


# Naineshos

An Isrogant story

Heero Miketta

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# Naineshos

*Heero Miketta*

Seven hard days he had slaved without pause to earn his passage aboard the four-sailer. A journey he had pushed ahead of himself for months before he finally gathered his courage and set out.

Now he allowed himself a rest. For the crew of the longship the last miles of the voyage meant a particular effort, for the sails were already furled and it was down to the oars. But Pridias had no rowing bench of his own. As a short-term guest on board he enjoyed the privilege of standing in the bow.

He was happy. True, fear and uncertainty still bored away deep inside him, his constant companions these last months; no, the constant companions of his whole life, since his parents had died, and more than ever since he had joined the navy of Ephedis. And yet: euphoria was washing through his veins now, he felt free and strong, as if he could leap from the longship's deck and swim the last miles.

He probably could, at that. The wind had dropped, the sea lay at peace, and Pridias was an excellent swimmer. One of the best. A war-swimmer of the navy these past two years, and before that a fisherman and pearl-diver, raised on the shores of 'the Fist', as the northernmost bay within the Tjella' Islands was called. He was quite certain he could swim from here to Naineshos.

Instead he stood where he was and savoured the feeling that the door stood open for him, the door through which he would step into a new part of his life. He breathed the scent of the sea and watched the legendary city rise before him.

'Quite a sight, eh, lad?' Pridias looked round; he had not expected anyone besides himself to be excused from the rowing. To his surprise it was Mordred, the four-sailer's captain, ordinarily a growling old sea-dog who had said little to his passenger the whole crossing. His grey hair stood up in every direction, which gave him a chaotic look, underlined by his wild bush of a beard, unkempt and shaggy. Curiously, he set great store by order all the same, and by hierarchy above all, which was why Pridias truly could not understand that the captain was now talking to him — to him, who ranked below the ship's boy.

To be on the safe side he merely nodded and said nothing.

The captain talked on, unimpressed. 'Wait, it gets better yet. The Torch of Nainos is hidden behind that headland up ahead, but a few oar-strokes more and we'll see her in all her glory.' He tucked his hands into his broad belt, which made him look as if he were holding his fat paunch in place.

Pridias looked at the city lying ahead of him — bigger than anything he had yet seen on the Tjella' Islands. The proud free cities of the islands rarely held more than ten or twenty thousand inhabitants, and every polis kept an eager tally; after all, only free men and women born within

the polis had the right to vote. Pridias had never been allowed to cast a vote. He had been born not in a polis but in a small fishing village, and to become a full citizen of Ephedis he would have had to serve another ten years in the navy.

But by the look of things, he would not be spending his future in one of the free cities. The people of Naineshos had no vote at all. The city spreading along the shore before his eyes was no polis. It did not even have a government. It was a wild growth, about which the maddest stories were told all over the Tjella' Islands, perhaps even on the distant continent of Isrogant. A place where every man wrote his own law, because the Naineshi, under whose watch the city stood, cared only for what happened beneath the surface of the water.

Pridias had never met a Naineshi, though in the navy it would only have been a matter of time: the water-breathers had settled the seas all around the Tjella' Islands and had established themselves in the inner bays of the islands too, if their word could be trusted. Many of the navy's water-warriors told of sighting Naineshi settlements on their dives, or at least the outskirts of them.

He was quite certain that in Naineshos he would come into contact with them sooner or later. That was an exciting thought — as was the idea that at this very moment, beneath the ship's hull, in the depths of the sea, another city lay, a twin of the great human settlement on land, peopled by beings who needed no air to breathe. What might that city look like? Did the Naineshi have

streets, were there houses, did they build fences to mark themselves off from one another?

Mordred broke into his daydreams. 'Looks big, the city, from here,' he said. 'But this, this is only where the poor and the outcasts live. Not many grand buildings this side, looks like an anthill.' He snorted and rubbed a hand across his thoroughly hairy face. 'Nothing, that's what this side of Naineshos is. A disgrace it's the first thing you see coming in, but wait. Just you wait, lad.' Pridias still said nothing, only nodded and did as he was told.

The four-sailer ploughed through the sea, choppier this close to the coast, the rush of the waves broken by the crying of gulls and the dull beat of the drum with which the mate set the stroke. None of the rowers had breath to spare for talk, and so even the usual jokes and coarse banter fell away.

The headland that had blocked the view of the true city fell away to starboard, and suddenly the Torch of Nainos swung into sight. At first Pridias saw only smoke rising behind the crest of the headland, then came the fire — a colossal column of flame, greater than anything he had ever seen — and finally the fire platform itself. It had to be enormous, at least it looked so from this distance, but that was not the astonishing part. The further the ship advanced, the clearer it became at what height the platform stood. As the ship drew closer the Torch seemed to grow towards the infinite, a gigantic lighthouse that looked as though someone had cast it from steel rather than piled it up from stones.

'There she's, the Torch,' the captain observed, still holding his belly while the sea wind ruffled his hair. 'Makes you feel small. Reverent. They say it was Dwarf magic that made the Torch out of a mountain that once stood in its place.' Snorting, he added: 'You want to believe it, looking at the monster.'

Now Pridias did risk a question. 'How is it the fire burns by day?'

'They keep it burning always. Day and night.' Mordred squinted up at it. 'No idea where they get the fuel. You see them all over the city.' He snorted again. 'It's the only thing in Naineshos that comes anywhere near a state power, the only thing reliably ordered.'

There was something in the old rough-neck's voice that made Pridias shiver. Could it be that even Captain Mordred was afraid of the streets of Naineshos? It was not a pleasant thought, and it put a solid dent in his elation.

He looked past the Torch into the mouth of Nainos Bay. Now he understood what the captain had meant when he said the settlements on the headland had nothing in common with the true city of Naineshos. They were merely buildings slapped down, dwellings and warehouses, a few squares between them, here and there a temple. But here lay the true city.

The entrance to the bay was flanked on one side by the Torch, on the other by a huge temple structure that Pridias could not assign to any god he knew. Torch and temple alike were crowded close by the buildings of the city, and the same went for the bay itself. The *entire* bay,

not merely its shores. Pridias's mouth fell open at the sight of the massive buildings contesting every scrap of space with no recognisable order, and the countless smaller houses squeezed in between.

Mordred laughed. 'Aye, that's how they all gawp,' he grunted. 'This is no decent polis such as we're used to, with clear order, a temple and a stronghold, maybe a harbour below. I tell you, lad, I've seen big and untidy cities on the continent, but Naineshos is something apart.'

'How many...' Pridias began, then swallowed first and asked again: 'How many people live here?'

Mordred made a dismissive gesture. 'Who's to know? There's no census here, there's only disorder and danger. Believe me, in these streets they die like flies. And still there are more people every year.'

Pridias stared again at the city and the unbelievable disorder its buildings radiated. He could make out movement, everywhere, and in the bay he saw ships. Great ships among them, of foreign build such as he had never seen at the Tjella' Islands, but also the familiar two- and four-sailers, the thirty- and fifty-oar vessels of the free cities. Between them went rowing boats and shallops, and along the shores he saw houseboats, flat constructions that could surely never manage a long passage.

'Even if you could count the people in Naineshos,' Mordred stared into the bay, and there was something hostile in his gaze, 'you still wouldn't know how many souls live there. You'd be missing the non-humans. There

are many beings in the city that aren't human, whatever else they may be. And the Naineshi, of course.'

Pridias nodded again. What had he let himself in for?

'It'll be tricky manoeuvring in there,' Mordred said. 'See how built-over it all is? Full of islands, big and small, and they've put houses on the smallest rocks and strung the lot together with bridges.'

Pridias saw it indeed. Vast towers stood on the islands, small houses, temples, warehouses, and everywhere there were moorings in place of a decent, well-ordered harbour. Between it all stretched bridges — low ones built of stone, but also great and mighty ones between the larger islands.

Many even ran from house to house, often at dizzying heights, and with astonishment he saw that some of them were not solid at all but hanging bridges of wooden slats joined by ropes.

On all of them traffic bustled. People on foot, with carts, even riders and carriages. Everyone seemed to know where they were going. Pridias could not imagine anyone finding their way in this labyrinth.

Mordred pointed straight into the chaos. 'Over there is where we'll berth, at the counting-house of the trading house Gooregan. It's one of the safer spots; the Gooregans keep an effective guard, and their Ciena Quay is well tended.' He looked the young man beside him over. 'So, lad. Do you know yet where you'll go from there?'

Pridias had believed he knew. Now he was no longer sure. 'I was told to come to Vrenjadin Island, that anyone

could tell me where it's.' Doubtfully he gazed at the tangle of bridges, streets and houses spread across the many islands, all of which presumably had some name or other, and so he missed the captain's reaction.

'Vrenjadin,' the captain said.

Pridias looked up. There was an expression in the captain's eyes that was hard to read.

'Yes?' he said carefully, questioning.

'Who's it you want, on Vrenjadin?' the captain asked.

That Pridias could answer. The name had burned itself into his memory over the many months in which he had wrestled with the decision truly to come here. 'A man named Wado il-Aksos is said to live there.'

'il-Aksos,' Mordred repeated, and again there was something strange in his voice that put Pridias on his guard. 'It's him you want to speak to?'

'I was told he's looking for good people.'

'And you're good people, are you?'

'I'm a swimmer. The navy employed me as a water-fighter.'

'Aaaah.' Mordred stared at Pridias until he grew uncomfortable. 'Aye, you've a swimmer's body, and a soldier's way of working. You grafted aboard this ship like I've rarely seen.'

The compliment took Pridias by surprise. The captain took him by the shoulder — a rough, hard, but not

unfriendly touch — and turned him towards the south. With one finger he pointed at one of the many islands.

'That there's the home of Patrios Wado il-Aksos. No idea how or where you heard of him, boy. But you must be careful. The Patrios is a dangerous man.'

With that he clapped him twice, hard, on the shoulder, turned and disappeared to oversee his ship's entry into the bay.

Pridias stayed behind. He stared at the island the captain had shown him. It lay a little apart from the others, joined by a great stone bridge that spanned a high arc to the shore. A ship was passing beneath it at that very moment, pale sail against a dark background: a bullish tower with small windows and many terraces, of dark stone that seemed to swallow the light.

Vrenjadin.

* * *

Creaking masts, the beat of the oars and now once again any amount of loud shouting ruled the last few yards, until the ship ground crashing against the quay. The captain had only a brief nod left by way of farewell as Pridias hurried ashore, keen to avoid being drawn into the general unloading.

It was entirely possible this would be read as ingratitude ('No sooner ashore than he can't be bothered to help, the lout'), but since the thought happened to be the plain truth, he did not let it trouble him.

On land, all calm ended at once. Porters hurried back and forth between the ships and the massive warehouses that blocked the view of the city proper entirely; between them moved a bright stream of people in every kind of dress, and the air was thick with a mixture of scents. Pridias had trouble keeping his mouth from hanging open.

A small, wizened man suddenly planted himself in front of him, let a great crate full of foodstuffs slide from his shoulder onto a wooden stand that unfolded itself, and asked in the broadest Adjagard: 'Sweetmeats, young man?'

Pridias raised his hands in refusal and took a small step back, colliding with a porter. Cursing loudly, the man was balancing a great roll of cloth on his shoulders, his bare torso covered in dirty sweat that now clung to Pridias too.

'Forgive me,' Pridias murmured. The porter had no time for lengthy quarrels; he vanished into the crowd with his load. But the old man with his portable table was still there, presenting his wares expectantly.

Pridias cast an eye over them. To his astonishment the offering was inviting: dried fruits, nuts, salted pastries. His mouth watered.

'You must do good business with the seafarers here, no?' he asked, fishing in his leather pack for his purse.

The seller grinned, displaying a fair number of gaps between otherwise snow-white teeth. 'That may well be so, young man,' he answered, reaching for a small paper bag to fill. 'What'll it be?'

Pridias leaned forward to inspect the selection, his purse in one hand, the pack loose in the other — when he was suddenly barged off his feet. He had not reckoned with that, and so he went down, in a shower of delicacies from the pedlar's little table. He lost his purse, and before he could even take that in, the pack was torn from his hands.

