that he didn’t like being among fellow students. It was because he just couldn’t focus very long, listening to a talking person. Reading went faster and cost him a lot less energy.

“That’s the problem,” Eveni said. “There *is* no book for that module. Following the class is the only way to pass it.”

Daran frowned. *No book? Eveni’s not the only one who’ll be in trouble there.* “Is it an applied module or do you need to do an exam?”

“There’s an exam. It’s a pretty theoretical module, from what I’ve heard.”

“Then it has to have some sample exams. You know what? I’ll take a look at the module. Give me a few days and I’ll try to come up with something.”

“Thanks Daran. You’re the best.”

As Eveni left Daran to his ponderings, the student mused, *If only more people thought that, my life here would be a lot easier.*

Before the evening was through, Daran had already picked up several dozens of example test questions. It wasn't much to go on, but it was the only information he had to figure out what the module was about. *This should be an interesting challenge*, Daran thought, smiling.

But as he set out to work, his smile slowly disappeared. Without any background knowledge, the questions hardly seemed to make sense. Also during the next morning, things didn't improve much. Every time he thought he had figured something out, he was still quite a bit off from the answer. Only after lunch did Daran start to see patterns in the questions and the answers. He eagerly worked on, well into the evening, until he was convinced he had it all figured out.

At that point Daran considered taking the test of the module himself, but the time for that had not yet come. His goal was to help Eveni. He thought about instructing the boy himself, but decided against it. It would cost a lot of time. It would be much better if Eveni could study the module at his own pace. So the next morning Daran started to write a very simple yet extensive guide on how to solve the test questions.

When he finally finished it, Daran was eager to test his problem solving guide. He headed over to the exam section of the Academy to take the test. To his own surprise, the test went better than any he had ever done before. *After explaining exactly how to solve a problem, it's not all that hard anymore to actually solve one*, he

realized. He made some final amendments to the guide and headed over to Eveni's room.

"Hey Daran, what's going on?" Eveni greeted him.

Daran smiled. "You remember that module you had some issues with?"

"Yeah," Eveni nodded with mostly fear in his eyes, but also a sparkle of hope. "What about it?"

"I wrote a problem solving guide. I think it might come in handy if you want to pass the module." He tossed the stack of papers on Eveni's desk.

"Wow Daran, that's amazing!" Eveni shouted out positively surprised. "I'll start studying right away. Thank you so much. And do let me know if there's anything I can ever do for you."

"Well, I could also use your help in a small matter," Daran confessed.

"Sure, what is it?"

Daran smiled thankfully at his friend. "Can I sit down somewhere? This may be a bit complicated."

Daran entered the gym hall and took in the scene. The room was pretty crowded with students and gizmos. In the far corner Firo was practicing some routines. As always his gizmo was nearby, leashed to the wall.

Daran put his bag in a corner. He practiced a few routines of his own to make sure he was warm. Then he walked over to the staff holder. As he pulled a staff out of it, he applied a small force and the whole cabinet toppled over. Several staves clattered noisily onto the gym floor.

“Clumsy fool,” Daran heard someone say as he picked up the staves one by one. “Can’t even handle something as simple as a staff.” Of course it was Firo. The boy had interrupted his routines to mock Daran.

Daran looked up and said, loud enough for everyone else to hear, “You think I can’t handle this? I already beat you with a stick. I can easily beat you with a staff as well.”

“Yeah, right,” Firo returned with a snide laugh. “*That* I want to see for myself.”

A few more students interrupted their practice sessions to see what was going on. Slowly, a circle was forming around the two students.

“Then I’ll show you,” Daran said, smiling. “Stick or staff?”

“I’ll stick with my stick, thank you,” Firo said. A few of the bystanders laughed at the pun, but most just waited in anticipation of what was to come.

Daran picked up a staff and walked to the middle of the hall. He looked around, happy to see that every student in the room had joined the circle. Every student but one, that is. Near the entrance, Eveni stood waiting.

Daran directed his gaze back to Firo. The staff felt awkward in his hands. He had never trained with one before. *It probably works the same as a stick*, he figured. He gripped it tightly and got ready.

For a few brief moments, the two boys circled around each other. Then Firo moved in for the first strike. Daran easily swept it aside and tried to counter by hitting Firo with one end of his staff, but while doing so the other end hit his own head. Firo used

the confusion to land a strike on Daran's shoulder. Then Daran jumped back, gaining time to recover.

"Like I said. Clumsy," Firo snidely remarked.

"I'm just warming up," Daran countered. He focused his ears on the noise around him. Through the exulted yelling of the crowd around them, he managed to distinguish the angry cries of Firo's gizmo. *Good*, Daran thought to himself.

Firo set up another series of attacks. This time Daran was ready. By cleverly using both ends of the staff, he managed to block all strikes without hitting himself. As Firo slowed down his relentless attacks, Daran tried a few strikes himself. Slowly he started to figure out how to use the staff for offense as well.

Yet still Firo pressed on. Daran wasn't sure whether he could win this fight. But his goal wasn't to win. It was to stall. He kept his ears open, waiting for a sound that just wouldn't come. His arms started to ache from all the blows he had absorbed with his staff. Doubt was creeping in on Daran. *Maybe the plan failed*, he thought. He was just about to try one last desperate offensive attempt when he heard the snap he'd been waiting for.

*Just a little bit longer*, Daran told himself, his determination renewed. He kept on blocking Firo's strikes until he saw some movement in the circle. He used the middle part of his staff to push Firo back. He then shifted his weight backwards, preparing for his final offense. With every bit of strength he had left, he started to swing his staff forward.

Firo recognized the move and quickly closed in on Daran's left. It was the proper response. Firo would be able to dodge Daran's

swing and immediately take advantage of the lapse in defense. In short, it would mean a painful defeat for Daran.

Except that Daran wasn't aiming for Firo.

Just before Firo managed to take advantage of the opening, a loud metallic clang combined with the splintering of wood surprised everyone. Daran's big swing had hit Firo's gizmo square in its center and the creature was launched sideways through the circle. Amazed, Daran looked at the wooden stump left in his hands.

"Foralas!" Firo cried out as he rushed to his gizmo. From what Daran could see, the gizmo's mechanisms were significantly damaged, but its thought core was still in one piece.

Firo stood back up and took several steps towards Daran, his fists clenched. Daran tossed his stump aside and got ready for another fight. Then a loud voice boomed, "Stop this immediately!" A hunter had entered the room. "What is going on here?"

"He destroyed my gizmo!" Firo roared, pointing at Daran.

At this, Daran innocently raised his hands. "It was an accident. We were sparring and I accidentally hit his gizmo. Somehow it had broken loose." Several other students murmured their agreement.

"That's a lie! He must have cut the rope," Firo yelled out.

Again, Daran's reply was calm. "How could I? I was sparring you. And besides, it's easy to check whether the leash was cut. Just look at the fracture pattern."

Firo picked up the rope that was still collared around the gizmo's neck and looked at the end. It was heavily frayed. *All the*

*time we spent teaching Eveni's gizmo how to partially fray ropes definitely paid off*, Daran mused.

"Looks like your leash was old and worn," the hunter said. "I'm sorry about your gizmo, but it's your own fault. You should've either gotten a decent leash, or trained him not to get near a sparring session."

Daran nodded solemnly. "I'm really sorry," he added, trying to hide the mockery in his voice. "It must feel terrible to lose your gizmo. But I'm sure you'll be able to get him back in working order in a month or three."

As Daran turned around and headed for the showers, Firo yelled after him, "You'll regret this Daran! I'll figure out how you did it and I'll make you pay!"



## Chapter 6 – Cause and effect

*Where did they put the entrance?* Daran wondered, quickly trotting through the corridors. Being late on his first kitchen duty would definitely not result in any alleviation of his punishment.

He stopped at an intersection and looked into each of the adjoining hallways, but there wasn't a sign to be found. He was about to give up when a voice behind him said, "You're Daran, right?"

Daran turned around. The voice belonged to a girl. Her age and uniform showed she was another first-year student, but she didn't look familiar.

"Yes," Daran said, surprised. He was looking for a proper response, but before he could find one, the girl quickly said, "I wanted to thank you for your problem solving guide."

"My what?" Daran blurted out.

"You know," the girl said, keeping her eyes focused on Daran's feet. "The one you wrote for the thought processes module. It saved me a lot of time."

It didn't make sense to him. "How did you ... Where did you get that from?"

"Oh, Ikiana gave me a copy," she timidly replied.

*Ikiana. Another name I've never heard before*, Daran thought, raising an eyebrow. *Well, I don't have time to sort this out.* "Listen, I'm looking for the entrance to the kitchen. Do you know where it is?"

"Yeah, just turn left here," she pointed. "It's the second door on your left."

“Ah, thanks. I’d better be off.” Daran turned around and set off, but after a few steps he couldn’t help glancing back. The girl was still standing there, watching him walk away.

Daran turned back. “I didn’t catch your name yet.”

“It’s Lana,” the girl said. For the first time, a shy smile appeared across her face. It made Daran smile too.

“Well Lana, I’ll see you around then.” He turned around again and ran to the kitchen.

*So my problem solving guide is circulating among the students, and they actually like it, he told himself, if only because he still couldn’t believe it. Well, I guess I can write one for another module too. It’s a nice way of studying anyway. And then at least I can figure out if this was a one-time fluke or not.*

Still with a smile on his face, he entered the kitchen, but the smile quickly disappeared when he saw Firo and his friends.

“Good, you’re all here,” a man from the staff said. He introduced himself as Jacksor. “I want three of you to clean all the tables in the dining hall. The other three will help with the dishes.”

Quickly three of Firo’s friends grabbed some cleaning gear and ran off, leaving Daran with Firo and a boy named Zeris.

Daran looked around. A huge pile of dirty dishes filled up one side of the kitchen. *I never knew we used so many*, Daran thought. Then he saw the twelve mechanical arms that were protruding from the wall. With a fluency that seemed enchanting, eight of them were washing all the plates, cups, bowls and whatever else they managed to grab, while the remaining four dried it all. Already a stack of clean plates was forming on the other side.

*It's a gizmo*, Daran realized to his surprise. *I never knew they used them for such simple tasks as well.*

"So what do we need to do?" Firo asked. "It looks like all the work is already being done."

Daran frowned. *Isn't it obvious?* He guessed he had worked too much in the workshop. *Whenever something starts piling up, it needs to be taken care of right away.* So Daran was already carrying a small stack of plates to the cabinets on the other side of the kitchen.

"Apparently your friend gets the idea," Jacksor told Firo as he turned away and joined his coworkers on the far side of the room.

"Trying to be a smartass again?" Firo snidely remarked.

"Trying to be a jerk again?" Daran countered.

For some time the three boys continued to work in silence. Daran was lost in his thoughts, until suddenly the word "break-in" drifted to him from the other side of the room.

"Yes, they stole some back-up keys," a woman told Jacksor. "They even adjusted the key book. That's why they're replacing all affected locks."

*I remember that key book*, Daran thought. When he was given his key to the Academy aviary, it was noted in a big registration book. In this way, the Academy could always find out who owned which key. *I guess they've removed my record when I handed my key back in.*

"And that's also why they're giving us new keys," Jacksor replied.

Suddenly interested, Daran turned his head to be able to focus on the conversation. Two steps later, he tripped and lost his balance. He frantically tried to keep the big pile of plates he was

carrying up straight, but in the end he went sprawling across the floor together with all the plates. Only then did he see what he tripped over. *Firo's foot. I should've known.* Though most of the plates survived the impact, quite a few of them broke into pieces.

"And that's an extra hour of work for you today," Jacksor yelled at him from across the kitchen.

"But it was – " Daran started to say, but he immediately realized it was pointless. He just nodded in resignation.

They continued working until all the plates were finished. They then continued with the cutlery, which turned out to be even more work. All the time Daran was wondering, *How can I let Firo get the same punishment?* He considered tripping him as well, but he knew the boy would be expecting it. Then Daran saw a few extra plates being washed, which gave him an idea.

It took some time and effort to inconspicuously set up the trap, and then some patience before the last plates were cleaned, but as soon as Firo picked them up, Daran walked across the kitchen to Jacksor.

"Excuse me. Do we need to do the bowls as – "

The clattering of porcelain resounded behind him. Daran turned around to see a surprised Firo, standing in front of the cabinet whose door he just opened. He still had some plates in his hand, but several others had fallen off of the shelves, right on top of his feet.

Jacksor sighed. "Yes, you need to do the bowls as well. And the good news is, you don't have to do them alone. We have another volunteer for an extra hour of work!"

Daran summoned a wry smile. *I hope this idea of Magnus is working, because so far it hasn't gotten Firo off my back. It's just got us spending more and more time together.*

Daran spent the next day with Eveni in the library, studying theoretical analysis. While his friend was practicing a module, Daran was writing a summary for it. He was adamant to make it just as good as the previous one, if not better. In the meantime, Eragos was playing around on the far side of the table, practicing with his new writing extension.

When Daran was finished with the first half of the summary, he decided to call it a day. Eragos climbed on Eveni's shoulder and the two students left the hall.

"So what will you do with the summary when it's finished?" Eveni asked.

"Good question," Daran admitted. "I'm thinking of putting it in some central place, where students can make copies."

"Sounds like a good idea," Eveni agreed. "Word will spread soon enough."

"You think so?" Daran wasn't all that sure. *What do people like so much about my summaries?* He did spend quite a lot of time on them, but still ... he just didn't get it.

"Don't worry. I know so," Eveni assured him as they reached Daran's room. "I'll see you at dinner."

"Wait," Daran called after him. "Something's wrong. My room is unlocked."

"Didn't you just forget to lock it?" Eveni asked, but Daran shook his head. He entered, expecting to see the room turned

upside down, but it wasn't. In fact, it looked almost normal.  
*Almost.*

He walked to his desk and tried to pick up a stack of notes, but it fell apart. Like oversized confetti, the pieces fell to the floor.

"They've cut everything to shreds," Eveni noted, with a few strips of Daran's bed sheets in his hands.

Daran cursed. "This is going to cost a lot of time to fix."

"You think it was Firo?" Eveni asked.

"Definitely. Firo and his friends."

"We should tell the thinkers."

"Yeah, great idea," Daran snorted. "Even if we can convince them someone broke into the room, what proof do we have it was Firo?"

"Ah, that's true," Eveni said. "But how did he get in anyway?"

"I don't know. But ... I overheard some of the Academy staff yesterday. They were talking about some keys that were stolen. A lot of locks had to be replaced to solve it."

"You think that was Firo?"

"It might be," Daran admitted.

"But if the Academy replaced the locks, then the whole thing didn't help whoever did it, right?"

Only then did Daran realize what he'd been missing earlier. "That's not entirely true. The thief also adjusted the key book. You know, the book that keeps track of who has which keys."

Eveni thought about it for a moment, but then he shook his head. "I don't get it."

“When they replace a lock, they have to give everyone involved a new key, right? So if the thief added his own name, he also got new keys. That’s how it did help him out.”

“But you think Firo did this?”

Daran wasn’t sure. *Would Firo be willing to steal from the Academy, just to get back at me?* Then he realized something else. “No. I mean, my lock wasn’t replaced, so my back-up key wasn’t stolen.”

*But who else might want to steal keys from the Academy?* Then the answer came to him. It was so obvious. *The spy that stole the thought cores. He’s adding himself to the records, becoming more and more ingrained in the Academy. I should tell Quenton.*

“So how did Firo get in then?” Eveni asked, pulling Daran away from his thoughts.

Daran shrugged. “I guess he learned how to pick a lock. The locks of the student rooms aren’t exactly high-grade and, knowing Firo, he wants to be able to do whatever I can do.”

“So your room isn’t safe anymore,” Eveni noted.

“Oh, that’s not the problem,” Daran thought. “I’ll figure out how to build a lock which even your gizmo cannot pick.” Upon hearing this, Eragos looked up from Eveni’s shoulder, somewhat offended, but Daran waved its complaints away. “What I am wondering is, how do we get back at him?”

“Got any ideas?” Eveni asked.

Daran glanced at the remainders of his notes, which were spread across the floor. The colored scribbles gave them a rather festive look. “Yes I do. We’re going to bring some color into Firo’s life.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that every part of Firo’s room could use a nice new layer of paint in various extra bright colors.”

“If we want to do that, we need to be certain that Firo’s not in his room. How do we do that?”

Daran couldn’t help laughing. “Oh, I know exactly the right time for that. Three days from now, Firo will spend his entire morning in the kitchen.”

“But so will you,” Eveni noted.

“True,” Daran agreed. “Which all leads to one question. Eveni, how good are your painting skills?”

Eveni gasped. “Pretty terrible,” he admitted, but Daran only smiled.

“Excellent.”



## Chapter 7 – A search for information

As Daran rounded the corner, he saw a familiar face enter mission control up ahead. It was one of Firo's friends. *Zeris was his name*, Daran recalled. If he wasn't dreading the upcoming group mission already, he certainly was now. He took a deep breath and followed the boy into the briefing room.

"Hi Daran!" said a voice.

"Lana!" Daran exclaimed, pleasantly surprised. He wanted to ask what she was doing here, but realized just in time what a stupid question that would've been. Not knowing what to say instead, he just looked around the room.

The three freshmen were joined by a first-year girl named Miril and a third-year student that introduced himself as Jona.

The thinker in charge stood up from behind the desk. "Today's group mission will be a role-play. When this mission starts, everyone involved in it will be playing a role, as if this is a real mission. I expect you to do the same. Is that clear?"

The five students nodded.

"Keep in mind that this role-play is about conversations only. Any fighting is not part of this mission. If you are unsure about the mission and want to talk *out of character*, clearly indicate so by using those exact words. Are there any questions so far?"

As the room remained silent, the thinker sat down. The expression on his face suddenly turned grave.

"We have just received word of a murder in the northeast part of Tarine. A man named Carlon was found dead in his own house. I need you to figure out exactly what happened."

Daran felt the irony. *I need to solve a murder for the Thought Academy?* But he shook off the feeling, burying it in the past, and decided to just go along.

Jona immediately took the lead. “When did this take place?” he asked.

“This morning, just before sunrise.”

“So whoever did this might still be in the city,” Jona reasoned. “We had better move quickly. Do we know anything else?”

“Not much. The victim was found by his neighbor.” The thinker shoved a small piece of paper across the desk. “Here is his address. You might want to check it out.”

Jona nodded. “We need some equipment. Communicators, if possible, to stay in touch when we split up. And in case there are any further names we need to track down, access to the city records would be nice as well.”

The thinker opened a wall cabinet. He handed Jona an envelope, as well as a small box. “The letter gives you access to the records. The box contains five communicators. And, out of character, I expect them back in one piece by the end of the day.”

“Out of character, that sounds perfectly manageable,” Jona smiled. He opened the box and handed each team member a communicator. “It’s time to get going. If you all will follow me, then I’ll fill you in on the plan.”

They left the control room and started heading to the Academy exit.

“Have you guys worked with these before?” Jona asked, gesturing to the device in his hands.

Zeris nodded, but the others shook their heads.

“Then I’ll quickly explain. These communicators all operate on one channel. With the top button, you can switch the sound on and off. With the button below that, you can also talk into the channel. Don’t forget to switch it off when you’re done talking.” He gave the first-year students an insistent look, which caused some snickering among the girls. Daran was surprised by the different atmosphere, compared to his previous mission. This could actually be somewhat fun.

“Finally, if you want to draw someone’s attention, you can also buzz that person. For that, you should use the numbered buttons below. I’m number one, Miril is two, Daran is three, Zeris is four and Lana is five.”

Daran raised his eyebrow, surprised by how quickly Jona had remembered all the names.

“The first thing we should do is talk with the neighbor. It’s our only lead. I’ll go there right away. In the meantime, I want someone to head over to the city records, just in case we need to look something up.”

Daran saw an opportunity. “I can go there,” he offered. *Then I can look up the address of this Donato guy right away.*

Jona shook his head. “No, I need you for something else. Lana, how soon can you get there?”

“If I run, in five minutes,” she said.

“Okay, go,” Jona nodded and Lana ran off.

“What about us?” Zeris asked.

“I need you to spread out across the city. If we get further leads, then we can quickly follow up on them. Zeris, I want you to go to a central place in the merchant district and wait for further

instructions. Daran, you're from the workshop district, so that's your region. Miril, I remember you partly grew up in the food district. Do you know the area?"

Miril smiled. "Like the back of my hand."

"Perfect. Then let's go."

Quickly the four students spread out. Daran ran over to the workshop district. On his way there, he listened in on the channel, but there wasn't much going on just yet.

After some time, Lana came on. "In case anyone's listening, I'm finally in," she said.

"I'm almost there too," Daran replied.

"Okay, now what?" Lana asked.

Daran shrugged. "Now we wait for further instructions."

It didn't take long before Jona's voice was heard. "I talked to the neighbor. He didn't know the victim very well. All he could give me were the names of his brother, his best friend and his business partner."

Jona mentioned the names, and not much later Lana added the addresses to that.

"Daran, you're closest to his brother. Miril, you've got the best friend. That leaves the business partner to Zeris. I'll be going to the King's Bridge, in case any of you need me. Oh, and these people don't know yet that the victim has died, so break the news gently. Does everyone follow?"

"Gotcha," Daran replied. He knew exactly where he needed to go. He switched off the channel, ran to the designated house and knocked on the door. It was opened not much later by a woman in her early forties.

“Hi there. How can I help you?” she kindly asked.

“I’m looking for Eduardo,” Daran said, remembering the name of the brother. “Is he at home?”

The woman tried to feign surprise, but she apparently wasn’t much of an actress. She turned around and yelled, “Eduardo! You have a visitor!”

A man came walking down the stairs. He took Daran’s uniform in with a frown. “The Thought Academy? Is something going on?”

“I’m afraid I have some bad news,” Daran said. “Can we sit down somewhere?” It felt a bit awkward. All the time Daran wondered, *What if Lana looked up the wrong address? Are they really acting?*

Eduardo led Daran down the hall, to the living room. When the two were seated, Daran decided to break the news. “There has been a murder this morning in the food district. Your brother, Carlon, was the victim.”

Immediately every sign of happiness evaporated from the man’s expression. It wasn’t long before he burst out crying. Daran was surprised when real tears were flowing down his cheeks.

Feeling slightly uncomfortable, he looked over to the man’s wife. She just stood there, a sad look on her face, watching the emotional outburst of her husband. A shiver of worry started to creep up Daran’s spine. Wanting to be sure, he looked closely, and then he noticed that the woman had trouble hiding a smile. *These people are good, he realized. Especially that guy. I really have to look for details.*

“Do you know who did it?” Eduardo finally asked, sobbing.

“That’s what we’re trying to find out. And we need your help. Do you have any ideas who might be behind this? Did your brother have any enemies or so?”

Eduardo shook his head. “No, not at all. He was always friendly to everyone.”

Daran frowned. “Any business rivals perhaps?”

“No. To be honest, I haven’t got a clue how his business went. We never talked about it.”

“Oh, okay,” Daran nodded. At that point he was lost for words. *What in the world can I ask him?* Then he remembered the communicator.

“I need to discuss some things with the others. I’ll be in the hallway for just a minute.”

As soon as he opened the channel, he heard Miril’s voice.

“I talked to the victim’s friend, but he didn’t have a clue who might have killed him.”

“The same here,” Daran confessed.

“Let’s hope then that Zeris has found something,” Jona said.

“Shall we buzz him?” Daran suggested.

“No. I trust that he’ll contact us as soon as he’s finished his interrogation.”

*Trust Zeris?* Daran thought. *That’s a risky move.* But he was proven wrong a moment later by Zeris’ voice.

“Is anyone listening?” he asked.

“We’re all ears,” Jona replied. “What have you found out?”

“Not much,” Zeris said. “The business partner doesn’t know anyone from the dead guy’s personal life. He was only worried about the money that was stored in the house.”

“Hmm,” Jona murmured. “So maybe this is about money. Daran, Miril, can you check this?”

“I’m on it,” Daran nodded. He returned to the living room, where Jona was proven right.

“Money, you say?” Eduardo mumbled after Daran explained the situation. “When I spoke with Carlon last week, he mentioned an old friend from his apprentice days that came asking for money. He sent the guy off.”

“That’s interesting. Do you have a name?” Daran asked, but Eduardo shook his head.

When Daran told this news to Jona, he was happy. “That’s a good lead. Perhaps the victim’s friend knows who this person might be. I’ll meet up with Miril now to check this out. You guys enjoy the weather until we’re done.”

As Jona switched off his communicator, silence returned to the channel. Daran said goodbye to the couple and went back into the streets.

“Hey Lana, how are things at the records?” he asked.

“Dusty,” Lana said. Through the communicator, Daran could hear the smile on her face. “There’s nothing like spending the entire morning buried in paper, just to look up three addresses.”

This gave Daran an idea. “That’s good, because I have another address to find. The guy’s name is Donato.”

“Is that for the mission?” Lana asked with hesitation in her voice.

Daran silently cursed. *She doesn’t want to do things that aren’t part of the mission.* He considered telling her the truth – that it was

just something important to him – but it was so important that he didn't want to risk it. "Yes, it's for the mission," he finally lied.

"Fine. Give me a second."

When Daran heard the address, he couldn't help laughing. It was only one street away from where he was. He just had to drop by. And so he ended up knocking on Donato's door.

A grumpy man in his early thirties opened up. "A thought student? And here I thought the Academy was finished with me."

"Are you Donato?" Daran asked.

"Call me Don. What do you want?"

At that point Daran realized he hadn't even thought about what he was going to ask. "I've got some questions about Nolan," he started.

"Nolan? I haven't heard that name in a while. We used to pull pranks together, you know," Don was blurting out, words flowing at lightning speed. "These thinkers were always way too serious. Pranks were the only way to survive at the Academy. I do hope you've found that out by now. How's Nolan anyway?"

"He's dead," Daran stammered, overwhelmed by the quick flow of information. *That's the second time this hour that I'm bringing bad news.*

"Dead you say? Ah, sorry to hear that. He'll be missed. You know, Nolan was the best planner ever. Great prank buddy as well. With him nothing ever went wrong. Never got caught either. Except for every few months or so. Too bad he turned."

"Turned?"

"Yeah. You know, to the obedient side. He stopped pulling pranks. Became as boring as the rest of them. In the end, I got



kicked out because of it. Can't pull a good prank without a buddy, you know. Now I'm a translator for traders from Erydon. Pretty good business these days. Erydic was the only useful thing I learned out there. Did you do those modules already?"

"Well ... no ..."

"Ha! I thought as much. Back then Nolan and I were already the only ones studying that. So what did you want to know?"

Finally Daran realized what he'd come for. "Did Nolan have a girlfriend? I mean, at the time when he ... well ... changed."

"Ha!" the former thought student laughed. "Nolan a girlfriend! Can you believe it? Nor could I. They were so different. She was always so boring. Never pulled a prank. Then one time Nolan convinced her into doing something fun. But I guess she just distracted him. Plan failed. Things went wrong. They split up. Never heard from –"

He got interrupted by the buzzing of Daran's communicator.

"Ah, you're on a group mission huh? I always loved those. You better put that thing on."

Daran switched the button. "I'm listening," he said.

"Good." It was Jona's voice. "We've got the address of our suspect. We need at least three persons to capture him. Miril, you and me are the closest. Let's meet at the Market Bridge right away so we can finish this."

"Got it. I'll see you there."

"You better get going," Don said.

