A mechanical bird, resembling a robotic phoenix or a futuristic eagle, is shown in flight against a backdrop of a misty mountain range and a dense forest of evergreen trees. The bird has a metallic body with intricate details and large, fan-like wings. The title "FIRST THOUGHTS" is written in a large, white, serif font, with a horizontal line above the word "FIRST" and another below the word "THOUGHTS".

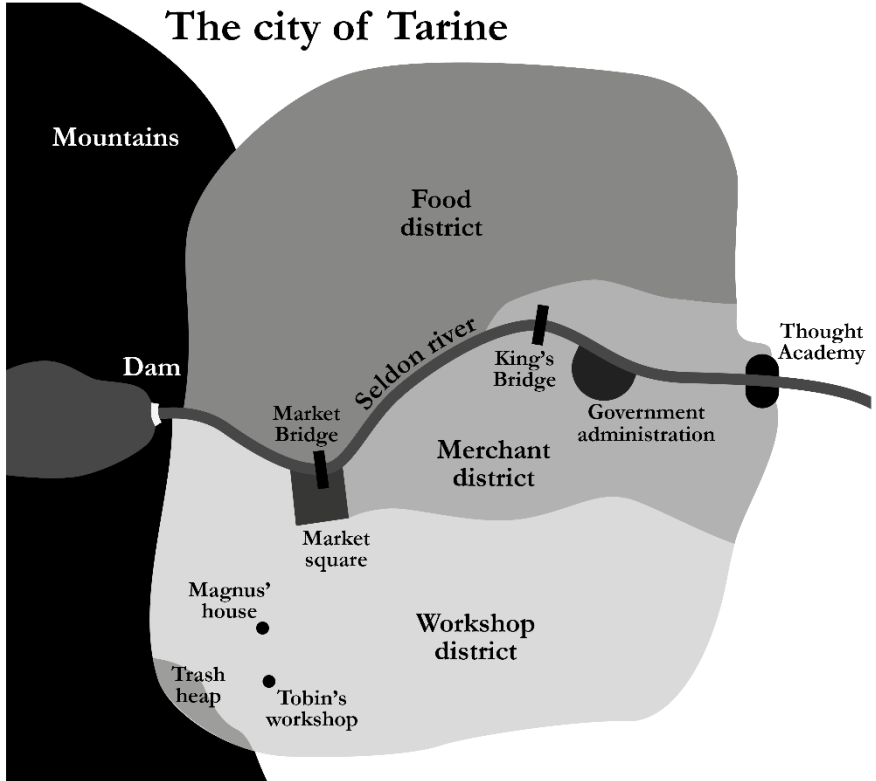
FIRST THOUGHTS

H i l d o B i j l

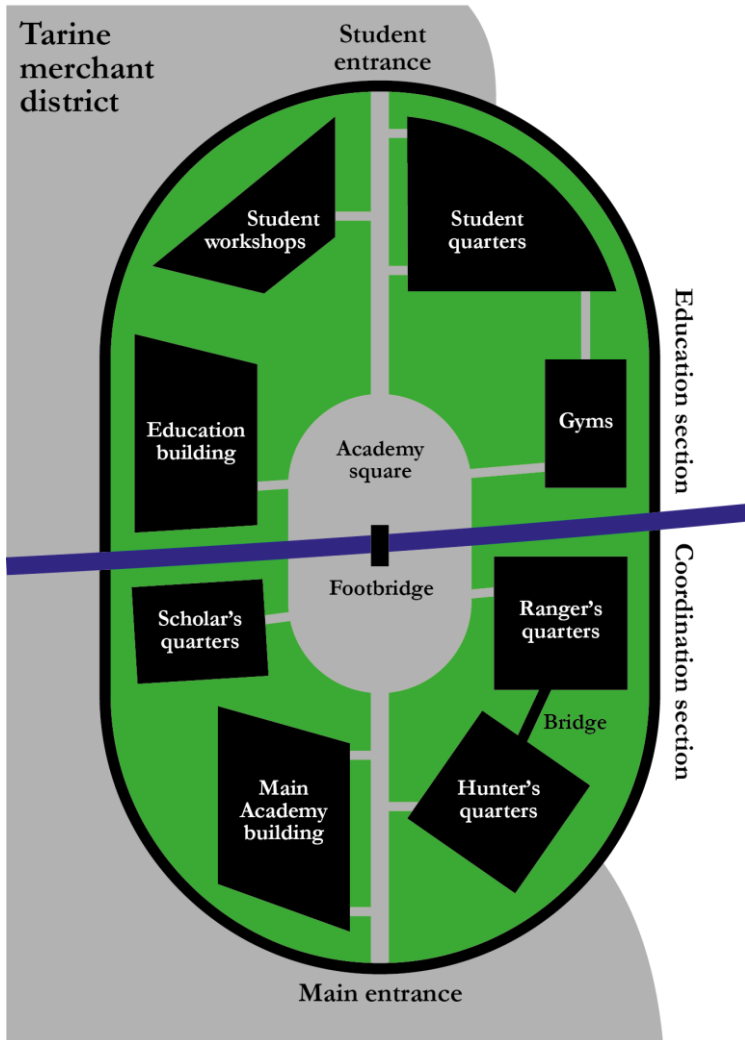
Part 3 – Unidentified thoughts

The Free Minds continue to wreak havoc in Tarine, so the government sees no other option. The Thought Academy is forced to crack down on the workshop district. While Daran tries to help his friends there, he is torn between obligations to his old life and his new one. At the same time, his fellow students at the Academy also need his help. Yet when an unidentified gizmo appears, which somehow appears to have a link with Daran, he suddenly becomes the target.

The city of Tarine



The Thought Academy



Prologue – An empty discovery

This ring must have been really important to him, Daran thought while replacing yet another old metal part of Nilas with a newer composite one. With their higher strength and especially their lower weight, these components would make the large bird even more maneuverable. But on every significant old chunk of metal he detached, he found the same imprint. The one of a ring stamped into it. Nolan's ring.

Daran always kept the memento close to him, hanging by a chain around his neck. He pulled it out of his shirt and looked at the way the artifact was put together. It was still a puzzle to him. The whole thing was made up of very thin metal wires, braided in a complicated pattern. These braids were again woven into another pattern to make more threads, which were eventually twisted into the shape of a ring. The pattern was mesmerizing.

He managed to pull his gaze away from the ring. "That should do it," he said, as he tossed the last part he had detached aside. "How does it feel?"

The big mechanical bird gave an enthusiastic squeal. Everything seemed alright.

"I don't have time to do a full test run now. I promised to meet up with Kira. You remember her, right? We flew together a few times last year. But I'll be back later."

Daran quickly cleaned up all the old parts. Some he threw away, but others he kept. After all, they were parts made by Nolan; his father, or so he had discovered. He felt guilty about throwing away anything, but there were only so many keepsakes he could

hold on to. After storing those, he ran to the main gate of the Academy, where Kira was waiting for him.

“Hey, what’s up?” he greeted her, as they set off for a walk through the merchant district.

“My last time at the Academy!” Kira smiled. When Daran looked puzzled, she clarified, “My punishment is over. A year of chores for the Academy, after we stole those thought cores last year.”

“Ah, it’s really been a full year already,” Daran realized.

“It must have been a pretty wild year for you too,” Kira noted.

Daran couldn’t help but nod, thinking back to everything that had happened. It all began when he found Nilas and, in the resulting struggle, lost his supposed parents, estranged his brother Tobin and somehow enrolled at the Thought Academy. Then he found out he was the son of the leader of the ranger department within the Academy, who had gone missing only a little while earlier. And the subsequent search for his mother led to a spy within the Academy, two spies even, one of which turned out to be Tamar. But things were very different now. “I’m just glad people are starting to accept me as Nolan’s son. Some are even saying I’m starting to look like him.”

“That’s a good sign, I guess,” Kira chuckled. “Are you still giving those workshop classes?”

“Yes,” Daran nodded. “Although they’re not really classes. We call them trainings. We basically practice how to make stuff. It’s not about actually making something useful directly, but about experimenting with how you can shape materials. About learning new things. It’s pretty fun and useful actually.”

“Ah, I never do that,” said Kira. “In Tobin’s workshop it’s all about making stuff for customers.” She nudged her head sideways, as if to say, *You know, for the people here in the merchant district.* Daran knew her feeling, having grown up in the exact workshop she was now living in. For the craftsmen it often felt like everything they did was meant to serve the rich people.

“You should, though,” Daran noted. “You should always continue learning. Hey, I told you about some new tricks for using the lathe a few weeks ago. Have you tried those?”

“No,” Kira shook her head. “There haven’t been any orders I could apply them to.”

“Well, try them anyway,” Daran said. “Whenever business is a bit slow or so. Just to see what you can do with them. As long as Tobin is fine with it, of course. How is he doing anyway?”

“Pretty well,” Kira said. “I think he’s finally recovered from what went down last year. Well, mostly anyway. I still doubt he’d be happy to see you, even after all this time.” When Daran gave her a questioning look, she clarified, “He still avoids talking about you. Always. Whenever I subtly try to steer the conversation in your direction, I just hit a brick wall.” She raised her hands in frustration.

“I guess stubbornness runs in the family,” Daran sighed. “I’ve been thinking for ages about looking him up some time, but ... ” He paused, unsure of how to explain why he never had. “I guess I just don’t know what I should do.” He paused again, hoping Kira would have an easy answer, but she remained silent. “Well, I’m glad business is getting better.”

“Yeah, me too,” Kira admitted. “Things were really crazy last year, with everything that happened. You know, after the people I grew up with were arrested. The thing is, just because a Free Minds cell had been discovered in the workshop district, the hunters kept poking around. It made everyone nervous. And nervous people don’t set up new projects. They don’t buy stuff, making it really hard to get enough work. But with things having calmed down, business is finally steady. It’s better.”

“Yeah, I know the feeling,” Daran said, nodding. “It’s been a while since I was pulled out of something for stuff that I didn’t –”

A blast of air knocked him off his feet. He fell onto the street, nearly landing on top of Kira, and covered his face. The first shockwave blew out his left ear and a wave of heat singed the hairs on his arms. A shower of debris followed. Through his still functioning right ear he could hear someone scream, but he ignored it. Not getting blown up was his first priority, with dust still raining down all around him.

Slowly all other noise died out, leaving only screams interrupting the background noise of the city. Daran finally unwound his arms from around his head and looked about.

On the other side of the street, just over ten meters away, a tall and stately building had instantly been reduced to rubble. The walls near the sides were still standing, but the central part of the house had entirely collapsed, despite its strong concrete structure. Small fires were destroying what was left of the interior.

What should I do? Daran wondered. The first thought that came up was, *Call for help*. “Nilas, I’m near the explosion,” he

shouted through the communicator in his watch. "I may need you, so get up in the air." He dismissed the idea of sending for rangers. Other people would surely do that, if they hadn't already heard the blast at the Academy.

What else? Make sure everyone is safe. He looked around to see if anyone had been injured. "You okay?" he asked Kira.

She groaned but nodded. They had both been slightly more than ten meters away from the outer walls of the building, so Daran guessed she was only shaken up, just like him.

He searched for the source of the screams. They came from a girl thirty meters down the road. She was a few years older than Daran, which made him wonder why she was screaming so much. Since she was still standing up straight, he doubted she was badly hurt, and there were no other people on the street near the explosion. That only left the ones in the building.

Daran ran to the door. Or at least, where it used to be. A large part of the facade had been blown into the street. "Is anyone in there?" he called out. He listened through all the noise and the beeping in his left ear, but couldn't hear any cries for help. Of course it didn't mean no one had been caught in the explosion, but he wasn't planning on starting a haphazard search of the building. The whole thing was still burning left and right and about to collapse further. He'd leave that for the thinkers.

That leaves one question: who or what caused this? Daran looked around, taking in the people who were coming out of their houses, but he did not find anything suspicious. *What was I expecting? Someone with a sign on his face saying, 'I just blew up a building'?* And the only thing he heard was ... *Crying?*

He listened again. It sounded like a small child, on one of the upper floors. The sound came from a room of which the wall on the inside had collapsed. The ceiling still held, but Daran wondered how. With the support beams gone, it could come down any minute.

“Hold on, I’m coming for you!” Daran called. *But how?* Climbing in via the roof seemed to be the only way in, but it wouldn’t be able to support him. It would collapse right on top of the child. *Unless...*

“Nilas, I need a pick-up,” he called through his watch. “By the shoulders.” He looked around for a building that was easy to climb. With all the ornaments the houses had around here, that wasn’t much of a challenge. He simply chose the one across the street. As he reached the top, he saw his gizmo flying in, its wings standing out against the blue sky behind it. He turned his back towards the large bird, which pretty soon wound his claws around Daran’s shoulders and lifted him up.

It was a trick Daran had practiced a few months ago, after replacing Nilas’ claws, to see if they could still carry him. Back then he’d had a safety rope around him. This time he was just dangling under the large bird as they were circling around the explosion site.

“Okay, I’ve got a really bad idea,” Daran called out over the noise of the wind. The turbulent air streams were buffeting him all over his body, but forming an aerodynamic shape wasn’t an option at the moment. “Do you see that room on the far side of the building? The one with the inner wall missing but its ceiling still intact?” When Nilas gave a brief squeak, he continued. “I need

to get in there as smoothly as possible. I don't want anything to collapse."

The surprised squeal that came out of Nilas this time sounded a lot like, "Are you sure?" but Daran was fully determined.

"Let's do this."

They approached the building. Just when it seemed like Nilas was going to impale Daran on a protruding section of the roof, the boy was released. He made himself small, eager not to slam his face into the roof tiles. Rolled up like a ball he crashed into the room, eventually coming to a stop against a large desk.

He stood up, rubbing his left hip – *that will be quite a bruise* – and looked around. It looked like a regular office. It had a large desk with a chair, a few cabinets with books, a smaller table to have meetings around. But most importantly: no child.

"Is anyone in here?" he called again. He closed his eyes and tried to listen for further cries. There was the crackling of fire down below and there was the clamor of a crowd accumulating outside, but nothing resembling a child. *How is that possible?*

He felt a shiver crawling up his spine. Something felt wrong. *I have to get out of here*, he thought. The only way out of the room was the same way as he got in though: through the blown-out wall. But as he walked to the edge, he found that the hole was multiple floors deep. He felt the intense heat of the fire raging at its bottom.

If I can't go down, I'd better go up. He turned to his right, where the side wall of the room ended just as abruptly as the floor. The edge of the wall was rough enough to climb up on. Slowly, careful of brittle pieces of stone coming loose, he lifted himself up onto the roof. He inched his way towards the neighbouring building,

taking care to keep his weight above the supporting wall he had just climbed up on. On either side of him the ceiling started to collapse, showering him in still more dust. *Please let the wall hold*, Daran silently prayed. Precariously balanced on the edge, with piles of rubble down below, both left and right, he crawled forward.

When he reached the adjoining building, Daran heaved a sigh of relief. He ran to the front end of the house and dropped down to its balcony, where an elderly man stood, staring at him in disbelief.

“Did you just go in there?” he said, astonishedly taking in the boy’s student uniform.

“Yeah, I thought I heard someone, but I couldn’t find him. Listen, I think this house will be safe, but just in case the fire spreads, we’d better leave the building. Can you take me down to the street?”

“Sure,” the man said. He rushed into the room, which turned out to be a bedroom, opened a drawer and quickly put some items into his pockets. Then he led Daran to the stairwell.

Ah, people can never leave their valuables behind, Daran thought. “Do you think anyone was in the building?” he asked while rushing down the steps.

The man in front of him shook his head. “I doubt it. I didn’t see anyone come in this morning. I thought they were closed for the day.”

When they came outside, Daran saw several hunters and rangers keeping the gathered crowd at bay. One of the hunters

spotted Daran and walked over. “Why am I not surprised to see you here?” he asked.

Daran didn’t even know the hunter, but he wasn’t surprised to learn that the hunter knew him. “Listen, I had nothing to do with this,” he started explaining. “You see the dust I’m covered in? I was caught in the blast. My ears are still ringing from it.”

“Then why were you in there?” the hunter asked, pointing to the neighbour’s building.

Daran sighed. “I thought I heard a child crying inside,” he said, pointing to the still burning building. Rangers were sending in gizmos to look for people and to extinguish any fire they could find. “I dropped in, but I couldn’t find him.”

“You know what I think? I think you went in there to loot the place.”

Daran’s jaw dropped from the outrage. “What? Well, search me. I didn’t steal anything.” *Heck, if I wanted to steal something, I’d have been better off stealing the valuables from the old man.*

And so the hunter did. While he was at it, another hunter joined them. “Anything going on?” she asked.

The first hunter was still busy searching Daran. When he passed by Daran’s back pocket, he appeared to find something though. As soon as the hunter touched it, it started moving. *What the ...* Daran thought. Eventually the hunter pulled out the struggling – whatever it was.

“Not much,” the hunter finally replied. “I wanted to check if he didn’t loot the place, but he’s got nothing on him. Just his keys, a pen and his gizmo.” He showed the small squirming rat-like

creature to his colleague. It seemed like the gizmo was very eager to return to Daran's pocket.

"But ... that's not mine," Daran stammered, amazed.

"Not yours, you say? Well, then you won't mind if we take it with us." He turned around and after a quick "Stay out of trouble" he walked off with the gizmo.

Daran silently cursed himself. He should've kept his mouth shut. There were so many questions going through his mind now. *Where did that gizmo come from? Why did it climb into my pocket? And why would anyone blow up an empty building?* But just then Kira found him.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Daran shook off the thoughts. "Yeah. You?"

"I am now," she said. "But you know what this means. More hunters crawling around the workshop district again."

"Really? We're in the merchant district. Surely it won't be that bad at your place."

Kira shook her head though. "I hope you're right, but I doubt it. The workshops always get blamed. This will have its consequences in the weeks to come."

Daran thought back to the gizmo he had unwittingly found and nodded. "I think you may be right about that."

Chapter 1 – Safety checks

This is really getting out of hand, Daran thought as he looked out over the crowd. The workshop was filled to the brim with people. He had just walked around to find the ones he didn't know yet; something he did at the start of every training. He insisted on at least knowing everyone's names and the level they were at. But this time there were a staggering eleven new people: eight freshmen and three much older students. The long introduction round meant the training was already starting late.

“Okay, listen up!” he called out over the inevitable chatter. The noise mostly died down, and Daran simply shouted over the remaining conversations. “I’m going to start with some safety instructions in the drilling corner. For everyone with less than three months of workshop experience: attend them. For the others, I’m sure you still have plenty of work left from previous trainings to keep yourself busy. I know we’re short on machines, so share them whenever you can. You might even learn something from each other. Let’s get to work!”

As the group got moving, Daran found himself surrounded by a small crowd of expectant eyes. He directed the freshmen into the corner, and when most of them were seated, he started going through his default list of safety instructions. No loose hair, no loose clothing, wear safety glasses, and so on. Most of the people had already heard it several times, but it didn't hurt to be reminded. He still noticed quite some students quickly conjuring up hair ties.

Now that the largest risks of the students accidentally killing themselves had passed, it was time to get started. “Today you guys will learn how to drill holes,” Daran told them. “Suppose I want to drill an eight millimeter hole into a block of wood, what should I do?”

The students started giving him answers. “Turn the machine on.” “Fix the block in the machine.” “Find the right drill bit.” Slowly Daran followed their orders, pointing out every detail of what he was doing. And just when he was about to actually drill the hole, a small cat-like gizmo climbed up to his shoulder to get a closer look of what he was doing.

Immediately Daran stopped drilling. He looked around to see if anyone was going to correct the gizmo. It was basic gizmo training: if a gizmo did something bad, you had to let it know right away. The sooner the feedback was given, the better. But no reaction came.

“Okay,” Daran eventually said. “We’ve had the safety instructions for human beings. Here are the safety instructions for gizmos. They stay away from the machines. If you already control them well enough to make sure they do, you’re welcome to bring them to the workshop. But if not, you leave them in your room.”

At this point, the owner of the gizmo got the hint. Quickly a girl with brown flowing hair stood up and rushed over. Daran knew her as Enise. If he remembered correctly, it was the third time she’d joined his trainings. As she picked up the gizmo from Daran’s shoulder, she started petting it.

Really? Daran wondered. *Petting is an affirmative signal. She’s reinforcing the behavior now.* He rolled his eyes, but halfway

through he stopped. *I shouldn't be doing that in front of the group*, he told himself. As he'd learned all too well last year, making fun of someone in front of a group was never a good thing to do. He was glad that Enise was just then walking back to her chair, meaning she hadn't seen it. *Still, others might have*. As she reached her chair, she turned and gave Daran a smile.

Only then did Daran notice she still hadn't tied up her hair. He couldn't help his shoulders from slumping down in frustration, though he did try to hide it as much as possible. To compensate, he gave Enise a smile back. That was actually easier than expected. *I guess she has a nice smile*, Daran figured. Still, he resolved to also give an instruction session for freshmen on properly training their gizmos sometime, if only to prevent incidents like this in the future.

"So, drilling," Daran finally said, but he got distracted again. Zeris was standing at the edge of the group, trying to get his attention. Daran waved him over.

Daran and Zeris had gotten off on the wrong foot last year, when Firo had set Zeris and a few other guys up to kicking Daran into the hospital. But from there on things had changed. Zeris had regularly been attending Daran's trainings for quite a while now, and he showed great promise.

"Some of the older students are getting bored," Zeris told Daran in a hushed voice. Daran appreciated the low volume. There was no need for the new students to know things weren't always flawless. "They're wondering when you'll give them something new to work on. Do you think you can come over any time soon?"

“I don’t know,” Daran confessed. “I still need to get the freshmen started with the drills, without them killing themselves. I know it’s taking longer than I had hoped.”

“Hey, why don’t I do that?” Zeris suggested.

Daran looked up, surprised. He hadn’t thought of that. “Are you sure?”

“Of course,” Zeris shrugged. “It’s basic drilling. How hard can it be to explain that?”

Oh, it’s often the easiest things that are the hardest to convey clearly, Daran knew, but he didn’t say it out loud. He wasn’t too eager to let someone else instruct the group, but he didn’t want to bail out on the experienced students either. “Okay. Just make sure they start drilling stuff. I’ll check in on you as soon as I can.”

Daran stood up to walk to the group of older students, who were indeed becoming somewhat restless, but then he remembered something. He turned back to Zeris.

“Oh, and tell Enise to tie up her hair.”

As the training came to an end and people were finishing up their work, Daran slumped down on a table and buried his head in his hands, if only briefly. Things had been crazy.

Though he loved having fourth-year students around, they were also the most challenging. For a start, Daran still felt like he couldn’t just order older students around. But asking everything politely took way too much effort. Secondly, the level was incredibly varied. Some of them were as experienced as Daran, while others had four years of bad habits ingrained in them. Those were even worse than the freshmen.

This is no longer working, Daran realized. *I should give separate trainings. High-level trainings for the more advanced students and basic trainings for the beginners and the hopeless people.* Before he could wonder how he would ever tell people kindly that they were hopeless, he noticed a red shape enter the workshop. It turned out to be a uniform.

A hunter? What's that doing in my training? The thinker was still rather young, but when he waved Daran over, Daran obediently complied. What else could he do?

"Arin wants to speak with you," the hunter bluntly stated. "In his office. And it looks like you're done here."

"Not really," Daran noted just as curtly. "Still need to clean up."

"You've got five minutes." The tone of the hunter made it clear that no discussion was possible.

Five minutes? Cleaning up usually takes me nearly an hour. Daran sighed. He shouldn't have expected much leniency from a hunter. *Well, at least they don't just drag me away anymore. I guess that's progress.*

How could he ever sort everything out in five minutes though? He only saw one option. "Guys, listen up!" he called. "I've got something new for you." He knew this would get them listening. "It's one of the most important parts of maintaining a workshop, and it's called cleaning up."

Quite some of the students groaned, but to Daran's surprise several also stood up and looked around, checking what needed to be done. Of course there was aplenty. And just as naturally, most students didn't have a clue where to start.

Five minutes later Daran hadn't cleaned up a single thing. He had only given about a hundred pointers on what needed to be sorted out and how. *What would the Academy do without a cleaning staff?* he wondered. The workshop was still far from spotless, but it would have to do.

"The drill bits are all back where they came from," Zeris came over to tell Daran. "What do I do with all the sawdust? Just wipe it away?"

That won't get it out of the workshop, will it? Daran thought, nearly facepalming, but in the previous five minutes he had grown used to bad ideas. "Vacuum cleaner," he curtly said. "In the cleaning cabinet." He pointed to the red door in the far corner, which no student had probably ever opened. "Listen, I've got to go. Could you make sure that, when you leave, things look kind of orderly around here?"

"Sure," Zeris nodded. "I can do that." He left to get the vacuum cleaner and Daran turned to follow the hunter. When Daran stepped out the workshop, he remembered the training Zeris had taken over. Whenever Daran had looked across the workshop for the past two hours, the first-year students were enthusiastically drilling stuff. And no one had gotten hurt, so it seemed Zeris had done a great job.

I should've thanked him, Daran realized, but when he looked around, he saw that Zeris was already on the other side of the workshop. At the same time, the hunter was impatiently waiting down the hall. *I'll do that later,* he resolved. The back of his mind knew he'd probably forget though, because he was already focused on what lay ahead of him.

What would Arin want from me this time? He shrugged. He would find out soon enough anyway, though he guessed it was about the building explosion. The first question fired at him after being ushered into the chair opposite to Arin's desk proved him wrong though.

"Daran, where did you get that gizmo we found on you?" Arin asked, looking straight at Daran. To Arin's left sat another hunter who, like Arin, was somewhere in his late forties, while to his right sat the younger hunter that had brought Daran in.

Daran raised his hands. "I don't know," he admitted, shaking his head. The answer didn't seem to satisfy the hunters.

"And we're supposed to believe that? It was in your pocket," the older hunter snorted. "Okay. If you don't tell us where you got it from, at least tell us what it was made for."

Daran raised his eyebrows. *They don't even know what it does? With what goal it was made for? But that means...* "You don't have it registered?" he blurted out, astonished.

The shoulders of the hunter slumped, as if to say, *Thank you for rubbing that in*. The annoyance on his face quickly turned to frustration. He placed his hands flat on the table, stood up and, leaning forward across the desk, looked Daran straight in the eyes. "Tell me where it came from."

Daran had had plenty of experience with these kinds of meetings in the past year. He planted his hands on the table in an identical way, also leaned forward until he could smell the hunter's breath, and said just as loudly, "I don't know." He gave the hunter an insistent look for another full second. Then he sighed and dropped back into his chair. "Listen," he said more calmly. "At the

moment you don't even know whether the gizmo was made here or somewhere else. And neither do I. But we can find out by looking at the way it was made. That should at least tell us whether the person that made it was trained here."

An angry sneer had made its way onto the hunter's face. He was about to reply when Arin raised his hand slightly. It was enough to stop him dead in his tracks.

"If the boy doesn't intend to help us, there are other ways of figuring out what we want to know," Arin said.

Doesn't intend to help? Daran repeated in his mind. *I just told you guys how to figure things out for yourselves. Which, from the looks of it, is exactly what you're going to do.* An incredulous frown found its way onto his face. *That's a very clever way of stealing my ideas. Well, at least you're actually using them.*

"What if the gizmo was made somewhere else?" the old hunter asked. "If they make dozens more, we'll have a revolt from the Minds hanging above our heads. We have to know."

"Indeed," Arin nodded. "We have to do something. We always used to keep track of where all the thought cores were, but that may not be enough anymore. I only see one option. We also have to keep track of the materials that are used."

"But that's insane," said the young hunter. It was the first time that he spoke. "How do we do that?"

Arin shrugged, as if to say, *It won't be easy.* "We'll require every workshop to keep a detailed administration on which materials they're using and what for. Every part should be recorded, and we should always be able to inspect those records."

"In the entire city?" the young hunter asked, surprised.

Arin let out a brief laugh. “Not just Tarine,” he said. “If we do that, they’ll just make them outside the city. This is for all of Kantara. I’ll talk with the Tharon and the cabinet about making this happen.”

Daran’s mouth had already been gaping open, but now it dropped to the floor. “You can’t do that!” he called out, surprising the hunters, who apparently hadn’t even remembered he was there. “Many small workshops are having a hard time staying in business as it is. This will finish them!”

Arin sighed. “Daran, you don’t know what’s at stake here,” he said in a soothing voice that only further enraged Daran. “But this is something we don’t need your help with. You’re dismissed.”

Daran opened his mouth to counter this, but then he realized they wouldn’t consider anything he had to say anyway. *This is pointless*, he thought, shaking his head. He stood up, turned around and left the office.

“Kira was only partly right,” he said to himself while leaving the building. “The workshops will take the hits. But it wasn’t because of the explosion. It was because I screwed up with the gizmo.”

And the worst part was that he didn’t have a clue how to make up for it. How could he possibly help out all the workshops in the entire country?

Chapter 2 – Learning about teaching about learning

I really have to get better at this, Daran told himself. After a long time he was finally back in the gym, working on his long-neglected fighting skills. Last year he had started training a lot, until he wound up in the hospital. Then, as his conflict with Firo got resolved, so did the immediate need to learn how to fight. Now there was a new and even more urgent need though: module credits. He was seriously running behind.

“Okay, let’s start again,” Jarod said. They were trying to figure out together how the whole quarterstaff thing worked, but so far they’d more often knocked themselves out than actually hit each other. “Go.”

They started circling each other, making feints to get the other off-balance. None of the fake attack moves were any convincing, but still they both fell for every one of them. Eventually Jarod actually moved forward, grabbing one end of his staff with both hands, lifting it up high and slashing straight downwards. Daran saw it coming and lifted his staff horizontally to block it, only to get hit right on the fingers of his left hand.

With a painful yelp he dropped the staff. “Blasted swarf!” he cursed. “That really hurt!” He flexed his fingers to see if they were still working, which they luckily were.

A hunter who was walking by picked up the staff. “Hey, I’ve got some pointers for you,” she told Daran. “When blocking, you should hold the staff like this.” The hunter slightly adjusted her hands, but Daran couldn’t quite see what he should pay attention to. “And after the block, you could’ve hit your opponent with a

crouching slash.” Again, the hunter made a move with the staff, and though it looked really flashy and skilled, Daran wasn’t sure what he needed to take away from it. Apart from the fact that he was a long way from being any good.

“Uh, thanks,” he mumbled.

“You’re welcome,” the hunter nodded, handing Daran his staff back and continuing on to the next sparring couple.

Daran saw Jarod looking at him with a question mark on his face. Still Daran asked, “Do you have any clue what she meant?” but as expected Jarod shook his head.

“Not a clue,” he shrugged. “Want to try again?”

Daran looked around for the hunter, but she was already on the other side of the hall showing something to other students. *Well, at least there’s a hunter around*, Daran thought. He kept being frustrated by the level of education at the Academy. He knew he shouldn’t complain – he got a lot more than he could’ve hoped for last year – but still it felt like the teachers didn’t really care about the students. Like they wanted to spend as little time on them as possible.

He sighed. “What else can we do?” he asked while getting into a fighting stance again. Or at least, what he assumed was a fighting stance, though undoubtedly it would look hilarious to any experienced fighter.

The next few times Jarod actually did manage to properly hit Daran, which only frustrated the boy further. He was tempted to just throw away his staff and fight his friend barehanded, but he knew that would defeat the purpose of why he was here. He was relieved when his time was up.

“I’m calling it a day. I’ve got my first thought core principles class in half an hour.”

“Thought core principles?” Jarod repeated with raised eyebrows. “Why are you taking that? It’s one of the hardest module sets around and it doesn’t get you many credits. You’re not even going to need it.”

Daran shrugged. “I’m just curious. I mean, everyone learns at one time or another how to make thought cores using the Academy’s machines. But how do these cores really work? And I mean deep down. Don’t you want to know that? To really understand them?”

“Not if it takes books and books full of equations,” Jarod said, shaking his head. “There’s more important things in life than equations.”

“Unless these equations are the only way to get to some of the important things in life,” Daran countered with a smile. “Thanks for the sparring session. I’ll see you around.” He quickly ran off to the showers, rushed back to his room to pick up his notebooks, and made it just in time for the class to start.

He had expected a typical small classroom, with a blackboard for the teacher to write on and tables for making notes. The tables were present, but they had all been moved to the sides of the already large instruction room, creating a large open space in the middle.

Jarod was right when he said the module set wasn’t popular, Daran thought, when he found only five other students present. They were sitting on the tables, waiting for the class to start. He didn’t know any of them – it looked like he was the youngest –

but based on the looks of recognition some of them gave him, a few definitely were familiar with him.

“It’s time to begin,” an old scholar in the corner of the room called out as he moved to the center. Due to his age he didn’t seem to move as fluidly as he once did, but his voice did convey a natural authority. “My name is Beno, and I will teach you every tiny detail of how thought cores actually learn stuff.”

Beno looked around for a bit to let his words reach his audience. Then he continued. “In its essence, gizmos learn the same way as humans do. So to know how gizmos learn, you need to understand how you yourself learn new things. The funny thing is, you don’t have a clue how you learn, do you?” He gave the students a provoking smile, which Daran took as a challenge.

Don’t I? he wondered. He thought back to his fighting practice just before. *I guess I’m simply trying different ways to hit Jarod, and if I find something that works, then I’ve learned something new. It’s ...* “Trial and error,” he blurted out.

“You’re assuming you need errors to learn,” the teacher replied with an excited smile. “Let’s see if you’re right. We’re going to do a small experiment. What I’ve got here is a few of the most instructive objects that exist.” Out of a bag, he pulled three plastic discs. They were mostly flat, except a slight downwards curve at the edge, allowing for an easy grip. With a surprising display of skill, Beno tossed them to random students. To Daran’s surprise, he managed to catch the one that got thrown at him. One of the other students let his disc clatter to the ground.

One of the most instructive objects? According to Magnus, balls were in that category too, he mused. But then the similarity with his lesson last year hit him. *Did Magnus attend the Thought Academy?*

He couldn't think about it further because the class continued. "I need you all to pair up with someone you don't know," Beno announced.

Ha, that should be easy, Daran thought. He looked around until he made eye contact with one of the other students. Questioning, he raised his eyebrows, after which the boy replied with a small nod.

"I'm Severim," the other student introduced himself. He appeared to be two years older than Daran.

"I'm Daran," the younger student replied, but Severim gave him a shrug, as if to say, *I knew that.*

After seeing that they had formed a pair, Beno walked over to them. "What I need you to do is figure out how to throw the disc in different ways," he told them quietly. "So after ten minutes or so you can show me something that you think is cool." Then he moved on to the next pair.

Daran looked at Severim, wondering who would first make a suggestion on what to do. The older student shrugged. "I guess we should just try throwing it around," he said. They put some distance between them and tried to throw the disc to each other. Having it actually arrive at the intended target turned out to be harder than they thought, although Daran did manage it a bit better than Severim.

"My throws are wobbling all over the place," Severim noted.

“You should use your wrist to spin it more,” Daran suggested. After Severim tried it a few times, his throws improved. There was still something peculiar though.

“Your throws never go in a straight line,” Daran noted. “They always make a curve. How do you do that?”

“I don’t know,” Severim confessed, slightly embarrassed. “It’s the only thing I can do. I guess it’s because the disc isn’t flat in the air.”

Let’s see if I can do that too, Daran thought. He tried to give the disc an angle when he threw it. To his surprise, it actually worked. The disc curved way off to the side, missing Severim by several meters. “Oops, sorry,” he said, but at the same time he thought, *That’s pretty sweet.*

After practicing some more, he seemed to have it working. But then he thought, “Can we also curve it the other way?”

“Try it,” Severim encouraged with a smile. This trick turned out to be a bit harder, but after messing up several times more, both of them managed well enough. Daran was just figuring how much he could actually curve his throws when Beno called the group together, next to the two large stacks of chairs he had dragged into the middle of the room only moments ago.

“Okay, I’m going to give you a challenge now, and I want you to pay attention to how you all react to it. I need you to throw the disc from here,” he pointed to a tile on the floor, and then walked across the room, “to me!” He was hiding several meters behind the stacks of chairs, which nearly reached up to the low ceiling of the classroom.

That's manageable, Daran thought. The two stacks together were only about a meter wide. He wouldn't need a lot of curve to throw around them. Having his plan ready, he remembered the instruction to look at the reactions of the others. One of the pairs was confused. "How do we do that?" the boy asked his partner, but the other group reacted more indignantly. "You told us to practice straight throws!" they complained from across the room.

"Well, now I'm telling you something else!" Beno called back from behind the chairs. "Who wants to start?"

First the confused pair tried, but their disc didn't even make it across the room. It fluttered off to the side. Then the other pair tried. Filled with determination, the girl tried to get it across to Beno, only to throw it straight into the stack of chairs.

"You care to do the honors?" Severim asked Daran, who eagerly rose to the challenge. He threw the disc with a curve, just like he had practiced. The result wasn't perfect, but with an outstretched arm Beno still managed to catch it.

"Great!" he called out as he walked back from across the room. "So, which task did I give you at the start?"

"You told us to do whatever we felt like for ten minutes," the confused pair explained. "We just randomly tossed the disc around while talking."

"That's not what he told us," the annoyed girl said. "He told us to practice throwing it in a straight line."

That's interesting, Daran thought, while Severim told the others their mission. "He told us to throw it in different ways, so we could show him something cool."

“Exactly. So what was wrong with the first pair’s mission?” Beno asked.

One of the confused students shrugged. “We just tried some stuff.”

“So did the others,” Beno noted. “Can you be more specific?”

“We didn’t really try anything useful, and we also didn’t really care what came out of the things we did try,” the other student of the pair elaborated.

“Exactly,” Beno nodded. “Now what about the second pair?”

The girl who had thrown the disc straight into the chairs lifted her hands defensively. “We did what you told us to. We tried to throw it in a straight line, and after a while we got that working. We didn’t know you’d ask us to do something else afterwards.”

“So you tried things, but only looked at whether the outcomes corresponded to your goal,” Beno summarized. “That’s a typical trial and error approach. What about the third pair?”

At this point Daran saw where this was going. “We tried things that were interesting. Maybe because you said we had to show you something cool, we experimented with everything that seemed fun.”

“Exactly,” Beno nodded. “The key to learning something well is to really figure out how something works, in different situations that may at one point or another be relevant. If you try everything without really looking at the effects, like the first pair, you hardly learn at all. And if you are so eager to reach a particular goal that you ignore any other outcome, like the second pair, you only learn a single thing.”

Severim was nodding too. “But if you look at what gives an interesting outcome, and focus on that, then you learn much more.”

Daran only partly agreed. “You should decide for yourself what you find interesting though. If someone else tells you that the only interesting thing is to throw in a straight line, then that will still narrow your focus.” *Just like things won’t work when I’m only focused on hitting Jarod with the quarterstaff.*

Severim nodded. “So that’s why Beno told us to show him something that we thought was cool, without telling us exactly what.”

“It made you think about how useful each outcome could be,” one of the other students realized.

“Precisely,” Beno confirmed. “In its essence your brains, like thought cores, are prediction machines. You learn to predict how situations proceed. Like how a disc flies after you throw it in a certain way. And to do this, it’s important that you pay attention to the outcomes of situations, and especially to the outcomes that seem to matter, not to someone else, but to you.”

“This idea is what we call the first step of learning. It’s how gizmos build up their view of the world. It doesn’t explain yet how they master certain skills, but that’s for later. The next few weeks we’ll focus on how we can make gizmos make sense of the world around them and use it to predict things. But only the things that seem to matter.”

When Daran eventually walked back to his room, he couldn’t help but feel amazed. *This is how teaching is supposed to be done*, he

realized, though he had trouble pinpointing what made it so good. *Teaching is not about conveying information. Books can do that well enough. It's about making students wonder about the right things, so they discover things themselves, yet still do so much more quickly than they would have done on their own. It's about challenging students on their own level, which then causes that level to increase.*

He thought about how he could apply it in his own trainings. *I really need to split them up based on level, he decided. And I need to make them discover more things themselves, by asking the right questions.*

As he unlocked the door to his room, he had to laugh at the apparent contradiction. *A good teacher doesn't explain stuff. He only asks questions.*

Then he noticed a letter that had been shoved under his door. The message was rather short.

Can you meet me at the main entrance of the Academy? Right now?

The handwriting was rather shaky, and at one place the paper had sagged a bit, like a drop of water had fallen on it. The letter wasn't signed, but Daran had no trouble guessing who it was from. The person he almost got caught in an explosion with three weeks ago. *Kira.*

Chapter 3 – A circuitous call for help

Daran found Kira on the other side of the street, where she was waiting for him. As soon as she saw him, she ran over and gave him a long and tight hug. “Thanks for coming,” she said after letting go.

Her eyes were a bit redder than usual, although it looked like they were nearly back to normal. “I hope you didn’t wait too long,” he said, not sure when she’d sent the message.

“Quite a while,” she shrugged, which made Daran think she’d been waiting for hours.

They started walking across the city, talking about random stuff. Daran excitedly told her a bit about the thought core principles lesson he just attended, and about the new trainings he considered giving.

Without realizing it, they walked back towards Daran’s old home and ended up climbing the wall where they had first met, over a year ago. It was there that Daran decided to broach the sensitive subject.

“So tell me what’s going on with your life,” he said. It sounded like an innocuous question, but they both knew there was a reason why Kira had called Daran up.

“Do you remember how you told me to experiment with the lathe?” Kira asked. “Last week things were a bit quieter in the workshop, so I tried it out.”

“That’s nice,” Daran said enthusiastically. “Did you learn something new?”

“Well, yeah, but that’s not the point,” Kira replied. “You see, pretty soon after the explosion the government set up a new rule. All workshops have to keep track of all the materials they are using.”

“I heard about that,” Daran said, not mentioning that in some way he was the reason they introduced the rule.

“So this morning hunters did an inspection of our administration. And they didn’t like what they saw.”

“You mean you didn’t have the administration up to date?”

“Of course we did. Sort of.” Kira seemed unsure about how to best explain what she was trying to say. “You see, we kept track of everything from a rather broad viewpoint. It’s impossible to make a note of which exact bolt was delivered to which client, so we just noted rough amounts. And usually that’s fine, they said. Except ...” Again she was struggling to find the right words.

Except what? Daran wondered. It must have something to do with the lathe experiments. And then the pieces fell together. “They didn’t like how you used a lot of materials for experiments.”

“It wasn’t even a lot!” Kira cried out. “But we’re a specialized workshop, so we always have quite some waste. This pushed it over the top. They believed we were trying to hide some of our orders. The illegal ones.”

“Then what happened?” Daran eagerly asked.

“They put us on a suspected list. It means they’ll not just do surprise inspections, but they will inspect us every single week. And we have to have everything ready for them, up to the smallest detail.”

Daran's mouth dropped open. "That's ... " He wasn't sure what to call it. "How are you going to cope with that?"

"That's the point. I don't know!" Kira cried out, her voice starting to shake. "I mean, we're workshop people. We build things. That's what we do. If we liked bookkeeping so much, we would've worked for some trader. We're just not used to it. Not trained for it."

"I know," Daran sighed. He couldn't imagine having to set up an administration for every single part he used. "So what do you want to ask from me?"

Kira shrugged. "I don't know. I just didn't know where else to go with this. I guess a part of me hoped you had some magical solution, or at least something that would help me make sense of this."

Daran shook his head. "I don't have a magical solution. But I do know where this came from." Surprised, Kira gave him a curious look, so Daran looked for the words to best explain it. "The Academy believes that the Free Minds can now make thought cores too. So the only thing they can do to stop them is prevent them from getting the materials needed to turn these thought cores into gizmos. That's why they want to check where all the parts are going."

Incredulous, Kira shook her head. "But gizmos aren't that big! It's easy to hide that many parts."

"I know it'll never work," Daran agreed. "I guess for them doing something pointless feels better than doing nothing at all."

“Yeah, and we get to carry the burden,” Kira snorted angrily. Then her shoulders slumped again. “And I don’t know how to cope with it.”

Daran let out a resigned sigh too. “I told them this would be the end of many small workshops, but they simply don’t see the damage they’re causing. They don’t know how valuable all these workshops are for Kantara. If only we could show th ... ” Daran didn’t finish his sentence, but instead got lost in thoughts.

Kira let him think for a bit, but eventually she cautiously asked “Have you got an idea?”

“Perhaps. Follow me.” Daran jumped off the wall and ran off. It was only a short distance before he knocked on the door of his destination, and soon an old man opened it.

“Daran!” he called out.

“Magnus, can I ask you for advice about something?”

“Sure,” the old man replied. “Do you want to come in?”

“Yeah, that might be better,” Daran nodded.

As Kira and he followed Magnus into the house, the former parts trader asked, “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?”

“Oh, yeah,” Daran remembered. “Magnus, that’s Kira. Kira, this is Magnus. I’ve known him for ages. And I’ve known Kira for ... ehm ... well, a year.”

