

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

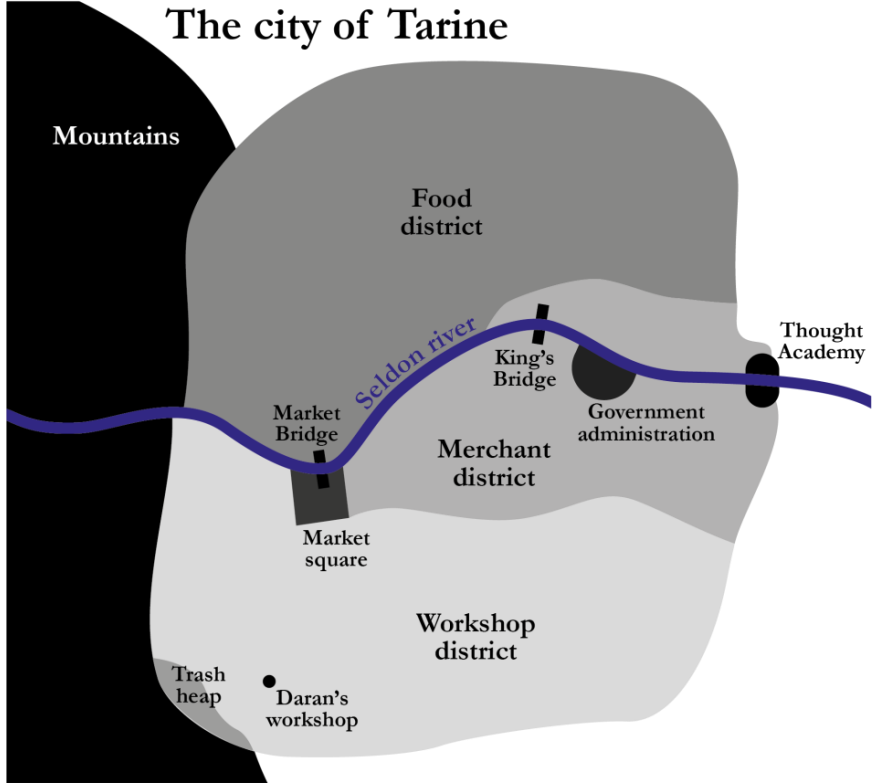
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## Part 1 – Stray thoughts

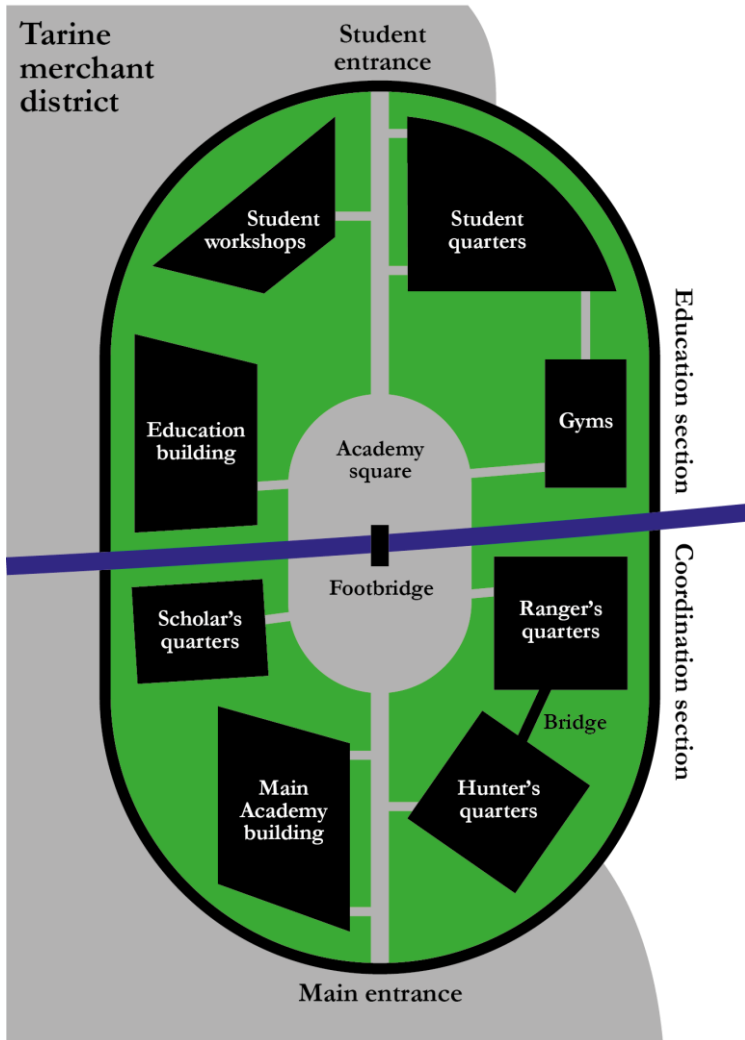
Within Kantara the Thought Academy is responsible for maintaining the peace. Crucial to this are the gizmos, handmade creatures with the capability to think for themselves. The Academy alone has the secrets of making them, ensuring its supremacy. Until one of its leaders goes missing.

Among the trash, Daran finds an abandoned machine and decides to fix it. But as he learns the intricacies of how it works, he also needs to learn how to stay one step ahead of others that want what happened to come across his path and will go to great lengths to get it. With multiple people chasing him, there is one question to answer: who can he trust?

# The city of Tarine



# The Thought Academy





## Prologue – A painful goodbye

Nolan patted the metallic shoulders of his gizmo as he led the big bird out of its shelter. As always, the mechanical creature was happy to see him and eagerly begged for a hug, but Nolan wasn't in the mood for that now.

"Are you sure this can't wait till tomorrow?" he asked Baltar, but his friend and colleague shook his head.

"You have to see this now."

The two men set off from the roof of the building and in the light of the setting sun they started flying southwest.

Baltar had told Nolan that he had found a very important clue about the big number of "accidents" involving rangers lately, but he also said it was something Nolan had to see for himself. Of course Nolan, as head of the rangers, was very interested in what Baltar had found. The problem was just that the timing wasn't particularly optimal.

"So are the Free Minds involved in all this?" Nolan shouted over the noise of the hurtling wind. He had suspected for a while that this rebel group would be behind the disappearances.

"I already said, this is a clue you have to see this for yourself!" Baltar yelled back. They were now flying over the merchant district of the city. "By the way, what's so important that you almost couldn't come along?"

"It's kind of complicated," Nolan confessed, "but quite probably I have a son."

"What?!" Baltar exclaimed. "Eternal bachelor Nolan has a kid? How?"

“That’s what I want to find out!” Nolan noticed they were now flying above the workshop district. Even from their height, it was obvious that this section of the city was a lot poorer. The streets were smaller and darker, with litter everywhere.

“So where is this little guy?” Baltar inquired.

“Apparently my brother is taking care of him.”

“Your brother? But you haven’t spoken to him in years!”

And that was exactly what Nolan found so strange about this whole situation. But there wasn’t much time to think about it, because at that moment three hunters rose up from the city and started following the two rangers.

Partly surprised, partly worried, Nolan looked at Baltar.

“Relax,” Baltar tried to reassure him. “They’re hunters. They’re on our side. It’s not like we’re wanted criminals or anything.”

Still, Nolan sensed something strange in Baltar’s voice. Doubt? He wasn’t so sure himself either. *Why else would they pursue us?* he wondered. *And why else would they pull – “Arbalests!”*

This surprised Nolan even more. *Why arbalests? The Thought Academy always uses pistols!* But then it hit him. *They don’t want anyone to know that, even within the Thought Academy, there are defectors.*

He quickly analyzed the situation. “We need to split up!” he shouted to Baltar. “Your gizmo is faster. Nilas is a better climber. We’ll beat them in height.”

Baltar nodded. “Think well.”

“Think well,” Nolan yelled back as Baltar quickly acquired speed. Nolan then turned to his gizmo. “Nilas, we’ve got some

trouble.” It was a sentence he had used before. He knew Nilas would now give everything he had to outrun these guys.

To Nolan’s surprise, all three hunters went after him. *Okay, it’s not about rangers today, but just about me.* It struck him as odd. *Even if I don’t lose them, Baltar will tell everyone what happened. Their whole plot of making these disappearances look like accidents will have failed.*

The three hunters were now flying some distance below Nolan. But then Nolan saw them aiming their arbalests. *Can these things fire that high upward?* He decided he didn’t want to find out. As the hunters fired, he swerved to the right. None of the arrows hit their intended target, but Nolan did lose some height. The hunters started to close in.

Nolan tried to make up for the loss by climbing even faster, but he knew that within a few seconds the arbalests would be reloaded. Another evasive maneuver would cost too much height. He decided to take a gamble and assumed that the height difference would be sufficiently big.

This proved to be a fatal error.

As soon as the three hunters fired again, Nolan knew something was wrong. Nilas had trouble moving his left wing. *Incredible,* Nolan thought. *They must have hit exactly the main control cable of the wing.* They immediately started to lose height and went spinning. In their dive, they shot past the hunters. The trio didn’t even bother to continue the pursuit. But suddenly Baltar was there, soaring down next to them.

“Baltar, give me your hand!” Nolan ordered, but then he saw Baltar’s face. It radiated regret.

“I’m sorry Nolan. I wish there was another way.”

“Baltar, not you too!” He couldn’t believe it. Baltar wasn’t only his friend, but also his replacement as ranger leader. The Free Minds would be one big leap closer to taking over the Thought Academy. Everything Nolan had worked for would be in vain.

“Goodbye,” Baltar said, as he aborted his dive.

Nolan looked down and saw the ground coming closer and closer. He turned to the only one he still trusted.

“Nilas, you might be able to make a safe landing without me.”

A loud screeching told that Nilas wouldn’t even consider it.

“Fine, then we go together.” As Nolan swung his arms around Nilas’ metal neck, they dove towards the ground.

## Chapter 1 – The first encounter

Daran knew that he had beaten Tobin. Soon his brother would be completely stuck, no matter what moves he would do. Tobin just didn't realize it yet.

"You've got that grin on your face again," Tobin noticed. "How many turns until I'm dead?"

"Eight," Daran replied.

"Phew, and I only look ahead five moves," Tobin sighed. "Playing games with you isn't much fun anymore."

At that moment Leroy entered. "Are you almost done?" he asked.

"Yes dad," Tobin replied. "Daran completely crushed me again."

"He's not very skilled at showing compassion, is he?" Leroy laughed.

"No, but he is at thinking," Tobin said. "When are you sending him off to the Thought Academy?"

"Like I'll ever get accepted there," Daran snorted. "Then I should've grown up on the other side of the city."

"And let me grow up without a little baby brother to pester?"

"Baby? I'm only ten months younger than you!"

"That's enough guys," Leroy ended the discussion. "There are some parts that need to be delivered. Tobin, can you head over to your mother? She'll tell you what needs to go where."

Tobin nodded and headed over to the workshop.

"Daran, we still need some vegetables for dinner tonight," Leroy continued. "Can you drop by the market and get some?"

“But I still wanted to visit Magnus this afternoon,” Daran complained. The old parts trader and he had been friends for as long as he could remember. Magnus always had fascinating stories to tell, and since he had recently retired, Daran could drop by almost any time of the day he wanted.

“You can also visit Magnus tonight,” Leroy claimed. “Can you hurry up? I want to start making dinner soon.” Leroy gave the boy some money, after which Daran set off to the market.

As always, it was extremely crowded. Daran had trouble pushing through the crowd, looking for the right stall. He even noticed a few Erydians in the throng. *What are they doing here?* Visitors from the neighbouring country of Erydon were very rare, mainly because it was nearly impossible to travel back and forth between the two countries. You either had to take a long walking trip through the wild Amuni forests, or sail all the way around it, across the treacherous Aryn ocean.

After being hustled by the crowd again, Daran suddenly found himself in an open space. He was shocked to realize why. Right in front of him were two men in thicker uniforms. Daran’s eyes widened in fear as he noticed the red stripes. *Hunters.*

“Move aside kid,” one of them said, as he roughly shoved Daran out of the way. Stumbling, Daran flew into a market stall. Without losing pace, the two hunters continued their stroll through the market, a circle of empty space following their every move.

Behind Daran reverberated the sound of breaking glass. A decorated glass orb shattered to pieces. Daran looked up into the eyes of an angry stall keeper.

“You break it, you pay it,” the man said, as he grabbed Daran by his shirt. He put his hand into Daran’s pocket and took out the money.

Daran looked around for help, but none of the bystanders was paying any attention to them.

“Eight kantas, that should be enough,” the man grinned. He shoved Daran back into the crowd.

A massive feeling of unfairness arose in the boy. Even if it was his fault that the orb broke, then the thing would still be worth nowhere near eight kantas.

Daran sighed in despair. *How can I get food now?* He considered going home and telling the story to Leroy and Mikai, but he immediately dismissed the thought. They’d never believe him. That left only one option.

With an interested look, Daran approached the vegetable stall. He picked up a big cabbage and studied it, until the stall owner looked away. At that moment, he ran off.

But the stall owner noticed. “Hey boy, get back here!” he yelled indignantly. To Daran’s surprise, the man gave chase.

Daran ran away as fast as he could. When the crowd became less dense, he dared to look behind him, but just as Daran looked forward again, he bumped into someone and fell to the ground.

“You again?” said an annoyed voice. Daran gasped as he realized it was the same hunter that had shoved him aside earlier.

The stall owner burst into the circle, panting. “He just stole that cabbage!”

The second hunter looked up. “So he’s a thief? Well, we’ve got places for those sorts of people.” Daran knew he was in big trouble now.

The stall owner wasn’t satisfied either. “What about compensation? There’s dirt on it now. I can’t sell it like this!”

“Rinse it,” the first hunter said indifferently. He picked Daran up and started dragging him away when a woman emerged from the crowd. She was wearing a brown coat, with the hood throwing a shadow across her face.

“Wait a second,” she said with authority. “He’s with me.” She then turned to the stall owner and handed him some coins. “Will this compensate you for your trouble?”

The stall owner nodded. “Yes, it will. Thank you.”

The woman smiled. “Then I don’t think we have a problem here anymore. Hunters, I thank you for your help.”

If possible, the hunters were more surprised than Daran. Before they could respond, the woman had led Daran away.

When they stopped at the edge of the market, the woman took off her hood. She had long, straight, dark blond hair and bright blue eyes. Daran estimated her to be about thirty years old. While she appeared familiar, Daran couldn’t recall ever having seen her before.

“Thanks,” was the only thing he managed to blurt out.

The woman smiled. Daran didn’t know why, but he had the feeling she hadn’t done that in a rather long time.

“You know stealing is wrong, right?”



“I know,” Daran said. He told her what had happened.

“Ah, that explains things,” the woman nodded. “I was already wondering why a fourteen-year-old boy would ever steal a cabbage. So how is your family? Do you have enough money?”

“My parents have a small workshop where we make parts. I occasionally help out. It doesn’t earn a lot, but we don’t have to go hungry or anything.”

Again, the woman smiled.

“I’m really sorry,” Daran apologized, “but I’ve got to go now. I should’ve been back home already.”

“That’s okay Daran. You know what? I’ve got something for you.” She handed Daran a small purse. “This should prevent you from getting into trouble again.”

Daran’s eyes widened as he glanced at the contents. *Coins. More than the workshop earns in a whole month.*

“What is it for?” Daran asked, still surprised.

“Whatever you want. You can spend it on your hobbies. You know, the things that you find interesting.”

Daran again didn’t know what to say, except for another “Thanks.” He then ran off towards home, with the cabbage under his arm.

As expected, Daran’s parents weren’t happy.

“What took you so long?” Mikai asked. “We were worried about you.”

“And I was waiting for you,” Leroy said. “But what have you done with that cabbage? There’s dirt all over it.”

Daran frowned at those comments. He wasn't in the mood for this. "I just stayed a little while to talk to someone," he yelled. "Is that a crime now as well? What are you going to do? Send hunters after me?"

"Don't you talk like that to your parents!" Mikai shouted back. "Go to your room. Now!"

Angry, Daran threw the cabbage into Leroy's hands, rushed to his room and slammed the door shut behind him.

It was very quiet that evening at dinner. Only Tobin, who didn't know what had happened, told some story. But as soon as everyone had finished their meal, Daran went back to his room. He just didn't intend to stay there.

He opened a small hatch in his wall and crawled through. The hatch closed automatically behind him, in such a way that no one would ever see that something was wrong with the wall. He was now in a small space below the sloped roof of the house. He continued to crawl, his path lit by the faint light emanating upward from the living room through cracks in the floor. At the end of the crawling space was another hatch, which he tilted up. He climbed through to reach the roof of the house. Using a drain pipe he slid down, until he had both feet safely on the ground at the back of the house.

Already a year had passed since Daran made the two hatches. He got the idea after a fight with Mikai, in which he had been sent to his room. Since then, he occasionally used his secret route so he didn't have to pass by Leroy and Mikai on his way out. Sadly, he hadn't found an easy way to go back yet.

Initially Daran wanted to go to Magnus, but he wasn't in the mood for that anymore, so he headed towards the big trash heap at the edge of the city. He often went there, looking for discarded parts he could fix. A lot could be found there, from broken parts to completely functioning carts, to old – and now illegal – flying machines. Sometimes he even found human remains in the trash heap, though he never liked that.

But above all, the trash heap was a good place to think, with no distractions whatsoever. And that was exactly why he went there this time.

Daran climbed over the various hills to the largest peak of the trash heap, all the way in the back. It was his favorite thinking spot, since almost no one ever came there anyway. He sat down on the peak.

*Why are Leroy and Mikai always interfering with what I'm doing?* he wondered. It frustrated him that he couldn't just go wherever he wanted to. Probably, when he got home, Mikai would ask tons of questions about where he had been. Daran wasn't planning on giving an extensive report again.

To Daran's surprise, he saw something move in the corner of his eye. Interested, he went over to investigate. At the bottom of the hill was a big metallic bird. It had very long wings, but both of them were completely torn. There wasn't much left of the bird's underside either. The metal 'skin' had been torn off and the rods making up its legs were broken in various places. For the rest, most systems still appeared to be intact though.

Daran took a closer look and smiled. *The wings are made from aluminium. Don't they know that you can get the same strength with less weight by using composite materials?*

Then a thought hit him. *All the really complicated stuff still appears intact. If I find out how to fix the wings and the claws, I might be able to get this thing working again. And it'll even be better than it used to be!*

But when Daran turned the bird belly-up, it started shaking, as if it was frightened. *I'd better make sure it can't move anymore*, he thought. He looked at how all the wires were connected. Apparently, they all came together at a small box in the head of the bird. As soon as Daran disconnected the box, the machine became fully silent.

Putting the box in his pocket, Daran sat down. *So where do I start?* Then he noticed someone else exploring the trash heap, some distance away. It was a small girl with short blond hair.

*Why would anyone else be at the trash heap at this time?* Daran wondered. *She's probably wondering the same about me though. I guess I'd better get home too. It's getting late.*

Daran took a big piece of tarp, which was lying a short distance away, and threw it over the bird. As he was walking home, he started to wonder where he would repair the bird. *I can't leave it on the trash heap, or someone will steal it. I also can't possibly bring it home. Mikai will never allow it. Perhaps I can store it at Magnus' place. I'll ask him tomorrow morning.*

As Daran got home, he didn't feel like entering the house yet. He stood in front of the door for a minute, looking around. At the far side of the street he saw a girl who appeared to be enjoying the

sunset. *I probably can't even simply watch the sun set without Mikai asking me what I'm doing*, Daran thought pessimistically. *Well, I'd better go in, or I'd still be standing here tomorrow.*

That night, before Daran climbed into his bed, he took another look at the small box he had brought from the trash heap. He was surprised by how heavy it was, but it did make sense. It was the most important part of the bird after all. Why else would everything be connected to it?

Then Daran noticed the five letters engraved at the top of the box. "Nilas," it read.

*Well Nilas, let's see if we can get you back up in the air again.*

## Chapter 2 – Discussing plans

“You’re up early today,” Magnus commented when Daran rushed into his kitchen. The old man was still having breakfast. “What do you want to ask?”

“How do you know I want to ask something?” Daran asked surprised.

Magnus looked up from his plate with a look that said, *why else would you be right there in front of me at this time?*

Daran seemed to get the hint. “Well, yesterday I found something at the trash heap which I want to repair. I was wondering ... can I do that here?”

“I thought your parents had a workshop?”

Now it was Daran’s turned to stare at Magnus, but his look said something more like, *Let’s not talk about my parents.*

“Ah, problems again? You know, it’s best to talk those things over.”

“Like they’ll believe me,” Daran snorted.

“Just explain everything as clearly as possible from your own point of view. If you only tell them how *you* experienced events, people can never claim that you’re wrong.”

Daran remained standing with his arms crossed. *I didn’t come here for a crash course on ‘How to deal with parents.’*

“Alright,” Magnus finally said. “I’ve got space to spare lately anyway. You can use the room in the back.”

“Great! Can I also borrow your cart to pick it up?”

“Only if I can finish my breakfast in peace now.”

After a brief “Thanks!” Daran rushed out of the kitchen and ran to the trash heap.