'Flood and ruin,' he swore as he came smoothly upright. The pedlar had fallen too, though he was not so quick in getting up. Pridias would have liked to help him, but he saw a young fellow sprinting away with his pack — with all his meagre possessions. That left no room for wasted time; he sprinted after him.

The chase was hard going. The thief ran through the crowd without the least regard, shoving passers-by aside, who turned after him in outrage and gave Pridias no chance to surprise them a second time. So he had to run zigzag, around obstacles that his quarry simply barged out of the way.

The fellow was uncommonly fit, too. Pridias was rather proud of his own condition, but the thief was at least his equal there. He ran like a hare, and he did not slacken his pace one bit.

Quick as a weasel he jinked and swerved, turned without warning into side alleys and drew further and further from the manageable quay, into the tangle of streets where Pridias knew nothing. After a while he lost sight of the hunted man, at a crossroads hemmed in by tall buildings that looked thoroughly shabby, gnawed by wind

and weather. With a groan he bent forward and worked at getting his breath back. He had no air left for cursing — and then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw his quarry reappear.

The fellow was evidently sure he had shaken his pursuer, for he was moving quite slowly. In a few bounds Pridias was on him and hauled him to the ground, into one of the very serviceable holds he had drilled to his heart's content in his military days.

'Hey, stop!' the boy wheezed, running out of air fast, because Pridias's weight lay on his ribcage while his arms were condemned to stillness in a solid lock. He used the language of the poleis, not the Adjagard that was also current on the Tjella' Islands, which was surprising in this city. 'I meant you no harm.' The last words drowned in a whistling rattle.

Pridias eased off a little, then snapped the hold tight again the moment the thief tried to stir. 'I want my things back,' he ground out. He was too exhausted to be angry, but it was also the relief of having caught the boy that made him merciful. 'Hand them over.'

'I can't,' came the answer, followed by a pained gasp as Pridias bore down again.

'I want my things back,' he repeated. 'And I'll have no trouble breaking your wretched arm, you damned flood-drunkard!'

'No, no, don't do that!'

'Then give me my things.'

'I've already...' — another groan interrupted the sentence before he went on — '...passed them on. You don't think... aaaah!'

Pridias's short-lived relief turned to raging fury. He had to rein himself in not to make good on his promise. Instead of breaking the arm, he dropped his weight harder onto the boy's ribcage.

'You plague-rat!' he snarled. 'I'll kill you!'

'No, no,' the thief whimpered again, and Pridias loosened his grip.

'Who did you give my pack to?' he growled. 'Don't mess me about — I'll finish you if you don't tell me the truth!'

'Yes, yes, I understand.' The boy shifted a little, then held quite still as Pridias tightened the pressure once more. 'I don't know. I don't know the people. Nobody works alone here. I'm only the first runner. I pass the stuff to other runners, hardly ever see them twice.'

'Flood and ruin!' Pridias bellowed. 'You filthy flood-drunkard, you back-stabbing Orc-arse!' In frustration he let go of the thief's arm, then struck at him at once when he tried to move. 'That was everything I own! Damned swine!'

His fury boiled over, and he drove his fist into the thief's face, once, twice, a third time. Then he found his control again, breathing hard. He saw blood shooting from the boy's nose, and now he became aware that people were stopping around him. Onlookers. They could mean trouble.

Resigned, he released his opponent and sat down on the ground beside him.

'Shit,' he muttered. All his savings... gone. No change of clothes. An iron fist closed around his stomach. The invitation! The small wooden seal with which he was to present himself to the Patrios! It had been in the pack too. He groaned aloud.

Beside him the thief stirred, very carefully, arms held up before him in case Pridias meant to strike again. He wiped a hand across his bleeding nose and slowly sat up.

'That was everything you have?' he asked. He was talking through his nose. Pridias risked a glance. Quite possibly it was broken.

'Yes, you miserable mud-fisher,' he replied. 'Everything I own was in that bag. I'm not a rich man.'

'That's bad,' said the thief, still careful. The crowd around them was beginning to disperse. Apparently they understood the show was over. 'But you know, it's not really clever...'

'What's not clever?' Pridias had no intention of taking lessons from this arsehole on top of everything else. His look seemed to make that plain, for the boy shrank back a little.

'Easy,' he said, placating. 'I mean you no harm!'

'You stole everything I have!'

'And you were fast. Nobody's ever caught me before.'

'Wonderful. Much good it's done me.'

'Man, at least now you know not to put all your money in one bag and then not watch it!'

That was too much. Before he could stop himself, Pridias's fist had landed once more. The thief toppled backwards, both hands over his face. Only now did Pridias look properly at who he was dealing with: a scrawny boy, fourteen perhaps, scarcely any flesh on his ribs, dressed in nothing but the thin tunic of the poleis. A runaway, most likely; in any case, in all likelihood a poor devil who truly had no choice.

All at once his conscience pricked him.

He held out his hand. Hesitantly the boy took it and let Pridias pull him up to sitting. 'No more hitting, yes?'

'No, it's all right. You're probably hungry too.'

'Always. Naineshos isn't a kind place.'

'Where are you from?'

The boy shrugged. 'The south,' he said vaguely.

'I see,' said Pridias. Then he sighed. 'So what do I do now?'

The boy shrugged again. Doggedly he kept trying to clean his blood-smeared face, only making everything worse by mixing street dirt into the whole mess.

'You need water,' Pridias observed.

The boy nodded. 'There's a well up there.'

* * *

The young thief had no home, no possessions, no refuge. He had lived on the streets since his parents died. His father had come from the furthest south of the Tjella' Islands, from South Mithriad, and had emigrated across the Narrows of Gobranti to Naineshos, for whatever reason. He had died young, and no natural death, so far as Pridias could make out.

He pitied the boy, who did not even know his own age and owned nothing but his speed and his connection to the gang of thieves who had made him their runner. Only slowly did it dawn on him that since the theft he stood in almost the same position himself.

That was a frightening thought. But when he asked the boy about Vrenjadin and Patrios il-Aksos, the boy went pale all at once and ran off without looking back. Pridias was left alone at the well, watching the hurrying crowd and wondering how he was to go on.

To crown it all, he was hungry.

Hunger became his constant companion over the next two days. Getting hold of anything edible without money was hard, and he would not beg. But nobody gave him work either.

He did not want to take on anything long-term, because he still hoped to find some way in to Vrenjadin, even if he had not the faintest idea how he was to manage it.

So he made do by helping traders with their carrying and an old restaurant keeper with the clearing up in the evenings, for which he received the leavings from the guests' plates and a dirty heap of straw to sleep on — at

least reasonably safe from the rats and the roaming thugs who had kept him awake in the streets the night before.

Naineshos had nothing of the quiet order that otherwise marked the poleis of the Tjella' Islands, even in dangerous times, such as Pridias had never known in his young life anyway.

As evening drew on at the end of his third day in Naineshos, he began to think seriously about leaving this filthy, dangerous nest of crime again. Surely he would find a ship in one of the city's many harbours to carry him back to the world of the poleis. He could even slip out through the North Gate and set off on foot. Perhaps he would find work in the north of the islands, so that he need not return to the shores of the Fist as a beaten man.

Tired and frayed, he crouched against the stone parapet of a bridge — it looked solid, which was more than could be said for every bridge in the city, and someone had in fact taken great pains to make it handsome. Which again could not be said for all the others.

With empty eyes he watched the crowd move past. Nobody bothered about him; already he had turned into one of those nameless boys who drifted about here in their hundreds. Bleak prospects.

He watched an older gentleman with an impressive beard, wrapped in an expensive toga, silk by the look of it. He was carrying a bulky crate on one shoulder, which mildly surprised Pridias. An obviously wealthy man, with no guard at all, in the middle of a crowd? Carrying a box

that looked as though its contents were worth something? That was remarkable.

And it did not work, either. The passing crowd jostled him; some passers-by stared at him openly. The sweat on his forehead had not come from nowhere. Disaster was plain to see, and only a matter of time.

At about the middle of the bridge's arc the man stumbled and caught himself clumsily on the parapet. The treasure he had carried with such effort lurched, and while he tried desperately to save something of it, he lost his balance and the crate went over. It struck the surface of the water beneath the bridge with a loud slap.

The man stared after it, despair written across his face. His lips formed words that Pridias could not hear but thought he understood. 'No,' the man gasped. 'No, no, no! By all the Dreams and the gods of the island! No!'

Pridias pitied him for a moment, until he registered that this fellow assuredly had money and would have enough to eat whether or not the crate came back. Then another thought joined the first. This was a chance.

He sprang up, paying no attention to the passers-by who resented his sudden movement or got in his way. Without much ceremony he shouldered through the crowd, over to the other side of the bridge, and planted himself beside the still lamenting man.

'I can get the crate up,' he claimed. He was not in the least certain of it. He had no idea how deep the water was beneath the arch, whether it might be too murky to see anything at all, whether there were shoals or clefts down

there that would stop him finding the crate. But none of that really mattered. He was hungry.

The lamenting broke off. 'And how do you mean to do that, boy?' Pridias heard the scepticism and saw the corners of the mouth turn down along with the raised eyebrows.

'I'm a good diver.'

'You can't dive here!'

'Oh, I can. I have managed harder tasks than this.' Pridias knew that boasting was not his way. But he was *really* hungry.

'You don't understand, boy. Though I see it now — you're not from the city, are you?'

Pridias shook his head. 'Not this one,' he replied. He did not want to argue any longer. Once he had the crate up and the man could see it, negotiating a price would be easier.

He peered down. The water was astonishingly clear, considering the size of the city around the bay and how much filth it must be discharging into the sea. It was deep enough to jump from the bridge, which saved time — he only hoped it would not be *too* deep. He knew well enough that it would hardly be possible to bring the crate up if it lay too far down. If only because a man's strength might not last after a long dive.

He stripped off his tunic and hung it over the parapet. He hoped nobody would steal the garment — it was the

last of his possessions — but then again, somehow it hardly mattered.

The man took hold of his arm. 'No, boy. I'm serious. You can't dive here.'

Pridias was not listening. He set one foot on the balustrade, then dived cleanly down into the bay.

* * *

That he had seen nobody swimming in Naineshos had struck him as the logical consequence of the filth that had to be fouling the water in the bay, going by the rest of the city. But the water was astonishingly clean.

So clean that Pridias was amazed nothing of what lay hidden down here could be seen from the shore. Only a few metres beneath the surface lay a second city, even if it did not look like the one along the shores of the bay. For one thing it was far too tidy for that, and for another far too strange.

The buildings seemed less built than grown. There were no fences, no walls, no boundaries of any kind between individual houses, and so far as Pridias could judge, the entrances lay on the roofs; at any rate where a human being would have expected a roof. Beneath these — some curved, some ornamented, some rounded upward or shaped like a wave following the current — walls reached down to the floor of the bay. The contours of the buildings were clean and straight, as though chiselled, and yet the walls were not made of stone. Shape and colour led Pridias

to guess it was coral, even if he had never seen coral grow so symmetrically and so neatly.

Down here too there were streets and bridges, though Pridias wondered what sense they might make, considering that the builders of all this splendour moved through the water by swimming. Or did they not?

He could not establish it, for he saw none of them. There were fish here; his salt-trained eyes picked out crabs on the move, water plants swaying, mussels, sea urchins and starfish... but no Naineshi. He was quite certain these were the houses of the water-breathers, and in fact that was hardly surprising. Naineshos was their city. Humans were merely tolerated here, and of course that was also why the man on the bridge had insisted so firmly that diving was not possible.

An ice-cold hand closed around his heart. A taboo. He had broken a taboo, perhaps even an open prohibition that the Naineshi had laid on the inhabitants of their city. It was entirely possible that he was in danger here.

Then he saw the crate. How long had he been down now? He had no sense of running short of air — even though he had not taken the time before the jump for careful preparation, as he had in fact been taught. Even though he had lost time gaping at this underwater world... he could take hold of the crate at his leisure and bring it to the surface. In fact it lay very conveniently, close to the shore. No trouble at all.

With bold strokes he swam across and took hold of it, delighted to feel that the box weighed almost nothing. His

heart sank a little when it occurred to him that this might mean there was paper inside, which would already be worthless. But of course the thought was nonsense. Quite the opposite: the crate was probably light only because it was watertight and still held a good deal of air.