Magnus raised an eyebrow, and Daran knew what that meant. The old man was analyzing things again. *At this point he’s probably already figured out exactly how I know Kira.* “So Kira, were you raised in a workshop family too?”

“I was only raised by my father, Steron.”

“Ah, I knew him,” Magnus said. “He fell ill a few years back, right?” When Kira gave a sad nod, he added, “I was sorry to hear that. He was a good man. Good with metals too.”

“He sure was,” Kira agreed, lightening up a bit.

“Anyway, Daran,” Magnus said, cleverly changing the subject. “What do you need advice on?”

“Have you heard about the new law they introduced a few weeks ago?”

“Yeah, workshops need to let the government know how many raw materials they use,” Magnus said. “If there was ever a more pointless law – ”

“It’s not just that,” Daran interrupted him. “The workshop Kira’s working for has to keep track of every single part that goes in and out of it.”

This seemed to surprise Magnus. “That’s a lot of administration. Is it a big workshop? Have you got people to take care of that?”

Daran shook his head. “It’s just Kira and Tobin.”

Magnus raised an eyebrow at that. *Ha, he didn’t know yet that Kira is working for Tobin*, Daran realized. *That’s surprising. It seems Magnus is out of his usual game, even though he’s probably already analyzing what it means.*

“What I’m worried about,” Daran explained, “is that this new law is killing small workshops like Tobin’s. I want to help them.”

“What did you have in mind?” Magnus wondered.

“I was thinking that, if we could just show the government how valuable these workshops are for Tarine, and for Kantara in

general, then the government would repeal this new and crazy law.”

“And how would you go about doing that?”

“I’m still working on that. At this point I’m mainly wondering, what if every workshop in the entire city would suddenly cease production. What would happen then?”

“A strike?” Magnus seemed surprised. “If every workshop would cease production, then already within a week so many things will break down that there will be chaos. The problem is, how in the world would you get every workshop to join? I know for a fact that the larger workshops would never even consider it.”

Daran frowned. “So what if we only get all the smaller workshops on board?”

“That’s difficult to estimate,” Magnus admitted. “The bigger workshops would certainly love that. They’d get a lot of extra customers. But there’s only so much they can do. They usually don’t do specialized work, after all.”

“So you mean ... ”

“All the equipment that requires very specific parts will eventually break down. In this case it will take a few weeks for things to go awry. And only if all the specialized workshops join in.”

“Then the main question is, how do we get everyone on board?”

“That’s easier said than done,” Magnus noted. “You need someone who knows them. Someone they can rally behind. Someone they trust.” And it was at this point that Magnus gave Daran a suspicious look.

He's figuring things out again, Daran thought. Patiently he waited.

"Oh, you sneaky scoundrel," Magnus finally said. "That's what you're here for. Ha! Advice you call it. You don't just want my advice. You want my help."

Daran figured at this point it would be best to remain silent. He'd sparked Magnus' interest, and often that was all that was needed.

"It would require a lot of meetings," Magnus started talking, more to himself than anyone else. "We would have to get organized. Set up a close community of workshop owners. Make them help each other, especially when some of them are getting too low on cash."

Many more things seemed to flash through the old man's mind, but eventually his thoughts returned back to the room. "It's a good thing I don't have much going on these days," he told them. "It won't be easy, but I think it can be done."

Before Daran could heave a sigh of relief, Magnus added, "I would need help though. Someone who keeps track of all the workshops and the issues they are facing. Basically, someone to do the administration."

Daran looked sideways to Kira. As he met her eyes, he asked, "Do you think you can do that?"

Kira thought about it for a second and then nodded. "Yeah, I think I can. Compared to keeping track of thousands of tiny parts, this should be a breeze."

“In the meantime I think it’s best if you don’t get involved in this,” Magnus told Daran. “Having a thought student around will cause the wrong kind of stories.”

“I understand,” Daran said. He didn’t mind. He had plenty to do and the matter seemed to be in very capable hands.

“I’ll talk with some people, to see what I can set up,” Magnus told them. “Kira, I’ll let you know when I’m meeting them, so you can join. It would be good if you could become a familiar face.”

As Kira nodded, the old man smiled, eager to take on the challenge. “Let’s see if we can get this strike going.”

Chapter 4 – Looking for hidden thoughts

Daran crashed down in a random chair near the back of the room. He was not looking forward to this. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Enise quickly moving into the seat beside him.

“Hi Daran,” she smiled to him. It lifted Daran’s mood a bit. At least he wouldn’t have to go through this alone.

As the class started, Daran grabbed his noteblock and started writing down anything he might put in his summary. *Basic Kantaran laws. I don’t think there ever was anything more boring.* Attending the classes wasn’t obligatory – it never was at the Thought Academy – but the only other way to study for this module was by digging through the actual law books. Although, based on the monotonous droning of the teacher, some scholar with the habit of talking at the blackboard, that would have been only slightly worse. The lack of choice explained why almost everyone still went to these classes every week. It also explained why Daran had already received countless requests to make a summary of exactly this module, even though this was only the fourth weekly lecture, in a series of twelve.

The problem was that he didn’t have a clue how to set up the summary. After yet another full hour, he had scribbled down pages of notes, but the pieces just didn’t fall together. The only option he could see was to write a new edition of the full book of laws himself. But he could hardly call that a summary.

Enise caught his confused look. “It’s not that hard once you understand the thoughts behind the laws,” she whispered to him.

It amazed Daran. She actually seemed to be enjoying this class. “So what’s behind them then?” he quietly asked, moving his chair a bit towards her so she could hear him.

“It’s simple. Every law has been set up to prevent something from taking place. Something that we do not want to happen. Figure out what would go wrong if the law wasn’t there, and you know why the law is the way it is.”

Daran thought back about the new law that was set up these past few weeks. *The bad situation is that people outside the Academy have gizmos without the Academy knowing it, he reasoned. So to prevent that, there is a law that workshops need to show the Academy what they use their raw materials for.*

Slowly Daran started to see the bigger picture. *It makes sense. Except that in my example the law does not lead to the goal being reached, while having tons of side effects. But that’s just a sign that the law is bad and should be fixed, or removed altogether.*

“Yeah, that makes sense,” he said, giving her a smile. “Thanks.” He had already written summaries of the earlier classes, but this gave him some ideas to significantly shorten those.

A sudden loud voice pulled him out of his thoughts. “If the two lovebirds could also pay attention, that would be great.”

Daran looked up. The teacher was standing right in front of him. *Lovebirds?* He looked at Enise and found that they were indeed sitting quite close together. *Yeah, so we could discuss things without disturbing anyone,* Daran reasoned. Slightly embarrassed, he moved his chair away from her again. Then he glanced across the class, at the looks on the faces of the other students. He had expected to see surprise at such an obviously incorrect statement,

but that was about the only expression he couldn't find. Some were snickering, while others continued to sleepily stare at the scratches blotted across the blackboard.

What's going on? he wondered. He looked sideways at Enise again, only to be amazed even further. *Is she ... blushing? I am really missing something here. Is Enise really –*

"Oh, and Daran," the teacher continued, looking at the boy's notes. "I know your reputation about writing summaries. I also know these summaries might prevent students from coming to classes, so I trust that you will refrain from writing a summary about this module."

What?! Daran thought again. *He didn't even ask. He just ordered!* His eyes went to the stack of paper in front of him, which clearly had 'summary' written on top. He wasn't about to throw it all away. "That's not going to happen."

"In that case, you should go and discuss it with Quenton," the teacher replied.

Does he mean now? Daran wondered, looking up at the teacher. When the scholar angrily called "Get out!" Daran assumed that meant yes. It seemed rather pointless that he got kicked out, with the class being nearly over, but he wasn't about to question the teacher's methods. That alone would probably cost him the rest of the day. And so he just made his way to Quenton's office who, to his surprise, was actually in.

"Daran, you're just the person I wanted to speak to," Quenton said when he spotted the boy. "Come in!"

Surprised, Daran took a seat. *News spread quickly*, he figured, although Quenton's question proved him wrong.

“I’m going to be upfront with you. I have a favor to ask. I have some hunters who need to examine Nilas. I cannot tell you why, but I can promise you that he will not be harmed. Will you allow this?”

This was not what Daran expected. He considered what to say. While he could think of a million reasons to refuse, there was something about the way Quenton asked the question that pulled him in. It was that he was being asked for help. He could actually be useful to the Academy in a way that they would acknowledge.

“I will want to be present,” he finally said.

“That is acceptable,” Quenton nodded.

“And when I tell the hunters to stop whatever it is they are doing, they will immediately do so.”

“I will instruct them to listen to your cues.”

“And if Nilas isn’t happy with what’s going on, they will stop too.”

This one seemed to catch Quenton off guard, but he went along with it. “Of course.”

“In that case it’s okay,” Daran said, with only a small part of him hoping he wouldn’t regret this.

“Perfect. When would suit you? Is it possible to inspect Nilas right now? Or do you have any classes you have to go to?”

“No,” Daran shook his head, not eager to discuss the class he just came from. “No classes.”

“Perfect! Then let’s go.”

As they slowly crossed the road and climbed the stairs to the aviary, Quenton called up some hunters who soon joined them. It felt strange for Daran to actually walk among the red uniforms,

instead of being dragged along by them. He considered asking for handcuffs, which would make it feel less unfamiliar, but it did not seem like the best idea.

When they reached the aviary, Daran called Nilas out of his shelter. The bird's usual enthusiasm was dimmed from seeing all the red around Daran.

"Relax, buddy," Daran tried to calm him down. "They only want to take a look at you. If they do anything you don't like, we'll tell them to stop. Okay?"

Nilas gave a hesitant squeal, but then he slowly stepped towards the hunters.

"Go ahead," Daran gestured. "But no funny stuff."

The oldest of the four, the same hunter who had interrogated Daran about the gizmo he found a few weeks earlier, stepped forward, followed by his colleagues. They walked around Nilas, inspecting him from every angle. This did not seem to satisfy them though.

"We will have to look under its skin," the older hunter said. "Is it okay if we disassemble it?" Though the question was posed in the most efficient way Daran could imagine, he was still surprised that the hunter actually asked it. Quenton was keeping his promise of keeping them in line.

Daran looked at Nilas to see how the bird was doing. He seemed to overcome his unease, though barely. *Why is he so afraid of hunters?* Daran wondered. *I know I got off to a rough start with them, but Nilas should be used to them from before he met me.* Finally he nodded his approval. "Go ahead, but only the skin. Nothing else."

The older hunter made a few small gestures to the others, and directly they split up in pairs to detach Nilas' skin panels. In less than a minute they were done and Nilas stood with his parts visible to the world. Daran was amazed by their efficiency. *These guys know how to build stuff. And more importantly, they know how to do so together.* It reminded him that there was still a lot he could learn, even from hunters. Especially from hunters.

The four thinkers made their rounds around Nilas again, carefully inspecting minor details. They were careful enough not to touch the bird, which Daran was glad about. The gizmo seemed to cope with his fear.

What are they looking for? Daran wondered. He started piecing together the clues. *They haven't asked me any questions, so this is not about me. This is about Nilas. And since they don't seem to know themselves what they're looking for, it's not about something specific like his thought core. It's more like they're studying him. But why?*

Daran took a closer look at what exactly the hunters were checking out. It seemed like they were investigating specific parts; mostly parts that Daran had replaced some time during the past year. *They're trying to figure out how he's made. But why? They know how to build gizmos, even flying ones like these. Nilas is not so unique. And if they want to know how Nilas works, they could just ask me.*

Slowly the pieces started to fall together. *Unless they don't believe that I know.*

It suddenly all made sense to him. He knew the hunters didn't have any faith in him. They couldn't possibly accept the idea that Daran would have rebuilt most of Nilas. In their mind, Daran had

stolen Nilas, and all of it was still Nolan's work. *They want to know what Nolan's work looks like.*

Daran turned to the person still standing next to him. "Quenton, how many gizmos did Nolan have?"

The scholar hesitated to provide an answer, as if it was sensitive information he couldn't disclose, but then he realized the question was innocuous enough. "Just one. He was special that way, in that he only needed Nilas. He didn't need anything else."

"What about his first gizmo then?" Daran wondered. "The one he got when joining the Academy? Did he discard him? Or did he die?"

"It got destroyed quite a while ago. That was before Nolan had Nilas. I don't know much about it though. Nolan never really wanted to talk about how it happened."

Of course, Daran thought. A sly smile appeared on his face. "You know, you can tell the hunters to stop searching," he told Quenton. "They won't find what they are looking for."

"What do you mean?" the scholar asked. Daran had expected to receive a frustrated *Here we go again* look, but Quenton maintained his composure.

"Your hunters are trying to figure out Nolan's workshop style, but I fully rebuilt Nilas. He no longer has any parts made by Nolan." It wasn't completely true. There were some minor parts Daran hadn't replaced yet, and he still had plenty of old parts lying around in his room, but the hunters didn't need to know about that. "I have seen those parts. In fact, I remade them. I know exactly how Nolan put him together. I can help you."

“That’s not going to happen,” Quenton curtly replied, keeping his gaze fixed on the still actively searching hunters.

Well, that was a quick decision, Daran noted dismayed. *This is sensitive stuff then*. He was amazed by what it implied. “It’s about that gizmo I found, isn’t it? You think Nolan may have made it, and now you want to check.”

This comment finally caused frustration to appear on Quenton’s face. *Seems like I hit a sensitive nerve*, he thought to himself. It confirmed to him he had guessed correctly.

“I should have known it was a bad idea to involve you in this,” the scholar sighed.

“Come on. I’ve already seen the gizmo. I mean, I found it. Or at least, it found me. Just show it to me and I can confirm whether Nolan made it or not.”

Quenton had to think about this for a moment. Eventually he called the older hunter over. The two of them moved to the far corner of the building, where they seemed to have a rather heated discussion. When they returned, Quenton had his verdict ready.

“This time we have our conditions,” he said.

“I’m listening,” Daran nodded.

“It will happen in a sealed room. We will give you the gizmo only after the room has been sealed. Nothing will leave the room until you return the gizmo to us. We will be there all the time, watching everything.”

“I can live with that,” Daran agreed.

“And secondly, no one will know about this,” Quenton urged. “You will not tell anyone anything about the gizmo or its existence. If someone somehow does happen to know that you

have found the gizmo in the first place, which I doubt will happen, you can acknowledge it, but you will not mention that you investigated it. Also, you will not encourage any rumours about this gizmo. Is that clear?”

“I will manage,” Daran said, knowing he wasn’t part of the gossip scene at the Academy anyway. Except possibly as subject.

“And, naturally, you will not damage the gizmo. If we tell you to stop, you will immediately stop. Do you accept these conditions?”

Daran thought about it. *It sounds like a big hassle. Why am I doing this anyway?* he wondered, although he already knew the answer. *To learn more about that gizmo that I found. And to have them actually take me serious for a change.*

Eventually he nodded. “Count me in.”

Chapter 5 – The difficulty of speaking out thoughts

While there were some classes Daran couldn't stand, there were others he couldn't wait for. Though Jarod still declared him mad, thought core principles was one of the latter. They had just finished analyzing the main thoughts behind how gizmos learned by analyzing how they themselves learned. It didn't only teach them more about gizmos, but also about themselves, which made it all the more valuable.

"By the way, I've got some good news," Beno said near the end of the class. The old scholar gave a smile to each of his six students. "You have all completed the first module of the thought core principles class. Next week we will start the second module, for the ones of you that are planning to join."

Daran looked at the students next to him, who all seemed to be nodding. He was glad. In this class he hadn't only learned things about himself, but also about his classmates, turning them into friends along the way.

"The second module will be different in many ways. We will dive into the fundamentals of making predictions. I'll give you an example." He walked to the blackboard at the back of the classroom – it was the first time Daran had seen him use it – and wrote down a few numbers. "Five, seven, nine, eleven, who can guess what follows afterwards?"

Daran shrugged. That was easy, but not wanting to spoil the question for the others, he waited for someone else to respond. "Thirteen," Severim said.

“Exactly,” Beno nodded, as he wrote another line of numbers down. “Here’s another one. 21, 29, 40, 49, 62, what is next?”

Daran immediately started to analyze the numbers. They seemed to be multiples of ten, but then with small deviations. Was there a logic to these discrepancies? Some kind of pattern?

To his surprise one of the other students, Elyssa, raised her hand well before Daran finished his analysis. “It’s roughly 70,” she said.

Daran cursed himself. *It’s that easy?* He was clearly overanalyzing things again.

“Exactly,” Beno nodded. “But what do you mean with roughly?”

“Well, it could also be 71 or 72, or 69 or something like that.”

“Could it also be 73 or 74?” Beno continued to ask.

“Unlikely,” Elyssa said, shaking her head.

“But possible,” Beno added. “What about seventy-and-a-half?”

“Eh, I guess so,” Elyssa stammered. “But all the numbers you wrote down are whole numbers, so I doubt it.”

“And so you are using the data you have to estimate what is likely and what is not,” Beno explained. “Our minds are surprisingly good at doing this, but actually understanding these subconscious thoughts is very difficult. Reproducing them even more so. But that’s exactly what we will do in the next few weeks. We will calculate chances, look into probabilities of outcomes and see how they are distributed. We will figure out how these processes work in our own minds. And finally we look at how we can reproduce these modes of thought in a gizmo.”

It sounded overly complicated to Daran, but he was excited by the challenges ahead. He knew Beno would present those challenges in a way that they could face them, and learn the most from them.

“We will close off with something that we will do at the end of every class from now on,” Beno continued. “You have all learned the importance of curiosity. And I don’t mean curiosity about how to solve some specific mathematics riddle, or how to make your homework. I mean random curiosity, about anything you can imagine. Anything that fascinates you. Usually about gizmos, but I don’t shun other subjects. So I want to save the last five or ten minutes of every class for these random conundrums, if anyone has something they are curious about.”

There were tons of things Daran had been wondering, and so he blurted out the first question that came to his mind, “Why can’t gizmos talk?”

“That’s a good question. The better question would be, why *can* most of them listen to what we’re saying?” Beno gave the class a smile. Or actually, Daran realized, he gave the class time to wonder. “Making gizmos understand words and sentences has been very difficult. Language is extremely complex. It took an incredible amount of research to discover how to set up the pathways that allow gizmos to learn this. And still, it takes months of training for a gizmo to learn to understand us.”

“But then why – ” Severim started saying.

“Why did your gizmo understand you from day one?” Beno finished the question. “Because it had already been trained for months, learning motoric skills, languages and so on. A gizmo

with a brand new thought core is like a newborn baby, still oblivious to the world around it.”

Daran raised his eyebrows. He did not know that. So he was not the only one at the Academy with a pre-trained gizmo. Not by far.

“The thing is, listening is hard. Capturing sound, processing it into words that together form sentences, that’s very difficult. But speaking, actually forming those sentences yourself, and then using vocal chords to make the sounds that form the words of that sentence, that’s a whole step further. That’s way beyond what we can do at this time. And that’s why gizmos can’t talk.”

The old scholar gave the class some time for this to sink in before he continued. “Anything else you’re curious about?”

They continued discussing things for over half an hour, when Daran finally looked at his watch, stood up with a panicked “Scrap!” and ran out of the classroom.

This is so not helping with first impressions, Daran thought as he rushed into the mission control room. As expected, everyone was already there. “Sorry I’m late,” he gasped.

“I don’t mind,” the young hunter behind the desk shrugged. “But the clock for this mission is already ticking, so your team might have a different opinion.”

Daran glanced at the annoyed faces staring back at him. He quickly realized there were no familiar ones in the room whatsoever. It didn’t surprise him. He had signed up for an equal-level group mission. Whereas regular group missions always had an older student designated as leader, these missions did not.

Everyone was equal. Of course that did not mean there were no older students around, Daran realized as he looked at the others. The two boys and two girls were all at least in their third year.

That was to be expected, Daran figured. Most students stuck with the regular group missions for nearly the entire first half of their studies. It was mainly Daran's small authority problem that had encouraged him to rush ahead in the schedule. Now he did not have any older students telling him what to do and what not to do. *Or at least, they're not supposed to*, Daran told himself. *They have to treat me as an equal member of the team. A team I intend to contribute to.*

The hunter cleared his throat. "At least now we can start the briefing. I have just received word from an engineer at the dam. One of their generators broke down and they need a replacement part to prevent power outages. It's your job to deliver it as soon as possible."

Daran raised an eyebrow. To reach the dam, they would have to go all the way through the city, and then even further up into the mountains. It would be quite a run.

"We don't have the part in stock anymore, so you will first have to make it. I have the specifications right here." The hunter pulled out a large sheet of paper, filled with scribbled notes.

That looks complicated, Daran thought. The solution to the problem seemed obvious though. Making a single part with five people was ludicrous. They had to let one or two team members focus on making the part, while the others already spread out across the path to the dam. Then, as soon as the part was done, they could transport it quickly through the city in a big relay race.

It would be the fastest way. *Unless you can fly, of course. Then this mission suddenly becomes a lot easier.*

"I got this," Daran called out as he grabbed the design. Rushing out of the room, he hardly registered the surprised and somewhat disgruntled looks on the faces of his teammates. He was focused on the task ahead.

On his way to the student workshops he studied the design. It seemed to be some kind of generator shaft. The shape was mostly rotationally symmetric, but on some places the shaft seemed to be off-center. The usual way of applying the lathe would not work for that.

Unless I use different rotational axes, Daran thought, plans already forming in his mind. He reached the raw material desk and called out "group mission!" It was an unwritten rule. If you were on a mission, you could skip the line. A few seconds later Daran was fixing the large lump of steel he had obtained into the lathe, and by the time his teammates caught up with him, it was already gaining some resemblance of its final shape.

"What in the world do you think you're doing?!" one of the boys called out.

"What does it look like?" Daran countered, never even taking his eyes off his work. "Building the part. I'm the best at workshop stuff. This is the fastest way."

"And what are we supposed to do then?" the student asked in an even more aggravated tone.

"I don't know," Daran shrugged. "You can take the design if you want. I've already memorized it." As soon as he had finished

his plan on how to construct the part, all the dimensions had stuck in his mind, as they always did.

From the corner of his eyes Daran saw someone snatch the sheet away. He kept his own focus on his work.

“Is there anything I can help with?” one of the girls asked.

It lifted Daran’s spirits a bit. *Someone with a constructive attitude*, he thought. *That’s a welcome change*. Still he shook his head. “Thanks, but I’ve got everything under control. I’m nearly halfway anyway.”

It took yet another ten minutes to finish the part. As Daran pulled it out of the lathe, he looked around for his team. The boys were busy installing their own block of steel into a nearby lathe, though from the looks of it, just getting the machine up and running would take them several minutes more. The girls were right behind Daran, looking at him as if they were waiting for orders.

“Now we just have to go and deliver it,” Daran told them. He ran out of the workshop while pressing the button on his watch. “Nilas, I need a pick-up from the Academy square. Right about now.”

As he exited the building, he already saw the large bird gliding straight towards him. The gizmo briefly landed on the ground, but that was all the time Daran needed to jump on its back, and so in one smooth motion it was airborne again.

Straight below him, Daran saw one of the girls jump away to avoid being hit by Nilas’ claws. *They actually followed me*, Daran thought. It surprised him. *What were they expecting? That we’d just walk all the way to the dam?* But when he looked at the situation

from their perspective, he cursed at himself. *It's what they would've done if I wasn't there, so I shouldn't be surprised if that's their first thought.*

He shook the thought off, making a mental note that he would think about this later. He still had a mission to do. "Nilas, we're going to the dam."

The flight would be a brief one. Flying over the city went a lot faster than walking through it. In the distance Daran already saw his destination appear. It looked like a large curved white wall, wedged between mountain ridges, desperately trying to keep the incoming water away from the city beneath it. And given the large lake behind it, there was plenty of water to keep at bay.

Near the top of the dam, connected to the lake, was a large building, but Daran knew it had nothing to do with the electricity supply. This was the distribution center, where all the raw materials mined in the mountains were brought in by boat and loaded onto carts, to be delivered in the city. If Daran wanted to find the control room, he'd have to be at the bottom of the dam, where a narrow but quickly flowing stream of water marked the start of the Seldon.

On both sides of the river, the entryways to the dam were blocked by fences. To keep unauthorized people out, Daran guessed. "Put me right in front of the door," he called to Nilas over the rushing winds, assuming he was authorized enough. The bird had to make a few circles in the valley in front of the dam before he was low enough to land, but landing turned out to be unnecessary. Before the gizmo touched down, Daran was already

off, running towards the open door of what seemed to be the control room, with the part firmly in his left hand.

There were two people – a woman and a man – sitting behind large walls of lights, indicators and dials. Neither of them had expected anyone to rush in. “Who are you?” the woman asked, taking in Daran’s student uniform.

Still feeling rushed, Daran could hardly form proper sentences. “Group mission. Thought Academy. Part delivery,” he blurted out with a multitude of gestures. He paused, taking a deep breath. “I’ve got a part that I had to deliver to you guys, from the Academy.”

Recognition appeared on the faces, followed by surprise. The woman that had spoken before looked on her watch. “It’s been less than half an hour. How can that be? Did you run all the way? No wait, that still isn’t ...” Eventually, she just gave him a questioning look.

Daran shrugged. “It helps if you can fly.”

The mood back in the mission control room was tense. It hadn’t taken Daran long to fly back. It had taken somewhat longer to convince the two boys to abandon their efforts at constructing the part, just after they had finally managed to make their first cuts. But eventually the whole team got back together.

“Okay, time to evaluate the mission,” the hunter said, as if he was dreading what was to come. “Despite the somewhat late start, you managed to smash two records. The first one is the mission time. For the past ten years we were curious whether any group could do this mission in under an hour. Last year a group got really

close. Now we finally know it's possible. And we know it can be done within half an hour too."

Daran felt his mood lift, and he also saw small signs of a smile appear on the faces of the girls. The guys only seemed to get angrier though.

"And the second record broken, if I read your expressions correctly, is the amount of frustration within the group. Does someone care to elaborate?"

"Someone doesn't know the meaning of *team* in teamwork," one of the boys said through gritted teeth.

The situation was becoming more and more familiar to Daran. He'd learned in the past not to counter the claim directly. "If I had done anything differently, it would have slowed down the mission," he calmly said instead. "So what should I have done then?"

"For a start, not do everything by yourself!" the other boy called out.

Daran pulled his hands through his hair. The hunter and the other team members engaged in some discussion, but he wasn't listening anymore. He was only asking himself questions.

What could I have done differently? he mainly wondered. He'd lost count of the number of times he had been at odds with teammates during group missions. By now it was pointless to claim it wasn't about him. *Yes, I'm breaking records, but I'm also pissing the rest of the team off. I've got to change that.*

A part of him wanted to blame the others. *They should understand that, if they don't have the skills needed for a part of the*

mission, they should steer clear of it. And more importantly: not get angry when they're not involved.

But merely expecting others to spontaneously change had not really worked so far, and so Daran's ponderings only left one conclusion. *I've got to try something different.*

Chapter 6 – Voices of the past

With the hairs on his neck standing on end, Daran walked into the cell. It may have been the same one he had spent a night in last year; he wasn't certain. It sure felt like it. The only difference, as far as he could see, was that the room was completely empty this time. Even the bed had been taken out. As the door got sealed, locking him in, he was glad he was not alone, even though his company was not among his favourites.

There were two hunters with him: the older and the younger hunter that had interrogated him weeks before. Neither Quenton nor Arin were around. Apparently the leaders of the departments were busy with other matters.

"You know the rules," the older hunter said. "Figure out whether Nolan made this gizmo or not. Nothing else."

Daran nodded. "Got it."

The man pulled out a key and unlocked the box he had brought with him. He then handed it to Daran, who expectantly opened it.

Within was the rat-like gizmo he had found weeks earlier, except it looked ... *Dead?* "You turned it off," Daran stammered.

"Of course," the hunter said matter-of-factly. It increased the feeling of dread that was already coursing through Daran. He had learned from Nilas how disconcerting it could be to be turned off for longer durations. Shaking off the shivers, he picked up the gizmo, rotating it in his hands. He was surprised by how cold it felt, until he remembered that gizmos, especially the ones with metal parts, always felt cold.

At first it seemed like any other gizmo, but as Daran looked closer, he noticed levels of detail that he had never seen in any first-year gizmo. This was definitely the work of someone who not only knew exactly what he was making, but had also spent a lot of time making it.

There was no sign of who had made it though. Not yet. “I need to look at the inside,” he said.

The older hunter made a small gesture to his colleague, who opened up his suitcase and put it on the ground in front of Daran. It was filled with a large variety of precision tools. But Daran hadn’t made his previous comment just to get equipment.

“It means I need to turn him on,” he clarified.

“What?” the older hunter said. “You want to turn it on to take it apart? That doesn’t make sense.”

“It does. I need to get his permission first.”

“Oh, come on,” the hunter said, angrily raising his arms. “Just take the scrapped thing apart. What’s so difficult about that?”

“Difficult?” Daran repeated. “It’s just wrong. It’s like a doctor that secretly sneaks up on a patient and knocks him out, only to perform surgery. Even if the patient actually needs the surgery, it’s still not the right way of going about doing things!”

The hunter only gave him an incredulous stare.

Finally Daran broke the silence by letting out a deep sigh. “Please? It would make me feel better about this.”

This somehow seemed to convince the younger hunter, and with two people expectantly looking up at him, the older one succumbed. He double-checked whether the room was fully sealed

before he nodded. "Fine. But if it starts running around the room, *you* are going to catch it. The switch is behind its right ear."

"Thanks," Daran nodded silently as he pulled a small screwdriver out of the suitcase, pushed it into the tiny opening and pressed down. Immediately the gizmo started trembling.

"Easy there," Daran calmly said, pulling the screwdriver out again. "I'm not going to hurt you."

This seemed to calm the gizmo down. Expectantly, he turned his mechanical eyes up towards the boy.

Daran confidently but compassionately met the gizmo's eyes. "Listen, these hunters have ordered me to figure out how you've been built. And for that I need to take your skin off. Is that okay? I promise I will put it back on immediately afterwards."

The gizmo seemed to think about it for a second, until it cried out something sounding like an affirmative squeal.

"Thank you," Daran said. "To make this easier, I need you to roll over onto your back."

As the gizmo did so, Daran heard the older hunter next to him gasp. He looked up at him with a questioning look.

"It's listening to you," he explained. "We tried everything, but it never listened to our orders."

"Of course not," Daran said, picking up yet another screwdriver and focusing on the gizmo. "Gizmos are like people. They won't listen to you unless you listen to them as well." *Which is what has been going wrong between you and me all this time*, he added in his mind.

After carefully detaching a variety of tiny skin panels, making mental notes on how to attach them again and in which order, he

picked up the gizmo. “Now I just need to take a look at your parts,” he told the creature. He was checking every surface area he could find for an impression of Nolan’s ring. With Nilas this had been easy, as the parts had been large enough for the ring to make a proper imprint, but inside this gizmo everything was far smaller.

“His name is Novic,” Daran said, finding the five engraved letters on the tiny thought core.

“Yes, we already found that ourselves too,” the older hunter said. “What else have you got?”

Other than the usual scratches, Daran couldn’t seem to find any imprint at all. *Maybe the parts were too small for Nolan to mark them? Or maybe he didn’t want to apply his signature mark at all with this gizmo? Or perhaps the thinkers were wrong and Nolan didn’t make this gizmo?* Still, he had a gut feeling that he missed something. After all, it still felt like Nolan’s handiwork, and he knew Nolan had his sentimental side. Only then did he notice that the scratches on the parts were all similar. *That can’t be a coincidence.*

He pulled the ring out of his shirt and laid it next to the scratches. Sure enough, the distance between the scratches was identical to the spacing between the wires on the ring. *He didn’t press the ring into the parts this time. He just scratched them with it. Probably because that’s easier.*

Finally Daran nodded, “Nolan made these parts,” he told the hunters, showing them the scratches and the ring. Now that he knew what to look for, he found even more matching sets of marks. “He always used to make an imprint of his ring on important gizmo parts.”

The hunters carefully studied the patterns and eventually seemed satisfied. "That will do," the older hunter said. "You can put it back together."

As Daran was reattaching the skin panels, the older hunter tapped him on the shoulder. "Since you seem to be so familiar with the gizmo, I have another question for you. Can you tell us what it was made for? I mean, what does it do?"

That was a good question. Daran hadn't figured it out yet either. He had only found the usual parts in the gizmo. A power source, tiny actuators for the paws, and so on. But he could check.

"Thank you for this," he told the gizmo after having put it back together again. "I want to ask you another favor. Can you do something useful for me? Anything you can come up with."

Something clicked inside the gizmo as it froze. For a second Daran thought he had broken something. Then a voice came out of the gizmo.

"That kid is always causing problems," the creature said with a frustrated male tone.

"It's speaking. How is that possible?!" the younger hunter cried out, before he realized something. "Wait, that's your voice," he said to the older hunter. In the meantime, the 'gizmo' continued talking.

"It wasn't enough that he was involved in a building blowing up. No, he also had to be caught with a gizmo that seemingly came out of nowhere. I'd say we lock him up until all this crazy stuff subsides and then we see what we do with him."

The gizmo switched to a slightly lower voice. "We are *not* the ones passing judgment." Daran recognized it as Arin's voice when

he was angry. It was a tone he knew all too well. “You should know that by know. How long – ”

The older hunter rushed forward and snatched the gizmo out of Daran’s hands, throwing it back into the box and fastening the locks. “We are done here,” he said briskly, knocking on the door of the cell.

Daran couldn’t resist a smile. *I asked the gizmo to do something useful*, he said to himself. *I’m not sure if useful and funny are the same thing, but they are close enough.*

It did get him thinking though. Apparently the gizmo was able to record sound and play it back later. Together with his small size, that would make him ideal for spying. But who did Nolan need to spy on so desperately that he actually made a second gizmo? And more importantly, why did he build this gizmo without letting anyone else at the Academy know?

At the same time, Daran knew the hunters would be asking themselves something else as well. Did Nolan make the thought core here at the Academy and only change the records? Or is there some other place where thought cores can be made? There were so many open questions.

The younger hunter also seemed to realize this. “There’s a lot about Nolan that we did not know,” he told Daran. “You looked into his past when searching for your parents, didn’t you? How did you do that?”

“Oh, I tracked down an old friend of Nolan, Donato, back from his student days,” Daran replied nearly automatically, still sorting out his own questions in his mind.

It was only later that day, some time after dinner, that he realized his screw-up: he had inadvertently pointed the Academy straight towards Donato.

They'll start asking him questions, Daran reasoned. Given Donato's aversion of the Academy, that didn't bode well for how willing he would be to answer Daran's own questions. *That means I'd better reach him before the Academy does.*

Daran had run all the way to the workshop district. He knew the area, which allowed him to approach the house from the back through a small alley. But as soon as he saw the place, something seemed off. The door was wide open.

Daran walked to the opening and was about to knock, until he glanced inside the house. The place was totally ransacked, with pieces of furniture, scraps of paper and shards of pottery lying all over the place. Not a single object in the entire building seemed to have remained intact. Probably no one would be around anymore, and even then knocking would just as likely summon the looters as the actual inhabitant. So Daran quietly searched the house, careful not to make any noise.

When he reached the living room at the front, he noticed a small crowd gathering on the street outside. *They noticed that the house was broken into,* Daran thought. *They've probably already called the thinkers too, who will be here soon.* It didn't seem like the best idea to be around when that happened, so he quickly left again. He didn't expect to find any clues in the mess anyway.

As he walked back through the alley, he started wondering. *Donato's house got thrashed right after I told the Academy about him.*

That can't be a coincidence. He just wasn't sure what it meant. The Academy didn't ransack houses. It wasn't their style. This had to be done by one of the cells of the Free Minds. But that didn't explain the timing. *Unless...* There had to be someone in the Academy feeding information to the Minds.

With that conclusion in mind, he rounded the corner and nearly walked into two boys. One was tall and muscular and the other short and scrawny, but both seemed to be a year or two older than him. "Sorry," Daran murmured as he tried to walk around them, except that they kept getting in his way. This finally pulled him out of his thoughts. These weren't random bystanders. They actually were looking straight at him, as if they wanted something.

Daran took a quick look around. He was on a T-shaped intersection of alleys. In front of him were the two boys blocking his path. He then noticed a third one emerge from the alley he himself had just come out of. There was a knife in his hand.

Swarf, he silently cursed. This was not good. There was only one alley left for him to go to. Quickly he turned around and ran in that direction, with the three boys hot on his heels. It was a short chase though. A few dozen meters further the alley had a dead end. *You'd think I had memorized all the dead ends in this neighbourhood by now.*

Daran turned around. His assailants seemed to realize he was trapped. Smiling, they slowly closed in on him. "You're looking into stuff that's none of your business," the boy with the knife, who seemed to be in charge, grimly said. "We're here to end that."

What am I looking into then? he wondered. *Something with Nolan? Is there a secret hidden there?* But there was no time to think about it. *I need a way out.*

The top edges of the walls were too high to jump up to. He tried a few doors into houses or gardens or whatever they were, but they were all locked. There was nothing around that could help him, except for a pile of old wood right behind him. The stack wasn't big enough to get him over the wall, but there were a few narrow wooden boards he could use as a weapon. He considered picking up one of the longer rods, resembling the quarterstaff he had been practicing with. But thinking back to his practice sessions, and how he had managed to hit himself more than his opponent, he eventually chose a shorter one. Picking it up, he raised it like a club, ready to swing it at anyone who came close.

The attacker holding the knife said something to his friends. Then the larger boy stepped forward. Daran moved to swing, but his assailant simply caught the club in both his hands and twisted it out of Daran's grip, tossing it over his shoulder.

Quickly Daran jumped back to the pile of wood. *Let's go for plan B*, he thought, picking up the staff-like stick. It was nearly as long as the alley was wide. As his opponent approached once more, he held it up in front of him, ready to block any attack that might come. He wasn't ready for what did come though.

A man jumped into the alley from up above, straight in front of Daran. His scarf was covering the lower half of his face, while the hood of his jacket covered the rest. Before Daran knew what happened, the man had pulled the staff out of his hands and in

quick succession hit both knees of the large boy with either end of it. Before the kid collapsed to the ground, the man was already on top of the other two, first disarming the one with the knife and then knocking over the remaining assailant.

When they were all down, which was basically a heartbeat later, the man stepped aside. “Get lost,” he told them. With little hesitation the three boys got back up on their feet and ran off.

It was only after they were gone that Daran managed to stammer “Thank you.” It took some more time before his mind calmed down again. “That was amazing. You saved my life.”

“Nah, they wouldn’t have hurt you,” the man said, his words flowing out at lightning speed. “Not much anyway. After all, you’re a person of interest. The Academy would come looking for you if you went missing. Me, I don’t have that luxury.”

Daran knew that voice. Or at least, that way of speaking.

“Donato,” he said. “They pulled your house apart. And still you let them go.”

“Call me Don,” Donato said. “And yes, I let them go. They’re only small fish. I know who set them up to it. Some nasty guy named Joka. It’s him I want to take down, but he’s gone already. He left those kids behind to watch the house and try to take me out if I entered. I was hoping for someone to draw them out. You came at exactly the right time. Hey, can you do me a favor?”

“Sure,” Daran stammered.

“I need to pick up some things from the house before I go into hiding somewhere. Can you be look-out for a minute? You only have to shout when someone is coming.”

“Eh, okay,” Daran said as they ran back to the ransacked building. Quickly Donato went up the stairs while Daran remained on the ground floor, trying to simultaneously check both the front and the back. To his relief nothing happened before Donato’s speedy return.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” the man said as they left the house the way they’d come in.

“Okay,” Daran nodded. Then he remembered what he had come for. “Ehm ... this may be a bad time, but I still have a lot of questions I want to ask you. Mainly about Nolan.”

“You’re right, this is a bad time,” Donato replied. He paused for a second and pulled something out of his pocket. It was a small scrap of paper and a pen. He quickly scribbled something down and showed the result to Daran. It was an address. “Do you know where this is?”

Cartwheel alley 42. “Yes,” Daran nodded. It was yet another street in the workshop district, but then closer to the market square. It was only a few streets away from where Magnus lived.

“I’ll be hiding in the basement there,” Donato said as he tore the paper into dozens of pieces and threw those away. “Go there, three days from now. Same time as today. I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

Chapter 7 – Obtaining followers

Daran took a deep breath as he walked out the large Academy gate. It was an important night, and despite not having a role in the proceedings, he started getting shivers.

That evening the first meeting of the workshop owners would be held. Magnus had talked a huge number of them, more than Daran knew existed, into being there. Now they had to be convinced to band together and make a stand against the new regulations.

The meeting would take place in a large assembly hall owned by one of Magnus' friends. Of course Daran had wanted to be there, but showing his face at the meeting would ruin the whole plan before it had begun. If there was even the smallest link to the Thought Academy, many owners would immediately bolt.

After some insisting from Daran's side, they had come up with a suitable compromise. For the meeting, most of the ongoing projects in the hall would be covered by large tarps. Daran could be hidden in exactly the same way. It did mean he would have to get there well before the meeting began, and he couldn't be seen entering the building either. So in jeans and a shirt, to stand out as little as possible in the workshop district, he made his way to the building's back entrance.

Well before he reached the hall, he already started avoiding the main streets, instead using the numerous alleys that wove through the district. These were mostly empty, reducing the chance that he would be spotted.

While passing through one of the alleys, Daran saw an older woman coming his way. He made space by walking on the right side of the narrow passageway. *The less effort she has to put in to avoid me, the less likely she is to remember me*, he figured. Without a word they passed each other

When Daran reached the end of the alley and was about to turn the corner, he couldn't resist checking whether he had been noticed. This didn't seem to be the case, as the woman was already at the opposite end of the alley. What he did see was half a face, peeking around the corner, with an eye looking straight at him.

He crossed into the next alley before he could get a good glimpse of whoever it was, but it was obvious what was going on. He was being followed.

Are they setting up another ambush? he wondered, but quickly dismissed the thought. Whoever it was that had been watching him didn't seem to be trying to catch up. The only thing he appeared to be interested in was where Daran was going. *Well, I'm not about to let him know*, Daran told himself.

He waited until he had reached the next intersection. He expected his stalker to be near the previous crossing, once more watching which direction he would go. He wasn't planning to raise any alarms yet, so he did not glance back to confirm his suspicions. Instead he calmly rounded the corner and immediately set off at a run.

Halfway through the alley he saw a stack of rubble next to a large wooden fence. Using his speed, he quickly scaled the pile and, grabbing the top of the fence, launched himself over it.

Luckily the ground was flat on the other side and he landed smoothly.

Struggling to control his breathing, he found a small crack in the fence he could peak through. He did not have to wait long before he saw someone running by. It was the shortest of the three kids that had attacked him two days ago. It looked like the boy was alone.

Is he after me, or does he hope I'll lead him to Donato? Daran wondered. He waited for a few more minutes, but other than two older men who came across as locals, no one passed by.

Eventually Daran climbed back over the fence. Without any rubble to help him, it took a bit longer, but he made it across without any problems. He first went back the way he came so as not to run into his pursuer, and then took an extra circuitous route, casually pausing every now and then to check for any tail. Nothing seemed amiss, so he finally dared to arrive at his destination.

"You're cutting it pretty close," Magnus said, looking at his watch. "I'm expecting the first ones to arrive any time now."

"Yeah I know. I got lost in the alleys," Daran lied. He wasn't eager to explain what had really happened, and this was close enough to the truth. "Are you ready for a big crowd?"

"I am with this," Magnus said, proudly picking up a device from the workbench next to him. It looked like a large cone with a handle beneath it. The handle had a small round dial. "I made it this week. It amplifies sound, up to the point where I can deafen the entire hall."

"That's pretty cool," Daran noted.

“It is if I want to scare people away. Anyway, you’d better get settled.” Magnus gestured to a corner where a couple of large cart wheels were stacked up. Then he spoke into the amplifier, “Kira, could you cover up our friend here?” The loud blast made Daran jump.

“My pleasure,” the girl called from the other end of the hall.

Daran sat down in the corner, already mostly hidden from view by the stacks of wheels. Pretty soon Kira’s face appeared above them. “Hi Daran. Nice to see you,” she said before she covered the stacks, with Daran included, under a large blue sheet.

And so we wait, Daran said to himself right as someone knocked on the door. The first workshop owners had arrived. Daran really had made it just in time.

The buzzing of voices in the hall steadily increased as more people entered. Daran knew that Magnus and Kira would personally be welcoming everyone. It was very important that everyone considered them approachable, Magnus had explained. It would mean that the owners would actually come to them if they ran into problems later on, instead of bottling it all up.

“Welcome everyone!” Magnus eventually called out. Because of the amplifier it was easy for Daran to follow everything. “You have come here because of the new government regulations. Workshop owners now have to make notes of every minor thing they do. The check-ups by the Academy are ruthless, and if you make a small mistake you’ll be subjected to even more rules and more frequent visits. This is all burying us in paperwork, which is not only frustrating, but it also costs us a lot of valuable time.