"You're right." Daran turned around and was just starting to run, when he realized he was missing something. "Wait. What was the name of Nolan's girlfriend?"

“Good question. It’s been a while. But I still remember it. Her name was Tamar. It still is, I suppose.”

“Thanks!” Daran quickly ran off, but only when he had been running for a while did the impact of the answer hit him.

*Tamar? That was the girl whose prank killed the Tharon! I thought she didn’t like to pull pranks. And Nolan was involved in that? No wonder he suddenly changed.*

But there was hardly any time to sort out his thoughts. Daran arrived at the bridge, just as Miril and Jona also reached it.

“The suspect is at Mining Street,” Jona explained. “We have to turn left here.”

*That’s very close to where I used to live,* Daran realized. “If we go straight ahead, we can take a short-cut,” he blurted out, surprising himself.

He expected to be ignored and already started turning left, but to his surprise, Jona said, “A short-cut sounds good. Lead the way.”

Daran smiled. He quickly ran ahead, through several alleyways, until they reached the back of a house. “This is it.”

They rushed through the back door, only to surprise a thinker. “Who are you ... Already? ... The back door?”

“Excuse me?” Jona said.

“Oh, right,” the man finally said. “You completed the group mission. And in record time too, if I may add. Congratulations!”

## Chapter 8 – Getting to know the enemy

The mood back at mission control was celebratory. It turned out that students were given this group mission more often, but none had ever completed it so quickly. Or even got close to it.

“It feels odd though,” Lana admitted. “It’s the highest score I ever got, and all I did was look up some addresses.”

Jona smiled. “You better get used to that. In a good team, if everyone does the tasks he is assigned to do, and does them well, no one has to do a lot. You only need to get busy when others are messing up.”

“But it was more than that,” Daran realized, remembering when Jona blindly followed him on his short-cut. “You trusted us completely.”

“Not completely,” Jona said with a grin.

Daran raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Trusting someone simply means you can guess how that person will behave. I trusted that you would all put in an effort, and I trusted that you all knew your way around the region you grew up in. Those are pretty safe bets. I wouldn’t have trusted you guys to quickly find your way in a part of Tarine you’ve never been in.”

The first-year students nodded. It seemed to make sense. “But this does require that you know people,” Miril noted.

“True. Of course, the better you know someone, the more things you can trust him on. But even for people you’ve never met, there are things you can trust them on. For example, you’d never

met the people you went to speak with before, but you could still trust them to at least talk with you.”

“But you didn’t know us at all,” Zeris said.

“You’re wrong there,” Daran realized. “He knew us quite well. In fact, he knew exactly where we were from. The question I’m wondering is: how?”

Miril knew. “He paid a visit to the result room.”

“The what?” Daran asked.

“The result room,” Miril repeated, but the look on Daran’s face didn’t change. “You mean you really don’t know? Wow.”

“Is that bad?” Daran asked, wondering whether he’d missed something important, but Miril shook his head.

“No, just strange. Every student knows. The Academy wants thinkers to easily get familiar with each other’s background, skill set and such, to improve cooperation. So they set up this big room in which every thinker has his own box. It contains all publicly available data. So no sensitive things, which they all keep in the Academy record halls, but there’s still plenty of interesting stuff.”

“Why do they call it the result room?” Daran wondered.

“Oh, only the students do that,” Lana explained, giving Daran a smile. “Officially it’s called the familiarization room, but we only go there to look up each other’s exam results. That’s why we call it the result room.”

“That, and pronouncing *familiarization* is simply way too complicated,” Miril laughed.

“The main question still stands though,” Zeris noted, looking at Jona. “How did you know where we all grew up? Did you memorize the data of all students?”

“Heck no,” Jona said with a smile. “Just the important bits of the ones I might have to work with. It’s the least I can do to prepare for this.”

“So that’s how you knew us,” Lana concluded.

“Indeed. And it’s how I knew what to trust you guys with. Because face it, working as a group is pointless if there is no trust.” At this point he was looking specifically at Zeris and Daran. “Well, I’m diving back into my theoretical analysis modules. It was fun working with you guys. You were a good team.”

Jona shook everyone’s hand and left the room. Daran figured he might as well head out too. He shook the hand of Miril and then Lana. The second handshake lasted a bit longer than the first, but Daran guessed it was because he was dreading the third.

For an excruciatingly long second, Daran and Zeris just looked each other in the eye. Then Zeris held out his hand. *Okay, I didn’t expect that*, Daran thought, but he eventually shook it anyway. Then he turned around and, looking back at the others one more time, he left the room.

As he walked out, he couldn’t help feeling impressed. The group mission had taught him a lot. *Good leadership really can make a huge difference. But being a good leader isn’t all that easy. You have to know exactly who you can trust with exactly what.*

*It really requires getting to know your team well*, he told himself. Then he realized how Zeris had managed to surprise him. He sighed. *And your enemies even better*, he finally added to it.

It was right at the entrance of the student workshops that Daran had eventually decided to leave his summaries. He was on his way to add a fourth, this one being on theoretical analysis.

*What in the ... ?* Daran wondered as he saw the table. It was empty! Or at least, nearly. Apart from the stack in his hands, there was only one set of sheets left. As Daran looked at it, he realized it was his first summary on gizmo thought processes. *But what happened to it? The print quality is terrible!* Then he figured it out. *It's a copy of a copy of... but who would –*

“Sorry, do you need that?” someone behind him asked. Daran turned around, only to find what appeared to be a second-year student pointing at the set of paper in front of Daran’s nose.

“No ... I mean ... you do?” Daran stammered.

“Well, yeah,” the boy said and, as Daran still stared at him incredulously, he spread his hands and added “What?”

“You’re a second-year student.”

“Third-year actually. But hey, we need to refresh our basics too, and these summaries are really nifty for that. Except that they’ve kind of run out.”

“Yeah, I’d better make some extra copies,” Daran figured.

“With what? I don’t think copying that will result in anything legible.” He pointed to the last remaining summary.

“No, I’ll use the originals of course.”

This surprised the boy. “You have the originals? ... You mean ... ” He appeared to be lost for words and just kept on staring at Daran, until he finally stammered, “ ... Wow ... ”

Now it was Daran’s turn to blurt out “What?”

“Nothing,” the boy said, though Daran knew he was just avoiding an answer. “Anyway, if you have the originals, I’ll just take this summary. And good luck making copies.” He turned and quickly scurried out of the workshop.

*Well, that was awkward,* Daran sighed. *Though I’d better solve this problem right away.* He fetched his original summaries and headed to the copying room. After having made a huge stack of additional copies he went back to the workshop, only to run into Lana, who was just browsing through his brand-new theoretical analysis summary.

“Hey, thanks so much for this,” she said. “It’s great.”

Daran tried to prevent a smile, but he couldn’t stop himself, which resulted in a rather awkward grin. “Sure,” he managed to utter.

“Are you also planning to add a summary on workshop processes?” Lana wondered. “That would be useful.”

“But also kind of impossible,” Daran had to admit.

Lana raised an eyebrow. “Why’s that?”

“Well, I can’t exactly make an instruction sheet that’ll tell you when you’re about to kill yourself with random machinery, can I?”

Lana smiled. “Ah, that’s true. Good point.”

“But I can give you an instruction session sometime, if you want to?”

“That would be great!” Lana said enthusiastically.

“Perfect!” Daran added with a big grin on his face. He was just about to ask what time would be suitable when Lana added a question.

“Oh, can Ikiana join too? And Miril? They’re having the same problems as I do.”

*Ah, I didn’t see that coming,* he thought, but he didn’t manage to say anything other than “Sure.”

“I’ll let them know,” Lana said, smiling.

Then Daran got an idea. “I could also just organize a full instruction session for everyone. Let people sign up and all. What would you think of that?”

“That would be great! I’m sure people will love it.”

“Perhaps,” Daran added skeptically. He grabbed an empty piece of paper, wrote down a short description of his plans and drew a table below it in which people could write their names. He then pinned the sheet to the pin-up board.

“I can’t wait,” Lana said enthusiastically.

“Yeah, it should be fun. With a bit of luck we’ll get up to eight people. That would be a nice group.”

*And that’s another morning of chores finished,* Daran sighed as he walked back from the kitchens to his room. Firo was really getting on his nerves. Daran wished he could see the look on the boy’s face when he opened up his room. If everything had gone well, Firo’s room would be all pink and green by now, with a slight touch of yellow in-between.

Daran arrived at his room and pulled his keys out of his pocket, but when he tried to unlock the door, he found that it was already open. *Again?* Daran wondered, worried. *Surely Firo can’t get back at me so quickly? I just left him in the kitchen!*



Slowly he opened the door. There was someone sitting inside. Daran exhaled when he recognized Eveni.

“Wow, you scared me,” Daran admitted. “How did you get in?”

“Same way as I got into Firo’s room,” Eveni told him. A laughing squeak emanated from his shoulder.

*Eragos.* “Of course. How did it go?”

“Quite okay,” Eveni nodded. “But I am afraid I splashed a few drops of paint on the ground, and on his desk, and perhaps on his notes too.”

Daran couldn’t resist laughing. “I think that’s quite acceptable.” He imagined what it would all look like, but the thought only brought forth even more laughter.

When the boys were done snickering, Eveni got a bit more serious again. “I was wondering, have you done the theoretical analysis module on basic building structures already?”

“Having trouble with it?” Daran guessed.

Eveni nodded. “Yeah. I can’t seem to – ”

Daran’s door flew open. Firo was standing in the doorway. He didn’t look happy.

“I don’t care how you did it, but you will pay for this. I swear you will.”

Just for fun, Daran put up an innocent face. “I don’t know what – ”

“Don’t act all ignorant. You painted my room. I don’t know how you snuck out of the kitchen to do so, but I know it was you.”

It was only then that Firo seemed to notice Eveni. He gave the boy a slightly puzzled look for a second. Then the confusion disappeared from his face.

“Like I said, you will regret this,” Firo sneered. With those words, he turned around and left, slamming the door on his way out. The two boys were silently left behind.

“Well, that was fun,” Eveni said, still somewhat baffled.

“No it wasn’t,” Daran said, shaking his head. “You shouldn’t have been here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Firo figured out who painted his room.”

## Chapter 9 – If only certain things could end

At the end of the next morning, Daran headed over to the workshops, looking for Eveni. He found him in the back, working on a new extension for Eragos.

“Hey Eveni, want to have lunch?” Daran asked.

“Sure. Just let me finish this part.”

As Eveni gave the small wooden object in his hands a finishing touch, Daran decided to tell his friend about his discoveries. “I think I found out who my mother is.”

Eveni looked up. “That’s amazing! How did you do that? And who is it?”

“You’re not going to believe it.” Daran told Eveni the whole story, including the name of his father’s former girlfriend.

“Tamar?” Eveni repeated in disbelief. “You’ve got to be kidding me. I read about her. Apparently, she pulled some prank which got the previous Tharon killed.”

“I know,” Daran nodded. “But from what Don told me, Tamar never pulled a prank. This had to have been Nolan’s idea.”

Eveni raised his eyebrows. “So after Nolan’s prank went bad, he blamed it on his girlfriend?”

“I don’t know,” Daran confessed. “I mean, it doesn’t sound like Nolan, but it’s not like I know him that well either. It could be possible.” He sighed, not sure what to make of it all. “What happened with Tamar anyway?”

“In the aftermath of the accident, she somehow escaped. They never found her again. At the time, it was believed that she joined the Free Minds.”

“So no one knows where she is,” Daran said, somewhat frustrated. “Very helpful.”

In the meantime Eveni had finished and stored away his part, so they headed out for the food hall. On their way out, Eveni looked at the bulletin board. “Seems like your workshop instruction session is filling up quite well.”

It was only then that Daran looked at the sign-up sheet. Or rather, the sign-up sheets. “Someone added a second sheet,” he realized. The first one was fully covered with names.

“You mean you didn’t do that?” Eveni asked.

“Well, no! I mean, look at how many names there are. I don’t think there are even that many machines in the entire workshop.”

“What will you do? Cancel the session?”

Daran sighed. “I can’t exactly do that at this point, can I? Not with so many people subscribed.” He once more looked at the sheet, just to be sure he wasn’t imagining things. “I’ll come up with something. But first, let’s get some food.”

They left the workshop building and set out across the Academy square to the student dormitories.

“So, what’s the plan with the whole Tamar thing?” Eveni wondered. “Will you try to find her?”

“I don’t think that’ll be so easy. I mean, if the Academy couldn’t find her fifteen years ago, what chance do I have now?” With glazed eyes he stared ahead, lost in thoughts. “I think the best thing I can do now is read up on her. It would be nice to know what kind of person she was.”

“Maybe she has some family you can talk to,” Eveni suggested.

It stopped Daran dead in his tracks. *Why didn't I think of that?* “That’s brilliant. Her family would of course also be my family. Maybe they’ll even know where she is.”

Daran continued walking and pretty soon they entered the food hall. They each got a tray and started loading it up with food. Daran was done first, so he headed out to find an empty table. He found one in the back of the hall and waved for Eveni to join him. The boy spotted Daran and started moving in his direction, until he suddenly disappeared between the tables. This was followed by laughter from that part of the hall.

*What’s going on?* Daran wondered as he quickly headed over. He found Eveni on the ground, covered by most of his meal. Especially the red sauce was everywhere. At the table just behind him, Firo and his friends were laughing.

“Maybe you should watch where you’re walking!” Firo chuckled loud enough for the entire hall to hear. The rest of the table snickered along.

Daran looked at Eveni’s clothes. *There’s no way that he could get so much food on his clothes by merely tripping. This is definitely Firo’s work.* He glanced around the table, finding everyone grinning. Then he locked eyes with Zeris for a brief moment. The boy quickly looked away, his smile vanished.

Daran turned his attention back to Eveni. “Let’s get out of here,” he said. They left the hall and walked up the stairs towards Eveni’s room.

“Thanks,” Eveni softly said when they got there, his voice slightly wavering. Daran looked at the boy’s crestfallen face and was surprised to see tears finding their way out of his eyes.

“Don’t let Firo get to you,” Daran said. “He’s just being a pile of milling scrap.”

“But the whole hall was laughing at me!” Eveni blurted out, now loudly sobbing. “And I didn’t even stand up for myself. I just walked away like the coward that I am.”

Daran shook his head towards his friend. “If you had fought back then and there, you would’ve only gotten yourself into more trouble.” At this point, he realized he was talking from experience. *They always pick the situations where they have the upper hand. If we fight back, they either beat us up or shift the blame on us.*

“Then we should get revenge!” Eveni yelled. “You’re good at getting back at Firo. What should we do?”

Daran put his hands in his hair. “I’m not sure getting back at Firo is the best way to solve th – ”

“Then why did you have me paint Firo’s room?!” Eveni screamed out.

*Because of Magnus’ idea to inflict on him whatever he does to me. But how can I do that here?*

“I don’t know,” Daran sighed. A part of him really wanted this discussion to end. “Listen, the next time Firo or any of his friends walks by in the food hall, we’ll try to trip them. Then we can forget about this. Okay?”

Eveni wiped away a tear and silently nodded.

Daran felt bad about coming up with such a lazy solution, but at least it had ended the discussion. “Good. Now hoist yourself up in a clean uniform. We can’t have you smelling like basil all day, can we?” Mockingly, he knocked his friend on his shoulder.

Finally a smile managed to find its way onto Eveni’s face.

Daran entered the test section of the Academy. "I'd like to do a test on theoretical analysis please," he told the clerk on duty. "The one about basic economic models."

"Did this test before?" the man asked.

"No, first time."

"Good, then you get a random one. Room eight is available." Daran picked up the test and headed to the designated room.

It was basic procedure at the Thought Academy. Every module had about twenty different tests and together they covered the entire module. Only if a student really understood what the module was about, could he be sure that he could pass any of these tests. And in this way, students could do a test whenever they decided they were ready for it.

Daran smiled. *No deadlines. No people checking on me. Just me, figuring out how stuff works. Working at my own pace, in my own way. Just the way I like it.*

Of course there were students with less discipline, but they were usually quick enough to learn how to take initiative. The ones that didn't fell behind too much and were thrown out of the Academy. This ensured that all graduated thinkers knew how to get things done.

Daran entered the room, closed the door and sat down. It was a small room, with only a table, a chair and very well insulated walls. And that was exactly why he was surprised when, ten minutes into the test, he heard footsteps down the corridor. The footsteps quickly neared and two hunters rushed into the room.

Daran looked up. "If this is the new policy on catching cheaters, then I'm innocent."

"Funny," one of the thinkers said, without a hint of a smile. "Come with us, right now."

Daran was led out of the education building. Surrounded by the two hunters, he crossed the main Academy square, which got him several stares from fellow students. He was glad when they had passed the footbridge and eventually entered the main Academy building.

Pretty soon Daran realized he was being led to Arin's office. *This building is becoming familiar. I wonder whether that's a good thing.* Both Arin and Quenton were waiting for him.

The two thought leaders were sitting behind a big wooden desk. Quenton gestured for Daran to sit down in the chair opposite to them. "Daran, I have to ask you this," he said. "Where were you this morning?"

Daran sighed. Frustration rose up in him. Clearly he was being suspected of something again. "In my room, studying. You know, that's what you do for a test. Before you're dragged out of it."

"I don't suppose we can verify that?"

Daran shook his head. "I like to study on my own."

Arin and Quenton looked at each other, wondering what to ask next.

"So what happened?" Daran interrupted their thoughts. "Some more thought cores got stolen, I'm guessing?"

Quenton shook his head. "No thought cores this time, but we can't tell you anything more."



At that point a thinker entered. It was a scholar, based on his uniform. "Sorry to interrupt, but Seraf's condition has become critical."

"Will he make it?" Arin asked.

"Not sure yet," the scholar said. "It can go either way."

Arin cursed. "May his thoughts not go astray." He stood up and left the room, followed by the scholar.

After the door was closed behind the two departing thinkers, there was a brief moment of silence. Daran broke it. "You're having some problems with that spy." It wasn't a question. "Things getting violent."

Quenton nodded. "Seems so."

Daran decided to make a small guess. "He got into a place which you thought was off-limits, except for trusted thinkers." From the look on Quenton's face, Daran knew his gamble paid off.

"How did you know that?" the thinker asked.

Daran told Quenton what he knew about the stolen keys and the adjusted key book, finishing off with his theory that the spy was becoming more and more ingrained in Academy records.

"Those are some interesting thoughts," Quenton finally said. "We'll look into it. Is there anything else you want to talk about?"

*We'll look into it? Is that all he has to say about this?* Daran had at least expected some kind of praise for figuring it all out. *I guess he's still in his mode of not telling me anything. Well, if he isn't telling me stuff, then I won't tell him any more either.*

“Actually, I was wondering if I can get access to the record halls one more time,” Daran said. “I’m getting close to something and I need to figure out a few more details.”

“I thought you wanted to get access to the city records? Now you want access to the Academy records instead? What changed?”

“I figured some things out,” Daran replied curtly.

Quenton raised his eyebrows at this meaningless answer, but he didn’t mention anything about it. “I’m afraid I have to give you the same answer,” the scholar leader finally said.

Daran raised his hands, palms upward, as if to ask *Why?*

“You know that some ... undesired ... things are going on at the Academy these days,” Quenton explained. “Some people suspect you of this. Now, I don’t believe this of course, but if I’d give you special privileges, it would put me in a rather awkward position.”

Daran could’ve shouted lots of things about how ridiculous this was, but instead he forced himself to focus on a solution. “So how can I prevent you from being in this awkward position?”

Quenton sighed. “That’s hard. You should prevent these people from suspecting you of things.”

This comment hurt Daran more than he had expected. He felt anger flare up inside of him. “How can I do that when I haven’t done anything?” he yelled out. “When I don’t even know what they suspect me of?!”

Quenton remained calm. “Just show people you’re an exemplary student, and things may change with time.”

“An exemplary student?!” Daran repeated, infuriated. “You mean like the one that always passes his tests instead of being

dragged out of them? Or the one that isn't escorted around the Academy grounds by a pair of hunters for everyone to see? Yeah, that should be easy!"

And with that comment Daran stood up, left the room and slammed the door shut behind him.

## Chapter 10 – The threat of being kicked out

The whole room was filled with people, and most of them had even brought their gizmos along. The creatures of varying sizes were swarming between the tables. *Whoa. I'm glad I prepared well,* Daran thought.

"This is amazing," Lana told him. "So many people are curious about your instruction session. Are you nervous?"

Daran listened to his beating heart for a moment. "Of course I am," he realized. "But I'll manage."

Just when Daran wanted to start the session, three more students entered: Firo, Zeris and Posak. *Oh no, not them,* Daran thought. *I haven't seen their names on the list.* He looked over the sign-up sheets one more time. Finally he managed to find their names, at the bottom of the second sheet. The three of them had subscribed at the last moment.

Daran considered kicking them out, but knew that he couldn't. They had subscribed like any other. And next to that, the workshop was officially still available for any student that wanted to use it. It wasn't like anyone could reserve the room or anything. *I guess I should just make the best of this.*

"Okay guys!" he yelled out over the crowd. "I thank you all for coming. I want you to make pairs and go to a machine. For each machine I'll be explaining you the sort of nifty things you can do with it. After every two hours, we rotate the groups."

Daran watched as the crowd partnered up. Lana teamed up with Ikiana and Zeris joined Posak, but Eveni didn't ask anyone. He just sat down at a milling machine and waited for someone to

join him. To Daran's horror, the boy that joined him turned out to be Firo.

Eragos was growling from inside Eveni's shoulder. Daran fully agreed. *This is bound to cause problems.* But there was nothing he could do about it. With the crowd looking at him, he had to start the session.

"I'm going to start off the instruction at the drilling machines. I've got some instruction sheets for everyone else, so everyone can already start on something." Daran handed out the sheets and some half-finished parts he had made for the groups to practice with. Then he went to the drilling corner of the workshop. Six pairs of students looked at him, among them Lana, Ikiana and Miril.

"Okay, the most important thing you should ask yourself when using a drill is which drill bit to use. What do you think this depends on?"

The group came up with suggestions like "the hole size, the material type, the hardness of the part, the skill of the user, the intent of the user."

"The intent of the user?" Daran repeated.

"Yeah, if you want to make a smooth hole, you have to use a different drill bit than if you want to completely rip something to shreds," one of the guys said. This got everyone laughing.

"I think you get the point," Daran said, laughing along. "Oh, and before you start, I want everyone to wear goggles. There will be chips flying around at high speeds and you don't want to get those in your eyes. Oh, and Lana, you need to tie up your hair."

"Are you giving me beauty tips?" the girl asked with a smile.

Daran laughed again. “Yeah, I am. Getting your hair stuck in a drill, which is rotating a thousand times per minute, can’t be too good for your looks.”

“Well, then I thank you for your cordial advice,” Lana smiled as she conjured some hair clips out of her bag.

As the drilling crowd went to work, Daran headed over to the milling group.

“No, you fool, you’re supposed to put it in the other way,” Firo said. He pushed Eveni aside, took out the part they were working on and put it in upside down.

Daran sighed. “Stop being annoying Firo. The part is symmetric. It doesn’t matter which side is up.”

“Well, if I say it does, then it does!” the boy commented.

“No, it doesn’t,” Daran immediately countered. He didn’t care what Firo thought. This was his workshop session and things would run smoothly. “You get to work as I tell you, or I’ll kick you out.”

The stern approach seemed to be working. Firo still mumbled something, but then he turned his attention back to his workpiece.

*Finally we’re in a situation where I’m in charge and he has to listen to me,* Daran realized with a smile. Then he saw a pair of students that hadn’t properly clamped their part in the machine. He rushed over to point it out before something bad happened. *Too bad I don’t have time to actually use this newfound authority to make things better.*

After making sure all the groups were doing their work properly, Daran took a step back to survey the workshop. The

students were having fun and they were learning quickly. A great feeling of satisfaction rose in him.

He noticed someone looking into the workshop through a window. It turned out to be a scholar. The man appeared to look impressed, but when he locked eyes with Daran, he quickly turned around and walked off.

*I guess people are curious about what's going on here, Daran mused. They're just afraid to admit it.*

After everyone had been working for an hour, Daran called out the order to rotate. The students did an attempt to clean up the mess they had inevitably created and moved on to the next machine. Another set of instructions began for Daran.

When Daran was instructing the milling group, he got distracted by people yelling at each other at the other side of the workshop.

"No, don't do that! Those are mine!" he heard someone cry out. It was Eveni.

"I'll be right back," Daran announced to the group as he quickly moved over. He found Firo drilling holes in a notebook. Before there could be any more trouble, Daran cut the power on the machine.

"Hey, what did you do that for?" Firo asked indignantly.

"Give Eveni his notes back," Daran said with more anger showing on his face than he had ever mustered.

Firo tried to pull the notebook out of the machine, but the drill bit was still punched through it. He applied more force and with a tearing sound everything came loose. With a sneer on his face,

he threw it at Eveni. During its flight, it broke apart. Eveni caught one half, while the other clattered to the floor.

Daran picked up the second half and held it out to Eveni. To Daran's surprise, Eveni silently snatched it out of his hand. Without a word, but with his eyes already red from the upcoming tears, the boy ran out of the workshop.

Two excruciatingly long seconds of pure silence followed. Not even the constant buzzing of machines or the insistent chattering of gizmos broke it. Daran realized it was his move, and his move was clear.

"Firo, get out. I don't want to see you in this workshop for the rest of the day."

"You don't have the right to kick me out!" Firo countered. "It's still an open workshop."

Daran knew the boy was right, but he couldn't stand being near him any longer. "Either you're out of here, or I'm out of here," he said.

Firo looked around the room. The entire workshop, still filled to the brim with people, was staring at him, awaiting his decision. Daran could see in his eyes that he was considering his options.

"Fine," he finally said. "It's not like I was learning a lot here anyway." And with those words he grabbed his stuff and left the room, leaving behind a drilling machine filled with confetti.

Daran uttered a sigh of relief. It felt like a weight had lifted off his shoulders. But not entirely. There was still the matter of Eveni. "Alright everyone, it's time to get back to work. I'll be back in a couple of minutes. In the meantime, try not to put any holes in yourself."



Daran found Eveni in his room. He was sitting on his bed, tears streaming down his face. His notes were lying on the ground in front of him.

“Hey, how are you doing?” Daran asked. It felt like a really stupid thing to ask, but he didn’t have a clue what else to say.

“Daran, I don’t want to be friends anymore,” the boy wailed out, as if doing so cost him all his remaining energy.

“What do you mean?” Daran asked in surprise. He hadn’t expected things to turn this way.

“Firo is pestering me because I’m hanging around with you, and I can’t take it any longer.”

“But we’re much stronger together. And I want to help you.”

“You can’t!” Eveni cried out. “You don’t even get it. I am *this* close to dropping out.” He held his fingers only a tiny distance apart. “*This* close Daran. I need to pass some modules quickly, or I’m out of here. And now with my notes ruined, I don’t know how.”

Daran picked up the stack of paper from the floor and looked through it. He recognized most of the modules. *None of these modules have any summaries or problem solving guides. There are only long books and tiring classes. It will take a lot of time for Eveni to redo this.*

“Just let me help you,” Daran begged.

Eveni shook his head. “No. Thank you for the friendship and all, but I have to do this on my own. I don’t want Firo around anymore and so I don’t want you around either. Now please leave.”

With very mixed feelings, Daran got up. He couldn't let this end here, but Eveni's mind seemed to be made up and there was also a workshop session he needed to get back to.