“This is definitely not like Nolan,” Quenton said, speaking his thoughts out loud. The scholar leader was starting to get worried.

For the second day in a row, Nolan had not shown up at the short morning meeting of the thought council. It wouldn’t have been the first time that Nolan had not been able to make it, but it was the first time that no one had a clue where he was. And now it had occurred twice in a row.

“Let’s bring in Baltar again,” Arin said. The hunter leader gestured for his gizmo, a large dog-like creature, to open the door, after which Baltar entered. It was standard procedure – if the leader of a department didn’t make it, his second in command would replace him.

“I think we only have one important thing to discuss today,” Quenton started. “Where is Nolan? I can’t recall having seen him in the last two days. Baltar, when did you last see him?”

“The day before yesterday,” the ranger replied. “In the evening he set out with Nilas, heading southwest I believe. He said it was about urgent family matters.”

“Family matters?” Quenton repeated incredulously. “Nolan doesn’t have any family. He was already an orphan when he joined the Thought Academy.”

“That’s what surprised me too,” Baltar nodded. “But Nolan was in a hurry, so I didn’t ask any questions.”

The situation didn't make sense to Quenton. What did make sense was what needed to be done. "Nolan is missing. We need to set up a search to find him."

"Indeed," Arin agreed. "A missing person is normally a ranger matter. With the ranger leader missing, it is even more so. Baltar, you're in charge of the investigation. You'll want to start by questioning thinkers on when they last saw Nolan. Also ask people living in the southwest part of the city if they've seen him fly by. He can't have vanished without a trace."

Baltar nodded. "I'll get on it."

"All other matters can wait until Nolan is back," Arin decided. "We'll meet again tomorrow morning. Let's hope we have some results then. Think well."

"Think well," Baltar nodded.

When Quenton left the meeting room, he wasn't happy about the situation. He had only been elected scholar leader a few weeks ago, after the old Alixan had finally retired. If Nolan was missing, they would have another somewhat inexperienced leader in the Academy.

But that wasn't the only reason why Quenton was worried. For years, Nolan had been trying to introduce certain changes in the Thought Academy. This had been, thanks to the more conservative Arin and Alixan, without much success. Since Quenton's election as scholar leader, things had finally started to improve, but Quenton doubted that these improvements would be continued without Nolan.

Then there was also the matter of the big number of accidents with rangers lately. If Nolan also had an 'accident', then the



Thought Academy might have a serious problem on its hands. It would most surely mean something or someone was behind it all. And with the already low number of rangers, that didn't promise anything good.

Quenton was getting curious about tomorrow's meeting. He hoped Baltar would already have some results by then, but waiting was not something Quenton liked to do.

"Let's see what I can find in the archives concerning these family matters," he said to himself.

Daran was surprised at how light Nilas was, as he dragged the large bird through Magnus' house. It still took quite some effort to get it on the right spot though. When Nilas finally reached the back room, Daran sat down panting. At that moment Magnus entered.

"Where did you find that?" he asked surprised.

"On the trash heap. Didn't I already tell you that?"

"Yes, but that thing is from the Thought Academy. There's no way they'd throw something like that away."

"Well, they did," Daran simply said. "And I'm going to fix it."

"I hope you know that that's illegal? Flying things are prohibited by law. And besides, how are you ever planning to control it? I doubt they left the thought core in."

"Don't worry, I've got the control covered. And it's only illegal to let it fly. There's no law on fixing it."

Magnus smiled. They both knew that, once the bird was repaired, it had to fly before Daran would be satisfied. And

although that wasn't exactly allowed, Daran concluded from the grin on Magnus' face that the old man wouldn't really mind.

"Let's see what needs to be done," Magnus suggested. He calmly walked around the bird and examined the inside. "Most systems are still intact, including the leaf processor, which is lucky. The sensors still look good. The control part is missing, but apparently you've got a solution for that. The batteries have leaked massively, so you need new ones. Also, the skin and the wings need to be completely replaced, including the actuators."

Daran wasn't very happy with the news. He could make the wings and the skin mostly on his own, but actuators and batteries were expensive. It would cost him quite some money.

"I'll start with building the wings," he concluded. "Have you got any tips for that?"

"Most certainly. With wings, the shape is of the utmost significance," Magnus explained. "Do you know why a bird stays in the air?"

Daran shook his head. "Haven't got a clue," he confessed.

"Air passes the wing on two sides. Due to the curvature and orientation of the wing, the air on the top side moves very fast. The air on the bottom side moves a lot slower. Slow air exerts more pressure than fast air, so the wing is pushed up."

"That sounds quite logical," Daran thought.

"You have to be careful though. When the airflow is disrupted, for example due to a rough wing, then the air will start to vibrate and twirl and it'll be virtually useless. So do make sure that your wings are as smooth as possible."

"That's a matter of proper sanding," Daran knew.

Together, the two discussed the best shape of the wing. Magnus brought in a book with a lot of wing shapes. It became apparent to Daran that the old man knew a lot about flying things and by the minute was becoming more and more enthusiastic about it. Near the end of the afternoon, he decided to ask Magnus about it.

“How come you know so much about wings?”

“It’s because I used to design and build them.”

Daran looked up surprised. “I thought flying machines were illegal outside the Thought Academy.”

Magnus’ face clouded over. “That rule has only existed for the last 24 years,” he said softly.

“And you were there when it came into existence?” Daran guessed.

“Indeed,” Magnus nodded. It was silent for a moment before he started his story. “I was always fascinated by making things fly. I was of course enormously happy when I got a job at the workshop which made the best flying machines of the country. I quickly built up a good reputation there too. I even got my own research group.

“Then one day, my group got the assignment to build the fastest airplane ever. After months of calculations and designs, we finally sent a first test plane up into the air. It exceeded all our expectations.”

“That must have been amazing,” Daran expected.

“We were certainly satisfied,” Magnus confirmed. “But we weren’t the only ones that were surprised. Apparently, there was a scholar from the Thought Academy around too. Although he had

never flown before, he suddenly got the idea to conduct air experiments that day. We never found out what exactly happened – probably the fool got distracted by our airplane – but he fell off his gizmo.”

“Gizmo?” Daran asked.

“It’s what you call those animal-like machines from the Thought Academy, like your little project here,” Magnus explained. “The Thought Academy blamed us for the accident. To prevent more such events, they invoked the law that anything flying may only be used by the Thought Academy.”

“That can’t have been very positive for your workshop, I guess.”

Magnus shook his head. “It was an enormous blow. Not much later, half of the people were out on the street without a job. That piece of milling scrap Elmero threw my group out first.”

“Elmero, I know that name,” Daran said.

“Yeah, now he’s one of the ministers ruling this country. Minister of crafts, to be exact. He was asked for that position exactly because he saved the company. But don’t ask me how. A lot of people lost more than their jobs there.”

With a glazed look in his eyes, Magnus stared off into space. Daran suspected it couldn’t have been easy for him. Not only had he lost his job, but he couldn’t work on his life’s passion anymore either. And to make matters worse, he also got blamed for it all.

It seemed better to Daran not to inquire any further. He didn’t know how painful the whole history was to Magnus, but he decided he didn’t want to run the risk of finding out. And after all, it was time to head back home.

Daran wasn't too eager to return, expecting trouble. What he didn't know was that the trouble would be of a whole different sort than he could ever have expected.

### Chapter 3 – A loss of freedom

*Why did they have to lock the front door of the house?* Daran wondered. Now the only normal way to enter the house was through the workshop. And that's exactly where Leroy and Mikai were working. Daran tried to walk past as quickly and unobtrusively as possible, but that attempt was doomed to fail before it had even started.

"Daran, can we talk to you for a minute?" Mikai asked.

Daran figured he might as well see what they would come up with, so he obediently followed them to the living room. Leroy and Mikai sat down on the two big chairs. Daran dropped down on the couch in front of them.

*Great, this is starting to look more and more like an interrogation,* Daran realized.

It was still quiet in the room. Finally Mikai broke the silence. "May I ask where you've been today?"

"With Magnus," Daran replied briefly.

"The whole day?" Leroy asked.

"Yes," Daran nodded. Leroy and Mikai exchanged a look which made it clear to Daran that they didn't believe him. *What's the use of asking a question if you won't believe the answer anyway?* Daran wondered.

Leroy sighed before he started speaking again. "Daran, when you leave the house, we want you to tell us where you're going and when you'll be back."

Anger welled up in Daran. So much for his freedom. "Why?" was the first thing that came out of him.

“We just want to know where you are,” Mikai explained. Daran expected it to be followed with *at every minute of the day*, though that addition didn’t come. Nevertheless, he certainly wasn’t happy.

“Can’t you just trust me for a change?” Daran half asked, half shouted. Leroy and Mikai looked surprised at his outburst. “Well that would be too much to hope for. It’s not like you’ve ever done so.”

Furious, Daran rushed off to his room, slamming his door again. He sat on his bed, fighting back tears. *Why did they always have to be so nosy?* Sadly, he couldn’t find the answer. What he did know was that he needed some time on his own to think, and this wasn’t the ideal place for it.

Daran opened the hatch and crawled into the narrow passageway. He stepped over Nilas’ box and his bag of money, which he had hidden there in case his parents somehow found and confiscated them. As he passed over the living room, moving as quietly as possible, he heard Leroy and Mikai speak through the cracks in the floor. Startled, he froze and held his breath.

“But he keeps disappearing to I don’t know where!” It was Mikai’s voice.

“Do you think he’s off stealing or anything?” Leroy asked. Daran gasped. *So is that what this is all about?*

“I don’t know,” Mikai confessed. “I’m just worried. What if something happens? How can we ever find him?”

A silence hung in the room. Daran realized she had a good argument there. *Why didn’t she just tell me that in person?*

“Do you think it was the wrong decision to take him in?” Mikai asked so softly that Daran wasn’t sure he heard it correctly.

“That has absolutely nothing to do with this,” Leroy immediately replied. “It’s just a period in his life which he needs to get through.”

“Well, I hope he gets through it quickly, because all these worries are killing me.”

Guilt rose up in Daran. He had never looked at it from their side. His parents’ behavior was starting to make a bit of sense to him. They were just excessively worried. He planned to be a bit more considerate with them.

He was just about to turn around and head back to his room when Mikai asked, “What was that?”

Again, Daran froze in his place.

“It sounded like a customer in the workshop,” Leroy believed. “I’ll go and check it out.”

Just when Daran was about to start breathing again, there was a loud knock on the living room door. Leroy opened it.

“Thought Academy business,” an unknown voice said. It sounded like a man not much younger than Leroy. “We have orders to search this house.”

“For what reason?” Mikai boldly asked.

“We suspect that prohibited items are hidden in this house. This would be in violation with meritocracy laws. Please stand against that wall until we have finished our search, and do not move.”

Through one of the small cracks in the floor, Daran could make out Leroy’s shape directly below him. For some time not a



word was spoken. Sounds were coming from various places in the house, including Daran's own room. It sounded like three men were searching the entire place, none of them doing so very gently.

Just below Daran, Mikai was whispering something to Leroy, but it was nearly impossible to make out exactly what she was saying. Only a few words were audible. "... beneath his unif ..." "... old ..." "... not ..."

The three thinkers came back into the living room. From their upset discussion, Daran could make out that they hadn't found what they were looking for.

"Tell me where you've hidden the gizmo," the leader of the group said.

Apparently, Leroy wasn't planning to answer. "You get out of this house right now," he replied angrily. It sounded more threatening than a person normally would sound with three men in front of him. Daran suspected his father had a weapon of some sort in his hands.

"We won't leave until we've got what we came for," the thinker refused. "You get back to that wall."

A dull thud echoed through the room, followed by the sound of a man dropping down. Immediately, a struggle broke out between Leroy and a second man, and just as the second man crashed into the floor, the loud bang of a gunshot made Daran gasp.

"Leroy, no!" Mikai cried out, though her cry was silenced by the sound of a second gunshot. Daran's first reaction was to try to get to the living room as fast as possible, but just as he started

moving his conscious mind told him that wasn't a wise thing to do.

"What was that?" one of the thinkers asked. Daran's heart skipped a beat. His body was still extremely eager to get out of its hiding place. He had to put all his efforts into not moving a muscle.

"An iron bar, you idiot," the leader replied sarcastically. "A really painful one too if you let yourself get hit with it. Now get up and collect as much valuable stuff as you can find. Make it look like a robbery gone bad. And hurry. We've got to get out of here as soon as possible."

For a brief while two men ran through the house, breaking more objects in their wake. Then they came back to the living room.

"Pick him up," the thinker leader said. "We're leaving." And not much later the house was immersed in an eerie silence.

The urge for action, which totally possessed Daran only moments earlier, had completely disappeared. It took several minutes, each seeming to last hours, before he crawled back to his room. From the looks of it, everything in it had been thrown upside down.

Daran was filled with dread as he descended the stairs to the living room. Though it was almost exactly as he expected it to be, he could not help but be shocked by what he saw. Leroy and Mikai were lying motionless on the floor, their glassy eyes locked in one last yet seemingly eternal moment of eye contact. There was no question on whether they were still alive or not.

All of a sudden, a growing despair overwhelmed Daran. He couldn't stand the sight any longer. He ran to the workshop, where he collapsed on the floor. Guilt rose up in him.

*Even the last time I spoke to them, we were fighting, while all they wanted was for me to be safe. If only he had listened to them and tried to understand what they were saying, then things would have been very different. Would they still have been alive? Daran wondered. Possibly. If I hadn't made Leroy angry, he might not have attacked the thinkers, but would have simply answered their questions. They would still be alive then.*

Then there was also that other matter. *What did they say about taking me in? Did I hear that right?* But at that moment Tobin entered. First he noticed the mess which the workshop had turned into. Then he found Daran on the floor.

"Daran, what has happened here?" At that moment he saw Daran's confused look. "What's wrong?"

*How do you tell something like this?* Daran wondered. He didn't have the answer. The only thing he was able to stammer was, "Leroy and Mikai."

"Did you have a fight again?" Tobin asked.

"No, they're ... dead." The last word didn't come out any louder than a whisper.

"What?!" Tobin replied incredulously. "What do you mean?"

"The living room," Daran muttered.

Immediately Tobin rushed to the living room. Daran got up and stumbled after him. He found Tobin bent over the bodies of their parents, looking for a sign of life.

“We have to get the rangers,” Tobin said. “They can help us. Find out who’s behind this.”

“No!” Daran immediately shouted out, surprised by his own reaction.

Tobin looked at the boy questioningly.

“They were murdered by thinkers,” he explained. “We can’t bring them here.”

“How do you know that?” Tobin asked. “Have you seen them?”

“No,” Daran replied. He considered telling Tobin that he had witnessed the whole event, but for some reason he didn’t feel comfortable with that idea. *What if he blames me, saying I could have done something?* He wasn’t looking for another fight. Then he remembered something else. “They were shot by a pistol. Only thinkers have such weapons. Any other person would have used an arbalest.” He pointed to the two metal casings on the floor.

Tobin realized Daran was right. “Then what do we do?”

“We can’t go to the Thought Academy and accuse them,” Daran realized. “It’s not like they’ll suddenly confess to all of this.” A feeling of powerlessness arose in him. There just wasn’t anywhere they could go to for help. The only people he ever went to for help were now gone.

“We have to bury them,” Tobin suddenly blurted out.

“I know a nice place in the forest,” Daran contributed. “It’s really tranquil. They’d like it.”

Carefully, they lifted the bodies of their parents, put them on the cart and laid a big blanket over them. They grabbed a shovel and headed for the forest.

They had been digging in turns, in the light of the setting sun, with the other one resting. When they considered the hole big enough, they put the bodies in it, side by side.

Daran looked at Tobin. "You're the eldest. You should say something."

"Oh, yeah," the boy realized. He went to stand in front of the grave, appearing somewhat uncomfortable, unsure what to say. "Mom and dad. Mikai and Leroy. You were great parents. You worked hard to provide us with whatever we needed. You taught us a lot. And when there was trouble, you were always there for us. You will be sorely missed." There was a brief silence, before he added, "And you will be avenged." He grabbed the shovel and started to fill up the grave.

Daran noticed that tears were starting to fill Tobin's eyes. Every bit of dirt added to the grave was accompanied with a small sob. It made Daran wonder. *Shouldn't I be crying as well?* But to his surprise, he realized that no tears were coming. *Well, I guess Tobin did have more of a connection with Leroy and Mikai than I did.*

When Tobin was done filling up the grave, Daran placed two big sticks in the ground at the head of the grave. "This will serve as gravestones," he said, "at least until we can make something better." Tobin nodded approvingly.

For a little while, they stood at the grave, each engulfed in their own thoughts. Then, without a word, they decided to head back home again.

For most of the trip no one said anything, until Tobin finally broke the silence. “I wonder what they were after. I mean, thinkers don’t just go rob some poor workshop. They have too much money for that.”

Daran started to wonder about that too. Didn’t the thinkers say what they were looking for? The word ‘gizmo’ emerged from his memory, but what was it? He had heard the word before. At Magnus’ place.

Then the shock of realization washed over him. *Nilas*. “I need to get to Magnus,” he quickly said as he ran off, leaving a surprised Tobin behind.

## Chapter 4 – Learning

The old man was startled as he looked up from his book. “Whoah, what’s the rush?”

“We have to move Nilas,” Daran said.

“Wait, you’ve got blood on your clothes. Are you alright?”

“Yes, I am – well, no, but that’s not the point. We – ”

“Calm down,” Magnus interrupted. “Take a seat and tell me what happened.”

Daran slumped down in a chair and told the old man everything, from the thinkers entering, to the part where his parents got shot, to the burial. All the time, Magnus just nodded supportively.

“I’m sorry about your parents,” he finally said, to which Daran nodded. “I do find it strange though. Hunters can easily handle such situations. They only shoot when really necessary, which is actually hardly ever.”

“Well, they shot my parents alright,” Daran noted. “The point is, they’re after Nilas.”

“Nilas?” Magnus inquired.

“The bird,” Daran explained. “His name is Nilas. Anyway, if they could have found out where I live, they might also be able to find Nilas here. We have to move him to some place safe.”

“And you do not think I should be moved to safety as well?” Magnus asked.

For a moment, Daran didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t thought about that yet. But then Magnus started to laugh.

“Don’t worry kid. I do not think some hunter will take the trouble of shooting an old man like me. But you are right: this bird is dangerous. Are you sure you want to keep it?”

Doubt didn’t even enter Daran’s mind. “If my parents really died for him, then you bet I want to keep him.”

“In that case, I know some old abandoned warehouse where we can store it for a while. Can you put Nilas on the cart? I’ll bring some tools.”

*Great*, Daran thought, as he moved to the back room. *I can tug that huge bird back through the entire house again.*

“You call that a warehouse?” Daran asked, as he looked at the old shed in front of him. They were at the edge of the city, in a part which wasn’t exactly high on the rangers’ priority list. In other words, it wasn’t the safest part of the city. “Looks more like a ruin about to collapse.”

“You don’t like it?” Magnus asked.

“Are you kidding? I love it! Nice and inconspicuous.”

Daran tried to push open the door. Instead of rotating inwards, the door simply fell into the shack.

“I think we need to fix the door,” Daran commented, as he stepped into a layer of dust. “And I also hope you brought a broom.” In the dim moonlight, the shed didn’t look very inviting.

“I used to build airplanes,” Magnus said. “I know how to plan. Don’t worry.”

As Magnus hung up a light, Daran started cleaning out the shed. When most of the dust had been cleared, Nilas was brought inside, followed by Magnus’ tools.



“I’m starting to feel at home already,” Daran smiled as he looked around.

After reattaching the door hinges, they locked the place up and went home, agreeing to continue their work the following day.

It was pretty late already when Daran finally came home. He walked through the door and almost bumped into a tall man who was on his way out. Daran recognized him as a customer of his parents.

“I’m sorry,” the man apologized with a resigned face, after which he left through the door.

Daran noticed Tobin sitting on a workbench, looking annoyed. “What was that about?” Daran asked.

“The rumour about mom and dad’s death is starting to spread,” Tobin explained. “A lot of people are passing by to give their condolences and – ”

“And what?”

“Daran, they’re pulling back their orders.”

“So?” Daran asked, not grasping the meaning. “It’s not like we can actually deliver everything without Leroy and Mikai. Well, it’s late. I’m off to bed. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He ran off towards his room, leaving Tobin on his own in the workshop.

Daran got up early the next morning and had breakfast. Just as he wanted to head out, a customer entered the workshop. The look on his face reminded Daran of that of yesterday’s customer.

“Excuse me, – ” he started saying, but Daran interrupted him.

“Sorry, I was just leaving. Can you talk to my brother?” He pointed to Tobin, who was just walking in. Without waiting for a response, he continued on his way out and headed for the small shed on the edge of the city.

When he arrived, the door of the shed was already open. *But we locked it*, he thought. Only then did he notice the old man sitting inside. *Magnus. And I thought I was up early.*

During the morning, Magnus and Daran finished the wing shape design. According to Magnus, the bird would have even better aerodynamics than previously.

“So, what’s next?” the old man asked. “Do you want to go home to build the wings?”

Daran considered it for a moment. “Nah, I don’t feel like being home now,” he realized. “Let’s continue with the wing actuators. We should find out which ones I need to buy. At least buying actuators isn’t so hard.”