Either way, he had been lucky.

A hand closed around his ankle. It was cool, not cold, and felt almost dry, which was impossible under water. Its grip was not hard, but firm and decided. The direction of the pull was unmistakable: downwards. Pridias looked about him and the crate slipped from his hands as he became aware of two Naineshi below him.

He was badly frightened, and very nearly breathed in the salt water that was burning his eyes. The two looked terrifying, not human in a bizarrely displaced way, although in fact everything was there that marks out a human being. Only the arms were too long, the bodies too thin, the nose far too broad, the lips too narrow and strangely curved, the hair looked limp and the hands misshapen.

Worst of all was their skin; scaled like a fish's, and it changed its *colour*... in the few moments Pridias needed to swallow his surprise, at least six times.

The hand that had fastened on his foot was strong despite the seemingly fragile build of its owner — and it was dragging him further down. That was bad, since Pridias, unlike the two eerie water-breathers, needed air to live. On the other hand, this very pull cleared his head,

because this was exactly what he had been trained for these past years.

Pridias was a water-fighter, a diver and a swimmer, and struggles without air were part of his daily training. Nothing mattered more to surviving them than overcoming the fear of drowning, and so being dragged into deeper water was nothing unfamiliar to him.

He did what he had learned. He yielded, let himself be pulled, and that surprised his opponent, who had expected resistance. He got it too. As soon as Pridias was close enough he rolled himself into a ball and threw the other off balance. It worked even better than he was used to from training against human opponents, because those swam, whereas the water-breather was in some undefinable way actually *standing* on the sea floor.

Pridias folded himself around the arm that held him, gathered speed despite the drag of the water, grabbed with his left hand and drove the right forward. The water-breather holding him was caught out, staggered forwards and into Pridias's oncoming hand, which struck him full in the face. His grip loosened, his head snapped back, Pridias kicked off hard with both legs and swam upwards before the other Naineshi could take hold of him.

He broke the surface spluttering and drew air into his lungs the way he had practised, breathing out more than in, so that as much air as possible reached his body. Quickly he assessed his position. Too far from the safety of the shore to count on escaping without another fight. It had to be assumed the water-beings swam faster than a

man. So all that remained was the fight — and the hope that no more of them would surface and cut off any escape. He got his breath, and still nothing had happened. On a sudden decision he dived again.

Not a second too soon: the two Naineshi had followed him towards the surface and were immediately behind him. They had probably expected him to try to flee, like any human, rather than come back. Even so they did not react, which confused Pridias. Perhaps Naineshi were simply slower to think? A good deal ran at a different pace under water than above it. He himself, at any rate, *was* fast, in thought as in action. He dived down, dragged one of the two along by the feet and reached firmly between his legs; to the place where a man kept his sensitive parts, an excellent target for an attack under water, where movements were slowed by the water's resistance and blows therefore had too little effect.

To his delight this appeared to be a painful spot on a Naineshi as well. The one he had attacked curled up and his skin colour began to change in a storm. Pridias had never seen anything like it, but he did not take the time to watch the spectacle; he drew up his knees and pushed off from his opponent with such force that the man collided with his companion and stopped him coming after Pridias.

Again he came up, took air and prepared to go under once more. Out of the corner of his eye, unclear and blurred by the salt water and the sudden change of visibility, he registered that the owner of the crate was still standing up there on the bridge. Other people had

stopped as well. How much of what was going on beneath the water could be seen from up there?

He had air enough. Nimble as an eel he turned and slid back under the surface. Despite the danger he was in, he suddenly felt magnificent — after all the setbacks of the last days he was in his element again at last, he could feel every muscle of his body, and it was wonderful how precisely all of it worked. He belonged here. This was his life.

And his pursuers had given up. He saw them a little way off. Suddenly they were no longer walking but swimming like dolphins, in swift undulating movements. It was impressive to see how they used their hands and feet: between the over-long fingers and toes stretched webs which they spread to push against the water, then folded quickly together again to draw the arms and legs back for the next stroke. He envied them the effortless elegance with which they moved; even if, in the circumstances, it astonished him all the more how easily he had prevailed against them, and how quickly they had broken off the fight.

But who knew how long it would take them to come back with reinforcements? He had to get out of the water, fast.

With presence of mind, he took the crate with him after all.

* * *

'What in fire and flood was that?'

The owner of the crate had hurried down to the shore when he saw that Pridias really could make it back to land. His expensive clothing billowed behind him, which looked ridiculous, though hardly anyone noticed — the attention of the onlookers was fixed entirely on the young diver, who now set the crate down on firm ground and crawled after it himself.

He eyed the surface of the water with some mistrust. The last part of the escape had been too easy, and he fully expected to see one of those shimmering Naineshi heads break the surface, followed perhaps by arms holding a harpoon with its point aimed at him. Nothing of the kind happened. He picked himself up and climbed the embankment.

'There were water-breathers down there,' he told the man, who was clutching his crate to him and following slowly.

'So it looked from above. How did you get away from them?'

'I don't know. More luck than sense, probably.'

The man looked sceptical. 'No one man can have that much luck.'

That drew a snorting laugh from Pridias. 'Then I must have built up credit these last days. Since I arrived in Naineshos, everything has gone wrong.'

The man nodded. 'It won't get better if you pick fights with the Naineshi. They rule this city, if anyone rules it at all.'

'I thought they cared little about what happens outside the sea?'

'That's also true.'

With those words he set his crate down and began searching in the pockets of his robes. 'Here,' he said, and threw Pridias a leather purse. 'You may have saved my life, and though I don't know whether you have forfeited your own for it... I don't care to be in anyone's debt.'

The purse weighed heavy in Pridias's hand. He could not believe that his most pressing problem had just dissolved into air, from one breath to the next, without warning.

'Thank you.'

The man nodded again. 'No thanks needed. That was damned brave, what you did. And fairly stupid.'

* * *

The mixture of guests in the taproom around Pridias was something he could never have dreamed of a few weeks earlier. At first he had hardly noticed it, because hunger had overwhelmed him completely the moment he had the money to satisfy it. He had stormed into the first inn he could reach, an open tavern not far from the bridge he had jumped off, its walls once white and now grey from the touch of many bodies; over an open fire at the back, joints of meat turned and gave off inviting smells, and the room was packed with people at tables, talking and drinking.

It was not as clean as it might have been, but neither was it one of those run-down dives of which Pridias had seen plenty in Naineshos. For him it was more than good enough, and everything got better still when he could bury his teeth in juicy pieces of roast meat, served with crisply baked bread and various raw vegetables. For a brief moment the hunger roared up once more. Then it fell silent.

Greedily Pridias drank deep from an earthenware cup of wine. At a stroke the world looked friendlier. Under his questing hand the purse bulged with the rest of the money, enough to feed him for weeks if he did not let it be stolen again.

He leaned back and relaxed. Now he could plan, no longer forced to think about the next mouthful. Lodgings would be the next step.

'Never again do I set foot in that city,' a deep, sonorous voice broke into his thoughts. He looked round and found that it belonged to a squat figure at the next table. Broad shoulders, muscular arms, long hair spilling out from under a leather cap. The man was oddly misshapen, but not in the way that some of the cripples at home in the streets of the Tjella' Islands looked misshapen. Quite the contrary; he radiated strength and vitality, which Pridias could feel plainly even though he saw the man only from behind.

'I tell you, men, that place is such a den of sin that even Naineshos looks like a skinny virgin beside it,' he was declaring.

'Now, now, you exaggerate,' another voice objected.

'Not a bit of it,' the first insisted. 'I swear by the gods of every mountain, the people of Boasp are wicked. Their famous inventor Telmi stole all his knowledge; the wonders at the mouth of the Nevrizian come out of the secret knowledge of the Dwarves, and now the priests of Avenicum Dalor are using the Great Flood to drive the foreign peoples out of the cities of men. Theft, that's what it's, nothing but theft.'

'The Dwarf is right,' said another voice, and now Pridias's curiosity was thoroughly awake. A Dwarf. Of course. The stocky fellow was a Dwarf. One of the foreign peoples, such as one rarely saw at the Tjella' Islands, even if they were still a common enough sight on the continent. Or perhaps not, if the rest of the conversation was true.

'Right about what? The theft? He shouldn't act as though only the foreign peoples had culture!'

'Nobody said that. But the priests of the One God are stirring up feeling against Dwarves and Elves all over the continent, though there are fewer of them every year in any case.'

'Are there, though? Perhaps they're only hiding.'

The Dwarf let his fist fall on the table. 'Rubbish! Where are they all supposed to hide? The only non-human people multiplying at the moment are the dragons. And there were hardly any of those left to begin with.'

'And the Naineshi,' said someone else, in a graveyard voice. That silenced the conversation for a moment, which

Pridias found remarkable. The influence of the Naineshi in the city named after them was hard to read, and how dangerous they could be he had learned for himself today.

'Well, we Dwarves are no dragons, and certainly no water-breathers,' the Dwarf observed. 'And we didn't cause the Great Flood either.'

'Who knows? Dwarf magic, Dwarf mechanics — plenty of dangerous things come out of your mountains,' put in a grey-haired, wrinkled seaman, and earned warning glances from several directions. Presumably the Dwarf was known for his temper.

'Oh, certainly,' another chimed in. 'The things you credit to a handful of Dwarves and Elves. There's only a handful left, and that was no different under the Ius Adjagard before the Great Flood. I see no reason to persecute anyone.'

'But it happens everywhere. In the Young Kingdoms the blood of the foreign peoples runs in streams. In central Isrogant there are battles raging between believers and unbelievers. The world hasn't even recovered from the Flood and already they're making war as they never did in a thousand years of Adjagard.'

'It will get worse,' the seaman observed. 'In Droni the king has just proclaimed himself the head of a religion of his own.'

'Not only there,' the Dwarf growled. 'Not only there.'

A loud clatter from the entrance to the taproom interrupted the tale he was surely about to begin. Around

Pridias it went suddenly quiet as heads turned to the door, where a bearded, long-haired man was holding on to the wall, as exhausted as if he had walked through the fires of Raftja. He wore heavy clothing of the sort common in the north of the continent, which left him hopelessly out of place in the night heat of Naineshos.

Tired eyes slid over the humans — and foreign peoples — in the room and stopped at Pridias, who was just conveying a mouthful of dripping meat to his lips and froze in mid-movement as he felt the Northman's gaze.

'You,' said the newcomer, levelling a finger at Pridias. 'You. Come with me.'

'Me?'

'Yes. You. Don't talk, come with me.'

There was something very definite in the stranger's manner, and Pridias felt the attention of the room settle on him. That he could not bear, not after these days. Sighing, he rose and climbed out of his bench, with an apologetic smile to the other guests, whose eyes burned in his back until he could finally pull the tavern door shut behind him.

* * *

'Sorry, lad,' the Northman greeted him, waiting at the roadside outside the door. His undertone unsettled Pridias more than the sudden darkness after the lit taproom.

'What are you sorry for?' he asked quietly, muscles tensed in expectation of an attack.

'Why, dragging you off your dinner. The vultures in there won't leave any of it, now. I mean, seeing as you're not watching your plate any more.'

The regret seemed genuine, and Pridias loosened a little.

'But you must have got yourself in trouble, man!'

With a sigh Pridias answered: 'Constantly. Since I came to Naineshos, nothing but trouble. Go on then, what's it this time?'

The Northman leaned over a little, and a cloud of stale sweat came off his far too warm clothing. 'Naineshi,' he whispered.

Pridias raised his eyebrows. 'Naineshi?'

'Aye, man! I was just going back to my ship in my shallop, over in Hargwarch Bay. Had a bit of a drinking tour, you know, seeing as one is here anyway, city of sin and all that... well.'

A seafarer ashore. Fine, so far Pridias understood what was going on. But where did the Naineshi come into this story?

'So I come to my shallop and I'm wondering whether I'm too far gone to row and had better sleep first and whether the rats will let me sleep... and I think to myself: there are cursed few rats in Naineshos, and the shores are pretty clean, considering what floats about in other harbour towns... I mean, I was in Rinjapur a few weeks back, and boy, that's a hole, by all the Dreams! What was I saying?'