*I don't care how, but I will fix this. I'll drop by Quenton as soon as I can. He'd better do something this time, instead of passively sitting back again.*

"Good luck," Daran finally said. "And I expect you to stay around in this Academy longer than Firo. Just so you know."

With those words, he turned around and headed back to his instruction session.

Daran opened the door and reentered the workshop. He looked around. Everyone was busy with their machines and there did not appear to be any problems.

Ikiana was the first to notice him. She knocked Lana on the shoulder. When Daran locked eyes with Lana, she briefly seemed to study the look on his face. Then she smiled and started clapping. Pretty soon the others joined her and a loud applause broke out, which included several gizmos that were knocking their paws or heads against whatever object they could find. The sound overwhelmed Daran. All he could do was look around the room in amazement, a grin charming up his face.

When the noise died out, Daran's enthusiasm was renewed. "Okay, let's get back to work!" he announced to the room with a smile.

The rest of the instruction passed uneventfully. The students worked hard and Daran was glad to see a significant improvement in most of them.

At the end of the day, when the session had finished and everyone was busy cleaning and packing up, Daran positioned himself near the exit of the room. One by one the students walked by, shaking his hand and thanking him.

“I learned a lot,” one of them said.

“Incredible that you’ve set this up.”

“Keep up the good work.”

“I can’t wait for the next session.”

When Zeris and Posak walked by, Zeris paused for a moment. Then he stepped forward and shook Daran’s hand. “Thanks,” he said. It looked like he was going to say something more – Daran already got curious whether it would concern Firo – but in the end the boy held back his words. He just nodded and turned around. As Daran’s gaze drifted to Firo’s other friend, Posak also nodded and walked away.

Though nothing appeared to have happened, Daran couldn’t help taking a big breath. *They might not have shown a lot of gratitude here, but things are changing. Slowly but steadily.*

In the end only Miril, Lana and Ikiana remained. “Do you need some help cleaning up?” Miril offered.

After quickly looking around the workshop, Daran gladly accepted the offer. Of course the Academy had a cleaning crew, but he didn’t want to receive any complaints from them after his first instruction session. Together they cleaned up all of the remaining parts and the leftover swarf and filings. They put every

drill bit they could find back in place and restored all the other machines to their original state.

When everything looked tidy again, they gathered around. One by one, the girls shook Daran's hand. Lana was last.

"Thanks so much Daran," she said. "It was really helpful, and you did extremely well. Also with ... well ... you know." She gave Daran a smile. Daran smiled back, again feeling like an idiot for the stupid grin he put on.

As the girls turned and left, Daran slumped down into a chair and looked around the room. Just a moment ago, it had been filled with people. Now it was completely deserted.

It felt like a week had passed in just the past few hours. So many exciting things had happened. In a way it gave Daran lots of extra energy, but in another way it also left him drained.

Then he remembered that the day was far from over. *I have to fix this mess with Eveni and Firo. That has to end right now.*

He got up and set out to go to Quenton's office.

## Chapter 11 – Helping people that need it

Daran paused before he entered the office. All the way there, he had been thinking about what he was going to say, but all the time too, the only thoughts that came up in his mind were the things he found unjust. In the end, he didn't have a story ready – not even close. There was only a massive feeling of unfairness and frustration churning around in him.

When Daran entered, the scholar leader looked up from his desk. "Daran, what brings you here?"

"I want things to change," Daran blurted out. Not the best opening, he realized, but at that moment his mind couldn't produce anything better.

"We all want things to change, Daran. I'm afraid you have to be a bit more specific."

"Just ... everything with Firo. He's always insulting me. He has torn my room apart. He has even attacked me, together with his friends! And what does he get as punishment? Kitchen duty. Just like me."

Quenton didn't say anything. He just looked at Daran with a penetrating gaze. "There's more though," he finally said. "You left something out of the list. Something that recently happened."

Daran's jaw dropped. *How did he know? Well, it doesn't matter.*

"Yes there is," he said. "Firo is now also picking on a friend of mine – Eveni. He's bugging him a lot, throwing food on him in the food hall and even destroying his notes, while Eveni is so close to dropping out!" It surprised Daran to feel how much effort it

had cost him to say all this. It was just the unfairness of it all that crept up on him. He had to struggle to keep his own tears back.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but what do you expect me to do?"

"I don't know!" Daran yelled out. "Just end it in some way. Kick Firo out or so. And stop punishing me!"

"Daran, you have to keep in mind what things look like from the outside. Yes, there was a fight in which Firo attacked you, but he didn't come out unscathed either. And yes, you lost your gizmo, but from what I heard, Firo lost his too. And yes, your room got torn up, but Firo's room also received a finishing touch. And then there was that case where you had to do extra dishes. Guess what I found out? Firo had to do extra dishes too. So please explain to me why I should kick Firo out and not punish you at all."

"But I was only doing that to teach Firo what it feels like when ... you know ... when he acts the way that he does!"

Quenton raised an eyebrow at this. "So that's why you're doing all these things," he eventually said. He sighed. "It hasn't worked out so well, has it?"

"Well, no, because I can't do the things that he does! How can I make Firo lose his only friend when he's got so many people around him ready to laugh at every stupid thing he does?!" It was at this point that Daran couldn't keep his eyes dry anymore. It felt somewhat embarrassing, but he didn't care. There were more important things going on here than mere embarrassment, and he knew he couldn't change it anyway.

"So you're trying to go for an eye for an eye," Quenton noted. "That's just about the worst thing you can do. You see, you're

assuming you know how hurt Firo is, but you can never know for sure. Having someone's room painted might mean a few hours of restoration work for one person, but it means the loss of a feeling of safety to another."

Quenton took a deep breath, giving Daran an insistent look. "The problem is, you generally always underestimate someone else's pain, while you overestimate your own. That's why your eye for an eye plan will only make things worse, with each strike being harder than the one before."

"Well, then you should do something about it sometime!"

"That's the other problem. I can't. Just think of what this situation looks like from the outside. Two boys having a bit of a rivalry. Why should I punish one and not the other?"

"Then what else am I supposed to do?!" Daran cried.

"Don't try to get back at Firo. Every time you hit back, you're weakening your own position. Only if it's unequivocally clear that you're not involved, will no one dare to complain if Firo is the only one that gets punished."

"So I should just let myself be the victim then? Is that it?"

"No. Just ... don't be provoked. Only do the things you would normally do."

"But how can I do that when Firo is trying to stop me at every step of the way?!"

Quenton looked down at his desktop. "I don't have an answer to that," he admitted. "It's something you have to figure out for yourself."

"If that's so, then I don't see what I'm doing here in the first place," Daran concluded. He got up, turned around and opened

the door. Before he left, he looked back one last time at Quenton, but the scholar didn't appear to have any last remarks. So Daran just left, again without answers.

With tears in his eyes, Daran stood in the hallway. All he wanted at that moment was to get to his room as soon as possible, but, not eager to show his tears to the world, he wasn't looking forward to the walk there. He considered refreshing himself in the bathrooms first, but decided against it. It wouldn't help at hiding his red eyes anyway.

As he left the main Academy building, he noticed it had started to rain. *Good. That'll cover things up a bit.* Slowly, eagerly embracing the droplets, he stumbled across the footbridge and the Academy square. Because of the rain, there were only a few students around, and none of them knew him well enough to give him more than a cursory glance.

When he entered the student dorms, he heard a chorus of conversations coming from the food hall. *Of course, everyone is having dinner now. Good.* He quickly jumped up the stairs towards his room, and just when he thought he'd reach it without running into anyone significant, he ran into the one person he really wanted to avoid.

"Hi," he softly nodded to Lana without raising his face, hoping she'd not notice the look in his eyes.

"Hi Daran," she said, followed by the words he so strongly feared. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. It's raining outside." Still Daran hadn't dared to look her in the eye.



"It's more than that," Lana knew. "Come with me."

*Why am I so easy to read?* Daran wondered. He couldn't find any good reason to say no to Lana, so he obediently followed. She led him to her room, where he was ushered into a chair and got a cup of water pressed into his hand.

"Do you want to tell me what's wrong?" Lana asked gently.

Daran leaned back in his chair, glazily staring ahead. "I don't know," he muttered. It wasn't just a futile attempt at avoiding the subject. He really didn't know whether he wanted to talk about it.

"You had the same look on your face when you came back from Eveni this morning," Lana noted. "This is about him, isn't it? Something's wrong with him."

"He doesn't want to be friends anymore," Daran blurted out before he could hold back the words. Now there was no going back anymore. "Firo's really getting to him, and he thinks it'll stop if he stops hanging out with me."

"But you think it won't."

"No! We're stronger together. He just doesn't see it."

"So what are you planning to do about it?"

"I don't know. I mean, I went to Quenton, but ..." Daran didn't know whether he wanted to talk about that either, yet somehow Lana managed to catch his gaze, and through an encouraging nod she convinced him to continue.

"Quenton says he can't do anything about it. According to him, I should just let Firo hit me without hitting back."

"Is that what he said?" Lana asked inquisitively.

“Well, yeah. And stuff about not getting provoked. About doing the things I normally would do. It sounded like a load of swarf.”

“He’s right though.”

*What?* Daran thought. *Not her too!* It started to feel like everyone thought he was a fool. “But I don’t get it!” he yelled out. Once more, he crossed the threshold where he couldn’t hold back his tears. This was evidently not one of his best days. “How will just taking the hits make anything better?”

“Daran, you don’t understand,” Lana said. She put her hand on Daran’s – grabbed hold of it firmly – and looked into his eyes. “It’s not about taking the hits. It’s about how you want to behave.”

“What do you mean?” Daran asked, strongly aware of the fact that Lana was holding his hand.

“You don’t like Firo because he’s damaging things that are important to you. If you get back to him in the same way, you’ll be just like Firo. Do you want to be like Firo?”

“Of course not,” Daran blurted out. *What kind of question is that?*

“Then stop being like him,” Lana urged. “You’d rather want people to be kind to everyone, right?”

“Well, yeah,” Daran muttered.

“Then make sure you’re kind to everyone too. After all, that’s the sort of person you want to be.”

“Even to Firo?”

“Yes. Be whoever you want to be. Don’t let who you are depend on the actions of others.”

Daran started to see what she meant. *I should just do the things that I feel comfortable with. The things that make sense to me.*

“Daran, you did something amazing today,” Lana added. “You offered help to anyone at the Academy that needed it. Lots of people were skeptical, but you proved them wrong. You saw the reactions today. That’s what should matter to you. Not how someone like Firo is acting.”

*She’s right, Daran realized. That’s what I want to do. Help people that need it. That’s what I should be doing. And if I need to take a few hits to do so, then so be it. I’ll cope with that.*

“You’re right,” he finally said. “Now I know what to do.”

“And what is that?” Lana wondered.

“I’m going to help out Eveni.”

This surprised Lana. “But how? I thought he didn’t want to have contact with you anymore.”

Daran smiled. He thought back to when he looked through Eveni’s notes. He still remembered exactly which modules the boy was working on. “You know, there are many ways to help someone out. Like writing summaries, for instance.”

Lana thought on that for a moment, until she smiled as well. “I think that’s a good idea.”

Then the silence returned. Only after a few seconds did Daran become aware again of the fact that they were still holding hands. He had expected it to feel awkward, but it somehow didn’t. It felt ... natural.

“Thanks Lana,” he said, looking the girl in the eye. “I needed this.”

“You’re welcome,” she said in return, giving Daran a smile which sent his mind reeling.

Daran took it as his cue to leave. He stood up and so did Lana. As he let go of her hand, he wondered whether to give her a hug. He was tempted to do so, but the time it took him to wonder whether it would be appropriate was also the time it took for the moment to pass. So in the end, all he did was give her a smile back and say, “I’ll see you later.” Then he turned around and left the room.

Only later did he realize that, while many of his thoughts had been sorted out in that room, quite a few others had been seriously jumbled up.

## Chapter 12 – Disappearances

*It's funny how you're always working less hard than you think you can. You often strive to be as productive as possible, but you never manage to reach your full potential. You often don't even get close.*

*There's just one exception. It occurs when you're doing something which, from deep within, you know is worth doing. From deep within, you know exactly how to do it. From deep within, it all makes sense, no matter from what perspective you look at it.*

That's what Daran realized when he started writing the summaries for Eveni. He didn't take breaks other than the really necessary ones. He didn't even feel the need to. He just wanted to write these summaries and put them out there. So that's what he did.

Every day he summarized a module. It became a routine. As each day wound to an end, he managed to finish his summary, left his room to make the test, came back to add some last-minute adjustments and then took the result to the copying room.

Every day, a new stack of summaries was added to the table near the workshop entrance, free for everyone to take. By now the table, which previously had been used for just about anything, was only covered in stacks of summaries and problem solving guides. It was Daran's table now, and everyone knew it.

Even the bulletin board above it was clear of other announcements. Daran had taken on the habit of using it to post notes on additions and changes. *Theoretical analysis module on basic material properties has been added*, he wrote, followed by the date, after which he pinned up the note.

Then he noticed a small note which he hadn't put up there. He pulled it off and read, *When is the next workshop instruction session?* The note wasn't signed. Daran thought he recognized Eveni's handwriting, but he realized that may just have been wishful thinking on his part.

Though an extra session wasn't something Daran had thought about, he figured it would be fun to set up something about working with composite materials. It would also be a nice way of pulling him out of his solitary studying mode. He quickly set up an announcement, added a name list beneath it and pinned it to the board. It was such a simple action – just writing a note – but by now he knew it would set plenty of people in motion. He wondered how quickly the list would fill up.

A few days later, there was a knock on Daran's door. "Come in!" he called out, wondering who it was. The door slowly slid open and a blue fluffy creature quickly slipped through the crack. Before Daran knew what was happening, the small gizmo was rubbing its head against Daran's leg.

"Oh, I'm sorry," a familiar voice said from the doorway. "I hope she didn't startle you." It was Lana.

At the sight of her, Daran's heart made a leap. "That's alright," he quickly said, petting the creature over its head. "What brings you here?"

"I just wanted to check if you were still alive. You've been going crazy with writing summaries. One per day? I don't know how you do it."

"I don't take a lot of breaks," Daran said with a smile.

“Well, you’re taking one now,” Lana told him. “You’re going to have lunch with Liona and me.”

“Is that so?” Daran said, teasingly raising an eyebrow.

“Yes it is. You deserve some time off.”

Daran considered the option. It wasn’t exactly a good time – he was in the middle of a chapter – but having lunch with Lana did sound really attractive. “Yeah, I guess I do,” he said. He made a few quick notes, just to remind himself of his current mindset when he’d return to work, and then he followed Lana out of his room.

The food hall was crowded. Most of the students were already close to finishing their lunch. Daran hadn’t realized it was so late already. Nor had his stomach, but that part of him quickly recovered as a delicious smell hit him. He quickly followed Lana’s example and filled up his tray. Then they went to look for an empty table.

“Oh no, where did Liona go?” Lana asked with a worried look in her eyes.

Daran glanced at the multitude of students. He didn’t see the gizmo anywhere, but he did notice a student who suddenly stood up with a surprised yelp, knocking his chair over in the process.

“I think I know,” Daran smiled. “Did you already train your gizmo to listen to her name?”

“Of course. That’s the first gizmo handling module. Didn’t you do that yet?”

“Well, not exactly,” Daran muttered as he tried to find his way between the tables. When he came as close as he could get to the

startled student, who had finally managed to turn his chair back upright, he called out “Liona!”

His suspicion was confirmed by the blue ball of fur which dashed through his legs. He grabbed the gizmo with his free hand and tried to pick her up, but he was rewarded by several scratches in his arm. He quickly dropped the creature again, surprising himself that he didn’t drop his tray along with it.

“Oh no, I’m so sorry,” Lana apologized again, quickly picking up her gizmo in a slightly more gentle way. “She really doesn’t like it if you lift her up like that.”

“I think I’ll be able to remember that,” Daran said, studying the red lines on his arm. When he was sure it was all superficial damage, he sat down. “She does like to be petted though.”

“Tell me about it,” Lana snorted. “It’s the sensors in her head. I think they’re directly coupled with the reward system in her thought core.” She petted her gizmo and continued in a high-pitched voice, “Isn’t that true, Liona? Don’t you have your sensors wired up a bit strangely?”

“I doubt that,” Daran noted. “No gizmo designer in his right mind would directly couple sensors to the reward system. I think it has to do with how they initially set up her value function. You know, which things she is inclined to like or dislike.”

“Yeah, but how do I change that?” Lana asked skeptically.

Daran let out a mocking laugh. “Haven’t read my summary on basic gizmo behavioral tuning, have you?”

Lana shook her head, a guilty look on her face. “Sorry. Can you summarize it for me?”



“Summarizing a summary? Sure. Okay, there are things which Liona definitely likes and things which she definitely dislikes, right?”

“You mean like being petted and being unexpectedly picked up?”

Daran couldn’t help glancing briefly at the red lines in his arm. “Yeah, things like that. Step one is to connect these to what we call triggers. You know, signals which you can easily give to your gizmo.”

“That sounds complicated,” Lana said.

“Not so much. In fact, you’re already doing it. Every time you pet Liona, you talk to her in a high-pitched voice. So in her thought core, you’ve already connected good things with a high-pitched voice. The high-pitched voice is your positive trigger. You can use a loud and low-pitched voice as your negative trigger.”

“Well, that’s convenient,” Lana noted. “What’s step two?”

“You can only continue with step two once you have these triggers firmly embedded. Once you have, you should connect these triggers with the corresponding behavior. Every time Liona does something good, you use the positive trigger, and every time she does something bad, you go for the negative one.”

“So every time she runs off, I should use a loud and low-pitched voice?”

“If you’ve got that trigger firmly embedded, then yes, that should work.”

“And what’s step three?”

Daran failed to stifle a laugh. “You’re ambitious aren’t you? Step three is advanced stuff. If you connect specific signals with

specific actions, you can train your gizmo to do things on command. In a matter of speaking, you can point to someone and have Liona attack that person with those sharp claws of her.”

Lana frowned. “What if I accidentally point at someone?”

“Yeah, then you’re in trouble. Or at least, that person is. So maybe you should use a less common signal, like a specific word or so. But I think you get the idea.”

“Yes I do. Thanks,” Lana said, giving Daran a smile. “It’s like they say in the books. It’s all about connections.”

“You’re surprised that the stuff you learn here actually makes sense?”

Lana let out a laugh. “No, I’m more surprised that the Academy needs multiple books to teach me something you can explain over lunch, in-between bites. You would do pretty well as a teacher.”

That reminded Daran of something. “Hey, have you signed up for the new instruction session already?”

“Instruction session?” Lana asked with a quizzical look in her eyes.

“Yeah, in the workshop.” Lana’s confused look didn’t disappear. “The announcement on the ...” And still there was no change.

Then it hit Daran. “Oh no, he didn’t,” he blurted out. He stood up and, with his meal still unfinished, he ran out of the building.

When Daran reached his announcement board, his suspicion was confirmed. The sign-up sheet was nowhere to be found.

A few seconds later Lana managed to catch up. “Care to explain why you’ve suddenly run out on me?”

“I announced another instruction session,” Daran said. “Firo removed the announcement.”

“When was the instruction session planned?”

“In three days.”

“Just put up a new announcement,” Lana suggested. “People will find out in time.”

“But what if they already have things planned?”

“Then that’s too bad. There’s never a perfect solution to a problem Daran, but if you see one that’s worth going for, you might as well go for it. Didn’t they teach you that in some group mission?”

Daran looked back at Lana. “No they didn’t,” he said. Then he smiled. “But it’s nice to learn something new. Thanks.” He wrote a new announcement, drew another name list beneath it and pinned it on the board.

Lana picked up the pen and wrote her name down. “Three days, huh? I can’t wait,” she said, giving Daran a smile.

Daran didn’t manage to finish his summary in the evening. The lunch with Lana had put him too much behind on his schedule for that. So it was only the next morning that he finally arrived at his table to add a new stack of papers. Yet as soon as he got there, he noticed something was wrong. His announcement had disappeared again.

He sighed. *This is getting ridiculous. How can people sign up like this?* In the end he wrote a new announcement and instead of

adding a name list, he just wrote that signing up was not required. *Guess I'll prepare something that works for any number of people.*

He started to prepare for the session, writing down instructions and building parts for students to experiment with. He double-checked everything that he made, making sure nothing could go wrong.

Every few hours he also checked whether the announcement was still present. And indeed, the third time he walked by, it was gone again without a trace.

Frustration welled up in Daran. *What's with Firo?* Quickly he created a new one. He also added an angry note, saying "Stop removing this announcement!" Then he turned and walked back to the composite hall of the workshops, only to stop after a few steps.

A familiar sentence rose up in his mind. *Do what you would normally do.* He thought back to the note he added. He started wondering, *If I wasn't so frustrated, would I still post that note?* The answer was obvious. He walked back to the announcement board, removed the note and posted a new one. "Please do not remove."

In the days that followed, Daran had to put up a new announcement six more times. He therefore wasn't surprised that, by the time the workshop was about to begin, the crowd was only half of what it was last time.

Just when Daran was about to start, Eveni walked in. The two boys locked eyes for a moment. Daran was surprised that his former friend had shown up. It was a positive surprise though, so

he gave Eveni a nod. Eveni gave a curt nod back and found a place to sit.

The session started off really well. With much fewer people to instruct, Daran could give more personal tips. Not only did the students seem to appreciate this a lot, but they also picked things up much faster than even Daran had anticipated.

When the first block had almost come to an end, and Daran was walking around to see how far along each group was, he felt his foot stick to the floor. Looking down, he saw he had stepped into a small pool of liquid. *What's that?* he wondered. He followed the stream to find the source. *Resin. That's not good.*

Daran knew the safety procedures. Resin vapors weren't very dangerous, but they could still result in some mild respiratory problems. In the event of a resin leak, the workshop had to be evacuated and proper ventilation had to be applied for a few hours. In short, it meant that the instruction session was cancelled.

Daran couldn't help but wonder what caused it. He looked around until his eyes settled on a student working in a corner of the workshop. *Posak. Firo's friend. Of course.* He angrily took a step in the boy's direction, but then stopped.

*Do what you would normally do,* he reminded himself. He took a deep breath. Then he turned to the group and called out, "Guys, listen up! We've got a resin leak. For safety reasons everyone needs to leave the workshop right now."

Three days later the instruction session was resumed. This time it took place without any further incidents.

"I'm glad we managed to finish this," Lana told Daran after everyone had left. "Are you satisfied with how it went?"

"Yeah, I am," Daran nodded. He felt quite good about the day. There had even been a few extra students who couldn't make it the previous time, and all the reactions were positive.

*This idea of doing whatever I would normally do really does work,* Daran found himself thinking. *I could've created a fuss about everything Firo's been doing, but it wouldn't have amounted to anything. It would've only made me angrier.*

Daran felt like he was finally getting things under control, settling into a stable life at the Academy. There was one thing which was bothering him though. Lana seemed to realize it.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No," Daran quickly said, but then he found Lana waiting for clarification. "It's just that ... Eveni wasn't at the session today. I wonder why he didn't show up. Maybe he thinks that the resin leak last time was his fault. That Firo had Posak cause it because he joined the instruction."

"No, that's not it," Lana noted, but then she appeared to realize something. She gave Daran a curious look. "You mean you haven't heard?" she added a moment later, raising her eyebrows.

"Heard what?"

Lana briefly looked around her, as if she was hoping someone else could answer Daran's question. Of course there was no one. The workshop was empty. Eventually Lana turned to Daran again.

"Eveni was behind on his studies. Too much behind. He dropped out."

## Chapter 13 – Saying goodbye to a friend

“I can’t believe you didn’t know that all test results are publicly available,” Lana said as she pulled Daran along to the result room.

“I knew they are,” Daran noted. “In fact, you were the one who told me. I just never thought of checking out how others were doing.”

Lana stifled a laugh. “You’re the only one then. Most of the students are constantly dragging their friends with them to see how their other friends are doing.”

“Are they that jealous?” Daran wondered.

“Jealousy, compassion, competitiveness, curiosity, there are plenty of possible reasons and we only need one.”

Daran snorted. “Well, then it’s a good thing I don’t have so many friends that are checking out my results.”

This time Lana failed to stifle her laugh. “You think no one’s checking out your results? You may be smart, but you don’t know people.”

Daran was about to argue with her, but at that moment they arrived at the result room. As expected, it was a large room with one box for every person at the Academy. It took Daran some time to get his bearings, but Lana had already found what she was looking for. “Let’s see how Eveni was doing.”

It felt strange for Daran to look up things like this about his friend, but his curiosity and Lana’s insistence quickly overcame his discomfort. He looked through the list of modules which Eveni had recently completed.

“His last couple of modules were modules which I summarized,” Daran noted. “He passed them all with decent results.”

Lana nodded. “It was keeping him drifting, until he failed his manufacturing module. That’s when he went underwater.”

Daran’s mouth dropped open. “He was counting on my instruction session. The one Firo sabotaged.” He dropped the folder and stood up. Slowly but steadily, the meaning of it all became clear to him. *Eveni’s gone because of Firo’s meddling. He’s gone because of me.*

He clenched his hands into fists, eager to hit something, but there was nothing suitable around. Instead, he just let the tension build up in his arms. When his arms started shaking, he put his hands in his hair. All the time Lana just looked at him.

“I shouldn’t have involved him,” Daran finally said, filled with regret. “It’s all my fault.”

“You couldn’t have known this would happen,” Lana tried to comfort him, but it didn’t help.

“You’re wrong. I could have. If only I’d just ... ” There were so many things Daran wished he’d done differently, that he didn’t know which one to talk about.

“You should stop thinking about this. It’ll only make you feel worse. Come on, let’s do something else.”

*Something else*, Daran repeated in his mind. A question drifted up in him. “How far back do these records go?”

“Pretty far,” Lana knew. “You can even look up the exam results of our teachers. That’s pretty amusing sometimes. Why? Who do you want to look up?”



“Tamar,” Daran answered.

“Tamar? Isn’t that the girl that killed the Tharon in a prank, quite a couple of years ago? Why are you interested in her?”

“Because ...” Daran wasn’t eager to explain it. Every time he told the story, he felt like people were skeptical, not taking him seriously. And though he usually didn’t care much about what people thought, it did hurt a bit every time. But he knew there was no going around it here. “Because I think she’s my mother. She used to be Nolan’s girlfriend, who I believe is my father.”

Daran had expected some quick retort about what a fantastic story it was, but after a few seconds of silence, all Lana said was, “Okay. Let’s look up Tamar then.” Daran appreciated her a bit more because of it.

They walked down the aisles to where Tamar’s box was. Or at least, where it was supposed to be. “It’s not here,” Lana said, baffled. “It should be between Talos and Tambu, right?”

“Yes,” Daran agreed. “How can it be missing?”

Lana shrugged. “Maybe they put it back in the wrong place?”

But Daran thought it was unlikely. “If it would have been, then there should be an empty space between Talos and Tambu, or otherwise another box in place of Tamar’s. But there isn’t.”

“Possibly it’s been missing for a while and they removed it from the system?” Lana suggested. “But how could an entire box go missing? Unless ...”

“Unless it’s still somewhere here,” Daran finished.

And so they spent a full hour checking every box in the entire room. The result? Absolutely nothing.

“It’s like she never existed,” Daran concluded.

“But she did,” Lana said. “Quite some people know her name.”