“Don’t be so sure about that,” Magnus countered. “From the looks of it, this bird has learning actuators. That’s typical gizmo stuff and quite hard to get by, but if you want it to fly as well as it used to, you really do need them.”

“Where can I get them?” Daran wondered. “Do I have to steal them from the Thought Academy?”

“No, only a fool steals from the Thought Academy,” Magnus laughed. “But you’re lucky. I still have a couple of learning actuators in stock. I’ll even sell them to you for the price at which I bought them. Still, they’re expensive.”

Daran thought about his bag of money. He remembered the words that accompanied it. 'Spend it on things that you find interesting.' *This is definitely interesting.*

"I've got some money. But what's the use of learning actuators anyway?"

"That's a good question," Magnus said. He threw something blue and shiny to Daran.

"What is this?" Daran asked.

"That's one of the most instructive objects that exist."

"It's a ball!"

"True," Magnus smiled. "Balls can be very instructive. I've got a challenge for you." He walked to the far end of the shed and drew a circle in the remaining dust. "Try to roll the ball such that it stops exactly in this circle."

Daran tried, but the ball rolled past the circle and slammed against the wall.

"Harder than it looks, huh?" Magnus said. "If you practised this for a day, would it go better?"

"Of course it would," Daran said. "That's the whole point of practicing."

"Exactly. Your muscles, being your actuators, learn how to perform the task. They'll know exactly what to do to throw the ball in exactly the right way."

Daran wasn't convinced. "But isn't that because your brain is learning?"

Magnus nodded. "Partly you are right, but your arm reflexes are important too. Let's suppose you have practiced a full day with your right arm. Will you then be just as good with your left arm?"

Daran thought about it for a second. "So learning isn't all about brain training." Then he smiled. "Let's pick up some learning actuators."

"You're lucky," Magnus said, with a smug smile on his face. "I just happened to have brought them with me this morning."

Daran smiled too. *That man can sure plan ahead.*

Together, they went through Magnus' stock of learning actuators and checked which ones were best suited for Nilas. By the end of the afternoon, they decided to use a set of very light-weight actuators, and by the end of the evening, after Magnus had mysteriously conjured up a warm dinner from his cart, they had even installed them.

"They weigh less than what was previously in there," Magnus noticed. "If this bird flew well before its demise, it will fly even better when we've got it up and running again."

Daran smiled. He couldn't wait to finish the repairs. With a bit of luck, that would only take a few more days.

"I'll start building the wing skin tomorrow," he said. "At least there'll be plenty of space in the workshop now."

Magnus raised an eyebrow but didn't make any further comments.

"Alright, it's time to go home," he finally said. "It's way past your bedtime. I'll lock things up."

*Bedtime...* Daran thought, as he was heading home. *That's one thing which I won't be missing. Or will I?*

The house was completely dark. *I didn't know it was that late already,* Daran thought. *Tobin must have gone to bed already.*

He silently entered the building and walked up the stairs. He froze when he realized he had left the design of the wings in the old shed.

*Should I go back for it?* he wondered. *No, I'll pick it up tomorrow.*

Just as he wanted to continue to his room, he thought he heard something. The sound appeared to come from Tobin's room. *But that room is dark. Tobin is sleeping.* He listened more closely. It sounded a bit like ... sobbing.

For some unknown reason, be it curiosity, compassion or something else, Daran felt like he had to enter the room. He knocked, but when no response came, he still opened the door. He found Tobin sitting on the side of his bed, his face drenched in tears. Without saying a word, Daran went to sit next to him. They sat like that for a few minutes until Tobin muttered, "Thanks."

"You really miss them, don't you?" Daran asked.

"Of course I do," Tobin replied. "Don't you?"

Daran was silent for a moment, thinking about this.

"Well, I guess it makes sense if you don't miss them as much as I do," Tobin noted.

"I don't know. It's just that, for some reason, it feels like the news just hasn't hit me yet."

"You have been away a lot," Tobin nodded.

"Yes, sorry, it's –" Daran started saying, but Tobin interrupted him.

"No, it's okay. We all have our ways of coping with things. But still, it would be nice if you could be around a bit more. I mean, we still have a few orders left to take care o –"

“Can’t we just cancel them? Surely they would und – ”

“Daran, we have no money!”

“What?!”

“It has all been robbed. And a lot of our stuff has been destroyed as well. We really need to start earning something.”

For a moment Daran didn’t know what to say. “I ... I didn’t realize.”

“We only have enough food for one more day. And with our current set of orders, we can’t add much to that.”

Only then did Daran start to realize what the loss meant. His life had always been carefree. The shelves were always filled with food. The evening meals were always prepared in time. If he was in trouble, there was always someone to bail him out. And when he needed advice, he always knew where to turn to. That was all over now.

Slowly, a tear started to struggle its way out of the corner of his eye. As it broke free, it was followed by several more.

Tobin noticed it. “I’ll finish some orders tomorrow, and with some luck we’ll get follow-ups. That should keep us drifting a little while longer.”

“But that won’t really get us out of trouble,” Daran countered. “No, we need something better.” He thought about his plans for tomorrow. They would have to be cancelled. Or would they?

“I’ll go look for some new orders tomorrow morning,” Daran said. “I’ll find something.”

“I hope you do. I really hope you do.”

Then it was silent again. Together, the two boys sat like that for a little while longer in the dark, each engulfed in his own

thoughts, drenched in his own tears, but finding comfort in each other's presence.

## Chapter 5 – Hard and patient work gives rewards

“So, Baltar, have you found something?” Arin asked.

Baltar shook his head. “Not even a single trace. I questioned every thinker that’s around. No one saw anything worth mentioning.”

Quenton sighed. It was now the fourth day since Nolan went missing. “Has the news of Nolan’s disappearance reached the public already?”

“Strangely enough, not a word is mentioned about it in the papers,” Arin noted.

“I told everyone to be quiet,” Baltar explained. “Considering the increase in crime lately, it didn’t seem wise to tell the population that we don’t have a clue where our ranger leader is.”

“But that will never work,” Quenton said skeptically. “News like this always leaks out.”

“Well, it works just fine so far,” Arin replied. “Good thinking Baltar. What will the next step be?”

“We could – ” Quenton started, but at the same moment Baltar started talking.

“I’ll inconspicuously start inquiring in the southwest part of the city whether the people there have seen any rangers fly by.”

“Good,” Arin said. “Quenton, what was your idea?”

“Oh, nothing important,” Quenton replied. He had checked the records to see whether Nolan still had any living family members. Apparently, Nolan had a brother who lived somewhere in the workshop district – the southwest part of the city. Quenton wanted to suggest finding him, but by now he felt like Baltar was



more focused on keeping Nolan's disappearance quiet than on actually finding Nolan. No, this was something he would have to do himself.

"Alright then," Arin concluded. "Then we can continue with the next point. Nolan has been gone long enough now to officially declare him missing. This means that Baltar is now declared ranger leader, at least until we organize a new election, or until Nolan shows up with a damn good reason for disappearing. Baltar, do you accept this position?"

"I do," Baltar nodded.

"Excellent," Arin said, "though for safety reasons we will keep this quiet until further notice. The next point we need to discuss is the rising crime rate. Even the merchant district is now rumored to be unsafe during the night. Something needs to be done. Baltar, do you have any ideas?"

"There is no way that this problem can be solved with the current number of rangers. We just don't have the manpower. I suggest that some of the hunters will assist the rangers until this problem has been solved."

"What?!" Quenton exclaimed. "A hunter can't do a ranger's job. He has not been trained for that!"

"I'll be the judge of that," Baltar said. "And right now, we simply don't have any other options."

"Fine," Arin said. "I'll instruct some of my hunters to help you out."

"Good. But there will still not be enough manpower to keep the whole city safe. We will focus on the merchant district. Patrols will be set up during the night."

Upon hearing this, Quenton's mouth dropped in amazement. Nolan would never have allowed this. He always said that every person in the city mattered; not just the rich ones. But, seeing Arin nod, Quenton realized it would be useless to complain.

"Then this matter is settled," concluded Arin. "I'll see you all tomorrow. Think well."

As Quenton left the room, a feeling of frustration and powerlessness welled up inside of him. *This plan is bound to cause trouble. I'd better find Nolan's brother soon.*

"Good luck," Tobin called out to his younger brother as he headed out the door. However, Daran wasn't going to hunt for workshop orders. He was on his way to Magnus. Magnus had the key to the old shed, where Daran had left the design drawings of the wings.

When he arrived at his destination, Magnus didn't appear at all surprised to see him. "Good morning," he simply said.

*Why isn't he surprised? Daran wondered. He probably noticed that I forgot the drawings yesterday. In that case, he surely took them with him. But, knowing Magnus, he wants me to ask about them first. Well, I won't give him that satisfaction. Not this time.*

"I came to pay you for those learning actuators," Daran said instead. He pulled his bag of money out of his pocket and started picking out coins. As he was counting, he noticed that Magnus' eyes occasionally flashed to a cabinet in the corner of the room. When the desired amount was on the table, there was still quite some money in the bag.

"Where did you get all that money?" Magnus wondered.

“You’re probably not going to believe it, but some lady on the market gave it to me.”

“That’s odd. What did this lady look like?”

As Daran described the woman, Magnus’ eyes widened in surprise. But all the old man said, was “I see.”

“Do you know her?” Daran asked, wondering why Magnus was lost in thoughts all of a sudden.

“It doesn’t sound like someone I’ve seen recently,” Magnus replied, though Daran suspected the old man was not telling him the full story. “So was there anything else you needed?”

Daran walked to the cupboard. “Oh, I also came to pick up something I forgot,” he said, opening the top drawer. The design drawings were there, just as he had expected. He pulled them out and headed back home, leaving a completely bewildered Magnus behind.

“You’re back soon,” Tobin noted when Daran entered the workshop. “Is it that hopeless?”

“On the contrary,” Daran said, as he showed Tobin the design drawings of the wings.

Tobin put down his tools, looked through the drawings and started to smile. “This is a nice order. How much did you ask?”

“Count for yourself,” Daran said with a wide grin on his face, as he threw a handful of coins on the table. “They paid half of it up front.”

“Up front? No way! Daran, you’re amazing!” Tobin threw down the drawings and hugged his brother, leaving two black handprints on his back.

“Happy to see you too,” Daran moaned under the pressure.

“Oh, sorry about that,” Tobin said, letting go of Daran. “But you do know that this order is all composites? I’m a metal guy. You will mostly have to do this one yourself.”

“I think I’ll manage,” Daran smiled, going to work.

He started off by tugging in a huge block of wood. From it, he milled away pieces until the general shape of the mold was ready. He continued by sanding the mold until it had exactly the right shape and smoothness. He spent the whole morning and a big part of the afternoon making separate molds for every part. By the time he was finished, almost the entire workshop, including Daran’s clothes and hair, was covered in wood chips and sawdust.

“Want to help clean up?” Daran asked Tobin, who was machining some aluminum parts in the only wood-free corner of the workshop.

After the workshop had been wiped clean, Daran inserted mats of fibers into the molds. He then covered each mold with several bagging films, creating an airtight seal. One end of a mold was connected to a supply of resin, while the other end was connected to an air pump. This caused a vacuum to arise in the mold, spreading the resin. When the resin was sufficiently spread through the first mold, Daran took the tank and the pump to the second mold. In this way, he filled up all the molds.

“Looking good,” Tobin commented.

“Now we just have to wait until the resin has cured,” Daran informed him. “Tonight is a good time for that.”

“Splendid. Are you hungry?”

“Is that a question?” Daran laughed.

“I figured you would be,” Tobin smiled. “Go take a shower. I’ll fix something tasty.”

“What in the world are you doing at this time?” Tobin asked when he entered the workshop in his pyjamas. “Chopping firewood? It’s not even light outside yet!”

Daran was removing the parts from the molds, but sometimes the wood was so stuck it had to be cut away. He just hadn’t thought of the noise it made.

“Don’t they look great?” he asked with a grin on his face.

“So does my bed, where I’m going back to now.”

*I guess I could’ve been a bit quieter,* Daran realized as Tobin left the workshop again. *This whole thing of being considerate towards others isn’t as easy as I thought.*

Luckily, all the parts had been removed from their molds by then. Daran continued by sanding them, making sure that the surfaces were as smooth as Magnus had recommended. Even with Mikai’s tools, this proved to be a tough job.

Just when Daran was finished, Tobin entered the workshop again.

“Wow, they look amazing!” he exclaimed. “I can almost see my reflection in them.”

“I think they’ll do,” Daran nodded, smiling. “I’m going to get a cart to deliver them. They’ll probably need my help with the assembly too, so don’t wait for me with dinner.” *Ha! How’s that for being considerate?*

Daran ran off to borrow Magnus' cart. Not much later, he arrived with the parts at the old shed on the edge of the city. Magnus was already waiting.

"These are of good quality," he said, after a quick inspection. "Did you make them? Who taught you that?"

"Mikai did," Daran explained. He realized that he now did miss her a lot. She always had these small pointers, which Daran had always hated, but which now turned out to be so incredibly useful.

"She taught you well then," Magnus said, clearly impressed. "Listen, I think that if we work hard, we can fully assemble this thing today, but doing that here doesn't seem very convenient. It'll be hard getting the bird out of the door once it's all put together."

"Good point. Do you perhaps know of a better place?" Daran already knew the answer.

"As a matter of fact, I do," Magnus smiled. "There's a small grass field not too far from here in the forest. It's mostly surrounded by rocks and dense vegetation, so the cover is ideal."

They packed up all the tools and set out to the forest. It was often hard guiding the cart between the trees, but it seemed to always just fit. And all the time, Magnus had a smile on his face which very clearly said, *I told you this would work*. Eventually they reached an open clearing in the woods. Daran couldn't help shouting "Nice!" when he saw it. It was indeed the perfect place to get busy without being disturbed.

The two enthusiasts set out to work. Slowly but steadily, Nilas reached its final shape. Even in their folded form, the two long white wings were an impressive sight, and the new tail also made

Daran's heart beat faster. Every now and then the boy took a few steps back to check what it looked like from a distance, only to continue the work with even more eagerness than before.

"That should do it," he finally said, after the last shock absorber had been installed in Nilas' paws.

"Almost," Magnus said. "I've got a surprise for you. I saw that Nilas has an auditory system, so –"

"An audi-what?"

"That he has ears. So yesterday I installed a communicator which I still had lying around." He tossed Daran a small watch. "With it, you can talk to the bird, as long as it is within roughly an hour of walking distance."

"Magnus, you're amazing!" Daran exclaimed. And before he knew what he was doing, he hugged the old man.

"You're welcome," Magnus laughed. "So, now all that is left is the controller. You said you had one?"

Daran nodded and pulled a small package from the cart. Unpacking it, he showed Magnus the little box with "Nilas" engraved on it. *I'm glad I thought of bringing this. Magnus isn't the only one who can think ahead.*

But Magnus' mouth dropped open wide in amazement. He grabbed Daran by his shoulders. "That's a thought core. Where did you get it?"

"It was already in there when I found it!" Daran said defensively.

"Then this bird that you found actually belonged to a thinker," Magnus concluded. "No thinker ever throws away a thought core

like this. Something must have happened to him. Are you sure you want to continue this?"

"Definitely," Daran nodded determined.

"Fine, but be careful. What you're holding there is very similar to an actual brain. It has its own personality and can be just as stubborn, mean or hostile as any other living creature. Remember that."

As an extra precaution, Daran and Magnus used rope to completely tie Nilas up. When that was finished, Daran started to install the thought core. When he finally plugged in the power cable, the bird started shrieking and moving convulsively, as if having an attack. In a reflex, Daran jumped away from the bird, covering his ears in an attempt to block out the noise.

"What's it doing?!"

"He's panicking!" Magnus yelled back. "You have to calm him down, or he'll hurt himself."

Daran slowly walked back to Nilas, the palms of his hands facing forward, indicating he meant no harm. "It's okay," he softly said. After some time the bird started to reduce its shaking, and when Daran finally put his hand on the bird's nose, he relaxed. "It's okay. I'm going to untie you now."

One by one, Daran untied the ropes holding Nilas. When he was done, Nilas was still calmly standing still.

"Do you want to fly?" Daran asked.

Nilas nodded. *He understands what I'm saying*, Daran realized, surprised.

"Well, give it a try then."



Nilas crouched, ready to lift off, but just when he tried to jump he fell on his side in a very weird manner.

“That’s strange,” Daran thought out loud.

“He’s got a new body,” Magnus said. “Let him get used to it.”

“No, that’s not it. His reflexes are all wrong. To balance himself, he should have shifted his weight to the left, but he moved his weight to the right instead, accelerating his fall.”

Daran walked over to Nilas, again making calming sounds. He opened the hatch leading to the thought core and swapped two wires.

“This should do it,” he said. But before he could pull his arms out of the hatch, Nilas crouched again and jumped off. Before Daran knew it, he was airborne, hanging from Nilas’ neck.

“Whoah! Let me down!” he shouted, holding on to the hatch as if his life depended on it. But when he looked down, he realized they were flying just above the ground. Daran let go and rolled through the grass. Quickly, he got up and ran after Nilas, laughing.

*Amazing*, Daran thought, as he saw Nilas flying over the rocks, in the light of the setting sun. *This is really amazing.*

Yet Daran wasn’t the only one who was amazed. At the edge of the field, a young girl with blond hair was hiding behind a tree. And just like Daran, she was laughing.

## Chapter 6 – Voices and words can bring up memories

“I think we did a good job,” Magnus concluded, while Nilas glided towards them and made a soft landing.

“Yes, we did,” Daran nodded. He was exhausted, but he still felt very satisfied at what they had accomplished that day.

“Now it’s your turn. Try to fly on him.”

“What?!” Daran exclaimed. “No way.”

“Are you scared?”

Daran had to think for a moment. “Yes, I guess I am,” he realized.

“Good,” Magnus smiled, “because I wouldn’t allow you to fly if you wouldn’t be. Come on, give it a try.”

Daran doubted, but Magnus’ confident look convinced him. He walked over to Nilas and asked, “Mind if I come along?” Nilas seemed to understand what he meant and bent down. On Nilas’ back were two cavities that were meant for either knees or feet. In front of it, a handle was submerged in Nilas’ back.

“This doesn’t look too comfortable,” he noted.

“What? You expected a heavy leather seat? Or did you want to sit up straight, messing up the entire aerodynamics?”

“Never mind,” Daran said, rolling his eyes. He started hanging on the handle and put his knees in the cavities. All the time, he did keep some distance from Nilas. *If this goes wrong, I can still jump away*, he figured. “Well, buddy, let’s fly.”

Nilas crouched and jumped. Daran tried to hold on, but it all went too fast. His hand let go of the handle and he fell on his back in the grass.

“That was not pleasant,” he grimaced.

“I never said it would be easy,” Magnus said, leaning back against a tree. “It’s all about practice. Come on, try again.”

And Daran did, over and over again, but every time he just fell down again. “This is impossible!” he finally exclaimed in frustration. “It’s like he keeps trying to throw me off. I can’t hold on if he jumps up like this.”

“Well, thinkers can,” Magnus noted, “and I’m sure that you can too.”

“Then why doesn’t it work?!”

“Catch,” Magnus said as he threw something blue and shiny to Daran. Daran caught the ball with both his hands.

“Ah, the most instructive object on the planet,” Daran said sarcastically. “I’m sensing that there’s a lesson coming.”

“Good guess,” Magnus smiled. “You just caught that ball with both of your hands. Now did either of these hands ask the other hand what he was about to do? Or did he complain that he couldn’t catch the ball?”

“Of course not,” Daran said, frowning.

“Indeed not. And do you know why?”

“Obviously, because my brain controls both hands,” Daran said, again with a tone of sarcasm.

“So does the brain of a newborn baby, but he can’t catch a ball,” Magnus countered. “No, it’s because your hands have been working together for almost fourteen years now. Each always knows what the other will do. You and Nilas should obtain the same. Once you have that, then you will work as an entity, as if controlled by one brain.”

Daran climbed back on Nilas' back for another attempt. Nilas crouched again. *Work as an entity*, Daran thought. *How can we be an entity if he keeps throwing me* – Just then, Nilas jumped off, and Daran was again launched into the grass.

“Ah, forget it!” he shouted. “This will never work.”

“Let's call it a day then,” Magnus said, sounding somewhat disappointed. “We'll try again some other time.”

*I'm not so sure about that*, Daran thought, as he helped Magnus put all the tools on the cart. “Is it okay if I stay for a while and watch Nilas fly?” he asked.

“Sure,” Magnus nodded. “You know how to find your way back.” With his cart he disappeared among the trees.

Daran was left alone in the middle of the clearing. He lay down on his back and looked up. In the twilight, he could just make out Nilas flying circles high up in the sky. *He really does look amazing*.

Daran was disturbed from his thoughts by the rustling of leaves at the edge of the field. *Why has Magnus ret* – But as he got up, he saw that it wasn't Magnus. Three men appeared from between the trees. The front one was carrying a gun.

*Thinkers*, Daran realized, though the three men weren't wearing thinker uniforms. *This means trouble. Big trouble*.