'You were going to tell me why you fetched me out of the tavern,' Pridias helped.

His sense of threat had by now almost entirely gone; only the word *Naineshi* still had a dull echo for him. And the question of why the man's entrance had needed to be so dramatic.

'Ah, aye. Down there, by the shallop, there they suddenly stood. Hardly to be believed, mad-looking fellows, skin glowing all colours, and it dark as anything. And they speak clean Isrogant to me. Well, sounds a bit odd, but it's understandable. I mean, did you know the water-fellows can really talk?'

'No,' Pridias answered. 'What did they say?'

'That I'm to fetch the lad from the inn. The young one with few clothes, next to no baggage. Well, they put it differently, stilted somehow, but that was it. And I ask: what happens if I don't? And they only look at me in such a way that it was clear that would be a shitty decision for an old sea-hare like me, what with them living in the water and being all along the coasts and so on. At least that's how I understood the look, you know?'

'And from that description you recognised me?'

For that he earned a sidelong glance. All right — going by that description he probably had not been so hard to spot.

'Right then,' he said. 'Where are they?'

The Northman pointed to a stair leading down to the shore of the bay. Pridias allowed himself a moment's

thought — was this sensible? Did he really want another meeting with the water-breathers, above all in his present state; short of sleep, battered, and now stuffed full of greasy food as well?

The man took the decision from him by walking on ahead.

* * *

There were three of them, and their bodies did indeed shimmer in every colour. The webs on their feet and hands hung slack, and so did their cheeks. Pridias had no idea how the Naineshi were breathing here on land. Perhaps they were simply good at holding their breath, as he was himself, only that did not seem likely to him, considering the length of the wait.

But quite apart from how they managed not to suffocate, the three figures were impressive enough. Their enormous eyes were fixed expectantly on Pridias, taking him in from top to bottom, until one of them spoke. Incomprehensible clicking sounds, accompanied by changes of colour in his skin. It sounded anything but intelligible, and Pridias asked himself in all seriousness how drunk the Northman really was and whether he had perhaps not understood at all what the water-breathers wanted of him.

Unfortunately that proved to be a mistake, for now another spoke, and he used the Isrogant that was current on the continent.

'What is your name, boy?' he asked.

Pridias swallowed and considered for a moment telling an untruth. Then he gave his name and origin, as a well-behaved child learns to do at school.

The answer was a fresh round of clicking and colour-changing among all three, before their translator spoke again. 'Ephedis, you say?'

Pridias shook his head. 'I served in the navy there, but I come from the coast of the Fist.'

'And that is where you learned to dive?'

Again Pridias answered with a shake of the head. 'That is where I began. My real training I had in Ephedis. The navy there has good divers.'

'Outstanding fighters like you as well?'

'I never had the impression I was anything special.'

After a short clatter to the others, the translator turned back to him and asked: 'Why are you here?'

Pridias hesitated a little. 'I received an invitation...' he said then.

'From il-Aksos?' The question came so fast and so unexpectedly that he nodded before he could stop himself.

For a short while there was silence, in which Pridias heard only the breathing of the seaman beside him. It sounded tight and laboured. Pridias wondered why. Had the man been breathing so hard before il-Aksos was mentioned? Who was it that frightened him — the Naineshi, or the man from Vrenjadin?

Then the voice of the sea-breather came again. 'Listen, boy,' he said. 'That il-Aksos wants you marks you out. You are excellent as a diver and a fighter. You proved that to us as well.'

Another Naineshi clattered something in between, but the speaker waved him off with a brusque movement before going on: 'You have now heard praise from us, and you have had praise from il-Aksos, in that he invited you. Of that you may be proud.' He drew a rattling breath, which answered the question of whether the sea-breathers had lungs for breathing on land. 'But if we see you swimming for il-Aksos, you will not get away a second time. If you want to stay in Naineshos, we do not want to see you diving in the bay, and we never want to hear your name in connection with il-Aksos. And our ears are everywhere. Have you understood that?'

Pridias swallowed again. He nodded.

'Say it, boy. Have you understood that you are not welcome in the waters of the bay, and that il-Aksos means death for you?'

'Understood,' Pridias answered, his voice thick.

'That is good.'

With that the Naineshi turned and disappeared into the sea. His two companions did the same. Pridias was left standing there at a loss. They had forbidden him the sea in Naineshos — and shattered his plans. What was he to do now?

'Fire and flood,' the Northman said into his thoughts. 'You have got off lightly there.'

He was probably right.

* * *

He had an uneasy night behind him. Partly because he had not been able to sleep well after the eerie meeting of the evening before, and partly because Naineshos was simply not a good place to spend a night in the street.

He had found a spot near a busy market in a park that was neither too filthy nor too far out of the way. To keep clear of the rats he had climbed a tree and made himself comfortable in the fork of a branch. Many of the trees in Naineshos were huge and spreading, and Pridias was not the only one spending the night up one.

In the morning he woke with hunger growling in him. To crown it all, he tore his tunic climbing down from his bed. The new day found him with his head hanging — and this after he had looked so positively into the future the evening before. Now it was clear to him how pointless the journey to Naineshos was, if his prospective employer was forbidden him and he could not use his real abilities in the city.

It went through his head to ignore the water-breathers' threats, but that did not feel good either, and so he pushed the idea away at once.

'I need something to eat,' he said to himself, and that gave him back some of the previous day's good humour. At

least he could afford to fill his stomach now. And was that not real progress?

He stretched and loosened himself a little at the foot of his sleeping-tree, studying the crowd going past. It was moving distinctly downhill, following the street towards the market, and was that not the logical direction? A glance at the long tear in his tunic told him he badly needed a needle and thread. But food first.

* * *

The girl who handed Pridias the fragrant pitta stuffed with good things was ravishing. Long, crinkled hair falling into her face, out of which she considered him with eyes that were dark and yet fiery. Her clothing was expensive, really too expensive for a market girl, and scanty with it. It drew the eye to the swell of firm little breasts and set off slender arms. Behind the counter he could not see whether her backside kept the promise her upper body made, but his imagination painted him a vivid picture.

By all the Dreams, he ought to concern himself less with the local bosses of the underworld and the warlike creatures below the surface of the water, and more with the female inhabitants of the city.

As he paid for the pitta she smiled at him so brilliantly that he blushed on the spot.

'New here?' she asked, which caught him off balance.

'Ehhh,' he said. 'Yes, yes, brand new.'

'You look like you could put your back into things,' she said.

He nearly dropped the pitta, because he misunderstood. Then it dawned on him that she probably meant he could work hard. 'I was a soldier,' he answered at last. 'I'm in fair condition. Only very hungry.'

He hoped that was explanation enough for the hearty bite he took out of the pitta. In truth he only wanted to look a little less helpless and assumed that chewing would manage it.

'One can see that,' she said. 'That you're hungry, I mean. Do you want to stay in Naineshos? Do you need work?'

Bite, chew. On no account let her see how much she confused him. Did he want to stay in Naineshos? He had already begun to resign himself to leaving soon. But what sort of work was the girl talking about? He certainly did not want to end up as a porter for a market trader; he had not trained all those years for that. All the same she was very sweet, and he did not want to walk on straight away either.

She waited patiently for his answer, and her smile did not grow a hair narrower. He swallowed his mouthful. 'Honestly. I have no idea where I'm to go now. All my plans have run away like a dream in the morning.'

'That sounds sad.'

'Depends how you take it. Now I'm here. And the food is wonderful.'

She looked him over.

'Wait a moment,' she said. 'Mind the stall. And don't you dare leave me in the lurch.' She turned away, then turned back once more. 'The stall, I mean. Don't leave the goods in the lurch. I'll be back directly.'

* * *

For Pridias's taste, too much happened over the following hours, and above all in too rapid a sequence. He lost the thread, and he found himself torn between the sudden kindnesses that were showered on him... and the price he was expected to pay for them.

Obediently he had stayed at the girl's stall, chewed his pitta to the end and waited while the crowd streamed past him and he had to shake his head now and then when a passer-by stopped to buy something. Then she had come back, but not alone; she brought an older gentleman with a grey beard who seemed in every respect the model of a successful man of business. Jovial manner, friendly firm handshake, deep voice, engaging laugh, and beneath it all a decisive hardness.

He introduced himself as Petrikles and explained that he was one of the most important street traders in this quarter, that many of the stalls around belonged to him, and that the young lady was his daughter Lysia, a delightful girl who was not only beautiful but also very industrious and had a good eye for useful fellows who could work hard and therefore earn well.

He underlined this with a grin no less brilliant than his daughter's. Pridias felt himself caught at once, in the positive sense. This was a family one could refuse nothing, and so he accepted the invitation to dinner.

'Good, my son,' Petrikles rumbled, and clapped him benevolently on the shoulder. 'Then I'll ask my good wife to cook properly, so that you don't waste away. And until then, if you like, you can earn yourself a little money. There's a ship down here in the bay that has to be unloaded, and we can use every pair of hands.'

So Pridias found himself labouring under the hot sun of a brilliant summer's day, surrounded by dock workers who neither smiled as brightly as their boss nor found such benevolent words, and among whom he nevertheless felt at ease from the first. In the last days he had grown less and less sure of himself. Here, by contrast, there was something to do, and it was something he could keep up with. The work was hard, but no worse than training in the navy, and being pushed did him good. He liked the rough comradeship of the men, and by the time he set off towards the house of Petrikles's family in the evening he had already struck up a few loose friendships.

Sadly, the evening did not keep what the day had promised.

* * *

'I have to apologise. He does that fairly often.' Lysia leaned in the door frame through which her father had just left the room in such a hurry.

'What do you mean? Getting into bed with strangers and grabbing them between the legs?' Pridias was in disarray; he had felt so comfortable with the family, and now this. He felt dirty, sweat had broken out all over his body, and his knuckles ached where his fist had met Petrikles's head. He preferred not to imagine how it had felt on the receiving end.

'No,' Lysia replied. 'Bringing strays home. Most of them are friendlier to him after he has spoiled them a bit.'

'Strays?' The word shocked Pridias. He had not seen himself that way until now. He was no street boy!

'Oh, don't make such a fuss.' Lysia came closer and sat down beside him on the narrow bed. 'You're one of hundreds looking for work in Naineshos. And your story about the water-fighter, I didn't really believe it until I saw just now how easily you dealt with my father.'

'That wasn't easy at all,' Pridias protested. 'I was utterly astounded that he would try anything so crude.'

Lysia laughed. 'What a performance you make! How many fellows do you suppose want to get a hand on my arse every day?'

'But I'm...' Pridias broke off, but Lysia had heard what he had not said.

'You're not a woman, exactly!' she cried. 'For them it's normal, but for real men like you it's unfamiliar. Perhaps no bad thing that my old man has introduced you to the realities.'

Pridias preferred to keep quiet. His head was spinning. He wished he had never accepted the family's hospitality, and it disturbed him that sweet Lysia, whom he had found so attractive himself, was now speaking to him in this way.

How dirty and how rotten was this city?

She let him keep silent for a while, drew one leg up under her chin and rested her head on it. He glanced up briefly, not without noticing how ravishing she looked in that pose, in the wide nightshirt she almost vanished into.

His interest did not escape her. 'You were thinking about me, weren't you?' she said after a while. A pert grin slid across her face.

'What?' Now he was still more nonplussed.

'Well, you would rather have had me in your bed than my old man.'

'How...? What do you mean?'

She laughed out loud. 'Pridias, by the waters of the geyser, you're hopeless, you're as naive as a child!'

He would have liked to object, especially since he did not want to stand there like that in her eyes, but the experiences of the last days suggested there was probably something in it. He shrugged.

She patted his shoulder, a cheerful movement. 'Come on, my friend. We'll go and have a midnight bite. Out into the city, among people.'

'Now?' he asked, surprised.

'Oh yes, now. Do you think Naineshos sleeps? Day or night, the streets and bridges of this city are always alive. Wash first, you look as though you could use freshening up.' She pointed to a basin on one wall of the guest room. 'The water comes out of that tap on the wall. I know, in the poleis you still fetch your water from the well, but this house has running water. One of the many wonders from the continent.'

Pridias nodded. She swept out of the room. Over her shoulder she called back: 'Five minutes and I'm back. Hurry up!'