“Do you remember anything else about her?” Daran asked curiously, but Lana shook her head.

“Not really. There were just stories. People were surprised, because she was an example student. They even called her a prodigy with better workshop skills than most graduated thinkers.” Lana gave Daran a smile. “I can see where you got your two right hands from.”

“Ha, funny,” Daran laughed sarcastically. Still, the news did fill him with a sense of pride. His parents hadn’t been just average thought students.

*Speaking of parents ...* “Is there usually information about families in these boxes? You know, like distant relatives?”

Lana shook her head. “Only some things about close family ties. For the rest, you have to access the city records. After all, you’re supposed to leave family ties behind when you join the Academy.”

Daran raised an eyebrow. *Tell that to Firo and his boasting.* But it did make him curious. Maybe he even had grandparents. “I should look that up.”

“If you can get access,” Lana added.

Daran nodded. *It’s worth another try.*

The next morning Eveni was scheduled to sign out of the Thought Academy. Wanting to say goodbye, Daran decided to wait for him at the student affairs office.

It took half an hour, but then Eveni finally came walking around the corner, with Eragos perched on his shoulder. “I should’ve known you’d be here,” the boy said when he saw Daran.

“You didn’t think I’d just let you leave without a goodbye, did you?” Daran smiled. Eveni returned the smile.

An awkward silence followed. Then Eveni said, “Listen, I know what you did with the summaries. Even I could see that you wrote them for me, despite that I told you not to help me.”

“Well, I also wrote them for the other students,” Daran started to say, but Eveni shook his head.

“Don’t get me wrong, Daran. I’m grateful. But you didn’t have to do that.” He sighed. “I guess I just don’t want you to feel bad about me dropping out. I mean, it’s all for the best anyway. I wasn’t meant to be a thinker.”

“But you could have been one,” Daran tried to counter.

“No, it wouldn’t have worked out,” Eveni said. “It just took me some time to see it.”

Daran didn’t feel like countering the claim, so he merely nodded. “So what will you do now?”

Eveni shrugged. “I don’t know. First move back in with my parents. From there I’ll try to find someone willing to apprentice me. I’m not sure yet in which field though.”

*It’s good he has his parents to fall back on,* Daran mused. Then he said, “You’ll find something. Someone as stubborn as you? I’m sure of it.”

Eveni smiled. “Thanks. Now it’s time to sign out.” He went to the desk and told the man behind it that he was leaving the Academy.

“That’s alright,” the man said. “Just let me check a few things.” He dove into a stack of papers and quickly returned with a check list.

“Your material budgets match out, so no action is required there. I just need your room key.”

Eveni nodded, pulled his key out of his pocket and put it down on the desk.

“And finally I need to take your gizmo.”

“What?” Eveni said, speaking out loud Daran’s exact thoughts.

“It’s standard procedure,” the man said. “People outside the Thought Academy are not allowed to own a gizmo. When someone leaves the Academy, all his gizmos automatically become the property of the Academy again.

“But ... you can’t!” Eveni cried out. “He’s my friend!”

“Ah, is Eveni getting emotional again?” a voice behind them said. Daran immediately knew who it was.

“You’re not helping, Firo,” he calmly returned. “Please walk on.”

But Firo ignored him. “You do know what the Academy does with gizmos that get returned?” he said. “It’s not like they have any use for them. They just destroy them and reuse the parts.”

“No!” Eveni screamed, briefly losing control over his voice. “Daran, you have to do something. You can’t just let them kill Eragos!”

“Can’t he just give the gizmo to me?” Daran asked the man behind the desk.

“No. Students are not allowed to trade gizmos with other students. If one of you would be a graduated thinker, this wouldn’t

be a problem. But if students want to exchange gizmos with each other, then they need authorization from the head of education. I suggest you go there. Until then, the gizmo belongs to the Academy.”

Eveni gave Daran another hopeful look, but Daran could do nothing more than give a helpless glance back. “I guess that for now we have to hand Eragos over.”

Eveni’s shoulders slumped and his eyes turned to the floor. Eventually he took a deep breath, picked Eragos off from his shoulder and put him on the desk. The gizmo stood up straight and looked expectantly at Eveni.

“So ... I guess this is goodbye ... ” Eveni was silent for a moment, looking for words. “I’ll miss you, but I hope we’ll meet again.”

Then the man picked the gizmo up and took him away. Eveni watched him go, a tear flowing down his cheek. When Eragos disappeared from sight, Eveni looked Daran in the eye.

“Do what you can Daran,” he pleaded. “Just ... don’t let them kill Eragos.”

## Chapter 14 – Changing points of view

“Take a seat Daran,” Malroy said. It had taken Daran quite some time to arrange the appointment, so he sat down eagerly. “What can I do for you?”

“A friend of mine, Eveni, dropped out of the Academy,” Daran started. “His gizmo is now ownerless. I was wondering if I could claim it. After all, we’ve spent quite some time training – ”

But Daran stopped when Malroy shook his head. “Only thinkers may claim ownerless gizmos,” the old man curtly said.

“But then you’ll just take it apart?” Daran asked incredulously.

Malroy nodded. “If the gizmo isn’t claimed, yes we will. That’s the procedure.”

“But you can’t just destroy gizmos! They’re like ... ” Daran didn’t know what he wanted to compare it with. *Family?*

“They’re personalized. And that’s exactly why we have no use for discarded ones. It’s not like we can give them to new students.”

“You can give this one to me!” Daran exclaimed.

“You’re not a thinker. You can’t claim it. And rules are rules.”

“Well, scrap the rules. You’re destroying something valuable!”

Malroy sighed. He calmly locked eyes with Daran. “The rules are made by the thought council. That is, the heads of the three departments. If you want to have them changed, I suggest you petition them.”

“And they’ll just blow me off too.” Daran sighed, utterly frustrated. He didn’t know what else to say. All he managed to blurt out in the end was, “You *can’t* destroy that gizmo.”

"I'm sorry, but we can. And we will." Malroy's tone made it very clear that this was final.

Daran realized there was nothing else that he could say. He gave a final nod, turned around and left the office, already thinking about his last chance: the thought council. *But what am I going to say to them?*

Daran knocked on the door and after a brief "Come in!" he entered.

"Hey Daran," Lana said. "Thinking well?"

"Not so much," he shook his head. "I need your thoughts on something."

"Oh, what's it about?" she asked. He then told her the story about Eragos, up to the point where he was planning to petition the thought council.

"So what are you planning to tell them?" Lana asked when he was finished.

Daran shrugged. "That's the point. I don't know. The same as I told Malroy, I guess."

"But that probably won't work, will it?"

"I doubt it," Daran sighed.

"Do you know why Malroy rejected your request?"

"No!" Daran replied, clearly frustrated. "For some reason he's insistent on destroying a valuable gizmo, and I just don't understand that."

"It's because you're thinking from your point of view. You find it valuable. He doesn't."

Daran looked up surprised. "What do you mean?"

“Eveni and you spent a lot of time and energy on that gizmo. That’s why it’s valuable for you. But for Malroy it’s just a simple gizmo. It’s something which he can make in a few hours if he wanted to. I guess he thinks of it just as a tool used to teach students.”

“It’s like a children’s toy,” Daran said. “It means the world to the child, but nothing to the parents.”

“Exactly,” Lana nodded.

“But then how do we convince the parent to let the kids keep their toys?”

Lana laughed at the comparison. “In the same way as you ever convince people of something. Let it make sense from their point of view.”

Daran thought about it for a few seconds. “So I need to show them why the current rules are flawed, but then from their point of view,” he summarized. “I think I can do that.”

“Good, but it won’t be enough,” Lana knew. “Changing the rules will mean they have to start doing paperwork. They won’t like that.”

“So I should offer them an easy solution.”

“Yes,” Lana nodded. “And on top of that, make them really uncomfortable with the current situation too.”

“Make them feel uncomfortable? Yeah, I can definitely do that,” Daran laughed. He had it all planned out by then. *There’s just one part which I need some luck with. But taking a chance is better than doing nothing.* “I think we can petition for that rule change. Um, do you know how that works?”



“I’ve heard a bit about it. You need to use some paper form to request an appointment. They then set up a meeting the next morning or the one afterward. Unless you want your meeting to be public. Then it takes a bit longer to set up.

*A public meeting?* Daran repeated to himself. *That would improve my chances significantly.* “How much longer?” he asked with a grin on his face.

“I’d like to start this meeting!” Aris called out over the noise of the people in the room. “If you all would sit down – ”

“There are no more chairs!” someone yelled.

“Then stand in the back!” the hunter leader rebuked. As the crowd quieted down, Aris sat down too.

Daran looked behind him at the people that filled the hall. Half of them were students and half were thinkers, but all of them had come to watch him put forward his case.

*It’s a good thing people like gossiping about me,* he told himself. *Although maybe the rumors which I spread also helped a bit.* He had told Ikiana that this meeting would introduce some significant changes in the way students dealt with gizmos. In the week it took to set up the meeting, the story had spread to all corners of the Academy. Or at least, different versions of it, each with different degrees of exaggeration.

“Daran has petitioned the thought council for a change in the rules,” Aris started. “Daran, can you explain to us what rule you’d like changed?”

“It’s the rule that students may not claim ownerless gizmos. Only thinkers may.”

“And why would you like that rule to be changed?” Aris asked.

Daran looked around the room. Then he started his story, addressing the audience more than the department leaders. “A friend of mine, Eveni, has recently left the Academy. As a result his gizmo is ownerless. We have both spent a lot of time training his gizmo. I would prefer not to let this work go to waste. That’s why I would like to claim ownership of the gizmo. But I can’t.”

“You could have requested to take over his gizmo before this boy, Eveni, left the Academy.”

“That’s what I did,” Daran said. Though not technically true, it was close enough. “My request was denied.”

“And so you’re here. But you still haven’t given us a good reason to change the rules, and my patience is wearing thin.”

*In that case, it’s time to change who’s asking the questions*, Daran thought. “I just want to get a few things straight first. Is it true that any thinker may claim an ownerless gizmo?”

“That depends on the type of gizmo.”

“Let’s talk about gizmos suitable for students. Any thinker may claim these?”

“That is correct.”

“And, unless some other thinker also wants to claim this student-type gizmo, then that thinker would own the gizmo?”

“Correct again.”

“Good. Next I’d like to continue about the rules about giving gizmos to students. Is it – ”

Aris interrupted. “Daran, this meeting has not been set up so you can learn about the rules. If you want to know the rules, you should’ve looked them up.”

“I am well aware of the rules,” Daran replied. “I’m just verifying things. Is it correct that any thinker may give a student-type gizmo to any student?”

Aris sighed. “I can see where you’re going with this. Yes, a thinker may claim a gizmo, and yes, he may give it to a student. So you found a small loophole in a rule. We’re not going to rewrite the whole rule book just because there might be a small and unused loophole in one of the rules.”

“Unused, you say?” Daran asked, gently increasing the volume of his tone so everyone in the room could clearly hear him. “I think someone in this room will claim that gizmo. Am I right?”

With these last words, Daran looked at Quenton. The scholar leader looked back at Daran. Then he closed his eyes, a painful expression showing in his face. *He doesn’t want to get involved in this*, Daran realized.

The expression on Aris’ face was one of anger though. “Daran! This is not the place for some p – ”

“I will claim it,” someone from the crowd called out. Instantly the room fell quiet and everyone looked around, until a thinker stood up. He was a young ranger, barely graduated from the looks of it.

“I will claim that gizmo for you,” he told Daran. “I know what it’s like to lose one.”

The crowd erupted with noise. After a few seconds, Aris started calling “Quiet! Quiet!” but it only reduced the sound a bit. It was only when Daran raised his hand that the room quickly turned silent.

“You’re wrong about the loophole never being used,” Daran said. “I didn’t need this meeting to get the gizmo. I set up this meeting because I don’t want students, sad for the loss of a friend at the Academy, having to resort to some loophole, only to prevent losing a *second* friend. Because this *can* be prevented.”

Daran was quiet for a moment, letting the message sink in with the audience. Then, just before anyone might dare to interrupt him, he continued. “We can change the rule such that students *are* allowed to claim ownerless gizmos, but *only* if they have the approval of a graduated thinker. And before you mention the materials which this will cost the Academy; we add that the materials used to build the gizmo will be subtracted from the student’s material budgets. It’s an easy rule and everyone’s happy.”

“And what if multiple students want to claim the same gizmo?” Aris challenged.

“In that case each of these students has a thinker supporting them. So then there’s a dispute between thinkers, just like when the thinkers all want to claim the gizmo for themselves. You already have rules on how to deal with that.”

“He’s got a point,” Quenton told Aris. “It’s not much work to change it. I can arrange that.”

Aris sighed. “Fine, let’s go for a vote. Who’s in favor of the proposed rule change?”

Quenton raised his hand. So did Baltar. Then, seemingly not wanting to be left behind, also Aris followed suit.

“The rules will be changed as suggested. I hereby close this meeting.” And the noise erupted in the hall again.

It seemed like everyone wanted to congratulate Daran. He lost count of the number of hands he shook. He was relieved when he finally saw a familiar face.

“Well done Daran!” Lana said. “That was incredible.”

“Thanks,” he said, trying to prevent a blush, in which he only partly succeeded. “It wasn’t that special.”

“Nonsense. That speech was amazing. I could never have gotten such sentences out without messing up somewhere. And you got them. With the right pauses. With the right emphasis. With everything.”

“It helped that I practiced for, well, the entire week.”

Then another face appeared. It was the young ranger that had spoken out.

“Congratulations Daran,” he said. “My name’s Malek.”

“Nice to meet you Malek,” Daran replied as he shook the man’s hand. “I owe you one.”

“No, I owe you. I had exactly the same problem only a few years back. I’m glad these rules finally got sorted out.”

“Me too,” Daran nodded.

“Why don’t you drop by my office tomorrow just before lunchtime? Then we can finalize the paperwork and you can get the gizmo.”

“Sounds perfect. I’ll be there.”

The next face that appeared was Quenton’s. “You played a dangerous game there Daran,” he said. “For a second there I thought you were forcing me to choose sides.”

“I would never do that,” Daran said apologetically.

“Good, because I always choose what’s best for the Academy.”

“And in the end you did. I should thank you for that.”

“Yes you should,” Quenton nodded. “I’m going to spend a lovely afternoon buried in rulebooks. Don’t expect another favor from me any time soon.”

Daran smiled. “That’s alright. I think I can manage to stay out of trouble for a while.”

At this Quenton raised an eyebrow. “You think? I strongly doubt it.” Then he gave Daran a smile too.

## Chapter 15 – A shout for attention

“That should do it,” Daran said to himself as he turned off the lathe. When the machine slowed to a stop, the deafening noise quieted down and he could hear the normal din of the workshop again.

“Hey Daran. What are you making?” someone asked. Daran smiled, recognizing the voice. It was Lana.

“Oh, nothing special,” he said. “I’m just experimenting a bit with some new tricks of one of the advanced workshop modules. You can do pretty nifty stuff with them.”

“It’s got to be amazing to be able to make just about anything you want,” Lana said. “It’s also exactly why it’s so insanely hard to fix a nice birthday present for you.”

“A what? ... How did you ... ” Daran stammered. *She must have looked it up*, he figured, involuntarily summoning a big smile on his face.

It made him think back to his earlier birthdays. They always were with his old family. *The one I lost*. He was doing alright at the Academy, but at days like these he definitely did wonder what it would be like if everything was like it used to be, with his parents baking pancakes for him – his favorite food – and Tobin giving him presents. *Now all he gives me is accusatory glances*, he thought with a pang of guilt. He wished he could fix things, but he didn’t know how, and so he did the only thing he could do: just let it be.

“And to make it even worse, you’re also getting Eragos back today,” Lana continued complaining, waking Daran from his

reminiscence. “I mean, how do you beat that? So instead of having a present for you, I made one for Eragos.”

She pulled a small package from her bag. When Daran unwrapped it, it turned out to be a small camouflage-colored cloth.

“It’s a stealth cloak,” Lana said. “It makes him nearly invisible for most backgrounds.”

“That’s pretty cool,” Daran said, thinking about everything he could use this for. “I’ve never thought of that. Thanks!” He gave Lana a wide grin.

“Of course you hadn’t thought of it. Otherwise you’d have already made it,” Lana said, giving him a wink. “I wish I was as good at making stuff as you are.”

“You’ll get there,” Daran said, giving her an encouraging pat on the shoulder. “Remember, I grew up in a workshop. I’ve got a bit of a head start here.”

Lana nodded. “I guess you’re right. So, you think you can teach me a few things on creating new gizmo parts?”

“Yeah! Or well, later. I’ve got to go collect Eveni’s gizmo now, which is all the way at the main building. I can drop by when I’m back though?”

Lana smiled. “That would be – ” but she got distracted by something going on behind Daran. It sounded like something big, sliding over the floor.

Daran turned around and saw Firo walking in, followed by his gizmo. Firo had never managed to fully restore Foralas to his former glory. Not even close. The side of the gizmo was patched up using tape and its front legs were nothing more than two



oversized wooden sticks with which the gizmo was dragging itself forward in a less than graceful manner.

“That’s a nice peg your gizmo has there,” Daran noted, but Firo was not amused.

“Shut up Daran,” he snapped. “Not everyone’s as good at stealing second-hand gizmos as you are.” Then he turned around, picked up his gizmo and dragged it further into the workshop.

Daran also turned around, only to see Lana frowning at him. “You don’t have to taunt him like that, you know.”

“After all he’s done, you’re defending him?” Daran asked.

Lana shook her head. “That’s not the point.”

“Well, then you’ll have to explain what the point *is* later, because I’ve got to run now. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Daran couldn’t believe the bureaucracy that was involved with transferring the ownership of a gizmo. If this much paperwork was required for a simple student gizmo, how much work would it be to get a more advanced one?

“It just confirms what I already knew,” he told Eragos, who was finally perched on his shoulder. “These thinkers have an unhealthy obsession with what people do with their gizmos.”

When he turned around the corner, he nearly bumped into Quenton. *I so hope he didn’t just hear that*, Daran thought.

“Hi Daran,” Quenton greeted. “I see you got that gizmo back. I trust that everything worked out?”

“Yes, if you don’t count the pain in my wrist from filling in way too many forms.”

Quenton laughed. "You'll get used to it. But if you have ideas on how to get around paperwork, then I'd love to hear all about it. Just not now. I'm running late for a lunch meeting at Arin's office." After a curt nod, he strode off towards the stairwell, leading up to the hunter's section of the building.

Daran walked out of the building and started heading back to the education district of the Academy. He was already thinking of how he would train Eragos further. At this point the gizmo could only pick the simplest of locks, basically only those of student rooms, but Daran had bigger plans.

He was so busy talking to the gizmo that he hadn't noticed the group up ahead. It was only when he was already on the footbridge that he saw the five boys on the other side.

Daran's heart sank. *Oh, no. Not again. Not after everything that happened with Eveni.* He took another look at the group, but there was no doubt whom they were waiting for.

*I strongly doubt this is a birthday surprise party,* he thought, wondering how to deal with the situation. He closed his eyes. *I can't take this anymore.* Swallowing back a breath of air, he made a decision. *This has to stop, one way or the other.*

He looked at Eragos, still sitting on his shoulder. "You better go to my room. I don't want you involved in this."

The gizmo squealed, as if to say, *Hey, I can help.*

Daran summoned a sad smile. "I'm sorry, but there are no locks to pick here. I have to do this on my own."

Eragos seemed to understand.

"Go," Daran gestured with his head. "I'll see you in a bit."

The gizmo climbed off Daran's shoulder and rushed over the footbridge, past the waiting crowd. The boys, with all eyes focused on Daran, ignored the creature as it scurried by.

Daran looked at Firo. The boy was sitting on the railing of the bridge with an eager look on his face. Just when Firo jumped off the railing did Daran turn around, heading back to the building he just came from. From the corner of his eyes he saw movement. The boys were following him.

Daran fought the urge to run. If he ran, they would be on him right away. *They'll only start frenzying when I panic.*

"Stop him," Firo called.

*Or when that happens,* Daran thought, silently cursing, but he wasted no time and immediately ran off. The pursuit had begun.

All the running around the city when he was young had turned Daran into quite a good runner. He had managed to reach the west side of the main Academy building when one of the boys caught up with him and grabbed his arm. Daran tried to pull away, but before he had any success, he was already surrounded. Figuring it was futile to try to run further, he stopped, looking the boys around him in the eye one by one.

"We just want to have a word with you," Firo said, but the snide look on his face told differently.

"Leave me alone!" Daran shouted, far louder than was necessary for the boys to hear him.

"We can't," Firo said. "Not until you stop harassing the people here."

Daran got pushed from the side. He regained his balance and looked at his assailant. "I said, leave me alone!" he yelled again. He

looked up to one of the higher windows of the Academy building. From the window, two pairs of eyes were staring down at him. Daran grit his teeth, staring back. Then he saw something move from the corner of his eye and a stabbing pain shot through his jaw.

He fell to the ground, using his arms to protect his face, but that left the rest of his body wide open for the kicks that were now coming in from all sides. He tried to curl up into a ball, but it didn't seem to help in preventing the blows from getting through.

"That will ... " *Pain*. " ... teach you ... " *More pain*. " ... not to ... " And Firo struck another blow. " ... mess with ... " At the next kick Daran felt more than heard a soft cracking sound in his rib cage. It caused him to move one hand to his chest, trying to protect that part of his body too.

It didn't really help. The blows just kept coming in, hurting more and more. Between the blur of moving legs, he once more looked up at the window. Now he saw only one pair of eyes, reading something that looked like regret, with a hint of sadness mixed in, before he felt something at the back of his head, and –

He woke up. He had a vague recollection of a dream. *I was in an important situation. Or maybe interesting is a better word. And it felt ... real*. Somehow the feeling lingered on in him, but he couldn't figure out what it had been about. Slowly, another question became more important though. *Where am I?*

He tried to look around, but even the slightest movement sent pain all through his body. Especially his head felt like it was close to bursting. So he just remained, lying still. For now the answer

‘In some really soft and somewhat funny smelling bed’ seemed to suffice.

He started to recall what had happened, but only vaguely. It was like he couldn’t piece together the full picture. *Funny. I still have no idea what Firo tried to teach me. I guess that his teaching methods, unlike his kicks, don’t exactly hit their target.*

It was only then that he noticed that he wasn’t alone. In the corner of the room, some people were talking with soft but clearly audible voices.

“Has he woken up already?” someone asked. It sounded like ... *Arin?*

“No, not yet. He’ll probably wake up some time tonight, or maybe tomorrow.” This was an unknown voice.

“Fine. Leave us.”

The unknown voice left the room and closed the door behind him.

“Only two broken ribs. Lucky guy. I’d expected worse when I finally got to him.” Arin sighed. “I still can’t believe you just waited up there and did nothing.”

“I just ... I don’t know.” Daran raised his eyebrows when he recognized the voice, although even that seemed to hurt. *Quenton.* “I felt like I had to watch.”

“There’s still one thing which I don’t understand. What was he doing on the west side of the building? What was any of them doing there?”

Quenton sighed. “He ran there,” he said softly, as if he didn’t want the words to be spoken.

“But why the west side? The main entrance is on the east side. If he wanted to increase the chance to run into a thinker, then – ”

“He went there because he knew I would be in your office.”

It was quiet for a moment, until Arin spoke. “You’re saying ...”

Daran couldn’t hear Quenton’s nod, but he pretty much felt it through the ensuing silence.

“I think he just wanted the truth to come out,” Quenton added. “He tried to tell us, but we wouldn’t listen. We wouldn’t believe him.”

“How could anyone believe a boy from a lower class to be ... well ... above the other students in something?”

Quenton gave a brief snort. “You have no idea about him. About the stuff he’s doing.” He swallowed, before he finally softly added, “I had the wrong idea too.”

As the two thinkers left, and the silence in the room returned, Daran drifted back into a peaceful dream. When he woke up quite a few hours later, he couldn’t recall dreaming at all. He just remembered the conversation he had overheard, as if it had been a dream.

## Chapter 16 – An unexpected kindness

When Daran woke up, there again was someone else in the room with him. “Hey,” he murmured to her.

Lana looked up from the summary she was reading. “You’re awake!”

“What are you doing here?”

“Well, you promised me a private workshop lesson,” Lana said with a stern look on her face. “And then you bailed out on me.”

“And with a crappy reason too,” Daran added.

“Indeed,” Lana nodded. “So I came to get a refund.”

They stared at each other with serious looks on their faces for a long silent second. Then they both burst into laughter, except that Daran was cut short by a searing pain in his chest.

“I think you’ve got to take it easy on the humor for a while,” he moaned.

At that point the door opened and the doctor entered. “Welcome back. How are you feeling?”

Daran snorted. “Like Nilas launched me headfirst into a wall.”

“You’ll be fine. You will be out of this bed in a few days, but you should take it easy on the physical activities for a few weeks.”

“No flights on Nilas then. Isn’t that convenient?” Then the door opened again and Quenton rushed into the small room. “It’s getting crowded in here,” Daran noted.

“It’s good to see you’re feeling better,” Quenton said.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Daran replied, raising an eyebrow. “I was finally looking forward to catching up on gizmo handling modules, and now I’m stuck in bed for a week.”

“Catching up?” Quenton repeated. “But I thought you were well ahead with that? At least for the three months until you got Nilas back.”

“Well, I got well ahead with the other subjects too.”

“You’ve been working hard, haven’t you? You could use some vacation.”

Daran’s smile disappeared. “What a great vacation. When I was still working at the workshop, I could fly around the country, delivering parts. Being stuck in a bed feels more like a punishment.”

“Yes, I’m sorry about that,” Quenton sighed, turning his eyes downward for a second. “But speaking about punishments ... we’ve been discussing what to do with the boys that put you here. You know the philosophy we have on punishments, right?”

“Yeah, I’ve had enough punishments to figure that out.”

Quenton didn’t reply to that. He just raised an eyebrow and silently kept looking at Daran.

Daran sighed in conceded defeat. “Alright.” Not feeling like being given a lesson, he monotonously started to recite, “Don’t be vengeful. Try to minimize the chance of something like it occurring again in the future, by giving the right message to both the perpetrator and to others.”

Quenton seemed satisfied enough. “Exactly. So I’ve convinced the others to let you decide on a punishment.”

“What?” Daran replied, not sure what to make of this.

“What would you give as punishment?”

Daran had to think about this for a moment. His first thought was to kick them all out of the Academy.



But then he thought about the other boys and realized he wasn't really angry with any of them. He was just angry with Firo for inciting them. For instigating the whole thing.

*So should I kick Firo out of the Academy?* He would be doing exactly what Firo had tried to do with him. Although earlier it was exactly what Daran had wanted, now it just didn't feel right.

Eventually Daran made up his mind. "Give Firo four months of chore duties. Let the rest get off with a warning."

Quenton gave a satisfied nod. "A wise decision. I'll make sure it happens." Not knowing what else to say, he stood up and started to leave the room, but as he opened the door, he turned around. "And Daran, I want you to know that I do feel bad about letting this happen. When you're out of bed, come look me up. I think I can give you access to some records again, if you still want that."

Daran raised his eyebrows. "I thought you weren't going to do me any favors for a while."

Quenton had to laugh about that. "Well, you have this annoying habit of making me change my mind. Get well, Daran."