“Hey kid, we want your pet up there,” the man with the gun said, pointing to Nilas. “Call him down.”

Daran gasped as he recognized the voice. *These are the guys that killed my parents. They won't take Nilas away from me as well*.

“No,” he bravely said.

The man pointed the gun right between Daran's eyes. "Care to reconsider?" he asked. At that moment, Daran's courage failed him.

"Okay, okay," he said, taking a step back. He pulled his new watch to his mouth, pushed the button and said, "Nilas, we've got some trouble. You'd better come down here."

With a wide arc, Nilas glided down towards the clearing. Upon arrival, everyone expected him to head to an empty patch of grass, but instead he headed straight towards the group of people.

"What the – " the man with the gun managed to yell before Nilas sent him sprawling through the grass. The bird landed a few steps further. Daran jumped on his back, and before the boy even had time to think about what he was doing, they were airborne.

"Get back here!" the man shouted, searching where his gun had disappeared in the long grass, but by the time he had found it, Nilas and Daran were well out of range.

Only then did Daran realize where he was. He looked down but immediately regretted it. Although the land below him was shrouded in darkness already, he could still see they were high up in the sky.

*How did I do that?* he started wondering. *I just jumped on without a thought, trusting Nilas. Magnus was right. I shouldn't be afraid. I should just fly.*

"Well done, buddy," Daran smiled. "Want to show me what you've got?"

Nilas dove down, and on a very high pace they started zigzagging between the hilltops. Daran wasn't even able to see most of them, but he trusted Nilas. *I thought that it was amazing*

*just to see Nilas fly. But this is even more ... eh ... well ...* – He just didn't have the words for it.

After a while, they turned around and headed back to the city. Thousands of small lights appeared in front of them. Again, Daran's mouth dropped open in amazement. The sight was breathtaking.

"I guess I'd better go home," he realized. "Can you drop me off somewhere on the side of the city?"

After they had landed, Daran patted Nilas on his back. "I'll come visit you first thing tomorrow morning," he promised. Then he headed home.

"Finished assembling stuff?" Tobin asked when Daran walked in.

"Oh yeah," Daran said with a big grin on his face. "It works perfectly."

"That's good to hear. Listen, I wanted to discuss something with you."

"Fire away."

"Every year we have this order of very complicated parts. The pay is really good, but it needs to be delivered in a small town called Bluelake."

"Where is that?" Daran asked.

"It's north of here, about two days walking. So the whole trip, there and back, costs you four days. I've already been there twice, but now I am really busy with the workshop. We're finally getting new orders again! So I was wondering if you would like to head out there."

*Four days? I think I can do that faster.* “Sure. I’ll leave first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Fantastic. I’ll help you pack, and I’ll tell you how to walk, and how to set up the tent, and where the parts need to be delivered, and everything else you need to know too.”

All the time, Daran simply listened and nodded. But all the time too, he knew he would do things somewhat different from what Tobin suggested. When he finally went to bed that night, he was certain it would be a nice trip.

## Chapter 7 – Flying away from conflict

Silently Daran walked out the door, only to be startled by a voice behind him.

“You’re not leaving without saying goodbye, are you?” It was Tobin.

“I didn’t want to wake you up,” Daran explained. “But I should’ve figured you would just sink into loneliness without me.” He jokingly knocked his brother on his shoulder.

Tobin laughed. “Don’t worry. It’ll take at least four days without you before I break down in tears.”

“Yeah, right. How will you ever survive three whole days without me?”

“Well, I heard there’s this workshop where there’s still plenty of work to do. And if that turns out to be boring, I could always become a makeshift hunter and try to find some murderers.”

“I’m sure the workshop will be fascinating,” Daran laughed. He shook Tobin’s hand. “I’ll see you in a few days.”

When Daran arrived at a clearing in the forest, he called out to Nilas through his watch. In the meantime, he looked at his bag. *This is way too heavy*, he realized. He hid the tent, the sleeping supplies and most of his food in a hole beneath a tree root. A push in his back almost threw him in the hole too. Startled, he spun around. It was Nilas.

“Yes, I missed you too,” Daran smiled, patting him on his neck. He noticed the remnants of leaves around his mouth. “I hope I didn’t disturb your breakfast?”



Soon afterwards, he was on his way. “Just follow the main road towards Fiara,” Tobin had said. To Daran’s disappointment, was a cloudy day. He had to stay low to be able to see the road.

Daran wasn’t too worried about being seen. Few people used the road, and even if he was spotted, they’d just think he was some thinker. Besides that, he figured people never looked up anyway.

He was therefore extra startled when he heard a shriek just behind him. He looked around and was relieved to see only a small bird. But then he noticed the metallic shimmering of its wings. *That’s not just any bird, he realized. It’s a gizmo!* The gizmo caught up with Nilas and was starting to peck its left wing. Nilas pulled that wing away, but this caused them to roll over.

“Do you mind flying straight?” Daran asked, trying hard not to fall off.

Nilas made a squealing sound, which sounded like “Sorry.”

“We have to shake him off. Let’s go up into the clouds.” Daran expected to feel some sort of chill when they rose into the grey mass above, but it only seemed like a dense fog appeared all around them. They continued to climb, making various sharp turns to lose their pursuer. Right after the first turn Daran had lost all sense of direction, but no matter what they did, the screeching behind them continued.

*What did Magnus once tell me about flying?* Daran started wondering. *Climb speed doesn’t depend on size but on strength. Cruise speed does depend on size.* Just as they climbed out of the clouds and into the sun, Daran had a moment of brightness. “That’s it! Nilas, we have to beat him on speed. Small birds can’t fly very fast for a long time. Let’s dive down.”

Daran swung his arms around the bird's neck. As they fell back into the clouds, a feeling of weightlessness encompassed them. *This is awesome*, Daran thought, adrenaline rushing through his veins, but he quickly changed his mind when they emerged out of the clouds again. Right in front of them was a mountain peak. Without knowing it, they had flown into the mountain region.

Nilas sharply banked to the left, narrowly avoiding a huge rock. Daran felt like he was being squashed on Nilas' back. Behind them, they heard a loud shriek, followed by a soft thud. "That's got to hurt," Daran laughed. Nilas responded with a loud squeal.

Then the screeching appeared behind them again. *Won't that thing ever give up?* Daran wondered. "Nilas, let's go for it!" He bent over even more, lying completely flat on Nilas' back. The wind blew through Daran's hair as they flew between the mountain peaks, just beneath the clouds. Slowly but steadily, their pursuer fell behind.

"I think he really is gone now," Daran finally said, but it still took a while before they dared to slow down. When they eventually did, Daran didn't have a clue where they were.

"Can you take us above the clouds?" he asked Nilas. Soon afterwards, the sun appeared to the right of them. *It's still morning*, Daran reasoned, *so the sun must be in the northeast now. This means we have been flying towards the northwest.* "Let's turn right until we find the road again. I don't expect to find a lot of thinkers this far from Tarine."

They carefully flew back down through the clouds, keeping their eyes open for more mountain peaks. Luckily, it didn't take

long before the mountains got smaller, and soon they saw the road appear ahead of them.

“What do you think? Should we turn left or right?” Daran asked Nilas, but the gizmo didn’t have a clue either. “Fine, then we’ll just ask for directions.”

Nilas made a sarcastic squeal, which Daran interpreted as “To who? The first eagle we run into?”

Daran laughed. “Just put me down somewhere close to the road.”

After they landed in a clearing, Daran headed to the road. Plowing through the multitude of ferns turned out to be harder than he thought. Luckily, when he saw the road appear up ahead, a traveler was just walking by.

“Excuse me,” he called out to draw attention, still surrounded by foliage. “Do you know which direction Bluelake is in?”

The man looked up, startled. “It’s a five hour walk that way,” he said, pointing north.

Daran thanked him and disappeared again between the leafs. He couldn’t help laughing about the traveler’s surprised look. Half an hour later, Nilas dropped him off at the edge of the town.

Daran’s final destination wasn’t hard to find. It was the biggest building in the small town. “Ryan’s farm tools” the sign read. Ryan turned out to be a big guy with huge arms, but the wrinkles on his face indicated he smiled a lot.

“I’m glad you’re here! I’ve been waiting for these parts. So how are Leroy and Mikai these days?”

Daran turned down his eyes, not knowing what to say.

“Did something happen to them?” Ryan asked.

“They’re dead,” Daran almost inaudibly said. He told Ryan what had happened. During the story, he had to try hard to keep the tears inside.

“I’m so sorry,” Ryan said when Daran was finished. “And you still took the trouble of delivering these parts. That’s amazingly kind. I do have to find a new supplier now though.”

“Why?” Daran asked. “We made these parts. We can make the next batch as well.”

“You and Tobin made these?” Ryan asked, inspecting the parts. “They’re just as good as always. If you can make more like these, then I’ll stick with you guys.”

“Thanks,” Daran said, just managing to let a brief smile appear on his face.

Quenton hurried to the extra meeting that had just been called. The last few days had been frustrating. All attempts to find out where Nolan’s brother lived had failed. Quenton hoped that this discussion would present some results.

When he arrived at the meeting room, Arin and Baltar were already present, but there was also another hunter in the room.

“Is there news about Nolan?” Quenton curiously asked before he sat down.

“It’s about Nolan’s gizmo Nilas,” Baltar explained. “Yesterday night, one of the rangers told me he had seen Nilas drop someone off on the edge of the city. I didn’t put much credence in it at the time, considering it was a dark night.”

“But that changed a moment ago when Jefron came in,” Arin continued, pointing to the hunter. “Jefron, can you tell us what happened?”

Jefron sat up straight in his chair. “I was returning from a visit to a family member, who lives just north of the city, when my gizmo Jarro all of a sudden took off into the air. I looked up to see where he was going and saw a big flying gizmo in the sky. It was Nilas, with someone on his back.”

“So what did you do?” Arin asked.

“It wasn’t Nolan, or I would’ve heard of his return, so I assumed that someone had stolen Nilas. I ordered Jarro to take him down.”

“Take him down?” Quenton exclaimed. “No one could survive such a fall. Why would you kill him?”

Arin threw Quenton an angry look. Defending the hunter, he said, “Stealing a class one gizmo is a crime against the meritocracy. It is allowed to risk his death in order to stop him.”

“And he’s not dead,” Jefron said. “Jarro returned with a lot of serious scratches.”

“Good,” Quenton commented, earning some surprised glances. “That our unknown thinker is alive, I mean,” he quickly explained. “I can imagine that Baltar is very eager to question him about where he found Nilas. And to be honest, I am curious where he learned how to handle a gizmo.”

“That doesn’t change the facts,” Arin said. “Every class one gizmo that exists outside of the Thought Academy is a threat to the order in this country. The thief must be dealt with, dead or alive.”

Quenton still disagreed. “This sounds like something to vote on. And it all comes down to Baltar’s vote then. Baltar, what do you think? Do you want to find out what happened to Nilas?”

It was evident that Baltar was thinking hard. In the end he said, “I agree with Arin. Any danger to the meritocracy must be dealt with first.”

“Fine,” concluded Arin. “I’ll make sure that a notice is put out to all thinkers. Nilas and his thinker have to be caught, dead or alive.”

Quenton couldn’t believe it. *Does Baltar even want to find Nolan?* he wondered. He had to use all his restraint not to yell these words out loud. Instead, he stood up and silently walked out of the room. *Something isn’t right here, and I will find out what it is.*

## Chapter 8 – A helping hand

As the land below was plunged into the darkness of night, Nilas and Daran were still flying in the light of the setting sun, which was just visible above the hills in the distance. After a long and tiring trip, they had almost returned to the capital, which was slowly turning into a sea of lights.

The scenery gave Daran a feeling of serenity. There was no time pressure, no one chasing him, just a feeling of peace and serenity. He considered flying some more, but the impending darkness and Nilas' tiredness convinced him otherwise.

"Okay buddy, put me down somewh – wait, what is that?" Up ahead, a cloud of black smoke rose up in the sky. Beneath it, big flames were engulfing a building. "Let's check it out."

They flew on, entering the air above the city. To minimize the chance of being seen, they stayed up high in the sky.

"Are those people, on the roof?" Daran wondered, trying to make sense of the glimpses between the smoke.

Nilas made a confirming squeal. They were people alright. A whole family was trapped on the roof. They were waving to the crowd down in the street for help, but everyone kept their distance.

"Let's get down there," Daran decided. They glided towards the building. Daran could see that the core of the fire was positioned at the middle part of the building, exactly where the most important support beam of the house was located. Coincidence? He wasn't sure. But he did know it didn't bode well.

They landed on the roof and immediately felt the immense heat of the flames. Five hopeful pairs of eyes stared at them. There were two babies, a young girl and their parents.

“Finally, the rangers have arrived,” the father said. “Where are the others?”

“There are no others,” Daran said. “But this building can collapse at any moment. We have to get out of here. Who wants to fly out first?”

“All they sent was a student,” the father sarcastically replied.

Luckily, the mother was more eager for action. “The children have to go first,” she said. “Liasa, take one of the twins and go.”

The young girl took one of the babies in her arms and walked to Nilas. Her big eyes looked scared.

“It’s easy,” Daran comforted her. “Just climb on and hold on to the handle. That’s all.” He helped the girl onto Nilas, who walked to the edge of the roof. Slowly the bird tilted forward, until he finally glided off the roof.

The girl released a cry that was echoed by her mother, but they glided safely to the street below. Daran was glad to see some people stepping forward from the crowd, helping her off Nilas’ back. Then Nilas lifted off and, after a quick turn above the city, he landed on the roof again.

“You go next,” Daran said to the mother. The woman lifted the remaining baby in her arms and climbed on Nilas. As they glided off the building, the father put a hand on Daran’s shoulder.

“Thank you for saving my family,” he said. “But where is the rest of the Thought Academy? We’ve been waiting for ages!”



“I have no idea,” Daran confessed. “I’m not with the Thought Academy.”

The man’s mouth dropped open in astonishment. “But then how did you – ” At that moment the rear part of the building exploded with an enormous bang.

Daran felt the shockwave reverberate through his entire body. “Blast it!” he exclaimed. Startled, he glanced at the man. “Houses don’t just explode. What was that?”

The man seemed doubtful on whether he could tell Daran, but the boy’s penetrating look convinced him. “It’s gunpowder for the Thought Academy. We make it here.”

“In the middle of the city?!” Daran cried. “What kind of – ” But then the middle part of the house fell apart. Daran felt the roof shake beneath his feet. “The building’s going to collapse!” He looked down and saw the mother just getting off Nilas’ back. “My gizmo won’t be back in time.”

“What do we do?” the man asked, looking at Daran with fear in his eyes.

“Well, we either fall into the flames or onto the pavement,” Daran said matter-of-factly. Somehow, fear hadn’t crossed his mind yet. “Got a preference?”

They both looked behind them into the blazing fire, felt its intense heat on their faces, and realized that their choice was clear. As the roof of the building was starting to fall away beneath their feet, they jumped.

In mid-air a shadow flashed by and Daran felt a sharp tug on his left upper arm and shoulder. *Nilas!* The bird had caught him with his claws. Daran looked down and saw a crowd below him.

At that moment, Nilas let him go, causing him to land safely on a stack of knocked-over people. He quickly got up and rushed after Nilas, pushing people out of his way. When he emerged from the throng, he saw his flying friend make a smooth landing, with the father on his back.

As the man slid off Nilas and onto the street, his daughter ran towards him and flew into his arms. They were joined by the mother, carrying the two babies. A spontaneous applause erupted from the crowd. Daran approached the family, smiling. A feeling of relief and happiness washed over him.

“I can’t thank you enough,” the father said with tears forming in his eyes. “If there is ever anything I can do to return the favor, then don’t hesi – ”

“What is going on here?!” a voice shouted behind them. Startled, Daran spun around, just in time to see a ranger emerge from the crowd.

*Oh no, Daran thought. Now I’m in trouble.*

The father looked up surprised when he saw Daran’s frightful expression. “An acquaintance of yours?” he asked, as he put his daughter back on the ground.

Then the ranger noticed Nilas. He pulled his gun and said, “You stay right there.” But to Daran’s astonishment, he pointed the gun at the father, who slowly raised his hands.

“Sorry, but I’ve got to go,” Daran quietly said, such that the ranger could not hear him. He then jumped onto Nilas and together they quickly flew off. Behind him, Daran heard a loud bang, but he only realized what it was when the bullet whizzed past his ears. It was followed by a cry of outrage from the crowd.

“That was too close for comfort,” Daran said to Nilas, who squealed in agreement. They tried to fly to safety, but they hadn’t even reached the edge of the city yet before two hunters were flying right behind them.

*The Thought Academy can’t get a ranger to a fire within ten minutes, but they can get two hunters on my tail in less than ten seconds? This is ridiculous!*

“Can you outfly them?” Daran asked Nilas, but the bird responded with an exhausted squeal. “Of course. It was a long day. You must be more tired than I am.”

They dove down towards the city and soared just above the rooftops. Daran looked behind him and saw that the hunters kept on flying some distance behind them, not managing to catch up, but also not falling behind.

“We can’t fly on like this for much longer,” Daran realized. “Put me down on the street and then get yourself to safety.”

Nilas squealed in an unsatisfied tone.

“Don’t worry about me!” Daran reassured him. “I’ll be fine.”

The bird glided down into a wide street and flared up his wings, slowing down a bit. Daran jumped backwards, away from Nilas, but he still had too much speed when he landed on the ground. He tumbled over, rolled across the pavement, got up again in one swift motion and started running. He turned left into a small alley, making it hard for the hunters in the air to keep track of him.

*They can’t capture me from the air, he figured. And if they land on the ground, they lose their advantage.* But when he looked up, he saw that only one hunter descended into a nearby street. The other

one stayed up in the air. Daran cursed. He hadn't thought of that. *I guess that's why they call them thinkers.*

There was only one thing he could do now. Run as fast as his feet could carry him and hope that somehow both hunters would lose track of him in the twilight, which by now had fully swallowed up the city. He immediately set off at full speed. At every intersection, he just went into a random street. Or at least, he thought that he did. But to his surprise, he suddenly saw his own home appear in front of him.

*This is not good,* he realized, breathing heavily. Not knowing where to go next, he continued running and turned into the first street that he encountered. Then all of a sudden he noticed a high wall looming in front of him. It was a dead end! They had closed this small street down last year.

*How could I forget? I've seen this wall thousands of times through the workshop window!* The wall was too high to climb over quickly, and going back would cost too much time. Only then did he notice the blond girl sitting on top of the wall. *How did she get up there?*

The girl initially looked very surprised to see Daran, but she quickly pulled herself together. "Need a hand?" she offered.

"Please," Daran eagerly replied. The girl bent down and stretched her arm. Daran took some steps back, ran forward and used the walls to jump up as high as he could. He just managed to grab the girl's hand. Holding on tight, he put his feet on the rough brick wall and pushed himself up until his other hand reached the top of the wall. Pulling himself up further, he swung one leg over

the edge. He was just sitting on top of the wall when the hunter rushed around the corner.

“Stop right there!” the man yelled, drawing his gun.

“Let’s get out of here,” Daran urged the girl. The two kids quickly hid on the other side of the wall. They lowered themselves until they were hanging on with both hands. The ground wasn’t much further down, so they let go and made a smooth landing on the pavement.

“Well, we lost him,” the girl said.

“Yes, but he’s got a friend in the air,” Daran explained, pointing up. “We need to get him off our tail too.”

“You’re one popular guy,” the girl laughed. “I know a good place to get rid of him. Follow me.”

They hurried on, deeper into the workshop district where the buildings were packed much closer together, rushing through narrow alleys beneath high buildings. Suddenly the girl threw open a door and ran into a building. She quickly rushed through multiple rooms, startling the inhabitants.

“Hi Kira,” one of them said.

Kira managed to utter, “I wasn’t here,” before she flew out of the building on the other side with Daran closely behind her. They had wound up in a big street which smelled a lot like sawdust.

Kira stopped dead in her tracks. “The idea was to blend into the crowd,” she explained. But, although the street was probably very busy during daylight, it was now nearly deserted.

Daran noticed a big pile of wooden boards stacked up on one side of the street. “I’ve got a better idea,” he said. “Help me carry one of these.”

“We’re going to attack them with an oversized plank?” Kira replied, raising her eyebrows. “Are you sane?”

“Just do it!” Daran closed the discussion. They both took one end of a big wooden board and lifted it above their heads. Step by step, they carried it onto the street, Kira at the front and Daran at the back. Then Kira got the idea.

“From the air, we look just like normal working people!”

In the meantime it had gotten almost completely dark. There was no way they would still be recognized from high up in the air. Daran, finally feeling somewhat more safe, uttered a sigh of relief. Silently they walked on for a while.

Slowly Daran started to realize he was exhausted. It had definitely been a long day. He was looking forward to his soft bed, but he figured that sleeping there wouldn’t be a wise idea now. Not only might there still be hunters near his house, but Tobin would also be very surprised to see him return so soon. Then Daran remembered his hidden stash in the forest.

“Well, I guess it’s time for me to go find my tent,” he said, breaking the silence.

Kira looked up surprised. “You live in a tent?”

“No!” Daran replied sharply. “I mean, I don’t think it is wise to go home now.”