* * *

'Wado il-Aksos?' Lysia dropped the sweet biscuit she was holding and stared at Pridias in disbelief. 'The Patrios Wado il-Aksos?'

She made him self-conscious. 'Yes, all right, yes,' he said, almost meekly. 'One of his confidants approached me at the swimming contests in Laryngos and gave me a letter of recommendation.'

'A letter?' Lysia's eyes were still wide. 'A small piece of oak, polished, with the seal of the Patrios?'

'That's it!' he confirmed, glad that she seemed to believe him. 'Exactly that, a small piece of wood, but very fine.'

She whistled softly through her teeth. 'You must be a good swimmer indeed, if they gave you a seal-wood like that. Where is it?'

He raised his hands in despair. 'It was stolen from me as I came off the ship. Along with all my money and most of my belongings.'

'Flood and ruin!' she exclaimed. 'You're as luckless as Fedjar the Adjagarean!'

'I don't know him.'

'Then you're an *uneducated* unlucky man!' Her voice sounded outraged. 'You really don't know Fedjar?'

'No,' he said, a little nettled. 'That will be another thing from the continent, will it?'

'Yes, Fedjar was a great warrior, and moreover a superb master of the Last Legacy. There are many anecdotes about his scenarios. He was a great man who achieved great things and always came to grief over small ones. He fought his way through the Orc guards and struck down their leader when they lay before Adjagard. Later he tripped over a fruit crate and broke his wrist... A luckless man. Like you.'

Pridias grunted and took a sip of the sweet coffee she had ordered for him.

They sat on benches by the bank of a small river that ran into Nainos Bay a few hundred metres further on, directly beneath a bridge. The benches were well filled with night-owls, lit by coloured lanterns and flickering torches. At a wooden counter there was coffee, tea and sweet cakes. Nobody here drank alcohol or took any other intoxicant, which after his experiences so far in Naineshos astonished Pridias.

On the other side of the river rose huge buildings, brightly lit as well, though much less busy. He saw only the occasional guard.

Lysia followed his gaze.

'Embassies,' she said. 'The one nearer the bay, with the big pier and the strange pagoda roofs, has been there a very long time. It belongs to the Realm of the Eleven Great Cities. Do you see the two slim sailing ships at the quay? Warships from Hji-Feng, a harbour city in the north. They say the navy of Hji-Feng is one of the most powerful in all Isrogant.'

'And Hji-Feng, what has that to do with the embassy?'

'One of the Eleven Great Cities.'

'I see.' Pridias thought about it. It had to be something like the poleis of the Tjella' Islands — each living for itself, but when an enemy came from outside they closed together like the fingers of a fist. He thought about it a little, with growing astonishment that a city like Naineshos was tolerated at the Tjella' Islands. The poleis kept clear of events on the continent, the islands lived for themselves, and yet here was an open gate for so many dangers... what was gathering in Nainos Bay in the way of foreign imperial power was scarcely to be reckoned.

Lysia pointed to the next building. 'That legation belongs to a league of cities too. The Empire of the Three Powers is quite new. By all accounts it's the rising power on the Fryyywan Ocean. Many people found it a little odd that the Empire of the Three should build its embassy

directly beside the Realm of the Eleven, but it's probably only chance.'

She reached for a biscuit. 'A particularly lovely detail is that the Prince of Dsita in the Empire of the Three Powers is very proud of his soldiers, whom he calls Dsitars. Elite troops, very disciplined. As their model he names the Dandereds, against whom he wants to measure the strength of his warriors. They're trained in Dan Dered, a city in the Realm of the Eleven. Legendary fighters; many of them were Adjagareans in the service of the Geyserthrone, before the Great Flood.'

Pridias's head swam. Until now Adjagard had been a distant legend for him, and the Great Flood had scarcely touched the Tjella' Islands. Now, all at once, he was very close to people for whom all of it was real.

Lysia added another facet by pointing to one of the neighbouring benches. A group of men sat there, deep in conversation. They were all comparatively small of build and wrapped in wide clothing, a little like the baggy trousers Lysia was wearing at that moment. Most striking of all, though, were their eyes: they were not round, as with most people Pridias had met in his life so far, but almond-shaped.

The lively way the men spoke to one another, their rather small stature and their clothing made them look harmless — if one disregarded the impressive swords each of them carried. Some had leaned the blades against the bench, some held them across their thighs in their laps,

but every one of them had his sword within reach, as though it belonged somehow to his body.

'Dandereds,' Lysia observed. 'Sometimes you see Dsitars here too, but rarely at this hour. They carry themselves far more martially. I don't believe they're more dangerous than those little fellows over there.'

'Those little fellows...' Pridias echoed. He wondered what knowledge these people carried, what went on in their heads, sitting so close to him and yet coming from a world so infinitely far away. The moment reminded him of the evening in the tavern, when he could hardly grasp that he was sitting next to a living Dwarf. Was that really only a day ago? Things were developing far too fast.

How big was Isrogant, in fact, and how different from the island world of Tjella' that had shaped his view of life for so long?

'And what will you do now?' Lysia asked.

An abrupt change of subject, another thing that came too fast for him.

'What?' he asked.

'How does it go on? When the night is over?' Her look was intense; she watched him with such interest that all at once he felt under pressure.

'I thought...' he began, and then broke off, because in fact he had no idea.

His silence did not please her. One hand lay on her coffee cup, the other made an impatient movement. Her eyes pinned him down.

He sighed. 'I have thought about finding the thief. Taking my things back off him.'

She opened her mouth in a soundless 'oh', then asked: 'In Naineshos?'

He had to laugh. 'Exactly. In Naineshos. Not the ghost of a chance, I have grasped that much by now.'

Lysia shrugged. 'I don't know, if you had some sort of lead as to where one might begin looking... but it seems the man came past and vanished, and you hardly saw him. That will be hard.'

Pridias nodded. 'He wasn't even a man. Only a boy. But in essence I see it as you do.'

'You know,' said Lysia, 'you could always try to get to the Patrios himself. It's only rather...'

He waited a while for her to finish the sentence, and when she did not, he pressed: 'Rather what? Difficult?'

'No. It's dangerous. Most people are glad if they have nothing to do with him. Seeking out his company is somewhat... unusual.'

'Ah.' He brooded on that briefly. 'You know, I think there's no point in it anyway. There's another problem, you see.'

For a short while she stared at him open-mouthed. 'Tell me, how long have you been here? Didn't you say it was only a few days?'

'What? What do you mean?'

'Well, you have loaded yourself with a sackful of difficulties... that can't be managed in such a short time. How do you do it?'

He sighed. 'Do you want to hear the story, or have you had enough and I had better keep quiet?'

'Of course I want to hear it, don't be a fool!'

'Hm,' he said, and told her about his dive and his encounter with the water-breathers. She listened attentively, but her eyes went into the distance, and her gaze stayed there when he had finished.

'You know,' she said after a while, 'that's not good. It means you can't swim here. And you can forget any visit to il-Aksos entirely.' She took a mouthful of coffee, pulled a face and flung the rest of it behind her towards the river. 'But you know, that would have been an idiotic idea anyway. Completely daft.'

She managed, in the most delightful way, to make him feel like a complete fool. Slowly but surely it was making him a little angry. 'I have grasped that now.'

'Good.' She rocked back and forth a little, tucked her hands under her legs like a small girl.

He gave it up. 'I could use some sleep, I think,' he said. His thoughts went to the tree where he had spent the last night. Perhaps it was still free.

'You have a bed with us,' she observed.

He looked uncertain. 'I don't know whether I'm so welcome to your father.' He thought for a moment, then added: 'Nor do I know whether I would feel comfortable there.'

She snorted. 'Boys are so weepy. If girls made such a fuss every time a man got pushy...'

Pridias raised his hands. 'You have told me that once already, and it changes nothing.'

Her eyes rested on him, with that intense look. Then she stood up and reached for his hand. 'Come along, fellow. I'll protect you from my father.'

'What?'

'You're sleeping in my bed,' she decided. 'And you'll not object if *I* pester you, will you?'

* * *

The sun already stood high when Pridias woke, and a bad conscience arrived with him at once. Rising early and hiding one's tiredness belonged to the service ethos of the navy, and besides he was only a guest, and the situation was precarious into the bargain. He sat up; his eyes travelled over the battlefield they had left behind, and that made the uncomfortable feeling a shade stronger.

Lysia had disappeared, presumably on her way to work, even if it was not entirely clear to him what her working day actually looked like or what she did when she was not standing at the market stall. That could hardly be her real place of work — it seemed far more that Petrikles had plenty of labourers for such lowly duties.

Her room showed plainly that she was no market girl. The walls around the enormous window were as colourful as the curtain billowing in the wind that blew in from the bay; there were piles of books and scrolls; a big earthenware basin with an elegantly curved tap. A large wooden flute stood leaning against a wall, the floor was strewn with items of clothing, the huge bed with its many soft pillows and covers completely churned up, which was however the doing of the previous night.

He breathed deep and enjoyed the scent of the sea, coming in from outside astonishingly pure, considering the size of the city and the filth of its streets. Those smells had accompanied him all his life. It lay beyond his imagining how people could spend their whole lives inland, far from the coast with its wide horizon and the water with its depth.

At that moment the door opened, stormily and with a loud crash, and let quite other scents stream into the room: steaming coffee, fried meat, fresh bread. Pridias needed a moment before he quickly shoved the covers aside so that Lysia could set the tray on the bed.

'There we're, sweetheart,' she said. 'Feed.'

'Feed,' he echoed. Years later he would discover that his habit of repeating other people's words amused her enormously.

Just now he was only fascinated by her long legs, emerging from under a white man's shirt so billowing that it presumably belonged to her father. Everything about them seemed perfect, the colour of the skin, the play of the fine muscles beneath it, even the shape of her feet. As she lay down beside him on the bed, on her stomach, hair hanging wild across her face, the shirt rode up and gave him a view of her backside — small, firm and inviting, exactly as in his fantasies when he had first seen her at the market stall.

Because she noticed his look, she began to laugh. 'Pridias, it's breakfast time. I didn't fry eggs and meat so that you could let them go cold while you fuck me.'

That drove the blood into his face, and he quickly took a piece of bread.

'That's better,' she praised him. 'Eat, so that something sticks to you.' She let her finger slide across his bare chest and added thoughtfully: 'But better not too much, I like a swimmer's body like this. You're in good shape.'

He smiled shyly, chewing. With the first mouthfuls he noticed how starved he was. He reached for one of the steaming cups of coffee and took a deep swallow. Bitter, spicy, hot, it was wonderful. And at the same time it brought home to him how far beyond the coast he was... no land in sight. No work, no idea for the future.

She had read his thoughts. 'I have spoken with my father.'

'What? About what?'

'That you're staying here until we have found something else. And that you're my guest and he keeps his fingers off you.' She took a piece of meat and pushed it into her mouth. The sight held him captive, her white teeth, the small tongue. 'He's very embarrassed,' she said, chewing.

'So am I,' he muttered, but that only made her laugh. She rolled onto her back, which afforded him new views, and stroked his cheek with the back of one hand. 'It's a funny start, after all. And besides, it means you can live here for months free of charge without him saying a word, out of sheer bad conscience.'

'That's not at all what I want!' he protested.

'I know.' She sat up and kissed him on the mouth. He liked it. 'And that's why you're all the more welcome. You will make something of yourself, I have a feeling for it.' She shovelled some egg onto a wooden spoon and fed it to him, her head leaned against his shoulder.

'What do you say? After breakfast let's stroll through the city and see where there's work for you. And then we'll see.'

Pridias had the feeling the sun was rising for a second time that day. 'Wonderful,' he said. Now he was hungrier still.

* * *

If the crowded side alleys and broad avenues of Naineshos had seemed threatening to him until now, he began to relax. The last days had been a nightmare, but what had actually happened? He had had to fend for himself, he had been genuinely hungry for a few days, but now he had money in his purse again and was out in brilliant sunshine with a sugar-sweet young woman at his side.

Who was never short of a word. Lysia talked without pause, pointed out interesting buildings or important squares and sometimes people as well, had a story about everything and everyone. Pridias felt himself run over once more, but decided to enjoy not having to say anything himself.