As Quenton closed the door behind him, Daran had a small inward smile. *I can't say I expected that. But I can't say I mind either.*

In the days that followed, Lana frequently came to visit. She also brought along the books that Daran requested. Daran intended to keep up his studies while he was bedridden, but that didn't go as well as planned. With his head still throbbing, remaining focused enough to read was often too much of a challenge. And while playing with Eragos was a welcome respite,

he was still glad every time Lana knocked on the door to alleviate his boredom.

“Your choice of punishment has created quite a stir,” she told him one time. “You should’ve seen the looks on the boys’ faces when they heard they got off with a warning.”

Daran wished he’d been there to see it. *Heck, I wish I was anywhere but in this bed.* “I just hope they’ll stop to blindly do whatever Firo yells at them.”

“With Firo occupied with chores, I think he won’t be around to yell much at them anyway.”

“Good point.” Daran hadn’t really thought about it like that, but it was a nice bonus. “Still, I think I should lay low for a while after this.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, just don’t do anything to stand out. So stop writing summaries and such. I guess I could use the extra spare time.”

Lana’s mouth dropped open. “But people really appreciate what you’re doing!”

“Do they?” Daran wondered. “I mean, when I talk with people, almost all of them say they find it helpful, but is that true? Or are they just being kind? I’m not so sure. And looking at all the fuss it’s been causing ... well ... I think it might be better.”

Seemingly startled, Lana stood up. “They do really appreciate it, and I’ll prove it to you.” She pulled a small strip of paper from her pocket, wrote a few words on it and showed it to Daran.

*Thank you Daran for your hard work on all the summaries,* it said. He looked at Lana. “This proves nothing.”

Lana shrugged. "It does when I pin it on your announcement board." She turned around and, with the note in her hand, left the room.

Daran shook his head and sighed. "It still doesn't," he softly said to himself.

"Thanks for coming along," Daran said, freely breathing in the fresh air. After six long days and especially nights, he had finally left his hospital bed. The first thing he did was take Lana to Quenton's office.

Quenton smiled when the two students entered. "I just heard they discharged you. I hadn't expected to see you so soon. I take it you're here for that favor I promised you?"

Daran nodded. "I'd like access to the city records. I want to find out more about possible family members."

"You're aware that I already had someone look up all family members of Nolan? Apart from your cousin, there are no living relatives."

Daran nodded. "I know. But maybe there are still some very distant relatives or so. I just want to look into it."

"Fair enough," Quenton shrugged. "I'll write a note giving you permission for today."

Quenton put some scribbles on a piece of paper and handed it to Daran, after which the two students went on their way.

"You're not looking for distant relatives of Nolan," Lana noted after they had left the office. "You're looking for family of Tamar. Why didn't you tell Quenton the truth?"

“I’m not sure,” Daran admitted. He thought about the feelings which he had had during the conversation. “I guess it’s because he doesn’t tell me much either. If he can’t be open and truthful with me, why I should I be open with him?”

Lana frowned at that comment. “Hadn’t you decided to always act like you normally want to act?”

“Yeah, but that was for Firo. Why would it apply here?”

“It applies everywhere,” Lana told him. “I think Quenton doesn’t tell you the whole truth because he doesn’t understand you well enough. And by not telling him anything, you’re only making that worse.”

“Well, there’s no point in going back now to tell him about Tamar. I’ll just trust that it won’t cause any misunderstandings in the future.”

“Is something wrong?” Lana asked when they entered the administration of the city hall. She was looking at Daran’s hand, which was shaking.

Daran pulled back his hand and let out a deep sigh. “No. I guess I’m just nervous about what we’ll find.”

Lana laid her hand down on his shoulder. “I’m sure that, no matter what we’ll find, it’ll feel comforting knowing more about your heritage than you do now.”

“Thanks,” Daran said, giving her a smile.

They looked up the cabinet which Tamar’s data was supposed to be in, pulled out the right drawer and browsed to her file. It wasn’t there.

*Again*, Daran thought, his heart sinking. *This is not a coincidence*. He went through all the other files in the drawer, but there was no mention of Tamar. There weren't even any other thinkers in the drawer. Just regular people.

"Time for plan B," Lana said. She called over the clerk that was on duty.

"Excuse me, we're looking for the file on Tamar, but it's not in this drawer. Do you happen to know where it might be?"

The clerk shook her head. "No, it should be here. If it's not, it may have been misplaced, although we check for misplacements at the start of every year."

*So if it's been misplaced, it happened recently*, Daran concluded. "Do you know if anyone accessed this drawer lately?"

The clerk let out a brief laugh. "That's not something that I'd rememb ... " Then a thought crossed her mind. After a few seconds she added, "Or maybe it is. I can recall this drawer being opened only one or two months ago. It was by one of the Academy administrators."

"Is that normal?" Lana asked. "That someone from the Academy goes through these files?"

"Oh, yes," the clerk said. "You know, the Academy arranges all the administration for the thinkers, so that they can think about more important things. Every once in a while, the Academy processes all changes that have been made into our administration. We let them do that themselves, since we're understaffed as it is."

"Thank you," Lana said to the clerk, who went back to her work. She then looked at Daran. "Anything else you want to look up?"

Daran shook his head. "I can't believe it. I just can't believe it." Disappointed, he stood up and left the room. He was fed up with it. Every time he was close to finding out more about his family, he found his way blocked at the last moment by something like a misplaced file.

It was only on his way back to the Academy that his mind started thinking again. "There's one thing that doesn't make sense," he told Lana. "She said that the Academy processes the changes, right?"

"Yes," Lana nodded. "A change in address, or a death of someone."

"But Tamar has been missing for a long time. Nothing would change for her. There's no reason why the Academy would have to update her file."

Lana looked at Daran with curious eyes. "So you're saying ..."

"It's like someone's deliberately messing up the records, so I can't find out information about my family." That brought up a memory in Daran's mind. *Messing up records* ... "Like that spy," he added softly.

"Spy? What do you mean?" Lana asked.

Daran looked up surprised. He hadn't meant for those words to be heard. Still, he didn't want to hold anything back from her, so he told her everything he knew about the spy within the Academy. Although he had to admit, it wasn't much.

"So there's a spy in the Academy," Lana repeated succinctly. "Not the best news, but it has nothing to do with you. Why would

a spy want to prevent you from finding out who your family is? That's ridiculous!"

Daran realized she had a good point there. "You're right. It's not like information about Tamar is such a huge secret. Maybe the file was just misplaced by accident."

Lana gave him a compassionate smile.

"Or ... maybe the spy misplaced several files on purpose, just to cause confusion. Maybe he even was that administrator of a month ago."

"Why would he do that?"

"You leave an enormous paper trail during your time at the Academy. If you want to blend in as an outsider, you have to forge a paper trail for yourself."

"Forging an entire life," Lana snorted. "Do you think that's possible?"

"With enough time, I think it is. Doing so without making a single mistake will be nearly impossible though. So then it helps if you add some extra mistakes to the rest of the administration."

"Clever," Lana mused. "So to find the spy, you'd have to update the entire administration."

Daran laughed. "It's a good thing that's not our task."

When they were back at the Academy, Daran went to his room to pick up the originals of his summaries. "Care to help me make some copies?" he asked. "I'm not writing stuff anymore, but at least I can still give them a few old samples."

"Sure!" Lana said with a big smile. It was a bigger smile than Daran had expected, but he didn't think much more of it. Until

he got to his table. He had expected everything to be emptied out. He couldn't have been more wrong.

*What has happened here?* On his bulletin board, there were tons of small notes, all of different sizes, shapes and colors, and all in different handwritings as well.

He pulled one off. "Keep up the good work," he read. Another one said, "You pulled me through at least eight modules already." And this went on for a while. Near the center of the board, mostly hidden behind other pieces of paper, was the only note that Daran had seen before. "Thank you Daran for your hard work on all the summaries."

*Thank you Lana, for showing me the effects of them.* It reminded him of one of the first rules which students learn about gizmo thought processes. For gizmos to learn, they need to understand the effects of their actions. It was only then that Daran realized how strongly this rule held for people as well. He looked at Lana and, blushing, he gave her a thankful nod.

Another surprise waited for him when his glance lowered to the table. He had expected it to be nearly empty, after not having made any new copies for a week, but the table was still filled with summaries. In fact, it was even more full than when Daran last resupplied it. And more organized too, like someone had ordered it.

*What is going on here?* He started looking through the summaries. They appeared to be copies of copies. Surprised, he looked at Lana again.

She started to explain. "After you were ... well ... hospitalized, people weren't sure when you'd get back to making summaries. As



a result, everyone tried to claim some copies before they ran out. The table was empty within a day.”

She then waved to two students that were drilling some parts in the workshop. They came over. Daran knew they had attended one of his workshop instruction sessions, but he couldn’t recall their names.

“These are Amilia and Jarod,” Lana introduced the pair. “During the past week, they made sure that new copies of a summary were made, as soon as they were running out.”

“We grouped them by subject, so people could easily find what they’re looking for,” Amilia told Daran.

Daran was speechless. “But ... why?”

Amilia smiled. “After all you’ve done, we wanted to give something back. Not knowing how we could give something back to you, we decided to give something to the community, just like you.”

“We’re just missing a few summaries,” Jarod admitted. “Like the summary on basic gizmo thought processes.”

*The first summary I wrote*, Daran realized. “I have the originals right here,” he smiled, tapping his hand on his bag.

“Do you mind if we make some more copies?” Amilia asked.

Daran looked at the table. This whole thing was becoming bigger than he could ever have imagined. Then he looked back at Amilia and Jarod. “Not at all,” he said. “It’s your table now.”

Lana frowned at that. “So you are still planning to stop making summaries?”

“I don’t want to be responsible for this table anymore,” he told Lana, whose eyes fell to the floor in disappointment. For a

moment, Daran left her like that. Then he put his hand on her shoulder. “After all, these two are much better at keeping it filled up than I am. And then I have more time to write new summaries.”

He turned towards Amilia and Jarod. “Would you be okay with that?”

Jarod gave him an eager nod. “We’ll take care of it.”

## Chapter 17 – Stealing loyalties

“Please let the group be any good,” Daran said to Eragos, who was perched on his shoulder.

“I hope I’m not disappointing you,” a familiar voice said behind him.

Daran turned around and gave Jarod a smile. “Not at all.” In fact, he couldn’t express how glad he was to see a friendly face.

“I hadn’t expected you to be joining a special group mission,” Jarod admitted. “You’ve only been out of bed for what, a week?”

“Nearly two, but I’ll manage,” Daran shrugged. “Speaking of which ... do you know what’s so special about these *special* group missions?”

Jarod stifled a laugh. “You never know in advance. That’s what’s so special about it. Students are honor-bound not to say too much about them, which means you only hear exaggerated stories.”

“Like?” Daran asked curiously.

“Well, a few months ago in the city a building exploded. Rumors are that it had to do with a special group mission. At another special group mission, the group disappeared for several weeks. It turned out they went on a secret trip across most of the country. So if you’re going on a special group mission, it’s best to tell your friends in advance.”

Daran’s mouth dropped open. “Several weeks? I didn’t – ”

“Relax,” Jarod gave Daran a wink. “These stories are always exaggerated. They probably just had to spend the night somewhere outside.”

Daran let out a sigh of relief. “Good.” Though he started thinking, *An exploding building? And thought students were involved?* But then they arrived at mission control. On entering, Daran nodded to the thinker behind the desk, a hunter called Cars. It was only then that he saw the other two students in the room.

*I should’ve figured*, he sighed. They were two of Firo’s friends: Zeris and Lioris. They both stood up.

“Daran, I’m sorry about what happened last time, at the bridge,” Lioris started. “It was ... ” but Daran cut him off with a wave of his hand.

“That’s all in the past,” he said, not wanting to talk or even think about it. “We’ve got a group mission ahead of us now.”

“Then at least let me thank you for that instruction session of a few weeks back,” Zeris added. “I didn’t do so before.”

“You’re welcome,” nodded Daran. This did cause him, if only very briefly, to smile.

Then their fifth and final group member entered. It was a third-year student that introduced himself as Altas. He looked the group over, until his eyes settled on Daran’s shoulder. Daran had almost forgotten that Eragos sat there.

“You’ve got to leave gizmos in your room,” he said firmly. “They cause trouble.”

“They said the same thing about me, and I’m still here,” Daran noted.

“I don’t care,” Altas countered. “You leave it behind. That’s my final thought.”

From behind his desk, Cars subtly coughed. “Let’s get started,” he said, waiting for the students to settle down. “First I want to explain the mission constraints. During this mission, there will be no fighting. You might get shot at though.”

“That sounds pretty special,” Daran whispered to Jarod.

“All arbalests contain rubber arrows. These will sting, but they won’t hurt you. If you get hit in your arms or your legs, you may not use that limb for the rest of the mission. If you’re hit anywhere else, you shout something painful, fall to the ground and lie down until you’re tapped on the shoulder by one of us. Then you go with that specific person until the mission is over. Is that clear?”

After the students had given him a “yes” one by one, the hunter nodded. “Good, then the mission begins now.” He sat up straight, as if he was going to make an announcement.

“This morning there was a serious incident at the Academy. A group of Free Minds managed to steal data on undercover thinkers. We know that the identities of three thinkers have been compromised. If we knew which ones, we’d pull these people out. The problem is, we don’t.”

“So you need to choose between pulling everyone out, or sacrificing three people,” Daran reasoned.

“Yes, unless we can get these papers back. The data is already compromised, but at least then we can pull the right thinkers out.”

Daran briefly looked at the other students in the room. They were all listening intently, absorbing the information.

“We have found out in which building the Free Minds are keeping the data,” Cars continued. “The good news is that they don’t know we’re on to them yet.”

“So we storm the building,” Atlas said.

“No. That is likely to result in casualties on both sides,” the hunter noted. “Stealth is a better option. It is your job to go in and get the papers without being detected. As you might have guessed, Atlas is in charge. If there are no further questions, then you can go.”

“Perfect,” Atlas said. “Let’s grab some equipment before we head out. And Daran, ditch that gizmo somewhere.”

The supposed Free Minds hide-out was all the way on the other side of the city. After the long walk, Atlas sent Zeris and Lioris to the front of the house, while Jarod and Daran were dispatched to the rear.

Daran didn’t want to get too close to the house, afraid of being spotted, so Jarod and he climbed up a building and watched the house from a distance.

“Do you guys see anything at the front?” Atlas asked through the communicator. Daran knew the third-year student was somewhere safe on the ground.

“One man and one woman on the first floor,” Zeris reported back. “The second floor seems empty.”

“What about the back?”

“Give me a second,” Daran replied. He opened his bag and immediately Eragos climbed out, settling on Daran’s shoulder.

Jarod gave Daran a questioning look, *Weren’t you supposed to leave him behind?* but Daran merely shrugged innocently before he pulled a pair of binoculars out of his bag and put them to his eyes.

“At the second floor is a window that’s open,” he reported. “We might use that to enter. There’s no one behind it. There is a girl on the first floor though.”

“So that’s three in total,” Atlas added.

“Wait ... through the doorway, I can also see another guy. He’s sitting in the central room of the house. And, oh ... ”

“I don’t like that sound,” Atlas noted. “What is it?”

“I think I know where the documents are. In a small box on the table right next to that guy.”

“That’s not what I want to hear.”

“Then I think you don’t want to hear the next part either.”

“Oh, come on,” Atlas cursed. “Stop thinking and blurt it out.”

“The box is locked, and it appears to have an ignition system too.”

“A what?”

“There’s a small device with a button beneath the box. It’s hard to see from this distance, but it looks like an ignition system. They use it for keeping secrets safe in case of an emergency. If you push the button, the device burns up whatever is in the box.”

Atlas let out a deep sigh. “So the papers are in a locked box, there’s a guy sitting right next to it, and as soon as he sees or hears something suspicious, he presses the button and the papers go up in smoke?”

“Pretty much, but I don’t think – ”

“Whatever,” Atlas interrupted. “This mission is clearly impossible. I guess that’s the special thing about it. We’re supposed to realize that it’s pointless and cut our losses. I’m going

back to the Academy and recommend that they storm the building. You guys should return too.”

“No, Altas, I think we can still complete the mission.”

The communicator remained silent.

“Altas?”

Still nothing. Daran cursed. “The thoughtless fool turned off his communicator. Zeris, Lioris, are you still there?”

“We’re listening.” Daran didn’t know the voices very well, but he thought it was Lioris speaking.

“Good. If we’re fast, we can get the documents and run back to the Academy before Altas gets there.”

“What’s the plan?”

“There’s no time to explain. I just need a distraction at the front in five minutes. Something noisy, but not suspicious. I don’t want them to see any uniforms. Can you fix that?”

“We’re on it.”

Then Daran turned to Jarod, who was still lying next to him on the roof. “I need a similar distraction at the back.”

“I’ll come up with something,” the boy said. “But what will you do?”

“I’m going to send someone in there. The stealthiest member of our group.”

Four minutes later Daran was sitting on top of the target building. “Alright Eragos, it’s showtime.”

The small creature, wearing his brand new camouflage cloak, scuttled over from Daran’s shoulder into the palm of his hand. Curiously, he looked up at Daran.



“There’s a box in this building, on the ground floor, in the middle room. I need you to unlock that box and bring the papers in it to me without being seen. Can you do that?”

The gizmo started an enthusiastic twittering, which sufficed as a “yes” for Daran. He pulled up his communicator. “Alright guys. It’s time for that distraction.”

A few seconds later, Daran heard a loud clattering at the front side of the building, like one of the market stalls had fallen over. He leaned over the edge on the back end of the roof and held Eragos close to the open window. It was only slightly ajar, but it was enough for the gizmo to squeeze through.

As the gizmo disappeared into the building, Daran looked down at the street. He saw Jarod appear from behind a wall. The boy had taken off his uniform jacket and had tied it around his head. Although it looked a bit funny, there was no way anyone would think he was from the Academy.

Jarod had a stone in his hand. With a powerful throw, he sent it towards the building and immediately disappeared behind the wall again.

The sound of broken glass followed. “Something’s happening,” Daran heard a female voice call out from below. “They might be coming.”

“So pay attention,” a man said. It was silent for a few seconds, until two kids ran by the house, one chasing the other.

“Ah, they’re just kids,” the girl said.

“Maybe,” the man said hesitantly. “Still, let’s keep our eyes open.”

*I just hope everything goes well with Eragos*, Daran thought. Just when he was getting worried, he heard a scratching sound below him. Daran leaned over the edge, held out his hand and felt a familiar creature drop into it. There were three sheets of paper in the gizmo's mouth.

"We've got it," Daran whispered happily through the communicator as he started to run away over the rooftops. "We're lucky those kids ran by when they did."

"Ha! I don't do luck," Jarod replied, almost offended.

"But then how ... "

"I bribed them," Jarod explained, laughing.

Daran had to laugh about that too. "That is some good thinking. But we should head back to the Academy, and quickly too."

"If we all take different paths, then one of us might run into Altas," Jarod suggested.

"Sounds perfect. Let's move out!"

## Chapter 18 – An accidental clue

Daran was panting on his way back to the Academy. *I'm so out of shape*, he told himself. The few weeks of rest may have recovered his injuries, but they hadn't been too good for his fitness. A painful twinge was building up on the side of his chest.

Because of the pain, he almost didn't notice the buzzing of his communicator. When he did, he stopped running and opened the channel, hoping one of the guys had run into Altas.

"This is an urgent call to all thinkers within the city of Tarine." The voice was unfamiliar to Daran, but it sounded like an older man. Definitely not one of his teammates. *What is going on?*

"A person in a hunter uniform is running southwest from the Academy. If in the vicinity, apply pursuit and detain. Switch to channel 22 for further instructions."

Daran had thought the mission was over, but it seemed like the special part was only just beginning. *It just shows even more how wrong Altas was*, he thought.

"Did you guys hear that too?" asked Lioris. "Should we switch to channel 22?"

Daran was curious what the reactions of the others would be. They didn't come though. The communicator remained silent.

"Daran?" Lioris eventually asked.

Daran raised an eyebrow. *They're waiting for me to take the lead*, he realized, somewhat surprised. *New habits grow quickly*.

He looked at the communicator. To his astonishment, there was no way he could switch channels. "We can't," he said. "We've got the student model. Probably only Altas can."

“So what do we do then?” Jarod asked.

“We improvise.”

Hoping to get a better view, Daran decided to climb on top of a house again. *I’m getting good at this*, he thought as he scaled some debris lying behind a house and jumped up to grab the roof. He pulled himself up, climbed further until he reached the highest point and surveyed the streets below. But it wasn’t the streets where his eyes finally settled. It was on two figures in the distance, running over the rooftops. The front one was a woman wearing red. The second one was a big monkey-like gizmo.

“I see her!” he called out. “She’s on the rooftops, coming towards us. You guys better climb up.”

Daran hid behind a protruding wall, waiting for her to get closer. But then he started to wonder, *What will I do? What are the chances that I can beat her in a fight? She’s a hunter, with a huge gizmo.*

A thousand possible ways of beating her popped up in his mind, one more ridiculous than the other, until one thought stood out. *I don’t have to win the fight. I just have to stall her until the others get here.*

Daran kept waiting and watching. He was impressed by the agility with which the hunter and the gizmo effortlessly jumped over the multitude of alleys.

When the two were as close as they would get, Daran emerged from his hiding place. He had to jump across a street to get to the hunter. It was a long distance, but he estimated he could make the leap. He took a running start and jumped. For a brief but

excruciatingly long moment he hung in the air high above the street below.

When he reached the other side, he wasn't as high as he had expected. Instead of making a smooth landing, his legs fell short of the edge, tripping him and sending him sprawling across the roof. After having come to a stop, Eragos appeared in front of his nose, twittering angrily. The gizmo had smoothly jumped off Daran's shoulder during his crash and was now impatiently tugging on his hair.

When Daran got up, he wasn't surprised to see that the hunter had noticed him. She had changed directions and was now running away from him. *She's trying to avoid a confrontation*, Daran realized. *That's something I can use.*

He let Eragos climb back on his shoulder and, ignoring the scrapes on his hands and knees, started the pursuit.

Although the hunter chose an easy path across the rooftops, without any big jumps, Daran had trouble keeping up, slowly falling more and more behind. He looked up at the hunter one more time and decided to give up. The pair was too far to catch up. Out of breath, he watched them go.

Then another figure emerged on the rooftops. *Jarod!* With renewed vigor, Daran started running. Jarod was a lot closer, and though Daran didn't expect to catch up during the chase, he might be able to help out if Jarod managed to stop the fugitive.

In the distance, Daran could see the hunter stop running. There was a hesitation of some sort. *Did they reach a dead end?* Jarod had nearly reached the pair when the two suddenly took a quick running start and jumped across the wide gap. Their landing

was hardly better than Daran's previous crash, but they made it across.

Not wasting any time, Jarod ran to the edge of the roof and jumped to the other side too. Then he disappeared from view.

*Oh no*, Daran thought. When he finally reached the edge of the roof, he saw Jarod. He was hanging down the other side, holding on with a single hand, and the hand was slowly slipping away.

"Daran, help me!" Jarod called out with fear in his voice. The frightened student looked down, but three stories below there was nothing but stone pavement waiting for him.

*I have to get to the other side!* Daran started to back off to get a running start, but he knew it wouldn't be in time.

He looked up at the hunter, who also stood transfixed, taking in the scene. *You have to help him*, he thought, until another thought struck him. *Is this part of the group mission?*

Then the hunter gave a subtle nod, sending the gizmo forward. The creature scuttled over on all fours and grabbed the boy's wrist, just when he lost his grip on the roof.

Now Jarod was hanging suspended above the street, trying to pull himself up, but the gizmo was having trouble holding on. Not wanting to waste any more time, Daran burst forward and jumped across the gap. He crashed into the wall on the other side, sending more jolts of pain through his chest.

His injury was the last thing on his mind though, as he was still hanging on the edge of the building. Luckily, both his hands had a firm grip, and so he managed to pull himself up. He then rushed

over to the gizmo and grabbed Jarod's other hand. Together they pulled the student up onto the roof.

After a few seconds of catching breaths, Daran looked up at the hunter, who was still staring at them from the other side of the building. She was pretty far away and wearing a hood, so he couldn't see her very well, but she did seem familiar. He'd probably seen her pass by at the Academy some time.

What surprised him more was the expression on her face. It was doubt. A very strong doubt.

*But about what? About whether to stop this group mission?* She was merely looking at Jarod and ... *her gizmo!* Daran turned around and saw that Jarod was still having wrists clasped with the metallic creature. Expectantly, the gizmo turned his mechanic eyes towards his thinker.

Jarod looked at Daran instead, giving him a questioning look, as if he was asking for advice. But Daran also didn't know what to do.

*Something really odd is going on here,* he thought. *But what am I missing?*

His gaze turned to the hunter. She also seemed unsure what to do too, but was apparently silently discussing it with her gizmo through eye contact. Then her eyes settled on Daran. She gave the boy a long and studious look, until she painfully closed her eyes, seemingly having come to a decision.

It was only then that Daran realized what was going on. *This isn't part of the mission. This is real.*

"I'm sorry," the hunter silently mouthed to her gizmo. Then she turned around and ran off.

For what seemed to be an eternity, neither of the three moved. Eventually Daran softly muttered to himself, "I'm such a pile of scrap. That was the spy."

"What did you say?" Jarod asked, evidently not following Daran's mumbling.

Daran looked up at his friend who, not knowing what else to do, still held on to the gizmo's wrist. Surprisingly, the gizmo was waiting calmly.

"There's been a spy in the Academy for a while, and that was her. This wasn't part of the group mission."

Jarod gave the gizmo another look. "But then this is ..."

"Her gizmo," Daran finished. "But if she's not a thinker, then where does she get her gizmo fr –"

Daran saw a shadow move from the corner of his eyes. Before he could turn around, they were surrounded by three hunters. Daran didn't know the first two, but the third was Cars, who had sent them on the group mission in the first place.

When Cars recognized the students, he angrily asked, "What are you two doing here?"

"At the moment, catching a breath," Daran said. "But earlier we captured the gizmo of that spy. Oh, and I've got something else for you too." He pulled the sheets of paper he'd retrieved earlier that day out of his pocket and handed them to Cars.

It took five full seconds before the hunter realized what he had in his hands. The look that then appeared on his face was one Daran would savor for quite a while.



The other group members were already waiting for them back at mission control. As they were ushered into the briefing room, Cars gave them an angry look. "Wait here. And don't touch anything." Then he closed the door and locked it, leaving a silent room behind.

Eventually Zeris broke the silence. "Normally they don't lock groups up after a group mission."

"It's because it wasn't a group mission," Daran said. "The extra message was real."

The mouths of Zeris and Lioris dropped open, but Altas' face just went blank. Seeing that the others didn't share his confusion, he asked, "What extra message?"

Daran facepalmed. He was glad when the door suddenly opened. It meant he didn't have to come up with a reply.

He wasn't surprised when Quenton entered. Nor was he surprised by his angry words. "I had specifically told you not to go after that spy!" Naturally, he was looking straight at Daran.

Luckily Daran had his reply ready and responded calmly. "Then explain something to me. If, during a special group mission, we are ordered to apply pursuit and detain, and we see the suspect coming towards us, what are we supposed to do?"

"You mean you got the message of ..."

When Quenton saw four students nodding back at him, the look on his face turned from anger to rage, but it wasn't directed at the students. He turned around and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

“Okay, will anyone tell me what’s going on?!” Altas called out, but he was shushed by the other students. Something was happening on the other side of the door.