“You could stay the night at my house?” Kira offered. “The people I live with will definitely help you, especially after what happened to you today.”

Attracted by the softness of a normal bed, Daran eagerly accepted. “That’s very kind of you.” Then he realized that they hadn’t even made proper introductions yet.

“Your name is Kira,” Daran said, remembering her name from when they were rushing through the house.

“And your name is Daran,” Kira knew. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” Daran smiled. For the first time this week, he felt like fortune smiled upon him.

## Chapter 9 – A residence found

Quenton almost choked on his breakfast when he saw the newspaper. “Ranger shoots at savior,” the big letters yelled out. With increasing amazement, he read through the article, only to read it two more times right away.

He finished his breakfast with suppressed rage, after which he headed towards the morning meeting. Arin was already present.

“What is this?” Quenton asked, slamming the paper on the table.

“I think you’d better ask Baltar,” Arin calmly replied.

Not much later, Baltar drove in a man in a wheelchair. The parts of the man that weren’t veiled by bandages were covered by bruises and hematomas. With difficulty, Quenton managed to recognize the man as a ranger called Dessel.

Quenton wondered what had happened to Dessel and why Baltar had brought him to this meeting, but more important things came first. “Now that we’re all here, can someone explain me this?!” he said, pointing to the newspaper.

Baltar nodded. “Yesterday, there was a fire in the workshop district. I sent Dessel there to see if he could help. When he arrived, he saw Nilas with a man standing next to it. Dessel tried to apprehend the man, but the suspect jumped on Nilas and flew off. So Dessel, as we had decided, tried to shoot the man.”

“The man?” Quenton replied, surprised. “According to the paper it was a boy. A boy who had just saved a whole family from the roof of a burning building!”



“What does it matter whether it’s a man or a boy?” Baltar said. “His actions are making our work impossible. Due to him, Dessel was attacked by an angry mob yesterday!”

“Oh, come on!” Quenton exclaimed indignantly. “The boy saved a family from a burning building! And what do we do? Reward him? No, we try to shoot him! We already had image problems with the population. This won’t make it any better.”

“That’s because of people like him!” Baltar shouted back. “We look like a bunch of incompetent fools because we can’t find him. How hard can it be to find a giant bird? I suggest we double the number of men searching for him.”

“That won’t solve anything,” Quenton said. “He knows how to evade us. But just think for a moment. It’s a boy, and he knows how to deal with a gizmo! Where did he learn that?”

“That’s a good question,” Arin noted. “Dessel, what did he look like?”

“Young, dirty dark brown hair, old clothes,” Dessel mumbled. He clearly had trouble speaking due to his wounds.

“No thinker would even consider teaching such things to a boy like that,” Arin knew.

“So only one option remains,” Quenton reasoned. “He learned it on his own. That is the kind of student that we need here at the Thought Academy! We’ve already had too little new talent over the past few years. Spread the message that we will offer him a place here and he’ll come here of his own accord. We kill two birds with one stone.”

“You want to accept a boy from a lower level of society into the Thought Academy?” Arin asked him. “That is against the rules!”

These rules have been set up with a very good reason: such people cause problems. No, I agree with Baltar. We have to find him as soon as possible.”

Quenton sighed. He knew that that plan would lead nowhere. Luckily, he had a plan of his own.

“Alright. I’ll help you with the search as well. Can I borrow one of the hunters that have seen the boy? Then we’ll try to find someone who might recognize him.”

A knock on the door woke Daran up. To his surprise, it was completely light outside already. He sat up straight in his bed and saw Kira’s smile appear around the door.

“Are you joining for breakfast?” she said. “Anerio wants to speak with you.”

“I’m on my way,” Daran nodded. Anerio was the old man housing Kira. Daran believed Anerio wasn’t Kira’s father, but he didn’t feel like asking Kira where her actual family was. He suspected the topic would be too sensitive, both for Kira and for himself.

Daran got dressed and left his room. As he walked through the hallway, he noticed that there were a lot more rooms in the building. *Kira and Anerio aren’t living on their own here*, he figured. Eventually he wound up in the kitchen. The girl and the old man had already begun their morning meal.

“Daran, great to see you!” Anerio greeted him heartily. “I hope you slept well?”

“Definitely,” Daran nodded. “Thank you so much for letting me sleep over.”

“No problem,” Anerio smiled with a friendly nod.

For a few moments, while Daran started on his breakfast, no one said a word. But after a few bites, Daran ended the silence. “Kira said you wanted to speak with me?”

Anerio nodded. “I wanted to discuss politics with you. What do you know about it?”

Daran looked up surprised. “Politics? Not much,” he confessed in between two bites. “Only that Kantara is a meritocracy.”

“Indeed, but what does it mean?”

That’s where Daran’s knowledge ended. “It says something about who makes decisions,” he still managed to remember.

“That’s true,” Anerio nodded encouragingly. “Decisions are made by the people that have shown to possess the most of certain good characteristics, called merits. The six people with the most merits are the ministers of our country. They form the cabinet.”

“So the country is ruled by the best?” Daran asked. It all sounded vaguely familiar. He had heard it all before in school, but he never found it very interesting back then.

“That’s the theory,” Anerio said. “But the question is, how do you determine how much merit someone has? How do you measure his capability to rule?”

“You could look at how much money he has?” Daran suggested. “If he has earned a lot of money, then he’s got to be smart.”

“So a person that inherited a lot of money is smarter than a hardworking metal smith?” Kira added to the discussion. Daran realized she had a good point there.

“You see, it’s somewhat subjective,” Anerio explained. “That’s the reason why we have the merit council. This council consists of six independent merit judges. Whenever a seat opens up in the cabinet, they choose the person to fill it.”

“That sounds fair,” Daran thought. In the meantime, he started to wonder what Anerio’s point behind this whole story was.

“Initially it does,” Anerio said. “But guess who appoints the merit council?”

“The ministers do,” Kira knew. She must have heard the story plenty of times. “So indirectly, they are the ones that choose their successors. And do you then still think merits are all they care about?”

The message behind the question was so clear that Daran didn’t take the effort to answer. “But if that’s such a problem, then surely someone will say something about it.”

“You mean people that oppose the government? You’ve never heard of any?”

Daran realized what he meant. “The Free Minds,” he spoke his thoughts out loud.

“Exactly. The Free Minds openly oppose the government. But what does the cabinet do? They send the Thought Academy after us.”

“But can they – ” Only then did Daran realize what the man had just said. “Us? You are – ”

The old man nodded. “We try to help.”

Daran didn’t understand it one bit. “But how?”

“Many people don’t agree with the government,” Anerio explained. “We believe all persons should have the right to choose how and by whom they are governed. We want elections.”

“I take it the cabinet disagrees?” Daran guessed.

Anerio nodded. “The only way to change things is the hard way, by uniting and confronting the government. But the problem is: we wouldn’t stand a chance. The Thought Academy just has too big of an advantage.”

“They’re the only ones with gizmos,” Kira added. “And they do whatever it takes to keep it that way.”

Daran definitely believed her on that.

“The Free Minds are now trying to get their hands on as many gizmos as possible,” Anerio explained further. “Until we have enough, we remain quiet. But the Thought Academy protects its gizmos well; especially the valuable ones. And that’s why we need your help.”

“Wait,” Daran said. “You need my help? Why?”

“Isn’t it evident?” Kira said. “It’s because you have a gizmo.”

Daran’s jaw dropped down in amazement. “How do you know —”

“We read the papers,” Anerio smiled. “So what do you say about helping us?”

That was something Daran had to think about for a moment. *Helping the Free Minds. Wow.* A few days ago, he never would’ve even considered it. It would be completely against the law.

“I don’t know,” he confessed.

“Daran, I’ll be open with you,” Anerio said, his brown eyes focusing on the boy. “You’re in quite some trouble. The thinkers

are very good at searching. But if you help the Free Minds, then they can help you too. You could even come and live here if you want to. So, what do you say?"

Daran hadn't looked at it from that point of view yet. *The whole Thought Academy is already after me anyway. It can't get much worse. This is the chance to get help. And not just help, but help from the Free Minds!*

"I'll help you," Daran decided. "What's the plan?"

"In short? We're going to raid the Thought Academy."

"So this is where you started chasing him on foot?" Quenton asked the hunter.

Krinos nodded. "Yes, this is where I landed. The boy ran that way." He pointed towards a small street.

Quenton marked the position on the map that he had brought, after which the two men walked into the street. They followed the route which Daran had taken the day before. Every time they entered a street, Quenton added another note.

"Shouldn't we be questioning people?" Krinos asked when Quenton marked the next street on his map.

"What are the odds that someone remembered a boy running by?" Quenton asked rhetorically. "No, I want to know what happened during the pursuit. When you entered this crossing, where was the boy?"

"He rounded the corner over there," Krinos pointed. "But what's the use of that?"

"There's a lot of use," Quenton smiled. There was quite some mathematics and logics in pursuit curves, and Quenton hadn't

become a scholar at the Thought Academy for nothing. “I determine the behavior of the boy. What was his goal? If he had a hiding place in mind, then he would go there as soon as possible, but if he just wanted to get you off his tail, he would move in a seemingly random pattern through the city.”

Krinos looked doubtful. “And you think he would take the time to think about what decision to make?”

“People always make decisions, consciously or subconsciously, after months of brooding or in the blink of an eye. The trick is to know why they make those decisions.”

They turned left, into a small street. Quenton looked up from his map. “Wait, are you certain he went into this street?”

“Very certain,” Krinos said. He pointed ahead. “See that wall over there? That’s where I lost him. A friend of him helped him over.”

*Did he plan this?* Quenton wondered. *Or was it just coincidence?* “Did you notice anything else? Did he appear hesitant or anything?”

Krinos’ face suddenly brightened. “Now that you mention it, he did stop running for a second before heading here.”

Quenton smiled. *So he didn’t plan this.* He threw a look at his map. In a nearly straight line the boy had found his way through the city, until he suddenly almost turned around and ran into this dead alley.

“Do you have any idea what it means?” Krinos asked.

Quenton continued thinking, and suddenly it all looked so evident. *When panicking, you don’t think consciously. You fall back to subconscious behavior. So when finding a route through the city,*

*you fall back to a route which you've taken hundreds of times. Like the route to your school, your job or your house.* Quenton knew one thing for sure. The boy lived or worked in this street.

He just didn't feel like telling that to the hunter. Krinos would undoubtedly tell it to Arin, and before anyone would even make a conscious thought about it, the whole street would be filled with hunters. No, Quenton had a better idea.

"I have no idea," he said, shaking his head. "Let's go back to the Academy."



## Chapter 10 – A cause for second thoughts

Daran looked at the pair that had joined them at the table. The man on the left had introduced himself as Toryas. With a kind look on his face, he gently rocked the toddler in his lap back and forth. This was in contrast to Gendra, the tall woman on the right, who had a focused look on her face. It was evident that she was the one with the plan.

“The first step is to get into the Thought Academy,” she started. “There’s no way we can get through the ground entrances. They check everyone thoroughly. The air entrances are a completely different story though. The Thought Academy would never expect someone to drop in by air.”

“They don’t even keep a lookout?” Daran asked.

Gendra shook her head. “They just assume that no one outside of the Academy can fly. And for a long time they have been right at that. Until now.” She looked Daran straight in the eyes. “Once we have landed, Daran will wait on the roof, while I slip inside with a thinker uniform. No thinker knows ev – ”

“Wait a second,” Daran interrupted her. “We’re not flying on Nilas together.”

“Yes we are,” Gendra claimed. “I thought you wanted to help us? We are not sending you in there alone.”

“I do want to help you, but Nilas simply can’t take the weight.”

“I am not heavy!” Gendra replied indignantly. “How dare – ”

“I didn’t say that,” Daran quickly recovered. “But two persons are just too much for Nilas, unless maybe if they are two very light

persons. And there are only two persons in this room light enough to come along with me.”

Both Gendra and Anerio first looked at the toddler. Then, slowly, as if they had forgotten she was still in the room, their glances shifted to Kira. There was a moment of silence.

“No way,” Anerio said.

“Not happening,” Gendra agreed. “I’m not sending in two kids to do our work for us.”

“Well, then I guess I’m going alone,” Daran concluded.

Gendra and Anerio looked at each other. It was clear to Daran that some sort of silent communication was going on here. In the end, Gendra conceded. “Fine. Take Kira with you.”

When Daran looked at Kira, she at first appeared not to care, but when he looked closely, he saw that she was suppressing a smile. *She’s really happy about this*, Daran thought. *But why does she try so hard not to show it?*

“Since I’m not coming along, both of you had better memorize the map of the Academy inside out,” Gendra said, looking expectantly at the man next to her, who was playing with the toddler in his lap. “Toryas? The maps please?”

“Oh, right,” Toryas said, as he tried to pull his finger out of the boy’s hand, but the kid started crying and Toryas quickly put his hand back. With his remaining hand, he clumsily tried to unroll the maps on the table. Slowly, the layout of the Thought Academy appeared before them.

“We are after the thought cores,” Gendra explained. “And not just any thought cores, but the special ones. Most of them are safely tucked away in a big vault in the basement floor of the main

building, but we know that some of them are locked away on a higher floor in a simple wall cabinet. And although we don't have a key, there's nothing that a well-placed charge won't solve."

"You mean explosives?" Daran asked. "I thought only the Thought Academy had such toys."

Gendra smiled. "Gizmo's aren't the only things we steal from the Academy. The downside is that this isn't exactly a silent solution. The wall cabinet with the gizmos is placed in the office quarters of the building, where no one would expect it. This means that there won't be many people around during the evening, but an explosion is bound to alert someone. So once you open the locker, you should put as many thought cores as possible in your bag and get out of there. If you encounter any thinkers, just act confused, as if you're scared and are trying to run away from the explosion."

"That sounds like it might actually work," Daran admitted.

Next, Toryas measured Daran's and Kyras lengths and sized down some stolen student uniforms. As he worked on that, Gendra informed the two kids about the routes they could take through the Thought Academy and instructed them on how to use the charges.

"It's very easy. Just mount it up against the lock, pull out the pin, and it'll blow up in exactly eight seconds. Do make sure you're well out of the way, or you'll get hurt. Badly."

Daran nodded. "I'll keep it in mind."

Contrary to the days before, this time the weather wasn't pleasant enough for a nice flight. The sky was completely grey, and

a light drizzle caused Daran to shiver. With the sun already setting, visibility would soon be reduced to a minimum.

“At least it’s less likely we’ll be spotted,” he said, trying to cheer Lana up as they entered a clearing in the forest. He activated his watch and asked Nilas, “Can you come down here? It’s time to fly again.”

“I still can’t believe I’m actually going to fly,” Kira said. “Is it hard?”

“Not really. Nilas does all the work. But that doesn’t mean it’s comfortable, so don’t get your hopes up.”

The big bird landed on the slope of a hill. He looked curiously at Daran.

“We’re taking a friend along to the Thought Academy,” Daran explained. Nilas appeared to nod and lowered his back.

“So what do I do?” Kira asked, as she tried to climb up.

“Just lie on its back and put your arms around its neck,” Daran told her. “You have to be as aerodynamic as possible.”

“As what?” Kira wondered.

“Just don’t catch a lot of wind,” Daran translated.

“But what about you?”

Daran realized it was a good question. “I’ve never flown double before,” he confessed, not counting the few seconds when he dangled from Nilas’ legs the day before. “I should catch as little wind as possible too, so I think I’ll have to lie on top of you.”

Daran couldn’t see Kira’s face, but from the silence that followed, he could guess that they were thinking the same. *This will be awkward.* Daran climbed up and lay down on Kira’s back. He could feel the quick rise and fall of her chest.

*She's nervous.*

"Don't worry," he tried to comfort her. "You won't fall. I've got you."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about," she joked. Slowly, she took a big breath. "Okay, I'm ready. Let's do this."

Nilas jumped off and glided down the hill. He flapped his wings a few times and quickly they gained altitude, as they flew towards the city. It didn't take long before they emerged above the clouds. The ocean of fog that stretched out around them glittered as it reflected the light of the sun.

"It's amazing," Kira gasped, her mouth agape. "But how do you know where to go?"

"I don't," Daran explained. "Nilas does. He has flown around the city plenty of times before, even in foggy conditions like these. He knows his way around."

Soon enough Nilas took them back through the clouds and they could see the Thought Academy appear in front of them. Although Daran had never been inside, he recognized the place instantly from the maps.

The Academy consisted of several buildings. The Seldon river split them into two groups, just like it split the city of Tarine into two. Daran knew that the south part of the Academy, the coordination section, housed all the thinkers, while the students spent all their time in the education section on the north side. The whole Academy was surrounded by a big wall, effectively shutting it off from the city around it, which bustled with life.

Nilas landed on the landing platform of the biggest building of the Academy. Looking like a ten story stack of bricks with

windows, the main building was positioned in the south part of the Academy and functioned as the headquarters of the rangers and the hunters. Daran was glad to get off the backs of both his traveling companions.

“Remember, act as if we belong here and are going somewhere,” he reminded Kira. “So no looking around. Just keep up the brisk pace.”

“I know,” Kira replied stoically. “Common sense hasn’t been shaken out of me during that flight. Well, not completely anyway.”

“Ha, funny,” Daran said sarcastically.

They walked over to a set of shelters, used to house gizmos. Here they found the stairwell, descended one flight of stairs and continued into a hallway. Daran looked up, partly surprised, when a ranger appeared around the corner. The boy couldn’t help being afraid that the man might recognize him, but when Daran made a subtle nod, the thinker simply nodded back. As he walked by, a smile appeared on Daran’s face. *Whenever you act confidently as if you belong somewhere, no one ever asks you questions. Except perhaps for directions.*

When they arrived at their destination, they checked whether the halls were clear.

“No one around,” Daran commented.

“Good,” Kira said, as she pulled the small explosive device out of her bag and mounted it on the cabinet door. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Daran nodded.

He hid behind a corner in the hallway. Kira looked around one last time, pulled out the pin and joined Daran. She started whispering, “Seven, six – ”

Just then a hunter rounded the corner on the other side of the hallway. If he kept up his current pace, he would be right next to the locker at the time of the explosion.

Daran looked Kira in the eyes.

“We can’t do anything,” the girl said, but Daran didn’t agree. He couldn’t just wait and watch how someone would get blown up. Even if it was a hunter.

He burst off in full sprint and managed to tackle the hunter a few steps before he reached the locker. As they tumbled over the floor, the hunter stammered, “What is going – ” but he was interrupted by the explosion. Daran, who was lying on top of the hunter, could feel the heat of the blast almost scorching his skin. He was glad he wasn’t any closer to the explosion.

The hunter threw Daran off of him. “You?!” he uttered, surprised, as he looked Daran in the eyes.

Daran realized that somehow the hunter knew who he was. Not wanting to wait around to see what the man would do, he set off at a run, away from Kira and the locker. The tapping of footsteps told him that the hunter was in pursuit.

Daran ran as fast as he could. Luckily the hunter didn’t appear to be very fast. After rounding several corners, Daran got the feeling that he had gained some distance and dared to look behind him. To his surprise, he saw how the hunter suddenly ran off in a different direction.

*Why would he stop following me?* Daran wondered. It didn't make any sense. But Daran knew thinkers were very well capable of thinking. *He knows the building better than I do. Maybe he knows where I'm going, and intends to cut me off. But how can that be? I don't even know where I'm going!*

Then it dawned on Daran. *Of course. I need to get away. He probably figured out how we got in and cut off our only exit.*

Daran ran back towards the locker, only to meet Kira halfway.

"Come on," she urged. "We need to get out of here."

"I think he'll be waiting for us," Daran warned her. Cautiously, they approached the stairwell, but from a distance they could already see the hunter.

"What do we do?" Kira asked.

"Have you got what we came for?" Daran asked.

Kira nodded, pointing to the bag she was carrying.

"Good. I'll distract him. When he's out of the way, you get on Nilas and take off."

"But what about you?" Kira asked with a worried look in her eyes.

"I'll figure something out," Daran said, smiling. He ran straight towards the stairwell. When the hunter saw him, Daran feigned surprise. He stumbled, got up and ran off in a different direction.

From the corner of his eye, Daran saw that the hunter was on his tail again. The boy ran through several hallways, again gaining a lead on the hunter.



“Nilas, are you up in the air already?” Daran asked through his watch. The gizmo responded with an affirmative squeal. “Good. Head to the west side of the building. I’ll see you there.”

Daran ran further along the hallway, looking for an open door. Finally he found one and rushed into the room. He hurried to the windows and glanced through them, but there was nothing to see but darkness. The fog even veiled the city lights. He tried to open a window, but to his frustration they all appeared to be locked.

“Not good ... ” he muttered to himself. He frantically tried punching his fist through the glass, with sore knuckles as only result. Time was running out. As a last act of desperation, he grabbed a chair and hurled it towards one of the windows. With a loud clatter, the glass burst apart.

“Nilas, slowly fly past the building, just below the top floor,” Daran said to his watch. As he climbed up to the windowsill, the hunter rushed into the room.

“Stop right there, you thief!” he shouted.