That's time we could have spent on making things. Time we could have spent supporting our families."

Daran, Magnus and Kira had discussed the plan in advance, so Daran knew this was step one. *Make people feel the gravity of the situation.*

"Before we continue, I want to know how much this affects all of you," Magnus continued. "I mean, I know it affects you. You have all come here, spending your precious evening in a large assembly hall, and I'm quite sure that's not because of the scenery. But does anyone want to share his or her experiences with these new regulations?"

Magnus had told Daran and Kira he would use the word 'experiences' instead of 'thoughts'. If he had said thoughts, people who thought the new rules were fine would also be invited to speak. 'Experiences' ensured that only the people that were affected by the rule would step forward.

"Yes, Peton, let me give you the amplifier," Magnus said.

A moment later a different voice was heard. "Is this thing working – ah, yes. Okay, my name is Peton and I run a workshop down at sawdust street. It's a small one. Just me, my wife and my two daughters. Naturally we were keeping track of the quantities of materials we were using, as required. But two weeks ago Julia, our youngest one, accidentally damaged a finished product we were about to deliver to a client. Well, damaged ... you know how that goes with kids. She, ehm ... she thought it was a practice project and completely destroyed the device, so we had to rebuild it. Of course we made proper notes of all the materials involved, but the thinkers who came to check on us didn't believe we wasted so

many parts. I told them what had happened, but they just wouldn't listen. And now we're on some high priority list, where we need to keep track of every tiny part we use. It's horrible. Output has been halved because of it, and I've got two little girls to take care of, and ...” His voice cracked up. Magnus noted this and took the amplifier back.

“Thank you Peton for sharing your story,” Magnus said empathically. “Who's next?”

Several more shared their experiences. All were similar, which wasn't a coincidence. Magnus already knew which people were most affected by the new regulations. When they walked in, he had already subtly hinted to them that it would be nice if they shared what they were going through. And because he carried around the amplifier, he was in perfect control of who could speak.

It was all part of step 2. *Give them the impression that this affects a lot of people. Make them believe they could be next.* Daran didn't feel too comfortable, knowing they were manipulating people like this, but if this was what it took to convince them to do the right thing, then so be it.

Eventually Magnus ended the discussion. “I have heard enough. These new regulations are a problem for all workshops. Some are already in trouble. Others do not feel the effects yet, but you never know whether during the next inspection the hunters might find something they don't like. Eventually all of us will feel the heat. So the question is: what are we going to do about it?”

“We can't do anything!” someone called out from the back.

“We can't do anything,” Magnus repeated, for the ones who hadn't heard it. “You're right. Not individually anyway. A single

workshop means nothing to the government. That's why they can pick on us the way they do. But together we are vital. We keep this city running. And if all of us would refuse to do the work they need us to do, then they will have to listen to us. But only if it's all of us together."

This was part of step 3, Daran knew. *Get people to feel that they are a community. You are powerless and vulnerable if you're on your own, but if you're part of the group, then you are heard.*

"I've thought long and hard on how we can get ourselves out of this situation. Of course, we could stand by do nothing. We could wait, and see our friends fall one by one. Every week another workshop will close. We'll sit back and hope that we won't be next. But one day we will be. In the end we will all fall, and the only workshops left in the city will be the big ones, where workers spend long days making standard parts and hardly get a salary in return. That's where we're heading."

"Those bastards are stealing our work again!" someone called out.

"But they're being checked too!" another voice objected.

"Yes, they're checked," Magnus confirmed. "But since they're underpaying their workers, they can easily hire administrators to fix the paperwork. It's hardly a problem for them. In fact, they like these new laws, because it will put you out of business way before it ever gets them into trouble. And when that happens, they'll get your work for free."

A crucial part of step 3 was creating anxiety – fear of a future they could not control – and turning that into anger. It was the most effective way of making people do things. And anger was a

lot easier to generate if it had a visible target: the bigger workshops. Whether these workshops were responsible or not didn't really matter.

"We can prevent all of this, but only if we take action right now. This won't be easy, making a difference never is, but it's always worth doing. And the only way in which we can show them that we matter, is by all shutting down at the same time. No more specialized parts will be available in the city anywhere. We will do so suddenly, and we will do so quickly. We will not give the bigger workshops the time to replace us."

"But how will we survive?" someone called out.

"How we will survive? We will fall back on whatever savings we have, and of course on each other. If you're on your own, and if they eventually manage to shut down your workshop, you will only have your savings to fall back on, if there's anything left of that by then. But when we're all in this together, we can help each other out, and make sure every one of us pulls through."

Magnus paused for a second, building up the tension. "To get through this, we have to band together. We have to make everyone feel how valuable we are. Because without parts, without us, everything fails. And we need everyone here to make this work. So are you with us?"

A couple of people shouted a hesitant "Yes," but most of the crowd hadn't expected the question yet.

"I repeat, are you with us?!" Magnus again called out.

This time there was a much louder "Yes!" Daran felt that it was filled with anger.

“Are you with us?!” Magnus yelled one more time. The “Yes!” that followed was the loudest so far. And instead of containing anger, this one was overflowing with hope. With camaraderie. With a shared purpose.

It was part of step four. *Have them make promises. Add as much group pressure as you can. Make people feel left behind if they don't do what you want them to do. Because no one wants to be cast out from the group.*

“Of course this only works when we are all in this together,” Magnus continued. “When we don't go behind each other's backs and still sell parts. So if there is anyone among you who is not fully with us, let us know now.”

He waited a brief moment, hoping no one would speak up, but still someone did. “I'm sorry, I can't,” a young man said. He was hardly audible from the back of the hall, and of course Magnus didn't bother bringing the amplifier all the way over to him. “I've just gotten a son. My wife is still recovering from childbirth. I haven't got any savings built up yet. I can't do this.”

Daran could almost hear Magnus shake his head. “I told you, we're all in this together. If your family is going hungry, then we will help you. That's why I'm asking all of you to make a small donation of twenty kantas when you leave tonight, so we can use that to feed anyone who is running out of savings. Including you, when it comes to that. Of course times will be tough, they already were, but together we will make sure no one will go hungry.” He paused for a second, to let the message sink in. Then he said, “So if you're still here, I trust you're fully with us.”

There was a minor shuffling of feet and the opening and closing of a door. Daran had guessed one or two people had left. It wasn't much, but still every workshop that wasn't on board would hurt their cause. These owners would have to be convinced later on.

But first, it was time for step 5. *The call to action.*

"Now it's time to start making a difference. We need to let everyone know that we are on strike, and that no more parts will be delivered to anyone. I have already invited Carl, over there in the back, to write a piece for the newspapers, but we also need to tell our customers and our suppliers. Hang up a note on your door. Get the word out."

Magnus took a deep breath before he continued. "But we need to do more. Because not everyone could make it tonight. We need to go out there and convince anyone who hasn't joined us that they are better off with us than on their own. That this is better for all of us."

"Wait!" someone called out. "You're working at Tobin's workshop, right?" Daran guessed the person was pointing at Kira. "So where is Tobin? Why isn't he here?"

Daran's heart skipped a beat. *He's not here?* But he mainly felt for Kira. She was not ready to face a crowd like this. For a moment only the noise of the crowd was audible, until Kira's voice blasted through them.

"I will convince him. Just like you need to convince your friends." It sounded more powerful than Daran had ever heard her speak, and that wasn't just because Magnus had subtly increased the volume of the amplifier. *He told her what to say*, Daran realized.

“We are now on strike, until we are once more free to work in the way we want to,” Magnus called out. “Let’s spread the word!”

Chapter 8 – How to lose someone

For the second day in a row Daran left the Academy grounds in regular clothing. His destination this time: the meetup with Donato.

The day before, it had been of the utmost importance that not a single workshop owner knew he was there. Today only his potential tail had to be kept in the dark about his destination. This made his trip a lot easier. He had plotted an elaborate route, mostly following the busiest streets where he could disappear in the crowds, but every now and then he would dart into the smallest alleys to reappear at a random location a moment later. He wasn't sure if he was being tailed in the first place, but he definitely wasn't by the time he reached his destination.

Cartwheel alley was not exactly true to its name, since a cart could hardly squeeze through. This also had to do with the mess. There were stray dumpsters, piles of trash, and with the buildings being higher than usual, this close to the market square, the place was also cluttered with rickety metal stairwells.

Daran quickly found number 42 and frowned at the boarded-up windows. The place seemed derelict. To his relief, a small trap door, hidden beneath one of the stairwells, opened right in front of his feet and a familiar face appeared.

"Come in," Donato said, disappearing into the hole. Daran followed him down the narrow stairwell, until he emerged in the basement a moment later. He had expected a dark and dusty hide-out, but instead the spacious room in front of him was well-lit by several ceiling lamps, and it had ample furniture, from a soft bed

and a well-stocked kitchen up to a large bookcase with a comfortable reading chair.

“Nice place you have here,” Daran noted appreciatively.

Donato just shrugged. “It’s not so great once you’re stuck in here for most of the day,” he said, jumping into the reading chair.

“You’re still hiding from what’s-his-name? Joka?” Daran asked, as he got himself a chair from the kitchen area.

“Yeah, but it’s not just him. Nolan has become a person of interest, and for some reason everyone seems to believe I know his secrets. I haven’t seen the guy in decades!”

“So why don’t you just tell them?” Daran asked.

Donato snorted. “You’ve seen what they did to my place. The more powerful people get, the less they seem to remember how to ask politely. No, I’ve got to leave this city. I’m probably going back to Forest’s Edge.”

“Forest’s Edge?” Daran knew it as a fishing and trading port in the southeast, but he didn’t see the link with Donato.

“It’s where I came from, before I joined the Academy. I’ll head there as soon as I’ve dealt with some unfinished business.”

“Unfinished business?”

“Do you always repeat the last thing I said?” Donato retorted, raising his eyebrows. “I meant payback. Joka tore everything in my place apart, including some rather ... sentimental ... items. He’s not getting away with that.”

Revenge, huh? That will work well, Daran thought with a hint of sarcasm, but didn’t mention anything about it. Instead, he just nodded and said, “It would be nice to have him off our backs.” When Donato raised an eyebrow, he explained further. “He’s

having those kids follow me. Every time I leave the Academy, I first need to shake them off.”

“Why are they following you?” Donato asked directly.

Daran took a deep breath. He remembered the promise he’d made to Quenton about not mentioning the gizmo to anyone, so he simply answered, “I’m not allowed to say.”

Donato seemed to accept it. “Fair enough. But you still could’ve led them straight to me. Are you sure you got rid of them?”

“As sure as I can be,” Daran said, explaining all the steps he had taken. With a critical gaze, Donato took all of it in.

“Good,” he nodded in the end, causing a surge of pride to well up in Daran. This was quickly countermanded by the addition, “But not good enough.”

Daran raised his hands in defense. *Hey, I did the best I could!*

“First mistake: never look over your shoulder. It’s a dead giveaway that you think you’re being followed, so whoever is watching will add more distance. If you want to check for a tail, just slow down or even pause for a bit and casually look around. Amateurs like these kids will also pause, some distance behind you. That’s how you can spot them.”

“And what if they’re not amateurs?”

“Then they’ll walk past you like anyone else, change appearances, and come back from another angle. Or worse, have someone else come back from another angle. Detecting tails like those is nearly impossible.”

“I can imagine,” Daran said. “How do they change appearances?”

“Simple,” Donato shrugged. “They take off their jacket, put on a hat, or something similar. If you focus on clothing, you should memorize pants, or even better, shoes. People hardly ever bring spare shoes.”

Daran nodded. He’d never thought of that.

“Second mistake: you weren’t unpredictable.”

“Hey,” Daran called. “I told you about the route I took.”

“Yeah, and that’s the only good thing you did. To lose a tail, you have to be unpredictable in every way. Change your speed. Suddenly double back. Disappear into a hide-out. Reappear in a different place.”

“Disappear into a dark alley? Great idea when they’re out to get me.”

“No kidding. If they’re eager to hurt you, you’d better stick to public places. No one’s going to attack you in the middle of Market Square. Unless they’re good assassins, of course. Then they’ll find a way to covertly kill you.”

“Well, that’s comforting,” Daran frowned. “What do I do if they are?”

“You? Probably something pointless. But I would go to a place where I have the advantage. A location I know. Where I have friends, or can at least find a weapon.”

“Ha, like a quarterstaff,” Daran laughed. “I don’t even know how to use one.”

“I can make you a bit less clumsy at that, if you want to put in some work.”

Daran thought back to all the pointless time he was already putting into this, which made his answer very clear. “Swarf, yes!” he enthusiastically called out.

“Alright then,” Donato said, getting out of his chair. He pulled a staff from behind the bookcase, handed it to Daran and gestured to the open space in the middle of the room. “Show me something.”

Eh, what? Daran wondered as he walked to the designated spot. It had to be something impressive. He thought back to a little contest he had earlier that week with Jarod, on who could spin their staff the fastest, and so he started with that. Quickly the staff got up to speed, rolling over one hand into the other and back again. He started adding a few extra tricks, bringing the staff over to the other side of his body, until it hit something and clattered to the floor. *What happened?* he wondered. *I thought I had enough space!* Then he saw Donato place back his foot. *So that’s what I hit.*

“Fancy,” the man nodded with an overdose of sarcasm. “Let me get this straight. When you spin the staff like that, you don’t have a clue what’s going on around you, and as soon as someone even touches the staff, you drop it. That’s not so useful in a fight, is it?”

Daran gave him a sheepish look. *So much for making a good impression.* “Not really,” he agreed.

“Well, sometimes it could be, but it’s not what you want to start with. We will want to start with powerful strikes. That means holding the staff as firmly as you can.” He picked up the staff and tossed it horizontally back to Daran. “Go ahead.”

As firmly as possible. Daran thought back to when he had blocked a strong downward strike from Jarod a few weeks back, nearly breaking a finger in the process. He held the staff in the same way, horizontally in both his hands, both palms facing downwards.

“That’s a firm grip?” Donato asked. When Daran gave a hesitant nod, he grabbed the staff in the middle and yanked it downwards. He did it so quickly that Daran couldn’t tighten his grip in time, and the staff slid straight out of his hands.

“Not so tight then?” he asked, teasingly spinning the staff back and forth.

“That’s not fair,” Daran complained. “I wasn’t ready.”

“Don’t expect advance warnings from your opponents,” Donato retorted with a frown. He tossed the staff back once more and adjusted Daran’s hands when the boy caught it. “You’re right-handed. Have your right hand palm-up. You will always have a palm on each side of the staff, and it allows for easier strikes.”

He didn’t even ask whether I was right-handed, Daran realized. *He just knew.*

Donato continued by making Daran perform a large variety of attacks. There were thrusts, punches, high strikes, swings from the sides, and low sweeps to pull the opponent’s legs out from under him. After a long hour Daran felt happy with the progress. He seemed to grasp the basic idea of most strikes, performing them in a variety of orders. His body felt a bit less happy though. With every slash, instead of hitting an opponent, the other end of the staff hit himself. At least he avoided his head, but his armpits and shoulders felt pretty bruised.

“You’ll get used to it,” Donato said when Daran complained. “But we might want to call it a day.”

“Good idea,” Daran panted. He was drenched in sweat. The basement might have been big enough for a good training, but its ventilation left room for improvement. “Thanks so much for the lesson.”

“That’s alright. I’ve got way too much time here anyway, and it’s more interesting than teaching people Erydic.”

“You do that too?” Daran asked incredulously.

Donato shrugged. “I used to. You want to learn that too?”

“Eh, sure,” Daran said. He was glad there was finally someone to challenge him on his own level. Someone he could pull himself up to. Though he wasn’t particularly interested in the strange language of their neighbouring country, he wasn’t going to let this opportunity pass by.

“Alright, I’ll teach you some basics,” Donato said. “But this is something you mostly have to do on your own at first, so I will give you homework. If you come back in another three days, I can teach you more.”

Fine, Daran thought. *I was already planning to practice these new strikes with Jarod sometime soon anyway. I might as well add this to the list.* “Bring it on,” he eagerly said.

Daran got back to the Academy just in time to claim the last remaining bits of dinner in the food hall. He gobbled those down and then slowly hobbled back to his room, which is where he ran into Jarod.

“Hey Daran, there you are,” the boy said, as if he’d been looking for him. “I’m hanging out in the common room tonight with some friends. Do you want to join?”

Does he know? Daran wondered, but dismissed the thought. *How could he?* “No thanks,” he said with an exhausted sigh. “Maybe some other time.” At the moment he was only looking forward to lying down.

“Come on,” Jarod encouraged. “It’ll be fun. You don’t have to stay long.”

Well, it’s not like I’m able to do anything useful tonight anyway, Daran figured. “Fine,” he succumbed. “But I’ve got to take a shower first.”

“Sure, take your time,” Jarod said as he walked off.

Daran slowly freshened up and crawled into his uniform. Students weren’t obliged to wear their black colors all the time as they were during group missions, but most just wore it anyway, if only because it was easy. Although with the high temperatures these days they did leave their jackets behind.

When he was finally ready, he made his way towards the common room.

“There he is!” someone called as soon as he entered.

“Happy birthday!” nearly everyone shouted out. A lot of people got up and swarmed around to congratulate him in person. Most gave him handshakes and Enise gave him an enthusiastic hug.

“How did you know?” Daran asked Jarod when he finally managed to get through the crowd. If anyone put them up to this, it had to be him.

“The result room,” Jarad shrugged. “It mentions birthdays too. But come on, let’s get this sixteen-year-old a seat.”

He ushered Daran onto a soft couch. Enise dropped down right next to him, with Jarad taking a seat in a chair on his other side.

Normally Daran didn’t really participate in social activities like these. There was always stuff to be done. But he figured that today he might as well join the others in whatever they were doing without worrying too much about everything he still needed to do. It was his birthday after all.

Some of the students were telling stories of group missions. It was a challenge to stick with the honor code – they were expected to stay quiet about them – but if ‘quiet’ only meant omitting a few details, this worked well enough.

“I once had a mission where we had to get our team to a town a few hours walking away,” one of the older guys was saying. Daran hadn’t seen him before. “The sooner we got there, the better. So Nik and I ran over and got there real quick. Turns out we all had to be there. An hour later the others arrived, except for Jacy. They’d lost her somewhere along the way. It took us most of the day to find her. Turns out she got lost in the forest.”

“That’s what happens when you leave a teammate behind,” Jarad snorted, which got everyone laughing.

Though Daran enjoyed listening to the stories, he also felt like he had to contribute. “I had a mission where we had to deliver a part somewhere outside of the city. I just took Nilas, my gizmo, and got there in no-time. It got us the best score ever, but the team was angry about not being involved.”

This got people laughing as well, with Enise giving him a playful pat on his arm.

“Ha, I can already see you flying off to save the day, leaving everyone else behind,” another student said. This one had attended Daran’s instruction sessions, so Daran knew his name. *Maxi*. He hadn’t ever talked to him though, other than giving some instructions.

Is that what people think of me? he wondered. *That I just leave people behind to fix things on my own?* It worried him. His second thought worried him even more. *What if they’re right?*

He got pulled out of his thoughts when Enise started leaning against him on the couch. It felt kind of awkward, especially since his elbow was stuck in place, poking her in the back. It couldn’t be too comfortable for her.

He pulled out the arm, but the only place to put it back down was around Enise. This made him pause.

They’re right, he realized for the first time. *She is ...* He didn’t know how to put it in words. His exhausted mind also wasn’t sure about how to deal with the situation, and so he just laid his arm down over her shoulders, his hand coming to rest on her upper arm. Enise seemed just fine with this and snuggled in even more.

The stories continued for another hour, and when the girl nearly started to fall asleep on his bruised shoulder, Daran decided to call it a day. “I think I’m going back to my room,” he yawned.

“Good idea,” Enise agreed, getting up and stretching out her arms. “I’ll walk with you.”

Together they strolled back along the dorm hallways. They reached Enise’s room first.

“Thanks for tonight. It was fun,” Daran said, as she opened her door.

“Yeah, it was,” she nodded. Daran started turning around to leave when she added, “Hey, do you want to come inside? We can continue talking for a bit.”

Usually Daran would have come up with some excuse – he wasn’t that fond of all the social stuff anyway – but today he was already in a mood of just going along with things. So he obliged.

When he stepped inside, Enise sat down on her bed which, in the absence of any chairs, was about the only thing in the room to sit on. Daran remained standing opposite to her, his back leaning against the wall. When Enise realized he wasn’t going to sit down next to her, she stood up.

“I still think it’s amazing how you’re organizing all these trainings,” she said as she took a step towards him.

“Thanks. It’s ehm ... ” Daran was trying to come up with a proper response, but forgot all about them when Enise took another step forward and locked her bright blue eyes onto his. She took his hand in hers and slowly leaned in closer.

Before Daran fully realized what was happening, he felt the warm softness of her lips touching his mouth. His heart was pounding in his chest and his body instinctively took over from his exhausted mind. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her back. At that point time became blurred.

As the smooching continued, his legs slowly started to give way. With his back against the wall, they slid down to the ground, and in the end wound up rolling over the floor, their tongues intertwined like their lives depended on it. Enise’s room had a soft

carpet floor, contrary to Daran's hard wooden one, which made it at least somewhat bearable to his bruised shoulders.

Slowly Daran's brain started functioning again, and the first picture that flashed through it was that of Lana. He froze. *Can I do this?*

It had taken him ages to get her out of his mind. To get rid of the feelings. The longing. The guilt. What if this caused history to repeat itself? And it wasn't just about himself. He vividly remembered the danger he had put Lana in. *I can't do that to Enise. It's just not fair.*

As he was lying on top of her, Enise's hands slowly slid under his shirt, crawling their way up his back. The shirt crept up his chest, and as it was eventually hanging down his shoulders he let Enise eagerly pull it over his head.

What is she expecting? That we'll be a couple? I don't have time for that. I've got trainings to organize. I've got things I need to practice for Don. There are summaries I need to write. And there's my own modules too.

Somehow they had turned over again, with Enise now on top. Daran found his hands also exploring her back, going wherever they desired. It was like his head was stuck in a deadlock, which made his body do whatever it wanted, and in this case that was to take off Enise's shirt as well.

Beneath it she seemed to be wearing a bra. To Daran's body, that object fell in the rather small but very frightening realm of 'stuff that it's never seen before and doesn't have a clue how it works,' and so it left that alone. His body still appeared to be enjoying itself well enough with the kissing and hugging anyway.

At the same time, his mind was still spinning in circles. *But she attends my trainings. How can I give proper trainings if we're together? I have to remain impartial. To divide my attention evenly. Can I do that if we have ... whatever this is?*

Enise's hands were slowly drifting down Daran's back, and when they were going down too far, under his belt, signals slowly started to get through again from his mind to his body. Subtly he shifted his orientation to prevent whatever it was that was happening. This continued for a few more times, with Enise trying things and Daran gently preventing them. Yet all the time the kissing continued.

Finally, as they were lying side by side, his mind started waking up again, with all the doubts of the previous – he didn't even know how much time had passed – coming back all at once. He pulled back to look Enise in the eyes. Surprised by the sudden motion, she stared back.

"I'm sorry, I ..." He paused to take a breath. "This doesn't seem right." He pulled his arm, which had nearly fallen asleep, out from under her and clumsily got up to a sitting position. The movement alone made it feel like the room was turning in circles around him. Not knowing what else to do, or how to deal with the situation, he grabbed his shirt, mumbled "I've got to go" and scrambled out the door.

The hallway was empty at this time of the day. Daran quickly put on the shirt and rushed back to his room, which was only one hallway further. When he got inside and closed the door behind him, he crashed down face-first on his bed, his mind still spinning. He wasn't sure if he had done the right thing. Should he have

stuck around and played along? Should he have stayed away altogether? He didn't have a clue either way.

With a deep sigh he pulled his hands through his hair. *How did everything spiral so out of control?*

Chapter 9 – Authority problems

“The key to how we think, and how gizmo’s think, is that we keep track of possibilities,” Beno explained. It was yet another thought core principles class, and things were steadily getting more challenging. “Suppose that we have some random person. How tall do you think he or she is?”

“About one point seven meters,” Daran answered. “With a large uncertainty. Anything between one point four and two meters is likely.” This was the one class where he didn’t feel like he got in the way of the other students by answering questions. It wasn’t just because he also made mistakes here. It was because he felt comfortable making them.

“So if you’d have to buy a jacket for this person, would you buy a small, a medium or a large one?” Beno asked.

Daran shrugged. “It could be anything. I guess going for medium would be the best approach, but there’s a good chance it won’t fit.”

Beno nodded. “Now what if I told you that the person in question was female. What does this tell you about her height?”

“About one point six meters,” Elyssa replied, “although anything between one point four and one point eight could be likely.” Daran recognized she had copied his way of answering.

“Makes sense. And which jacket do you go for?”

“I don’t know,” Elyssa sighed. “I guess small, but maybe medium.”

“Not large?” Beno inquired.

“Ha, that will probably get you the wrong size,” Elyssa laughed.

“Good, so you do know more about the height of that person. The uncertainty is slightly lower. Now what if I also told you that the woman in question has the same shoe size as I do?”

Daran saw his friends frown in surprise. Beno may have been a lanky guy, but he was tall. He probably had big feet to go with that. “I’d go for large then,” Severim noted.

“But it’s for a woman!” Elyssa countered.

“So? You have tall women too!”

Daran wondered which of his friends had the right idea. Shoe size seemed to be a better indication of height than gender, so he would have to side with Severim.

“The correct outcome would indeed be to go for a large jacket. But many people already have a picture in their mind of a relatively short person, and getting rid of this image is difficult. The human mind has trouble switching from a theory that was considered likely towards one that was previously seen as unlikely, even if the evidence does point towards it. Naturally gizmos have the same problem, and once you start learning how gizmos form theories, you will see exactly why this is the case.”

Daran leaned back in his chair to think about this, which led him to another thought. *We don’t just learn how our minds work by studying what we can do. We also learn by knowing exactly where our own minds fail miserably. If anything, these limitations tell us even more.*

He was pulled out of his thoughts by a knock on the door. A young hunter walked into the classroom. Daran recognized him as the same one that had pulled him out of his training some weeks before.

“Daran, Quenton needs to speak with you. Come with me please,” he said, gesturing for Daran to follow him.

Daran stood up when Beno called, “Stop.” Halfway out of his chair, Daran paused. “We’re in a class. We’re done in ten minutes. Come back then.”

“Sorry, Academy orders,” the hunter countermanded.

“The Academy has as goal to teach their students. I’m not letting orders get in the way of that.”

The hunter tried to stare the scholar down, but the old teacher wasn’t about to budge.

“It’s okay,” Daran tried to placate the two. “We only have the curiosity round left, and I can skip that if n – ”

“I won’t have it,” Beno firmly said. “Throwing away your curiosity may be an easy short-term solution, but it will get you nowhere in the long run.” He turned his gaze back to the hunter. “Listen, Stane. I’ve thrown you out of my class before, and I will do so again if I have to. I don’t care whether you already graduated or not.”

Daran’s eyes widened. *This guy was a student here too? Swarf, of course he was. He’s a thinker. And he’s got a history with Beno too, it seems.*

“Fine,” the hunter, Stane, succumbed. “See you outside in ten minutes. Not a second later,” he told Daran as he turned around and closed the door.

“So, let’s go for the curiosity round,” Beno said. “Who has an interesting question this time?”

Daran was still baffled by what had just happened, but one of the other students wasn't. "The Academy uses a gizmo to create new thought cores, right?"

"Yes," Beno nodded. "We call it a core creator. The Academy has a few."

"So how did they make the first one?"

"Ha, nice one," Beno said. "A similar question is how the first tool was made. It started off as cracking a rock against another rock, to get a rock with a sharp edge. Using that, we made a tool that was just a bit more advanced, and then went yet another step further, until thousands of steps down the road we wound up where we are today. And now there's no need to crack rocks against each other anymore."

"So it's the same with gizmos?" Elyssa wondered. "The core creators are the result of several core creators, all a bit more advanced than the previous one?"

Beno nodded. "Exactly, and just like outdated tools, no one really uses the outdated creators anymore."

"But what if you want to make a gizmo without such a creator?" Daran asked, suddenly curious.

"That would be very difficult," Beno confessed. "You would have to redo all the steps. This takes a lot of time, but you also require a huge variety of skills to understand everything that's going on. You need a good team for that."

"Is there anyone who could do it on his own?" Daran wondered.

Beno gave an exasperated sigh. "Given enough time, I might be able to do it, except I lack some electrical engineering skills. I'd

need help with that. No, I doubt anyone could do so without help, although if there is one person who could ...”

Beno’s voice faded and he seemed lost in thoughts until Severim took a guess. “Quenton?”

The scholar shook his head. “No, he’s really smart, but he’s a theoretician. While he knows exactly how gizmos work, he cannot actually put them together as well as is required here. No, I was thinking of someone else.”

“Who then?” Severim asked further, but Daran already knew the answer Beno would give.

“Nolan,” they said simultaneously.

Arin was a fool not to involve Beno in his research, Daran thought as he followed the hunter towards the main Academy building. By keeping everything a secret, he’s missing out on some valuable information. He could have known ages ago that Nolan made that gizmo, Novic, from scratch. He didn’t use the Academy’s core creators.

He still needed to work out the implications though, which wasn’t easy after last night. Scenes from Enise’s room were continuously flashing through his mind, and he had to keep reminding himself that now was not the time. He’d take care of that mess later.

Nolan must have built a large variety of core creators to get to this stage, and he did it in absolute secrecy. This all leads to one question. Where did he do that? It only added to Daran’s desire to check out Nolan’s apartment.

Maybe if I tell Quenton about this, he will let me, he figured, but any thought of that disappeared when he saw who else was in

Quenton's office. It was the teacher of the basic Kantaran law module. The one that had thrown him out a few weeks before and had been bugging him every class since.

"That's about time," the teacher said when he noticed the student walking in. Although they were more than halfway through the module, Daran still didn't know his name.

Getting blamed again didn't improve Daran's mood. "Yeah, I was in a class, and the teacher actually wanted to teach me stuff instead of kicking me out," he explained matter-of-factly as he sat down opposite to Quenton and next to the teacher. "You have people like that around here too. It's ama – "

"That's enough, both of you," said Quenton, ending the not-so-friendly banter. "It seems you two are at a bit of a disagreement and I mean to solve that. Caris, you brought this matter up. Can you explain the problem?"

"The problem?" the teacher repeated somewhat offended. "This kid is preventing students from attending my classes. He writes these notes and claims they're a worthy substitute."

Daran's mouth dropped open. *Where did this scrap come from?* "I didn't cl – " he started to yell back, but a very firm "Daran!" from the head of scholars stopped him dead in his tracks.

Quenton let out a deep sigh. "You better control yourself," he told the student. "If you can't think calmly about things like this, then you should start asking yourself whether the Academy is the right place for you." He gave the boy an insistent gaze that made him cringe in his chair. Luckily the scholar soon turned to his colleague.

“And Caris, you seem to have lost track of your goal as a teacher. What exactly is your goal?”

“To teach the students,” the man said. “You know, in a classroom.”

“No,” Quenton shook his head. “A goal is a desired result. Not a means of getting there. So I’ll ask again, what is your goal?”

“To make the students learn?” Caris replied, asking for confirmation.

“Exactly,” Quenton nodded. “And you’re saying that the students reading the summaries aren’t learning?”

“Well, no,” the teacher said. “They are missing a lot of details that I do discuss in my class.”

“What kind of details?”

“Well, you know,” Caris stammered. “Details of certain laws, and ...”

“Have you actually read his summaries?” Quenton curtly asked.

“No, but ...” he seemed lost for words. “They can’t convey things as clearly as I do in class.”

Daran let out an involuntary cough, which got him a frown from Quenton and an angry gaze from Caris.

“The way I see it, there are students that prefer to read instead of attend classes,” Quenton noted. “Not all of them, but definitely a couple. So these summaries have an added value. But you’re saying that they aren’t good enough for students to learn from?”

“Yes, exactly!” Caris called out.

“Then I see an obvious solution,” Quenton nodded to Caris. “You help fix them.”

Both Caris and Daran looked up at this. *Eh, what?*

“You both heard me. Work together to make sure that there are proper notes for the module. Daran, keep writing them. Caris, make sure they live up to your standards.”

Great. Like I wasn't busy enough, Daran thought.

The teacher seemed even less happy with the verdict. “But it won't get students back to my class!” he complained. “How will I know whether they're learning?”

“If the notes are good enough, you'll just have to have faith that they will use them. And besides, if they are in your class, you still can't be sure that they're actually learning.”

Daran found himself vehemently agreeing to that last bit.

“I think we're done here. Caris, you're dismissed. Daran, stay here. I have something else to discuss with you.”

Great. What other trouble am I in? he wondered as the teacher left the office.

“I have a deal to propose,” Quenton said as he pulled out a small wooden box and put it on his desk.

Daran recognized the casket that contained the gizmo. *Novic.* This definitely piqued his interest, but he managed to remain calm, like Quenton had instructed him. “I'm listening.”

“For some reason this gizmo only seems to listen to you. We need your help in using it.”

“You want me to spy on someone,” Daran summarized, knowing exactly what the gizmo was for. “And in return?”

“In return for your perfect cooperation and discretion, you will be allowed to keep the gizmo after the mission, as long as you never use it within the Academy. We don't have any mice problems

around here, so any report of rodents will lead straight back to you.”

Daran started thinking. He knew right from the start he wanted to accept the deal, but there were some things that needed to be resolved. Both problems and opportunities. “I’m in, but I need your help first.”

Quenton raised his eyebrows. “Oh, and what for?”

“To use this gizmo, you order it to hide out in someone’s house for a while. But to listen to its recordings, you need to call it. And you can’t exactly walk in to ask if you can have your gizmo back. Nolan must have had some kind of calling device for this gizmo.”

“Of course,” Quenton nodded. “I’ll send some hunters for it.”

Daran shook his head. “That won’t do. Knowing how good Nolan was at hiding stuff, they won’t find it. But I’ll recognize it. It means I need access to his room.”

Quenton let out a deep sigh. “Fine, I’ll have some people supervise you there tomorrow morning. But you better find this caller, or we’ll have to work out a new deal.”

“I’ll manage,” Daran said. “So who is it you need me to spy on?”

“There’s a group of people in the workshop district who we believe are planning to incite a riot. We need to know their plans, and what their connection to the Free Minds is.”

“Sounds manageable,” Daran said. “Do you have an address?”

“Yes we do,” Quenton said, as he pushed a folded sheet of paper across the table. Daran moved to pick it up and flip it open.

“We only have identified their leader, but that should be enough,” Quenton added. “It’s a man named Magnus.”

Daran's heart skipped a beat. He glanced at the paper. It contained the exact address that he knew would be there.

Swarf. This just got a whole lot more complicated.

Chapter 10 – And so things began

Daran was told to meet the hunters at the footbridge. Two had arrived, and they were waiting for the third. *They need three of them, just to escort me around Nolan's place?*

He stifled a yawn. It had been another short night. The evening had been filled with preparing trainings, and although he was far from done, he also spent some time on his Erydic.

A part of him wondered how he'd ever gotten it into his mind to start learning that strange language in the first place – it wasn't like he had an abundance of spare time – yet another part of him knew exactly why. All his other activities were things he either did for or with others. He did all his module tests so the Academy didn't kick him out, he gave trainings to help his fellow students, and he did his staff practices because he'd promised Jarod to work on this together. Erydic was something that was his, and his alone. He didn't have to do it and nobody pressured him into it, which was exactly why it was such a good way to get his mind off of everything.

Finally the third hunter arrived, taking them to the ranger's quarters. He looked even sleepier than Daran, which was impressive considering the student's early morning activities. Daran had gotten up before sunrise for a sparring session with Jarod. Usually he'd only be making his way to the gym now, but his appointment with the hunters had forced that plan to change.

Daran had taught Jarod the new strikes he learned two days before. This was a bit awkward, because he couldn't tell his friend about where he had picked all of it up. He knew Jarod would want

to join Daran on his next visit to his secret trainer, and that just wasn't an option. So Daran came up with a scrappy story of how he figured it out from books and by talking to people. He felt bad about the lie though.

Despite the feelings of guilt, the training had been really good. As always, by explaining things to others, Daran had started to understand the concepts better himself too. And once more the exercise left his muscles feeling so sore he could hardly walk.

His pulse quickened as they neared Nolan's apartment. Usually it would have been cleared out by the other rangers, right after they had found Nolan's corpse, but with two more rangers having disappeared over the course of the past year, they had more urgent matters to attend to. And it wasn't like there was a shortage of ranger quarters in the first place.

This meant that the place was just as Nolan had left it. Since Daran wanted to take in as much of it as possible, the one thing he shouldn't do was stumble upon the caller too quickly. So he told the hunter that opened the door that he wanted to get a feel for the place first.

As he walked around, he was surprised by how simple the apartment was. It was just a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom, a small bedroom, and a room whose purpose seemed to combine office and storage.

He mentally sorted the rooms by how likely they were to contain the caller. *It would probably be stored in a private part of the house. So the bedroom or the office, and not the living room, kitchen or bathroom.*

“I’ll start searching the living room,” Daran told the hunters. He hoped to find some memorabilia there – something that would tell him more about what Nolan cared for – but there was nothing of the sort. Apparently Nolan kept his sentimental side private.

While the living room had been somewhat cluttered, in a cozy kind of way, the kitchen and the bathroom were meticulously tidy. *They probably cleaned them up as soon as Nolan went missing*, Daran figured. The same could not be said for the office.

Well, office Daran wasn’t sure what to call it. On the right was a desk filled with stacks of papers. Some were scribbled full with equations and other incomprehensible symbols. Others just had lists and lists of notes. He browsed through them, but a subtle cough by one of his escorts quickly ended that. The hunter gestured that he needed to keep searching, and so Daran did. He didn’t mind. He was sure that, just like the kitchen, this room would’ve been cleared of anything potent well before he set foot in it.

Towards the back wall Daran found a large pile of old parts. Upon closer inspection, they appeared to have been made for Nilas, and the imprint of Nolan’s ring was clearly visible on some of the more complicated ones.

And then there were the wall cabinets. Daran went over the shelves and through the drawers one by one. Most contained a variety of small tools. There were some shoes, bags and first-aid items. A large drawer was filled with ropes, a harness and other climbing equipment. *I didn’t know Nolan was into climbing*, Daran thought. A smaller drawer contained tiny and fragile gizmo parts. At least, that’s what Daran thought they were. There were really

tiny wires, running between small blocks of what seemed to be plastic, although Daran couldn't be sure. *This is really advanced stuff.*

In the back of the drawer, he noticed a small circular box. On its top was a single button. Daran picked it up and tried to find any other features, but there didn't seem to be any. *A device with only one button? This can only be one thing.*

He silently let out a sigh. He had hoped to get to check the bedroom too for anything about Nolan's past, but it wasn't like he could just put the device away and 'accidentally' return to the right drawer later on. So he turned to the nearest hunter and said, "I think I found it. We've got to test it though."

One of the other hunters pulled a familiar box out of his backpack. "I'll be in the bedroom," he said as he left the small storage room and closed the door behind him. Daran waited for a few more seconds, and then demonstrably pushed the button, for both of the remaining hunters to see. A mere three seconds later, a small creature scurried its way into the room from under the door.

"Well, that confirms it," Daran said.

The third hunter returned to the room a moment later. "If you found the device, I was told to give you this," he said, holding out the wooden box to Daran, but the boy shook his head.

"Don't bother. You can keep it. The gizmo is all I need."

The rest of Daran's day was filled with setting up trainings. It started off with his first gizmo handling training, to instruct the new students on how to properly control their gizmos. It made

him wonder why he was the one teaching this. The basics of this should be known by everyone, and everyone should be able to explain them to new students. But since no one did, he'd picked up the task.

He had a whole room full of first-year students who didn't have a clue what to do with their gizmo. Worst of all, Enise was there. It was the first time Daran had seen her after their little adventure two days before, and he still wasn't sure how to deal with it. For now, he just shrugged the matter aside and proceeded with the training.

"The key to teaching your gizmo is to give it proper feedback," he explained. "Your gizmo already knows that a happy version of you is good, and an angry version of you is bad. They just don't know which behaviors makes you happy and which do not. So your main job is to let them know as clearly as possible."

They continued to discuss properties of good feedback, after which Daran took every student through an example case. Most students just wanted to teach their gizmo a trick, and he helped them to get started. Eventually the moment came that he had been dreading. It was Enise's turn.

"What would you like to teach your gizmo?" Daran asked her, hoping his voice didn't sound forced.

"Actually, I mainly want to teach him not to do something," she said while she stroked the purring creature on her lap. "He's got a thing for chairs. Every time I put one in my room, it's all scratched up by the time I get back."

Well, that explains something, Daran silently thought. He quickly shook the thought off and started focusing on a solution.

“The key is to let him know you don’t like it when he gets near a chair. So put a new chair in your place, and keep watch on it for an hour or two. Whenever your gizmo gets close to it, let him know it angers you by clearly using a low and loud voice. Pick him up and drag him away from the chair if you have to. And above all, don’t start petting him.” He remembered Enise’s mistake at last month’s workshop training all too well.

“That will be hard,” Enise said. “I’m not used to being strict to her.”

“Well, you’d better learn it,” Daran noted. “Although ... only being strict isn’t the best option either. Imagine that you’re in a place where people constantly tell you you’re doing things wrong. How will that affect you?”

“I’d be afraid to do anything, because it’ll just be wrong again,” Enise said.

“Ha, I would just ignore them and do what I want,” another student said. “If everything you do is wrong, why bother?”

“Exactly,” Daran nodded. “There’s multiple ways to cope, but none of them is any good. And that’s why it’s so important to also let your gizmo know what kind of behavior does make you happy. So in this case, if the gizmo wants to scratch something, let her know what it can scratch.”

“But I don’t want her to scratch anything!” Enise countered.

“Well, it seems like your gizmo does,” Daran noted. “She has her own opinions too. You can’t just impose yours and always expect it to work. Of course you could try to train her so that she never scratches anything again. But why don’t you give her something sturdy, which she can scratch as much as she wants?”

Then she's happy, and as long as it's not your chair, so are you. It'll save you a lot of training."

"But, like, what should I give her then?" she stammered, as if she was feeling attacked.

"I don't know. Make something yourself," Daran said. He thought back to the sturdy climbing rope he found in Nolan's apartment. "Maybe some wooden structure wound up in rope or so. Anyway, let's continue to the next case."

To Daran's surprise, the next few students who he passed also brought up problems with their gizmo that they wanted to prevent. He didn't mind – he was fine with either learning new habits or unlearning old ones – but it did get him thinking. *Why did only the students that came after Elise bring up problems? It's like the ones before her didn't know it was allowed. But I thought I'd made it clear that it was.*

He couldn't exactly blame others for misinterpreting him though. It just meant he had to be clearer. And the only way to know whether he was clear enough, was to check which message came across. *I should ask people after the training what they remember,* he resolved.

By the time he realized this, the training was already over, and most students had left already. Only Enise was still around, helping him clean up, which was a lot easier now than during workshop trainings. They just needed to put the chairs back.

"Thanks," he told Enise when all the furniture was sorted out. It surprised Daran how normal his interactions with Enise were here. There was no emotional charge behind them, which was mainly because Daran, as sleepy as he was, was running on

autopilot. He'd given tons of trainings, and he was simply treating Enise like any other participant.

It eased his worries. *If these romantic things don't affect my trainings, it means I actually can get involved with her*, he realized, and so he took a step towards her. "Hey, ehm ..." he started, unsure what to say. Expectantly, Enise looked into his eyes.

Not a smooth start, Daran, the boy told himself. *Fine, let's just get this over with*. "Do you want to go and do something fun sometime? You know, not Academy related?"

The question caused a smile to appear on Enise's face, but then she became hesitant. Daran could see the doubt in her eyes, although he wasn't sure what she was so uncertain about. Finally, she just shrugged. "Sure, why not? What do you have in mind?"

Swarf, Daran silently cursed. *Haven't thought of that*. He blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "I can take you climbing sometime?"

"Eh, sure," Enise nodded. "I didn't know you could also do that. But of course you can. You're Daran. You can do anything." She gave him a blush. "You'll have to teach me though."

Yeah, as soon as I figure out how it works myself, Daran thought, though he kept his mouth shut. No need to ruin the image.

"When did you have in mind?"

"I don't know yet," Daran admitted, annoyed with himself for not having thought about all of this. "My schedule is crazy with all these trainings. Some time later this week. I'll let you know when."

"Looking forward to it," Enise said with a smile that lifted his heart.

There was only one activity left for the day: his newly founded advanced workshop group. He was looking forward to spend some time with this group of high-potentials, even though his preparation was virtually non-existent. Earlier that day he had come up with a rough idea of what he wanted to do, which hopefully would be enough.