“It wasn’t their fault!” Quenton yelled out. “They got the emergency message. They did what every thinker should’ve done. In fact, they did what your hunters should’ve done! Pursuit and detain.”

“So now you’re blaming us?” Daran wasn’t sure who the voice belonged to, but he guessed it was Arin’s.

“This isn’t about assigning blame. This is about what to do next. Have you found out who the gizmo belonged to?”

“No. The thought core records have been altered.”

“So basically we don’t have a clue how many unregistered thought cores are out there?”

“Oh, we know exactly how many and which ones. We just don’t know who they belong to.”

“Is there any other clue that could tell us something? Serial numbers of parts maybe?”

“Nothing. All the parts are handmade, and they’re unbelievably well-made too. He knows his way around a workshop.”

*They’re rushing to conclusions again,* Daran thought. *The spy isn’t a guy. And she could’ve had help with building the gizmo.* Still, for some reason the comment stuck in his mind.

“So there’s nothing we can deduce from it?” Quenton asked in desperation.

“If you want to be sure, go check it yourself. We’re keeping it with the first-year gizmos.”

“No, it’ll just be another dead end.” Suddenly the door shook from a blow. Apparently Quenton had kicked it in frustration.

“What should I do with the students?” someone asked. It wasn’t Arin. It probably was Cars.

“Which special group mission were they on?”

“The impossible data recovery mission.”

“And how did they do?”

“They, ehm ... They recovered the data.”

At this point Altas’ face went blank again. He gave Daran a look which was a mix between confusion and frustration.

“That shouldn’t have been possible,” Quenton said. “On the first sign of entry, the data should be flashed.”

“But there was no sign. I just called the guys out there. They said everything was fine. That is, until I asked them to check the casket. They found it empty.” Cars let out a nervous laugh. “You should’ve heard their reaction. It was – ”

Again the door shuddered, but less than previously. This time it probably was Quenton’s fist that caused the noise.

“That boy will be the end of me some day.” Quenton let out a deep sigh, which was audible even through the door. “Fine, I’ll deal with them.”

Suddenly all the boys were looking around innocently, but it wasn’t necessary. Quenton opened the door and curtly said, “You’ve all passed the module. We’ll skip the evaluation. Now get out.”

Daran tried to help. “But about the spy. I – ”

“I don’t want to hear about it!” Quenton yelled. The look he gave Daran made it pretty clear that that was his final thought.

The students silently scurried out of the room and walked back to the student quarters. For the last bit, Daran was only accompanied by Jarod.

“Thanks for saving me out there,” Jarod said.

Daran shrugged. “You’re welcome, but it wasn’t me. It was that gizmo.”

“And still we captured him,” Jarod said with guilt in his voice. “Do you think we should’ve released him?”

Daran took a deep breath. “I don’t know,” he finally said. “We didn’t know we were capturing anyone. We didn’t even know it was real.”

“But she did,” Jarod countered. “I mean, we were both exhausted and hurt. She could’ve easily attacked us and taken back her gizmo.”

“Perhaps she didn’t want to hurt anyone? I mean, she saved your life after all.”

Jarod shook his head. “The threat alone would’ve been plenty.”

“Maybe she feared she would be recognized? That would pretty much end her spy career at the Academy.”

Again Jarod disagreed. “We’d already seen every part of her face that wasn’t covered by her hood, and that wasn’t much to begin with. No, it’s something else.”

Daran thought back about the long eye contact that he had with the spy, and the painful realization that he slowly saw growing inside of her. He knew that Jarod was right. *There’s indeed something else. Something we don’t know. But what?*

## Chapter 19 – Resolving tension

*Let's do this*, Daran said to himself as yet another workshop instruction session was about to begin.

He was browsing through the list of participants, when his eyes settled on a name he didn't like. When he looked up, the person owning that name was suddenly standing right in front of him.

"Posak," Daran said. A dozen suitable follow-ups flashed through his mind. *Planning to leak some resin again?* But he held the angry remarks back. Instead he asked, "Are you bringing any friends?"

"No, I'm on my own," the boy replied. He bit his lip. "Listen Daran. I've been acting like drilling waste towards you. I'm really sorry, and I get it if you kick me out. But I really need to pass some workshop modules, and your previous instruction session was really good. So will you please let me join?"

Again Daran shook off several snide comments. *The previous instruction session? You mean the one you sabotaged?* He just said, "Sure, grab a seat."

As the room started to fill up, Daran noticed that most of the attendants were regulars. *They're coming back. That's good.* He knew almost all the names and quickly looked up the ones that he had forgotten. Then he set everyone to work.

The level of the students was very varied. Some picked up everything instantly, while others were even struggling with the screwdrivers. To Daran's surprise, Posak was in the former group.

*He'd be fine without my help, but there's still plenty of stuff he can improve on.* He gave the boy a few pointers, which Posak gratefully

accepted. Later on, Posak even asked for more tips and tricks and an interesting discussion ensued.

When the session was finished, Posak came to shake his hand. “Thanks Daran. It’s amazing you’re doing these things. I owe you one. So if you ever need a hand with something, just let me know.”

Daran merely nodded and said “Okay,” but inwardly it felt like a massive leap forward. Things were changing.

After all the other students had left, Daran was doing a final cleanup, together with Lana. “So how did it go?” he asked her. It was always hard to judge how the students experienced his sessions, so whenever possible he asked someone.

“Really well,” Lana said. “I can feel I’m making progress. I was worried a bit about the tension between you and Posak, but I shouldn’t have been. There wasn’t any.”

*Oh, you’re wrong there,* Daran thought with a smile. *But tension is apparently easy to dissipate when you treat someone like you appreciate him. Like you would treat anyone else.* It was another lesson learned.

Daran couldn’t help smiling. He always loved the feeling he had after another successful instruction session. It was still like the first time, like he had pulled off the impossible. It made him feel like he could take on the world.

With that feeling in mind he asked, seemingly out of nowhere, “What are you doing tonight?”

Lana looked up. “Not much. Why?”

“I want to take you to some place. Somewhere fun. Would you like that?”

Lana seemed surprised for a bit, but then a smile appeared on her face. "That sounds great."

As the sun was setting, Daran and Lana were looking out over Tarine. From the top of the education building, they could see the sun showering its red glow over the city.

"So once we're thinkers, these are the people we're supposed to protect," Daran said. With his hands on the railing, he leaned forward, as if it would give him a better view of the sunset.

Lana let out a nervous laugh. "Kind of frightening, isn't it?"

"A bit," Daran admitted. "But I guess it's because we don't know how yet."

"I think we'll just do the best we can. That's as much as anyone can expect from us, right?"

Daran nodded. It made sense.

He looked sideways at Lana. She was staring out over the city, lost in thought. Not knowing why, Daran slid his hand over the railing, placing it on top of Lana's. The girl seemed surprised, but then she accepted Daran's hand in her own and gave him a smile. Daran couldn't help smiling back, before he turned his gaze back towards the city.

"Do you think we'll find out? You know, that one day we'll know how to protect the people out there?"

"I don't think it's as easy as that," Lana said, shaking her head. "It's not like the current thinkers always know exactly what to do either. They can't even catch that spy."

"Good point," Daran snorted, amused.

“Do you think the spy is a thinker gone rogue, or a Free Mind that infiltrated the Academy?”

“She’s probably a thinker. I mean, where else has she learned how to deal with gizmos?”

“The Minds have gizmos too,” Lana noted. “So they must know at least a bit about how to operate them. Besides, it’s said that the leader of the Minds used to be a thinker. So maybe the spy learned how to handle gizmos there.”

“That’s interesting,” Daran said, not knowing that particular rumor. “But your theory doesn’t add up. You should’ve seen how she controlled her gizmo. You don’t learn that from a few stolen thought cores. You learn that at the Academy.”

“Says the boy who fixed a gizmo on his own,” Lana completed.

Daran thought back to a few months ago, before he joined the Academy. Although he knew a lot back then, there were many more things that he didn’t have a clue of. “I was just acting on instinct then. Now I’m starting to feel like I understand gizmos, like that spy understood her gizmo. At least a little bit. No, I’m quite sure that spy was trained at the Academy.”

Lana thought about it for a few seconds, but then she nodded. “In that case, I think pretty soon the Academy will know who it is. I mean, you captured her gizmo. The way which someone builds gizmos is pretty characteristic. If she has always been at the Academy, then someone will know her style. She will be unmasked.”

“It’s been a few days. She’s probably already been unmasked then. Except that Quenton won’t share anything about his



investigation with me.” That last sentence was filled with malice, but Daran didn’t care.

“It’s not our place to think about this,” Lana said, a consoling note in her voice. “One day we’ll be thinkers. Then we can hunt spies. And you cannot tell me you won’t know how to do that by then.” She gave Daran a wink and squeezed in his hand. “For now, let’s just let this rest.”

“I guess you’re right,” Daran said, squeezing back. He looked Lana in the eye and gave her a smile. When she smiled back, there was something in her smile and her unwavering gaze that seemed to pull him in. Slowly, their eyes got drawn closer and closer together, until their lips gently touched. Daran closed his eyes, lightly feeling Lana’s breath around his mouth. He lingered in that feeling, enjoying the sensation, until he pursed his lips, imprinting the kiss. It had only lasted for a second or two, and while it seemed like much longer, it still felt way too brief.

Lana’s face was frozen, as if a sudden realization had dawned in her. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” she asked.

“I’m thinking two things. First, that it was a very nice kiss.” He gave Lana a wink, which caused her to blush briefly.

“That too,” she snickered. “What’s the second thing?”

“That Quenton didn’t share anything about the investigation.” It was the exact same thing Daran had said earlier, but now he said it like it mattered, because he knew it did.

“Exactly,” Lana agreed. “If the Academy had unmasked the spy, they would’ve made it public to everyone by now. They’re always eager to bring out good news.”

Daran nodded vehemently. “And since we didn’t hear any public declarations, the spy must be someone from outside the Academy.”

“Which supports your theory that the spy is creating a paper trail,” Lana added.

Though it sounded logical, it still boggled Daran’s mind. His gaze turned towards the city while he was trying to sort it all out. At first he thought the spy was trained at the Academy. After all, it was someone who knew exactly when to blow up a safe in the main Academy building, and someone who could get in secure places. But now the evidence seemed to say the spy wasn’t from the Academy. It was like he needed to merge two seemingly contradictory theories in his mind. Since the latter seemed more conclusive now, he went for that one.

He looked back at Lana, who still had her eyes fixed on him. “So to find the spy, we just have to examine the paper trails left behind by all the thinkers,” he told her. “We find the flaw and we find the spy. I think we can do that.”

“Didn’t Quenton tell you not to get involved?” Lana asked.

“People drag me out of whatever it is that I’m doing whenever something is happening,” Daran snorted. “And this whole mess is preventing me from learning anything about my family. I’d say I’m already involved. So let’s do this. All we need is approval to access the records, which ... ”

“You have to get from Quenton?” Lana finished.

“Yes,” Daran confirmed. “He won’t like it, so I hope he feels more guilty about getting me in the hospital than angry about me capturing that gizmo.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Lana said.

“Indeed,” Daran nodded. “Let’s have lunch together tomorrow and go to Quenton afterward?”

“Ah, now you’re asking me out for lunch as well?” Lana asked, giving Daran another wink.

“I do hope you still have some appetite around me,” Daran countered, smiling back.

Lana put her hand on Daran’s shoulder. “Having lunch with you sounds delicious.” Daran then put his arm around Lana. Like that, they watched the sun sink behind the mountains on the horizon.

## Chapter 20 – Making amends

The next morning, Daran continued working on a few summaries, but for some reason his mind kept drifting away. It could've been weariness that made it easy for his mind to go elsewhere. *I did go to bed later than usual*, he thought. But the main problem was that there was something it liked to drift off to. Or someone. *Lana*.

It gave him mixed feelings. On the one hand, just the thought of Lana cheered him up. But on the other hand, his inability to get anything done, combined with the fact that right now she simply wasn't there in the room with him, made him feel more miserable and powerless than the week he was stuck in a bed with a major headache.

He thought of just aimlessly walking around the Academy, for the slim chance of running into her. It felt like that would solve all his problems, but deep down he knew it wouldn't.

He shook his head. *I'm not going to start acting all erratic, all because of some feeling which ... I don't even know what it's doing with me*.

He buried his head deep in his hands, let out a long yawn, shook the weariness off, and went for one more attempt at writing a summary.

Ten minutes later, when all he'd written down was two brief sentences which he wasn't even satisfied with, he sighed and wiped the sleep out of his eyes. *This isn't working*.

He stacked up his summaries, put them in his bag in case he got a flash of inspiration, and went to the workshop to work on

some assignments of his own. Lately he had spent so much time teaching others, that he was close to falling behind himself, and falling behind just wasn't an option.

He entered the workshop, dumped his bag near a table and went to work. He was glad that workshop assignments didn't cost him as much time as they did for others. *It's a bit of an unfair advantage, having grown up in a workshop*, he mused. *But then again, there are plenty of disadvantages to my heritage too.* He went from machine to machine at a high pace until he was satisfied with the result.

Eager to hand it in, he picked up his bag. Or at least, he tried to, but the bag was stuck to the floor. When he looked down, he saw that there was glue all over it. It had penetrated into the contents of the bag too.

A thought froze Daran. *Oh no. The summaries. A few days worth of them.* He opened the bag and pulled them out, but the glue had already spread through them. In fact, it had already started to dry, turning the whole stack of papers into a thick and heavy piece of cardboard. *I haven't even copied these.*

The cause of the glue was evident. There was a leaking can on the table right above his bag. *This may be made to look like an accident, but there's no way that it actually is*, Daran knew. *It's only so he can deny he is behind it.* Daran looked around the workshop and found Firo in the corner, sitting at a workbench. The boy was trying hard not to look at Daran, which only made everything more obvious.

Daran felt aggression well up within him, but he released it in a big sigh. He could start flinging around accusations, which

would only cause more frustration. He could retaliate, which would probably get him punished. Or he could just try to make the best out of things.

And so he used all his workshop experience to pry apart the sheets of paper, recovering as much from them as possible. It took longer than expected, but he managed to restore most of them, with only a few sheets torn apart too much to read. He'd just have to rewrite those.

When he was copying the last bits of data, he suddenly found Lana standing next to him. His heart leapt. That is, until he realized why she was there. *Oh ...*

"I thought you'd join me for lunch," she said.

When Daran looked at the clock, it was indeed already past lunchtime. Only then did he notice his growling stomach.

"I assumed you were just a bit late, so I started eating. But you didn't come at all."

"I'm sorry," Daran stammered, "but there was glue all over my bag, and I had to sort it out before it dried, and ..." He knew the excuses sounded meaningless.

"Anyway," Lana countered after a long silence, "I've got a group mission this afternoon, but we can meet up afterward. Say, at eight, at the Academy square? Then we can go after these records, and perhaps do some other fun things?" She gave Daran a wink.

Daran exhaled, happy about the change of subject and the second chance. "Eight is perfect," he said. "I'll see you then!"

*There's no way I'm going to be late again,* Daran thought as he headed to the Academy square ten minutes early. He didn't mind waiting for a bit. To his surprise, Lana was already there and, even more surprising, she was talking with Firo. Lana's gizmo was energetically circling between the legs of the two, like a big rolling ball of fur.

When Lana saw him, she gave him an angry frown.

"What's going on?" Daran wondered.

"What's going on is that you're late again," Lana said accusatory.

"But we would meet up at eight," Daran said, raising an eyebrow.

"No, you sent me a message to meet half an hour earlier."

Daran's jaw dropped. "No I didn't."

"Yes you did," Lana said insistently. "Don't lie to me."

Daran didn't have a clue where all the accusations came from. He just wanted to make one thing clear. "I never lied to you, and I never will," he said, and he meant it.

"Is that so?" Lana retorted. "What about that time when you asked me an address from the city records? You said that was part of the group mission. Was that the truth?"

Daran's heart sank in his chest while, right next to him, Firo gave a brief chuckle. *So he's behind this. But how did he know about the group mission?* Daran thought back to when he asked Lana about the address. *Firo wasn't on that mission, but Zeris was. He must've listened in and told Firo afterward.*

In the meantime Lana was still waiting for an answer and, no matter what, Daran wasn't planning on lying to her again.

Capitulating, he slumped his shoulders and softly said, “No, it wasn’t.”

“Fine,” Lana said, her angry and unwavering gaze aimed directly at Daran. “If I can’t trust you, then I don’t want to be with you either.” She turned around and walked away, followed by her gizmo.

“Lana,” Daran called and took a step towards her, but he stopped when she turned around and he saw the look on her face. Her anger had doubled, but her eyes were also starting to glisten.

She raised her outstretched arm to Daran, with her palm open, as if she was gesturing him to stay where he was, but then she purposefully closed her hand into a fist. Immediately her gizmo launched herself towards Daran and placed her claws in his thigh.

Daran didn’t know what surprised him more. That Lana had actually followed his not so serious suggestion of teaching Liona an attack signal, or that she was now using it on him. Astonished, not even feeling the scrapes in his skin, he watched Lana turn around and run away. The gizmo, realizing that Lana was leaving, let go of Daran and shimmied after her.

Daran could do little else than look at her disappear inside. Only when she was gone did he notice that Firo was still standing next to him, staring at him with an amused smirk on his face.

The urge to fling himself at Firo rose up in Daran, and only weeks of practicing restraint allowed him to hold himself back. Instead, he buried his face in his hands.

“Not what you’ve been looking forward to, was it?” Firo snidely remarked.



At that point Daran only wanted to be alone. So he walked away from Firo, but the boy followed.

“Running away from your problems huh?” he called from behind. “Why don’t you run away from the Academy as well, while you’re at it?”

“Leave me alone!” Daran yelled back as he started running. From the corner of his eyes, he saw that Firo was still following him. So he ran on, until he entered his room and slammed the door behind him.

It was only then that he noticed his face was drenched in tears.

The next morning Daran woke up with another unfamiliar feeling. After a long night, he had expected to feel miserable, but his pillow had apparently soaked up all his sadness. What was left was not only wakefulness, but also acceptance about what happened as well as a strong determination to improve everything. All he wanted to do was to work as hard as possible to make things right.

He felt that he had some explaining to do to Lana, but he didn’t want to do so face to face. He wanted her to think well about his explanations before she could give a reaction. Next to that, he also wanted to show her that he still cared about her. An idea formed in his mind to do both things simultaneously.

“Let’s go to the workshop,” he told Eragos, who eagerly climbed on his shoulder.

He started off by carving a flower out of wood. Using differences in surface roughness, he made different textures,

spending extra attention on making the leaves as life-like as possible.

Then he started crafting the blocks that were to surround the flower. Eventually, when he was done and had put them all together, a solid sphere of small blocks surrounded the flower. But he still needed to see if his design had worked.

He tried to move the individual pieces making up the sphere, but only one of them was able to slide out. He pulled out that piece and tried the same. Again, there was only one piece that was loose. The pieces were hooked into each other such that the sphere could only be taken apart in a particular order. *Just as planned.*

But he wasn't ready yet. After taking apart the sphere, he made each block hollow on the inside. That's when he started writing messages on small slips of paper to put inside the blocks.

Most of the messages described the events that had led to their misunderstanding, explaining what happened, but he also made sure to insert some notes on what he appreciated about Lana, about what she had done for him and meant to him. He double-checked that all the messages were inserted in the right order, assembled the whole contraption, cleaned up the mess he made and set out towards Lana's room.

It felt silly, walking around the building with a big wooden sphere. It felt even sillier to be handing it over to Lana soon, but his earlier feeling of determination still lingered inside of him and cast his doubts aside. It just was the right thing to do.

With his nerves running wild, he knocked on Lana's door and waited. No reply came. He knocked again, but nothing happened.

*She must be out*, he figured. He considered waiting, but that was one thing he wasn't looking forward to, and so he came up with a plan B.

"Eragos, would you mind?" he asked, gesturing to the lock. He had been having the gizmo practice on more advanced locks lately, so opening a student room was a breeze.

Daran took a last look across the hallway. *This will be really awkward if she comes back right now*. So when the coast was clear, he quickly went inside, placed his creation on Lana's desk and left the room again, letting Eragos lock the door behind him.

*I've done all I can*, he told himself. *Now all I can do is wait*.

Daran grabbed a quick lunch from the canteen. Having lunch on his own, which used to be so normal, now felt strange. Of course if he was earlier, he could have had lunch with Jarod, Emilia, or someone else he knew, but they all had already left.

The only person in the hall that he knew was Firo. The boy sat on the other side. Daran felt angry about him, but when he saw Firo's gizmo crawling on the ground beside him – Firo still hadn't managed to repair him – that feeling changed. Now the whole situation just felt ... wrong.

*We've spent so much effort giving each other a hard time, that we both ended up miserable and alone*, he told himself. He let out a deep sigh. *I'm going to solve this. I'm going to solve all of this*.

But now was not the right time to fix his problems with Firo. Instead, he went to do what he had been meaning to do for over a day: visit Quenton.

## Chapter 21 – Home visits

“I know how to catch that spy of yours,” Daran told the scholar leader after sitting down in his office. After some thoughts, he’d decided that honesty was the best approach here.

Upon hearing this, Quenton raised a single eyebrow. “Oh, and how would we go about doing that?”

“Every thinker has been trained at the Academy, right? And during all those years, you leave a huge paper trail. So if we’d just examine all the thinkers, and see which one has holes in her paperwork, we find the spy.”

Quenton sighed. “Is that what you came here for? Listen, I shouldn’t even be telling you this, but don’t you think we haven’t already done that?”

“You did?” Daran replied, somewhat surprised. He realized his astonishment didn’t help his argument, but he was eager to learn more.

“Yes. We’re not even sure the spy comes from outside the Academy. But assuming that’s the case, we’ve checked all the thinker registrations. All thinkers were once registered as a student. They all passed their modules. So there goes your theory.”

“No ... but ... you really need to check the details,” Daran stammered. “You know, test results, disciplinary records, and so on.”

“Apart from the fact that most students don’t even have disciplinary records, we don’t have the manpower to go searching for a needle in a haystack. So I’m going to tell you this for the last

time. Don't get involved with that spy!" The look which Daran received told him that Quenton's patience had run out.

Yet so had Daran's. "But when I came here, you promised to help me search!"

After this comment Quenton's composure broke away and anger started to show on his face. "Don't twist my words. I promised to help you learn more about your mother, but I think that your research about your mother and your investigation on this spy are being mixed up here."

"Yes they are!" Daran called out, thinking Quenton finally got his point, but the look on Quenton's face didn't improve. Instead, it only got worse.

"Get out," the scholar said. "I don't want to hear anything from you, either directly or indirectly, for ... I don't know. A long time."

Daran wanted to argue, but as soon as he opened his mouth Quenton's eyes narrowed, so he swallowed the words and, seeing no other way to make Quenton understand his point of view, he left the office.

*How can I make him understand me?* Daran wondered as he walked back across the Academy square. He figured the solution he had applied to Lana wouldn't work on Quenton. No, he needed help on this one. *Magnus*.

A long walk later, he entered the old man's house. He had always just walked in without knocking, but he hadn't been around in so long that it now felt strange.

“Ha, Daran,” Magnus said when he spotted the boy. “Good to see you’re still alive. I almost thought you’d died of old age.”

Daran laughed, feeling a bit guilty. “Yeah, maybe I could’ve dropped by a bit more.”

“Don’t worry. It’s the inevitable fate of the old,” Magnus said, giving Daran a forgiving wink.

“Yeah, and it’s not like you’re my grandpa or so,” Daran continued the joke. Magnus raised an eyebrow at this, but Daran shrugged it aside.

Magnus sat down in his big soft chair. “I doubt this is a casual visit, so what problem can I help you with?”

*As always, right to the point*, Daran thought, smiling. It’s what he liked about the old trader. “It’s a bit of a long story,” he said. “The short version is that there’s a spy in the Academy. If I could just access the Academy records, then I can discover who it is. The Academy won’t let me though, and they’re too lazy to check all the records themselves.”

“Can’t you subtly point them where to look?” Magnus suggested.

Daran shook his head. “I don’t exactly know myself either. I just know that something must be in there.”

“So you know that there is a way to unmask the spy, but you don’t know how exactly to do so.” Magnus leaned back in his chair, putting his hand on his chin and staring upward, clearly thinking hard. “You know,” he said eventually. “It often doesn’t matter whether you know the secret. It matters whether others believe you have the secret.”

“What do you mean?” Daran asked, not grasping Magnus’ abstract thinking just yet.

“Suppose you can make the spy believe you know the secret to unmask him or her. What would happen then?”

“That’s like putting a big target sign on my head,” Daran said.

“That depends,” Magnus countered. “If you hold the secret in your head, then you do. But what if the secret is in the records? And if others know about it too? Then there’s no gain in targeting you.”

“She’ll target the records instead,” Daran said softly, more to himself than to anyone else. There was still an obstacle though. “But if I can’t access the records, then I cannot set up a trap.”

As Daran said it, he realized it was a problem he could solve. Several ideas already went through his mind. Apparently Magnus noticed this. Instead of replying to Daran’s comment, he just smiled and said, “I think you’ll figure it out.”

Daran was impressed that the old man could read his thoughts so well. *I never knew so much could be read from an expression*, he thought. *I should learn that trick.*

“Yeah,” he replied. “I think I’ve got a plan.”

Contrary to most of Daran’s previous plans, this was one he couldn’t do on his own. Not even close.

Asking for help wasn’t something he liked to do. It always felt uncomfortable, like he was imposing on people, but he felt that this was important enough to overcome his unease.

And so he found himself in front of his own house again. As always, the door was open, but Daran didn't enter. He didn't want to run into Tobin.

From a distance, he checked who was in the workshop. In one corner Tobin was forging something, the repeated strikes of his hammer clearly audible outside, while on the other side of the workshop Kira was assembling a wooden piece of furniture.

*How do I get her out?* Daran wondered. He decided to position himself such that he could only see Kira, and conversely that only Kira could see him. Then he started waving to get her attention, but she didn't seem to notice. After a long minute, in which Daran had already switched his waving arm five times, she finally looked up, only to gasp in surprise.

The beating of the hammer stopped. Daran expected to see Tobin's face appear in the doorway any second, curious about what had caused Kira's exclamation, and so he quickly ran off and hid in an alley, every now and then stealing a glance around the corner. A short while later he saw Kira appear outside and walk away from the workshop. He quickly caught up with her.

"Hey, sorry about that," he said as he appeared next to her.

"Oh, it was my fault," Kira said. "I shouldn't have been so shocked. But I told Tobin that I had just realized I'd forgotten something important for dinner tonight."

"Clever thinking," Daran praised her.

"Not really", Kira shook her head. "Considering I was planning to serve leftovers, I have to buy an entirely new meal now. And you'll just have to walk with me to the food district." She gave Daran a stern look, but he easily saw through it.



“That’s okay,” the boy said with a smile. “I’ll pay for the food.”

Upon hearing this, Kira looked up. “That’s very nice of you.” But then the idea apparently crossed her mind that Daran was making fun of her. “Really?” she added.

Daran nodded. “Yeah, because I need a favor. You’ve got cleaning duties at the Academy tomorrow again, right?”

“Eh, yes,” Kira said, this time more hesitantly. “What about it?”

“There’s no better place to create gossip than in the cleaning crew,” Daran said. “I need you to spread a rumor.”

“I can do that,” Kira said, not so worried anymore about the impending favor. “What rumor?”