Daran hadn’t expected the hunter to be very nice to him, but he was surprised at how much it hurt to be called a thief for the second time that week. Then it dawned on him why it hurt so much. *He is right. This is stealing.*

“I’m sorry,” Daran said, as he jumped out the window.

The last thing that he heard from the hunter was a loud, “Wait!”

Daran landed on Nilas’ and Kira’s back, but the bird was going too fast. He started to slip. His hands desperately tried to grab onto something. Then they found Kira’s hand.

“Hold on!” she yelled.

“Nilas, go into a dive!” Daran shouted back, above the sound of the rushing wind. Thanks to the momentary weightlessness during the dive, he managed to climb onto Nilas’ back. Nilas pulled up again, narrowly avoiding the roof of a building.

Kira uttered a sigh of relief. “How nice of you to drop in.”

“I couldn’t let you take all the credit on your own,” Daran smiled. “You’d just get arrogant.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Kira laughed. “They wouldn’t give me that much credit, no matter how successful the mission was.”

“I want to see that with my own eyes first,” Daran said. “Let’s head home.”

“Wait. We’re actually going to land on the house?” Kira asked, incredulously. “Isn’t that a bit too overconfident?”

Daran laughed. “Why? No one will see us with this fog. What could ever happen?”

## Chapter 11 – A change of plans

Quenton was startled by an urgent beeping emanating from his communicator. It was an emergency call from Arin.

“What’s going on?” Quenton asked.

“Get your head down to the hunter entrance hall right now,” Arin said. “I’ll explain when you get here.”

“I’ll be there in two minutes.”

Figuring it was urgent, Quenton quickly ran over. He arrived breathing mildly, in contrast to Arin, who was out of breath. The hunter leader gestured Quenton to follow him. They headed towards the building exit.

“He was here,” Arin said.

“Our rogue thinker boy?”

Arin nodded. “He just came out of nowhere and jumped on me.”

Quenton looked up, surprised. “Why did he do that?”

Arin stopped walking. “To save my life,” he suddenly realized.

Quenton, discovering Arin suddenly wasn’t next to him anymore, turned around. “He did what?”

“He was using some kind of explosive to break into a closet. I would have been within the blast radius if he hadn’t pulled me down.”

“And what did you do?”

“I chased him, but ... well ... I’m not as fast as I used to be, and I had also left my gizmo downstairs. I wasn’t there in time.” Arin turned his eyes down.

“The boy got away?”

“No. He fled into a room and I cornered him, but before I could get a hold of him, he smashed through a window and jumped.”

“Which floor?” Quenton demanded, eager to know whether the boy might have survived.

“The top one,” Arin said, answering Quenton’s hidden question.

It didn’t make sense to Quenton. *Why would he jump? Did he fear capture so much?* “I want to see him,” he concluded.

They walked out into the cold evening air and turned left.

“He’s got to be somewhere over here,” Arin said.

Some distance away, Quenton noted shards of glass lying on the ground, surrounding a dark object. He took a deep breath to mentally prepare himself for what he was about to see. Then he stepped closer and realized it was a chair. He walked around it, but he couldn’t find a body.

Arin didn’t understand it. “He has to be here. How could he ...”

Looking up, Quenton searched for a broken window on the top floor, but the top of the building was engulfed by the fog. *Something can fly right past it and I wouldn’t even be able to see.* He smiled. “I think you’re forgetting that the boy has a flying gizmo. And he’s more capable with it than either of us would have guessed.”

But Quenton knew that more than skill was involved here. *The boy took a big risk, jumping from a window onto a gizmo. He got lucky. But if we don’t find him soon, he might not be so lucky next time. So it’s time I try my luck as well.*

The moment Daran and Kira entered the room, Daran could see relief spreading through their audience. At least things hadn't gone horribly wrong. Still, both Gendra and Anerio waited in apprehension.

*Why?* Daran wondered for a second, until he figured it out. *They think we might have chickened out. Well, we'll surprise them on that.*

Kira had asked Daran whether she could present their loot, so after a moment of building up the tension she smiled and put their bag on the table in front of Anerio.

"You did it!" Anerio happily exclaimed, and as he started rummaging through the contents of the bag, he nodded with a big grin on his face towards Daran. "These are the ones. Great job!"

"Well done," Gendra also smiled towards Daran. "We knew we could count on you."

Daran glanced over to how Kira took the compliments, but to his surprise she had an impassive look on her face. She yawned and said, "I'm tired. I'm off to my room." Then she turned around and walked out. Daran got the impression that she had trouble looking composed, though none of the others seemed to notice it, or even care about it. All the attention was focused on him.

After the door closed behind Kira, Gendra said, "Daran, after your excellent work today, we have a new plan in which we can really use your help."

Daran took a deep breath and gathered some courage. "That's what I want to talk to you about. What we did today may have

been for a good cause, but it's stealing, and that's just something which we shouldn't do, no matter who it's from."

"It's not stealing," Gendra said. "It's simply taking the things which the Thought Academy is denying us. It's taking the things which we should have had in the first place. They have no right to forbid us to have gizmos and guns and such."

"That may be so, but it's still taking things which people have put a lot of time and effort in to create and which they are attached to. I don't want people to do that to me, and I don't want to do that to others. Don't get me wrong, I do want to help you, but if you're asking me to steal, even when it's from the Thought Academy, then I'm out."

At that point, the door opened and Toryas entered. "Gendra, we've got this kid in front of our door who says he wants our help in finding and bringing to justice some thinkers. Any suggestions on what we should do with him?"

Gendra sighed. "What are we? An alternative public helpdesk? Well, let's first see what story he has." She got up and followed Toryas out of the room, but not before giving Anerio an urgent glance, which Daran could clearly interpret as, "Try to change his mind."

After the door closed, Anerio said, "Daran, I can imagine you're tired after a long day like this. We'll talk about it tomorrow. You deserve some rest."

The reaction surprised Daran, but he could see the sense in it. "Goodnight," he wished the man. He turned around and headed towards his bed. It didn't take much time for him to fall asleep. It also didn't take much time for him to be woken up again.

Someone was shaking his shoulders. "Wake up Daran." It was Kira. She sounded urgent, almost panicking.

"What's wrong?" Daran asked sleepily.

"I just overheard Gendra and some of the others. They're planning to kill you, once they've captured Nilas."

"What?! Why?"

"I don't know. I only heard them say they had to have Nilas, one way or another. Daran, you have to get out of here."

Then Daran realized what it meant. "Nilas is in danger! I have to turn on my watch."

"You turn it off during the night?" Kira asked, surprised.

"Yeah, Nilas talks in his sleep, gizmo style. Not pleasant when you're trying to sleep yourself." He groped the bedside table until he found the device. As soon as he pushed the button, he could hear Nilas' frantic squeaking.

He jumped out of his bed, ran into the hallway and rushed up the stairs two at a time. When he emerged into the cold night air, still wearing only shorts, he could see three men trying to constrain the big blue tarpaulin that Daran had thrown over Nilas only hours before to hide him from prying eyes. The men used large metal nails to pin the sheet to the roof. Nilas was desperately trying to get free, but he was fighting a losing battle.

Only then did Daran recognize the men. *They're the guys who also tried to take Nilas back in the forest – the ones that killed my parents! I have to stop them.*

He ran over to the nearest man and pushed him out of the way. Grabbing the nail, he pulled as hard as he could, until it shot up.

Daran almost fell backwards, but managed to stay on his feet. Just when he regained his balance, he saw some object approaching from the corner of his eye. Before he could turn to see what it was, he got hit hard on the side of his head and fell down. With his head throbbing, he rolled onto his back and looked up.

Both the man whom Daran had just pushed away and the man that had knocked Daran down were standing over him. "Let's make sure you stay out of this," the latter said. "Permanently." He pulled his gun and aimed it at Daran. Daran's eyes went wide with fear.

Something big and blue came up from behind the two men and knocked them over, sending them sprawling across the roof. Daran sat up and saw Nilas appear from beneath the big sheet, right where he had pulled out the nail a moment earlier. Wasting no time, Daran got up and dove head-first over Nilas' head. With Daran's legs dangling around his neck, Nilas jumped off the roof and spread his wings.

When Daran, who was still lying on Nilas the wrong way around, looked up, he saw how the man with the gun got up and pointed his weapon right at him.

*He's not going to miss this time*, Daran realized. He closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

To Daran's utter astonishment, when the expected bang came, it was not followed by an impact, but by a loud screech from Nilas that drowned out all other sound. Daran opened his eyes and just managed to discern Kira on the roof, before the house was swallowed up in darkness.



Using the handle on Nilas' back, Daran quickly spun around, getting back to the normal flying position. In the meantime, Nilas was already drifting to the left. Something was wrong with his left wing.

But there was more. Nilas was panicking, like he was terrified of something. Daran didn't have a single clue why the bird was so afraid. "It's okay," he calmly said. "Just keep on heading towards the forest and it'll be fine. You're going to make it."

Initially, Daran wasn't even sure whether they would make it out of the city. They had trouble keeping their altitude. But Nilas was giving everything he had in him. Soon they passed the last houses. The only problem left was finding a place to land. They almost made it to the place where Daran had hidden his supplies when Nilas couldn't take any more. They flew through several treetops, scratching up Nilas' bottom, before making a rough landing in the clearing.

It was hard examining Nilas in the darkness, so Daran first went to his supplies. He put on some clothes, grabbed a flashlight and went back for a quick inspection.

Daran smiled. *It's just like playing doctor. And the best way to find out what's wrong with a patient, is to ask where it hurts.*

"Can you still move everything in your left wing?"

Nilas shook his head. *No.*

"Some problems with the actuators?"

Now a subtle nod followed. *Yes.*

Daran examined the bullet hole. Nilas was right. The bullet had exactly hit one of the main wing actuators and damaged a power line. Daran found it amazing that Nilas could still fly as

well as it just did. It shouldn't have been able to. But then again, there were still many things about Nilas which Daran didn't understand.

"You did an incredible job," he complimented the bird. "I just need to replace some cables and you'll be able to fly again."

Figuring it would be best to waste no time, Daran ran off back home. Only then did he realize that he had also left his keys at the Minds. So instead of taking the front door, he walked to the rear side of the house and started stacking boxes. During the day, this would have looked suspicious. During the night, it looked even more so, except that there was no one awake to see it. Eventually, the stack was high enough to reach the roof from it. Daran quickly climbed into the house, silently picked up some cables and tools at the workshop, and then set out again. *I'll make sure everything is back before the morning comes. No one will ever know I was here.*

Repairing Nilas turned out to be a tougher job than expected. It wasn't easy, removing and installing cables in the close confines of Nilas' wing, especially during a dark night in the middle of a forest. When Daran was finally finished, the first light of the morning already appeared on the horizon.

"You're back in working order. Okay, not counting the few holes and scratches in your skin. I got to go home now to return these tools before Tobin wakes up. I'll be back soon."

Daran ran back and entered through his hidden entrance again. When he passed by Tobin's room, he listened for any sounds. To his surprise, Tobin wasn't snoring. *That's weird. He always does that.*

Being even more careful not to make a sound, Daran went to the workshop and put back all the tools, making sure he left no trace whatsoever that he'd been present. Silently, he laughed. *Normally, I never put everything back this well. Hmm, maybe Leroy was partly right in always calling me sloppy.* A feeling of guilt rose up once more in Daran. He intended never to appear sloppy towards Tobin.

As he put back the last pliers, he noticed something strange in the corner of his eye. Two notes had been shoved under the door. Wondering why people didn't just use the mailbox, Daran picked them up and started reading the first.

*To Daran from A & G.*

*We hoped it didn't have to come to this, but some things are just too important. We have Tobin. We want Nilas. Care to trade? You have until midnight to decide. It's going to be a cloudy night again, so you know where to land.*

Daran couldn't believe it. He trusted them! And now he had to decide between his brother and Nilas. How could he make that decision?

Then he remembered the second note.

*To Daran from Kira.*

*I think that by now you have a lot of questions. I have a lot to answer for. Meet me at the start of sunset, at the place where Nilas first flew.*

Daran sat down on the bench intended for waiting customers and started thinking. *Kira has a lot to answer for? She saved my life twice. Three times, if you count getting away from hunters. What does she have to answer for?*

Then he thought about Tobin again. *They took him. I still can't believe it. I've been so focused on learning new things, on expanding my world, that I forgot what I already had. A family. And now I lost it.*

He let out a deep sigh. *When everything in life is being taken, when all you hold dear appears to be slipping away, there has to be a moment when you decide that it has been enough, a time when you take a stand and give all you've got to make things right. With me, that time has come. I will make things right.*

With that resolution in his mind, his eyes slowly fell shut and sleep overtook him.

## Chapter 12 – Keep your eyes open

Daran was just dreaming about flying through the mountains on Nilas, with Kira on her own gizmo next to her, when the sound of someone trying to bash in the door woke him up.

*What's going on? Have the hunters found me?*

He jumped up from the bench, looked through the window and saw a man in his late twenties or early thirties urgently knock on the door, having a panicked look on his face. Daran couldn't recall ever seeing him before. The man appeared to be alone, and there wasn't any sign that he was from the Thought Academy, so Daran cautiously opened the door.

"I'm glad someone's here," the man said, quickly stepping inside.

"Eh, is there anything I can help you with?" Daran asked, somewhat surprised.

The man took a quick look around the workshop before he started speaking. "My wife has fallen ill and I need to take her to a doctor, but my cart just broke down. I need a new bearing to fix it. Do you have any?"

"Sure," Daran nodded. They still had several in stock. "What size do you need?"

"Oh, of course, you need to know the size," the man said. After some thinking, he gave Daran the required inner and outer diameter.

The numbers surprised Daran. "No one makes bearings with these diameters," he knew. "The two diameters are too far apart."

“Yes, the cart is very old,” the man explained. “So can you help me?”

*This will require some improvisation.* “If I put a small bearing inside a bigger bearing, then I should get the right dimensions. Not ideal, but it works.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” the man nodded approvingly, like he knew what he was talking about.

While Daran picked up two bearings and went to work, the man looked around the workshop again. “It’s quiet here today. Aren’t your parents around?”

“My parents are dead,” Daran said. Without knowing why, he added, “They were killed last week.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” the man said. After a brief moment of silence, he asked, “Did the thinkers find the killer?”

“We didn’t call in the Thought Academy.”

“Oh, why not?”

“They were killed with a gun. That makes it pretty obvious who did it, doesn’t it?”

The man looked up surprised. “You’re saying that the Thought Academy killed them? Thinkers don’t just kill people. They only shoot when they really have no other option.”

*I’ve heard that before,* Daran thought. *But I know what I heard and saw. At least, I thought I did.*

“Do you have any family that can help you out?” the man asked.

“Just a brother.”

“Ah, and where is he?”

Daran gave the man a glance which said as much as, *Why do you ask so many questions?* He grabbed a hammer and answered, in a sarcastic tone, “If you want to know, he has been kidnapped by the Free Minds yesterday.”

The man raised his eyebrows, not sure whether to believe Daran. “Sounds like a tough week. Do you have a plan to get him back?”

“I’ll probably break him out some time tonight,” he said, as he forcefully slammed the two bearings into each other. “That should do the trick.” He handed the man the result of his work.

“Thank you so much,” the man said, carefully examining the bearing. He then pulled a small pouch out of his pocket, grabbed some coins and handed them to Daran. “This should cover it.” He turned around and calmly walked out the door.

Daran looked at the coins in his hand. It was much more than he would have asked for. *This guy has money to spare*, he realized. It troubled him. *The only reason he would come to this exact workshop is if he would live nearby. But no one with that much money lives near enough. And, for a man whose wife is really ill, he’s not exactly in a hurry to get back home.*

*Something funny is going on here.*

A good night’s sleep was just what Daran needed. The fact that it was daytime didn’t change that one bit. When Daran woke up, he felt reborn. Sunset wouldn’t begin for another hour, but he figured it wouldn’t hurt to be early and set out for the forest.

When he arrived, Nilas was waiting for him. The bird gave Daran a look that clearly said, “Where were you?”

“Oh, right, I said I’d be back sooner,” Daran remembered.

Nilas made a long squeal, which Daran took as, “Eh, yeah you did!”

“Sorry, but something else popped up.” As they took off into the air, Daran told the gizmo about the two letters he had received. “So what do you think Kira has to answer for?”

The bird shrugged, as if to say, “You tell me.”

“According to Kira, Gendra wanted to have you, one way or another. That means that Gendra is in on it.”

Nilas nodded, encouraging Daran to continue.

“But Kira brought me to Gendra, so maybe she is in on it too. But if she is, then why would she save me?”

This time Nilas remained silent, as if he was wondering the exact same thing.

“Well, we’d better play it safe,” Daran decided. “Can you land on the mountain peak overlooking the field?”

Nilas made a soft landing on the rocks, after which Daran observed the surroundings. From their high point of view, they could see the forest stretch out in front of them. If anyone was coming, they would know.

Soon enough they saw Kira walking towards the clearing. Daran kept an eye out for people following her, but none were to be seen. When Kira reached the clearing, she walked to the middle, sat down and waited.

“Alright buddy, go pick her up,” Daran said.

Nilas glided down the mountain, made a soft landing next to Kira and bent over. Initially Kira looked surprised, but soon she got the meaning and climbed up on Nilas’ back. Luckily she had



flown before, so it didn't take long before the three were all together on the mountain top.

"You're very cautious all of a sudden," Kira noted.

Daran nodded. "I learned the hard way."

He looked at Kira. In her blue eyes, he saw a feeling of guilt. *There's far more at play here, he realized. It's time to find out exactly what.*

"I could ask you a hundred questions, but I think it will be easier if you just told me the story from the beginning."

Kira nodded and took a deep breath. "It all began a week ago. I heard stories about a ranger that was shot down. The Minds were looking for his gizmo, but after a day of searching they still hadn't found a trace. I wanted to help the search, but they wouldn't let me, so I searched on my own, at the most obvious place where a disposed machine would end up."

"The trash heap," Daran said, his eyes wide. "You were there the evening I found Nilas."

Kira nodded. "I saw you working on something, but when you saw me, you immediately left. I decided to follow you to your home. The next day, I brought some of the Minds to where I saw the gizmo, but it was already gone."

Daran got a suspicion where the story was going. A feeling of fear came up in him, but he still had to know. "So what did you do?"

Kira was silent for a moment. Then she softly said, "I told the Minds where you lived. They paid you a visit."

Although Daran had expected it, it still hurt badly. "So they weren't thinkers," he thought out loud.

Kira shook her head. "Garin and the others just dressed up."  
Still, there was one thing that didn't make sense. "But the gun ..."

"Garin got it as a present from a hunter who defected to the Free Minds," Kira explained. "He always keeps it with him."

Daran silently cursed the hunters. *If only there wasn't a Thought Academy.* Though it also made him wonder. *Kira caused this all. Shouldn't I blame her?* But as Daran looked into her sincere eyes, he knew why he didn't. *She just did what she thought was right. If I should blame someone, it should be the people that put her in this situation.*

"So what happened then?"

"When Garin and the others came home, Gendra wasn't happy. Not only did they end up empty-handed, but they killed two people. In the end they blamed me, because I gave them wrong information."

"But you were right!"

"Yes, but how could I convince them? They didn't trust me in the first place. The only way in which I could win their trust was to find the gizmo."

"That had to be easier said than done."

"I only had one lead. I knew you once came to that workshop. If I just waited long enough, you would return and I could follow you to the gizmo. At least, that was the plan."

"It didn't work so well?"

"Not really," Kira admitted. "I didn't see you at all during the first two days. I started doubting myself."

Daran smiled. "I left early and got back home late," he explained.

"It was only on the third day that I saw you enter. So I planned to follow you when you left."

"Except I never left the house again that day," Daran remembered. It was the day when he built Nilas' skin.

"On the fourth day the plan finally worked. I followed you to some old shed and then to the field down there. As soon as I saw Nilas fly, I ran home to get Garin and the others."

"So you convinced them that you were right all along."

Kira laughed. "Yeah, right," she said sarcastically. "They never thanked me at all. Not even a single appreciative nod! Everyone was just annoyed again that Garin had let you get away."

Daran remembered what had happened the next day. "On day five, you were there again, watching my house."

"It had become a habit. I don't even know why I went up that wall again. Probably to think, or something. But then I saw hunters flying over, and all of a sudden you came running towards me. You scared me to death there."

"And yet you helped me."

"At first, I didn't think about it. It just seemed like the right thing to do. Later on, I figured that if I brought you to the Minds, they would finally appreciate me – maybe even trust me."

"But they didn't," Daran knew.

Kira shook her head. "I was so annoyed. The next day I got the chance to help them out again, by stealing those thought cores, and it still wasn't enough!"

The frustration in her voice was evident. Daran noticed that her eyes started to glisten. He thought back to when they returned with the thought cores. *So that's why she wanted to hand them over herself. Why didn't I figure this out before?*

"There's one thing I don't understand," Daran confessed. "Why do you want their appreciation so badly?"

Kira sighed. "It's because they're all I have!"

"What happened to your family?"

Kira turned down her eyes. "My mother died when giving birth to me. I was raised by my father. He was a metal smith, and taught me almost everything he knew." She let out an almost inaudible sigh. "I always thought he was the strongest man in the world; that nothing could bring him down. Until he got ill. He tried everything to get well again – to be there for me. He even sold his smithy so he could buy treatments, but in the end it didn't help. In the end, when he knew he would die, leaving me nothing at all, he called for Anerio."