“Let’s get started,” he told the group which, thanks to his split in levels, was of a more manageable size than the crowd he usually got. “Today we’re not going to make anything. Instead we will talk about design. Specifically, we will design an extendable quarterstaff. The idea is to make it easier to carry a staff with us at all times.”

Some of the students seemed disappointed about not making anything, but others looked excited about this new challenge.

“The first step, as always, is to come up with a list of requirements. What properties should our product have?”

“It should be extendable and collapsible,” one student noted.

“Yes, but it should not collapse in the middle of a fight,” said another one.

“Nor extend while running,” contributed someone else.

“Yeah, but it should be possible to extend it quickly.”

“What about taking hits? It has to withstand quite some force without bending or breaking.”

“Yeah, bending would be bad, because then it doesn’t collapse anymore.”

Some time later, they had a whole list of necessary properties, as well as even more nice-to-haves. “Good,” Daran nodded, happy

about the enthusiasm. “Step two is to come up with concepts. Do we want to fold out the staff? Slide it out? Is there any other option? The idea here is that every idea is fine, so the word ‘no’ is forbidden.”

One by one the students came up with a whole list of ideas, some more crazy than others, from screwing a staff together on the spot up to bringing sawing equipment to quickly turn any piece of furniture into one.

“Step three is the trade-off,” Daran told the students. “Which concept, or combination of concepts, best meets our list of requirements?”

Some ideas were discarded right away. For the remaining ones, they came up with scores on to what extent they met the requirements. In the end, the group decided on a staff that could slide out. Collapsed, it was basically a short cylinder, but extended it would be nearly five times as long. Daran felt confident it was the best idea they could come up with.

“The final step is the detailed design,” he then explained, excited about where the group was taking this. “Here we make sure the product really does meet all the individual requirements. So we need to set up a simple locking mechanism that keeps the staff in its desired mode, but allows quick switching when desired. We need to choose which material to use, and how much of it is required to give our staff the desired strength. We can also add other detailed features, like a proper grip so it won’t slip out of our hands. We do whatever it takes to make it perfect.”

At the end of the workshop, they had come up with a design that was better than anything Daran could have thought of on his

own. One student had suggested to make it easy to take the staff apart, so whenever a part was damaged, it was possible to replace only that part, instead of building a whole new staff altogether. Another student had proposed to attach the staff to a belt through a snap button, making it easy to detach when needed. Daran was glad to have all these ideas now, instead of after making it. It made incorporating them so much easier.

All of the students insisted on getting copies of the design, but the one most eager to make it was Daran himself. He couldn't wait to show it to Donato and start practicing with it. As soon as everyone had left, he went to the Academy smithy. Usually he preferred working with wood or composites, but this time the design specified hardened steel.

He started off picking the right type of steel, making sure it had a nice and high amount of carbon in it. Though he wasn't sure of the exact reason, he knew this was necessary to harden the material. Then he started to forge the parts.

When he finally put his hammer down, it was already pitch-dark outside. The workshop was deserted, though Daran could hear the revelries from the student common rooms through the open windows. Knowing that all the students were chilling out, or even already sleeping, partly filled him with envy. He really wouldn't have minded some rest. But another part of him didn't care. He absolutely loved making things, and having all the space in the workshop to do so only made it better, especially because now it was time for the most important part: the heat treatment. It involved heating all the parts up to the point where they started glowing, then quickly quenching them, and then heating them up

again to a mid-range temperature. When he had to do this in the past for his parents, he thought it was a pointless and time-consuming exercise. Now he knew how important it was. It was the one thing that made the steel capable of withstanding heavy blows.

By the time he had finished polishing all the parts and put them together, it was deep in the night. His excitement beat his exhaustion though. Fascinated, he observed the short metal cylinder in his hands. It was just as heavy as a long solid wooden staff, which was just as it should be.

He turned the small strip in the middle of the cylinder, unlocking the still collapsed staff. With a twist of his hands he flipped the device around. The centrifugal force caused both ends to pop out, and a small click told Daran the extensions successfully locked in place. The staff was ready for a fight, and the process only cost a second. A huge grin appeared on Daran's face.

It still took more than an hour before Daran finally crawled into his bed. He just couldn't stop playing with his new toy. It cost yet another hour before he fell asleep. Though he was exhausted, there was still too much excitement coursing through him. There was his spying mission, the new trainings he'd started up, and of course the promise of his upcoming date. He wondered what it all would bring.

Chapter 11 – Family stories

The fresh morning air did a good job at waking Daran up. He yawned, which turned into vapor as soon as he exhaled. *Summer is definitely over*, he thought as he zipped up his old jacket. Since he was on his way to Magnus, he'd left his uniform back home.

The roundabout route he took this time wasn't only to loose a potential tail, but also to figure out how to play the part of a double agent. *Will they find out that I know Magnus?* he wondered, but he knew the chance was slim. The Academy didn't keep track of friendships, and it wasn't like he had a family connection with the old man.

That just left Kira. *They know I'm friends with her, but the fact that I got this assignment means they don't know she is involved with the strike. I'd better make sure it stays that way, or things will get difficult.* He was going to do everything he could to prevent the Academy from figuring out his connection to the strike. That included keeping attention away from Kira. He would only give them information that they'd figure out sooner or later anyway. That would have to suffice.

It's convenient, actually, Daran thought. *I can show them that Magnus really has honest intentions. He's not going to incite a riot. He just wants to help people.*

But what should he tell Magnus? Should he hide his new spying job from him as well, or come clean? *It all depends on what he would think about it*, Daran pondered. *He may be okay with it, but knowing the Academy sent me to spy on him may also make him doubt my loyalties. If that happens, I'll have no information to give to*

the Academy, and this whole thing will fall through very soon. No, I cannot tell Magnus.

Now that his mind was made up, he had some more time to focus on the tricks Donato had taught him. So he paused, leaning against the front of a jewelry store. *I can't believe people have that much money to spare*, he thought, seeing the outrageous prizes. What he didn't see was someone following him.

A few streets later he suddenly jumped into an alley and looked for anyone suspicious passing by, but again there was nothing. *Maybe they've given up*, Daran thought. *Or they just don't get up so early.* He pulled Novic out of his jacket pocket. "It looks like we're on our own," he told the creature.

He studied the way it was made. The parts in the claws were so small, and yet they were all controlled by the tiny thought core in its head. It left Daran amazed. "Where were you made?" he silently asked the gizmo as he set out again, but it just shook its head. "Of course you don't know," Daran shrugged. "I don't have a clue where I was made either."

He did know Nolan didn't make gizmos in his apartment. The parts he had seen there were, as far as he could tell, made for Nilas. That meant Nolan would have had to be making his gizmos somewhere else. But where?

It may be in the city, Daran thought, but something about that didn't add up. The ranger had become a bit of a public figure. If he'd regularly gone to a particular place, someone would have noticed. *Unless he disguised his activities as something else. Like ... a hobby!*

Without realizing it, Daran had stopped walking. *Of course! He has hidden it in the mountains. It's the ideal place to keep something like this!*

The ramifications of this started to flash through his mind, as he continued with the last part of his trip. *It's impossible to search all of the mountain ranges. The area is too big!* Even with Nilas, the search would take years. Although he did have one piece of information: the place could be reached through climbing. And it couldn't be too hard to get there either, since Nolan probably needed to bring some equipment along every now and then. So if Daran explored all the good climbing paths in the neighbourhood, he might just stumble upon it.

Well, he thought, chuckling about what it meant. I'd better hope this date with Enise goes well, because it's going to need a sequel.

Reaching his destination, Daran knocked on the door. Magnus' back entrance was located in a small alley with a dead end. No one was passing through here, which was perfect if you didn't want to be seen.

"They're here already?" he heard Kira's muffled voice say.

They? Daran thought as he heard the footsteps come closer. *Who is she expecting?*

"Daran!" Kira exclaimed when the door loudly creaked open. "What are you doing here?"

"Just visiting," he said as he stepped inside, into the storage room at the back of the house. Magnus used to run his parts trading business from here, before he retired. Now it was mostly empty, with only several large wall cabinets along the sides. Daran

knew the place well, since he'd done part of the repairs on Nilas here last year.

"Well, now is a bad time," Kira said, wildly looking up and down the alley.

"Who were you expecting?" Daran asked while looking for Magnus. He found him in the living room, just as someone knocked on the front door.

Magnus' eyes widened when he noticed Daran. He made a waving gesture to Kira, who roughly pushed her friend back into the storage room. "Quiet," she whispered with a demanding look before she shut the door in his face.

Baffled, Daran stared at the wood grain. *What in Kantara just happened?* He sat down on the floor and pulled Novic out of his pocket. "It seems like both of us are eavesdropping today," he told it in a whispered voice.

"Come in, have a seat!" Magnus said on the other side of the door. "Do you want anything to drink?"

"I'm fine," said a voice that made Daran's hair stand on end. He hadn't heard it in a while, and although it sounded deeper than he remembered, he knew exactly who it belonged to. *Tobin. What's he doing here?*

"Geno? Anything?"

"No thanks," a gruff voice, seemingly belonging to a bulky man in his thirties, replied. "What did you want to discuss?"

"The strike," Magnus explained. "The effects are becoming more and more visible. Several companies across the city cannot do business because their machines broke down and they failed to get new parts. However, if they wait long enough, and pay enough,

they still can get the parts they need. And they get them from the workshops of your group of friends.”

“They also get them from the bigger worksh – ” Tobin said, but his voice faltered. *Someone’s gesture must have shut him up*, Daran figured.

“Yes, they still get basic parts from the bigger workshops,” Magnus calmly said. “I have some ideas on how to fix that, but their execution will take time. I’m not talking about basic parts though. I’m talking about specialized items, like the ones your workshops make. Through those the city keeps on running, albeit at a lower pace, and your group is the only one still making them.”

“So what’s your point?” Geno asked.

“My point is that the strike is nearly working. If you join us, it will be successful. We get our point across to the government. But if you don’t join, the strike will fail. It means we’ll be stuck with this ridiculous administrative rule until it’s killed all small workshops. It is in your hands.”

For a moment the entire house was quiet. Daran imagined some sort of non-verbal communication going on. “Can we talk in private for a second?” Geno eventually asked.

Daran knew he had meant it as a suggestion for Magnus and Kira to leave the room, but Magnus didn’t take it as such. “Feel free to step outside,” the old man replied, not wanting Geno to dictate the terms.

The silence that followed felt like a battle of wills, and Daran knew Magnus wasn’t going to budge. “Fine,” Geno eventually grudgingly said. “We’ll just use this room.”

“No, wait!” Kira called out.

Surprised, the workshop owner turned around. "Is there a problem?" he asked.

"That's the storage room," Magnus noted. "It's a mess, but if you don't care about that, feel free to use it."

Oh, swarf! Daran thought, quickly getting up and looking for a place to hide. Opening the heavy outer door would make too much noise. Other than that, there were only the wall cabinets. Daran remembered from last year which one had the most space. He opened the corresponding door and jumped in, twisting himself between the overalls hanging there. As soon as he closed it behind him, he heard the two visitors enter.

"We have to join them," Tobin said in hushed whispers. "He said it plainly. If we help them, we get rid of the rule. If not, we'll go down in the long run."

"It's not just about that," Geno replied. "It's about influence. By working together, we have finally obtained some bargaining power. We can negotiate better contracts with clients. We can help each other out if we're busy, or if we run out of materials. But if we support this old man, then he'll be in charge, and we'll just have to do what he says."

"So you're saying ... "

"I don't like him pulling the strings. I'm saying no."

Tobin let out a deep sigh. "Fine. I mean ... I don't know. You obviously have more experience with this than I do. It's just ... what he says does make sense."

"It does, if you don't see the bigger picture," Geno added. "It's all about who gets to make the decisions."

“Alright,” Tobin succumbed, and the door to the storage room once more opened and closed. A few seconds later, Daran cautiously opened his own door and came out of the closet.

“We’re not joining,” Tobin announced. “It’s not in our best interest.”

“In that case they will have won,” Magnus said resigned. “I seriously urge you to reconsider. I will give you one day. If I haven’t heard from you then, I’ll end the strike. It means we’ll be stuck with paperwork forever, and it’ll all be on you.”

“We’ll live with it,” Geno said. “Don’t expect to hear from us.”

Some time later there was the sound of the front door opening and closing. Not long after, Kira entered the storage room.

“That backstabbing piece of sawdust!” she cursed. “I had Tobin convinced, but he’s just listening to that milling scrap!”

“Good job on hiding,” Magnus complimented when he followed her into the room. “I don’t understand why they refused though. Do you know?”

“They said it was about influence,” Daran told him. “About you being in charge.”

Magnus’ gaze drifted off. “Of course! Why didn’t I see that before?” He turned around and, as fast as his old bones could carry him, he ran outside.

As soon as the door slammed behind him, Kira turned to Daran. “I was shitting wood chips when they said they’d go to the storage room,” she laughed. “But I shouldn’t have yelled at them. It could have revealed you.”

“It was a good thing Magnus gave me a warning,” Daran said. “He’s still as sharp as ever.”

“Yeah, he is,” Kira nodded. “I’m going to check what he’s up to.” She turned around and went out the front door.

Not wasting the opportunity of having the house for himself, Daran pulled Novic out of his pocket. “Hey there, little guy. I’ve got a mission for you. I need to hear all the conversations that take place in this house. Especially when it concerns the two guys we just listened to. You need to stay hidden from everyone though. I will try to call you every week to listen for updates. Can you do that?”

“Alright,” the gizmo said using Tobin’s voice, exactly with the intonation the boy had used earlier. It freaked Daran out. *It’s strange enough that he can play back voices, but does he have to use Tobin’s?* It gave him the shivers. He tried to shake them off: this was something he’d just have to get used to.

“Then go. And good luck.” The gizmo sped out of his hand towards the floor. From there it just seemed to vanish. Even Daran didn’t have a clue where it had gone.

Some moments later Magnus and Kira returned. Magnus had a familiar smug look on his face. “I just needed to offer Geno a place by my side. Let him announce that he’d be leading the strike together with me,” the old man explained.

“So you’re saying ... ”

“Yes, they’re in. We now have every single specialized workshop in the city on board!”

Both mentally and physically exhausted, Daran slumped down on a chair. Donato had been working him hard. They had decided

to start with Erydic first and work on staff skills second. Daran wasn't sure which one had been the toughest.

It had nearly made him forget the main reason he'd come over. "Do you know whether Nolan did any climbing?" he asked.

Donato frowned as he visibly struggled to recall his student days, but then shook his head. "Can't remember anything about it. Why?"

"He picked it up as a hobby. I was hoping you could tell me where he went most often."

"Sorry, not a clue," Donato shrugged.

Well, that was a dead end, he thought, moving on to the next question on his list. "What about gizmos? He didn't build Nilas as a student, did he? Did he have others?"

"Yeah, he had lots. We used many utility gizmos in the pranks we pulled off."

"Utility gizmos?" Daran repeated.

"Gizmos designed for one specific purpose. They're easy to train, because they only need to learn a single thing. You don't even bother teaching them a language. Anyway, we used those, and he of course had his starting gizmo, Novic."

Novic? Daran thought, his eyes widening. "What kind of gizmo was it?" *Did he already have his spy back then?*

"Dog-like," Donato said, refuting Daran's theory. "It was his best friend, even before me. I can't believe he just lost it."

"Lost it?" Daran asked incredulously.

"What is it with you repeating everything I say?" Donato countered. "Anyway, it's a long story, going back to Tamar."

“Please tell me,” Daran said, even more eager now at the mention of his mother. “I won’t, ehmm ... repeat after you again.”

“Fine, where shall I start? Okay, there used to be this tunnel between the scholar’s quarters and the education building, running beneath the Seldon. It used to piss the students off when they’d get to class wet from the rain, and all the teachers were still spotlessly dry. So Nolan and I had the plan to blow the thing up.”

“But that would flood the place,” Daran noted.

“Oh, no, we weren’t going to collapse it entirely. Only damage it enough to make it inaccessible for a month or so. We had it all planned out. We’d calculated exactly how many explosives we needed. We set it up right the night before the rainy season started. Everything was perfect. And then I got called on a special group mission. I assumed we’d do it later, but when I got back, the tunnel was gone.”

“Nolan blew it up without you?” Daran wondered.

“That’s what I thought too, and I would’ve been fine with that. I mean, he was the mastermind behind it anyway. But it wasn’t him. It was his new girlfriend Tamar. No one knows why she did that – maybe she was trying to impress him or something – but she’d never pulled a prank before, and now she tried something like this? It was bound to go wrong!” He sighed, shaking his head. “You know what the Tharon is?”

“Yeah, I’ve had my fair share of encounters with the Academy management,” Daran nodded, rolling his eyes. “Head of the Academy, above the three department leaders. Represents the Academy as one of the six ministers in the cabinet.”

“Exactly, that one. So apparently Tamar didn’t check the exits, and right when she blew up the tunnel, the Tharon and the leader of the hunters happened to be in there. The Tharon’s head got hit by a rock and he died on the spot.”

“That’s some blasted bad luck,” Daran grunted. “What happened to the hunter leader?”

“Got out safely. He was the one to catch Tamar in the act. I guess that helped his career too. After all, he became the new Tharon and has remained up there since.”

“You mean that ... ”

“Yeah, that was Alveris. He was pretty young then, but no one has kicked him out of his seat, not even with the rise of the Free Minds.”

“You’re saying that back then the Minds weren’t ... ”

“Swarf no, they only started around that time, but there were still lots of other small groups rebelling against the government. Anyway, a day or two later, in the middle of the night, Tamar escaped. Everyone went searching for her, of course. Even Nolan, although I guess he did that for his own reasons. And when he got back, his gizmo was missing. He claimed that at one point during this search his gizmo caught her trail and ran off, and he couldn’t find it anymore. As if it had just disappeared.”

“You don’t believe it?”

“I don’t know,” Donato admitted. “The whole story just sounded funny. No one had seen him bring his gizmo in the first place, although that didn’t mean much. It was chaos all around. But what I do know is that something happened there, and whatever that something was, it changed him.”

I already figured that out, Daran thought, but he was curious about the details. “In what way did it change him?”

Donato let out a deep sigh. “Everything,” he said, waving his arms outwards in frustration. “He started talking about taking proper care of gizmos instead of just discarding them. About helping people. About doing the right thing. It’s stuff I may have expected from Tamar, but not from him. It was like they traded personalities. But he’s never said a word about what may have caused it. About what really happened.”

“And I guess Tamar hasn’t either?” Daran asked.

“No, not during the interrogation,” Donato recalled. “And after she escaped, she disappeared without a trace, never to be seen again. So don’t even think about finding her. The Academy hasn’t managed to in all these years.”

Except that she already found me, Daran thought. *It does seem like, the next time we run into each other, we have some serious catching-up to do, because I really want to know how I fit into all of this.*

Chapter 12 – Afraid to let go

Several days passed with little change in Daran's daily schedule. He gave trainings, wrote summaries, got way too little sleep and kept training, both with Donato and Jarod.

"I seriously have to make myself a staff like that too," Jarod said as he admired Daran's new toy. Daran didn't often train with his extendable staff because it wore down and wooden sticks were a lot easier to replace. Despite this, he did have to get used to its unconventional weight distribution, so sometimes he made an exception.

"The designs are available in the workshop box," Daran said, referring to the set of boxes that contained all the summaries and other documents he was sharing. "We're even making them with the advanced workshop group. You can join if you want."

"Ah, I wish I could," Jarod sighed, shaking his head. "I'm already taking a lot of modules and the advanced group would be a bit too much, so I'm skipping it for now."

I wish I could just forgo a training like that. I'm the only one that has to be at every single one of them, Daran thought. "Too bad," he shrugged. "We're doing some awesome stuff."

They donned their head protectors, getting ready for another round of skirmishes. The safety precautions had seemed like a wise idea, after a hit from Daran had caused Jarod's ear to bleed just the day before.

Slowly they started circling each other. Every now and then one of them launched an attack, but quickly fell back, careful to avoid the counterstrike. Like Donato had said, 'A good offense is

the best defense.’ With their improved defense, their skirmishes now actually lasted more than a few seconds before one of them scored a hit.

Jarod went for a high attack on the left, and then quickly used the other end of the staff for a low sweep on the right, but Daran blocked them both and pushed Jarod’s staff to the ground. Before Jarod could pull back, Daran thrust the end of his staff into the boy’s ribcage.

“Ouch, good hit,” Jarod complimented him after having caught his breath.

“You could’ve blocked it with the other end of your staff, but you were still focused on the part I had pushed to the ground,” Daran told him.

“I keep forgetting,” Jarod confessed. “There are two ends to each staff. That’s four ends I need to keep track of. Not easy, you know.”

“It’s what we train for,” Daran nodded. He picked up his water bottle and looked around. To his surprise, a pair of new students was watching them. As soon as the freshmen saw they had been spotted, they quickly went back to clumsily swinging wood at each other. From the looks of it, they had even less of a clue what to do with a staff than Daran had a few months ago.

“It’s moments like these when you realize how much we’ve learned,” Jarod noted.

“Indeed,” Daran agreed, “but we still have a long way to go too.”

“True. Still, it might help these guys if we start giving staff trainings too.”

Daran's eyes widened. "You're saying I don't have enough of them already?" *How in the world am I going to squeeze that in?*

"You don't have to teach them if you're busy," Jarod noted. "I think I can do them on my own."

He's serious about this, Daran realized. *It's something he's already thought about before.* "I'm not sure if it's good if everyone just starts giving trainings all of a sudden," he hesitantly said, trying to change Jarod's mind.

"Do you know that Firo is also giving some?" Jarod asked.

Daran's mouth dropped open. "What? Firo? What's he teaching?"

"Some economics modules or something," he shrugged. "But what about basic staff techniques. Should we go for it?"

"Good question," Daran said, leaning back against the wall. He had to think about this.

Why am I so hesitant? he wondered. *I know I'm short on time, but why can't I just let Jarod give the training? What am I worried about?* The answer to those questions surprised even himself. *Because I'm afraid he'll do poorly, which will affect how people think of me.*

When people think of trainings, they think of me. When the trainings are good, they think highly of me, and so I have to make sure the trainings remain good.

On the flip side, Jarod seems really eager. Daran let out a deep sigh. "You're going to do this with or without me, aren't you?" he asked Jarod with a hint of a smile.

"Yeah, I am," Jarod nodded.

"In that case, count me in," he said. "Let's organize them."

Daran's preparation was perfect. He was carrying all the climbing equipment he would need. Thanks to another midnight study session, he'd read all the manuals. He knew exactly how everything worked. The only problem was that, if you didn't count scaling buildings, he'd never gone climbing before.

They had passed the trash heap at the outskirts of the city and hiked into the mountains, all the while chatting about gizmo handling skills. This mainly came down to Daran explaining everything he'd be teaching Enise anyway during the upcoming training session.

Daran knew the area here, and he was guiding her to an easy cliff to scale. In fact, it was so easy that there was a path that led right to the top. It was perfect to practice on.

"Okay, step one is to prepare the safety rope," he said as they reached the precipice after a long walk up the mountainside. Trying to look more certain of himself than he felt, he pulled a piton out of his bag and hammered it into a crack in the rock. After checking that it was solidly embedded, he attached a carabiner to the ring at its end and hooked in a rope, throwing both ends down the cliff. "All set," he told Enise with a smile. "Let's go back down."

The path to the bottom wasn't very close, but after some more walking and casual chatting they reached the foot of the cliff, where both ends of the rope were waiting for them.

"Step two is to put on the harness," Daran explained, pulling two out of his backpack. "It's just like putting on pants. This is what you will be hanging from in case you fall." He was planning

to put his own on and then help Enise get into hers, except the first part took him long enough that Enise was already done by the time he might have been able to assist.

“Let’s get hooked up,” he said, which made Enise giggle nervously. Not understanding what was so scary about this, Daran took one of the rope endpoints and tied it to his own harness using a figure-eight knot. He then picked up the other end and pulled it through a figure-eight descender, which he hooked to Enise’s harness.

“They sure like the number eight,” Enise joked.

“It’s a nice number,” Daran smiled. “Now, let’s see if this works. It’s your job to save my life if I fall.” He told her the basic steps of belaying, after which he climbed up for a meter or two and jumped backwards, as if falling. He felt the satisfying tug of the rope as Enise held him, until suddenly the tension gave way and he dropped to the ground. He landed hard on his back in the leafy undergrowth.

“Sorry!” Enise called out. “You started pulling me off the ground, and I didn’t know what to do.”

“Holding on to the rope is usually a good idea,” Daran noted dryly, swiping the leaves away from his behind. *I’m really glad we went for an easy try-out*, he thought.

While staying close to the ground, they kept practicing belaying until Enise was comfortable doing this. They also worked on bringing Daran down in a more controlled fashion than his first descent.

“I think we’re ready for this,” Daran told Enise with a smile. It was time to go up higher. *It’s almost like climbing buildings*, he

thought to himself. The main difference was that, knowing he was secured, he tried things he otherwise wouldn't have, like jumping up to grab a piece of rock he initially couldn't reach. To his surprise, all his crazy maneuvers actually worked. Apparently his regular climbing style had been overly careful. *But probably with good reason.*

"This is going really well!" he called down to Enise when he was roughly halfway to the top. From down below the cliff hadn't looked so tall – it was only about thirty meters or so – but from up here it was a very different story. "Oh, just so you know, looking down is a bad idea."

"Should I let you down?" Enise called back up, but Daran shook his head.

"No, I'm okay. Just enjoying the view." This view actually wasn't all that spectacular. He was only just above the trees, and the most he could make out was a hiking path some way in the distance, where he thought he saw two people walking. He could hardly discern the city in the distance.

He climbed onwards until he got close to the top. "Now you can let me down," he called. "Ready?"

When Enise gave the signal, Daran put his feet flat against the cliff and leaned backwards into his harness. While he was slowly fed more rope, he walked backwards down the cliff, even taking a few hops every now and then. It nearly felt like flying, although of course it would never be a match for taking Nilas out for a ride.

"Alright, your turn," Daran said when he was safely down on the ground again. He disconnected himself from the rope while Enise unhooked her own figure-eight. "Do you want to try?"

“Ehm, yeah, I guess,” she said.

Daran frowned. *Does she? Or is she only saying that because she’s somehow expected to go up?* “You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” he told her.

“No, it’s okay,” she said, which only confused Daran further.

It’s like she doesn’t want to climb, but doesn’t feel like refusing either, he thought. *Can’t she just clearly make a decision: yes I want this, or no I don’t?* He decided to just go along, hooking up the descender to his harness.

“Alright, you’re safe now, if you want to go up,” he said, trying not to pressure her into anything.

Eventually Enise started to climb, although she had some trouble following the guideline ‘Don’t look down.’ It also seemed like she didn’t trust the rope just yet. While Daran had grown comfortable falling at the start, Enise seemed so careful that she didn’t dare take even the slightest risk. It all caused her to go up a lot slower than Daran. He tried to help her wherever he could by pointing out places where she could put her hands and feet.

When she was just past halfway, Daran saw movement at the top of the cliff. Two faces were staring downwards. *The hikers from a moment ago*, Daran realized. To his shock, he found that he recognized one of them. It was the tall kid that had ambushed him in the alley. The other face didn’t belong to a boy, but to a somewhat older man. Daran realized who it must be. *Jokan. He’s found me.* And the metallic reflection of the object in his hands also told him what he was about to do.

Enise hadn’t noticed the pair yet, focused on the rocks she was climbing, which was all the better. “Enise,” Daran called out,

struggling to keep his voice calm. “We have a bit of a problem. I need you to firmly grab hold of the wall. Find a comfortable grip. You may need to hang on for a while.”

To Daran’s relief, she followed his orders without comment. Once she was settled, she asked “Why? What’s going on?”

The two ends of rope that soon fell past her answered that question for Daran. Her startled cry told him she had seen them too.

“Don’t worry, I’ll fix this,” he called back, although he didn’t have a clue yet how. He was getting really angry with Jokan. *They could’ve killed her. They still may.* Although he was relieved at seeing the two faces retreat from the edge. Then again, there wasn’t much more damage they could cause from up there.

I have to get her on belay again, he told himself. *That means getting a rope back up there.* He still had plenty of it lying about. They had only cut off the last fifteen meters or so. It would require him to either run or climb to the top of the cliff, and neither seemed a good option. Climbing would be very risky, since he wasn’t secured himself either, while running all the way to the path would take way too much time, even if he didn’t run into Jokan and his friend. He did have his staff with him, but he doubted he was a match for the two of them just yet.

“The rope snapped, didn’t it?” Enise called down, her voice trembling.

She doesn’t know it was cut, Daran thought. *Good, let’s keep it that way. She’s scared enough as it is.* “Yeah it did,” he replied. “But I’ll get you down safely.” *As soon as I figure out how.*

How else could he get up there? Maybe through Nilas? *It's worth at least calling him*, he thought. "Nilas, I need you up in the air," he spoke into his watch, hoping it would connect from this distance. To his relief Nilas squealed back. "Fly in the direction of the trash heap, and then a kilometer past it. There's a vertical rock wall there. That's where I am."

He did the math in his head. *It's about five kilometers, so when flying fast, Nilas should get here in three or four minutes.* He still needed a plan, because there was no way the gizmo could land on a vertical cliff. The large bird couldn't even land nearby, because of all the trees. Daran would have to grab his rope and run to a nearby field to be picked up. He knew of a suitable meadow some distance away, but that only introduced a second problem.

Even if Nilas drops me off on top of the cliff, and I don't run into Jokan, what can I do? I can throw a rope out to her, but as soon as she lets go of the wall, she'll fall. I have to use the rope that's attached to her, but I can't bring that one with me to the field.

Unless ... I don't have to! Oh, she is so not going to like this.

"Enise, I've got an idea to get you out of there," he said. "I need you to stay where you are for three more minutes. Can you do that?"

"Eh, sure?" she said, which was good enough for Daran.

He quickly located the end of the rope hanging down from her. It was three meters above the ground. Luckily the first few meters were very easy to scale. He grabbed the other cut end and climbed up until he was high enough. Then, bracing himself against the wall to have his hands free, he tied the two ends back together.

You got to love figure-eights, he thought as he tightened the knot and jumped down again.

Next, he needed something heavy. He looked around for a rock until he realized he had half a metalshop hanging from his harness. *It's not like I still need this descender anyway.* So he disconnected it, pulled the rope all the way out, and then tied the final end of it to the metal figure-eight in his hands.

"You're doing a great job!" he called up to Enise in the meantime. "Keep it up just a bit longer."

"My hands are cramping up," she yelled, her voice on the verge of breaking. "You'd better hurry."

That's exactly what I'm doing, Daran thought. He only still needed to climb up the nearest tree. With most of the leaves already on the ground, it was easy to plot a path upwards. On his way to the top he explained the plan to Nilas, and right when he reached the highest branch that would support his weight, he saw the large bird approach in the distance.

He pulled as much rope upwards as possible, and when Nilas got near he threw his descender up as high as he could. It wasn't as far as he hoped, since the descender was dragged down by the large amount of rope it was attached to, but it was enough for Nilas to catch it in its claws.

Quickly Daran climbed back down the tree. When he reached the ground, he saw that Nilas was still circling upwards. The gizmo had nearly obtained enough altitude.

"Daran!" Enise was panicking. "What's going on?! I can't hold on much longer!"

“It’s okay!” Daran called back. “Any moment now I’m going to hoist you up.” He saw that the rope was nearly pulled tight. “Nilas, whenever you’re ready,” he whispered in his watch.

Enise didn’t quite understand the plan. “You’re going to do wha – aah!” she screamed as she was pulled off the cliff and dragged through the tops of the trees, dangling a long distance beneath the giant bird, who was high up in the sky.

“Perfect, buddy. Let’s put her down in the nearby meadow.” He picked up his bag and, as he started running to the nearby field, he felt like he had to add, “Gently.”

When he got out of the trees and into the open field, he searched for Enise. She hadn’t landed yet. All Daran could find in the field were cows. But then he discovered her, still dangling beneath the gizmo.

Why hasn’t he put her down yet? he wondered, but it all became clear when he put himself in Nilas’ shoes. “You don’t know how high Enise is above the ground, do you?” he asked.

Nilas gave a confirmative chirp.

“Alright, I’ll coach you into this,” he said. As Nilas approached the field, Daran continuously gave feedback on how high the girl was above the ground. When she was floating only a meter above the grass, Daran gave the signal, “Flare up!” This flare was what Nilas usually did upon landing to lose speed and drop the final meter, except the bird now did that maneuver in midair. What Daran had forgotten was that, while Nilas may have slowed down, Enise did not. Dangling from the largest pendulum Daran had ever seen, she kept floating just above the green expanse, drifting by several surprised cows, before she finally slowed down and

smoothly dropped to the ground. After some more rolling, she came to a stop.

Daran rushed over as fast as his legs could carry him. "Are you alright?" he called when he reached her.

"You blasted, molten piece of scrap!" she screamed as she unfastened her carabiner. "This was your idea of bringing me to safety? Dragging me through the trees while hanging from a crazed gizmo? And with no warning? He could've killed me!" She stood up and charged at Daran, but after a single step she fell over, shrieking in pain.

"What's wrong?" Daran asked, worried. He started to doubt how wise it was not to inform Enise about the plan. The surprise rescue didn't seem to make her very grateful.

"I sprained my ankle, you burning lump of sawdust!" she yelled, her face contorted with pain.

"I'll help you up. Put your arm around my shoulder."

She grudgingly obliged and pulled herself up. "If this was your masterplan of getting me to put my arm around you, I really have to tell you that there are easier solutions."

"I'll remember that for next time," Daran nodded.

"Don't expect a next time," Enise huffed as she landed on her bad foot again. With her teeth gritted together against the pain, she started hobbling down towards the city, which was partly visible in the distance.

Seeing her obvious discomfort, a feeling of guilt welled up in Daran. "We could fly home on Nilas?" he offered, but the suggestion only earned him a death glare.

“No way I’m letting that lump of metal carry me again! We walk.”

He’s not made of metal, Daran thought, but he didn’t expect mentioning that would help his case. So he silently followed the girl back to the city, all the while wondering how he’d managed to mess things up so badly yet again.

Chapter 13 – A conflict of interest

In the week that followed, Daran saw Enise only twice. The first time was during the brand new staff training. Daran had jumped into his natural habit of taking the lead, doing all the group instructions. He wasn't looking forward to giving Enise feedback though, so he subtly nudged Jarod to cover the half of the hall she was in. The boy gave him a sly smile, which made Daran wonder how much he knew.

The second time was in yet another gizmo handling training. Daran had planned to let every individual student show a trick that they had taught their gizmo, after which he would give feedback. Seeing Enise dutifully show up had made him adjust that plan, going for a more improvised approach. He let the group ask questions and was relieved to find that the girl remained silent.

He still didn't have a clue what to do. *Should I go talk with her? Apologize? Explain everything from my point of view? Or just pretend nothing happened and ask her out for another trip?* Every time he thought about it, there was one idea that seemed slightly better than the alternatives, but it was always a different one than during his previous ponderings. And it wasn't like he could talk with anyone about it, because he didn't want to contribute to the rumours that would undoubtedly be circling around already.

"Daran? So is it okay?" Zeris asked, which tore him away from his thoughts.

"Eh, what?" Daran hazily replied. He could vaguely recall someone talking to him, but wasn't able to remember anything that had been said. He honestly couldn't say whether he'd only

been lost in thoughts or had actually fallen asleep. The boundary between the two was often blurring these days.

“Can Ando join the training?” Zeris spelled out as if he was repeating himself for the fifth time.

Only then did he recall where he was. *The workshop training of the experienced group is about to start.* He shook his head, trying to clear the grogginess from it. “Um, sure. You told him about the trial period?”

“Yeah, I did,” Zeris nodded.

When setting up the experienced group, Daran had explained that everyone had to go through two try-out trainings. After those, he would decide whether they could continue to join or not. He had to kick a few people out after the last session, but to his surprise this had actually been rather easy. Naturally the few that he decided to cut had been disappointed, but they had already expected it and accepted the judgement without complaint, eager to try again next year. He was left with a group of almost twenty students, with many of them already in their fourth or even fifth year. It was perfect for the exercises he had in mind.

Alright, let's get this started, he told himself. He always hated the part where he had to claim everyone's attention. Every time, no matter how often he did it, there was this small voice in the back of his head telling him the group would reject him. That they would ignore him, or worse, make fun of him for trying to order people around. Of course that voice was the loudest with this group of older students, and his lack of sleep only made that worse.

After yet another *Do I really have to? Yes, I have to*, he called out, "Time to begin!" Quickly the group became silent, leaving his fears unfounded as usual.

"The next few weeks we'll be designing and building something more complex," Daran told them. He saw the eyes of many students widen, some out of fear and some out of excitement. "Imagine you're a hunter in pursuit of a suspect and he's climbing up a building. In that case you quickly need to go up after him. Or imagine you're a ranger trying to save someone from the roof of a burning house. It's the same thing. We need a device that lets us scale buildings quickly."

"Or rescue a damsel in distress from a cliff wall," someone said softly, yet still loud enough for everyone to hear. A timid snickering rose up from the group.

Great, he thought, rolling his eyes. *Apparently there are no secrets at the Academy*. Too tired to come up with any reprimands or clever remarks, he merely said, "Yeah, exactly like that." It earned him a few extra laughs, but Daran didn't care.

In truth, he had indeed envisioned a device that could shoot a grappling hook to the top of a cliff, and then pull someone up after it, but he doubted he'd ever get the chance again to rescue a girl that way. It was so he could more efficiently explore the mountains around Tarine.

While explaining the design parameters, he cautiously avoided revealing anything of what he imagined the result would be. It wasn't because he didn't want to give anything away, but because he knew they would likely surprise him with something better if

he didn't steer them in any particular direction. His quarterstaff was proof of that.

"Over the next few weeks, we will design and then build this lifting device, including the mechanical parts and the electronics. Let's see how long it takes to get a working product." He let his eyes wander over the faces and saw that the group was eager to tackle the challenge. "Alright, we'll split up into five subgroups and start with step one: the list of requirements. Let's go!"

After every group had made their own list, all of which were subsequently merged together, they continued with the concept phase, which was hilarious as usual. There were ideas ranging from foldable ladders, to using climbing gloves with extra suction, up to simply polevaulting to the roof.

"We could also mount springs under someone's feet," Zeris laughingly suggested.

"Ah, not springs again!" Shamon, one of the older students, called out. "The last thing I had to make for the Academy was filled with them, and it was a disaster."

Daran was about to speak up to defend the first law of the brainstorm phase – *don't use the word no* – but something else bothered him more. "Wait, you had to make stuff for the Academy?"

"Yeah, you didn't get that note last week?" Shamon replied, but Daran shook his head. "They set up extra workshop practice modules. To complete them, we need to build specialized parts for some of the trading companies in the city."

Swarf, they didn't, Daran cursed to himself. *They're using students to circumvent the strike?* "How many of you got that note?"

Most of the group raised their hands. Only the three youngest ones, including Zeris, seemed just as confused as Daran. “Splendid,” he noted sarcastically. “They asked all third-years and higher.”

“Maybe you can join too,” one of the girls said. “These practice projects give a ton of module credits. Way more than they actually should. It’s easy scoring.”

“That’s not what this is about,” Daran noted. At least he now knew how the Academy lured students into this. *I have to stop this*, he told himself. *But how?* He tried to come up with ideas, but his mind just seemed to shut down from exhaustion.

Shaking the sleep away, he forced himself into the logical approach. *Let’s start with constraints. I have to stop these parts from being made, and I must do that without revealing my connection to the strike. I cannot be seen choosing sides.* Through these thoughts, an idea started to form in his mind. *No one should be taking sides here.*

“Guys,” he called out to get the attention back from the boisterous group. “Do you have any idea why the Academy is all of a sudden arranging this?”

“Your trainings have shown that we can use some more practice?” one boy suggested, but he instantly got corrected by the girl sitting next to him.

“It’s because of the strike.”

Most of the students looked up with a frown. “What are you talking about?” Shamon said, voicing their thoughts.

Daran was appalled. *They don’t know?*

“You really have to follow the news more,” the same girl tartly explained. “The workshops in Tarine are protesting against a law that the government installed last month. They’re on strike, not making any specialized parts until it’s revoked. Many companies are now having trouble with their machines. Some parts of Tarine are starting to shut down.”

“Ah, so we’re making sure the city stays running,” yet another student said. “That’s good.”

While most students seemed to nod in agreement, Daran shook his head. “Not exactly,” he said, which got him some surprised glances, but they waited for him to explain. “How many of you know what this strike is really about?”

Only the girl who had spoken up before raised her hand. The others kept their blank stares.

“Just as I thought,” Daran nodded. “It only shows that it’s a complicated situation. The workshops want one thing. The traders want something else. If we start building parts for the traders, we are actually choosing a side in a conflict that we know nothing about and that has nothing to do with us.”

“But aren’t we supposed to help them?” Ando asked, but again Daran shook his head.

“Help who?” he asked. “This isn’t about saving lives, capturing criminals or defending the country. This is pure politics. One group versus another. Helping one will hurt the other and vice versa. The Academy doesn’t involve itself in politics. Or at least, it shouldn’t. We shouldn’t.” *Not unless others already pulled you in before it even started*, he silently added to himself.

“So you’re saying we should stop making these parts,” Shamon concluded.

“But then we’re taking the side of the workshops,” Ando noted.

“No we’re not,” Daran insisted. “Doing what you’d normally do isn’t called taking a side. It’s called being neutral. It’s not like you’re organizing the strike yourself.”

Even Daran realized the hypocrisy here, but he ignored it. *This has to be done*. He studied the faces in front of him. Some were nodding, some were still thinking, and others were frowning, probably worried about what they’d be missing out on.

“Of course I can’t force you to,” he added. “If you need the credits, then go make those parts. But if instead you want to learn, and do what’s right, then skip those extra modules and keep coming here. Because this is where we figure out how to really make stuff. And we do so together.” He slowly let his gaze drift over the group once more. “So, who’s with me?”

The students looked at each other for a brief moment. Then, one by one, they all raised a fist.

Chapter 14 – A light in the darkness

That evening, after having been the last one to get dinner again, Daran retired to his room for yet another session of intense summary writing. The plan was to work out his notes from the last basic Kantaran law class, but for some reason his mind just blocked. It felt like his thoughts were drifting off, although when he tried to pinpoint where they were drifting off to, he couldn't find anything. In the light of his desk lamp, he simply kept staring at the nearly blank sheet he was trying to write on.

A long time, possibly several hours – he wasn't sure – passed like this. The pitch black rectangle at the far end of the room showed that it was fully dark outside, but it wasn't late enough that people had gone to bed already. Through his door, he could still hear loud conversations and laughter coming from the common room further down the hall.

He envied the people there. *They get to relax, while I'm stuck here with this module.* He still wasn't getting any work done though, and his mind kept going blank. *I don't have time for this scrap,* he told himself, a cold shiver creeping up his spine. *I have to do this.*

The more he tried to force himself to put his thoughts on paper, the more they drifted from whatever he needed to write, which contributed all the more to his evergrowing frustration with himself. He kept squeezing his pen tighter and tighter in his hand, until he got the strong urge to fling it across his room. Usually he didn't give in to these aggressive urges, but this time he figured they might help. *Nothing else does,* he told himself, and he

forcefully swung it against the wall in front of him. It skittered across the floor towards the door.

That helped a bit, he thought, but as he stood up to collect his improvised projectile, the frustration was already seeping back, and by the time he sat down again, his mind was nowhere near being cleared.

“Then what *do* I need?!” he asked himself out loud, his voice trembling with emotion, but deep down he already felt the answer. *I just need someone who helps me take my doubts away. Someone who supports me. Who puts a hand on my shoulder and tells me I’m on the right track.*

His thoughts drifted to Lana, but the stab of pain that followed reminded him that that wasn’t an option, and so his thoughts drifted to the next closest thing: Enise. An idea formed in his mind, and though a small voice in his head was asking whether it would be wise, his desperation quickly shut it down. *What have I got to lose?*

He got up and walked to the door again. As he opened it, he found that the noise from the common room had mostly died away. *Everyone’s probably back in their rooms by now.* He walked around the corner towards Enise’s and knocked.

A chair scraped over the floor, followed by the sound of footsteps. The door opened and Enise’s face appeared. When she realized who was on the other side, her eyes widened. “Daran!” she called out, surprised and a little guarded. “What are you here for?”

“I ehm ... ” he started stammering, realizing he maybe should’ve thought this through a bit more. “I just needed some company.”

“Really? That’s what brings you?” she asked, incredulously raising her voice.

“Yeah ... well ... I don’t know,” he confessed, shaking his head.

“You’ve been ignoring me all week,” she countered, further opening the door so she could fully face him. “There have been plenty of occasions where you could’ve come over to talk things out, but you didn’t. And now you finally drop by, because you need company?!”

“I didn’t know that was what you wanted!” Daran instinctively defended.