“There’s a spy in the Academy,” Daran explained. “Probably the rumormongers already know all about that. I want you to add that I know how to unmask the spy.”

“Ah, and how will you do that?” Kira asked curiously.

“Good question,” Daran said with a mysterious smile. “The rumor is that, while copying summaries, I also happened to make copies of certain unmentioned records. Just this morning I noticed that these records have recently been changed slightly. So what I want to do, as soon as I get access to the records again by the end of this week, is compare these copies with the current records. The difference will point directly to the spy.”

“Exciting!” Kira said. “How smart that you made copies of those records.”

“I didn’t,” Daran said curtly, this time with not even a hint of mystery. “It’s a rumor, right?”

“But then why ... ”

“It’s better that you don’t know,” Daran said. “Oh, you should add one more thing. Until I get access to the records, I’ll keep the copies safely in my room. That’s very important to add.”

“Ah, clever,” Kira said, who seemingly had already guessed what Daran was up to.

Daran had Kira repeat the story, but her memory was flawless. All the necessary details were in it.

“Just one last question,” Kira added. “How do I know all this?”

“We’re friends, right? I think you can make up a plausible story around how I told you that doesn’t involve scaring you away from your own workshop.”

An eager smile appeared on Kira’s face as she nodded. “Yeah, I think I can.”

The next person to visit was Jarod. Daran knocked on his door and was quickly ushered in.

“Daran, how’s life?”

Again, Daran had to overcome his unease on saying the seemingly simple sentence, “I need your help.”

Luckily Jarod seemed all too eager. “What for?”

Daran had decided to tell Jarod everything he had concluded about the spy, and so he explained all his thoughts and theories.

“Okay, let me summarize,” Jarod said when Daran was done. “That spy which we ran into comes from outside of the Academy and has changed a ton of records so she can pose as a hunter. She regularly steals thought cores while blaming you and is quite fine with nearly killing a thinker, but on the flip side is willing to

sacrifice a really advanced gizmo to save a student, being me. Well, that makes perfect sense.”

“Really?”

“No, but I’ll go along with it. What do you need me for?”

Daran decided to cut to the chase. “We’re going to lay a trap and catch her.”

“I should’ve known,” Jarod said with a smile. “How?”

Daran told him about the rumor that would soon be running through the Academy. “In two days it’ll be showtime. I’ll announce a private workshop session, only for invited students. That’s how the spy knows when I’ll be out of my room.”

“So then you need me to guard the room and see who tries to enter it.”

Daran nodded. “She won’t hurt students, so it won’t be dangerous. If we just get enough students to surround her, she should give up and surrender.”

“Sounds perfect,” Jarod said, nodding along. “If you want, I can ask some more friends to join. I’m sure there are plenty that want to help you out.”

It surprised Daran how happy he was with the offer. He’d been dreading begging people for help, so it felt like a load was lifted off his shoulders. “That would be great! Although it would be better not to tell them too much until the day itself.”

“Of course,” Jarod said. “I’ll leave the explaining part to you. But do you really think we can catch that spy, while the Academy can’t?”

Daran smiled and nodded. “I’ve learned that, if you’re willing to put in the hard work to make things happen, everything is possible.”

## Chapter 22 – Letting go

They had agreed to meet in front of the student workshops. When Daran arrived at the scene, he expected to find Jarod, but his friend wasn't there. A surprisingly large group of other students was.

He recognized a big part of them. They were mostly friendly faces from his workshop sessions, like Miril. But also Lioris and Posak, Firo's friends, were there. And then there were a few students which he didn't know, some of them even from higher years.

"I found you some help," Jarod said from behind Daran. He came walking in, carrying a box. The girl next to him, who Daran recognized as a second-year student called Cinly, carried another one.

"What are those?" Miril asked, voicing the question Daran was also wondering.

"Communicators," the second-year student said.

"I thought those were only for group missions," Miril replied, but Cinly rolled her eyes.

"They don't tell these freshmen anything, do they? You're allowed to organize your own group missions if you want. It's the experience that counts. Not who set you up to it."

"And the Academy doesn't mind?" Miril asked, still astonished.

Cinly shrugged. "It saves them work, so why would they? They're happy to sign off your modules if you give them a good story."

Daran raised his eyebrows at that too. *That could be useful.* But it was of later concern. He had work to do now.

“Alright, let’s get started!” he called out to the group. He explained the basic ideas behind the plan, that they had spread a rumor which would lure the spy to his room.

“With the numbers we have, we can even set a perimeter around the entire building, so the spy will feel safe enough to enter the room. First, I want you to form pairs.”

With a lot of scuffling, the group split itself in groups of two. Daran had Jarod hand out communicators to everyone, storing the rest away in one of the workshop lockers.

“I want one pair at each entrance to the student dorms,” Daran instructed. “I want you to look casual, so just sit down some distance from your entrance and have a friendly chat. When a hunter enters, let everyone know right away. I’ll coordinate from here, and when I give the signal, everyone closes in to capture her.”

“So who goes where?” Jarod asked.

“Good question,” Daran said. He took out a map of the student dormitories, quickly drawn the night before, and started assigning pairs. In the end he was only two persons short, so he split up a pair and had each of them guard an exit individually.

“Wait a second,” one of the guys whom Daran didn’t know said. “There’s an emergency exit on the north side of the building. Shouldn’t we cover that one too?”

Daran didn’t even know there was such an exit, but he decided to trust the student stepping forward.

“Good point. Then I think we need to split up another pair. Ehm ... ”

“No need,” a familiar voice called out from behind Daran. “I’ll cover it.”

Daran spun around, knowing exactly who it was. *Lana*.

She stepped forward until she was standing right in front of Daran. It felt as if the entire group around them had disappeared and it was just her and him.

She was staring downward with a nervous look on her face. Or was it an apologetic one? Daran couldn’t tell. Then Lana looked up to meet Daran’s eyes.

“Daran, I’m sorry for ... well ... for yelling at you, and for believing Firo’s stories, and for calling you a liar, and ...” She was stumbling for words.

In the meantime Daran’s heart made a leap, as a big smile crossed his face. “You’re forgetting Liona,” he joked.

Lana suddenly blushed. “Yes, that too,” she snickered. “I’m just sorry for everything.” She leaned back a bit, taking in Daran, expecting a reaction, but Daran didn’t know what to say. No words came up in him. Just a fierce desire to give her a hug. And so he did.

As soon as his arms closed around her, and he felt her arms around him, something within him let go. It was as if all the worries, all the problems of the last few weeks, months even, suddenly never existed.

As the pressure of the hug was slowly released, he leaned back a bit, without letting go of Lana, so he could look at her expression. He saw a smile which was probably as wide as his own. He got drawn in by her eyes, until he got so close that it only felt

natural to close his eyes and only be engrossed in the sensation of her lips.

As the feeling slowly subsided, he became aware of his surroundings again. Someone started clapping, and pretty soon the entire group joined in for a loud applause. As the kiss ended, Daran looked at Lana, overwhelmed by the sound, and he couldn't resist blushing back.

"I think we have some catching up to do tonight," Daran said, teasingly raising his eyebrows.

Lana's smile widened further. "I think I agree. But first we have a mission to do."

"Oh, right, the mission," Daran said, finally fully snapping back to the real world. With difficulty, he crawled out of Lana's embrace and turned to the group. "What are you looking at? You know what to do. Let's head out and capture that spy!"

Laughing, the group headed for the dorms. There was some chatter on the communicators, of people who couldn't find their entrance, and pairs that simply disagreed which entrance they were assigned to. It was all sorted out in an orderly fashion though, with plenty of jokes in-between.

*It's funny that the atmosphere is so different from an official Academy group mission,* Daran realized. He started to ask himself why. It wasn't that people were less committed now to a good outcome. In fact, they were more motivated, so much that no pressure was needed to get the job done. *I should try to set up an atmosphere like that in my next official mission too.*

In the meantime, he had asked Jarod to walk around the building, making sure that all the exits were covered. Daran had



learned that his friend was good at getting people motivated to do things, so he wasn't surprised when Jarod reported back that everyone was in position and standing by.

*Jona was right, Daran mused. It's crucial to know who you can trust with what.*

And then the time of waiting began. Daran stayed at the workshop, occasionally helping random students with their projects to keep up appearances.

The students in the workshop were a bit distracted by the regular chatter from Daran's communicator though. Apparently, keeping watch on the student dorms wasn't the most interesting thing to do, and so the crew enjoyed themselves by broadcasting funny noises.

Daran was hesitant whether to put a stop to it. He didn't want to shut the bantering down, fearing morale would drop, but he was also afraid that all the communicators would alert the spy. In the end, when a bit too many people started to join, he decided to put a stop to it.

"Guys, this is Daran, listen up," he said. To his relief, he didn't have to yell. The channel immediately quieted down. "If everyone's sitting around with their communicators, then the spy is sure to notice there's a trap. So I want everyone to put away the communicators, in your bag, pocket, or somewhere else. No chatter until something's up."

There were some loud moans. Someone asked, "Do we really have to?" but Daran felt this was the time to be strict and replied, "Yes you do. This is important to me guys." It seemed to have been the right thing to say, because it was silent afterward. It

amazed Daran, how he could affect the behavior of an entire group of students like this, even one with older students. It was something he'd never experienced before.

In the meantime, Daran started giving workshop assistance again. His heart started beating faster every time a hunter walked by, but it wasn't uncommon for thinkers to check on the student workshop, to see if no one was destroying things, so he forced himself to calm down. Eventually, he got so involved in the workshop work that he almost didn't hear the communicator.

"I've got something," a voice said. "A female hunter just entered through the main entrance on the west side."

Daran quickly walked to an empty corner of the workshop.

"I hear you," he said. "We wait until she's well inside. This will be easier if we catch her in the act."

Daran imagined himself walking through the student dorms to estimate how long it would take. When he envisioned himself opening his door, he picked up his communicator, but before he could switch the button to speak, another voice sounded. It was Miril.

"We have another female hunter entering the building from the east side," she said. "She's taking a side entrance."

Daran was left standing with his mouth wide open, trying to make sense of it, but there just wasn't any time.

"Okay, it's time for action," he said. "I want you guys to move in, but do so walking. We don't want to alarm the spy. When you see her, start talking with her until others catch up, and whatever you do, do *not* let her pass."

In the meantime Daran started thinking. *Two spies? Can it be?* There had always been an inconsistency. There were signs that the spy was from outside of the Academy, like the fact that she had to change records to fit in, and that no one in the Academy knew who manufactured the gizmo Daran had captured. But there were also signs that the spy was from inside of the Academy, like that she knew exactly when to blow open a safe without having anyone around, as well as being comfortable enough in the Academy to store away the thought cores for some time. If there really were two different spies, then the pieces seemed to fall together.

Then another thought crossed Daran's mind. On one occasion the spy had nearly killed someone, while on another occasion she had saved someone. Daran thought the latter was because it concerned a student and not a graduated thinker.

He froze. *What if that's also because it was a different spy?*

That's when all the pieces fell together. That's when he knew he had to let go of his plan to capture the spy.

He grabbed his communicator and headed for the exit. There was no use in keeping up appearances in the workshop anymore. "Guys, we have a problem," he called out. "There are two spies and one of them is dangerous. Do not confront her. I repeat, do *not* confront her. Just take a good look at her face and let her pass."

The next thing that was heard on the channel was a loud curse. It was Miril. "I'm sorry Daran. It happened so fast. She came in running and flew right past us. I couldn't really see who it was."

"Which way did she go?" Daran asked.

"Back west, towards the workshops," Miril answered. "Something must have spooked her."

*The spies must have seen each other*, Daran realized. *Good*. It meant they didn't know yet that the students were involved. At this point he didn't care so much about the mission anymore. He just didn't want anyone getting hurt.

"That's okay," he replied. "I want everyone to back o –"

"Daran!" Lioris interrupted, a panicked note in his voice. "A hunter just ran past us. She knocked Posak against the wall pretty hard."

Daran silently cursed. "Is he alright?" he asked concerned.

"He'll have a headache, but other than that he's fine," Lioris replied.

Daran let out a big sigh of relief. "Which way was she going?"

"She headed ... ah, thoughtless fool, I don't know these directions! Towards the outer wall."

*That's north*. Daran thought. "Okay, everyone on the north side, get out of there now. This spy is dangerous. Let her pass. I repeat, let her pass."

He tried to remember who he posted on the north side. Of course there were Lioris and Posak, but who else? Then he knew.

"Lana, are you there?" he called out.

There was no response.

"Lana?"

Still nothing.

"Lana!"

Then Jarod's voice came up. "Daran, she doesn't have a communicator. She came late, remember?"

"Oh no!" Daran called out, more to himself than to anyone listening. He had just exited the student workshops and was

standing west of the student dorms. Lana would be just around the corner. He started running as fast he could. Then a hunter came out of the building and he nearly ran into her.

*Not the hunter I'm worried about*, Daran thought, although he did recognize her. The thought crossed his mind that he'd seen her before, in at least three different places, but he shrugged the memories aside. He had to reach Lana.

Running past the spy, he rounded the corner. Up ahead, he saw two figures on the emergency stairwell. He didn't have to look closely to know who they were. *Oh no, she's trying to stop her.*

Daran kept running, his eyes locked on the two. His heart skipped a beat when a struggle started. Something was going on.

Suddenly Lana froze. Then she fell backward and rolled down the stairs. The spy jumped over her and ran off, heading towards the wall.

Daran got the urge to go after her. *I can catch her and stop all these problems*, he thought, but then he saw Lana. Her chest was soaked with blood from what appeared to be a knife wound. More blood was spurting out with every breath she took.

"Daran," she croaked, as if saying the name alone cost her all the effort she had left. Daran hadn't taken any first-aid modules yet, figuring that could always come later, but in that moment he regretted it more than anything else in his life. He just stood there, not knowing what to do.

He looked up at the spy, who was nearing the wall. The thought crossed his mind again. *If I go after her now, I can still catch her.* Considering he didn't have a clue what to do here, it

suddenly seemed very attractive. He turned around and was about to run, when he heard something.

“Please stay,” Lana sputtered.

Daran turned back, all thoughts of going after the spy suddenly gone.

Lana looked up into his eyes. “I don’t want to ... ” she started saying, but she stopped. After taking another gaspy breath, she added “ ... be alone.”

Daran knew she was avoiding the word “die.” He knelt down beside her. The blood was still oozing out of the wound at a frightening pace, so he placed one hand firmly over the gash, trying to stop the flow. With the other he held Lana’s hand. It seemed to comfort both of them somewhat.

“I’m sorry,” Lana said, her voice turning into a whisper. “For everything.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Daran replied. “Please don’t go. We have a date tonight. I’ll be on time. There are so many things I still want to show you, and talk with you about.”

Daran looked at Lana. He felt bad about talking so much, when all he wanted was to hear her voice, to see her smile again and feel her enthusiasm, her energy, her eagerness to make the most out of everything. But while no words escaped her mouth, a tear did manage to fight its way out of her eye.

And then her mouth opened again. “Life ... ” she said, so soft Daran inched closer, “ ... goes ... ” it was only a whisper, “ ... on.” The last word was nothing more than an exhale, one which should have been followed by an inhale, but not this time. The last bit of energy left Lana and she lay still.

Daran squeezed his eyes firmly shut, trying to make sense of the situation. Then he looked up, to where the spy had run off. She was still visible at the wall, but she was already on top, pulled up by a gizmo. Daran stood up and ran towards her, but it was pointless. When he reached the wall, she had already disappeared on the other side. He tried to climb up the rough stones, which resulted in nothing more than scraped fingers. *With Nilas I could have followed her, caught her*, he thought, but now ... he just felt powerless.

“No!” he cried out in an excruciating scream. He slammed his fists against the wall until his legs gave way and he curled up on the ground. If he’d been paying attention, he could’ve seen through blurry eyes the multitude of feet that surrounded him, but he was too much engulfed in his own tears for that, lost in thoughts on what had just been ripped away from him.

## Chapter 23 – Recovering the damage

The rest of the day, Daran was in a daze. There were so many struggles going on inside of him that he didn't really notice the ones that were taking place in the world around him.

First he was brought to the infirmary, but when they cleaned up the blood and found no significant wounds, he was sent on to an office for questioning. Various hunters asked him about what happened, some inquisitive, others accusing, but Daran could only stare downwards, with his head in his hands.

"Daran, look at me," someone said.

The voice seemed familiar.

"Daran, look at me," the voice said again.

Then Daran recognized that it was Quenton. He finally looked up, meeting the man's eyes.

"Tell me, what happened?" the scholar gently asked.

Daran opened his mouth and he tried to speak, but no words came out. It was as if something inside him blocked them. He tried to push harder, but it only added to his despair. Tears welled up in his eyes until he burst out crying.

Quenton said something to the other thinkers in the room, but Daran couldn't even tell what it was. He only vaguely noticed that he was half guided, half carried, towards his room, where he was left on his bed.

It was still early in the afternoon, but Daran didn't have the strength to get up. He could only alternate sobs with short bursts of restless sleep and moments of blankly staring at the wall, reliving moments of the past. Slowly the light of day turned into darkness,



and only when the night was well underway did he finally fall into a deeper sleep, less filled with troubled dreams.

When Daran woke, the sun was just starting to rise. He jumped out of bed, eager for a new day, until he realized what had happened during the previous one.

It felt like he was stabbed through the heart. His eagerness disappeared instantly, with the pain coming back just as fast. Everything suddenly seemed pointless. *If even someone as amazing as her can be taken away so easily, so quickly, then what's the point of doing anything?* It was only due to the past night of crying and resting that he didn't burst into tears again.

He sat down on his bed, with his hands in his hair. Part of him was eager to crawl back under the blankets, which were still warm, but before he could do so, Lana's last words flashed through his mind.

"Life goes on," he whispered to himself. The words felt wrong. *Life didn't go on for her*, he thought. *What was she thinking?* Only then did he realize that, in her last moments, she wasn't talking about herself. *She was thinking about me.*

He remembered what Lana had told him earlier. "Be whoever you want to be." *She wants me to continue doing the things I was doing, making things better.*

Daran didn't know if he could do that. *How can I, without her telling me whenever I'm acting like thoughtless swarf again?* He shook off the thought. *I'll just have to. I owe it to her. I'll do what I can, to make things right.*

The first thing he felt that he had to do was visit Quenton. He figured that the scholar leader was eager to know Daran's point of view, and he felt like he owed the thinker a favor for pulling him out of the interrogation the day before.

After a quick breakfast in the food hall, which was still mostly empty due to the early hour, he crossed the footbridge and went to Quenton's office. It was still empty, but Daran knew that the scholar was an early riser, so he sat down and waited. In the meantime he tried to figure out how he would make things right, although the inspiration for that failed to come.

Luckily, before the frustration got too big, Quenton showed up. "Daran, it's good to see you're doing better," he said, opening the door and ushering the boy in. "I take it you're here to tell me what happened."

Daran nodded. He took a deep breath, wondering how to tell it all. He thought back to several months ago, when Magnus had told him, "If you explain things from your point of view, people can never claim that you're wrong." And so he did.

He didn't just tell what happened the day before. He told Quenton about everything that had happened in the past months, related to the spy. He told about all his discoveries, all his reasonings, and all his frustrations that he couldn't find more information about his mother.

To his credit, Quenton didn't stop the story at any time, but only urged it on with the right questions at the right moments.

When Daran finished, right after the most painful part of the entire story, his eyes were filled with tears again. It wasn't the overwhelming feeling of the day before – he was more in control,

as if he was already slowly recovering – but that didn't make it hurt any less.

A silence filled the room. Eventually Quenton, having thought things over, broke it. "I didn't know this affected you so much," he admitted. "I told you not to jump into the spy business, but I didn't see how it was jumping on you instead."

Daran squeezed his eyes shut. A part of him felt like blaming Quenton, but he knew that was unfair. *There were plenty of times I could have explained things better to him.* So he remained silent.

Eventually it was Quenton that spoke again. "Listen, I'm glad that you've told me all of this. Now that I understand what happened, I can more effectively help you. But the fact remains that you went chasing that spy while being explicitly told not to. And as a result a student died."

The scholar took a deep breath before he continued. "There's a hearing at 20 hours today. It's a closed hearing, so it's just you and the thought council. I'm going to see if I can let you stay at the Academy, but to be honest, I'm not sure if I can convince the others."

Daran looked up at this, initially surprised, then afraid, but eventually he just shrugged. Getting kicked out of the Academy felt so inconsequential now, after what happened with Lana.

"With that in mind, there's something I should give you." Quenton pulled a small piece of metal out of his pocket and slid it across the table. Daran recognized it as a key, one which he handed in several months ago.

"The three months have passed. You have access to the aviary again. Listen, why don't you take Nilas out for a flight?" Quenton

also added the watch, through which Daran could communicate with Nilas.

Daran could sense the words which weren't said, *while you still can*, but he ignored them. Instead, he just picked up the items, gave Quenton a nod and left the office.

He didn't feel like flying though, not yet anyway, and so he simply headed back to his room. He was glad that the Academy grounds were still empty, with most of the students having breakfast. Without running into anyone he knew, he made it back to his room. As he opened the door, Eragos was waiting for him, eagerly pointing to a message which had been delivered.

*Messages aren't delivered this early*, Daran thought. He let Eragos climb up on his shoulder and unfolded the note.

*To Daran.*

*Meet me today at 19 hours in the city, at the place where we talked to each other several months ago.*

The letter wasn't signed, but Daran knew exactly who it was from. *I assumed that she'd already left*, he thought. *But if she just had this message delivered ...* He immediately turned around, locked his door again, and ran off, back across the footbridge.

Almost out of breath, he arrived at the hunter residences. He was quite familiar with the building, because the aviary was on top, but he still needed to look up which exact room he was heading for.

“Norema,” he whispered to himself, looking through the long list of names and room numbers. Norema was the name of the hunter who had taught him his basic fighting skills during his first month at the Academy. Daran had recognized her after nearly running into her the day before. He had always found it strange why she had spent so much time teaching him, while hardly interacting with the other students, but now it all made sense.

He found the name near the bottom of the second column. “Number 84.” He quickly ran up to the corresponding room and without knocking he pushed down the door handle. Partly to his surprise the door opened, but he didn’t find who he was hoping for. In fact, there was no one in the room.

He entered and took a glance around. It looked like the typical living room of a single thinker, except that there were no personal items like pictures or mementos. As Daran searched further, he also realized there were no valuables left. He cursed. *She’s already cleaned the place out.*

He finally checked the bathroom. There wasn’t anything peculiar there either, except for a wig with black, curly hair. *Of course she was wearing a wig*, Daran thought, wondering why he hadn’t thought of that sooner. *Her real hair is straight and dark blond.*

Seeing the wig did give him an idea. It was a risky idea, which would definitely get him kicked out of the Academy if it went awry. *But since I’m likely to be kicked out anyway, I can afford some extra freedom.*

He grabbed a bag he found lying around and put the wig in. He then went to the bedroom and searched the wardrobe for a

hunter uniform, which he also put in the bag. The bag was a bit larger than he had hoped for, but he wasn't in a position to complain.

*Now all I need is a distraction*, he thought. *Something that will get all the hunters out of the Academy.* He pulled the note he had received out of his pocket. It said to meet at 19 hours. He grabbed a nearby pen, checked that it had the right color, and then turned the 9 into an 8. "Meet me today at 18 hours," the note now said. He left it on the table.

He knew exactly what would happen when the hunters found the message. They would check the handwriting, which would match out. Then they'd fill the city with undercover thinkers, hoping to catch Norema, except she wouldn't be there. In fact, if Daran was right, Norema would have ceased to exist by now. Or at least, almost.

He smiled as he slung the bag over his shoulder. He opened the door slightly to check if the coast was clear. No one was around, so he quickly left the apartment and headed outside, leaving the door wide open.

With breakfast finished, the dorm hallways were bustling with students. Wherever Daran walked, things turned quiet though, except for the multitude of whispers and accompanying stares. Earlier he had hoped to avoid friendly faces, but now he was glad when Jarod suddenly emerged out of the throng and walked with him.

“Daran, I’m sorry about what happened,” he said. He looked for a reaction, but when Daran didn’t give him one, he asked, “How are you feeling?”

Daran stopped walking and shrugged. “I don’t know,” he answered truthfully. He sighed and shook his head. “It’s still a lot to take in.”

Jarod gave him a compassionate nod. “I know. It’s like that for all of us, but I imagine even more for you. Listen, if there’s anything I can do to help, just let me know.”

Daran shook his head. “I just need some time on my own to think, before the hearing tonight. Just ... no one around. And especially not Firo.”

Jarod gave him an understanding smile. “You’re lucky. I heard Firo’s on a group mission the whole day. But I’ll make sure that the rest gives you some space too.”

“Thanks,” Daran nodded back. Then he turned around and continued on to his room. He didn’t reach it though, because when he walked past Firo’s room he got an idea. He waited until the hallway was nearly empty. Then he quickly let Eragos pick the lock and went inside.

Daran had never been in Firo’s room before, but he wasn’t surprised to find that the walls had recently been painted to a uniform light grey. He was surprised that there wasn’t a trace of Firo’s gizmo.

*Has he taken Foralas along on the group mission?* Daran wondered astonished, until he heard a small thump from a closet. *Oh no, he didn’t.* But when he opened the closet doors, he found that Firo had indeed locked his gizmo inside.

The creature aggressively flew towards Daran, but its jump was hardly coordinated enough to be dangerous. Daran pushed the gizmo to the ground, found the off-switch and pressed it. *It's a good thing student gizmo's are easy to take out*, he mused as Foralas suddenly stopped moving. Turning gizmos on and off was usually discouraged, as it's very disorienting for the gizmo. *But so is locking a gizmo into a closet*, Daran figured. He picked up the creature and added it to his bag of stolen items.

*This is going to be really hard to explain if I get caught now*, he thought with a wry smile on his face. *If I do, I'll just blame Lana. She set me up to do this*. He opened the door slightly and listened. When he couldn't hear any students anymore, he picked up the bag and left the room, letting Eragos lock the door behind him.

Daran spent the next hour in his room, examining broken parts, making measurements and designing new parts. With all the drawings done, he then headed to the workshop. There were still plenty of students staring at him, but Daran quickly lost himself in the work enough that he didn't notice anymore.

Most of the problems could be fixed with off-the-shelf parts, but Daran didn't just want to fix problems. He wanted to make things better. So it took him several hours of work before he was satisfied. He then cleaned up the mess he made, gathered all his parts and headed out.

As he left the workshop, he saw five tired students enter the Academy from the north gate. Firo was among them. It seemed like they were heading to the mission control room.

*They're already going to evaluate their mission*, Daran realized. *I'd better be quick*. He rushed back to his room, turned over the



bag with all the parts and started installing them one by one. It didn't take long, but he knew he didn't have long either.

He resisted the urge to turn the gizmo on and do a test run. *There's no time*, he told himself. It went against what he'd been taught. "Before you deliver something, you have to check that it's as good as you think it is," Mikai had always said. In this case Daran just had to trust that he hadn't screwed up.

Breaking into Firo's room was just as easy as last time. When Daran entered, he didn't even bother to close the door. He just dumped the gizmo in the middle of the room, turned it on, and left immediately, locking the door behind him.

Just before he reached the end of the hallway, he saw Firo rounding the corner on the other end. The two boys locked eyes, but before any meaningful glances could be exchanged, Daran had disappeared around the corner.