"Anerio was a friend of your father?" Daran asked.

"No, not really," Kira knew. "My father had saved Anerio's life a few years before, at an escalated robbery, so Anerio owed my father. My father called in the favor. Anerio took me in, but he didn't really care for me, and the others also mainly ignored me." Kira sighed. "Do you know what it's like, when there's no one around whom you can turn to?"

Daran turned down his eyes. Before last week, he didn't have a clue. Now he knew all too well.

"I always figured that, if I would be able to help them out, they would appreciate me. I guess I was wrong."

Daran looked Kira in the eyes. "That might not work for them, but it does work for me."

Kira's mood lightened visibly. "Thanks," she muttered softly.

"So where will you go now?" Daran asked.

"I guess back home," Kira said.

"You mean they still trust you? Or I mean, they haven't kicked you out? Even after you warned me?"

Kira smiled. "I told you, no one pays attention to me. They haven't got a clue that I warned you."

"But you pushed Garin away when he tried to shoot me!"

"I argued that we wanted Nilas in one piece. Gendra was so angry at Garin that she actually agreed with me for a change."

Daran couldn't resist laughing. Then he realized again that his problems were still far from over. "I don't suppose they told you anything about their backup plan?"

"What backup plan?" Kira asked surprised.

"Kira, they've got my brother!"

Kira gasped. "They wouldn't!" But as she looked Daran in the eyes, she realized she was wrong. She was silent for a moment, until she suddenly jumped up. "So that's what they were hiding from me. I know where they're holding him."

"That's great!" Daran called out enthusiastically, but then his mood darkened again. "I still can't break him out. Their note said the deadline is midnight. Before then, they'll be waiting for me, and after that it will be too late."

"Don't be a fool," Kira said. "They're not even sure you got their message. I know I wasn't sure either, a moment ago down in the forest. If you don't show up before midnight, they'll assume

you haven't found it yet. Knowing Garin, he'll even be too lazy to keep a proper lookout for the whole night."

Daran started thinking. *She's making a good point there. And besides, what choice do I have?*

"Fine. Just before sunrise I'll get him out of there."

## Chapter 13 – Choosing sides

Daran shivered in the cold night air as Nilas took off. The boy was dressed for breaking into a building and not for nighttime flying. He pressed his chest tighter against Nilas' back. Although the gizmo hardly produced any heat, at least clutching him closely reduced the amount of air blowing through his shirt.

In the past few hours Daran had tried to catch some sleep, but thanks to his messed-up sleeping rhythm that was a futile attempt. All the time he had just stared out of his window, watching and growing worried as the fog had slowly lifted. Because of the clear night sky, he had to risk flying over the city without a cover. With sunrise only an hour away, he counted on it that everyone was fast asleep.

The improved visibility at least helped them find their destination. Nilas glided downwards, into the street leading towards the Free Mind residence. On either side of the road, his wings were almost touching the buildings.

At the last moment, just before they would fly into the building at the end of the street, Nilas pitched up, coming to a complete stop exactly at the edge of the roof. The landing couldn't have been more silent.

"Good job buddy," Daran whispered, as he slid off Nilas' back. "I'll be back in about ten minutes. When someone sees you, give a soft beep and I'll be back as soon as possible."

Nilas nodded, after which Daran quietly ran towards the staircase. As Kira had promised, the door was left unlocked. Daran smiled. *I knew I could count on her.*

Slowly, trying not to make a sound, Daran descended the stairs and walked through the winding main hallway of the building. It was hard to see in the darkness, but Daran refrained from using his flashlight. It would be too noticeable.

He rounded another corner, but immediately doubled back. There was someone sitting in the hallway.

*Did he notice me?* Daran wondered. It felt like his heartbeat was loud enough to wake the whole building. He silently exhaled, forcing himself to calm down. When he listened closely, he could hear a gentle breathing. *Wait a second. I know that sound.* Carefully, he glanced around the corner, confirming his suspicion. It was Kira. She had fallen asleep.

Slowly Daran walked towards her. “Kira, wake up,” he silently whispered, not daring to speak any louder, but the girl didn’t move a muscle. Next, he gave her shoulder a gentle nod. This time she did stir, but her eyes remained shut.

*Well, it’s time for plan B,* Daran decided. He put his left hand on her mouth, and with his right hand he shook her back and forth. That had the desired effect. Startled, Kira tried to yell something, but Daran’s hand muffled the sound. Only then did she appear to realize who was waking her up. Carefully Daran lowered his hand.

“I fell asleep,” Kira whispered, more to herself than to Daran.

“Why were you waiting for me?” Daran asked.

“I thought you might need some help,” Kira smiled. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“I don’t want to involve you any more than I already have,” Daran reprimanded.



“And you think I don’t have a vote in that? Come on, let’s go.”

Kira led him further down the hallway and stopped next to a big brown door.

“He should be in here,” she said.

Daran grabbed the handle and tried to open the door, but it wouldn’t move. Kira gave him a look, saying as much as, “What did you expect? A big invitation sign?”

“Hey, you never know,” Daran replied. He grabbed the crowbar that was bound to his back.

“Good preparation,” Kira nodded admiringly.

Daran stepped forward to push the crowbar into the doorframe, but he hesitated. He gave the door a closer look. “This won’t work,” he concluded. “The door is sunken into the doorframe. I can’t get the crowbar around it to pry it open.”

“You could try the hinges?” Kira suggested.

“Didn’t bring the tools for that,” Daran said disappointedly.

“Knock it in then?”

“Won’t be easy either. The door opens outwards.”

Kira saw what it meant. “If you try it, you need to knock out the whole doorframe.”

“It looks pretty sturdy,” Daran commented. “I don’t think I can do that.”

“So what now? Come back later with some more aggressive tools?”

“That may be too late, and I’m not leaving without at least trying.”

“You’ll wake up half the building.”

"I know. So you should go back to your room before anyone finds out you're involved."

Kira shook her head. "Oh no, I'm staying."

Daran knew Kira long enough to expect that answer. He also knew he couldn't change her mind, so he gave her a thankful nod. "You better get ready to run then."

He stepped back a few steps, jumped forward and threw his shoulder into the door. It shuddered loudly but didn't budge.

"Try again," Kira encouraged.

For the second time Daran threw himself at the door. It still didn't give in, but next to the bang, a soft beep was audible. It came from Daran's watch.

"What was that?" Kira asked.

"A signal from Nilas. He's been spotted."

"Already? But how? No one wakes up that quickly."

Daran shrugged. "I have no idea. But someone's bound to be awake by now. We better get out of here."

Kira ran back down the hallway, but before Daran could follow her, he heard a sound from inside the room. It was the sound of a turning key. Then the door opened and Daran and Tobin stood eye to eye. It was hard to say who looked more surprised.

"What are *you* doing here?" Tobin asked.

"I'm freeing you. Let's get out of here."

"Freeing? What?"

It was clear Tobin didn't have a clue what his brother was talking about. Daran wondered why.

"You have been kidnapped by the Free Minds," he explained. "I'm busting you out."

“Kidnapped? I’m a guest here. I’ve asked them to help me find whoever killed our parents.”

Daran’s mouth dropped open wide. “You asked the Free Minds for help?” Then he realized it was exactly what he had done only two days ago. It was the worst decision he had made all week, and considering what had happened in that week, that meant something. “Tobin, the Free Minds killed our parents.”

“But you said that the Thought Academy – ”

“They didn’t. Not this. Now come on!”

“You lied to me!” Tobin yelled.

Daran was distracted by noise, somewhere down the hall. It sounded like someone running down the stairs. He hoped that his escape route hadn’t been cut off.

“I’ll explain later, but we have to go now!”

Tobin considered it only briefly. “No,” he then decided. “The Free Minds have so far been the only ones who stuck their necks out for me. I’m staying.”

Daran grabbed for Tobin’s wrist, but his brother pulled back his arm and turned around. Frustrated, Daran tried to follow him into the room, only to have Kira pull him back by his shoulders. The door was slammed shut right in front of his nose.

“Daran, there is no time,” she told him. “You have to get out of here. Now.”

“But Tobin – ”

“You can’t force him to come along.”

Daran doubted that for a second, but then he knew she was right. There was no way he would get out dragging a struggling

Tobin behind him. Still, he didn't like it. In frustration, he slammed his fist against the door. That helped.

He nodded to Kira. "Let's go."

Kira led the way, with Daran following a few steps behind. They rounded a corner, just when a door was swung open, right into Daran's face. He was knocked over and fell to the floor, causing the flashlight in his pocket to bruise his thigh.

Two men rushed out of the room to find out who they had knocked over. Their bodies were blocking the hallway, taking away Daran's escape route. Daran recognized one of them as Garin.

"What do we have here?" Garin said, standing such that Daran could not pass him by in the narrow hallway. "You came after all. Did you bring your machine?"

Daran smiled inwardly. *They have no idea what's going on. Well, I'm not going to tell them.* He got up and looked Garin in the eyes. Kira was standing behind the two men, but apparently they hadn't noticed her yet in the darkness.

"Yes, I do," Daran said. "He's on the roof, and I've got the communicator right here in my pocket." He waited a second to arouse their curiosity. Then he lifted the flashlight out of his pocket, directed it towards the two men, closed his eyes and turned it on.

The men, being blinded by the light, cursed loudly. Daran turned off the light and opened his eyes just in time to see how Kira pushed Garin aside. He roughly shouldered his way past the other guy and ran further down the hallway.

Daran had almost made it to the stairs, when he saw two other men there. Horrified, he recognized the uniforms. *Hunters*. He turned around, determined to find another way out of the building, but the other side of the hallway was already blocked off by Garin and his friend.

Confused, Daran looked left and right. Both sides were drawing their weapons.

“Now, slowly come this way, or we *will* shoot you,” one of the hunters said, pointing his gun straight at Daran.

“We just want you to help us,” Garin said on the other side. Daran noticed how Garin kept his gun fixed on the hunters.

*Which side should I choose?* Daran asked himself. *The hunters, who always try to shoot me, and who I thought killed my parents? Or the Free Minds, who are willing to do anything to get their hands on Nilas, including killing my parents?* Daran didn’t have a clue what to do. *How can you choose between two options that are both terrible?*

He thought about the last words that both sides said. The hunters would surely put a bullet in him, but with the Free Minds he might still have a chance to get away. Hesitantly, Daran made a few small steps towards Garin, who got a big grin on his face.

Then, behind the two hunters, another man appeared. He was wearing a thinker uniform, but instead of the red finishing, his colors were yellow. *He’s not a hunter*. The man placed his hands on the shoulders of the hunters and whispered something to them. Reluctantly, the hunters lowered their weapons.

Daran took another look at the thinker. Though there was hardly any light present in the hallway, he looked familiar. With expectant eyes, the man looked at Daran.

Daran couldn't explain why, but he suddenly felt sure about what he had to do. In the blink of an eye he took off towards the thinkers, wiping the grin off Garin's face. He knew that the Free Mind would open fire soon, so he leapt forward, sliding over the floor on his chest. A moment later, two pairs of hands dragged him around the corner, just when the sound of gunfire enveloped him.

Sixteen minutes later, in the light of the rising sun, Daran was standing in the street with his hands cuffed behind his back, watching how the Free Minds were escorted one by one out of the building and onto several waiting carts. Almost all of them were still in their sleeping outfits.

Daran had overheard that the hunters had surrounded the building only four minutes after he landed. Given that fact, he didn't regret his decision to choose for the thinkers. Still, with the cuffs around his wrists, he wasn't happy.

First, some people whom Daran didn't know were brought outside. Then he noticed Toryas and Gendra. Gendra was staring at the pavement with a resigned look on her face, but Toryas continually looked over his shoulder. A moment later Daran saw – and especially heard – why. A loudly wailing child was being carried outside by a hunter.

"What will happen to him?" Daran asked the hunter that was assigned to keep an eye on him.

"If both his parents are locked up, he will be treated as any other orphan. The meritocracy will provide him with food, shelter and education until he turns fourteen. After that he's on his own."

*Fourteen, Daran thought. That age is way too early to be on your own. Especially when you grew up without parents.*

Next, Kira came walking out. The fear was evident in her eyes. When she looked at Daran, the boy subtly nodded. *It's going to be alright. I'll make sure of that.* It seemed to comfort her somewhat.

Behind Kira, two hunters were dragging Garin out by his shoulders. His left leg had some rudimentary bandaging on it, probably to cover up a bullet wound, but the hunters weren't very gentle with him. It surprised Daran that Garin wasn't crying out in pain.

For a moment, it looked like no one else would come out anymore, but Daran knew the raid on the house hadn't been completed yet. Then the person whom Daran had been waiting for appeared.

Just like Daran, Tobin had his hands cuffed behind his back, but unlike Daran he wasn't happy about leaving the building. He struggled as much as possible, trying to stay inside. It eventually took three hunters to drag him out.

As the hunters dragged Tobin past Daran, the two brothers looked each other into the eyes. To Daran's horror, the stubborn look on Tobin's face turned into one he had never seen there before: a hateful sneer.

*This isn't right, Daran realized. I have to talk to him.* But the rangers had already dragged his brother away. He tried to follow them, but the hunter next to him pulled him back.

As Daran fell to the street on his knees, a feeling of despair crawled up in him. Silently he cursed himself. *I can't believe I didn't see what was happening all around me. First my parents. All*

*they did was care for me, while all I did was get angry at them. Then the murderers. All the time I thought they were hunters – I wanted them to be hunters – but I didn't see the signs that were right in front of me. And finally Tobin. My brother! Why didn't I see how he felt? Why didn't I expect him to do what he did? And when I finally knew what was going on, why was I still unable to explain it to him?*

Daran squeezed his eyes shut, trying to keep the tears from seeping out. At that moment he made a promise to himself. *Never will this happen to me again. Never will I miss the signs that tell me what is going on around me. I will understand what people think, what they want, and what they will do to get it. No matter how much effort it takes.*

Feeling more miserable than ever, but finding at least some comfort in his resolution, he let the hunter lead him onto one of the carts. As he sat down, his tears finally won the battle against his eyelids. Not able to bury his head in his arms, he put the ponderous lump on his knees instead. Then the cart started moving, slowly but steadily rolling towards the Thought Academy.



## Chapter 14 – A sealed fate

It was the first time in his life that he spent a night locked up, Daran realized. And even though his accommodation looked more like a regular bedroom than a prison cell, he was constantly aware that he couldn't leave. All the time, except for the rare moments when he managed to catch some sleep, he was staring at the door, waiting for the moment when someone would come and open it up. It was the moment he was looking forward to, but also the moment he was dreading. The only solace he had was that sooner or later that moment would come.

Sometime early in the afternoon, just when Daran was dozing off again, the door finally creaked open. Without saying a word, a hunter led him out of the building. When they emerged into the open air, Daran recognized where he was. *The student quarters*. In the distance he saw the building he had broken into a few days before. And it was exactly where they were heading. *Why did they put me in the student quarters?* he wondered.

Daran saw several groups of kids in black Academy uniforms sitting outside. One of them noticed Daran, pointed to him and said something to his friends. A moment later, the whole crowd was gossiping in whispered voices, with every single eye focused on Daran. *I'm so glad I'm not studying here*, Daran thought. He was relieved when they finally entered the building on the other side of the river.

Eventually the hunter opened a door to what appeared to be a study and gestured for Daran to go in. A thinker was sitting in one of the comfortable armchairs, but contrary to what Daran had

expected, his colors were red. Daran recognized him as the man he had tackled during his previous visit to the Academy.

“So we meet again,” the hunter said. He gestured for Daran to take the seat in front of him. “I am Arin, leader of the hunters, and I’m here to decide what we’re going to do with you.”

Daran yawned. After a terrible week and an even less comfortable night, he wasn’t in the mood for this kind of discussion. “Something tells me you already have something in mind.”

“Daran, you owned and used an advanced gizmo without authorization of the Thought Academy. You broke into the Thought Academy to steal thought cores and hand them to known terrorists. Hunters have the right to shoot someone if they find it’s the only way to prevent such crimes.”

“I’ve noticed,” Daran sarcastically said.

“Right now, you have a good chance to be locked up for the rest of your life, but there might be special circumstances that reduce this somewhat. I’m curious what your circumstances are.” He gave Daran a stern look. “Just don’t put together some story. We’ll know right away.”

Only then did it start to dawn on Daran what kind of trouble he was in. From the looks of it, he wouldn’t just spend one night in a cell, but every night from now on.

Then he remembered something which Magnus had told him. “Just explain everything as clearly as possible from your own point of view,” the old man had said. “If you only tell how *you* experienced events, people can never claim that you’re wrong.” It

should have been applied to Daran's parents, but although that was now impossible, Daran hadn't forgotten the advice.

So Daran told Arin the whole story of how he experienced the previous week. How it started when he found Nilas, how he witnessed the murder of his parents, how he learned to fly on Nilas, how he met Kira, how the Free Minds convinced him to break into the Thought Academy, how they then kidnapped Tobin and how he eventually failed to free his brother. Everything. All the time, Arin was simply listening and nodding.

When Daran was finally finished, Arin stood up. "I think there's someone else who wants to meet you." He left to an adjoining room and another thinker walked in. This thinker was dressed in yellow and Daran recognized him all too well. It was the man he had seen not only the night before at the Free Minds, but also the morning before in his own workshop. And it was the person whom Daran had expected to find in this room in the first place.

"It's the third time we meet, and I still haven't introduced myself," he said. "I'm Quenton, head of the scholars here at the Thought Academy."

The latter part surprised Daran. *First the leader of the hunters and now the head of the scholars. I'm starting to feel important.* But instead of showing his surprise, he simply smiled and said, "I hope your wife is getting well?"

Quenton smiled back. "My wife is just as non-existent as she was yesterday, but I thank you for asking anyway."

"The whole affair with the bearing?" Daran asked.

"Just a test. And a way of getting acquainted."

“You have funny ways of getting acquainted then,” Daran commented. “Where I’m from, we just shake hands.” He offered his hand to Quenton and the scholar leader shook it.

“Daran, I’ll get straight to the point. We need your help. And if you help us out, we’ll annul a part of your punishment.”

*So that’s what this is about,* Daran realized. *They brought the mean Arin in to frighten me with scary stories of lifelong prison sentences, but every time I cooperate, they bring in kind Quenton, who charms me with stories of reduced punishments. In this way, they’re trying to teach me to help them out. No doubt, if I refuse to help them, Arin will be back before I can blink my eyes.*

*Luckily I was already planning to help them anyway.* “Alright, what do you need me to do?”

“Your gizmo belonged to a thinker called Nolan,” Quenton explained. “Nolan used to be the leader of the rangers, but a week ago he suddenly disappeared without a trace.”

Daran raised his eyebrows. *Nilas used to belong to the ranger leader. Wow.* But he understood what Quenton meant. “You’re wondering what I know about all of this.”

Quenton nodded. “Did you see anything that could tell us something about Nolan’s fate?”

Daran thought for a moment, but then shook his head. “Nilas was pretty badly damaged. Even if I had searched for the cause of the crash, I don’t know if I could have found it. And I didn’t see a body either.”

Quenton lowered his gaze in disappointment. “Of course it is possible that the body has landed somewhere else. Can you show us where you found Nilas?”

And so it happened that Daran led a group of thinkers, accompanied by a whole assortment of gizmos, to the trash heap. It felt weird, and the boy was secretly glad that they didn't run into anyone he knew.

"This is where I found him," he said when they arrived at the place where last week's adventure had all begun.

Quenton gave some orders and immediately everyone spread out. Less than four minutes later someone already shouted, "We found something!"

"You wait here," Quenton said to Daran as he and Arin walked over.

From a distance, Daran heard Arin ask, "What have you got?"

"A body, mostly buried under trash," one of the hunters replied. "His face is pretty much torn apart, so we can't recognize him, but he is wearing the remains of a ranger uniform. I think it's safe to assume it is Nolan."

"Unless someone wants us to believe it's him," Arin suggested. "From what I've heard, thinker uniforms aren't that hard to come by."

"There's an easy way to find out," Quenton knew. He bent down for a moment, stood up again and showed the others something in his hand. "Nolan once told me that this ring was unique and very important to him. He'd never lose it. I'm sorry, but this has to be Nolan."

Arin nodded. He turned around towards the group of thinkers that by now had formed a semicircle around them. "Today we found that one of our own has fallen. As a ranger, Nolan helped

countless of people. As a ranger leader, he did even more for the inhabitants of this country. He was an inspiration for many of us and he will live on in our thoughts. We will continue to think of him.”

Then everyone, including Daran, lowered his head and was silent for a moment, lost in remembrance.

When they returned to the Academy, Quenton took Daran to the roof of the education building. From there, they had a view over a big part of Tarine.

“I always loved coming here as a student,” Quenton said. “For me, it wasn’t only a place to think. It also showed me what I was thinking for.”

*My place to think was the trash heap*, Daran thought. *Not exactly as inspiring as this*. Still, he remained silent as he leaned against the railing, looking out over the city.

“In your story, you told how easily the Free Minds convinced you to help them. What did they tell you?”