What fascinated him most was how, in this vast metropolis, every quarter held a small community in which everybody seemed to know everybody, exactly as it had been in the village community at home on the coast of the Fist. Lysia knew which master butcher was having an affair with which florist, where there were inheritance quarrels or an old family feud, who had said what to whom and when... only the stories of origin were more exciting than that. Because Naineshos was growing so fast, few of its inhabitants had been born here. They came from every part of the Tjella' Islands, and even from the continent.

When he left Ephedis, Pridias had not thought beyond Naineshos, but now he felt the appetite for adventure and the call of distant countries. It was hard to credit, but from here the gate to Isrogant stood wide open.

He was chewing on that thought when Lysia suddenly stopped and took him by the arm. 'Something has just occurred to me,' she said. He could not say whether that statement or her sudden silence afterwards astonished him more.

He waited a while, then risked the question: '*What* has occurred to you?'

She brushed her hair back from her forehead. 'Of course I don't know exactly...' Again she fell silent, her gaze fixed on the distance with such concentration that he tried to follow it with his eyes — but there was nothing special at the spot she was looking at, so it was evidently not a matter of spotting anything in particular. 'How good a fighter are you really?' she asked without warning.

He shrugged. 'I was fairly good in the poleis, and the Naineshi... well, that was a sort of praise too.' The question embarrassed him. He had the feeling of having to prove himself in front of her, and that was rather difficult. She was a personality that took up room, oddly demanding and even a little frightening, if he was honest.

'I think the last part matters more,' she said. 'If the water-breathers say something positive, then there's probably something in it. I think you can be as good as you like in the poleis; here you'll find your master quickly enough.'

Very decidedly she took his arm and pulled him with her, against the flow of the crowd in the street.

'Hey, what are you planning?' he protested. 'Stand still a moment.' He could not let himself be dragged through

the streets by her like an uncomprehending donkey, at any rate not if he wanted her lasting respect. This... this would not do.

And so he stood still. She turned round in surprise. 'What's the matter?' she asked impatiently. 'Come on! I have an idea!'

'So you said.' He did not move from the spot, although she was tugging at his arm and passers-by were jostling him.

'Yes, and so why are you standing there?'

'Because it's *your* idea. I don't even know where you want to go. And I don't know whether your notion is to my taste at all.'

'Don't you trust me?'

The question left him perplexed. Where had that come from? 'What has that to do with it?'

'If you trust me, you come along. Or not?'

He shook his head. 'That's not the point. But why the hurry? What's this about?'

She looked at him for a moment, then her gaze went off into the distance again. 'I don't know,' she admitted then.

'What don't you know?'

'Why I'm in such a hurry. It's a feeling.'

'What? And so you simply set off at a run?' He stayed stubborn.

A steep furrow appeared between her eyes. 'That's how we met, you dreamer! I spoke to you because I had a feeling. That was good for you, wasn't it?'

It sounded annoyed, but he bore it. If he gave way now, she would go on shoving him about. That helped neither of them.

'Well?' she asked, plainly angry now. 'Are you coming or not?'

He nodded slowly. 'As soon as you tell me what this is about.'

Now she let go of his arm. For a very short moment she was speechless, then she threw her hands towards the sky. 'Aaaaah,' she cried. 'Gods, you're stubborn!' The furrow of anger on her forehead had gone all the same; instead she was smiling. 'Come along.' When she saw his closed expression she quickly added: 'Only over there, so we're out of the way. Otherwise they will run us both down here!'

Obediently he trotted after her. Slowly he was growing curious.

* * *

The massive counting-house of the trading house Gooregan loomed a little darkly above them as they walked down to the Ciena Quay, familiar to Pridias from his arrival. For all its size, the counting-house could not conceal the enormous Torch standing far behind it towards the sea, at the harbour mouth.

That the great tower impressed him so much made Pridias angry for a moment. He was sick of feeling like a village simpleton. On the other hand... he had not left his more or less safe life in order *not* to enjoy the wonders of the world. And had he not decided, only a little while ago, to seize his chance and set out, perhaps even to leave the Tjella' Islands? How was he to do that without standing open-mouthed from time to time?

Their goal lay a little below the trading house on the Ciena Quay, in one of the many houses ranged along the shore of the bay, most of them several storeys high, many in poor condition. The building they were making for, however, had been freshly renovated and looked inviting despite the barred windows and the solid entrance gate. Pridias tried to fathom why, but could not really settle it. True, the house had been newly rendered, the window and door frames painted, but why should that make such a difference?

Lysia tugged his arm and pointed to the flags flying from the roof of the house. They were blue-black, with a red device in the middle made up of strokes that meant nothing to Pridias. They were not the characters of the poleis, but neither were they the Adjagard letters used on the continent.

'Shay-Beshi,' she said. 'Do you remember when I told you about the Realm of the Eleven and the Empire of the Three Powers? There were Dandereds sitting at the next bench.'

He nodded.

'The characters on the flag — that's Gomeric,' she explained. 'The language as it's spoken in Dan Dered. The founder of the Shay-Beshi learned in Dan Dered. The characters mean Shay-Beshi; the translation I don't know.'

'Everlasting learning,' said a voice behind them.

They spun round. The quay was not so densely packed with people as most streets in the city, and Pridias would have sworn they would notice if anyone came near.

The man now standing behind them must have flown. He was smiling, and in general he seemed very friendly, though not harmless. An impressive scar ran across his face, and the muscular arms too were covered with a white lacework of scars, as Pridias knew from the swordsmen he had trained with during his time in the navy.

The man was obviously from the Tjella' Islands; his features showed the typical marks of the poleis, and the shape of nose and eyes spoke volumes. His clothing, though, was unusual: a loosely cut shirt with fairly tight cloth trousers, and a black beret on which Pridias now made out the same Gomeric characters as on the flag.

Still smiling, the man put out his hand — first to Lysia, and when she had shaken it, in a very continental gesture, he offered it to Pridias as well, who took it readily. There was something disarming about the man, in the way too that he now introduced himself: 'Kryas is my name. From Tsuropolis in the western islands. I'm one of the instructors at the Shay-Beshi school.'

'Oh,' said Lysia. 'How marvellous. I wouldn't have thought there were Shay-Beshi instructors from the Tjella' Islands so soon after the opening.'

He laughed, and that sounded friendly too.

'I was away from the islands for a time,' he replied. 'I learned in Rinjapur; the Shay-Beshi have been established there for longer.' He made an inviting movement with his hand. 'If you like, take a look inside our school. We're in the middle of building it up; everything is still new and exciting.'

'Gladly!' said Lysia, and something in her readiness gave Pridias a sting. How old was this fellow? Why did she have to beam at him like that?

Kryas raised a hand. 'You're in particular luck. We have a demonstration shortly; some businessmen of the city want to know more about us.'

'So there's something to see!' Lysia balanced her excessive enthusiasm by taking Pridias's arm and pulling him against her. That gave him another sting, though this time of the positive kind. His heart began to knock. Now the spark leapt across. A demonstration! He could hardly wait to see what the Shay-Beshi had to offer.

A carriage came racing onto the quay, driven by a reckless driver who made people to left and right of the quay jump aside to avoid being run down. The vehicle came to a halt directly in front of the school; out sprang heavily armed muscle-men who made room for another figure — with excessive ceremony, considering that nobody roundabout was actually in their way.

Kryas frowned. 'Master Shem won't like that,' he said. 'He hates that kind of entrance. Let's hope it doesn't cause trouble.'

'Who's Master Shem?' Lysia asked.

'The head of the school,' Kryas answered, but his friendly smile had gone, and he seemed absent as he now set off. They followed him, but he barely seemed to notice them any more.

The muscle-men and the figure they were guarding had disappeared into the house; the carriage still stood before the entrance, so that they had to squeeze past it. Kryas threw the driver a black look, but the man seemed wholly uninterested and took no notice of them at all.

The inside of the school was cool, and very dark after the sunlight out on the quay. Later Pridias would learn that this was a protection against intruders — the Shay-Beshi inside always had the advantage that their eyes were already accustomed to the darker surroundings, while newcomers were still struggling with it. Just now it was merely a nuisance to him, and yet he was deeply impressed as the outlines of the interior peeled themselves piece by piece out of the dark.

The ground floor of the school consisted essentially of one large room with a multitude of windows that steeped it in warm light. The room was kept in shades of orange and largely laid with mats; near the entrance stood a row of tables and chairs of fine wood around a marble counter, above which hung the flag of the Shay-Beshi — and a painted portrait of two men standing side by side. They

looked very different: one of them round, almost fat, with a broad grin, the other with a delicate smile, his strikingly cut face framed by long dark hair. A tap over a basin on the wall behind the counter showed that here too the modern achievements of the continent were valued.

On the walls of the room hung weapons of every sort, plainly not for decoration alone. Swords, staves, all manner of cutting and thrusting weapons. Knives and throwing weapons were within reach as well. In the middle Pridias saw a spiral staircase leading upward, mounted in the centre of a swimming pool, this too set in marble. He thought that well conceived — anyone wanting to go up had to cross the water on stones or get wet feet. Was there another way to the upper storeys? The spiral staircase looked narrow and anything but comfortable. An effective defensive measure.

Most astonishing was how spacious the school was, for all the number of people in it. In the furthest corner a group was busy warming up, at least if Pridias read their movements rightly. At one of the windows on the opposite side two young women were sharpening knives, and in the sunlight falling in from outside they looked as deadly as the flashing blades in their hands.

The visitor stood on the matted floor, still surrounded by his guards. He was impatient to draw attention to himself, and he was succeeding. Down the spiral staircase came a rather small, somewhat round man with a shaven head and a little chin-beard that gave his round face something roguish, striking enough that Pridias noticed it even from his position near the entrance.

A smile lay on the man's features as he swung off the end of the staircase towards the visitor, holding on to the rail and swinging his right leg, like a small boy called to supper.

'What can I do for you?' he asked cheerfully, with a marked stress on the first word.

The visitor's answer came barking, but so indistinctly that Pridias did not catch it.

The round man apparently did, for he answered lightly: 'But we know that already! Master il-Aksos sent word yesterday to announce himself.' He nodded amiably, and then, as if it had only just occurred to him, added: 'Oh, and could you take your shoes off our mat, by the way?' To this he made a shooing motion with his hands, which looked strange directed at heavily armed men.

Accordingly they did not move, but merely looked to their leader. He too made no move to go. 'We're here to make certain that everything is properly prepared and secured,' he barked instead. With some effort Pridias understood him this time, even though he was still busy placing the name he had just heard. il-Aksos? Here? Today? Right now? What a strange coincidence.

Lysia had caught it too. 'Don't you dare start believing in the hand of fate,' she murmured to him. The idea had not occurred to him at all, but now that she had said it, it did not sound so foolish. That in this enormous city he should cross the path of the very man he had come for, and by chance at that? Was that not rather far-fetched?

'Look at that rat who speaks for il-Aksos,' she whispered. She was standing very close beside him now, and she was right. The man on the mat was behaving with marked boorishness. The men who had been training at the back of the room now stood motionless and looked across. Kryas, who had greeted them so pleasantly before, was moving slowly along the wall.

Although the atmosphere in the room was charging itself with tension in this way, the man who had come down the spiral staircase was still bubbling over with good humour. 'How lovely that you take such care of Master il-Aksos. Is there some reason for concern, then? Is the good master in trouble with somebody? Does he bring danger with him when he visits us?'

Lysia giggled at this method of playing the ball back. The visitor did not share her amusement. 'What's that supposed to mean?' he snapped. 'Who are you, anyway?'

The small man nodded, as if he had been waiting for the question. 'My name is Sheman Adjevan; my students call me Master Shem. I'm the master of this house, and I should like you to get off my mat.'

That set the muscle-men moving, and the other people watching in the hall still more. The women at the window stopped sharpening their knives and now held them ready before them. Kryas had armed himself too. Loosely in both hands he held an impressive staff with blades at either end. Pridias could not imagine how such a device might be handled to any purpose without inflicting serious injury on oneself — but it was quite possible that precisely this

training was responsible for the many cut scars on the man's arms.

'My master won't be pleased at this kind of reception,' the visitor snapped. 'And it's not advisable in this city to annoy him.'