“So what do *you* want?”

“I don’t know,” Daran confessed. “Whatever we had.”

“Like last time you were here?” Enise asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I guess,” Daran shrugged.

“Daran, what happened last time will not happen again. I can promise you that.”

“Just because of what happened in the mountains? Because of an accident?”

Enise sighed and shook her head. “You can’t expect to suddenly show up here and make it work as if nothing happened. I’m sorry.” She just stood there for a moment, waiting for a reaction. When it didn’t come, she ruefully closed the door, leaving Daran standing alone in the hallway.

Not wanting to awkwardly remain in front of her door, Daran slowly shuffled back to his room. When he got there, he didn’t want to enter yet. He just wanted to catch some breath, before he locked himself up in his dark summary factory once again. And so

he leaned against the wall, staring at the floor, trying to process what had just happened.

Thinking back to when he knocked on her door, he realized he'd never expected to get anything from Enise in the first place. He'd pretty much known what would happen. Still, there had also been the possibility that he'd be wrong, no matter how improbable. And it was that tiny potential, that insignificant chance, that had brought him there. In truth, he hadn't come to get any affection, even though he wouldn't have minded. He'd come for clarity. And although the pain of a definite rejection felt as if someone had drilled a hole straight through his heart, it was better than the constant milling in his mind, caused by uncertainty.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw someone walking down the hall. He recognized her as Amilia. Daran mainly knew her because she and Jarod helped him copy summaries, but that was pretty much it. He wasn't looking forward to a long conversation, and so he just kept staring downward.

"Hey Daran," Amilia greeted as she passed by.

"Hey," he softly greeted back. *Is she going to keep on walking?* he wondered, keeping track of her movements while holding his eyes fixed on the ground. *No, she's stopped.*

"How are you doing?" she asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"I am, eh ..." Not having a clue what to say, he let out a deep sigh. He opened his mouth twice more, hoping sensible words would flow out, but with those obviously lacking, he shut it just as many times. Eventually, after yet another sigh, he could only come up with, "I don't know."

“What’s on your mind?” Amilia asked. Even though Daran was still looking at the floor, he could feel her eyes piercing him.

“I’m not sure. It’s, ehm ... busy ... and eh ... ”

“It’s becoming too much.”

This hit closer to home than Daran had anticipated, and he let out an involuntary sob. After the first, several more followed, with the tears not far behind. It felt embarrassing, but at the same time he knew there was no way he could hold it back anymore, and so he just let it go.

“Yeah,” he blurted out in-between gasps. “The trainings, the summaries, Academy stuff, modules, and ... ”

“Enise.”

“That too,” Daran said, trying to wipe his eyes with his sleeves, but it only made them sting more. “I can’t handle it anymore,” he added, his voice shaking.

Amilia softly grabbed his shoulders. “Daran, you don’t have to do all of this.”

“But I have to help them!” Daran countered.

“No you don’t!” Amilia forcefully replied, looking Daran in the eyes, even though the boy was avoiding her gaze. “Don’t get me wrong. We appreciate all the stuff you do. Everyone immensely does. But you also deserve time for yourself. Why do you have to help everyone?”

“Because I can!” Daran cried out. “When every summary that I write saves dozens of others several hours of time, don’t you think that I should write them? Especially when other people can’t?”

“No I don’t,” Amilia said. “Yes, you’re good at writing summaries and at teaching. But why is that? It’s because you’re

always trying to find new ways of helping people. But don't others have an obligation to do the same? So that they can do what you do? I don't see them doing that, so why should you?"

"Because that's not who I want to be!" Daran shouted, tears streaming down his face. "I just want to be the best I can be."

"And that's an amazing aspiration. But if it's breaking you down, then you should let go of it. Especially when a bit less than your best is still really helpful for a lot of people."

"I don't know," Daran groaned, involuntarily shaking his head. "Maybe I just ... maybe it doesn't have to be perfect. But I want it to be."

"I think slightly less than perfect would still make lots of people happy," Amilia nodded encouragingly.

"I guess," Daran shrugged. He had trouble accepting the idea, but at least he was considering it now. "Thanks," he eventually said. He finally managed to bring his eyes up to meet Amilia's, and for as much as he could, he cracked a smile.

The grin that he got in return was much wider. "Any time," she gladly said and pulled Daran into an encompassing hug. Only then did Daran realize how much he'd needed that.

After a long time, but still way too early, Amilia let go. "You should get some rest," she said.

"Yeah, I should," Daran agreed, still trying to get the remnants of tears out of his eyes. "Thanks for listening."

"Sleep well," Amilia said, even though she waited for Daran to enter his room.

"You too," Daran replied, opening the door and, after a last look over his shoulder, stepping inside.

It was only then, as he crashed down onto his bed, that he realized what his problem had been. Somehow, despite having groups of friends listen to him several times each week, he felt like no one ever really listened to him. At least not in the way Amilia had done just now.

But if the last few minutes had also shown anything, it was that he wasn't alone. He'd learned that, whenever things got really bad, someone would always step in to help. And although it would never be the person you'd expect it to be, it would always be worthwhile.

Chapter 15 – Looking for traces in the wrong places

“I’m actually looking forward to this mission,” Daran told Jarod as they walked towards the mission control room. They had signed up for a special group mission at the same time, hoping they would get to do it together, and the plan had worked. It corresponded well with the philosophy behind the group forming process of the Academy: *you can’t fully control who you get to work with, but you do have some influence.*

They were the first to arrive, eagerly awaiting the other team members. Ando entered first, and his face showed a frown upon seeing Daran.

I can understand that, Daran thought. The boy had attended his second training with the advanced workshop group only the day before, and he clearly hadn’t known enough about manufacturing methods to learn much from the discussions. Daran therefore had to send him back to the basic trainings. Tomorrow that group would focus on wood processing, which would be much more appropriate for him.

Next came a girl Daran hadn’t ever seen in any of his trainings. “Hi, I’m Clara,” she said, shaking his hand.

“I’m Daran,” he replied, although she already seemed to know. And though she was much better at hiding it, she also didn’t appear to be thrilled to have him on the team. *What’s going on here?*

Naturally this impression paled to that of the final participant. *Oh scrap,* Daran cursed when he saw her. *Enise.*

“Time to get started,” the scholar behind the desk announced.

Daran pushed his thoughts away. *There's a job to do.*

"Your mission is a simulation," the thinker explained. "Naturally the case we have is fictional, but we will act as if it's real. Is that clear?"

The reply was five simultaneous yeses.

"Oh, and Daran, to make this fair with respect to other groups, I am not allowing the use of flying gizmos. Sorry about that."

"That's alright," Daran shrugged. He was happy to have this clarified before the mission even began, instead of having to fight about it afterwards. It surely wouldn't stop him from tackling the challenge head-on.

"This morning two of our hunters, Balus and Plake, failed to check in," the scholar told them. "I cannot tell you much about their mission, except that they were pursuing a potentially dangerous suspect. Your job is to find out what's going on. Maybe it's just an equipment failure. Maybe they've been killed. Probably it's somewhere in-between. I will give you a map in which I've marked their last known location. It's close to Iron Spring."

"Iron Spring? But that's half a day's walk!" Ando called out. "There's no way we're getting there and back today."

"Correct," the scholar noted. "You'll probably have to spend the night in the woods. The weather is expected to be dry, but it will be cold. Pack accordingly. Naturally you may use Academy supplies. The final evaluation is the day after tomorrow, first thing in the morning."

Oh no, Daran told himself. Tomorrow morning is the basic workshop training. What am I going to do with that?

“I suggest you pack your bags and meet in half an hour at the student entrance of the Academy.”

Daran and Jarod were the first on their feet. They were quickly followed by the girls, leaving Ando to study the maps.

“We’d better pick up some backpacks first, before dropping by our rooms to fill them with warm clothing,” Jarod suggested.

“Good idea,” Daran nodded. “Listen, can you do me a favor? Can you pick up a backpack for me too? I need to fix some stuff for tomorrow’s workshop training.”

“Yeah, no problem,” Jarod nodded.

“Thanks. I’ll be at your room in ten minutes or so.” Then Daran rushed off, hoping to find Zeris at the dorms. When the boy wasn’t there, he ran to the student workshops, but there was no trace there either. The study halls gave the same result. He even took time to ask around, but no one had seen him.

Out of breath, he checked his watch. *Fifteen minutes have passed. Swarf!* When he finally got back to the dorms, he rushed to his room and grabbed a piece of paper, scrawling that he might be late or totally absent tomorrow. He added as many pointers as he could on how to set up the training, what to give feedback on and more. If he had the time, he would write a whole book on it. Just when he’d filled up the page and was about to leave his room, he found Jarod in the doorway, already wearing his hiking boots.

“I’ve packed your bag,” he said. “It’s got a bedroll, water bottle, food for two days, toilet paper and a flashlight. I even added a small medkit, divided over our bags, in case the hunters we’re supposed to find are hurt. Just add your own stuff and you’re all set.”

"You're awesome," Daran gratefully nodded. "Listen, can you drop this note off at Zeris' room? I couldn't find him just now."

"Yeah, he's doing a test for a theoretical analysis module," Jarod nodded, picking up the collection of scribbles. "I saw him freaking out about it at breakfast. I'll shove the note under his door."

Why didn't I just ask Jarod about it right from the start? Daran wondered as he stuffed his backpack with all the clothing he might need. He shook off the thought, fastened his staff to his belt and rushed after his friend, heading towards the gate.

"By the way, is it me, or did the others seem to be unhappy with the team?" he asked as they walked down the stairs. "And I'm not talking about Enise."

"It's not just you," Jarod said matter-of-factly. "You don't exactly have the reputation of a team player, Daran."

This wasn't what he had expected to hear. "What do you mean? What reputation do I have?"

"Well," Jarod started, looking for the right way to put it. "You're known to ignore your teammates and just take over the mission whenever you feel like it. People don't like to be shut out. They want to help too. Ignoring them makes them feel like they're not good enough to assist."

What?! was Daran's initial thought. He felt offended. Angry even. *How does he dare, saying those things? After all that I've done?* But the glances he'd gotten flashed through his mind, and he realized it was the truth. Getting angry wouldn't change any of it. In fact, it would only make it truer.

“So I actually hurt them,” he stammered. He looked at Jarod who remorsefully gave a slight yet affirmative nod.

I never knew, he thought. If he was hurting people, he wasn’t any better than Firo had been to him last year.

“Wow, thanks,” he finally said, feeling overwhelmed. *I really have to learn more about how I affect other people*. At the same time, he was still unsure on how to fix it. “So what should I do differently then?”

“Let others contribute too,” Jarod said. “Let them take control, even if it’s only over a part of the mission.”

“Alright, I’ll try to be more passive,” Daran promised as they arrived at the student entrance. Clara and Ando were already waiting for them.

Daran felt apprehensive to step through the gate. Every time he’d gone out in the past couple of days, he’d been trailed. These boys were starting to get to him, if not physically, because he’d always managed to shake them off, then definitely mentally. Automatically he started searching for a pair of watchful eyes. Suppressing the urge, he tried to focus on the mission. “Did anyone bring the maps?”

“Yeah, I thought it might be wise to take those along,” Ando smiled, tapping his backpack. He seemed to have packed the least of everyone, and definitely far less than Enise who just joined them. Daran stared at the mountain on her back, wondering what was in it.

“All set,” she said, seemingly oblivious. “Let’s head out.”

The hike turned out to be longer than Daran anticipated. He was glad of all the training of the past few weeks, but it still didn't fully prepare him for the long walk, nor for hours of incessant chattering from Clara. The only relief was that Enise didn't join in. Her vocabulary seemed to have been reduced to the word "Break?" Given the weight on her back, Daran couldn't blame her.

"Not yet," Ando replied for the umpteenth time. He was the one guiding them, and doing an expert job at it too. "We should be at our destination in a few minutes." True to his word, the small trail they were on opened up into a clearing, where they found a camp. Or at least, what was left of it.

"Awesome navigating Ando," Jarod said and ran forward.

"Wait a second," the boy mumbled, but the rest of the group was so entranced by their discovery that they paid him no heed and started to investigate.

The most obvious sign that something was amiss was the collapsed tent, which had several tears. Inside they found two sleeping bags, still mostly intact, but no backpacks or anything that could provide information.

Outside there were remnants of a campfire that had burned out. "I found a pan," Clara called, and indeed, a few meters off there was a travel-sized kettle lying in the dirt. They walked around the clearing and found a few other cooking utensils, scattered around.

"I'd say there was a fight," Daran summarized. "Maybe they used the kitchen supplies as weapons of some sort, and I suppose someone may have fallen on the tent, which caused it to break

down. In the end, whoever attacked them took the hunters and the bags somewhere else.”

“Or the hunters fended them off and left, only having time to grab their bags,” Enise countered with a smirk.

“Either way, where did they go?” Clara voiced the thoughts that everyone was thinking.

“We should look for footprints,” Enise contributed. “I saw some leading that way.” She pointed over her shoulder, in the opposite direction of where they’d come from. Indeed, there were lots of impressions of boots in the dirt, all leading to a small creek a few dozen meters further. The trail ended there.

“Of course this is where the tracks go,” Daran noted. “It’s where they got their water.”

“Hey, I thought it was a good idea,” Enise said defensively, but Daran shrugged it off. He hadn’t meant it as an attack.

Taking the opportunity, the four students eagerly refilled their bottles. Daran hadn’t run out of water yet, but he’d rather not take chances on running dry.

Something felt off though, and it took Daran a moment to figure out what. *Four?* he wondered. *Where’s Ando?* He walked back to the camp site, where he saw the boy some distance off, studying the ground. After a little while Ando returned, just when the others also got back.

“Found anything?” Daran asked.

“There’s not much I can make out from the camp site,” he reported. “There’s prints everywhere now. But there are three main trails leading away from here. The one we arrived on, of course, and then one in either direction.”

Quickly the group spread out again, to look for prints near any of the paths. After a few minutes they gathered again, near the trail where they came from. Daran wanted to voice his thoughts, but he held back, first listening to the findings of the others.

“There are no prints on this path, other than our own,” Clara said, “but I found quite a few on the trail on the right. I’d say that’s where they’ve gone to.”

“Or came from,” Ando reasoned. “I’ve found prints leading away from the camp site on the trail on the left.”

“But not enough for the thinkers and their attackers,” Enise argued. “There were so many prints on the right! They must have both come from there and left there again.”

“I’m with Ando on this,” Jarod noted. “What about you, Daran?”

Daran’s main impression had been the same as that of the girls. “I’m with them,” he said, pointing to the girls, which got him a contemptuous look from Enise. *Don’t worry, I’m not agreeing with you just to get in your good book again*, he said in his mind, though he didn’t dare to speak the words out loud. “So what do we do now?”

“They’ve already taken out two hunters, so I don’t think splitting up is the best idea,” Jarod said. “I guess we just go with the majority?”

Ando shrugged. “Fine,” he said, not very happily. And so they took the path on the right.

To Daran’s surprise, despite being overruled, the boy didn’t trudge after them but eagerly took the lead, studying every part of the trail. Daran wondered whether that was because he was so

enthusiastic about searching for traces, or whether he just wanted to find them before they were disturbed by their group.

After nearly an hour, doubt started to creep in. "There's nothing yet," Clara voiced her thoughts, supported by a nod from Enise. "Maybe we should try the other path."

"But there are still prints," Ando noted, surprised at the change of heart.

"Well, I just think we should've found something already," Clara explained.

Daran sent Jarod a questioning look, who shrugged. "Fine, why not?" he said. And so the group doubled back to the campsite, which they reached a quarter of an hour later.

The other trail gave a similar experience. There were a lot less signs of people passing through, but every now and then Ando still managed to find a clear print in the mud. Nevertheless, after more than an hour, the doubt returned. This time it was Jarod voicing nearly everyone's thoughts. "The other trail did have a lot more traces."

Ando let out a sigh. "So we go back again?"

"I guess," Daran shrugged. They turned around, passed by the camp and found the place on the other trail where they'd originally turned around. Here they spent another half hour searching for clues, which slowly became harder and harder to find. It wasn't until Ando spoke up that Daran realized why.

"It's getting dark. We'd better go set up our camp site."

"Let's head back to the clearing then," Jarod suggested. "There's already a place for a fire there." No one voiced any objections, and so they once more turned around.

They didn't go far before Ando stopped them. "Something's off," he said. "There's a print here that's leading back to the camp site."

"No kidding," Enise snorted. "We've only been here like twenty times already."

"That's not it," Ando added. "The print is on top of ours. Like someone was here after us."

Daran let out a yawn. He wasn't in the mood for stuff like this. He just wanted to sit down and rest. "It's hard to see with this light. If you're right, we'll figure it out tomorrow."

The others seemed to agree, and so they moved onwards. After gathering some wood, Ando managed to get a fire going. Pretty soon everyone was wrapped up in their sleeping bag, sitting around the flames, eating whatever food they had brought. Enise had apparently brought an entire cooking set. Jarod had only packed a basic potato salad for Daran and himself, and though it wasn't as good as a warm meal, after a day like this Daran would happily devour anything.

"It feels strange, to be sleeping out in the open like this," Clara said. "Too bad the tent is in pieces. Otherwise I'd claim it."

"Maybe we should set a guard," Ando suggested, but this got him a snort from Enise.

"Really, Ando," she said. "We've been looking the entire day and haven't found anyone. There's no one here. Just get some rest."

Ando let out a sigh and fell backwards onto his bedroll. Daran lay down as well, amazed at how all decisions were taken. *Is this*

how teamwork is supposed to be? he wondered. *Whoever is the most insistent?* He honestly didn't know.

Though the mission had been stressful for the others, the walk had actually managed to clear his mind. For the first time in ages, he wasn't worrying about a dozen different things at the same time. *There's nothing I can do about it from here anyway.* So quickly he drifted off into a well-deserved slumber, and before long he was fast asleep.

Chapter 16 – Taken

“That bunch of gizmo shit!” Clara shouted loudly, instantly waking Daran up.

What in the world is going on? He sat up and looked around. Though it was still dark, the stars gave a faint glimmer of light, which showed the girl frantically looking around the clearing.

“What’s happening?” Jarod asked. “Are we being attacked?”

“My bag is gone!” she called out.

Immediately Daran’s eyes flew to his side, where his own one was still safely lying on the ground.

“Swarf, so is mine,” Ando added, who was already up and walking around.

How did he get out of his sleeping bag so quickly? Daran wondered.

“Mine’s still here,” Jarod said, relieved. Also Enise’s was present, which didn’t surprise Daran. Her mobile kitchen was still scattered all over her bag, so anyone who wanted to steal her backpack had to lift an entire metal store quietly enough not to wake anyone up.

“There’s no one around,” Ando reported after completing his quick survey. “My guess is they’re long gone.”

“Why would they steal our stuff?” Clara wondered out loud. “They just happened to come across our camp and felt like making a quick profit?”

“This isn’t about money,” Ando said matter-of-factly. “You don’t just walk through the forest at night for fun. These guys

knew we were here and directly targeted us. My guess is they want to scare us off. They're hoping we pack up and go home."

"So we don't," Jarod proposed. "We go and find them."

"Not like this we won't," Ando said. "There's no way we'll find them in the dark. Sunrise isn't for another hour or so. If one of us stays awake as guard, the rest can still get some rest."

"I'll stay up," Daran volunteered. He'd already slept more than he was used to these days, so he doubted he could get back to it in the first place.

"Thanks," Jarod softly said, turning over in his sleeping bag. Daran climbed out of his and got dressed, putting on every single piece of clothing he had with him.

He wrapped his coat as tightly around him as he could, and still he was shivering as he walked around the camp site, searching for anything Ando may have missed. It all seemed normal though, with the three leftover bags in place, the remains of the fire undisturbed and the torn-up tent still containing the sleeping bag. *Wait, just one sleeping bag?* Daran wondered. *I thought there were two?*

With chattering teeth, he sat down on his mattress, gently unzipped his own sleeping bag and wrapped it around him. It was still warm on the inside. *So who would steal two backpacks, and then dare drag a sleeping bag out of a collapsed tent?* It didn't make the slightest sense. In the end Daran just shrugged, assuming it was part of the mission. *It's a special group mission after all. Anything can happen in one of those.*

During the long wait Daran's thoughts drifted off to his trainings. He started preparing them in his mind, visualizing

himself explaining workshop skills, staff drills and more. As he kept going over his storyline, he found ways to explain things more clearly and in less time. He couldn't wait to try them out.

With the sun slowly rising, Clara woke up and soon Jarod followed, expectantly looking over at Daran. The boy decided it was time. "Wake up guys!" he called. "It's time to get going again." Some unhappy moaning followed, but no one complained.

They put together their breakfasts, sharing what was left. Then, while Enise set to packing her bag, Ando walked another circle around the camp site, looking for clues.

"Nothing," he said after Daran gave him a questioning look. "They must have come from one of the paths, and those were already littered with prints."

Clara let out a sigh. "That's just great. So what do we do now?"

Daran decided to suggest what he'd come up with during his thinking this morning. "Let's pick a path and follow it for at least two hours, with a decent walking pace. Then either we find something, or we know for sure that that direction isn't worth looking into."

"Sounds good," Jarod nodded. "Which one?"

Daran thought about it for a second, until an idea came up. "Ando, you choose one."

"The left one," the boy said without hesitation.

"But what about my sleeping bag and mattress?" Clara asked. "I can't exactly put them in my backpack."

Daran shrugged. "I'll bind them onto mine. Jarod can take Ando's. Let's get ready. We start walking in five."

Jarod stifled a laugh. After Daran gave him a look, he explained. "You sound just like you're starting up a training."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Daran immediately said, remembering he didn't want to come across as dominant on this mission, but Jarod shoved his apology aside.

"Don't be. It's good to have someone organize the group."

This left Daran even more confused, but he just shrugged and made sure his own bag was ready for departure.

They took off with Ando in the lead. While Jarod and Daran were discussing ideas for staff trainings, and the girls were chatting in the back, the boy kept his eyes focused on the path. Soon he told the others they had passed the turning point of the day before, which Daran accepted without question. All the trees looked the same to him, so he didn't have a clue where he was either way.

Every now and then Ando called for the group to stop. While the others used this time to take a sip of water, he studied the ground, confirming every time that they were on the right track. "People have passed by here one or two days ago. It looks like a group of three."

"Three?" Daran wondered. "The two missing hunters and only one captor? That doesn't make any sense."

"Maybe they carried the hunters?" Jarod suggested, but Ando shook his head.

"All this distance? When the hunters are struggling, that's plain impossible. Even when they're dead, it's really tough. A person is five to ten times heavier than these bags of ours, and you can't exactly strap one onto your back either."

Though it was just a simulation, Daran felt that even the mere idea of murdered hunters suppressed the mood. After all, one day this could become reality. “Let’s not assume they’re gone already,” he said. “We haven’t found anything indicating this. We should keep on going.”

Ando nodded and led them further down the trail. A bit over an hour after they set out, he suddenly stopped and raised his hand, quieting the others. “There’s a clearing up ahead,” he whispered to them. “We better approach it with care, in case someone’s still there.”

Daran didn’t see any open space yet, but that changed soon enough. There was a small circle of mostly long grass and rocks, less than twenty paces across, and it was empty, with the path continuing on the other side.

“Hold up,” he whispered to the others, who were eager to move in and check things out. “We stay here. Ando, can you do a quick inspection?”

The boy gave Daran a surprised look, but then eagerly moved in to walk around the opening, regularly squatting down to examine something. After a minute or two, he was done. “Nothing recent,” he said on a normal volume, releasing the tension that had been in the group. “But I found something that might be important. Come and have a look.”

Quickly the five students made a small circle around a piece of red cloth lying in a patch of long grass, but no one dared to touch it. Daran got the feeling that the others were looking at him, so he eventually picked it up and unwrapped it. They all recognized it

for what it was: the lower half of the sleeve of a hunter's jacket. A small yellow object fluttered out, and Jarod picked it up.

"It's a note," he said, carefully unfolding the damp piece of paper. It had a few slipshod scribbles on it. "Captured by Minds. Surrounded at night. Unhurt. Took B somewhere else. Destination unclear. P." He turned the note over, looking for more. "That's it," he eventually said.

The group was silent for a moment, processing the implications. "We better keep following them," Ando noted afterwards. "Maybe we can find out where they've gone to."

"Really?" Clara asked. "It's only a simulation. We figured out what happened. Let's just go home."

"Oh, come on!" Ando called out. "We have to act like it's real. Hunters have been abducted. We can't just say, 'Oh, they're taken. Well, that sucks for them. Next time they shouldn't let themselves be captured.' I mean, what would you expect us to do if it was you?"

Clara let out a deep sigh. "Fine. I'll just ... keep following you guys." Daran guessed she'd not taken last night well, and only wanted to go home.

They continued following the trail, but a few minutes later they hit a larger path, big enough to support carts.

"Swarf," Ando cursed. "They probably drove Plake out from here." He walked around the intersection, but his look became grimmer by the second. "Nothing. He could've gone either way."

"Fine," Daran nodded. "We might as well go back then."

An hour later they returned to the camp site, where the inevitable discussion ensued. "I think we should follow the other path too," Ando said. "That's where they must have taken Balus."

"Seriously?!" Clara called out, exasperated. "Well, I'm not taking another step that's not in the direction of the Academy. You want to keep on walking around? Go ahead, but I'm staying here."

"Fine by me," Ando calmly shrugged. "Let's go." Immediately he set out walking along the final path.

The others were torn about who to follow. Eventually, after Daran gave Clara a quick "We'll be back in two hours or so," they all ran after Ando, who had already vanished around the corner.

None of them dared to discuss what had happened, so they walked in an awkward silence. After a bit more than an hour, they found another clearing, and just like in the previous one, there was a red piece of cloth with a note hidden in it.

"This is so fake," Ando said, examining their discovery. "Even the contents of the note are the same, except with the initials reversed. I guess the Academy only wanted us to find one of them."

"Yeah, probably," Jarod nodded. "So let's go back."

As usual the return trip went faster. Daran's legs felt tired from all the walking, so he was eager to get back home. When they got back to the clearing, something was off though.

"Where's Clara?" Enise voiced everyone's thoughts. They looked around, but couldn't find any sign of her.

"Clara?!" Jarod loudly called out. There was no reply.

Daran found Ando squatting near the side of the clearing, picking something up. "What have you got?" he asked him.

"A ring," Ando said, showing a silver trinket with a small blue stone. "Does it look familiar?"

"Yeah, that's hers," Enise said. "And she wouldn't just lose it."

"Swarf, that means they got her," Ando said. "She managed to drop it before she was taken."

"Do you think this is part of the mission?" Enise wondered.

"Of course it is," Jarod immediately replied. "I mean it's a special group mission. Anything can happen on those."

Enise gave him a frown. "The disappearing bags were already a stretch, but a kidnapping?"

"Guys, what does it matter?" Ando interjected. "The main question is, how are we gonna fix this?"

"Look around, I guess?" Enise suggested, but this resulted in a snort from Jarod.

"If they've taken her, they're not just keeping her around, waiting for us to find her."

"Well, we can't just leave her behind!"

All the time Daran felt his frustration growing inside of him. It was like yesterday all over again. Indecisive group discussions up to the point where no one got anything done. He'd been fine with it then, but this time they really couldn't afford it. And to be honest, he'd had enough of it anyway.

"Stop it," he said with more determination than he'd ever shown in any of his trainings. Immediately the others were silent. "There's no way we're just going to stumble onto them," he told

them, soft enough that they couldn't be overheard. "Instead, we're setting up a trap. Enise, how well can you blow on your fingers?"

"Well enough," she said, curious where this was going.

"Good. You stay here and, as soon as anyone appears, you blow on your fingers as loud as you can. Each of us will choose one of the outgoing paths and walk a hundred steps out. That's where we will hide. As soon as we get the signal, we come running in to get them."

"So I'm bait?" Enise asked, somewhat daunted by the prospect.

Jarod gave her an encouraging nod. "We're just around the corner." It seemed to put her at ease.

Thanks Jarod, Daran gratefully thought. He knew that comment was a lot more effective not coming from himself.

"Okay," he finally said in a voice loud enough to carry outside of the clearing. "You stay here and guard the bags. We'll see if we can find Clara."

One by one the boys set out along different paths. A hundred paces further, Daran stepped off the beaten trail and laid down on a bed of leaves. It felt like torture, having to wait without knowing anything that was going on. Several minutes passed, but he was determined to make this work. And that wasn't only because he didn't have any other ideas.

Less than a second after the whistle sounded, he was up and running. As soon as he entered the clearing, any lingering doubt that this was part of the official mission vanished, because right in the middle of the clearing, only three meters away from Enise, was a boy with a knife. And Daran hadn't only seen the same boy

before, but also the same knife, when he had gotten ambushed himself, only a month ago.

It's happening again, he thought, his fear turning into anger. *But I won't let it. I'm not getting the people I care about hurt again.* "You are so dead," he grunted through his teeth.

The boy, who had not expected any company, immediately bolted away from Daran. He had wanted to flee down one of the other paths, but both were blocked by Daran's friends, and so he flew into the thicket. Daran went after him, and for a while they dashed through the trees, jumping over logs and pushing their way through branches. Slowly Daran was catching up, which the boy also seemed to figure out. At the same time, he realized that he was the one with a knife. Suddenly he stopped, turned around and pointed his weapon straight at Daran.

The Academy student stopped just in time, only three meters away from this target. "I've had it with you," he barked as he detached the metal rod hanging from his belt. He twisted both ends to unlock the device, and the quick spin that followed extended it into a full-grown staff.

The boy seemed awed at the quick transition in front of him. Daran took advantage of the hesitation by taking two quick steps forward and launching an attack. His first strike blasted the knife out of the hand of his assailant. Before the boy had any time to react, the second attack with the other end of the staff hit him against his head, and the third struck him in his kneecap, dropping him to the ground. In just a second or two the fight was over.

But Daran didn't consider the matter as over. Anger was still coursing through his veins. Despite that the boy was lying on his

back, he swung his staff downwards. Desperately the kid tried to protect his face with his arms, but how could you protect yourself from a hardened steel bar? The second downward stroke caused him to cry out in pain, and after the third strike a loud crack was audible, followed by an even more excruciating scream.

Suddenly Daran was tackled, and it was only then that he realized Jarod had been behind him all this time, calling his name. “Daran! Stop!” his friend shouted out as they rolled through the leaves together. As the sound of the crack resounded once more in his head, Daran felt a wave of sickness well up inside of him. *That breaking sound was definitely not my staff.* But now was not the time for that. He had to fix this, or at least salvage the situation as best as he could.

He stood up, leaning on his staff for support. The boy was still lying on the ground, with his right arm bent at an unnatural angle. “Where’s Clara?” Daran asked him, trying to show as much anger as he could, even though it had all vanished with the realization of what he’d done.

“Just past the creek,” he said in-between sobs. “I tied her up with rope from the bag I stole.”

“That was my bag!” Ando called out. Daran hadn’t even realized he had arrived too. “Why did you take it?”

“Because I was scrapping hungry and cold, alright?! I didn’t sign up for any of this.”

“So why are you and your friends stalking me then?!” Daran shouted back.

“It’s just orders. We only need to scare you and that Donato guy, so you give up searching for whatever it is that you’re after. I

don't know why, but some powerful people don't want you to find it."

Scrap, Daran thought. *This is bigger than I feared*. "I still don't get it. Why do *you* do it? Wait out in the cold for weeks, waiting for me to leave the Academy? Work for this piece of milling scrap Jokan in the first place? Why not just stay home?"

With a hurt look in his eyes, the boy let out a deep sigh. The pain wasn't just physical, from his broken arm. It was emotional, deeper even than Daran had ever felt himself. "To survive," he softly said.

As Daran gave the boy another look, he realized how similar they were. Roughly the same age, the same body type, the same hair color. *That could have been me*, he thought. *If the Academy hadn't taken me in, or if I hadn't learned any workshop skills, this would have been me*.

At that point he got even more disgusted with himself for what he had done. *This isn't his fault. It's more mine than his*. Realizing what it meant, he swallowed. *I need to fix this*.

"Ando, Enise, can you go pick Clara up?" he ordered. "She's just past the creek. Jarod, can you head back to the clearing and get our med kit? I'll need it here."

The three ran off without question. Daran sat down and silently waited for Jarod to return. When he did, Daran used his first-aid training to patch up the broken arm as best as he could, hanging it in a sling from the boy's neck. Then all three of them walked back to the camp site.

“What’s he doing here?” Clara asked when she saw her assailant. She seemed to be massaging her wrists, restoring the blood flow.

“He’s having lunch with us,” Daran curtly said, not accepting any further questions. With the two missing bags returned, there was plenty of food, although it also helped that neither Daran nor his guest was any hungry at all.

When everyone had eaten enough, they refilled their bottles in the creek, packed up the bags and set out. Ando and the girls went at the head of the column, with Daran and Jarod just behind them. The sixth member of the party was trailing a few dozen meters after them, which seemed just fine with everyone. While no one was in the mood to talk with him, Daran also couldn’t bear letting him get lost on his own; not after the state he’d put him in. The only times Daran walked over was during breaks, when he’d share his water supply.

As the evening fell, they could see Tarine appear in the distance. It led to the question that had been on everyone’s mind, though Jarod was the first who dared ask it. “What do we do with him? Do we turn him over to the Academy?”

Daran considered it, but he strongly doubted the Academy would treat the boy anywhere near as well as it had treated him. *Which hasn’t been perfect either*, he mentally added.

“No, that’s not going to help anyone,” he eventually said. “He’s got to find his own way.”

With the temptation of a warm shower and a soft bed calling, they accelerated their pace. It wasn’t long before they’d lost sight of their tail.

When they finally walked through the Academy gates Daran couldn't help but wonder where the boy would wind up.

Chapter 17 – The burden of leadership

“Okay, when were you planning to tell me about this?” Quenton angrily yelled at Daran from across the room. He wasn’t even in his chair anymore, but strolled back and forth behind his desk.

Daran had expected something like this to happen. He couldn’t exactly hide Clara’s brief kidnapping from the Academy during the debriefing this morning. The scholar in charge of the group mission had immediately forwarded the issue to the scholar leader, which is where Daran had to explain why they’d been followed in the first place. Naturally, Quenton hadn’t been too happy about the story he got.

“What was I supposed to do then?” Daran shouted back. “Tell everyone that, every time I walk out of the Academy, I feel like I’m being followed? Yeah, that’ll come across well.”

“Then we could’ve fixed this before it caused problems!” Quenton countered. “Search for these boys and question them.”

“Like that would’ve happened,” Daran snorted. “The Academy doesn’t exactly have the best track record at believing me.”

“No, but I do!” Quenton immediately replied, a hurt look on his face.

The office, which moments before had seemed too small, was now filled with an oppressive silence. It made Daran shrink in his chair. *He’s right*, he thought, taken aback.

“Yes, you usually were the only one who believed me,” he eventually said with a solemn nod. “But you haven’t always been

able to help me, which is why I need to solve my problems by myself.”

“I don’t mind that you do,” Quenton added. “Just ... keep me in the loop. I don’t like having to wonder what you’re hiding from me.”

Just a couple of things, he thought. *Okay, pretty big things*. But he passively remained sitting in his chair, keeping his musings to himself. He couldn’t exactly tell Quenton he was playing both sides of the strike.

“About the strike ... ” Quenton started, which directly got Daran sitting up straight in his chair.

“Eh, yeah?” he cautiously asked.

“You’ve been listening in on them for three weeks now. Have you heard anything about their plans?”

Daran tried to hide the sigh of relief he let out, until he realized that he hadn’t checked in on Novic in quite a few days.

“You are still listening, right?” Quenton asked.

“Yeah, I am,” Daran nodded. “There’s just not much going on. They’re simply waiting until the companies get in trouble because of missing parts. Some businesses are now importing parts from outside of Tarine, so the workshop owners are looking into ways to stop that. In fact, there’s a meeting about that tomorrow, I think.” Truth be told, he didn’t know any of this from listening to Novic’s recordings. It was all from a much better form of spying: Kira had dropped him a note on this a few days before.

“Any idea on how they want to do that?” Quenton asked. “Steal shipments or something?”

Daran shook his head. “They’re not sure yet, but I expect they’ll drop by the workshops delivering these parts – the ones outside the city – and ask them to join the strike.”

“Ah, okay,” Quenton said, though he didn’t seem satisfied.

Daran wondered what was behind the disappointment. “You actually want them to steal those shipments?”

“No! Well ... yes. Then we can do something about all of this.”

Daran let out a brief snort. “The moment the Thought Academy is hoping for people to commit a crime, you know something is wrong,” he said. “Why is this new workshop law still around in the first place? It’s the cause of everything, and it’s not helping in any way.”

“You do not understand what’s going on,” Quenton countered. “There’s a lot of politics behind it.”

“Politics?” Daran huffed. “They came up with a scrappy law, and now they don’t dare to remove it again because they’ll look silly. Am I close?”

Quenton let out a deep sigh. “It’s ... complicated. But it’s not the job of the Academy to question the laws. We merely enforce them. And for you that means you keep spying on this group. Is that clear?”

That’s milling scrap, Daran thought. *The ones enforcing the laws are exactly the people who should be able to question them. They see the effects of their enforcement firsthand! But then again, the Academy already had a hand in this law in the first place.*

Slowly he started to see that arguments would get him nowhere here. It was better to fix things on his own. “Yes, it’s clear.”

“Then you can go,” Quenton said, nodding to the door. Daran returned his nod and left the office.

That wasn't so bad, he thought as he walked down the hallway. *At least this time he didn't tell me not to get involved.* But quickly his mind tuned to something far more interesting. It was what he'd been curious about for the last two days. *The workshop training Zeris took over.* He still didn't know how it had gone.

He crossed the footbridge and the Academy square, entering the student quarters. When he knocked on Zeris' room, there was no reply. *No surprise*, he thought, since the morning was well underway. He continued by checking the study hall and the student workshops, but again there was no sign.

He's a tough guy to track down, Daran said to himself, double-checking whether Zeris' face wasn't hidden behind a machine somewhere. It wasn't, but a few of the freshmen that attended the training were. *I could also just ask them how it went.*

So one by one he dropped by the students to check in on their experiences. A part of him was afraid that it had been terrible, and that they'd all complain. Yet another part of him feared that they'd be ecstatic about Zeris' performance. In truth, he expected them to be slightly critical of his replacement. But what he got was something he hadn't expected: indifference.

“Yeah, it was fine,” one of the freshmen shrugged, looking up from his sawing work. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, I wasn't there,” Daran explained. “So it wasn't any better or worse than usual?”

“No, not really,” the boy said, shaking his head. “I mean, Zeris has a slightly different style than you, but that doesn’t matter much.”

It baffled Daran. Of course Zeris worked within the structure he’d set, so he hoped that counted for something. But other than that, they really didn’t care who was leading the trainings! It made him wonder whether he could let others take over more often. At least it was worthwhile to have Jarod give part of a staff fighting training some time.

Speaking of Jarod ... Daran still wanted to drop by his friend. He walked over to the study halls and found the small sideroom where he knew the boy was burying himself in books. After some smalltalk, he brought up what he’d come to discuss: the group mission.

Of course they had already done the official briefing this morning, which is where the thinker who sent them out had told them about how they did. Apart from the stalker discrepancy, which wasn’t part of the mission to begin with, he was pleased with their performance. Few groups managed to find both notes. Most only found one, or none at all, while some teams got so lost that they never even reached the main camp site. The verdict was that they had done well.

As usual when it comes to the Academy, Daran didn’t agree. “We were terrible!” he called out to his friend. “There was no teamwork at all!”

“What do you mean?” Jarod asked. “We did everything together, right?”

“Just doing things together doesn’t make us an effective team. If you want to hammer a nail into the wall, you can let everyone hit it once, or just assign one person who fixes it. Which works better?”

“Fair point,” Jarod said, laughing about the comparison.

“But it’s not about who is doing the work. It’s about how decisions are made.”

“Like whether to take the left or the right path?”

“Yeah,” Daran nodded. “We just went with the majority. But every time one person switched sides, we ended up going the other way again. It’s why we never got anywhere in the first place!”

Jarod gave him a frown. “You’re saying that, to be effective, we needed a leader?”

This gave Daran pause. “Well, maybe. But having a scrappy leader is just as bad.”

“What should we have done then?” Jarod asked, raising his hands in confusion.

“Isn’t it obvious here?” Daran said rhetorically. “Did you see Ando? He was finding clues no one else even thought of checking for. That guy is a footprint genius! We should’ve let him make the call.”

Jarod nodded. “His father often takes him hunting.”

“You mean you knew?” Daran asked incredulously.

“Why do you think I took his side in the first place?” Jarod countered. “But I don’t see what you’re getting at yet. You’re saying we should’ve made Ando lead us?”

“Swarf, no!” Daran loudly called out, the aggression in his voice shocking Jarod back into his chair. Daran rushed to explain.

“He’s an okay guy, but he’s more silent than a deactivated gizmo. A leader needs his team to trust him. That he’ll fix it when things go bad. You can’t get that if you don’t even explain what’s going on. And besides, a leader also needs to keep his eye on the big picture. Ando would probably search for clues until the end of the week.”

“If anyone keeps their eye on the big picture, it’s you Daran,” Jarod noted. “So maybe you should’ve taken the lead.”

Oh, now I should have taken charge? Daran thought wryly, though he didn’t say it out loud. Instead he shook his head again. “A good leader knows his team. I only knew you and ... well ... Enise. Much good that would do me. You’re the guy who always knows everyone, Jarod.”

“Ha, now I should’ve been the leader!” the boy laughed. “If there’s one thing I’m bad at, it’s keeping my eye on the goal. I’m already scared shitless about having to lead my own group missions later on.”

“In that case, we’re kind of stuck,” Daran noted.

“Yeah,” Jarod nodded with a smile. “We’re all pieces of milling scrap that can’t lead a bolt into a nut.”

Daran let out a sigh, and silence returned to the room. Both were thinking about the problem, with Daran going back to check his assumptions. *Why do we need an official leader in the first place?* Walking through possible reasons, he found that all he could come up with was, ‘Because people have always done it like this,’ which was pretty much the worst reason for anything. Eventually he had a thought. “What about splitting things up?”

Jarod looked confused. “You mean ... joint leadership?”

“No,” Daran said, vehemently shaking his head. “Let’s get rid of that whole leading thing. It means that someone is in some way above the others, which should never automatically be the case.”

“Okay ...” Jarod nodded, wondering where this was going.

“Look, we first need someone who keeps an overview of the task at hand, right? Who figures out what needs to be done.”

“Like, splitting the task up into smaller subtasks?”

“Exactly,” Daran agreed. “Let’s call him the task splitter, or something like it. He’s the one that says, ‘We need to look for footprints.’”

“So that would be you,” Jarod noted.

“Yes, it could be me. So perhaps I know what needs to be done, but I don’t know who’s the best at each task. So that’s where I pass these tasks along to you, where you assign them to the group members.”

“So that makes me what? The task assigner?”

“Sure,” Daran shrugged. “You’d then tell Ando to look for clues. You could’ve even assigned Enise to manage food for everyone. If she was bringing a cooking set in the first place, we might as well have made a warm meal for everyone.”

“She would have had to carry all our food?” Jarod countered, laughing, but Daran shook his head.

“No. You could’ve told Ando to manage supplies, and divide it over our bags, because he seemed to be good at packing li –”

“Clara would be better at that,” Jarod interjected. It left Daran confused, and just when Jarod was about to elaborate, Daran burst out laughing.

“You are a blasted good task assigner!” he cried out. Only then did Jarod see what he had done and guffawed along.

When the snickering had died out, Jarod started wondering how to actually use this. “I’ve seen it happen often enough that someone just assigns tasks directly, without getting them from someone else. You mean that’s wrong?”

It somehow made Daran think back to the first group mission that ever went well for him. Last year they had to solve a murder, and Jona had done an expert job of leading the team of first-year students to the suspect. “Not really,” Daran answered. “If you have someone who knows both the people and the task at hand, then he can be both task splitter and task assigner. It could be more efficient. My point is that you don’t always have people that can do both.”

“Alright, that makes sense,” Jarod admitted. “We need a splitter and an assigner. But what if people volunteer for tasks? You mean that shouldn’t happen?”

Daran’s thoughts once more drifted to the same mission, where he had actually volunteered for a task. “No, they can. Of course you can show a preference. But the task assigner has to check whether it actually makes sense. If you volunteer for something, but the assigner needs you somewhere else, then you’re simply out of luck.”

As Jarod let this sink in, he slowly started nodding. “This whole set-up would have made our mission a lot easier. Less walking, and more warm food. I’m in!” he joked. But as Daran gave him a smile, the boy’s gaze drifted off again. “It won’t work though. I mean, how can we get everyone on board with this? You never know who

you'll be teamed up with. We can't have this discussion at the start of every mission!"

Daran nodded, a sly grin appearing on his face. "Don't you think it's strange how the Academy expects us to be able to work in groups, but never really teaches us how we should do that?"