“They explained the political system of Kantara,” Daran said. “You know, how the cabinet chooses the merit council, and the merit council chooses the cabinet. So indirectly, the cabinet chooses its own successors.”

“And you’re opposed to that.”

“Yes!” Daran exclaimed, a bit louder than even he anticipated. “I mean, I don’t know much about politics, but shouldn’t people have a vote in how they are governed?”

Quenton smiled. "That question has been asked many times. There is no evident answer, but I can give you my point of view on it. We want to have the best people ruling our country, right?"

Daran nodded. "Yes, that seems to make sense."

"And who would be more qualified to determine who's good at ruling a country? Six people that have been specifically chosen and trained for it, or random people from the population who, like you, don't know much about politics?"

Daran raised an eyebrow. "If the ministers only need to know how to make a country profitable, then you're right. But I believe it also matters what the population wants and needs to be happy. Do the ministers know that?"

"They partly do," Quenton knew, "but maybe not enough. Do you think that letting the people choose their own rulers would fix that?"

"I think it will," Daran nodded. "Ministers would have to know what the people want to get elected."

"These elected ministers might know what the people want," Quenton said, "but do they also know how to rule a country? Do they know the intricate workings of economies to actually give the people the things they need as well?"

Daran saw his point. "Maybe not. So we need a system that selects rulers that know very well what the people want, as well as understand how a country works."

"Indeed, though that does raise some problems. The first one is that such people are very rare. The second one is that there is no easy way in which we can find them."

“Can’t we combine the idea of a merit council with the idea of elections?”

“I fear that such a system will be too complicated,” Quenton admitted. “There will always be loopholes. But if you think of a system without any, then I’m all ears.”

Daran smiled. *That shouldn’t be so hard.* Yet every time he thought of something, there was always a flaw in his plan. After a long minute, he gave up and let his thoughts drift to other matters.

“What will happen to Tobin?”

“Your brother? If your story is true, then he hasn’t done anything against the law. He’ll soon be free to go.”

“Can I talk to him before then?” Daran asked.

Quenton nodded. “I’m sure that can be arranged.”

“And what about Kira?”

“That girl? You like her, don’t you?”

“She saved my life.”

“She also broke into the Thought Academy. But from what I’ve heard, the Minds put quite some pressure on her. She’ll probably get off easy.”

“And the other Free Minds?”

“That depends on a lot of things, like what exactly they’ve done. We’re still busy with the interrogations.”

“But they will all be locked away for some time?”

“Quite probably, yes,” Quenton nodded. He looked at Daran. “You sound worried?”

Daran shook his head. “No, it’s just hard to believe. I’ve always been told that the Free Minds are all bad people. I envisioned them as scary men with mean faces.” Out of embarrassment, he let out



a soft laugh. “I never thought that they would be people with families, just like the one I had.”

Quenton put a hand on Daran’s shoulder. “Always remember: all people are similar. Every person believes that their actions are right and just. The only things we differ in are our points of view and our morals. Those differences are the only reasons we have conflicts.”

Daran realized the thinker was right. *People aren’t as different as we sometimes try to convince ourselves. All we need to do is take the trouble of understanding their points of view.*

“And for how many years will you lock me up?”

Quenton let out a brief laugh. “We’re still not sure whether we’ll even lock you up.”

Daran looked at him with wide eyes. *Will this mean I might not spend countless nights in that cell?* “But Arin said that the punishment for owning a gizmo and such was, well, ...” He had trouble putting into words what he feared.

“There’s something you should know. Here in Kantara, we don’t punish people based only on what they did. That would be like taking revenge, and we are above being vengeful. No, our goal of punishment is twofold. Most importantly, we want to prevent the perpetrator from repeating his crimes. But we also want to give the right message to others who might try to do something similar in the future. A punishment is only just when it reaches these two goals with a minimum amount of side-effects.”

“How does that apply to me? You want to prevent me from returning to the Free Minds?”

“A couple of minutes ago I was considering it, but now I know that’s not necessary anymore. You’re too smart and way too stubborn to be convinced by their stories again.”

Daran couldn’t resist laughing. “I’ll just take that as a compliment. But what about that rule against owning a gizmo? I doubt I’ll ever spontaneously find another gizmo again, but can I keep Nilas?”

“People outside of the Thought Academy are not allowed to have gizmos,” Quenton replied with a stern voice. “We will not make an exception for you.”

But Daran sensed there was something that Quenton was not telling him. It was because Quenton had put a very mild emphasis on his first two words. *Why would he do that?* Then Daran knew. “You’re trying to recruit me,” he blurted out.

It caught Quenton off-guard. “I wasn’t ... How did you ... Well, yes, I was thinking of offering you a place as a student at the Thought Academy. I mean, I think you know how to deal with gizmos, and apparently you’re pretty good at guessing people’s thoughts as well. I suppose you qualify.”

“But I’m not from any rich family!”

“Considering the circumstances, I’ve convinced the other leaders to make an exception.”

To Daran it sounded like this had taken quite some effort. But was this also what he wanted? *I would become a thinker myself.* He envisioned himself being a hunter and walking through the marketplace, with people all around being afraid of him. Then he shook his head. *There is no way I’m going to be a hunter.*

He turned to Quenton to disappoint him, when he realized Quenton was a thinker too. *I don't have to be a hunter.* He thought back to the fire the other day. *That day, I did what the rangers were supposed to do. I can stay here and show everyone how we can use gizmos to really help people.*

With his mind made up, he nodded to Quenton. "I'll do my best."

With a big smile, Quenton said, "Welcome to the Thought Academy then."

"But what about that second part of your punishment rule?" Daran still wondered. "What message does this give to others?"

"Simple," Quenton said. "If someone ever winds up in the same situation as you were in and hears your story, then he will know right away that there are not terrible punishments that await him here at the Thought Academy. Only opportunities."

Daran couldn't help laughing. *Opportunities? We'll see.*

## Chapter 15 – A fresh start

Daran looked at himself in the mirror. It felt strange to see his head sticking out of a thinker outfit. With his black student uniform he didn't look as official as the real thinkers, but it came awfully close. *It will take some time for me to get used to this.*

He left the toilet cubicle and found Quenton waiting for him. "Everything has been set up," the thinker said. "You can speak with Tobin now."

Daran had requested a meeting with his brother. To his surprise, he turned out to be the only one who had been locked up in a regular bedroom. The rest had simply been tossed into the cells of the main Academy building. Which was exactly where he was now.

"Why didn't you put me with the others?" Daran asked.

"I wanted to put your brother in a student room too," Quenton explained, "but I could only convince the other leaders about you."

"But ... why?" Daran asked once more.

"Because people, and especially younger people, have the amazing capability of living up to expectations. Expect the most and they will try their hardest, but treat them like a criminal and they will once more make sure you're proven right."

Intrigued, Daran looked at the thinker, wondering where he was going with this.

"The others only see you as a problem. I wanted to prevent them being right."

"And what about Tobin?" Daran asked concerned.

Powerless, Quenton shrugged. "I couldn't help him. So that's up to you now."

The thinker opened the door to a small interrogation room and Daran entered. The only objects he found in the room were a table and two chairs. On one of the chairs sat Tobin, his head lying on his arms. When he heard Daran enter, he looked up.

Daran was surprised by how tired Tobin looked. *His night must have been much worse than mine.* He was also afraid of the way Tobin looked at his new outfit.

"So you're one of them now," his brother said contemptuously. "How did you do that?"

"It's a long story," Daran explained as he sat down.

"It sounds like one more thing you didn't tell me. Well, I'm all ears."

Daran took a deep breath. This wasn't going to be easy. "A week ago I found a broken gizmo on the trash heap. I hid it and started to fix it so it could fly again."

"So that's what you were so busy with," Tobin said. "But wait a second. That order you brought in, it involved wing parts. Was that for your machine? Where did you get the money from?"

"I already had the money."

Tobin slammed his hands on the table and bent forward, looking Daran straight in the eyes. "You had money and you didn't tell me? All the time when I was worried sick? Why?!"

Daran didn't have an answer for that. All he could do was stare down at the table.

Finally Tobin broke the silence. "So why did you come and 'break me out' last night?"

That was a question which Daran did know how to answer. “Somehow the Free Minds found out I had a gizmo and they would do anything to get it. When I came back home that day, they left me a message that they had kidnapped you and wanted to trade you for the gizmo. You were nowhere to be found, so I believed them.”

“You weren’t supposed to be home that day!”

“Travelling goes much faster when you can fly.”

Then Tobin appeared to realize something. “When did they find out you had a gizmo?”

“Right after I found it.”

“But the burglary – they searched the entire house. They weren’t looking for valuables. They were looking for your pet project!”

“I didn’t know that’s what they were after! They didn’t say!”

“Didn’t say? Wait, you were there?!”

“Yes, I was hiding, but – ”

“You could have saved them!”

“No. Tobin – ”

“You could have done something!”

“I was afraid!”

Tobin stood up and looked his brother in the eyes with more scorn than Daran had ever seen anywhere. Then, in a loud voice, he slowly said, “Our parents were killed because of you. And when they needed you most, you didn’t even help them.”

“No – ”

“I never want to see you again.”

“Tobin – ”

“Get out!”

These last words were so loud that they blew Daran’s last bit of composure away. Not knowing what to do next, he turned around and, as his last few remaining tears ran down his cheeks, he fled out of the room.

Only a good night’s rest was able to bring Daran’s mood somewhat back to normal. So the next morning he finally went to look for Kira. He found her at one of the gates, just as she was heading out.

“Kira!” he called after her.

“Daran, look at you,” she said admiringly as she examined his new outfit. “You’re going to become a thinker!”

Daran shrugged defensively. “It was the only way they would let me keep Nilas.” He then looked at Kira. It appeared she was leaving the Academy empty-handed. “What about you?”

“They let me off easy,” Kira told him. “I have to come back once a week to help them out with some nasty jobs, but that’s all.”

“That’s alright then,” Daran nodded. “Where are you going now?”

Kira turned down her eyes. “I don’t know,” she softly murmured. “I lost my home yesterday. I haven’t really thought about a solution yet.”

Daran raised an eyebrow. “You were just planning to wander around the city aimlessly, hoping to run into something?”

“I guess so,” Kira shrugged.

Daran then shook his head. “Come with me,” he said as he walked out the gate.

“Where are we going?” Kira curiously asked.

“You’ll see,” Daran replied with a knowing smile.

Some time later, they arrived in a street where a house had burned down. A lot of people were now working on the site, partly to clear the rubble away, but at the front of the parcel the construction of a new house had already begun.

“When did this happen?” Kira wondered.

“On the night we met,” Daran told her.

“And they’re already rebuilding?” she asked with surprise in her voice.

Daran nodded. “Even when everything in your life has been burned down, life itself still goes on. You can give up hope and wait until something positive happens to cross your path. Or you can set out and chase those positive things yourself.”

“You’re saying I should go find a job and a place to live? That’s easy to say when these things have already happened to cross your path.”

“I’m saying you should give it a try. The best thing that can happen is that you find something. The worst thing that can happen is that you learn something.”

Kira thought about it with a look on her face that clearly said, *That’s still easier said than done.*

“Can you wait here for a second?” Daran asked. He walked over to a man that was overlooking the construction site. The man initially looked puzzled when he saw Daran coming, but then he recognized the new thought student.

“I thought you weren’t with the Thought Academy?” he said, looking at Daran’s uniform.



Daran laughed. "I wasn't. I just enrolled." He looked at the construction site. "I see you're eager to get the business up and running again?"

"The Academy needs the stuff that I produce, so they put some pressure behind it. In fact, they paid for it. And I can't wait to have my own house again, so I don't mind."

"Did any of your tools and machinery survive the fire?"

The man shook his head in disappointment. "No, and that's what worries me. It is very specific equipment, not readily available anywhere, so it has to be handmade. I still need to find a workshop that can do that."

Daran got a confident smile on his face. "Can I recommend one?"

"Where are we going next?" Kira asked as they set out again.

"Home," was all Daran said.

"The Thought Academy?"

"No, the workshop."

"You're visiting Tobin?"

"Not really. He doesn't want to see me anymore. Ever." Daran told Kira what had happened the day before.

"I'm sorry," Kira said compassionately. "But then why do you still call it home?"

Daran didn't answer that question. He just smiled. *I didn't call it my home.*

"Okay then," Kira ended the silence. "What are we going to do there?"

"You are going to apply for a job."

“What?!” Kira exclaimed. “But – I can’t do that!”

“Why not?” Daran replied with a teasing laugh. “Your father taught you the basics of working with metals. Just ask for an apprenticeship and my brother will teach you the rest. He may be young, but he’s very adept.”

“Why would he take me on?” Kira wondered, trying to find excuses.

“The workshop isn’t meant to be operated by a single person. There are a lot of things he simply can’t do on his own. Trust me. He needs you more than you can know. Just do me one favor.”

“Which is ... ”

“Don’t tell him you know me. Ever. Knowing Tobin’s stubbornness, he’ll kick you out right away.”

“Yeah, that trait runs in the family. Alright, I’ll give it a try.”

While Kira confidently entered the workshop, Daran waited outside. Less than a minute later she came out again, looking disgruntled.

“He didn’t even consider it!” she told Daran with a frustrated look on her face. “He just said he didn’t have enough work.”

“I thought that might happen,” Daran said. “Come on. I know a good way to calm you down a bit.”

They walked over to the small alley opposite to the house. Kira showed him how to climb the wall, after which Daran followed her. Then they just sat there, watching the workshop. For fun, Daran started testing Kira’s metalworking knowledge. He was impressed by how much she still knew.

“Hey, wait a second,” Kira suddenly said as a man entered the workshop. “Isn’t that the guy you talked to at the construction site?”

“Sorry, I didn’t look,” Daran apologized. They waited until the man came out again. Then he smiled. “Yes, that’s him.”

“What a coincidence,” Kira thought. “What do you think he was doing in there?”

“He was probably busy rebuilding his life. And you should do the same. I think you should give it another try.”

Kira looked at Daran like he had gone mad. “But he already turned me down!”

“Then start negotiating. You don’t need money, just food and shelter. Ask him if you can move in, instead of getting paid. He has plenty of living space, so you’ll both be better off.”

Kira sighed. “Alright, I’ll give it another try. But I tell you, it won’t work.” She jumped off the wall and reluctantly entered the workshop.

Daran waited for a few minutes. Then he also jumped off the wall and walked to the workshop. Tobin already noticed him before he even stepped through the door.

“What are *you* doing here?” he asked. “Didn’t I say – ”

“Don’t worry,” Daran interrupted him. “I’m just picking up my stuff. Then I’ll be gone.” He glanced at Kira. “Who’s your new friend?”

“That’s Kira. She’s my new apprentice. I think I’m going to put her in your room.”

“Fine by me,” Daran said, ending the conversation. He started heading to the living section of the building. As he walked past

Kira, he said “Nice to meet you” and gave her a wink. Then he continued upstairs to pack.

Not much later, three big bags were all packed up and lying downstairs. Tobin was waiting for Daran to pick them up and leave.

“It’s too much to carry in one go,” Daran said as he grabbed one bag with each of his hands. “I’ll need to return for the last one.”

“No need,” Tobin said, eager to get rid of his brother. “Kira, can you help him carry his stuff wherever he needs to go?”

“Sure,” Kira nodded as she picked up the last bag. They then headed out.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the workshop, Daran said, “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Kira let out a brief laugh. “It was so weird. It was like his whole mood had changed. As soon as I walked in again, he didn’t know how quickly he needed to hire me. He’s giving me a place to live, regular meals and still a decent salary. And I get to become a metal smith!” She gave Daran a thankful glance. “I’m so glad you insisted that I’d try again. So thank you.”

“You’re very much welcome,” Daran said with a suspiciously big grin on his face.

## Epilogue – Logical discoveries

“Daran!” Quenton called after the boy as he crossed the bridge over the Seldon river. Daran waited for the scholar to catch up. “I was looking for you. Are you going somewhere?”

“I’m heading for the aviary, to go out for a flight with Nilas. Is something wrong?”

“No, I just wanted to talk. I’ll walk with you.”

“Sure,” Daran nodded, as they continued to the education district.

“First of all, I wanted to let you know that you will start your studies here the day after tomorrow. Your inauguration ceremony will be tomorrow afternoon.”

“Ceremony? What for?” Daran wondered.

“It’s a small ceremony which every new student gets to officially welcome him to the Thought Academy, and to give him his first gizmo.”

“But I already have one,” Daran noted.

“Yes, you’re a bit of a special case,” Quenton confessed. “We’re discussing what to do with it, but there still are a few disagreements.”

“You’ve had a lot of those recently. The other leaders didn’t want to take me on as a student, did they? They were hoping I would get shot.”

“How did you know ...” Quenton started to task, but then he realized the answer. “You know, sometimes you think too much about things.”

Daran couldn't resist laughing. "I tend to disagree on that. I'm going to be a thinker, right?"

Now it was Quenton's turn to laugh.

"What I don't get is why you did not hope I'd get killed. You even knew where I lived. You could have easily arrested me, which would have solved your whole problem as well."

"Now I tend to disagree. You never solve a problem by only battling symptoms."

*I was a symptom?* Daran wondered. *Of what?* But then he figured it out. "You wanted to know why someone like me would join the Free Minds in the first place."

"Yes. Instead of fighting the Free Minds, we can then fight the problems which motivate people to join them. There's no use arresting a whole group of Free Minds, when another group is eager to take their place."

Daran nodded. *That makes sense.* "By the way, did you get back any of the thought cores that I stole?"

Quenton shook his head. "We've searched the whole house, but the cores weren't there. They must have passed them on to another Free Minds group right away. Considering the way the Minds are organized, we'll never find them again. I think the first time we'll see those cores again is inside gizmos during one of their strikes."

*Then I'll be there to foil those strikes and take those cores back,* Daran decided. "And did you get any wiser on what happened to Nolan?"

Quenton shrugged. "I only know that the Free Minds are behind it."

Daran looked up, surprised. "How do you know that?"

"Now that's a complicated story," Quenton said with a proud smile on his face. "Last week I was surprised when news about Nolan's disappearance hadn't reached the public. I knew that there were people in the Thought Academy that were connected to the Free Minds. It's a truth I initially didn't admit to myself, but when I did, I realized that the Free Minds had to know about Nolan's disappearance."

Daran saw what he was getting at. "And because they didn't leak the news to the public, you knew they also wanted to keep it a secret."

"Exactly. And that didn't make sense. The Free Minds want the population to doubt the thinkers, and what is a better way to spread doubts than to have rumors about a missing ranger leader?"

"But why did they want to keep it a secret?"

"Something had to be more important than spreading doubt. If the news would spread, people that had seen something might get the idea to inform the Thought Academy. We then might even start to search for Nolan in the right place. The Minds knew roughly where Nolan had gone down and they didn't want to lose that lead."

Daran nodded. "They really wanted that thought core badly."

"What I still don't know is how they managed to take Nolan out in mid-air. Either they have advanced weapons we know nothing about, flying gizmos we know nothing about, or help from thinkers we know nothing about. Either one is a big cause for concern."

They then arrived at the aviary, which was at the top of the hunter's quarters. Daran walked over to the big cote that had been assigned to Nilas. His gizmo greeted him with an enthusiastic squeal. Then, in one swift motion, Daran climbed on Nilas' back.

"There's still one last important thing I want to discuss with you," Quenton told him before the two took off. "Normally gizmos like Nilas only listen to their thinker. It is hard and takes time to win the trust of someone else's gizmo. Between close family it occasionally happens spontaneously, but ... "

From Quenton's pause, Daran realized something sensitive had to be coming up. He already mentally braced himself as he asked, "What did you find?"

"I doubt anyone at the Academy knows this, but Nolan had an older brother. His name was Leroy. Nolan was your uncle."

Daran's mouth dropped open wide in astonishment. Could it be? Nolan his uncle?

But then he thought back about everything that had happened. He thought about Nolan, apparently being close family. He thought about the big differences between Tobin and him, not only in behavior, but also in looks. And he thought about the last things Leroy and Mikai had said before they died.

"No, he wasn't my uncle," Daran finally concluded.

This surprised Quenton. He looked up at Daran with a questioning look on his face.

"He wasn't my uncle. He was my father."

Now Quenton was really astonished. "How do you know?"

"I can't tell. I just know."



In truth, Daran wasn't fully certain about it, but he couldn't be sure about Leroy and Mikai being his parents either. He simply knew that the theory of Nolan being his father explained things which the other theory could not. That was why he chose to believe it.

"In that case, I think you deserve to have this," Quenton said. He pulled a ring out of his pocket, reached up and handed it to Daran. "This used to be –"

"I know," Daran said, remembering the scene at the trash heap. He looked at the ring admiringly. It was a plain ring, but it glinted in a way Daran had never seen before. With pride, he put it on his finger.

There was still one important question left, and both of them seemed to wonder it at the same time.

"But then who is –" Quenton started.

Daran shook his head. "I have no idea. But I'll be here for a while. There will be plenty of time to find out."

"I hope you find her," Quenton said. "And if you need any help, then I'll be there."

"Thanks," Daran nodded. He then urged Nilas forward and took off into a new part of his life.