Master Shem remained imperturbably calm. 'Nobody here is being annoyed, so long as you step off my mat promptly. There's stone floor by the entrance; from there you can watch the demonstration excellently.'

The visitor spun round towards the entrance, and a furious glance brushed Pridias and Lysia, who were still standing there.

'Ugh, even his face looks like a rat's,' she remarked. A shade too loudly, perhaps; Pridias wondered in all seriousness whether the man had heard it.

But he turned his anger back on the martial arts master. 'Man, do you know who you're dealing with?'

'With somebody standing on my clean mats in dirty shoes,' came the calm answer. 'And I don't like that.'

That brought the barrel to overflowing. The visitor took a step forward and made a grab for Master Shem's collar. It did not work, for Shem withdrew by a fraction of a centimetre, and while the attacker snatched at empty air, he pulled at his sleeves. A kick to the shin of the stumbling man brought him down. He hit the mats with a crash, while Master Shem stood over him with an innocent expression, arms raised in a gesture of helplessness.

'You see,' the teacher said to the muscle-men, 'this is why I like to keep the mats clean. Because somebody is forever landing face down on them.'

Lysia giggled again, and Pridias would happily have sunk into the floor. After everything he had heard of il-Aksos so far, it was probably a bad idea to make fun of one of his henchmen. At that moment, however, a booming laugh rang out behind them, followed by hearty clapping.

'Splendid,' cried a deep voice with a marked Tjella' accent. 'Quite wonderful! I see I shall not be bored here.'

A corpulent, very tall gentleman in expensive clothing had entered the school behind them and now came closer with a confident stride. 'Excuse me,' he said as he pushed past Lysia, laying a hand on her shoulder as he did — a fleshy, powerful hand with lacquered fingernails. With long strides he stepped to the edge of the mat, where he stripped off his shoes with such an overstated gesture that it could escape nobody. Which it would not have done in any case; every eye in the room was on him.

Barefoot he walked across the laid-out mats, almost dancing, which looked distinctly silly. He pushed the muscle-men aside and stepped up beside the fallen spokesman of the group.

'Georgios, what are you doing here!' he cried, offering the man a hand to help him to his feet. Then, with excessive theatre, he beat non-existent dust from his clothing and patted him in the face with one hand, as if to make sure nothing was amiss.

Through the whole of this performance the air in the room grew thicker. Pridias found it difficult to breathe, and the impression only strengthened when the newcomer extended his fat hand to Master Shem.

'Wado il-Aksos,' he thundered. 'It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, worthy Sheman. A good name, I must say. Distinguished in the fore and in the rear. I have studied with great attention the works of the famous world-traveller Sheman'O, and it delights me to meet a namesake of that celebrated scholar.'

Master Shem took the offered hand and shook it. 'Welcome to the Shay-Beshi,' he said. 'I take it these watchdogs answer to your word. Perhaps you might finally send them off my mat.'

Georgios, back on his feet, flinched noticeably at these unfriendly words, but il-Aksos himself, the legendary king of crime, feared throughout Naineshos, made himself obliging.

'But of course!' he cried. 'Naturally! Off the mat, lads! How could you be so careless! You can see everything here is still new and shining. One doesn't go tramping over it in shoes. Get on with it!'

He also gave Georgios an ungentle shove, which led Pridias to suspect the whole performance would have a sequel later.

All of it seemed unreal, but what did he know of the customs of the underworld in great cities? Beyond the fact that he wanted no part of such a masquerade. Under no circumstances.

The whole troop around il-Aksos now left the mat and trudged towards the entrance, and so directly towards Lysia and Pridias. Hard looks met them. One of the men — broad shoulders, tattooed arms, shaven head — fixed on Pridias and thrust his chin up in challenge when Pridias returned the look. His heart beat in his throat. The situation was unpleasant, and he did not want to be drawn into it if serious quarrels broke out here.

Slipping away was no longer possible. It got worse still: Wado il-Aksos came waddling along beside his men towards them, threw an appreciative glance at Lysia and winked at Pridias like an old comrade before planting himself beside the two of them. His henchman Georgios stopped beside him. Lysia found this unpleasant too, as Pridias noticed, because she pressed closer to him.

'Not many spectators here, it seems to me,' il-Aksos remarked in a patronising tone to nobody in particular. 'But then again, there's probably not much of a demonstration either.'

Out on the mats Master Shem had gone over to the small group who had been doing their warm-up exercises at the back of the school. The women at the window strolled across as well; only Kryas stood behind the counter.

As Pridias had feared, il-Aksos now turned to him. 'Well, laddie, seems the two of us are almost alone. What are you hoping for here?'

Pridias cleared his throat. 'I'm only curious,' he answered.

'Curious! Yes, that's a fine thing, when something new comes to the city, and a fighting school at that. One likes to go along and see what's on offer.'

He nodded, understanding, almost fatherly. Thoughtfully he added: 'And of course times are hard. Perhaps a young man like you wants to make something of himself too, and is considering starting at a school like this. I hear one can take a one-year here. Go through a training. Even be paid for binding oneself to the school. And afterwards one is somebody, has connections. Might stay on, or take service elsewhere. There's something in that.'

Of the possibility of a year's training Pridias was hearing for the first time. That was far more than he would have expected of the Shay-Beshi, since it meant not only receiving the training free but paid work along with it.

'Must be tempting for a young man, eh?' il-Aksos nudged Georgios with his hand. 'What do you think, old friend? A good offer, isn't it?'

'Outstanding,' the man confirmed, wiping a hand across his chin. His honour was still bruised from his unexpected fall.

'Splendid!' il-Aksos clapped his hands. 'First rate! Like something dreamed in a temple, unbelievable. One has to think of it first. I mean, they're geniuses, these Shay-Beshi. Real geniuses!'

His enthusiasm sounded false and dishonest, and presumably that was how it was meant. The crime king was sending a message to the newcomers in his city; that

he was watching them, and that he had understood their game.

Lysia pointed out to Pridias later how threatened a local power in the underworld must feel by the appearance of an organisation spanning the whole of Isrogant, and all the more so if it truly took warriors under contract who could be used for whatever purpose. She explained to him too that for those in power, whether prince, duke or elected city council, it was an equal threat to harbour such a small private army inside their own walls — which was also why she had no faith that the Shay-Beshi would be welcome in the poleis of the Tjella' Islands.

Before any more words could fall, another group entered the room through the front door. Businessmen, it appeared, carefully dressed and exuding prosperity, and greeted by Kryas as though he had been expecting them.

A little later Master Shem stepped forward and said, with a brief bow: 'A warm welcome to our Shay-Beshi school on Nainos Bay. That we have been able to awaken your interest is an honour to us.'

Smiling, he studied the small group of spectators in its strange composition, then went on: 'Each of you is certainly here for a particular reason, and at the end of the demonstration we shall give you the opportunity to ask any question you please. But we shall begin with a short overview of our training programme. Since the founding of the Shay-Beshi by the masters Shivan Germont and Ash Gooregan, we have worked to enable every student to find his own fighting style. As various as people are, so various

is their way of fighting. You will therefore witness very different forms of movement and see variable possibilities of defence, with and without weapons.'

These were no empty promises. What the men and women showed over the following half hour was remarkably varied. It went far beyond anything Pridias had learned in his own time as a soldier. The instructors of the navy in Ephedis seemed to be lagging far behind their age, if this was really how they fought on the continent.

Each of the Shay-Beshi showed exercises with a set of weapons in which he had specialised, and to each of these weapons belonged its own collection of exercises with and without a partner, these too apparently tailored to the individual student. Speed, precision and body control were outstanding, which the gang members around il-Aksos seemed to see as well, taking the growing restlessness among them as evidence.

They reacted most clearly to the demonstrations of unarmed fighting. The Shay-Beshi way of fighting found no favour with the muscular strongmen: highly flexible, very mobile, unbelievably adaptable. The demonstrators never let themselves be drawn into a trial of strength, but gave way, evaded, used every limb as a weapon.

'All theatre,' one of il-Aksos's thugs grumbled behind Pridias. 'If I get my hands on those lads they won't go dancing about like that. Then it's a smack in the snout.'

A fine smile appeared on the face of his boss, which the speaker himself probably did not notice at all, but which Pridias registered all the more clearly. Rightly so, as it

turned out when the demonstration ended and Master Shem joined the spectators to answer their questions.

Wado il-Aksos took the floor at once. 'Master Shem, I liked your show!' he declared. 'Acrobatics, body control, marvellous choreography. I'm delighted!'

'Pleased to hear it.' The sarcasm in Master Shem's voice was unmistakable, but il-Aksos acted as though he had not noticed, leaning forward instead, a fat finger laid thoughtfully against his lips, his eyes narrowed to slits as if he were pursuing some deeper thought.

'One of my men here, however, has raised an interesting question.' He turned round and pointed at the earlier speaker, who all at once went quite stiff as he moved into the centre of attention. 'This young man remarks that all this perhaps only looks so good because it's arranged in advance. Perhaps none of it works against a real opponent?'

Master Shem sighed, as though he had seen it coming. 'That's presumably the nature of a demonstration. To show a range, not fights to the death.'

'You're quite right there, of course, Master Shem. Absolutely right!' il-Aksos folded his fleshy arms across his imposing belly. 'On the other hand... I'm not convinced. I think my young friend here has raised an important point. I should very much like to see how a Shay-Beshi reacts when he's not playing about with his own comrades.'

'An interesting view. But not the right place and the right time.' Master Shem smiled amiably. 'We're among friends and interested parties here. This isn't about

winning. And your companions seem a little over-motivated.' The last sentence he said with such an obvious grin that it was already a provocation, and the jolt that went through il-Aksos's people made it plain the message had arrived.

With a mild shock Pridias understood that Master Shem was not declining the challenge at all. He was only playing the innocent, because he wanted to keep the moral high ground. The situation here would lead to serious trouble; of that there was no doubt now. He wanted to be out of this sharpening of the mood as fast as possible. He had nothing to do with these people's quarrels.

He exchanged a glance with Lysia, who seemed to be of his opinion. She made a movement of the head towards the exit, and he nodded briefly.

But as he turned to go, a heavy hand settled on his shoulder. 'Young man, where are you off to?' il-Aksos's voice boomed in his ears. 'You look to me as though you have some training behind you as well... and since you don't belong to my people, Master Shem will hardly suspect you of being over-motivated. Perhaps one of his men will dare to face you and prove the superiority of the Shay-Beshi.'

A cold shiver ran down Pridias's back. This had to be a nightmare. 'I don't believe I'm the right man for that,' he answered hoarsely.

But il-Aksos held on to him. 'Nonsense!' he cried. 'Don't be coy! Here you can show what you have in you. Perhaps Master Shem will even want to keep you here afterwards.'

He winked. 'Or perhaps I shall? I can always use good men!'

Pridias shook his head. 'I'm not suitable, I think.'

The crime king's grip grew firmer. He had considerable strength. 'Now I really am becoming curious!' he said. 'You don't look like a coward to me.'

It was hot in the room, the faces around him seemed to be coming closer, and Pridias was relieved to hear the voice of Master Shem: 'The poor boy!' he cried. 'Doesn't know what's happening to him. Let him go; you can put up one of your men and I shall fight him.'

'All of a sudden?' il-Aksos sounded surprised, but his grip did not loosen by a millimetre. 'No, I don't know. I think this fine fellow here should have his chance. You're no coward, lad, are you?'

'Truly, Master il-Aksos, I'm not the right choice here.'

'Not?' Now there was something unmistakably threatening in the gang leader's voice. 'Lad, now you must decide. Man or milksop. Fighter or victim. What do you say?'

Pridias caught Lysia's eye — that her usually confident eyes now looked frightened as well finished him. Abruptly it was clear to him that there was no way out. He could measure himself against a Shay-Beshi here, or against il-Aksos's thugs outside the door, and faced with that choice the decision was plain.

He nodded. 'Very well,' he said in a cracked voice. 'Very well. If somebody makes himself available, I shall fight.'

* * *

To his surprise it was Kryas who stepped up at once as the school's representative. Pridias had the feeling that Master Shem agreed so hesitantly above all because he would have preferred a real fight... but perhaps that was a mistake too, and the Shay-Beshi teacher was genuinely concerned for the innocent guest who now found himself in such an unpleasant position.