When Jarod saw the twinkling in his friend's eyes, he had to ask. "What are you going to do?"

"I might just write a summary," Daran said, giving him a knowing wink.

"Like, a teamwork manual?" Jarod asked, excited.

When Daran thought about it, that actually seemed like a better name. "Yeah," he nodded, all the while thinking, *Jarod is much better at coming up with the terminology for this*. It gave him yet another idea, which he doubted he would have had before this mission.

"Care to help?"

Chapter 18 – Hidden goals

Calmly Daran walked through the streets of the merchant district, on his way to Magnus. The sky was a clear blue, and the fresh snow of last night made everything glimmer. Taking a deep breath, he thought back to all the things that had happened the past few weeks.

It had been over a month since he'd broken the arm of his stalker, and he hadn't been followed since. It was a welcome relief, because he was dropping by Donato nearly every other day now. These visits cost a lot of time, but the progress showed. By this time he was able to hold basic conversations in Erydic, and his teacher actually had to break a sweat to still beat him in a staff battle.

The only reason why Daran could keep this up was the help he had enlisted in organizing trainings. Last month he'd posted a note at the summary table, asking whether people would like to join in giving them. He'd made it clear that no experience was required; he'd coach them along the way. Several people had reacted, some of whom Daran had never even anticipated, but all were enthusiastic. By now he had help for every training he gave, except of course for his favorite one. He kept the advanced workshop trainings for himself.

It still varied how much everyone did. Zeris turned out to be a natural, and he had pretty much taken over the basic workshop training altogether. Jarod was also progressing well with the staff trainings, organizing them on his own, and only needing advice on what kind of exercises to set up. His new aides for basic gizmo

handling and theoretical analysis still had a longer way to go, but they'd get there too.

The main point of confusion, as usual, was Enise. Last week she'd asked Daran out of the blue whether he could help her set up trainings on Kantaran law. Daran liked the idea – no one was helping students out on that subject in the first place – but working together with her was difficult. She understood the laws well enough, definitely better than Daran, but that was also the cause of the main problem: she didn't understand what the freshmen found difficult. For some reason she couldn't place herself in their shoes, and kept using terminology that they didn't know to explain concepts they didn't comprehend. The worst part was that she took Daran's feedback on this personally, seeing it as an affront rather than a means to improve. How to deal with that was something he still needed to figure out.

Daran had to zigzag through the crowd on the street, waking him out of his thoughts. He was surprised to find so many people out today. Most were merely standing around, doing nothing other than talking to each other. Usually these people would either be busy dragging goods back and forth, or be inside working on their bookkeeping. It showed that the strike was having an effect.

The past few weeks Magnus and his associates had dropped by all workshops in the neighbouring area. Not many had joined the strike and shut down, like those in the city, but most did agree to stop making specialized parts for now. It was good enough for Magnus.

Daran kept being amazed by how close-knit the community of workshop owners was. It seemed like they all knew each other and

everyone had once helped one another out when being late for a deadline. It was a far different story than the rumours of aggressive competition between merchants. *I guess that's why the Academy never anticipated the strike to work so well*, he thought.

But it still wasn't working well enough, Kira had said in her last message. It was time to fix that.

"So what exactly is the problem?" Daran asked when he finally made it to the old man's house and sat down in the usual comfy chair, next to Kira.

"They keep finding other ways to keep their machines up and running," Magnus explained. "Clever improvisation with basic parts from the bigger workshops, or with specialized parts made at the Academy."

"The Academy?" Daran repeated.

"Don't worry, those parts fail more often than not," Kira laughed. "The rumours are you only use Academy parts if you're either stupid or desperate."

Daran briefly smiled, feeling a surge of pride at his advanced workshop group, but quickly his mind turned back to the problem at hand. "How can we stop this then?"

"Simple," Magnus shrugged. "We need to shut down the bigger workshops too."

Daran frowned at this. "That's impossible. They already made it very clear that they wouldn't join the strike. These companies can't wait until all their competition is gone."

"I never said they'd stop their work voluntarily," Magnus said with a sly smile on his face. "But what can they do when they don't have any raw materials to work with?"

“You’re going after the supply lines! But how? You can’t target the smelters. There’s too many of them. The only place it all has to go through is – ”

“The distribution center,” Kira nodded. “That’s where all the ore comes in. Take it out and eventually everything grinds to a halt.”

“I still don’t see how,” Daran said with an even larger frown. “How can you get the distribution to stop?”

Kira hesitated with her answer. “That’s still a point of contention,” she admitted. Daran gave her a questioning look, but it was Magnus who clarified.

“Yesterday we had a meeting about this with Geno and Tobin,” he said. “They were getting impatient and pushed for a quick solution: sabotage.”

“They want to take out all carts carrying ore into the city,” Kira added. “No transport means no raw materials. And with the weight of the ore that’s transported, the trolleys need specialized parts to be repaired, which you of course cannot get these days.”

Very effective, Daran thought, but at the same time he remembered the conversation he had with Quenton a month ago. “It won’t work. The Academy is waiting for a reason to start arresting people. As soon as this happens, they’ll be up in arms. They’ll pick up the leaders, after which everyone else will be too frightened to speak up.”

“Exactly,” Magnus nodded. “So that’s why we convinced them to go with our plan.”

“Which is?” Daran wondered.

“A protest,” Magnus explained. “We set up a large gathering in front of the facility. No carts go in or out. They’ll think it’s only for a day, but it turns out we’ll never leave. We will always have people blocking their gates, day and night.”

“But it’s the middle of the winter!” Daran exclaimed, remembering all the snow he just had to plow his way through. More was expected in the days to come.

“Which only emphasizes our message of how important this is to us,” Magnus added. “We’re still busy arranging it all, setting up a schedule of who’s going when, taking care that they have enough warm clothes, food and water, and so on. We should be good to go in two weeks or so.”

“And Tobin and Geno agreed to this?” Daran checked.

Magnus was nodding. “Eventually.” But at the same time Kira looked hesitant. When Daran gave her a questioning look, she explained.

“It’s not the impression I had from Tobin last evening. He seemed excited about something, and it wasn’t the protest.”

“You think he’s up to something,” Daran said.

“Yes!” Kira called out, but Magnus shook his head.

“They said they would join, and so we have to believe them on that,” he said decisively. “If we start distrusting each other now, we might as well give up right away.”

It didn’t ease Kira’s worries. “But what if he – ”

“We’ve had this discussion already!” Magnus high-handedly cut her off. It shocked both teenagers back into their chairs.

I’ve never seen him like this, Daran thought. It seemed like the stress and uncertainty of how this would end was getting to all of

them. As usual, Daran didn't have a clue what he got himself into when he had started this, but he began to wonder whether Magnus did. He doubted the old man had expected things to go this far.

"The protest sounds like a great idea," Daran said in an effort to ease the tension. "As long as we keep this up, we will get there."

"We will see," Magnus nodded.

Daran studied the look on his face and found two expressions there. One was new to him – the stressed Magnus – but the other part was very familiar. It was the Magnus that was curious about the future, and how to make it as good as possible. When he eventually left the house again, he knew that this was the part of him that would pull them through.

As usual after visiting Magnus, Daran continued towards Donato's hide-out. Though he hadn't been followed in ages, he still took a somewhat circuitous route, crossing through several alleys until he made it to Cartwheel Alley. He opened the hatch of number 42 and climbed in, only to notice that it was dark inside. *That's strange*, Daran thought. *He knew I was coming. And he's always here anyway.*

When he reached the bottom of the staircase, he found a small slip of paper lying on the second-to-last tread. He picked it up and in the light coming through the opening up above he found two short lines written in Donato's handwriting.

Get out of here
Pile of junk

The second line had several arrows pointing towards it, as if to place emphasis on it.

Daran's thoughts got stuck on the first line. *Is it an insult? Or a warning?* Just in case, he quickly left the place and randomly crossed a few streets. Only then did he stop to lean against a wall, trying to come up with a story that would explain this.

Donato hadn't left in a hurry. He had turned the lights off and left a message for the first person who would enter. But who was the message for? *It could be that his hide-out was discovered*, he thought. *It meant he left this for Joka to find.* It would explain the angry note of the message, with the insult at the end.

Yet another part of him was wondering if the message could have been meant for him. It didn't make sense though. Why would Donato call him junk? He wasn't the type to randomly dole out curses. In fact, the man made a clear distinction between friends and enemies, and was only ruthless to the latter. *If Donato had found out that he'd been discovered, he'd probably boobytrap the place. Though I would expect him to leave me a warning then, and maybe let me know where I can find him instead.*

At that point Daran slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand, frustrated with himself. *Of course.* He put the piece of paper in his pocket and set out.

Ten minutes later he arrived at the trash heap. He walked around for a bit until someone whistled to him. It came from the man he was looking for, sitting beneath the overhang of a derelict building.

"You couldn't have written the note in Erydic?" Daran asked him.

“It would make it a bit obvious that there was a hidden meaning, wouldn’t it?”

“Fair enough,” Daran nodded. He casually looked around the place, studying the remnants of the house. At some places the roof had caved in, and beneath those holes there was snow on the ground. “Nice place you’ve got here. I can see why you moved. And the view is amazing too.”

“Don’t get funny with me,” Donato retorted. “I was an idiot. You don’t have to rub it in.”

“You mean – ” Daran started to ask, but his teacher already clarified.

“I got careless. After walking through the market square, I went straight to my hide-out without checking for a tail. I only noticed the kid when I entered Cartwheel Alley. I kept walking, of course, and led him a few alleys further before I lost him, but I can’t be sure they don’t know about the place.”

“So now you’re staying here,” Daran said matter-of-factly. “I’ll see if I can think of some other place for you.”

“Thanks, but I’ll manage,” Donato nodded. “Just you wait until I get my hands on that pile of scrap.”

“So that’s why you’re still in town?” Daran asked. “You haven’t completed your big plan of revenge on Joka yet?”

“Indeed,” Donato said. “It explains why I’m still here. It doesn’t explain why he’s still after me.”

“You’re asking – ”

“Yes. Why am I still being followed? Earlier you didn’t want to explain why you were followed, but it seems to be linked to me,

which is why I want to know.” His tone made it clear that he wasn’t merely asking.

“Fine,” Daran said. “As long as you keep what I’ll tell you to yourself.” He knew he’d promised Quenton not to tell anyone about Novic, but he guessed the scholar leader was mainly worried of rumours going around in the Academy. Donato wouldn’t cause any of those.

“You have my word,” the former translator promised.

“The short version is that I found an unregistered gizmo, made by Nolan. He built it somewhere outside of the Academy.”

Donato let out an appreciative whistle. “That’s some serious stuff,” he said, gesturing for Daran to continue.

“Naturally Nolan must have built a core creator somewhere, which is what everyone is searching for. I’ve managed to dig up a few of Nolan’s old secrets before, so my guess is some powerful people are worried I’ll find something. They sent those kids to discourage me from searching.”

“And since they can’t touch you inside the Academy, they went after you whenever you walked out. That makes sense, except for one part. How do I fit in?”

“The last time I got my information from you. People knew about that.”

This didn’t fall well with Donato. “And so they tried to take me out?” he yelled. “What kind of scrapped up idea is that?! I don’t know anything!”

“But people believe that you may,” Daran added, having already thought this whole theory through all too well in the past weeks. “No one expected this from Nolan. People say it’s like

Nolan had a second life, hidden from everyone. A life like he had before he graduated. And as far as I know, you're the only one who knew him well back then."

Donato let out a deep sigh. "Great. Not much I can do about that then. Good thing I'm already planning to leave town. It does leave one question though, who in the Academy hired Joka and his goons?"

Daran looked up at this. "It wasn't the Academy," he said with conviction. *Quenton would never allow it.*

"I wouldn't put it above them," Donato snorted. "And you said they knew you contacted me."

"They did," Daran nodded. "But the Minds have eyes and ears everywhere too."

"Sure, but what's in it for them? If they think I have information about where this creator is, then they should've captured me. And trust me, that's not what that piece of milling scrap was after when he trashed my house!"

"Well, that's the thing. The Minds don't have to find it. Of course it's great if they do. They may be able to use it, if they miraculously have someone who can operate it. But it's mainly about the Academy believing they might have it."

"I see," Donato said, nodding along. "As long as the Academy doesn't find it, they don't know how many thought cores the Minds actually have. They might just have a ton of them, which means they'll be a much bigger threat."

"Exactly," Daran confirmed. "But since no one has any clue where this creator might be, it seems the Minds will get their way after all."

After a tough training in the cold, Daran eventually made his way back to the Academy, but not before stopping near Magnus' house. He pulled the caller he'd brought along out of his pocket and pressed the button. As usual, a couple of seconds later a small creature scurried near his feet. Daran found a secluded spot in the alley, and he sat down in the snow with crossed legs, placing the gizmo between them to hide it from any potential prying eyes.

The past month Quenton had demanded weekly updates from Daran, and the next one was due tomorrow. That wasn't the main reason Daran was checking up on Novic though. He had a much more pressing question.

"Do you remember the two guys I asked you to pay special attention to?" he asked the gizmo. When the creature nodded, he continued. "Did they have any private conversations in this house lately?"

Daran's heart skipped a beat when the creature gave another affirmative squeal and started playing a record.

"It's just not going fast enough," said a voice that Daran recognized as Geno's. "We'll be out of cash soon. We need to accelerate things."

"How then?" Tobin asked. "You heard him. There's no way he's on board with the sabotage plan. What else can we do, except join the protest?"

"There's the thing," Geno noted. "At the protest, there will be hunters to make sure things don't get out of hand. What if there's some kind of commotion resulting in a fight?"

“They’d blame us for starting a fight and arrest a few people,” Tobin snorted. “That’s not going to help us at all.”

“Unless they start the fight, and we can prove it. That will start a public uproar.”

For a few seconds the background noise of the recording was the only thing Daran could hear. Then Tobin’s confused voice came back on. “How will that ever happen?”

“I’ve got a friend who can make things happen,” Geno explained. “Trust me, we can use this to our advantage.”

The recording continued with the sound of a door opening, but Daran wasn’t interested in the rest. Kira and Magnus had already heard that. So with a nod to the gizmo, he ended the playback.

This is bad, he realized. It was exactly what Kira feared and what Magnus refused to believe. And to make things worse, Daran couldn’t even tell Magnus! *After all this talk of having to trust each other, there’s no way I can admit to him I’ve been spying on him all this time, and I won’t convince him without any solid proof.* He saw only one last resort to prevent this from going awry. *I have to tell Quenton.*

“Thanks for the update,” he told Novic. “You can go back now.”

To his surprise, the gizmo shook his head. Even after a gentle nudge, it refused to walk in the direction of the building.

“What’s wrong?” Daran asked it. Immediately, it started playing a whole cacophony of recordings, containing dozens of different voices. After a few seconds, it started to dawn on Daran what the gizmo was trying to tell him.

“Your memory is full?”

A confirming squeak followed.

“Is it possible to get rid of recordings to create space?”

Again the gizmo nodded. Daran was about to give the order when a thought struck him.

“How far back do these recordings go?” he asked. “Do you still have any from the exploded building?”

He gasped when the gizmo nodded once more. *I can find out what happened there!*

“In that case you’re definitely not going back. I’m taking you with me, because we have a lot of work to do.”

Chapter 19 – Unexpected side effects

“And when you strike downwards, you let the staff slide through your left hand,” Jarod explained to the group, showing the exact motion. The audience today consisted of nearly twenty students. “It gives you more control over where you hit.”

“Unless your main hand is your left hand,” Daran added. “Then your right hand will slide over the staff.”

“Yes, exactly,” Jarod said, briefly glancing over at Daran from the corner of his eyes. He once more showed the move, now at full speed, adding a shout as he struck the air in front of him. “Make two lines and start practicing this.”

“And no hitting each other yet!” Daran called out. “We’ll get there later.”

As the students spread out across the hall, Jarod came to stand next to Daran. “I was going to add it, you know. About the left hand.”

“I was worried you might forget,” Daran explained. “Come on, let’s go fix some wrong postures.”

When all students seemed to have their strikes resemble what it should be, Jarod called them in.

“Alright, suppose Daran will strike me in this way. I need to avoid getting hit. What are the three ways I can do so?”

“Dodge, block, deflect,” several of the students droned, familiar with the theory.

“Good,” Jarod nodded. “Dodging is hard here, because Daran can adjust the direction of his punch up to the last split second.” In slow motion, Daran swung his weapon towards his friend. As

his target stepped to the left, he followed and gently tapped him on the shoulder with the tip of the staff.

“Good,” Jarod noted. “That leaves me two options. I can block him head on.” Once more Daran obliged with a strike at half speed. Jarod lifted his own staff horizontally, catching the attack straight at the center, between both his hands.

“Make sure not to get your fingers hit,” Daran added, collecting some chuckles from the group.

“Yes,” Jarod nodded, followed by a bit longer pause than Daran would have recommended. Eventually he continued.

“Or if you’re fast enough, you can also deflect the attack.” Once more Daran threw the same slow motion strike at him. Before it struck, Jarod had pushed it aside. “The key is to hit the end of his staff with the end of mine. If you do it well, you can guide it downwards, which puts you in a perfect position for a counterstrike.” As the boy spoke, he pushed Daran’s staff into the ground and followed it up by thrusting the butt of his own into his opponent’s stomach. Though it wasn’t at full speed, Daran still felt the impact.

“Better be careful when you’re trying that,” he grunted, rubbing his newly acquired bruise. It again earned him some laughter.

“Exactly,” Jarod added. “Try these things slowly at first. Once it goes well, you can speed it up a little bit. Make pairs and start working on this.”

As the group spread out across the hall, Jarod grabbed Daran by the shoulder and guided him away from the students, into an empty corner of the hall.

“Listen Daran,” he softly but insistently whispered. “You asked me to give this training. So why don’t you let me give it?”

“What do you – ”

“Yesterday we discussed what we were going to explain today. But here you are, adding stuff in my story at every step of the way. And I’m not just talking about that whole left-handed thing.”

Daran frowned at his friend. “I thought you forgot. I was trying to help. You’re still learning after all.”

“Yes, and how can I learn when you’re taking over half the time? When you’ve fixed every mistake before I even make it?” Jarod gave him an exasperated look.

Daran realized his friend had some good points – that he should have stayed silent – but still something didn’t feel right about the idea. Why was he so intent on speaking up? He tried to trace the feelings inside of him.

As he recalled the first comment he had made, he realized he was afraid. *I just want it to be good, and I don’t like taking chances.* But as he thought about the other additions, he knew there was more to it than that. Jarod hadn’t messed up there. The story was perfect. Why had he still felt the need to contribute?

It’s because I’m used to being in the spotlight. It’s what I love. And when I’m in a supporting role, I long to be back in them. I simply put myself in them, even when I shouldn’t.

He let out a deep sigh. “You’re right,” he admitted. “I should let you do your own thing. And if you’d really fail big, which I know you won’t because you’re too good for that, but if you would, I should just let you crash, because that’s how you learn. Swarf, it’s what I did countless of times.”

“Thanks Daran,” Jarod nodded, grateful for the understanding. “Just give me feedback at the end, as usual, because I know I still have a lot to learn.”

Daran let out a brief laugh. “Don’t we all?”

While Jarod walked back to the students, Daran leaned against the wall, lost in thoughts. He was impressed by how his friend had handled it. First of all, the students hadn’t noticed a thing. They were focusing on what they came here for: the staff techniques. But more importantly, Jarod had taught him a very valuable lesson. *So this is what it takes to teach people*, he thought. *Give them the chance to fail*. And the way he had gotten this lesson across was by forcing Daran to wonder about exactly the right things. *Swarf, he’s better at this feedback thing than I am!*

He pushed off from the wall he was leaning against and walked back to the students. While he did, his thoughts also drifted to his teamwork manual and how this fit into it. The whole document was focused on getting the right person for each job; on making sure that every task was performed at the highest quality possible. Only now did Daran realize that sometimes it wasn’t just about a job well done. *Other things can matter too, and a good task assigner takes all of that into account*.

Daran made a mental note before he went back to helping the other students. *I’d better make an update of that manual*.

Jarod’s feedback at the end of the training mainly came down to pointing out what he’d done right. After all, he was a natural at working with people. Someone who wasn’t so proficient at dealing

with groups, however, was the person Daran had given a training with afterwards.

Enise. What am I ever going to do with her?

When this session just ended, and while the students in the small classroom were packing up, Daran and Enise sat down at the front, evaluating how it went.

The main challenge had been that many more people attended than expected. Not just first-year students had shown up, but also several second-years like Firo, and the packed room hadn't worked well at calming Enise's nerves. She wasn't the outspoken girl she usually was, but often resorted to twisting her voice, as if she was trying to hide behind an alternate persona. But that wasn't the main thing challenging Daran's patience.

They had planned it to be a session where students set up laws for themselves. Where everyone in the group was given a certain problem in society and had to figure out how to set up regulations to fix it. Then they could check how close they were to the actual laws. It would be less about droning up regulations, which both the usual classes and the law books were already doing well enough, and more about discovering why the rules were the way they were. "Less talking, and more doing," Daran had said in advance. "Because it's only by doing that people actually pick up new skills."

What the students had eventually gotten was neither a proper training nor a lecture. Even before Enise had finished her brief explanation of what they were going to do, a question had digressed the whole event, turning it into a large group discussion for the better part of an hour. Daran considered intervening, but

the lesson from that morning was still stuck in his mind all too well. *Let them fail, because that's how they learn.* It was the hardest thing he had done in a while.

“What I’m disappointed about, is that we didn’t meet our goal,” he told her, trying hard to be gentle about it. “They only worked on devising their own laws for the last ten minutes or so. That’s hardly enough time to figure out all the thoughts behind them.”

“But I thought it was still a good session,” Enise defended. “I mean, it felt good. There was a lot of interaction.”

“For you, yes,” Daran said. “You see, people learn when they do things, like coming up with a reply to a question or comment. You did that a lot today. So yeah, you learned a lot, which is why you’re feeling good about it. But while you were talking fifty percent of the time, they weren’t.” Daran was pointing to the by now mostly empty classroom. “In fact, the twenty-five of them had to share the other fifty percent of the time. That’s on average two percent of being active. It’s not the best score ever, is it?”

Enise seemed hesitant. “I just think that they also learn from each other’s questions,” she said softly. Her timidity caught Daran off guard.

Is she ... scared? Of what I'll say? It amazed Daran how he could have such an effect on Enise. To him it felt like she was above him for rejecting him last month. *Now she is afraid of me? What's going on?*

He dismissed those thoughts and focused back on the conversation. “Some of them do,” he admitted. “So two percent is probably a bit on the low side. But I think you get the – ”

"That was a nice discussion," someone behind Daran complimented. He knew the voice all too well, and though the usual malice was gone, it still made his hair stand on end.

"Thanks," Enise replied with a smile. "See you next time?"

"Definitely," Firo nodded, after which he turned around.

When the boy walked out the door, leaving the two of them behind in the otherwise empty room, Enise questioningly raised her eyebrows to Daran. "I guess some people do like discussions."

"Could be," Daran admitted. He honestly couldn't say whether listening to a discussion was as good as following a well-rehearsed lecture. *Maybe Enise is right*, he thought. *Maybe for some people it does work better.*

It all confirmed what he had discovered this morning as well. *There's still a lot to learn.*

"I've got something for you this time," Daran told Quenton as he walked in to give his regular updates. Only then did the boy notice that the leader of the hunters was present as well. "Sorry, am I interrupting ..."

"Don't worry," Quenton told him. "Arin is joining today. Sit down and tell us what you heard."

"Okay," Daran said as he took a seat in front of two leaders of the Academy. Seeing them, Quenton in his yellow and Arin in his bright red, he suddenly felt small in his student black. He definitely got the message. *Things are getting serious.*

"First of all, in the next week or two, they're taking things a bit further than just a strike," he told them. "They're going to set up a protest right in front of the distribution center."

“Ah, they’re going after the raw materials,” Quenton nodded.

“It’s not just a protest, is it?” Arin added. “It’s a blockade.”

Daran raised his eyebrows. *Swarf, these guys are fast. They immediately saw it through.* “Yes it is,” he nodded. “Once they’re there, they are not planning to leave.”

“That’s good to know,” Quenton nodded. “What’s the second thing?”

Right, Daran thought, having already nearly forgotten what he wanted to say. “Some people in the organization are losing patience. They want things to go faster.”

“You have to be more specific than that,” Arin told him.

“They want the protest to turn into a fight, and make it appear as if the Academy started it.”

“A riot,” Arin said.

“We can’t let that happen,” Quenton added. “Not with the state the city is in right now.”

“You’re saying ... ” Daran started, unsure of what Quenton actually was saying. Luckily the scholar clarified.

“People in the city aren’t exactly happy, Daran. And I’m not just talking about the workshop owners.”

“So we stop it,” Arin said. “It’s time we made some arrests.”

Daran’s jaw dropped. He had not expected this. “Who are you going to – ”

“All of them,” Arin said. “Anyone involved. Magnus and Geno are in charge, right? Do you know any other names?”

“No! I mean, yes. Too many passed by. But they’re all small fish. Even my brother – ” Daran’s mind was not able to handle this. He paused and took a breath. “I mean, my cousin, he owns a

workshop now. He was around too. But they're not in charge. Magnus and Geno are. But Magnus doesn't even know about this! It's Geno that came up with it."

"Doesn't matter," Arin said. "If we pick Geno up, Magnus will just take over. We take them both. I'll send some hunters there directly."

Incredulous, Daran stared at the man in red sitting in front of him.

"Was there anything else?" Quenton asked, pulling Daran out of his astonished gaze.

"Eh, no," Daran shook his head.

"Then you can go."

Daran stood up and slowly tottered to the door.

"Oh, and Daran?" Quenton called after him as he opened it. "Do you ever bring that gizmo back to the Academy, or do you always keep it there?"

"No, I keep it there," Daran said, glad that this lie at least came easily. "I don't want to miss anything."

"Next time bring him along, will you?"

Daran gave an imperceptible nod and stepped out, closing the door behind him.

Somehow he had trouble taking another step. His mind was still busy processing things. *What just happened?* he wondered, although he knew exactly what had taken place. *I got them to arrest Magnus!*

Things were spiraling out of control again. *I better fix this, before it gets any worse.* He started walking across the hallway to

the exit, and by the time he left the building, he knew exactly what he had to do.

He ran to the Academy gate, and out into the city. He didn't even bother checking if he was being tailed. *They want to follow me? Let them try.* As fast as he could, he made his way through the streets, across the merchant district towards the workshops. It took him less than fifteen minutes before, completely out of breath, he knocked on Magnus' back door.

"Daran!" the man said, not just surprised to see the boy but also the exhausted state he was in. Then he noticed something else. "You're wearing your uniform!" Quickly he grabbed the student by the shoulders and dragged him inside, closing the door behind him.

"This is very dangerous, what you're doing," Magnus said with more anger than Daran was used from him. "If anyone saw you, and claims I'm having some connection to the Academy, this strike will break down before you know it."

"The Academy," Daran repeated, still struggling to catch his breath. "They're going to arrest you."

"What?!" Magnus called out. "Why?"

"No time," Daran gasped. "They're on their way."

Luckily Magnus didn't waste another second. He quickly flew upstairs and moments later came back with a large bag.

Always prepared, as usual, Daran thought.

"It's still better if we're not seen together here," the old man said.

Daran nodded. "I'll go out the back. Let's meet at the trash heap in fifteen minutes." He quickly turned around and left the way he had come.

Taking the long way towards his destination, he kept his eyes out for any hunters that might be coming in his direction. Luckily everything seemed calm. There was no sign of a uniform, nor even of anyone following him.

When he got to the mounds of garbage piled up at the edge of the city, Magnus was already waiting there. "Care to tell me what's going on?"

"The Academy found out about your protest," Daran said, walking past Magnus so that the old man had to follow him. "They don't believe it's going to remain peaceful, so they want to put a stop to it right away."

"Those pieces of milling scrap," Magnus cursed. He turned to Daran. "How did you find out?"

"I'm doing some consulting work for the Academy," Daran said, not entirely lying. "Sometimes I hear stuff that I'm not supposed to."

"Well, I'm glad that you did," Magnus nodded gratefully.

Daran pointed at the bag the old parts trader was carrying. "You already packed?"

"Yeah, I knew something like this was bound to happen eventually," Magnus said with regret in his voice.

"Any idea where you're going to stay now?"

"Not sure yet," Magnus confessed. "Probably with friends. I just hope I won't get them in trouble when the Academy finds out they're harbouring me. It's a small world after all. People talk."

“Well, I might have a better idea.” Daran knocked on the door of the old house he’d guided Magnus to. Before he did, the inhabitant already stuck his head out the window opening. Daran gave him a surprised look.

“No windows. Heard you coming,” Donato explained. When he saw Daran’s company, he gave the boy a frown. “Didn’t think we’d be meeting up today. Nor did I say you should bring a friend.”

“We’re not meeting up. In fact, I’d better get back to the Academy right away. I just wanted to introduce you guys. You see, you both have a house that you can’t stay in at the moment. I figured you might want to trade, at least for a little while. I’m sure you can work out the details by yourself, like which story to tell the neighbours.”

Before either of them had the chance to reply, Daran turned and walked around the corner, heading back to the Academy.

Chapter 20 – A forgotten source of answers

Slowly the days passed by. Through rumours and stories, Daran heard that the Academy's attempt arrest hadn't gone as planned. The hunters had nearly managed to apprehend Geno, but the workshop owner had craftily fled out of a window as soon as he saw the red colors outside of his door. Despite the ensuing chase, the man had managed to disappear and go into hiding. At Magnus' place things hadn't been any better. It seemed he'd haphazardly rented it off to a stranger for a few weeks. Naturally this new tenant didn't have a clue of the strike leader's whereabouts.

At the weekly meeting, Quenton had Daran bring Novic along, and they listened to some older recordings. Of course Daran had told the gizmo, right before the meeting, to only play back conversations between Magnus and Geno, but still he was relieved when Quenton finally accepted the situation and told Daran to cease his spying for now. "We'll find them in some other way," the scholar had concluded. The hoped-for "Good job" was left missing.

The preparations for the protest were going better. There was only a minor delay, which was mostly because of the pressure from the Academy, although the weather didn't help either. As another week passed, the torrent of snow transitioned into a constant outpouring of rain, causing the white winter landscapes to turn back to their regular grey and brown. Eventually the workshop owners resorted to waiting for a dry day to start their protest.

Though they would stay around afterwards, regardless of what came out of the sky, they at least wanted to get a good start.

In the meantime Daran kept up his own work with Novic. He couldn't find as much time for this as he wanted, but every night, before going to bed, he listened to the recordings. After more than a dozen hours of conversations and whatnot, there was still no sign of why the building had exploded. As far as he could tell, the place seemed like a regular transport and trading company, up until the time of that fateful blast.

Nevertheless he often continued playing back recordings until deep into the night, absentmindedly listening until he dozed off to sleep. Near the end, he wasn't even consciously listening anymore, thinking more about upcoming trainings, until a very unexpected name pulled his thoughts back to the present. *Tamar*. "Hold up," Daran immediately ordered. "Play the conversation again, from the start."

There was a moment of silence, in which Novic pulled up the memory again. Then the usual background noise came back on, followed by a knock on a door.

"Yeah?" called a businesslike voice, as if it was used to being disturbed hundreds of times per day. It sounded female, and definitely adult, though the woman couldn't have been too old yet.

The door swung open and footsteps entered.

"Hareno!" the same voice called out, surprised at this particular visitor. All of a sudden the reply transitioned to overtly pleasant. "What can I do for you?"

“Have you got the Academy shipment in yet?” an older man asked. There was an obvious authority in his voice, as if he fully expected everyone to obey him and couldn’t even conceive any other possible response.

“Yeah, it’s the crate marked as actuators, down in main storage.”

“Good. Send the devices over to Altair right away. I want them out of the city.”

“Altair it is. I’ll have them shipped out first thing tomorrow morning. Do you want to add any instructions?”

“No, Tamar will know what to do with them.”

“Alright, consider it done,” the woman noted. “Was there anything else?”

“No, that’s all.”

Afterwards the door closed, which marked the end of the recording.

For several very long seconds, Daran remained motionless in his bed, staring at his ceiling. There were so many implications of this small recording.

First, he had to doublecheck when it was made. It couldn’t be recent. “Novic, this chat was more than a year ago, right?”

“Yes,” said the gizmo in some deep male voice Daran had never heard before.

“Also more than two years ago?”

“No,” was the reply, this time coming from a young girl.

“I see,” Daran nodded. He knew that Tamar was with the Free Minds back then, which meant that Hareno was too. *Swarf, this is all a Minds operation!*

But what were they doing? *The crate with devices was marked as actuators*, Daran repeated in his mind, knowing full well it actually contained something else. It sounded all too much like a smuggling job. So what were they smuggling then? *They called it the Academy shipment*, Daran remembered. And that could only mean one thing. *The devices were thought cores!*

Part of this revelation shocked him. *The workshops are always blamed for harboring the Minds, but the group is hidden among the merchants too!* Yet another part of him realized it was all too obvious. If you wanted to move stuff around the country, you had to be connected with traders.

The recording also contained something entirely different: a clue to Tamar's whereabouts. And though the trail was cold now, after more than a year, it had once been warm.

"Novic, did you ever play this recording to Nolan, when he was still alive?"

"Yes," the gizmo replied in the voice of a young boy.

"And how did he react?"

This time the gizmo let out a confused squeal and shook its head.

Swarf, we really need to invent talking gizmos some time, Daran thought, letting out a deep sigh. Still, there was much he could tell from this. It meant that Nolan had traced Tamar all the way to Altair, and if the ranger had followed the shipment logs, he might have been able to track her down.

Would that have had something to do with why he got killed? Daran wondered, although that was a question he couldn't find an answer to. On the flip side, he now did know that Nolan had

likely tried to trace Tamar right before his death. *But did he find her? And if so, what did they talk about?* He added the questions to the long list of things he wanted to ask Tamar the next time he saw her.

Yet there was one question that was more urgent. *Who blew up the building?* On a hunch, Daran decided to give Novic a more direct order. “Can you find the next conversation with Hareno?”

Once more the gizmo froze – the telltale sign that it was bringing up an old recording.

“Oh, hello! You’ve come to check on the progress?” said the same female voice as from the previous conversation.

“Yes,” said Hareno. “The inspection is scheduled for next week. I don’t know why those blasted rangers are interfering, but we cannot afford any delays.”

“Everything is going according to schedule,” the woman told him. “We’re now busy deleting any records related to the Academy shipments.”

“Good. If anything does survive the flames, I don’t want them to find out about those.”

“Don’t worry,” the woman said, a slight smile audible in her voice. “It’s all taken care of.”

As the gizmo’s recording ended, Daran cursed. *They blew up their own building. Only to cover their tracks!*

“Novic, how many days before the explosion was this?”

“Four,” said the gizmo, as if the word was pulled from the middle of a sentence.

So the place blew up just when the rangers were about to check in on them. The fact that they were rangers surprised Daran. Usually

these kinds of inquiries were done by hunters, yet for some reason Baltar and his rangers had gotten involved here. *But why?* It didn't make the slightest sense.

What was clear was what had happened with the building. It had been a trading company, secretly smuggling thought cores out of the city, and when they were about to be discovered, they themselves destroyed any trace of what had actually transpired in there. *The workshops had absolutely nothing to do with this at all. And now I can prove it.*

Satisfied, Daran wished Novic goodnight and turned off his small bedside light. *I've found the smoking gun*, he told himself. He didn't know how he would use it yet, but he knew he would find a way.

When Daran walked from the dorms to the education building the next morning, the sky was clear and blue. *Finally*, he thought, knowing Magnus would already be busy gathering people for the protest. He'd probably drop by there later today himself, in regular clothing of course, just to see how things were going.

For now he was still clad in his student uniform, because there was a thought core principles class to attend. When he got to the classroom, Beno and several of the other students were waiting outside. "No class today?" Daran asked them.

"You don't remember? We're visiting the core creators today, checking out how they work," Severim told him. Daran facepalmed, feeling stupid he'd forgotten. He had been excited about the visit when it was announced last week, but this morning he could only think about his discovery from the night before. He

had even brought Novic along in his pocket, just so he could keep listening to the recording, making sure he hadn't missed anything.

When the last student arrived, they walked to the main Academy building, where they headed down the stairs into the thought core department. Daran had been there only once before, last year, when he pretended to be Tamar resuming ownership of her gizmo. Since no one knew about that particular stunt, he tried to act as if everything was new to him. Luckily this wasn't all that hard when they moved from the familiar entry hall into the not so familiar core creator hall.

"Blasted metal," he cursed upon seeing how huge the place was. *It's more than triple the size of the gym!* Daran thought. *How can they fit this into the building? Unless ... it's not part of the building. It runs beneath the entire Academy square, all the way up to the river!* The large space was taken up housing a multitude of enormous machines, many of them reaching all the way up to the already high ceiling.

"You've never been here before?" Severim asked surprised, until he corrected himself. "Of course not. You're still in your second year, right? You haven't even tried creating your own thought core yet."

"Yeah," Daran softly nodded, still overwhelmed. He had no idea what he had expected. Maybe just one sophisticated machine, in a quiet but serene room. Definitely nowhere near this factory-like environment, with people busy all around.

"What are they all doing?" he spoke his thoughts out loud.

"Everything needed to create thought cores," Severim explained. "You thought it was easy? That you could just kindly

tell the machine what kind of core you wanted, and out it comes? There's way more behind it. You thought that so few people are doing the thought core principles module just because it's hard? Swarf no, it's because trying to make a core itself is already hard enough. The module about it is very good at preventing students from wanting to learn more."

"Imagine having to make a core creator," Daran stammered.

One by one they went past the machines, where Beno explained how they worked. It was fascinating stuff, but Daran's mind just wasn't there. It kept spinning in circles about how Nolan could ever build a core creator on his own, especially without anyone knowing. *No wonder the thought council hardly considered it. It's much easier to make a single core here without anyone figuring it out than doing something as crazy as that.* He was glad that, when he got near the end of the tour, he was able to ask some questions again.

"How do they record the cores that are created?"

"That's done automatically," Beno said. "All core creators are made so that, whenever they create a thought core, they also print a small report on its specifications."

Daran frowned. He didn't know about that. "So what if you want to make a thought core without anyone knowing? You just have to get rid of the report afterwards?"

The scholar gave Daran a frown. "I'm not sure why someone would ever want to do that, but it's impossible. Every core creator numbers their reports, so we'd know when one goes missing. It's never happened."

Never, Daran thought, relieved. It meant that his theory that Nolan had made his own core creator held up. There was just one problem remaining. “Is it possible to make a core creator any smaller than this?” he asked, pointing to the enormous machine behind him.

“Well, yeah, that’s one of the older ones,” Beno said. “You see the one to its left? That’s the newest one, finished six years ago. I mostly designed it myself.”

Daran took a few steps towards it, giving the device a closer look. It was a lot sleeker than its neighbour, with shining white panels covering up the complicated innards. But most importantly, it was less than half the size, only towering a meter or two above Daran and being a few steps long.

“I’m guessing Nolan helped you build it?” he called back over his shoulder.

“Yeah, he didn’t just build it,” Beno said. “He even helped me design it.”

I knew it, Daran said to himself. *I knew it! But how could he ever build something so huge without anyone finding it? It has to be in the mountains then, where no one ever comes. But he couldn’t possibly drag all these parts up there. Unless ...*

Blasted swarf, I’m such a deactivated gizmo! How did I not see? He turned to Beno, who was already talking with some of the other students. “Thanks for the tour,” he told the scholar. “I’ve got another appointment, so ehm ...” He pointed to the door behind him. When the scholar nodded his approval, Daran turned around and left the room.

As soon as he got outside, he ran across the road and flew up the stairs towards the aviary. As usual, Nilas was happy to see him.

“Hey buddy,” Daran greeted him. “I have to ask you something very important.”

Apprehensively the gizmo looked at him.

“Is there a place in the mountains you often took Nolan to?”

Daran’s heart skipped a beat when the gizmo nodded.

“Can you take me there?”

Again a nod.

Daran patted the gizmo on its shoulder, and quickly jumped on its back. “That’s great buddy. Let’s go.”

The large bird walked to the edge of the building and jumped off, quickly gaining speed and height. Daran shivered, not sure whether it was because of the cold wind, or what he was about to find. Either way, he was glad of his padded uniform jacket, keeping most of his body warm.

As they flew over the houses of the merchant district, he kept cursing at himself. All the time he’d found it ridiculous how the Academy didn’t include others in their search. They hadn’t asked Beno for advice, and were reluctant to include Daran too. *And all the time I was doing the exact same thing. Trying to solve problems on my own while my gizmos already had all the answers.*

They were flying just south of the Seldon, passing over the market square. To Daran’s left he could make out the trash heap, and to the right was the dam and the distribution center. A large group of people was already gathering in front of it. *It’s beginning,* he thought.

He didn't join them though. Instead, they kept flying in the same direction for several more minutes. Slowly the hills turned into mountains, with the peaks getting higher and higher. Daran was glad when Nilas finally descended into a small valley, not just due to the excitement, but also because he was really starting to freeze up. Slowly the bird spiraled downwards and eventually flew straight at a vertical rock wall, flaring up at the last moment to land on a small outcropping.

Confused, Daran looked around. It was only a small platform, several steps across, set into an otherwise near-vertical cliff. He had expected Nilas to jump off again, continuing its descent, but the bird gently tried to shrug the boy off its back, indicating this was the final destination.

Daran dismounted, trying very hard not to look down. He was well above the highest trees from the valley below, so a fall would definitely be fatal. Shying away from the edge, he placed his back against the stone wall. It was only then that he noticed the opening. It couldn't look any more inconspicuous – just a crack in the stone – but he knew what it meant. *This must be it.*

With his hands he checked the tools on his belt. It had become a matter of habit to always carry his staff with him, as well as the lifting device he'd recently built with his advanced workshop group. When he was assured of their presence, he took a deep breath and stepped into the crevice, keeping his head low to fit through. Slowly, while rounding the corner, the fissure started to widen. Daran tried to see what it contained, but everything in front of him was pitch black. The only thing barely visible was something hanging on the wall next to him. *A flashlight!*

This is definitely the right place, he thought as he picked up the torch and turned it on.

Chapter 21 – Waves of emotion

Daran had heard stories of amazing caves, with enormous halls, deep crevices and glittering pillars of stone. Well, this one didn't come close. It turned out to be a mere cold and dark hole, slightly larger than his room back at the Academy. The interesting part – which got Daran madly excited – was what it contained.

The whole back wall of the cave was covered by an enormous machine. As Daran inched closer, the artefact strongly reminded him of the constructions he had seen at the Academy, only an hour before. Of course the sleek cover was missing – *not much use in making it look pretty here* – but the set-up was definitely the same. And also just like this morning, he didn't have a clue how any of it worked. Of course there were the obvious parts, like the tubes guiding inflowing rainwater around the device, but everything else was a big question mark.

How is it even powered? The core creator seemed to get its electricity from a single power cord, but the long cable was curled up in the corner, its other end unattached. *What should it be plugged into? There's no way the Kantara power grid reaches this place, and there isn't anything else nearby that can provide power. The closest thing with a battery is –*

Swarf, of course! He grabbed the end of the wire and ran out of the cave. When he reached Nilas, he showed the bird the plug. “Would you mind?”

The bird seemed to shrug and slowly lifted up its head, so Daran could access the panels underneath. He detached the one covering the gizmo's power storage and plugged in the cable. He'd

always wondered why Nilas' batteries had such a socket in the first place. *I always thought it was an alternate way to provide him with electricity. I never would've thought using him as a power source too. This is brilliant!*

He ran back inside, finding the machine powered up. To his dismay, no detailed guide on how to operate it had spontaneously appeared out of thin air, and so Daran was left just as clueless as before. *Swarf, this isn't going to work.*

He studied the machine in detail, but there was too much to take in. There were wires everywhere, parts that in theory could move but right now didn't, and quite a couple of dials too. The largest one, all the way on the side, was showing the number "23".

What does it mean? he thought. With the indicator so far away from the main operating point, it couldn't be a very useful one. Yet, considering its size, it definitely was important. *Is it the number of thought cores made?* Knowing Nolan, Daran could hardly believe the man had made so many. He pulled Novic out of his pocket, and showed the gizmo the cave.

"This is where you were born," he told the excited creature. "Do you remember having ever been here? And possibly having brothers, or whatever you would call it? Fellow gizmos to be trained with?"

To Daran's disappointment, the small thing only shook its head. *This is not going to work, is it?* he thought, letting out a deep sigh. He really didn't have a clue what to do with the machine. He resolved that one day, when he knew enough about core creators, he would. *In any case, no one will ever find this place, that's for sure.*

He walked outside to unplug the cable from Nilas. On a hunch, he went back inside and also pulled the other end out of the machine. Winding it up, he placed the cord inside Nilas before reattaching the panel to the gizmo. It would be a small weight dragging the bird down during flight, but so were the tools on his belt, and so far Nilas hadn't complained about those. Finally, after also putting the flashlight back, he mounted his gizmo and took to the skies again.