"That was a bit too close for comfort," he told Eragos, although he knew that his actions here hadn't been all that risky. He checked the time and found that it was already past 17 hours. He'd saved the real risks for the next three hours.

## Chapter 24 – Reunification

It was a couple of minutes before 18 hours when Daran left his room, with a full bag on his back and Eragos on his shoulder. He was wearing regular city clothing, and while the absence of a student uniform would stand out at the Academy, he knew it would come in handy later.

When he got outside, he looked around. Apart from the usual students, there were several individual scholars taking a break near the education building. There was just one problem.

*They never do that, Daran knew. They always form groups to chat.* Still, it was pretty inconspicuous. If he hadn't been expecting it, he wouldn't have recognized the thinkers for what they were. *Hunters, trying to figure out where I'm going to meet Norema. Well, it's time to give them another clue.*

He crossed the Academy square and the footbridge, entering the hunter residences. As he was climbing up to the aviary, he noticed the whole place was deserted.

*Good. It means they've found the note.* Probably the entire city was filled with hunters. If Nilas put him down anywhere nearby, they would be on his tail right away. He had a very different plan though.

When he reached the aviary, he was delighted to see Nilas again, and from the reaction of the gizmo, the feeling was mutual.

"Hey buddy, it's been a while, hasn't it?" he said as he let the gizmo out of his shelter. The bird playfully tried to push Daran over, but the boy eagerly jostled back.

“Listen, I know you’re eager to go for a flight together, but first I need you to do something really important for me, okay?” The bird seemed to listen intently to his words, so Daran continued.

“I need you to drop off something in the forests just northwest of the city, a kilometer or so past the last house, and then quickly come back. Can you do that?”

When Nilas squealed enthusiastically, Daran pulled a large dummy from his bag. It was basically a full set of old clothes, which he’d filled up with old newspapers. He’d used an old and hollow lump of wood for the head. He put the dummy on Nilas’ back and attached it with a bit of tape. It was enough to hold the dummy on Nilas’ back during a normal flight, but if the gizmo went for some barrel rolls it was a whole different story.

“Look, this is supposed to represent me,” he explained. Nilas let out something that sounded like laughter, but when Daran gave him an indignant frown, he quickly he stopped. “Please put it down at least a little bit gently. I don’t want them to think you’ve killed me.”

With those words, he sent Nilas off. He had to resist watching the gizmo fly off in the distance. After all, there was work to do.

He went back down the stairs, getting out of view in case anyone was still watching. Then he pulled the stolen hunter uniform out of his bag and put it on. He added the wig and used some socks to get some more feminine shapes.

*And that’s another situation which will be embarrassing if I get caught,* Daran mused. He checked his appearance in a small pocket mirror. Then he asked Eragos to hide inside the bag, which the gizmo grudgingly complied to, and headed out.

When he left the hunter residences, all the supposed ‘scholars’ were gone. *They must have seen Nilas fly off.* He quickly crossed the road and entered the main Academy building.

Several months back, he had memorized the floor plan of the building. Because of that, he knew exactly where to go: the thought core department, which was placed in the basement below the building. It was where all new thought cores were made and all the unused cores were stored. *Well, they are now, after all the other cores got stolen.*

When Daran entered the core department through the main door, he came into a large room, which was mostly deserted. There was only an administrator sitting behind a large desk. Daran gave the man a nod, figuring it was what any thinker would do, but the wide smile he got back made him doubt about that.

Determined, he continued walking towards one of the storage rooms. It was the one where the gizmos for first-year students were kept, waiting for a new student to claim them. The room was well-secured, with a sophisticated lock of which supposedly only department leaders and the head of education had the key. Still, Daran had been working hard to train Eragos. *This just has to work,* he told himself.

He opened his bag and let the gizmo out, who quickly got busy. The surprised sounds which Eragos made told Daran that the gizmo had never seen a lock like this before. For twenty excruciatingly long seconds, he tried out his tricks.

They didn’t seem to work. Twenty more seconds passed. Although Daran was partly hidden from view from the administrator by a large support pillar, he still wasn’t happy with

the situation. *I hope that guy doesn't know that even hunters aren't supposed to have access to this room.* To cover up for his delay, he started rummaging through his now empty bag, all the while using his body to keep his gizmo hidden from view.

It already felt like several minutes had passed. "Come on Eragos," he whispered encouragingly, but also partly frightened.

"Is there a problem?" the administrator called out across the room.

Daran's mouth fell open, looking for words, but just when he was thinking of how he should distort his voice to sound feminine, a clack indicated that the lock was open. Figuring an opening door was the best reaction he could give, he quickly entered the room.

As is often the case with storage rooms, it turned out to be a room with lots of shelves and stacked boxes. The thought that every box contained a gizmo gave Daran pause. *They're low-level thought cores*, he thought, realizing they were designed for first-year students. *But still, imagine what you could do with so many gizmos.*

He walked along the shelves until he found what he was looking for, tucked away in a corner: the gizmo he had captured. Its limbs were already folded in as much as possible to save space, but rolling it into the bag was still a challenge.

When he was done, he slung the bag over his shoulder, nearly falling over because of the weight, and left the room. "Eragos, would you lock the d – " he started whispering, but then he noticed that the administrator was talking with a scholar, and he was pointing her straight towards Daran.

“On second thought, let’s leave the door open,” he said, letting Eragos climb back up on his shoulder. He quickly started walking to the exit.

“Excuse me,” the scholar called out. When Daran pretended not to have heard her and kept on walking, she added “Wait a second!” This was so loud that ignoring it would be pointless.

Daran knew he had to make a choice. *Talk or run?* he asked himself, but he knew that his disguise would fall apart as soon as he started talking. So when he reached the door, he quickly opened it, stepped through, shut it behind him and ran.

He had only taken three steps when he knew it was pointless. He’d never outrun anyone while carrying a bag that heavy. So he went for the only other option that came up in his mind: hide. He pulled open the first door he encountered, jumped inside and quickly closed it behind him.

It turned out to be a cleaner’s closet and, with the door closed, it was pitch black inside. With the sound of running footsteps outside, he groped for the light switch. After some excruciatingly long seconds, in which he started to believe the closet didn’t even have a light switch, he found it.

In the meantime, the sound of footsteps had stopped. It hadn’t stopped in the distance. In fact, the footsteps hadn’t even passed him at all.

The next sound he heard was the opening and closing of a door. *Of course*, he thought. *She knows I haven’t had enough time to run through the entire hallway. She knows I’m in one of the rooms. And now she’s checking them all.*

Slowly the sounds were coming closer. Daran considered leaving the gizmo behind and just running away, but he didn't want to give up so easily. Instead, he got another idea.

*This may just be the worst idea I've ever had*, he told himself. He opened the bag and pulled out the gizmo. After a few seconds, he found the on-switch.

The first thing students were taught in the gizmo handling modules was to be careful when turning on gizmos. Being turned off can be very disorienting, so it's hard to predict what a gizmo will do when it's turned on.

Daran hesitated. *If such a careful warning was given for simple first-year gizmos, turning on a large and sophisticated gizmo inside a cleaner's closet will be ... well ... oh, let's just do this*. He flipped the switch and quickly moved as far away from the gizmo as possible, which meant that now only his knees were touching the gizmo.

Initially the gizmo just moved its arms and legs, as if to check if they were still working. Then he turned around and looked up at Daran with expectant eyes. Daran was fearing something more violent, but it didn't appear to come.

Not knowing what else to do, he softly said, "Do you know who I am?"

The gizmo gave a small nod.

*Incredible*, Daran thought. *He's listening to me?* "Okay, there's a scholar outside who's following me. We need to lose her, and then get out of the Academy together. Will you help me?"

Again a nod.

*I have no idea if he understands me, or if he just likes to nod*. Still, Daran counted down from three, opened the door and ran. Except

that the scholar was suddenly right in front of him. Not being able to run past her in the small hallway, he just shouldered his way through. From the corner of his eyes, he saw that the gizmo was also barging into the thinker. The combined force sent her sprawling backwards across the floor.

Not having time to feel guilty, Daran jumped over her and ran on. When he finally dared to take a look behind him, right before he disappeared around the corner, the scholar was slowly starting to sit up, although she still appeared dazed.

Daran ran out of the building, across the road, back to the aviary. On his way up the stairs, he ditched his disguise, leaving the wig and the uniform behind on the steps. *It would be a bit too suspicious if they see the hunter fly off on Nilas*, he figured. He only took the bag and the extra socks.

As expected, Nilas was waiting for him. Daran asked the newly acquired gizmo to get back in the bag, and to his surprise the creature complied without a single complaint. *That's a good example for Eragos*, Daran thought, giving the gizmo on his shoulder a meaningful look. Then, before anything else could happen, he climbed on Nilas' back and took off.

"We've got to head south," he told Nilas. "Because if I'm right, then all the hunters are out north, trudging through the forests."

Although Daran expected most hunters to be gone, he still hid in a dark alley for half an hour. When no one resembling a thinker had walked by during that time, Daran figured he was safe and set off.



He reached the market square and checked his watch. *Exactly 19 hours.* With the onset of the evening, the square was nearly deserted. Not eager to take unnecessary risks, Daran didn't stop to wait, but continued walking to the nearest alley to hide. When he reached it, he turned around, keeping an eye on the market square, until someone put a hand on his shoulder.

Daran immediately jumped away, and only when he was several steps removed from his assailant did he recognize her.

"Burning swarf, how did you manage to creep up on me like that?"

She didn't reply. Instead, she seemed happy just to look at him, her eyes absorbing every part of him. Now that Daran got a good look at her, he was certain that this was the woman he'd seen many times before. When he nearly ran into her the day before, when he'd captured her gizmo, and when she had given him fighting lessons. But it was only when she had given him a bag of money several months ago that she looked as she did now, without her wig.

"So what should I call you? Norema or Tamar?"

She smiled. "Norema is gone. It's time to be Tamar again." She continued to take Daran in, until suddenly her eyes widened. "Is that my bag? How did you get it?"

Daran held back a smile. "I brought you a present." He opened the bag and immediately the gizmo jumped out, flying straight at Tamar. Daran gasped. *What is happening?* he wondered, until he saw that they were hugging each other.

“Thank you so much,” Tamar said, tears filling her eyes. But then she appeared to realize something. “The Academy wouldn’t release him. You took it. But that would get you expelled!”

Daran shrugged. “Not exactly. You see, I framed the theft on you.” When Tamar remained silent, he added “I hope you don’t mind.”

Then Tamar burst out laughing. “Not at all,” she said. “The Academy means nothing to me anyway.”

Daran could sense some animosity in her voice, but he didn’t want to press it. Instead, he was curious about something else. “Earlier, on the roof, why did you let us take your gizmo?”

Tamar let out a deep sigh. “What else could I do? Attack my own son?”

It caused another question to pop up in Daran’s mind. “Am I the reason you infiltrated the Academy then? Or did the Free Minds send you?”

“Both,” Tamar replied. “For a while there had been a plan to put someone in there. They just couldn’t find someone capable enough. Until I had reason to volunteer.”

“But then why the second spy?” Daran wondered.

“We didn’t send the second spy.”

“You mean the other spy wasn’t from the Minds?”

“No, she was,” Tamar said. She took a deep breath, searching for the right words. “Everyone always thinks of the Free Minds as one organization, but there are different factions. My faction sent me in to gather information, mainly about what the Academy knows about the Minds.”

“And to steal thought cores,” Daran completed, but Tamar shook her head.

“That’s a different faction,” she explained. “A more violent one. Somehow they found out I infiltrated the Academy. And as soon as they knew, they took their chance.”

This confused Daran. “What do you mean?”

“They started stealing thought cores, and they weren’t too subtle about it either. While I was trying hard to remain hidden, they were encouraging the entire Academy to find me. They knew that eventually I would get caught, and then they could just blame everything on me, while they had the thought cores.”

“And they were thinkers. Actual, official thinkers.”

Tamar nodded. “Rumors are that there are even some thinkers high up on the ladder that have joined the Free Minds.”

“As high as the thought council?” Daran wondered.

“We think so, yes,” Tamar nodded. “But no one in my faction knows who it might be. Of course we have theories.”

“What do they say?” Daran asked curiously.

“They s – ” Tamar was interrupted by a soft but insistent beeping. She pulled a communicator out of her pocket and pushed a button. “Yeah?”

“Hunters have located you,” a voice came over the communicator. “The boy had a tail. They’re setting up a perimeter now. Exit south east.”

“Exit south east,” Tamar repeated. Then she let go of the button and gave Daran a last look, one which she appeared unwilling to end.

“Stay at the Academy, Daran. Learn as much as you can from them. You’ll need it.” Then she turned around and ran off.

“When will I see you again?” he called after her.

“Someday!” she called back before she disappeared around the corner.

Daran was left standing, one part of him wondering about how he had been followed. *Probably there was still a hunter around that recognized me. I should’ve noticed.* The other part of him was thinking about who in the thought council could possibly have joined the Free Minds.

*You’d think that the Minds wouldn’t mind having someone outside of the rich families, someone like me, join the Academy,* he reasoned. *But with the council working against me, that rules out all of them. Unless it’s ... Quenton?*

He couldn’t finish his thoughts, because suddenly hunters dropped in all around him. They appeared surprised to find only Daran.

*And again they find me exactly where the spy was spotted a moment ago,* he thought. *I’m starting to see how this can be considered suspicious.* But instead of voicing his thoughts, he just smiled and said, “I take it you’re here to escort me to my hearing?”

## Chapter 25 – Unexpected help

Daran wasn't surprised when some of the hunters actually did escort him to the hearing. As a result, he arrived much too early and was left in the antechamber to wait.

After some time Aris passed by without a word, entering the hearing room. A few minutes later Baltar followed suit. All the while Daran just sat around, smugly thinking about how his plan had worked out. It was a good way to keep his mind off other things. *Lana*. And instantly his mood dropped.

Ever since he screwed up, he was constantly wondering how he could have prevented what had happened. *If only I had written down who covered which exit*, he thought. *Then I could've known sooner. Then I could've sent someone who'd have been there sooner*. It was a lesson he intended to remember for the future. *Prepare well. Know what's going on. Know what you can do when things go wrong*.

Daran checked his watch and found that the hearing should've started several minutes ago. At that moment Quenton entered. In the brief moment that the door was open, Daran could hear chattering voices from the hallway, as if something was going on. *I guess that's what delayed him*.

"It's time," the scholar said, gesturing for Daran to enter the hearing room. The solemn look on his face gave Daran the feeling he'd been expelled already.

"Alright Lana," Daran softly said to himself, as if she was there in his mind with him. "I've done what you told me. I've spent my last day helping people, both those that I wanted to help and those that I didn't. I hope you were right. I hope that, in the end, it was

worth it.” With that thought in mind, he stepped through the doorway.

It felt strange, walking through the big room while all the seats were empty. Aris and Baltar were already sitting and, as Quenton joined them, Daran sat down in front of them.

Aris started off the meeting. “Yesterday a student died at this Academy. We are here to discuss to what degree Daran is responsible for this. Our first task is to understand what happened. Daran, can you tell us from the start about the events which led to Lana’s death?”

Daran took a deep breath. *Here I go again*, he thought. He wasn’t looking forward to bringing up the entire story again, but he knew there was no way around it. And at least he had prepared the start of the story.

“In the past few months, there were talks of a spy in the Academy, stealing thought cores. There were many people suspecting me for that. I’ve even been pulled out of a test because of it. But also in many smaller ways, these suspicions were making it very hard, if not impossible, for me to study here. I figured the only way to get rid of those suspicions, and be treated as a regular student, was to prove my innocence and unmask the culprit myself.”

The explanation was only a partial truth, but one which Daran preferred above the full truth: that he had gotten Lana killed because of a vague and partly incorrect suspicion that the spy just might be his long-lost mother. And because the story didn’t blame anyone or anything other than circumstances, it would be a lot easier for everyone to accept.

Daran looked at the three leaders for a sign of their opinion, but none was visible. Only Quenton slightly raised an eyebrow in surprise, but the look didn't show disapproval.

So Daran continued the story, first listing his information about the spy, before telling how he set up the trap. Contrary to his introduction, this part of the story was complete and truthful. He then explained how he discovered that there were actually two spies, eventually reaching the hardest part of the story: how he had seen everything go wrong.

Though tears were on the verge of bursting out of his eyes, Daran was surprised to find that there weren't any running down his cheeks. There was nothing more than glistening eyes to show signs of his sorrow. *I guess I am slowly getting used to the pain.*

"Thank you Daran," Aris said when the story was finished. Then he turned to the other thinkers. "Does this story match with the information you have gathered?"

Quenton nodded. "I have talked with the students that were involved. The stories match out."

"I have talked with the hunters," Aris added. "The stories there match out too. So then we can conclude that the main lines of the story are likely to be the truth."

*Likely to be the truth?* Daran repeated in his mind. The conservativeness of the statement surprised him. *These guys really like to be thorough.*

But Aris already continued. "Daran, I have been told that you have been instructed not to get involved with the spy. Is that true?"

With Quenton sitting right in front of him, Daran could see no reason to lie. "It is, for as much as I wasn't involved already."

“So you knowingly disobeyed a direct instruction by a senior thinker?”

On hearing the condemning tone behind the question, Daran considered coming up with a random story which might just explain how he technically didn't disobey the order, but it just didn't feel right to him. *It shows more strength of character to stand behind your decisions in the face of pressure*, he realized. So he simply and confidently said, “Yes.”

“And this eventually got a student killed?”

Again Daran nodded and said “Yes,” although he couldn't resist dropping his eyes after the statement.

“Then I have enough information,” Aris said. “Do either of you have any more questions?”

He looked at Baltar and Quenton, but both thinkers shook their head.

“Okay,” Aris continued. “Next, we need to decide on how to proceed. Generally, if a student disobeys a direct instruction from a senior thinker, he is expelled. Do you think that is appropriate here?”

At this point Quenton intervened. “I do not.”

“Please explain,” Aris added.

“Certain circumstances which we have caused have disrupted the life of this boy. To solve that, we offered to give him a chance at this Academy. He accepted, but due to additional circumstances we are responsible for, he never got the fair chance he was promised. Yes, he messed up, but his failure is as much his fault as it is ours.”

“So you would suggest he stays?”



Quenton nodded. "We have promised him a fair chance. I say we actually give him one."

"But Quenton, he doesn't fit in," Baltar interrupted. "You've seen what the other students think of him."

"Yes I have," Quenton replied. "But have *you* talked with them?"

Baltar looked up surprised. "What do you mean?"

"It was a simple question," Quenton said. "Have you talked with the students about Daran?"

Confused, Baltar shook his head. "No, I haven't."

Quenton sighed. Then he turned to Aris. "Can we step outside for a minute?" he asked.

Aris frowned. "I don't see wh – "

"Trust me," Quenton added.

"Fine," Aris shrugged. The three thinkers stood up and Quenton led them up the stairs, to the main entrance of the hall. With the door slamming shut behind them, Daran was left to wait.

After some time, a question popped up in him. *Why did they go out the main entrance?* He knew there was a meeting room behind the hearing hall, specifically designed for small private discussions. *Why are they discussing things in the antechamber?*

But at that point the three thinkers returned and took their seats again.

"I believe all of us have come to a decision?" Aris asked. When the other thinkers nodded, he turned to Baltar.

"Baltar, do you vote in favor or against expelling Daran?"

"I vote in favor," Baltar said.

On hearing this Quenton raised an eyebrow. *He's surprised*, Daran realized. *He had expected Baltar's support*. It wasn't a good sign.

"Quenton, do you vote in favor or against expelling this student?"

"Against," Quenton said resolutely.

"Very well. That means the final decision is left to me," Aris noted. "I vote in favor of keeping this student on at the Academy."

The first things Daran noticed were the looks on the faces of the other thinkers. Baltar appeared horrified, while Quenton only had a satisfied smile. And only then did Daran notice his own surprise. *I can stay?*

"Subject to the right disciplinary action, of course," Aris added with a smile.

The discussion went on for a while on what would be appropriate. They considered forbidding Daran from being in charge of groups again, but limiting his interaction with fellow students didn't seem like the best idea. In the end, all he wound up with was extended cleaning duties.

When Daran eventually got out of his chair, he still couldn't believe it. Dazed, he climbed the steps of the hall. When he reached the antechamber, Quenton caught up with him.

"I suppose I should thank you," Daran told him, but the thinker smiled and shook his head.

"You don't have to thank me here."

"Well, someone changed Aris' mind," Daran added.

Quenton nodded, again with a satisfied smile. "True, but I didn't do that. You did."

Daran still didn't get it. In the end, Quenton just ushered him out the door. When he entered the hallway, he was immediately surrounded by people.

In front of the crowd were several familiar faces. Daran recognized Jarod, Amilia, Miril, Ikiana and Cinly. In fact, the entire crew of his failed group mission seemed to be there. He also spotted Lioris, Posak, Zeris, and several other friends of Firo. There were even quite some thinkers. Daran met eyes with Malek, who gave him a wink.

Jarod put a hand on Daran's shoulder. "We're sorry we weren't in time to wish you good luck for the hearing. I just want you to know that we're behind you, no matter what happens."

The look of surprise on Daran's face slowly turned into a big smile.

"So, what's the verdict?" Jarod asked. Daran was still too lost for words to answer though. In the end Quenton helped him out.

"Lots of cleaning duties," the scholar said with a bit of a proud smile. "But he can stay."

When the crowd erupted in a loud cheer, Daran also felt his spirits lift. He was finally starting to realize that there was a place where he was welcome. It wasn't just a place where he had a room and a bed to sleep in. It was a place where he could help people, and where they appreciated him for it. *It's a home.*

Then, in the back of the crowd, he saw Firo. Somehow, when the eyes of the two met, the crowd knew to part for them, and so they stepped towards each other.

"I'm sorry I was late, but I think I made it just in time," Firo said.

Not sure how to react to this, Daran focused instead on Firo's gizmo, who was enthusiastically circling around him. There was something off about his gait though.

"It seems he's missing a part of his leg," Daran noticed.

Firo nodded. "It kind of came loose right after I found him."

Daran grimaced. "I guess I didn't attach it properly." Then he added with a welcoming smile, "I can help you fix it?"

Firo initially seemed hesitant, but he eventually shrugged and returned the smile. "That'd be nice," he said, holding out his hand.

It was only then that Daran understood what Quenton had meant all those months ago with "We are above being vengeful." He wished he'd realized it sooner, but it was still a lesson he intended to remember and apply. *I have to make decisions not based on the past but on the future.*

And so he shook Firo's hand. "It's the least I can do."

But Firo shook his head. "No. You've already done a lot."

As Daran let these words sink in, he laughed. "I guess I have," he said, happy to see Firo laughing along. "But I can always do more."

## Epilogue – A last-minute change of mind

The funeral took place on the northeast outskirts of Tarine. It was exactly on the opposite side of the city compared to Daran's previous funeral several months ago, which wasn't so surprising, as the two funerals were each other's opposites in pretty much every imaginable way.

A lot of people had shown up, all dressed in immaculate outfits. Daran was glad that student uniforms were appropriate, because there was no way he could have afforded that kind of clothing.

Then he saw Lana in the crowd. *But that can't be*, he gasped. She was accompanied by a woman and a man looking much like her. *Her parents*.

Because of the confusion, he hadn't noticed Quenton coming up next to him. "That's her family," the scholar said, startling him.

When Daran looked closer, he realized that it indeed wasn't Lana. It was a slightly younger girl looking just like her. "I didn't even know she had a sister."

"Don't worry. You're not expected to know everything," Quenton assured him.

"Still, it feels as if I should have known this."

"No matter how much you know about someone, there will always be some small and seemingly important tidbit which you've never stopped to think about," Quenton said, putting a comforting hand on Daran's shoulder. "It's just like when half of the hunters of the Academy are led on a wild goose chase all across the city, following a false alarm, and no one seems to think it may have been intentional."

*He knows that?* Daran thought, until he scolded himself. *Of course he does. He can think well enough.* He was unsure how to reply, but he also felt like he had more important things on his mind, and so he just shrugged. “It wasn’t my decision that they were following me.”

“And yet they were,” Quenton said, raising an eyebrow. “You know, if you have any influence on this, it would be wise to use it, to prevent things like this from happening.”

The comment felt a bit like an accusation to Daran. It was as if he was held responsible again, although he realized that, this time, he partly was. Still he felt the need to defend himself. “You know that I would only let stuff like that happen if I felt that it was absolutely necessary.”

Quenton looked surprised to hear this. But then he gave the boy an understanding smile. “Yes I do. I suppose you won’t be continuing the search for your mother anymore then?”

Daran shook his head. “No, not for a while.”

The ceremony was about to begin, so the two slowly started following the crowd towards the seating area. At that moment a question popped up in Daran’s mind.

“When you asked for a break, during the hearing, you took the others to the crowd outside, didn’t you?”

“Yes I did,” Quenton said, a small self-satisfied smile appearing on his face. “They still believed that you could never fit in. I knew otherwise. Instead of telling them, I figured it would be better to show them. Still, it wasn’t easy.”

“The crowd couldn’t convince them?” Daran asked.

“No. Especially Aris. He figured everyone only wanted to keep you because of your instruction sessions. Only in the end did his mind appear to have been suddenly changed.”

“That’s strange,” Daran said, but he wasn’t able to ask how it happened, because they had reached the seats. “I’m sitting near the front,” Daran said, pointing towards the reserved seats.

“Ah, you’re one of the speakers. Good luck,” Quenton wished him as Daran proceeded to the front.

For a while he had been doubting whether he should give a speech or not. He wasn’t sure what Lana’s parents would think of it. He had this image in his mind of a large crowd giving him angry looks as he climbed up the pulpit. That is, until a question had popped up in his mind. *What would Lana say I should do, if she were here?*

A reminiscent smile had then appeared on Daran’s face. *She would tell me not to worry so much about what other people might think. She’d say I should do what I think is right.* And though he was still scared witless by the prospect, frightened that he would regret it, he knew that not doing anything could be a far bigger regret.

And so he had sent in the request to speak. It took him days to fine-tune his story about Lana’s last moments. He still wasn’t sure whether he would keep his eyes dry during it all, but if he could survive bursting out in tears in front of Lana, he could survive it in front of a crowd too.

The ceremony was opened, and after some formalities Daran was already called up. But as he stood up and walked forward, he wasn’t thinking about the speech. Instead, he was still thinking

about what Quenton had said. *Aris suddenly changed his mind near the end.* He also thought back to the first thing Firo had told him after the hearing. *I'm sorry I was late, but I think I made it just in time.*

Halfway to the speaker's stage, he suddenly stopped walking. *It was Firo who changed Aris' mind,* he knew. And the next thought baffled him even more. *I got saved by Firo.* It was something which Daran would never have expected, but he did know why it had happened.

*Thank you Lana,* he silently mouthed. And at that point he knew that he didn't want to talk about Lana's last moments and how she died. It wasn't important. What did matter was the way she had lived. Everything he had learned from her, everything she stood for, that was what this was about.

Part of him felt bad about throwing days of preparation out of the window, but when he looked at that feeling from a broader perspective, he knew he shouldn't let it deter him. It was because of another thing he had learned from Lana. *Don't let emotions make your decisions for you. Instead, look at what, deep down, is worthwhile for you, and go for that.*

So he started walking again, and when he faced the crowd, he didn't even think about being nervous. He knew what he wanted to say. *This is for you, Lana. Let's do this.*