"Take us to the dam," Daran called out to his companion, shouting over the strong winds passing him by. "I want to see how the protest is going."

He heard the crowd before he saw it. Flying over the large reservoir of water, the sound of shouting and drums came forth to meet him. But it was only when Daran rounded the corner that he saw the source of it.

"Blasted swarf, that's huge!" he called out. The entire square in front of the distribution center was filled with protesters, with just as many banners and signs. Off to the side, a number of hunters were keeping watch. They'd even brought several of the older students along, to increase their numbers. The thinkers were ready to intervene if things got out of hand, although they also appeared to be scanning faces.

Of course. They're still searching for Magnus and Geno, Daran thought. He knew that the old man was smart enough not to join the crowd, but at the same time Magnus did always want to keep an eye on things. *That means he's probably somewhere up in the hills, watching.* While circling high up over the crowd, Daran started checking which place offered the best view. In the end, there was

only one likely candidate. An outcropping of a hill, right next to the distribution center.

“Nilas, can you put me down somewhere on the mountain on your left?” Daran asked, and the gizmo happily obliged, dropping him off onto a large rock, some distance up from the viewpoint. Daran climbed down the lump of stone and, following the noise, plowed his way through the undergrowth. It was more tiresome than he anticipated, but in the end he reached the place he was aiming for.

Looking around, there was no sign of the old man. *Was I wrong about this?* He really did have a clear view over the square. *Maybe Magnus stayed home? Or he found another good spot?* He glanced over the neighbouring hills when he heard a whispered voice, only a few meters next to him.

“Daran, get down. You’re way too visible.”

Startled, he looked for the source, finding Magnus lying in a shrub, just behind a tree. Wearing a camouflage jacket, the man was nearly invisible. Quickly Daran followed orders and crawled over to his side.

“How did you figure out I was here?” the strike leader asked as he kept looking at the crowd through a large set of binoculars.

Daran merely shrugged. “Thinking. What else?” The old man looked up to give him an annoyed look, which Daran shrugged aside with a smile. “How are things going?”

“Well enough,” Magnus said, turning his eyes back to the crowd. “Now be quiet. Kira’s giving a speech. You missed most of it already.”

“Wait, what?” Daran cried out, only to be shushed. He gave a snort and also turned his attention to the square beneath. Indeed, all the shouting and drumming had stopped, replaced by Kira’s amplified voice. From her tone, it sounded like she was already building up to the end.

“We are not here today because we want more than other people. We are here today because we want to be treated as equals! As others can do their business without being checked, so should we. As others can use their property as they please, so should we. As others can live without fear of impending penalties, so should we!”

As the excitement in Kira’s voice rose, the crowd got more and more silent, eager for her next words. “This is good stuff,” Daran whispered, casting a glance at Magnus. The old man had a huge smirk on his face. *Of course. He’s been prepping her big time for this.*

“They say that we are innocent by the law, until proven otherwise. They say that things are fair. But as soon as we need to start explaining ourselves while others do not, fairness has ended! And we are here to get it back!”

Daran could feel the tension built up in the audience. The devotion and commitment was as high as it would ever get. Now was the time to unleash it, and Kira seemed to know.

“We will not leave here until we are truly equal again!” she called out in one final shout, raising her arms wide to emphasize her message. It was the perfect cue for the crowd to end its silence, and it roared loudly with her. Kira remained standing, looking out over the mass of people in front of her for a few more moments,

until she calmly turned away and stepped down the elevated platform.

“How does she do that so confidently?” Daran stammered, knowing how difficult it had been for him to speak in front of only a dozen fellow students. He still couldn’t believe how massive this crowd was.

“Oh, she is far from confident,” Magnus said, still watching through his binoculars. “But you can only see that when you’re close. We trained to get rid of the most obvious signs.”

He says it so casually, Daran thought, but something like this must have taken days. A lot of rainy days, I’m guessing. He followed Kira as she walked through the crowd, shaking hands with people, but due to her small size it was hard to keep track of her.

“Can I get the binoculars for a bit?” Daran asked. “I’d really like to see how she’s holding up.”

“Sure,” said Magnus, carefully handing them over, after which he picked up yet another device from the backpack next to him.

Daran put the binocular to his eyes and scanned the crowd, trying to find the girl. The first thing he got into his field of vision was the row of hunters and students, who seemed to be extra wary, now that the crowd was fired up with emotion. It was of the positive and hopeful type, Daran knew, but the hunters didn’t seem to care.

Then he found Kira. She was still passing through the crowd, shaking hands. When Daran looked closely, he could see what Magnus meant: the way her eyes kept flicking about and how her shoulders were pulled up high showed that she was feeling far from comfortable, but she was coping remarkably well.

“Kira, are you hearing me?” Magnus said right next to Daran. At the same time, Kira pulled up a communicator from her jacket pocket with her right hand, the amplifier still being in her left.

“I’m here. How did I do?” Kira said, her voice again seemingly confident, yet behind the surface filled with anticipation.

“You were truly great darling,” Magnus laughed in the friendly way that Daran was all too familiar with from the past sixteen years. “It was a splendid speech.”

“Thanks,” Kira said, overwhelmed with relief. “I hope I didn’t let you down.”

“You never do,” Magnus smiled. “You never do.”

They’ve really grown close these past three months, Daran thought, glad that the two people in his life outside of the Academy got along so well. Although a part of him was wondering whether they’d grown close only because he was growing apart from the both of them.

“Daran, something’s happening at the hunter line,” Magnus said, back to his formal self. “Can you check it out?”

The boy quickly shifted his view, only to be shocked by what he saw. “People are throwing rocks at them.”

“What?!” Magnus said. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Daran said. “I’m looking at a guy now, pulling a stone out of his pocket, and – ouch, I think it hit his jaw. This is not good. They’re provoking the hunters.”

This is the disturbance that Geno was talking about, Daran thought. But so far it wasn’t working. The thinkers didn’t seem to be baited into an angry outburst.

“Kira, there’s people throwing rocks at the hunters,” Magnus said through the communicator. “Can you call out that they need to stop right now?”

“I’ll go check it out,” came the reply back.

“No, wait, just use the amplifier. Then the rest of the crowd will make them stop,” Magnus called back. He waited for a reaction, but none seemed to come. “Kira? ... Kira?! Swarf, she can’t hear me over the crowd.”

As Magnus kept trying to get her attention, Daran surveyed the stone throwers. They were all young men, some of them even boys, and it slowly started to dawn on Daran that he knew one of them. *The tall one that attacked me in the alley, back at Donato’s old place.* He knew what it meant. In fact, he knew who was behind all of this. *That friend of Geno, who could cause some commotion ... Geno’s friend is Jokan!*

He shifted his view back to Kira, who was still trying to push her way through the crowd. Given her small size, it wasn’t going very quickly, but steadily she was getting closer. Up ahead, people mainly seemed confused about what was going on. They still remembered the speech, and were wondering why there was any aggression in the first place. But there was one person, a man in his thirties, who didn’t look the least bit confused. Instead, he seemed to be waiting for Kira to approach. And again, he looked slightly familiar to Daran. He’d seen the face only once, thirty meters above him, but that wasn’t a sight he was likely to forget.

Swarf, it’s him, Daran knew. Jokan himself.

“Magnus, I can’t seem to get through,” Kira called through the communicator.

“You don’t have to,” Magnus said, happy to have finally reached her again. “Just stay where you are. Use the amplifier!”

“But what do I say?” Kira asked, confused and insecure.

In the meantime, Daran saw how Joka stepped closer to the place where Kira had stopped. He was only a few meters away, and as he got nearer Daran saw him pull something out of his pocket. The boy’s jaw dropped when he recognized the object. *A gun! And he’s raising it. What’s going on?!*

Magnus was still trying to explain to Kira what to do. “Just call out to stop throwing stones. Then the Academy knows we – ”

Daran stretched out his arm and ripped the communicator out of the old man’s hands. Pressing the talk button, he quickly called out, “Kira! Duck! Now!”

To her credit, she didn’t hesitate. When Daran had his binocular back on target, the girl had just dropped to the ground. The shot that was fired flew straight over her head, into the back of the unsuspecting person right behind her.

Immediately the crowd turned silent. Everyone seemed to be surprised about what had happened, including Joka. When Daran looked at him, the astonishment on his face was genuine. Despite this, he smoothly handed the gun behind his back to a partner, who carried it away. *Scrap, that’s the other boy from the alley. The short one*, Daran thought.

“Daran, talk to me. What’s going on?” Magnus cried out as he claimed the communicator back.

“Someone tried to shoot Kira, but she dodged it. Another man got hit. And now she’s ... oh, swarf, she’s going after him. She’s pointing him out to the crowd. The guy who tried to shoot her.”

“Kira!” Magnus called. “Ignore the shooter! We’ll get him later. You have to keep everyone calm!”

As Kira was waving her finger at the man that had fired the gun, other people started facing him too, but the guy gave an innocent shrug. He spread his arms, inviting the onlookers to search him. One younger man did, frisking him and checking the pockets, but the only result of the search was a pocket knife. The young man shook his head and gave Kira a frown.

“I’m sorry Magnus, I think I picked out the wrong person,” Kira cried out.

“No you didn’t. You ...” the old man started in an attempt to console her, but this time even Magnus couldn’t find the right words. “Just tell me what’s going on.”

“The guy who I thought shot me, he’s now pointing at the thinkers. He’s telling people that they fired the gun.” At this point Kira seemed so distraught that she didn’t even know what to believe anymore. “Did they? It makes sense, right? I mean, they’re the only ones who have guns.”

“Oh no,” Magnus said to Daran. “By pointing him out, she gave the shooter credence, and now he’s hijacking the crowd.” He took a deep breath and pushed the speaker button again. “Kira, see if you can help the victim. I’ll take care of the rest.”

For a few seconds Daran and Magnus just looked out over the square in silence. As the message seemed to spread that the hunters had tried to shoot Kira, the overwhelming feeling of hope all turned into anger. The crowd started turning on the red and black uniforms, with more and more people throwing insults. Several

brave souls were already stepping forward from the mass to challenge the thinkers more directly, with raised fists or knives.

“You don’t have a clue how to fix this, do you?” Daran eventually asked. A part of him was hoping that the old parts trader still had a trick up his sleeve, as usual, but the man abjectly shook his head.

“It’s gotten out of hand,” he sighed. “We can only try to contain it, and fix the damage afterwards.”

“Yeah, but how?” Daran asked. He watched as the hunters fell back and reorganized down the road, where the path passed between two cliffs. At this chokepoint they held their ground, preventing the angry mass from turning its anger onto the city. Noticing this, Jokan called out to the crowd, making them turn around and go the other way.

At that moment Kira came back on the communicator. “Magnus! I’m sorry!” she called out. “I couldn’t help him. There was already a doctor there, but even she couldn’t do anything. He was already gone.”

“Who was it?” Magnus called out, surprising Daran with his composure.

“His friends called him Nareton,” Kira said. “Did you know him?”

Only now did Magnus turn his head downwards, absorbing the loss. “Runs a small electronics workshop with his brother, near the merchant district,” he quietly confided in Daran. But to Kira he said, “No, I didn’t know him. And if his friends are still there, there’s not much we can do for him now. So tell me, where’s the crowd going?”

“That guy I pointed out, he’s telling everyone to meet up at the market square,” Kira explained. “The hunters blocked the road, so now they’re going down to the dam.”

“But that’s fenced off,” Daran said.

“You think that’s a problem to a few hundred angry workshop owners?” Magnus retorted, and soon he was proven right.

The throng burst into the restricted area, and while a large group went across the bridge to the other side of the river, a small detachment headed into the control room. *What are they doing?* Daran wondered, but the smoke that was coming out a minute or two later, just when the mob was leaving again, answered his question. “They’re trashing the place,” he blurted out, astonished.

“Are you serious?” Magnus said, picking up the binoculars and examining the situation.

The silence that followed got Daran more and more filled with worries. *It looks like he’s double-checking things. That’s not a good sign.* “How bad is it?” he finally asked, but all Magnus could do was shake his head. “That bad, huh?”

“Worse,” Magnus said with a deep sigh. “It looks like all generators are down. The entire city is blacked out.”

“Swarf, that’s not good.”

“Yeah, but that’s just the beginning, because the spillways are still closed.”

“The what?” Daran asked.

“They can let out the water from the reservoirs, through the spillways next to the dam. If the generators are down, that’s what they have to do. Because otherwise – ”

“The water has nowhere to go,” Daran completed.

“Exactly,” Magnus nodded. “The reservoir is already very full, and it will fill up a lot more with the snow and rain of the past week. We have to release the pressure on the dam.”

“Why us?” Daran asked. “Isn’t this a problem for the thinkers?”

“Which ones?” Magnus snorted, gesturing with his head to the square down below.

When Daran looked back at the road, he found that the hunters had already left. Only a few stray students were still lingering about, unsure of what to do.

“They’re probably already on their way to the market square, to prepare for what’s coming,” Magnus guessed. “They don’t even know about the dam.” He took another look at the large wall holding back the water and let out a deep sigh. “This is our mess, Daran, and we have to fix it.”

“And if we don’t? And let the reservoir fill up?”

“Then anything can happen. But there’s a good chance the dam won’t survive if water starts flowing over the edge. And if that thing fails, then a power outage is the least of Tarine’s concerns.”

“You mean – ” Daran started, interrupted by another nod.

“A twenty meter tall wave will wipe out most of the city.”

Chapter 22 – Assigning tasks

“But ... I don’t get it!” Daran loudly complained. “Why would people do that? It’s just ... ”

“It’s what?” Magnus calmly asked with his gaze focused on infinity, as if he was simultaneously making plans to get out of the mess they were in.

“I don’t know. Evil? Why would anyone want to destroy an entire city?”

“You think they want to? You think anyone wants to be, in your words, evil?” Magnus gave the boy a solemn look and shook his head. “People always believe that they’re trying to do the right thing. So tell me, what can be ‘right’ about demolishing the control room of the dam?”

Nothing is, Daran thought at first, but putting himself in the shoes of the crowd, he found himself able to imagine how it could be. “They want to be heard. And they think that, if they hurt the government, then that same government will understand their own pains better.”

“Close enough,” Magnus nodded. “And what is wrong with that view?”

“Everything!” Daran called out, only to be shushed by an angry look from Magnus.

“Be specific Daran,” he ordered.

Fine, Daran sighed, trying to calm his mind. He again put himself in the shoes of the workshop owners, and zoomed in on their feelings. Then he compared their desires to the results of their anger. “Two things. First of all, the Academy may now notice

them more, but they also breed animosity among the thinkers, which only brings them further apart.”

“Very good,” Magnus nodded. “It’s exactly why I’ve tried to keep the strike away from anything related to the Academy. And the second thing?”

“That one’s obvious,” Daran snorted. “They’re hurting other people for no good reason. The whole city! Speaking of breeding animosity ...”

“But if it’s so ineffective, then why did they do it?” Magnus asked.

Once more Daran put himself in their shoes, finding it to be a bit easier every time he did so. “They’re not realizing it. They didn’t stop to think what other consequences their actions would have.”

“And there you have the root of all evil,” Magnus nodded. “It’s unawareness and indifference. And the best way to fight evil is to combat those traits. It’s to make people aware of the consequences of their actions and plans.” He let out a morose sigh and turned his eyes downwards. Then he added, “Starting with ourselves.”

“Well, it’s a bit too late for that,” Daran noted. “And like you said, once it’s done, the best thing we can do is contain and fix the damage. So have you got a plan?”

“I may have,” Magnus said, his mind back in the present again. “We first need to get down to the square, which will take long enough.”

“Oh, I can fix that,” Daran said with a smile. He pushed the button on his watch and asked, “Nilas, would you mind picking us up?”

“You’re not having me fly, are you?” Magnus asked, his eyes wide.

Daran shrugged. “Have you got a better idea?” He watched as the bird, who was still high up in the sky, slowly angled towards them and landed right on the edge. “Relax. We’re only gliding down,” Daran added. “You get up first.”

The old man again shook his head, but he didn’t complain as he carefully climbed onto the back of the large bird and tightly grabbed the handholds. Daran soon went up after him and laid down on the man’s back.

“There we go,” he grinned as Nilas slowly tilted forwards and fell off the edge. The descent lasted only a few seconds, but it was enough for the old man to freeze up. After gently landing in the square, now mostly abandoned, Daran had to coax him off of the gizmo. Before the boy was well and done with this, Kira was already around his neck.

“Oh, I’m so glad to see you,” she told him after ending her hug. “Thank you Daran.”

“Any time,” Daran said, giving her a smile. “But we’re not done yet. Magnus, what’s the plan to save the city?”

“There are two huge problems we need to solve. First, we need to calm down the crowd, before they start wrecking the city. And secondly, we need to fix that dam. I can do the first, but I’ll need the voice amplifier.” He was looking at Kira now, but the girl cast her eyes downwards.

“I’m sorry Magnus. It slipped out of my hand when I dropped to the ground, and I forgot about it afterwards. It was ...” Though

her message was clear, she still couldn't bring herself to say the words.

"Trampled by the crowd?" Magnus completed. As Kira gave a nearly imperceptible nod, he laid a consoling hand on her shoulder. "It's alright. I've got a spare one. It's at my old place, in the storage room."

"I can get it," Kira enthusiastically said.

"Good," Magnus nodded. "Bring it to me at the south end of the market square, as soon as you can. I hope there's enough time. The crowd is getting closer as we speak."

"Nilas can bring her there just a bit faster," Daran suggested.

Since the concept of flying didn't seem to freak the girl out, Magnus responded with a nod. "Perfect. But that still leaves the dam. Daran, can I count on you to fix it?"

On hearing this the boy's eyes went wide. He wasn't sure what he had counted on – some detailed instruction? – but certainly not this. "I have no idea how," he admitted.

"Use what's around you," the old man suggested, pointing to the few students still hanging around the square. There were four of them; two boys and two girls. Only then did Daran realize he knew one of them. *Shamon, from the advanced workshop group. Of course! He's training to be a hunter.* "Good luck," Magnus said, giving the boy a confident nod, after which he turned around and started a gentle jog towards the city.

Kira gave Daran another quick hug. Then she stepped back and pulled something out of her pocket. "I don't exactly know what's going on, but I think you need this more than I do right now." She handed Daran the communicator.

“Thanks,” Daran said, giving her a smile in return. “I should also let you know that a friend of mine is living in Magnus’ old house right now. His name’s Don, and he can be a bit scary, but he’s a nice guy. Just tell him I sent you. Oh, and please tell him that a mutual friend of ours is in town today.”

Kira frowned at the cryptic message, but she didn’t question it. “Alright. Will do,” she nodded. “Good luck Daran.”

“You too,” the boy wished back, as she climbed onto the gizmo and took off, leaving Daran behind on his own. *Alright, let’s get this started*, he told himself.

As usual, he felt apprehensive about approaching the group of older students, but considering what was at stake, he didn’t really have a choice. “Shamon! I need your help,” he called out, surprising himself by how easy that actually went.

“Daran! Yeah, sure, but ... what are you doing here? And was that your gizmo?” Incredulous, the student pointed to the dot on the horizon.

“It’s a long story,” Daran admitted. “The short version is that the crowd trashed the dam, and if we don’t fix it, it’s gonna break.”

“Spillways aren’t open?” the small girl on the left asked.

Daran shook his head. “Nothing.”

The girl’s mouth let out a silent ‘Uh oh.’

“So are you with me?”

“You know I am, Daran,” Shamon said. Then he turned to his friends. “What about you guys?”

The tall boy next to him shrugged. “It’s not like we have any other orders.” When the girls gave similar reactions, Daran led them downhill, towards the dam control room.

“This is like a group mission,” the tall blonde girl right next to Daran said. “And we need to appoint a leader, right? Daran, you wrote the manual on this. You should take the lead.”

“That’s not how it works,” he explained. “I don’t know dams and I don’t know you guys. If there’s one person that shouldn’t take the lead here, then it’s me.”

The girl seemed to accept this, but she did give him a look that Daran read as, *What then?*

“Okay, we need someone who does understand how these massive things work,” Daran said. “Who’s closest?”

“Ciora,” Shamon said, pointing to the small brown-haired girl at the back. She seemed unsure about her designation as expert, but Shamon gave her a confident nod. “Come on, you’re taking all those engineering modules. You can do this.”

“That’s great,” Daran nodded. “You’re task splitter. We also need an allocator. Someone who knows the group. Who of you is most up to speed on what everyone here can do?”

No one answered, but somehow the entire group wound up looking at Shamon. “Yeah, I can do that,” he eventually shrugged.

“Perfect,” Daran said. “Ciora says what needs to be done, and Shamon makes sure it gets done by finding the right people. Let’s fix this mess.”

As they passed through the outer fence, it amazed Daran how even these older students had read his manual, or at least heard of it. Still, they hadn’t gotten the main message, which meant that he had to make it clearer. He was already thinking of setting up another update when they reached the control room.

From outside, it was already clear that something was amiss. Small debris was scattered all over the place, and they found a lot more of it when they stepped through the door. The whole interior had been smashed apart, with broken dials and control panels everywhere. The damage would have looked even more serious if the light had still been working, but naturally that was out too. With very few windows around, the place was cast into an eerie darkness.

“Is anyone in here?” Daran called out.

“In the back!” a female voice cried back.

They ventured further into the dam, accidentally knocking over who knows what, until Ciora told them to wait. She opened her bag and rummaged inside, pulling out a flashlight. “Let’s go,” she said with a smile as she provided some much-needed illumination.

Soon they found the source of the voice. At the far end of the room a woman was pressing a piece of cloth to the head of a man lying unconsciously on the ground. Given the already permeating color of red, the wound was significant. The woman wasn’t unscathed either, with her ankle bent at an unnatural angle. It was only when Daran finally managed to look through the tears that were strewn all across her face that he realized he’d actually seen her before. *She’s the same one as when I dropped off the part for that group mission.*

An uncomfortable silence ensued, in which everyone wound up looking at each other. Eventually Daran gave Ciora a smooth but gentle nudge.

“Right,” she said, getting the hint. “We need to provide medical aid.” She bent down to examine the head of the victim.

Daran couldn’t resist a frown. *Task splitters shouldn’t take up too many tasks, but keep an overview*, he thought. “Shamon,” he then whispered to his friend. “Is Ciora the best at medical stuff?”

“No,” he whispered back. “Jane’s got a lot more modules on –” At that point the boy seemed to remember his task. “Ciora, let Jane provide the aid. Thomo, run around and see if you can find a medkit anywhere.”

“There’s one in the cabinet next to the front door,” the woman said, pointing back to where they’d come from.

“I’m on it,” the boy nodded and rushed off towards the rectangle of light in the distance.

Ciora seemed taken aback for a moment, for being replaced at her medical task, but to Daran’s relief she quickly got over it and took control. “We still have to open the spillways,” she said.

“We should ask for help,” Shamon suggested, causing the three of them to look towards the woman still sitting against the wall. “How can we open them?”

“Normally you do that from here, but everything is broken,” she said, bursting out in another sob. Quickly she wound up crying again.

Daran waited for a follow-up question from either of the other students, but all he got was a nudge from Shamon. *Wait, what?* he thought. *He thinks I should talk with her? That’s ridiculous! Surely they’re better at it than I am.* But as another second passed, he remembered one of the team rules he’d written in his manual. *Trust each other’s judgment.*

“We’ll fix things,” he confidently told the woman, crouching down to get on the same level. She finally looked up from the ground and met his eyes. “We just need some pointers. Is there a way to open the spillways manually?”

“There’s a wrench. It’s the large one, on the wall over there,” she said, nudging with her head to the left. “Bring it up to the spillways and you can open them. But the mechanism there isn’t easy.”

“Thomo, go find it,” Shamon said. Only now did Daran notice that the boy had already returned with the medkit, as well as a second flashlight.

Thomo quickly rushed off again, but when he reached the wall, he cried out, “It’s not there!”

“Swarf,” Shamon cursed. He ran over, and together they started searching the place, until Thomo called again.

“I’ve got it!” he shouted. But as the two returned to the group, the boy didn’t look happy, and Daran quickly saw why. Part of the wrench’s end was broken off, with Thomo holding the dislodged piece in his other hand. There was no way it would still fit around whatever it was that it should be connected to. “They must have used this to thrash the place.”

“Is there any replacement?” Daran asked the woman from the dam, but she shook her head.

“No. I mean, we can order it, but that takes a while.”

Yeah, I’ve seen that before, Daran thought, noting that this part was harder to make than his previous challenge. *Although ... I don’t have to start from scratch this time.* “We can also weld it.”

“Do you see any welding equipment here?” Thomo scoffed, but an angry glance from Daran shut him up.

“Alright, Ciora, what needs to be done?” he asked.

“Well, we can weld that part back in the city,” she said. “And we should check out the spillway mechanism, so we know how to open it once the wrench has been fixed.”

Glad that someone was finally thinking in solutions instead of problems, Daran then threw a suggestive glance over at Shamon, who got the hint.

“Good idea to already check that out now,” he said, sounding impressed. “Ciora, you go and do that. Daran and I will run to the city, to find a workshop where we can fix the wrench. Thomo, you’re runner boy. Help Jane with whatever she needs, and carry messages from Ciora too.”

“Hey, why do I have to be the runner boy?” the boy asked indignantly.

“Because we need one, and you’re the fastest,” Shamon said in a voice that immediately ended the discussion. He turned around and, followed by Daran, left the control room.

Soon, they were jogging their way towards the city. “I’m starting to see the sense behind that team plan of yours,” Shamon said. “I never would’ve thought of already checking out that spillway mechanism ahead of time.”

“It’s all about finding the right people to make the decisions,” he said. “But it does take some practice to get all the right habits ingrained.”

“Yeah, definitely,” Shamon nodded. “We can use the group missions to learn that. Still, I’m not sure if you can expect everyone

to always follow these guidelines. I mean, especially when things get heated up, you quickly forget.”

Daran nodded. “That’s a good point. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“We’re glad to have you with us then,” Shamon said, giving him a smile. “Every time we make decisions in the wrong way, you call it out.”

I do? Daran wondered, but quickly realized the boy was right. It gave him an idea. “You think every team should have someone who monitors the process like that?” he asked.

“Yeah, definitely,” Shamon nodded. “I mean, everyone in the team should already do that for themselves, but it helps to assign someone for that too. Someone who really understands how teams should work, like you.”

I do? Daran again asked himself. *I don’t know squat about teams. That’s why I’m thinking so much about them!* Yet slowly he started to realize that maybe all that thinking had given him a slight edge on the others.

“Of course you don’t always have to specify it,” Shamon continued. “I mean, at the moment we’re a team of two. We’ll improvise who is splitter, allocator, or whatever. But I guess that, the bigger the team, the more important it becomes that you get to decisions in the right way. So then you definitely need clear roles, and that includes a process monitor, if I can call it that.”

“You sure can,” Daran nodded with a smile. He already had so many new ideas to update his team manual. For now, he stored them away though, because they were nearing the city.

“Ehm, Daran? I think we forgot about one thing,” Shamon stammered.

“What is it?” Daran wondered.

“With all the workshop owners rioting in the city, how are we ever going to find a workshop that’s open?”

Swarf, that’s a good point, Daran thought. It’s yet another unintended side-effect of this strike we set up.

Instead of cursing himself, he forced himself to focus on solutions. *Problems are there to be solved.* “I think I have an idea,” he said with a smile on his face.

Chapter 23 – Dropping by for help

“There’s the workshop we need!” Daran called out between breaths. “The one with the blue door.” He was trailing Shamon, who was obviously in better shape, by a dozen meters.

There’s no way Carl joined the riots, he thought. Magnus had told him that this old man was one of the last, apart from Tobin’s friends, to join the strike. *He’s got to be home*.

Shamon quickly pushed the door open, nearly unhinging it in the process. “Academy business!” he called to the owner, who was indeed present. “We need to confiscate your workshop for a little while.”

Eh, what?! Daran thought. He also burst through the door and saw Carl standing there, with a large bat in his hands and an angry look on his face.

“I’d expected rioters, but I got worse,” he barked to the two students.

“Shamon, you piece of milling scrap!” Daran shouted to his friend. “Get out.” He pointed to the door, with a look on his face that made clear he accepted no argument. “Now.” Slowly the student’s will succumbed and he grudgingly stumbled out the building. *Thanks for trusting me*, Daran silently told him.

When his friend was gone, Daran turned towards the owner. “Okay, let’s start over,” he said. “Carl, I need your help. Badly. Do you know who I am?”

“Yeah, that kid who betrayed us,” the old man said, looking more at Daran’s uniform than at his face. “Went over to the Academy.”

Daran's first thought was, *I didn't betray you!* At the same time, he knew that directly contradicting Carl would only widen the divide between them. *I'd better go along with what he says.*

"Can't say I like them either," he told the old man. "But the best way to change a rotten system is from the inside. So that's what I'm doing."

"By bugging workshop owners?" Carl scoffed him. "Some change that is. Seems to me that you're just like them."

Daran gave him an annoyed look in return. "You have no idea why I'm here, do you?"

The workshop owner raised his chin at Daran, challenging the boy to blow him away with his reasons.

"An hour ago an angry mob destroyed the control room of the dam. No water is passing through anymore. If we don't fix it, the reservoir level will rise too much and the whole thing will break."

"I still don't see how that's my problem," the old man countered.

It's just what Magnus said, Daran thought upon hearing this. *He's about to let the city perish, not because he wants it to, but because he doesn't see this is what his choice leads to. It's ignorance again!* Luckily, this realization also told him how to fight it. With a neutral look on his face, he bluntly stated, "The floodwave from the reservoir will wipe out most of the city." He knew there were a lot of maybes attached to this claim, but he felt it best not to advertise those. Instead, he raised his eyebrows, as if to say, 'Now it's your turn again.'

The man appeared baffled for a moment. "Are you ... " he started saying, but when the look on Daran's face still didn't show

the slightest shiver of doubt, a hint of fear got mixed into the confusion. Still several thoughts, which Daran could only guess at, seemed to cross his mind. Finally the turmoil behind the man's eyes seemed to calm down. "What do you need from me?"

"I'll show you," Daran said, opening the door and calling Shamon back in. The boy calmly waited for suggestions from his friend, not wanting to cause a stir again. Daran took the parts of the wrench from him and showed them to Carl. "If we get this fixed, we can release the pressure on the dam."

"There's no way to get that back to its old strength," the craftsman told them. "You need to make it anew to get anything reliable."

"We're past reliability today," Daran stated matter-of-factly. "We just need a quick and dirty fix. A weld should do the trick."

The man nodded appreciatively. "A good idea. But still I'm afraid I can't help you."

What? he thought, giving the man an inquisitive look. *I really thought he'd changed his mind!*

Then the man pointed to the lightbulb above him. "In case you hadn't noticed, the entire city went dark. There's no welding without electricity."

This news dropped in like a bombshell, leaving the room dead silent. Daran glanced from Carl over to Shamon, who returned his incredulous stare. "Swarf, how are we ever gonna fix this then?" his friend stammered. Slowly Daran's gaze turned back to Carl, until eventually he burst out laughing.

The confusion in the faces of the others only increased further. The man and the young student exchanged a meaningful look of

wonder, unsure of what had gotten into the boy. This only added to Daran's laughter, and he had to lean against a workbench to prevent himself from falling over. "Guys," he blurted out, after having regained some semblance of control. "I think I have an idea."

A few minutes later Nilas had made its way to the street outside, and was hooked up to the welding equipment. Daran was about to pick up the protective gear to put it on, when Shamon laid a hand on the student's shoulders. He turned around and looked at his friend, who subtly nudged his head towards Carl. Understanding the hint, Daran took a step back and made way for the old man.

"You guys better stand around the corner," Carl told them, pulling on the gloves. "I don't have enough protective glasses for the both of you." The boys did as instructed, and soon they heard the telltale sound of the welding arc.

"Sorry for cursing at you," Daran softly told Shamon, knowing the welding noises would prevent eavesdropping.

"No, you were right," the student said, shaking his head. "What you did was the only way to salvage the situation and get a second chance for a first impression. You know these workshop people a lot better than I do. I should've let you talk with them right from the start."

"Just like I should've let Carl do the welding," Daran nodded. "He's been doing it for ages. I've only welded stuff twice."

"I guess it's a human habit to believe we're better at something than other people, even if there's not a single sign to indicate this," Shamon added contemplatively.

“And that’s why a team needs a good allocator, who takes this into account and properly divides tasks over the team.”

“You’re saying Carl is part of the team too now?” Shamon asked, raising an eyebrow.

Surprised, Daran shrugged. “Of course! Teams are fluid things. You can always recruit new people.” It was only then, as he said this, that Daran realized it was exactly what he’d done with Shamon and his friends, even though he’d initially been so afraid of it. *Guess I’m learning*, he thought.

Eventually the noise died out and Carl let out a triumphant shout. “It’s good to be working again,” he said with a huge grin on his face. He showed the boys the wrench.

“That looks amazing!” Daran called out, knowing he couldn’t have gotten anything remotely close to this result. “But the faultline is still glowing hot. Shouldn’t you quench it?”

“Swarf no,” Carl countered. “That would make it as brittle as a rock. Just let it cool down on its own for at least half an hour. Then, once it’s at a proper temperature, you can use it.”

I did not know that, Daran said to himself, really glad now that he’d asked Carl for help. “Thank you so much. You may just have saved the city today.”

“Well, some good that did me,” the old man said, though Daran could see from the excited look in his eyes that he hadn’t done it for the recognition. He’d helped out just because he wanted to feel useful again, contributing to something. “Hey Daran, while you’re at the Academy, see if you can do something about that crazy law they put on the workshops these last few months. That would really help out.”

He doesn't know I'm already involved with the strike, Daran thought, until he cursed himself. *Of course he doesn't know*. “Yeah, I’ll see what I can do about that,” he eventually said. “Thanks again.”

They went outside, and while Daran put Nilas’ power cable back, Shamon asked him, “You’re going to fly back?”

“No,” Daran shook his head. He turned around and faced his friend, who was carrying the result of their hard work, partly wrapped in a borrowed piece of cloth. “The hard part is over now. The wrench needs to cool down for half an hour, which is plenty of time for you to get back. So I was thinking that, if you can bring that back, I’ll see if I can do something about that angry crowd in the city.”

“You really like getting involved in everything, don’t you?” Shamon laughed. Then he shrugged. “Sure, we can take it from here. You go ahead and save the day.”

“Thanks,” Daran gratefully said, slapping his friend on the shoulder. Not wanting to waste any more time, he quickly jumped onto Nilas and took off into the air again.

From the way the bird flew, Daran could tell it was tired. “There’s only a little more flying today,” he comforted the gizmo. “We’re heading to the market square.”

As they passed over the houses, Daran thought back to the group mission. It amazed him how he could just leave it behind like this, without double-checking everything everyone did. He realized it was because he trusted Shamon and his friends. He trusted their intentions, and he trusted they could get the job done.

So that's what makes a good team, he thought. It's not that everyone is involved in every decision. It's that you are so sure that people do things well enough, that you don't even need to be bothered by exactly how they'll do so. The less that people in the team have to worry about what the others are doing, the more efficiently the team works.

Ahead of him, he quickly saw the market square approach. It was filled with people, and to his surprise a few hunters were already circling above it. *Let's see how things are going.* He pulled the communicator out of his pocket and pressed the speak button. "Magnus, are you there? What's the situation?"

"Magnus is addressing the crowd," was the reply in Kira's voice. "It's not working well so far. There's still a lot of anger, and he's having a really hard time bringing that down." Only then did Daran see the old man up ahead, on top of a ladder that was towering above a market stall.

"I may have an idea," Daran said, thinking about the gizmo in his pocket. His insight was nowhere close to an actual plan though. There were still way too many details to fix.

If I land now, I'm sure Joka will be on my tail in no-time, he thought to himself. And this is exactly the moment where an angry workshop owner might be able to get away with stabbing an Academy student. I've got to fix that first.

Circling above the square, letting Nilas avoid the others in the sky, he pressed the speak button of the communicator again. "Kira, did you give Don my message while fetching the amplifier?"

"Yeah, I did," she said. "He asked whether I knew more about where that friend of yours was staying, but I didn't."

“That’s alright,” Daran reassured her. “Can you do me a favor and quickly run back? Tell him I’ll bring that friend to the back door of the house real soon.”

“I’m on it,” Kira said and from high up Daran saw her running off. He circled another few rounds above the crowd himself, to make sure he’d been spotted, and then ordered Nilas to drop him off next to an adjoining street, on the edge of the market square. He instructed the gizmo about the next rendezvous and quickly sent it back up into the air. Then he remained standing, leaning with his back against a wall and looking out over the crowd, until he locked eyes with a familiar face. *There he is.*

After three additional long seconds of waiting, he turned around and ran into the sidestreet he’d picked out. From the quick looks over his shoulder, he knew he was being followed. *This had better go well, or I’ll be a pile of sawdust when this is through.*

The man running after him was quickly catching up. *He’s faster than I thought!* Daran added another burst of speed, which enabled him to reach the alley he was aiming for before having lost all of his lead. He turned into it, briefly but loudly knocked on the door of the house he was passing, and then continued on, until he arrived at the back.

“Dead end,” a voice behind him said. Daran turned around and found Jokan standing only ten meters away. With a smug smile on his face, he was calmly blocking the only way out. Reaching into his pocket, the man pulled out a knife, waving it to the student. “Literally, in your case. You should’ve kept your nose out of our business, like we told you, but now it’s too late for that.”

Daran pulled the staff from his belt and wiggled it around, to ensure it was still locked in its unexpanded form.

“Ha, you think you can take me out with that?” Jokan scoffed. He still seemed to be savouring the game of generating fear, before closing in.

“Nah, I can’t,” Daran honestly admitted, knowing that his few months of training hadn’t gotten him anywhere close to his opponent’s level just yet. “But he can.” He firmly grabbed the cylinder and threw it into the alley, well over Jokan’s head. When the clattering sound of metal skittling over the ground never came, the man turned around to find the cause. He was just in time to see Donato give the small device a twist, expanding it into a full-grown staff.

For a brief moment Jokan froze, looking at his new opponent with fear on his face. The glance quickly turned into a malicious sneer though, as the man turned around again and advanced on Daran.

Luckily, that single second was all the boy had needed. He’d already fired his lifting device up to the edge of the roof, well above him. As his attacker ran towards him, he pushed the lift button, which smoothly pulled him up. It just wasn’t fast enough. When Jokan reached him, the man jumped up and used his empty hand to grab hold of the boy’s foot.

“Get back down here!” the hitchhiker called out.

Wasn’t planning to, Daran thought, frantically trying to shake off the extra luggage before Jokan got the idea to use his knife. When kick the man’s hand didn’t work, he put his free foot against

his other heel and pushed. As the shoe slid off, so did Jokan, both tumbling down to the pavement below.

Smoothly the device kept pulling Daran up further, until he reached the edge of the roof. He ignored the sounds of fighting, knowing he was nowhere near skilled enough compared to these guys to help out in any way, and pulled himself up on the gutter. Gently he climbed further along the tiles until he reached the top, where Nilas had just landed.

“Good to see you buddy,” he greeted the gizmo. “Let’s see what else we need to do.” Pulling out the communicator, he once more checked in on Kira. “Are you already at the square again?”

“Yeah, just got back,” she replied. “But things aren’t looking any better Daran. Some people are destroying stalls already. The others are still listening to Magnus, but I’m not sure how long that will last.”

Swarf, it’s really bad, he thought. He had to do something about this, which started with getting the amplifier to actually speak to the crowd. *But how?*

He couldn’t exactly have Magnus happily hand it off to him. *If people find out I was connected to the strike all along, I’ll lose all credibility*. But the alternative, of using Kira to secretly smuggle it towards him, would take too much time. People would get distracted, resulting in a full-blown riot before he could say anything in the first place.

It leaves only one option. “Ehm, Kira? I’m going to try and fix this, but I’ll need to steal the amplifier from Magnus in a minute or two. Can you make sure he stays on that ladder of his, and doesn’t struggle too much?”

“Well, yeah, I can tell him,” Kira replied. “But Daran, what in Kantara are you planning to do?”

“You don’t want to know,” the boy said, though after releasing the speak button of the communicator, he softly added, “Something tremendously stupid.”

Chapter 24 – Broken communication

To be honest, I'd expected this to be much worse, Daran thought. He was flying over the rooftops again, but instead of comfortably lying on top of Nilas, he was dangling upside-down, underneath the bird, his feet hooked into the bird's claws. And as long as he wasn't worrying about all the houses the gizmo might slam his face into, it was actually quite nice to see Tarine from this new perspective.

To Daran's relief the buildings quickly ended and the square began, with Magnus' ladder positioned on the right side. *Or is it left? Swarf, this is confusing.* "Nilas, let's go!"

The gizmo dove down to fly over the crowd, heading straight towards the speaker. If Daran wanted, he could actually high-five the people down below, or perhaps steal a hat from a particularly tall person, but the main thing on his mind was, *How am I ever going to pull that amplifier out of his hands? We're going way too fast!*

Before Daran had anything close to a proper answer, Nilas sharply pulled up, tugging Daran along, and for an astonishing second he actually was face to face with Magnus. It felt serene, as if he was suddenly weightless after the sharp tug that the gizmo had given him. The boy barely had enough state of mind left to remember what had brought him in this situation in the first place, but luckily the idea reached him just in time. He extended his arms and grabbed hold of the amplifier in front of him. As Nilas dove down again, the motion automatically made him pull the device out of the old man's hands.

It was only after they had circled halfway across the square, gaining a bit more altitude, that Daran realized what had happened. *Blasted sawdust, that actually worked!* he thought, his jaw dropping down. Luckily he had already instructed Nilas in advance where to drop him off, because he was still too astonished to form anything close to a proper sentence, let alone specific orders.

A moment later the bird roughly threw him onto the roof of the largest building around the square. Landing flat on his chest, Daran heard the sound of some device breaking. *Oh no*, he thought. *Not Novic! And not the amplifier!* He frantically checked whether everything was still in one piece, only to find what had been broken.

He pulled the squashed communicator out of his jacket pocket and examined the damage. With little confidence he pushed the speak button. “Kira, are you there?” To his disappointment, the thing remained silent. *Swarf, Magnus is not going to like this.*

At the same time he wondered why Nilas hadn’t been up to its usual carefulness. When he checked on his companion, he immediately saw why. The gizmo was having trouble keeping its wings up. “You must be exhausted,” Daran said, putting his hand on the bird’s shoulder. “Head back to the Academy. You deserve some new power.”

Well, it looks like I’m on my own now, the boy thought, as the bird jumped off the warehouse and slowly made its way east. He walked over to the edge, looking out over the open space in front of him. *Swarf, that’s a lot of people.*

There were probably a few thousand of them down in the square below. Most were workshop owners, or friends and family, but there were plenty of others too; disgruntled people from the food district, traders looking to protect their goods, and of course the curious youths who wanted to see with their own eyes what was going down. Near the edge, Daran also saw several lines of hunters and rangers, with their gizmos, ready to take action when things got out of hand. Given the size of the crowd, there didn't seem anywhere near enough of them.

What shocked Daran the most was not necessarily the size of the crowd. It was that they were all looking up, straight at him. *I'd better say something.*

He dialed the amplifier up to its maximum and took another step forward, closer to the edge. *It's just like starting a training,* he told himself. *Let's do this.*

The first step is to get them listening. They need to feel like I'm one of them. "You guys probably know who I am," he called out, remembering Carl at least had. The shockwave coming out of the amplifier nearly overwhelmed him, but he knew this was necessary to reach everyone. "I'm that workshop kid who joined up with the Thought Academy. I grew up with you guys, so I know the struggles you're going through. And despite this uniform, I'm still with you."

Someone loudly called, "Yeah, right!" but most of the others were still listening to him. *Seems like they haven't figured out just yet what to think of me.*

"I know about that law you're protesting against, and how you're buried in paperwork instead of actually making stuff." This

at least seemed to get him some agreeing cheers. “Now, the thing about being in the Academy, is that you hear stuff. So I know why this law was set up, and I want to tell you.” He paused, checking whether this piqued their interest.

“You may recall that it happened right after that building in the merchant district blew up.” He had trouble reading the looks on the faces of the audience here. *They’re not visibly nodding*, he thought. *Does that mean they remember, or not?* At the same time, the doubt brought his attention away from the story, and as the silence lasted on, he knew he had to start talking again.

“When that building exploded, the Academy immediately assumed the Free Minds were behind it, having built a bomb somewhere in the workshop district. In other words, they assumed *you* did it. And so you had to start explaining your every move to them.” This at least got him some nods from the audience.

“But these assumptions were wrong. You guys didn’t blow up that building. You know that, and I know that. They just don’t believe it! But here’s the twist: I can actually prove it.”

This got the audience talking. *Am I losing their focus?* Daran worried. *Or are they wondering how I can prove this? Well, I might as well tell them anyway.*

“It turns out that the rangers were already spying on that building. It was housing a trading company *connected* to the Free Minds! They were smuggling stolen thought cores out of the city!”

This got the crowd talking even louder, but Daran didn’t want to give them a break just yet. He wasn’t done.

“It wasn’t workshop people that blew up the building. They themselves did! The rangers were getting on their track, and they destroyed all evidence! But they missed one small thing.”

At this, he pulled Novic out of his pocket and asked it to play the recording into the amplifier. Pretty soon a female voice sounded over the square. “Oh, hello! You’ve come to check on the progress?”

As the conversation from the destroyed house took place yet again, the entire square went silent. Only after it ended did the cacophony of voices erupt.

Daran had trouble getting over the voices again. “It’s the same as always!” he called out. “The merchants are breaking the law, then cover up their tracks, and who gets to pay the price? The workshop district! This law isn’t just unfair. It’s also highly misdirected!”

The crowd started to roar back in anger. Slowly Daran started to wonder what the next step was, until a large gizmo approached from up above. The enormous bird was nearly double Nilas’ size. It landed smoothly, dropping off a thinker in a white uniform. The man moved to stand next to Daran, looking out over the square. As the crowd noticed the new addition, their shouts quickly dialed down to urgent whispers.

Who is that? Daran wondered, amazed by the calm that the man seemed to emit. *And why is he in white? I’ve never seen that before.*

Slowly he remembered the color setting again. *There’s black for the students, and red, blue and yellow for the three branches. It’s all symbolic. As a student you haven’t obtained a color yet. You only get*

one at your graduation. But white is the mix of all colors, and there's only one person who gets to wear that. At that point his jaw dropped to the floor. *This man is the Tharon!*

"Can I borrow that thing from you?" the Academy leader said, pointing to the amplifier.

Stunned, Daran nodded and handed it over.

"People of Kantara!" he started with obvious authority in his voice. "As always, one of our goals is to keep the people in this country safe. And that includes you!" With a compassionate look, he spread his arms out wide in a large gesture, visible to everyone down below. It managed to silence the crowd.

He sure knows how to deal with an audience, Daran thought, impressed.

"Sometimes, to keep everyone safe, we need to ask for your help. Sometimes we actually need to requisition it, to make sure the burden is shared by all, instead of being carried by only the well-willing among you. But sometimes, this burden that we place on you turns out to be too big. In this case, the only logical recourse would be to take it off of your shoulders again."

Wait, what's he saying? Daran wondered. *And why can't these people ever speak in plain language?* Down below the crowd seemed just as confused as him.

The Tharon seemed to realize this. "In other words," he added, "the law requiring you to register all your parts will be revoked. You can go back to your regular lives."

This news was met with loud cheers. The Tharon gave the crowd another wide smile, as if he was happy with their joy. Then he turned around and stepped away from the edge. Giving the

amplifier back to Daran, he told the boy, “Good move kid, but you’re playing a game that you don’t know the rules of.”

“Not yet,” Daran admitted. “But I’m figuring them out as I go.”

“That’s a dangerous thing you’re doing then,” the Tharon told him. “You could end up losing a lot more than just your shoe.” He gave Daran’s feet a suggestive glance.

Feeling exposed, Daran tried to hide his naked sock behind his other foot, knowing full well that this only added to his image of lacking control. The Tharon didn’t wait around to revel in his discomfort though, since he and his gizmo had already taken to the skies again.

Alone on the rooftop, Daran looked down again, but the crowd had turned its attention away from him. The chattering down below didn’t seem angry anymore. It seemed ... *Celebratory?* Daran’s jaw dropped. *They’re happy! I did it!*

Relieved, he stepped away from the edge and strapped the amplifier to his back. His job was done here. Now he just needed to find a way down. This turned out to be a lot harder than anticipated, but eventually, through the roofs of several adjoining buildings, he made it at least somewhat close to street level. All it took then was the help of a convenient downspout to guide him safely to the pavement below.

After gently sliding down and landing on both feet, he turned around and got punched square on the jaw by a swinging fist. *What in Kantara?!* he thought, staggering backwards. He turned around and raised his arms, ready to fight his assailant, only to find that he knew him all too well.

"Tobin?" he indignantly called out, spreading his arms to demand an explanation.

"You had to fly in and save the day, huh?" Tobin snorted at him. "You had to be the one thing everyone will be talking about now." He gave Daran a rough push on his chest, flinging him with his back against the wall.

As the boy kept coming closer, Daran shoved him back. "You'd rather I didn't?" Daran scoffed, raising his chin.

"We've been working for months on this, getting everyone together," Tobin lashed out. "We've been suffering on empty stomachs, with no income and no orders to fulfil. And you, nicely pent up at your precious Academy, suddenly drop in and fix everything for everyone! Where were you when all of this started?!"

Covered by tarps, Daran thought wryly, but he still didn't want Tobin to know how involved he'd actually been. So he merely shrugged. "Gathering evidence takes time."

"Yeah, right," Tobin jeered. "If you already had this ... whatever it was, why didn't you just give it to us this morning?"

You think I didn't want to? he angrily thought, remembering the struggles he'd had with his mixed allegiances. He gave his former brother an annoyed frown. "If you want to know ... does the name Jokan ring a bell?"

From the way Tobin's eyes widened, it seemed that he definitely knew the man, or had at least heard of him.

"First of all, that guy's been on my ass for months now, trying to prevent me from finding this proof. You may think he's loyal, but he's only loyal to whoever's paying him the most, and trust me, that's not you workshop owners."

This seemed to cause Tobin to raise an eyebrow, but before he got the chance to counter any of Daran's remarks, the boy continued.

"Secondly, you may have noticed that the power's out across the city. Joka had some guys destroy the control room of the dam. Swarf, nearly the entire dam broke, but guess who was fixing that this morning? While you guys were busy destroying the city, I was saving it from a blasted tidal wave!"

"That can't be—" Tobin started, but Daran wasn't in the mood to listen to anything the boy had to say.

"Oh, and guess what started this whole riot today? Someone shot Nareton! But the shooter wasn't aiming at him. No, he was aiming right at Kira. The only reason she's still alive is because I told her to duck, right as it happened."

Tobin's jaw dropped on hearing this, an incredulous look on his face.

"Yeah, I was up there with Magnus," Daran added. "I saw Joka pull that trigger. He wanted to start a riot that way. And why? My guess is because someone had paid him to. But I don't suppose you know anything about that?!"

Puffing, Daran gave the boy in front of him a questioning look. It made Tobin's eyes widen further.

"You were with Magnus," he stuttered, his jaw still down.

Wait, why is he focusing on Magnus? Daran wondered. *What does he know?* Tobin was well aware, from the old days, that Daran used to hang out with the old parts trader. But the connection with Kira was still hidden. *Until now, anyway,* Daran thought. Because behind the boy's eyes he could see his former brother

putting the pieces together, and slowly the shock on Tobin's face once more turned to anger.

He's forgotten everything I said, Daran thought. All he's thinking about now is how I know Kira, and what that implicates. Maybe he already knows how I set the two of them up last year.

"It was a mistake talking with you," Tobin finally blurted out through clenched teeth, waving his finger in front of Daran's nose. "I don't want to see you again. So stay away from the workshops. And stay away from Kira!"

During these words, he pointed his finger at Daran one final time. Then he turned around and headed back to his workshop, away from the market square.

Chapter 25 – Deciding another’s fate

As Tobin disappeared, Daran was left standing with his back against the wall. *What in Kantara am I going to do now?*

His first thoughts were with Kira. He walked back to the market square, finding the place still packed. *How will I ever find her in this mess?* Already people were staring, nudging their friends’ shoulders and pointing at him. *If I enter this crowd, I’m never getting out again.*

Resolving to catch up with her later, his mind shifted to the other friends he was working together with this morning. *The dam!* He turned left into a side street and then rounded the corner, circumventing the square. When he reached the Seldon, he found a steady flow of water making its way downriver. *They did it!* he thought, a huge smirk on his face.

He considered heading up to the dam to congratulate his friends, or just celebrate with them, but eventually decided against it. There wasn’t anything more that he could add. They were doing just fine without him. So instead of following the river upstream, he walked away from it again.

As he stepped through the streets towards his next destination, his mind subconsciously drifted back to the team process. All these months he’d been struggling with what it really meant to be a leader in a team, and now finally an answer had formed in his mind, suddenly making its way to his conscious thoughts. The realization stopped him in his tracks.

Being a leader is about predicting the future, he told himself. It took him a few seconds to put into words what it really meant. *If*

the future is fine, a leader does nothing. But if it's not, then – and only then – it's time to change things, until everyone's heading the right way again.

The implications of this surprised him. In the past group mission he hadn't had one of the crucial team roles. He didn't decide what needed to be done. He didn't hand out orders. Still, he felt like he'd made a difference.

You don't assign a leader, he added. Often you don't even need one. A leader doesn't have to be a task splitter, or an allocator. It could be anyone. All it requires is that that person can get enough influence to actually change things. Looking back at the strike, Daran realized that such a change could come about in more ways than one.

Eventually he started walking again. He was still heading to Magnus' place, where he hoped to check in on Donato. Surely whatever happened between him and Jokan would be done by now.

He walked up to the front door and knocked. When no reply came, thoughts started coming up in the back of his mind. *Maybe he lost? Maybe he's lying knocked out in the alley? Maybe I set him up to be killed?* He decided to knock again, a bit louder this time. When still nothing happened, he turned around to check the back, but just then someone unlocked the door. Daran braced himself, unsure of who would open it, but behind the narrow opening a friendly face appeared.

"You're alright!" Daran exclaimed, seeing the surprised look on his mentor's face.

"Course I am," Donato said in his usual stoic voice. "The day I let that piece of sawdust get the better of me in a one-on-one, I

quit.” He glanced around Daran to see if anyone else was near. When his checks seemed to satisfy him, he opened the door further. “Come in.”

As Daran was led into the familiar house, he kept glancing into every corner. It didn’t take long for Donato to notice.

“Ah, right,” the man said. He walked to a corner of the room, picked up the staff standing there and tossed it over. “Thanks for borrowing. It was quite useful.”

“You’re welcome,” Daran nodded, collapsing the device and affixing it to his belt. Right after, Donato threw a familiar shoe at his head too, which the student gratefully caught and put on. Yet he still kept looking around. “So ehm ... what happened with Joka?”

“Oh, yeah,” Donato said. “Don’t worry about him. He’s lodged down in the basement. I’ve made sure he’s as comfortable there as he deserves.” From the smell of sarcasm, Daran could tell exactly how much that was.

He raised an eyebrow. “No complaints from the neighbours about him staying over?”

“Nah,” Donato shrugged. “The basement is well-insulated. I hardly heard you knock.”

And I even knocked twice, Daran thought, but he shook the thought off. “What are you planning now, then? You’re still eager to leave town?”

Donato nodded. “Yeah. There’s not much to pack, so I’ll leave tomorrow morning. In the meantime, I can spend some quality time with my friend downstairs. See if I can figure out who was paying him.”

“And after that?” Daran wondered. “You’re letting him go?” He didn’t dare to ask the question that was really going through his mind. *Or will you kill him?*

“Well, that would kind of defeat the purpose, now wouldn’t it?” Donato answered. “But it would help if he got a bit more permanent place to stay in. I don’t suppose you can let the Academy know about a new potential guest in their lower quarters?”

Relieved, Daran smiled. “Yeah, I think I can drop a hint some time tomorrow about him overstaying his welcome here.”

“Perfect. Anyway, would you be up for a last lesson today? It’s the least I can do, after you got me such a nice present.”

Daran stifled a laugh. He had to admit he had mixed feelings about another training. A part of him was already exhausted, yet another part knew he wouldn’t get an opportunity like this again for a long time. He shook his doubts aside and gave his mentor a smile. “Yeah, let’s make it count.”

When Daran finally stepped out the door, three hours later, he knew he still had a long way to go with his staff skills and his Erydic. At the same time, Donato had given him plenty of pointers on how to continue improving. He knew how to proceed.

“Thanks for everything,” he said, shaking his friend’s hand.

“If you ever get close to Forest’s Edge, feel free to drop by.”

“I will. I might even beat you in a staff fight by then.”

Donato snickered. “Now don’t get cocky.”

“Of course not,” Daran grinned. “I’ll be very humble about kicking your ass. Anyway, if Jokan still tells you something useful, then do let me know. I’m very curious who sent him after us.”

“As am I. I will send you a note before I leave,” Donato promised. “Take care Daran.”

“I will,” the boy said, giving his friend a final nod before he turned around.

When he rounded the corner, he pulled his gizmo out of his pocket. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust his friend, but his curiosity got the better of him. “Novic, could you do me a favor and record whatever’s going on in that basement? I’m really curious what Jokan has to say.” The gizmo nodded and rushed off, leaving Daran to walk back to the Academy on his own.

When he arrived, he found that a letter had been delivered straight to his room. *Is it from Don already?* his first thought said, but then he realized it was impossible. *It would be way too fast.* He was proven right when he opened the message.

To Daran from Quenton.

You are expected at tomorrow morning’s thought council meeting, at eleven hours. Bring Novic. Cancel whatever other appointment you may have.

The message filled the boy with dread. Quenton had never spoken to him with a tone like this. It was always with compassion, at least up to some degree. A direct order like this was completely new.

Things just got serious, he thought, only to curse himself. *Swarf, of course things have gotten serious. I just hoped they wouldn’t blame it on me.* But there wasn’t much else he could do for now. So he

resolved not to worry too much, and at least go to bed on time. After a long day like this, he could use the rest.

Naturally, the night was far from perfect. When Daran woke up for the tenth time, pondering about what would go down at the meeting, he found that light was finally seeping through the curtains. *Well, I might as well get out*, he convinced himself.

He took a shower to warm up his sore muscles, worked a bit on a theoretical analysis summary, and finally headed for breakfast. He did find some friends in the food hall, but not being in the mood for smalltalk, he had a quick meal on his own. His friends knew his brooding moods well enough not to disturb him.

By the time he was done, he already needed to head out to collect Novic. When he got close to Magnus' house, he pressed the caller button and quickly the gizmo appeared, climbing up his leg.

"Good to see you again," Daran said. "I'd really love to hear what you discovered, but first we both have a meeting to attend."

The gizmo gave him a curious gaze, but Daran just shrugged.

"Yeah, I also don't know what it's about. My guess is they want to hear this recording you played yesterday before the crowd."

When Daran got back to the Academy, he went straight to the main building, which got him there way too early. With fifteen minutes left, he sat down in the hallway. He considered doing something at least somewhat productive, but he knew well enough that his thoughts weren't up for that in the first place. So he simply waited.

When he was finally called in, he stood up and let out a deep sigh. “Let’s see what they’ve got,” he told Novic, and walked through the door.

All of them were there. *Quenton, Arin and Baltar*. To Daran’s relief the Tharon was missing. It was the usual procedure for thought council meetings, but things had been far from usual these days, so you’d never know.

“Daran, have a seat,” Quenton gestured, more friendly than the boy had anticipated. As he did so, the scholar said, “After the events of yesterday, we wanted to listen to the conversations between the strike leaders ourselves. We want you to play back as many as you can, starting with the first one.”

“Okay,” Daran nodded, somewhat surprised. He’d expected trouble from his actions yesterday. This was something he could handle. “Novic, can you play back talks between Magnus and Geno?” he asked, carefully phrasing the request. The gizmo froze, as usual, and soon Magnus’ voice was audible.

“Geno? Anything?”

“No thanks,” replied the other strike leader. “What did you want to discuss?”

Swarf, Novic recorded this? Daran thought, hoping his surprise wasn’t too visible. *This was from before I inserted him. He’s really recording everything he hears.*

Daran wasn’t even listening to whatever story Magnus was telling, but his eyes widened further when Tobin said, “They also get them from the bigger worksh – ”

“Pause it,” Quenton ordered, and Daran gestured to Novic to comply. “The first two were Magnus and Geno, I assume. Do you know third voice?”

“Well, yeah,” Daran said, as if it was obvious. “That’s Tobin. He used to be my brother, if you can recall. I told you about him. He’s helping Geno.”

“Alright,” Quenton nodded. “Proceed.”

The conversation continued, until Magnus told Geno, “Feel free to step outside.”

“Fine,” Geno replied after a while, although Daran could have sworn the pause was a lot longer the last time he listened to this conversation. “We’ll just use this room.”

“No, wait!” Kira yelled. At this Quenton’s eyes narrowed.

“Pause it again,” he ordered. “Do you know who that was?”

“Ehm ... ” Daran started, unsure how to respond.

When the silence dragged on, Quenton interjected, “Was that by any chance Kira, who was assisting Magnus in setting up the strike?”

“Yes, it was,” Daran said, not seeing any reason he could get away with denying this.

“Was that the same Kira you stole our thought cores with last year?”

Swarf, he knows, Daran thought, trying to swallow back the signs of fear that had suddenly sprung up all around his body. “Yes, it was.”

Quenton gave a subtle nod and, piercing Daran with his insistent look, he calmly asked his next question. “Tell me then, Daran. Were you involved with this strike right from the start?”

Daran let out a deep sigh. *He had to find out eventually*, he told himself. “Yes, I was,” he softly said, guiltily looking down at the table.

“We figured as much,” Quenton said, his voice filled with sadness. “I’m glad you openly admit it, instead of beating around the bush, but it still leaves me no choice. I have to expel you from the Academy.”

Chapter 26 – Finding a way in

Expulsion? Daran thought with wide eyes. *I had not expected that.* His mouth agape, he tried to reply, but no sound managed to come out.

Giving up talking, he looked away from the three pairs of eyes staring at him. He placed his hands on the armrests and pushed off, standing up. Turning around, he slowly paced back and forth behind the desk, trying to sort out his thoughts.

A lot of stuff has happened in the past year, but I somehow always assumed I could stay here at the Academy. If not, where would I go? What would I do? He shivered, knowing he didn't have an answer to any of those questions.

Slowly he started to realize that he did have answers to others. *I still have some cards up my sleeve. I can still fight this,* he told himself. *So let's play this political game of theirs.* He turned back to the thought council and said, more confidently than even he had expected, "It's not going to happen."

"Oh? And why is that?" asked Aris. It was the first time someone other than Quenton had spoken.

Apparently they haven't scripted this part, Daran figured. He started piecing together his explanation.

"Multiple reasons," he started. "First of all, what's bad about organizing a strike? If I want to convince the workshop owners to take a break, why can't I do so?"

"It's not about that," Quenton said. "It's that you didn't think it might be relevant to tell us about it. For example when we asked you to listen in on the organizers."

“Sure,” Daran said, his voice filled with sarcasm. “You guys finally decide to put a bit of trust in me, asking to help out. And then I should tell you the one thing that will blow that trust out of the water?”

“It might help if you didn’t do stuff that would betray our trust in the first place,” Quenton noted dryly.

Daran gave him an angry frown. “And betray that of my friends? Who came to me, asking for help? You can pick on the workshops all you want, but I can’t help out my friends?”

“Again, it’s not about that,” Quenton said. “It’s about not getting involved, which is something you haven’t learned just yet.” The scholar gave Daran a judgmental glance.

“Yeah, like how I shouldn’t have gotten involved in fixing the dam,” the student said, once more with an overload of sarcasm. “Is that it?”

This comment put a confused frown on Quenton’s face, but Arin raised his eyebrows. When the scholar leader gave Daran a questioning look, the boy gestured to the hunter. “Maybe you should ask him about that.”

Arin cleared his throat. “You know that the crowd destroyed the dam control room yesterday, causing the power outage,” the man in red explained to his colleague. “It turns out a group of students fixed it. Daran was one of them.”

“One of them?” Daran snorted. “I brought them together! And if we hadn’t opened the spillways, most of Tarine would have been washed away at this point. But feel free to downplay it all you want.”

The scholar turned to Arin for verification. To Daran's relief, the hunter leader nodded.

"Do people know?" Quenton asked.

"The students know," the hunter shrugged. "So yeah, expect people to figure it out."

"That will complicate matters," the man in yellow noted, turning back to Daran. "But it doesn't matter. You set things in motion that nearly destroyed the city. The fact that you prevented the actual destruction doesn't acquit you from the rest."

"The destruction of the city?" Daran repeated. "You can't pin that one on me. I was *not* the one starting that riot."

"You knew very well about the blockade," Quenton said. "You told me about it."

"Yeah, but were you there? The blockade was peaceful – swarf, even fun – until someone tried to kill Kira. It was that gunshot that turned the crowd into a rioting mob."

"And you're blaming us?" Quenton asked, appalled, but Daran shook his head.

"Of course not. I saw it happen. I don't suppose you know a guy called Joka?"

The scholar looked over to Arin, who clarified. "Underworld organizer. Works for whoever pays him the most, which is usually the Minds."

"Yeah, that one," Daran nodded. "He fired the gun. Then he took control of the angered crowd and sent them to the city, destroying the dam in the process."

"Sounds like an easy scapegoat," Quenton frowned. "But Daran, like it or not, this is about images. We need to be seen as

doing something about what caused the riot. And until we have Jokan, someone needs to take the fall."

What kind of scrappy reason is that? Daran wondered, but he knew it was all part of the game. In fact, he'd already counted on it. "So why don't you pick him up?"

"He's not exactly easy to track down," Arin said, giving the boy an annoyed frown.

"Oh, I can help you with that," Daran said, giving the hunter leader a shrug. "I've already got him."

"What?" Quenton called out, although the same message was shown on all three faces.

"Hey, I told you about those kids following me, right?" Daran countered, now with the voice of an innocent bystander. "It turns out Jokan set them up to it. And considering you couldn't help me with this, I took care of him myself. It seemed the most effective solution."

Quenton seemed offended by the snub, but it was Arin that replied first. "So where is he then?" the hunter asked, raising his chin as if to challenge the boy.

He doesn't believe me, Daran realized, not surprised. At the same time, he knew he was being baited. "Here's the deal," he said with a small smile on his face. "You let me stay at the Academy, and I give you Jokan."

"No way," Quenton directly said. It earned the scholar a surprised glance from Arin, who seemed more interested in the proposal. "Even if you did capture him, you think handing over some petty criminal is going to excuse what you did?"

"I don't suppose you want to discuss this first?" Daran asked, glancing over at Arin. To his disappointment, the hunter leader shook his head.

"I'm with Quenton on this," he calmly said.

Scrap, these guys go along with each other's decisions. A part of Daran was impressed by the unity, while the bigger part was mainly pissed off. He glanced over from one department head to another, but none of them seemed to budge. "So you're still planning to expel me?"

"Yes, we are," Quenton nodded. "So unless –"

"Fine," Daran blurted out, annoyed that it had to come this far. He looked at the scholar leader and let out a deep sigh. "I can tell you where Novic came from."

"Is that so?" Arin said. From his tone, Daran could tell that they really didn't believe him this time.

Guess I have to convince them first, he figured. "There's a core creator, well-hidden in the mountains. Nolan built it."

"And you can take us there?" the hunter leader asked.

With a large sense of regret, Daran nodded. He'd hoped that one day, when he had learned more about thought cores, he'd be able to analyze Nolan's creation himself. Now he was just giving it all away. *Well, if I get kicked out of the Academy, that day won't come in the first place.*

"And in return, you want to stay at the Academy?"

"Yes," Daran nodded. "I want immunity, until I graduate."

"That is something we need to discuss," Arin noted. "Could you step outside? We'll call you when we've made a decision."

The student gave him a nod and turned around, walking out of the office. He closed the door behind him and leaned against the wall, pondering the decisions he'd brazenly made in the last few minutes.

Slowly, it dawned on him that today he was losing all he'd built up over the last few months. *The strike. Donato. Jokan. And now Nolan's core creator.* At the same time, he knew it was necessary. He hadn't realized it before, but now he knew he had to stay at the Academy. *This is who I am. It's where I can learn the things I want to learn.* He didn't regret the choices he had made. Just the fact that he had to make them. *Now I can only wait and see what they've resulted in.*

When the door finally opened and he was called in, he'd fully regained his composure. Calmly he took his seat in front of the three most important men in the Academy, apart from the Tharon. It was only then that he noticed he'd left his gizmo on the table. *Did Novic just record their entire deliberation? That could be interesting,* he mused. Before he might give the thought away, he looked up to the department heads and gave them a questioning look.

It was Quenton that leaned forward in his chair. "You can stay," he said, sounding somewhat regretful. "But there are conditions."

"I'm listening," Daran said, desperately trying to hide his curiosity overkill.

The scholar looked at the scribbled notes in front of him. "Number one. You hand over Jokan, as discussed," he read out loud. "Number two. You direct us to the core creator, but keep it

a secret for everyone else. And we really mean everyone.” He looked at Daran to see if he agreed with this so far, but the boy merely nodded.

“Number three. You will not be rewarded for saving the dam, and will keep quiet about your own role in the affair.”

They really care about this image of theirs, Daran thought. He didn’t care much though. His friends knew what had happened, and that was all that mattered. “Sure,” he shrugged.

“Number four. You will not be granted immunity. We won’t give you free rein to cause havoc around the Academy for the years to come.”

Daran could see their point. Still, it sounded like a loophole to throw him out later anyway. “In that case I want amnesty for whatever I’ve done so far. I won’t have you kicking me out tomorrow for what happened yesterday.”

Quenton looked at Arin, who gave him a nod. “Agreed. You haven’t exactly gotten the clean start at the Academy that other students have. While they were given their place, you had to earn it first. But now you have. So from now on, you’re just like any other student.”

“I want nothing else,” Daran nodded.

“Good. Then finally there’s number five. The Academy takes back Novic.”

What the swarf, Daran silently cursed. “No way,” he immediately replied. It wasn’t just that Novic still held many conversations he wanted to listen to. *The questioning of Jokan. The discussion between the department heads a moment ago.* It was more that Daran had started to consider the gizmo as a friend, and given

all he'd lost today already, he wasn't about to add this to the list. "There's nothing you can do with him anyway. I'm the only one he listens to."

"This is not up for discussion," Quenton reprimanded, but Daran would have none of it.

"You're right it's not. Novic isn't just my gizmo. He's my friend. I'm not betraying him." Daran was unsure how far he could push this, but the least he could do was try. "I get to keep him, or there's no deal."

Quenton gave him a frown. "You're forgetting that, if we expel you, you'll lose all your gizmos."

"True," Daran said. "But you're forgetting that I know where Novic was made. If I lose my gizmos, I can make new ones." He gave the scholar a meaningful look, before he decided to spice things up further by adding, "Perhaps with some help."

On hearing this, Quenton's eyes narrowed. *It seems he got the hidden message*, Daran thought. *There's no way he's going to let the Minds get anywhere near that core creator*. The scholar took several deep breaths before turning to the hunter on his side. They briefly whispered to each other, until they seemed to come to an agreement.

"The moment anyone else hears about this creator, and I mean *anyone*, this deal is off, and you're out of here faster than you can count your gizmos. Do you understand that?"

Daran understood perfectly well what Quenton meant. *He budged. It worked!* "Yes, I understand," he calmly nodded.

"Good. Then we have an agreement?"

Daran considered asking for the whole thing spelled out in black and white. He was still worried about the thought council coming up with a trick to kick him out later after all. But if he got to keep Novic, who had undoubtedly recorded this entire affair, there was no such need. Plus, he didn't want to push things any further. "We have an agreement," he said.

"Perfect," Arin interjected. "Then tell us, where's Joka?"

Daran let out a sly smile. "Since Magnus hasn't been using his house these days, I figured I'd borrow his basement. I locked him up in there."

"And the core creator?" Arin added.

"Like I said, it's well-hidden in the mountains. I can take you there by air though."

"I'll arrange some hunters to accompany you," Arin said. "Baltar, you care to join?"

Daran sensed regret in the hunter's voice, although it took him a second to pinpoint why. *He doesn't have a flying gizmo*, he realized. *Baltar does. But Arin doesn't like giving up control.*

"I'll lead them there," the ranger leader said.

"I also really like to study the creator, after it's been secured," Quenton added.

"I'm sure that can be arranged," Arin nodded. "Let's schedule departure at two o'clock."

That afternoon Daran, Baltar and four hunters landed one by one on the outcropping, leading into the cave. As soon as they entered, one hunter immediately went to check out the machine.

“This is splendid work,” he quickly reported to Baltar, clearly having trouble suppressing his excitement. “It’s better than even the new one back home.”

“Yeah, great,” Baltar mumbled, obviously not caring about how amazing everything was. “Can you see how many thought cores were made here?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s easy,” the hunter said. “It’s the dial over there on the right. Twenty-three so far.”

“Twenty-three?!” Baltar called out. “You mean to say that there’s twenty-three advanced thought cores out there?”

“Well, twenty-two actually,” Daran said, patting the pocket that held Novic.

The death stare the ranger gave him instantly shut the boy up. “What else can you say? What types were they? And when were they made?”

“Oh, everything’s logged,” the hunter said. “Like I said, this is good stuff. The first one was made three to four years ago, and was for a small rodent-like gizmo. The other twenty-two are of all sorts, and they’re more recent. In fact ... ” The hunter appeared to do the math, but it seemed to confuse him. “This can’t be right.”

“Spit it out!” the ranger leader ordered impatiently.

“They were all made a month after Nolan died.”

“So the Minds already found this place,” Baltar gasped.

“Yeah,” the hunter said. “But after that, there’s nothing. It’s like they just forgot about it.”

“Well, they’re bound to remember some day. It’s time to lock this place down.” One by one Baltar started ordering the hunters

around. The hunter who checked out the core creator was told to gather all the data he could. Another was told to create a locked gate at the entrance, while the next was supposed to add booby-traps in case anyone tried to break through. The last hunter had to add monitoring equipment, informing the Academy if anyone got close. “We may destroy it later, but until then, no one comes in here, and especially not without us knowing it.”

Daran merely stepped aside, watching them from a distance. But while the hunters thought he was just getting out of the way, he kept careful track of every trick, up to the smallest detail, that was being installed. *If I ever need to come back here, I will get in, whether they like it or not.*

Epilogue – Vanished support

A day later, just after dinner, Daran was hanging out in the common room again, listening to the chatting and banter of the other students. It still felt new to him, this whole group socializing thing. He wondered if he could ever get used to it, but for now it was a good way to get his mind off of things, and to get used to a calmer pace of life again.

Of course they all knew what had happened on the market square two days ago. It wasn't like you could hide something with so many witnesses. To his surprise, it meant he got rather few questions about it. The only ones they asked started with "Is it true that," and he always dutifully nodded his way through those.

I guess that the best way to quell rumours is through openness, he mused. *But if you want to get people talking, shroud things in mystery.*

"Hey Daran," Maxi suddenly called, pulling the boy out of his thoughts. "The talk is that Enise got hooked up to someone. I don't suppose you know anything about that?" He gave the boy a huge grin.

The comment raised a few eyes, while others chuckled. Daran merely returned a confused look. "Haven't got a clue," he honestly said, yet somehow this got even more people snickering. *What do they think? That we're a couple?*

The talk continued with a story from Jarod about how he got lost in the food district the other day. *The most random subject ever,* Daran thought, but it was a good background noise for his mind to drift off, catching a few tidbits every now and then.

The next time he was pulled away from his ponderings was when a boy tapped him on the shoulders. It was a first-year student, breathing heavily.

“You’re impossible to find,” he said in-between gasps. “Got a message for you. From some girl. Waiting outside the student entrance. Asks you to come. As soon as you can.”

Once more the people close enough to Daran to overhear the message raised their eyes, but Daran ignored them. *Kira*, he thought, figuring it was the only girl he knew outside of the Academy. “Ah, thanks,” he said, giving the boy a grateful nod. “I’ll look her up right away.” *It’s not like I’m doing anything useful here anyway*, he silently added.

He got up and rushed towards the hallway door, only to run into Firo. He still wasn’t exactly on friendly terms with his former nemesis, but at least there was some sort of peace. So he gave the boy a nod and squeezed his way around, only to find Enise right behind him.

“Hi,” Daran said, assuming it would be the proper thing to say, but the way the girl looked down and softly returned his greeting caused him to doubt himself. *Why is she avoiding eye contact? Did I do something wrong again?* Now wasn’t the time to worry about it though, because Kira was waiting.

With large steps he rushed through the hallway towards his room. He quickly entered, grabbed his coat, and rushed out again. When he rounded the corner, someone behind him called, “Daran!” He turned around and found Jarod running after him.

“I’m kind of on my way to something,” Daran said, pointing to where he was going.

"I'll walk with you," Jarod immediately said. "Listen, did you know about Enise?"

"Know what?" Daran asked, wondering what the fuss was about. He didn't care too much though, with his mind more focused on other matters.

"That she hooked up with Firo," Jarod explained.

It made Daran stop walking. He turned to his friend and gave him an astonished look.

Jarod returned his surprise. "You didn't know."

Daran shrugged. "No, I didn't," he said, turning back to continue walking again.

"So?" Jarod asked, rushing to catch up.

"So what?" Daran countered, giving his friend a bothered frown.

"So how do you feel about it?"

"Feel about it?" Daran snorted. "It didn't work out between us. So she should do whatever she wants to do."

"Yeah, but do you think it's fair?"

Daran stopped walking again, if only to once and for all get rid of the endless flow of questions. "Is it fair? That I've been working to the bone to help everyone? That because I was so busy, I pushed her away? And that now Firo's got her? Is that what you mean?"

He let out a deep sigh and shook his head. "Fairness has nothing to do with it. I didn't help people, or save the dam for that matter, to get some grand prize at the end. I did it because it's the right thing."

While he said those words, he did notice that deep down a part of him actually was disappointed. He gave Jarod a tired shrug.

“But I guess it would be nice if luck could come my way a bit more often.”

“I’m sure it will, in the end,” Jarod said, giving his friend a pat on the shoulder. He added a large grin. “Besides, with your gizmo, you deserve a girl who’s a bit less uncomfortable with heights.”

“Thanks,” Daran smiled. “That helps.”

“Anyway, you’re off to something important,” Jarod noted. “I’m diving back into the common room for some more gossip. I’ll catch you later.”

“Sure,” Daran nodded, turning around and running off. When he rushed out the student gate, he found Kira across the street. She looked relieved when she saw him.

“Daran! Let’s go for a walk,” she said. “I know a nice alley not too far from here where we can talk.”

“Sure,” Daran nodded, following her through the streets. “Listen, I tried to find you after the protest, but there was too much chaos. And I broke the communicator when I crashed onto the roof. And I ran into Tobin afterwards, and he told me he didn’t want to see me anywhere close to the workshop, and I just —”

“It’s okay,” Kira said, interrupting his ramblings. “It was good that you did. Tobin has been acting strangely, like he’s keeping an eye on me or something. I had to wait until he left before sneaking out.”

“I think I know why,” Daran said. “He’s figured out that we know each other.”

Kira gave him a frown. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“He’s trying to push away any memory of me. And if you have a link to me, it means he’ll try to push you away too.”

“Ah,” Kira said, slowly understanding the problem. “It sounds like I need to talk this out with him sometime.”

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Daran snorted sarcastically. *There’s no way that’s going to work with Tobin.* “Anyway, there’s a ton of stuff I want to tell you. They wanted to throw me out of the Academy yesterday, but I convinced them otherwise.”

“What?” Kira called out. “Why? Because of what you did with the protest?”

“Not exactly. They, ehm ... they kind of figured out I was connected from the start. But maybe I should let them explain.”

Kira didn’t understand that last part, giving him a questioning look, but Daran was already pulling Novic out of his pocket. They’d just reached the alley Kira had guided him to, so it was as secluded a place as Daran could hope for.

“This is a gizmo – you know, Thought Academy tech – and he can record conversations. He accidentally listened in on the thought council.”

“That’s so cool,” Kira said, studying the tiny creature.

“Novic, can you play back the fragment we picked out from the council discussion?” Daran asked. He’d already listened back to it yesterday and selected a small sample which was safe enough for Kira to hear.

After the telltale freezing of the gizmo, it was Quenton’s voice that spoke. “To be honest, after hearing all the things he’s done so far, my first reaction is even more to throw him out. He organized

the strike, he captured Joka, and found the core creator. Who knows what else he's got going on?"

"And your second reaction?" This voice was Arin's.

"It's that, if we kick him out, he won't stop doing these things. It'll only make it worse."

Arin seemed to agree. "He might become our biggest enemy, like how Voldor left the Academy and is leading the Minds now."

"But he's still young," Quenton noted. "If we keep him around, we can at least steer him into the right direction. He'll have friends here, to keep him in check."

"Or he pulls those friends along," Baltar said. "Like how he got the students of his workshop group to join the strike too." When Daran first heard this, he was surprised by how much they knew. *They're really keeping an eye on what happens inside the Academy*, he thought. *I should remember that.*

"Yes, it's not without risks," Quenton agreed. "He's like a loaded gun that we've unleashed upon the country. But it's better to keep a loaded gun close, than to have it shoot you in the back when you're not watching."

"Perhaps. But it still leaves me worried," Arin admitted. "You heard what he did with the riot. He went in and threw oil onto the fire!"

"Isn't that what he did here too?" Quenton said. "He's not afraid to do some provoking to get what he wants. I'd never expected it of him though." The scholar let out a deep sigh. "There was a time when I thought I understood him. When I trusted him. Those days sure are over now."

With a gesture to Novic, Daran ended the recording. The rest was just a long and winded discussion, where in the end Quenton and Arin both voted to keep him in. Baltar, who had hardly joined the discussion at all, still stuck with the original point of view, considering it safer to get rid of Daran.

Daran gave Kira a questioning look. *What do you think?*

"It sounds like you've lost the support of Quenton," Kira noted. "You're on your own in the Academy now."

Daran couldn't help snickering. "I'm not on my own. But yeah, my popularity ratings among the higher-ups aren't exactly stellar."

"They were right about you throwing oil onto the fire though," Kira said.

Daran gave her a surprised frown. "I didn't understand that comment. You mean you did?"

"You thought you stopped the riot because you found proof of something?"

"Well, yeah," Daran shrugged. "I told the crowd, including the thinkers, that the anger was justified. And then the Tharon dropped in and revoked the law."

"The crowd didn't care about your proof," Kira said. "Swarf, they hardly heard it through all the noise. The main point is that, while Magnus tried to calm them down, you only enraged them."

Daran's jaw had slowly dropped down. "But then, why ... "

"Why did the Tharon drop in? To prevent a disaster. The riot was like a loaded arbalest. And instead of disarming it, like Magnus was trying to do, you pulled the safety pin and pointed it right at the city. You basically forced their hand."

Scrap, she's right, Daran slowly realized. And I did the exact same thing with the thought council yesterday. I didn't even know.

Though he was far from happy with the realization, he was at least glad with the feedback. *People never really see the real effects of their actions*, he thought yet again. *So the best feedback you can give them is to let them know what kind of mess they're causing.*

"No wonder the Tharon looked pissed," he eventually said.

"But on the flip side, you did give him a reason to come back on that crappy law, other than 'We made a mistake.' You gave him a way out. That may have helped."

"You mean he couldn't just honestly admit having screwed up?"

"No," Kira shook her head. "Sadly, that's not how it works. Leaders aren't supposed to make mistakes. They're supposed to know everything already."

"What kind of blasted idea is that?" Daran reacted indignantly. "People never know everything. You always try stuff. Sometimes it works better than expected, and sometimes worse. It's how we learn. It's how we continually improve things."

He thought back to how he was organizing his trainings. They always kept changing, evolving along with the things he discovered. "If you can't accept mistakes, you never allow others to learn. It's the worst thing you can do. Instead, let people fail, and then improve. Because why would you want someone who never learns to be in charge of your country?"

"What you're saying makes sense, but few people really think like that," Kira said. "And besides, admitting mistakes is hard. Can you admit that the strike was a bad idea?"

“No, it was – ” Daran immediately started, but a meaningful look from Kira shut him up.

She’s right, he thought, noticing that his first reaction also was to defend himself. After thinking about it some more, he gave her a resigned nod. “It was necessary, but there were definitely a lot of things we could’ve done better.”

He was amazed by how smart Kira had gotten, relating to political stuff like this. *She’s really learned a lot the past few months*, he thought. He was glad to count her as his friend, which reminded him of something.

“You may be happy to know I also dealt with the guy who tried to shoot you,” Daran said. “In fact, you remember that mutual friend of Don and mine? That wasn’t exactly about a friend. That was about him.”

“Wow,” Kira said, shocked. “So what did you do with him?”

Daran swallowed back his apprehension. He’d listened last night to the ‘interrogation’, which had been a really bad idea. Donato hadn’t exactly been careful with Joka – far from it – and sleeping peacefully afterwards turned out to be rather difficult.

“I let Don deal with him,” he explained. “He handed him over to the Academy eventually.” Daran had received confirmation that the Academy arrested Joka but, apart from being alive, he hadn’t heard what state they’d found him in. He was really curious what Quenton thought of him, and the deal that they’d made, by now.

“He also told me who hired the guy,” Daran added.

“And?” Kira asked curiously.

“For causing the riots, it was Geno. It was the shooter’s idea to target you, but Geno had approved it.”

“That pile of milling scrap!” Kira shouted angrily. “I hope Don or the Academy or anyone got him too?”

“No,” Daran shrugged. “He’s still missing. In hiding, probably.”

What Daran didn’t say was what else he’d learned. It turned out that the riot was only a small assignment, what with Geno not having a lot of money. Trailing Daran had been the big one, which earned Jokan more kantas than the boy had seen in his lifetime. Jokan didn’t know who had hired him – his contact was rather mysterious – but given the solid up-front financing, he didn’t expect it to be the Minds. “It had the stink of a secret government job,” the man had said.

If he was right, then someone in the Academy must have known, Daran figured. *But did they?* He had listened several times more to the entire thought council discussion, but there was nothing suspicious in there. *At least they’re not all in on it.*

“Anyway, I still have that amplifier that I took from Magnus. I should give that back sometime.”

Kira’s jaw dropped, and two worried eyes stared up at him. “You mean you don’t know?” she said. “I thought you may have seen what happened, from up there.”

“Seen what?” Daran asked, curious what had spooked the girl so much.

“Where Magnus went,” the girl explained, distraught. “I only got back to the square when you started your speech, and he was already off his ladder by then. I thought he’d just joined the crowd, but later I heard rumours from the workshop owners, how he’d been dragged off by some men. And no one has seen him since.”

“Dragged off?” Daran exclaimed. “How?!”

“I don’t know!” Kira cried out. “They just said it went quickly. That he was already gone by the time they started wondering what was going on. No one even gave a shout.”

What in the world is going on? Daran wondered, incredulous. He had to figure this one out. “Did those men wear uniforms?”

“No, probably not,” Kira said. “The owners didn’t call them thinkers. Just men.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Daran said. “There were hunters everywhere, watching for Magnus. It would have been hard for him to leave the square in the first place. How would anyone get him out against his will? Unless the men were thinkers, and this is all one big Academy plot.”

Kira shook her head. “Then the hunters would’ve just barged in and arrested him. I think it was someone else.”

Daran gave her a confused look. *But how?*

“It was chaos out there,” the girl tried to explain. “So much was happening. If these guys are good enough to pull Magnus away from his friends, I guess they can manage avoiding some hunters too.”

Daran buried his hands in his hair. *I don’t know*, he groaned. *After all that’s happened, now this?*

“But why did they take him?” Kira continued. “Are they going to kill him?” Fear was permeating her voice.

“No,” Daran immediately said, shaking his head. He realized his comment resulted more from desire than logic, but soon his thoughts confirmed his initial reaction. “Abducting him like this, if that is what happened, is a really risky thing. If they wanted to

kill him, they could have shot him from a distance at any time while he was up on that ladder. No, they took him for a reason.”

“What reason could they possibly have?” Kira asked, her eyes wide.

“I don’t know,” Daran honestly admitted with a desperate headshake. “But apparently they need him for something.”

“Well, then at least there’s time,” Kira softly said.

“Time for what?” Daran asked her, a bit more aggressively than he intended.

“You know, for the Academy to find him,” she explained. “Or maybe for him to escape.”

“You think that’s going to happen?” he noted critically.

“Well, it might, right?” Kira asked, giving him a hopeful look.

The boy replied with a hesitant frown. “I don’t think this will be high up in the Academy’s priority list. Or even *on* that list, for that matter.”

“Then what else is there?” Kira asked, worried. “I mean, we’ve got to keep hope that he’ll come back.”

“It’s not about what we hope for,” Daran said, shaking his head. “It’s about what we do.” He thought it over and, after looking at all the options, took a deep breath and made his decision. “I’m going to find him,” he resolutely said.

Kira looked up at this. “How? Where will you start?”

Upon hearing those words, Daran merely shrugged. “Not a clue yet, but I’ll figure it out as I go.” He gave the girl a smile. “Apparently that’s what I always do.”