And so Pridias dutifully took his shoes off at the edge of the matted floor, not without noticing that he badly needed new ones in any case. He did his best not to look too foolish while he went through the warm-up exercises he had learned in his military training.

Kryas watched him attentively, then came over and bent down to him. 'What sort of training do you have?' he asked quietly. 'You're not completely raw, are you?'

Pridias shook his head. 'No, I was with the water-fighters of the navy in Ephedis. I'm only here at all because a talent-scout recruited me at the contests in Laryngos.'

Kryas raised his eyebrows. 'A talent-scout? Who sent him?'

'Hard to believe, but it was Wado il-Aksos.'

'You work for him?' Kryas's voice went suddenly sharp, but he relaxed again at once when Pridias shook his head. 'No, but I wanted to. Only... after that performance...' He swallowed the rest, aware that their words might be overheard.

The Shay-Beshi clapped him benevolently on the shoulder. 'A water-fighter, then,' he observed thoughtfully.

Pridias smiled faintly. 'I'm afraid I'll have next to no chance against you. From what I saw in the demonstration... ouch.'

'We don't have to overdo it,' the other grinned, and clapped his shoulder again.

Perhaps he had meant it seriously — and possibly he did not find the beginning of their contest particularly demanding either. For Pridias it looked different. He had learned to use his hands for striking and to work out advantages by way of solid stances. His trainers had schooled him in wrestling too — valuable for close combat, and knowledge of inestimable worth in the water, where punches and kicks had little real effect.

Kryas, though, used arms and legs in an entirely unfamiliar way. His movements were fast and unpredictable. If his foot twitched upward for a kick, it might be his knee that landed at the end of it, and instead of the head it was the body that had to absorb the attack. The same went for the hands. Kryas struck with the fist, with the edge of the hand, but just as fast with fingertips or knuckles at sensitive places that Pridias had never learned to cover in his classical training: elbows, ribs, the sides of the head, and again and again painful points on arms, legs and torso.

None of these hits was dangerous in itself. Taken together they were exhausting and demoralising. All the more so because it was almost impossible to hit the

Shay-Beshi at all, let alone get hold of him. He was like water — he gave way, moved around the attacks or took them in, so that Pridias stumbled or found himself in a hold from which he first had to work himself free with some effort.

With growing doggedness he searched for a way of putting Kryas under real pressure, but the man still gave a relaxed impression. With arms and legs he kept Pridias at a distance, though he did not depend on them, for as soon as Pridias launched an attack he used its energy. He hardly ever went backwards.

The situation was maddening. Pridias began to wish Kryas were more active, so that he could break off the fight and declare himself the loser. But however hard he pushed, nothing changed.

Nor did it help much to grow more passive himself and wait for an attack from the Shay-Beshi. Going by the experience of the last minutes there would be no adequate answer to such an attack... unless...

On a sudden decision Pridias began to give way himself. As covertly as he could he lured his opponent backwards, even though the man made that hard for him: he was set on reaction, not action, which meant that Pridias had to launch attack after attack in order to fall apparently into the defensive afterwards.

It could certainly have gone on that way for a long time — Lysia told him later that il-Aksos's muscle-men were already grumbling, while Master Shem watched with great interest — but at last they reached the edge of the pool in

the middle of the hall, and Pridias launched one last attack in order then to throw himself into the water. Kryas hesitated only a moment, presumably because he saw through Pridias's attempt to turn the situation to his own advantage, but then he followed, with a quick header, elegant as a dolphin.

The Shay-Beshi entered the water perfectly, without splash or turbulence. He was fast and dynamic, but that did not help him: in the clear water Pridias could see exactly where he was moving. No sooner had Kryas surfaced than Pridias covered him with sprayed water, like a child at the beach, and yet highly effective. The wall of water took his sight and created confusion, which Pridias used to close the distance between them and land, at last, a real hit.

With a swing Pridias wound himself around his opponent, his right hand between nose and upper lip, applying painful pressure and cutting off his air, his left hand sliding upward after a short hand-edge strike to the kidney on the other side of the head. Astonished, Kryas found himself dragged beneath the surface again, Pridias's arms slung about his neck while the legs too now locked around him and pulled him into the depth.

Kryas did the only right thing: he yielded and let himself be pulled, speculating that his attacker would need air again at some point too. Only in this case that was a poor decision. Pridias was trained to stay active for a long time without breath, he was an outstanding diver, and he had taken air once more before his attack. As they touched the floor of the pool, he tightened his grip and pressed the

Shay-Beshi harder down until he felt that the man could no longer suppress his breathing reflex.

Pridias gave him room and allowed him to surface, while he dealt him several blows to the soft parts. Then he set himself moving in a flash, came up through the surface ahead of Kryas and greeted the Shay-Beshi with another wall of water that took his sight and his air and allowed Pridias to push him straight back under. Kryas struck wildly about him, but Pridias forced his head down once more, so that the Shay-Beshi rotated about the long axis of his body and lost his orientation. He let him come up in front of him and tore him under again at once, before he could really take breath.

Kryas's movements grew weak. His will to fight went out. Pridias reached under his right arm, set a cross-lock and hauled him to the edge of the pool. He refrained from striking his half-unconscious opponent's head against the stone rim, as he would have done with a real enemy — instead he lifted him half out of the water and gave him a shove, so that he landed on the mats outside it. Then he pulled himself up onto the rim.

At that moment his own exhaustion caught up with him. Weakly he raised a hand. 'Shay-Beshi,' he said, 'have to be drowned. Otherwise they appear to be unbeatable.'

* * *

He remembered a good deal of laughter on the part of the Shay-Beshi and the grinning face of Wado il-Aksos, who had evidently enjoyed his remark as well. He remembered too that some time later Lysia wounded his pride

considerably by observing that she would never have credited him with such a witty comment. The rest was somewhat blurred.

Far more important than any of it, though, was how the Shay-Beshi received him that afternoon. While the spectators, the feared crime leader among them, left the school, they wrapped Kryas and Pridias in dry towels, brought them warm drinks and installed them on a window seat with a view of the quay.

'That was very instructive,' Kryas said after a while, grinning. 'I'm not going swimming with you again.'

Pridias smiled faintly. The memory of the ease with which the Shay-Beshi had dominated him out of the water was still all too clear. 'Your methods are very strange,' he observed.

'Ah, there's a concept behind it. Once you have understood it, it becomes quite easy.' Kryas beamed over the top of his cup. 'Isn't it marvellous? I love what I'm learning here!'

'Is there still room?' another voice interrupted their conversation. Without waiting for an answer, Lysia dropped onto the window seat beside Pridias. Critically she studied his face, took it between her hands and turned it this way and that to inspect his bruises. 'You have knocked him about properly, you Orc!' she snapped in Kryas's direction, but he buried his nose unmoved in his beaker and said nothing.

'He was kind,' answered Master Shem instead, joining them with a chair on which he sat astride. 'And that's as it

should be. There's no need for your young friend to take harm because Wado il-Aksos is an idiot.'

For a short while there was silence, broken only by the other Shay-Beshi in the room clearing away their equipment, and then he went on: 'But what you did there in the water... that I find very interesting.'

Pridias pushed Lysia aside; she was now examining his upper body for injuries, which was getting on his nerves more and more. She confused him. She did it constantly. How could she behave so extremely childishly, precisely now, when the Shay-Beshi teacher had joined them as well? On the other hand, without her he would not be here at all, and she always seemed so fearless and self-assured, as if she knew exactly what she was doing.

'That was nothing special. I saw in the demonstration that you train in the water too.'

Shem and Kryas exchanged a glance. 'We don't do much water fighting,' the teacher said. 'All of that's still in its infancy. But you seem to have talent. You could become a great warrior.'

Lysia leaned forward, ears pricked, gaze attentive. Her behaviour now irritated Master Shem as well. He was visibly put off his stride. 'What's it?' he asked in her direction.

'I'm interested!' she answered. 'This is turning into a recruitment interview, isn't it? I have heard a great deal about the Shay-Beshi, and about how they take on good people all over Isrogant.'

'Have you?' Shem's voice sounded taken aback, and Lysia laughed in her girlish way.

'Well, only in the last few weeks, really, since the school here in Naineshos opened,' she admitted.

Shem nodded. 'I thought as much.' He indicated Pridias and asked in her direction: 'May I carry on, then?' With an approving wave she replied: 'Do go ahead.'

Pridias felt like a piece of furniture whose price was being haggled over. Quick-thinking, quick-talking, quick-acting people like Lysia gave him this feeling constantly, of lagging behind.

Instead of picking up the thread again, however, Shem said something entirely different. 'It's beautiful here.' He pointed out of the window, at Nainos Bay, the islands with their impressive buildings, the quay, the ships. It was a picturesque sight, and from here, from the window of the school, it all seemed very peaceful. So Pridias nodded, not sure what was expected of him.

'But you're not from here?'

Pridias shook his head.

'Do you want to stay here?'

He almost shook his head again, but then his glance fell on Lysia, and to his astonishment she was looking at him too. 'Do I?' he asked.

'I have no idea,' she answered. 'But listen first to what he has to offer you. I think Master Shem is driving at something.'

'I thank you, young lady.' Mischief flashed in the eyes of the Shay-Beshi master. It suited his round, small-grown figure and his friendly face well. But it did not help Pridias in dealing with the situation. It did not match his idea of what should go on in a school of martial arts. Somehow he had expected dignified old masters passing on deep secrets in an atmosphere of spiritual detachment. This here was something else entirely, and nobody seemed to hold Lysia's disrespect against her.

'I really am driving at something.' Master Shem ran his hands through his stubbly hair. 'I can offer you a place as a one-year with us here at the Shay-Beshi school, if you have no other obligations. You bring talent and fighting spirit with you. We could use you well.'

That sounded better; Pridias sat up, but before he could agree, Master Shem raised his hand. 'That's the one possibility,' he said. 'But before I came here to Naineshos I spent a few months in another harbour city, in Ciena, one of the centres of the Shay-Beshi movement. The teacher there's one of the founders of our system, and I could imagine he would be interested in what you can do and know in the water. You could serve your one-year in Ciena and work on the concept yourself at the same time. I would give you a letter of recommendation to take with you.'

Kryas drew a sharp breath at these words. Shem heard it. 'Easy now, my friend,' he said. 'I know I'm making a fairly green boy a fairly good offer. But you experienced how he held out against you, and how quickly he finished

you in the water. Quite an achievement for such a lad, considering what you're capable of, isn't it?'

Kryas did not answer, but he leaned back. Pridias found that remarkable and wondered whether the young Shay-Beshi's easy acceptance of such open words spoke more of subordination or of self-assurance.

For a while all four of them stared out at the sea while Pridias thought. After the last days with all their setbacks and sudden surprises, it was hard for him to make a decision of such weight from one moment to the next. Leave the Tjella' Islands? Seriously? A few hours ago the thought had been attractive to him, but now it frightened him.

He looked at Lysia, who was the reason he was sitting here and not wandering about somewhere on the streets. She smiled at him. 'By the waters of the Flood — what's holding you back? You're free as a bird!' she said. 'I would come along at once!'

His heart missed a beat. How seriously did she mean that?

'You would always miss Naineshos!'

'Yes, and so? I can always come back!' she replied. '*Getting away* is the problem!'

They sat in silence again for a while, then Master Shem stood up. 'My offer stands,' he said. 'From my own experience I can tell you: that I left my home and went out into the world... that was the best decision of my life.' He grinned. 'But I don't want to talk anyone into anything.'

With that he went. He took his chair with him and set it down by the entrance before disappearing up the spiral staircase into the upper part of the house.

Pridias looked at Kryas. He was smiling. 'I think you should stay with it,' he said. 'That gives me the chance to pay you back some day.' His smile widened to a broad grin. 'And the offer of your sweet companion,' he indicated Lysia, who rolled her eyes at the description, 'that I would accept too. The school in Ciena is large; there's room for her as well, I'm sure.'

He too stood up now and folded his towel. 'Oh, before I forget,' he said then, and pointed out of the window at one of the ships at the quay. 'That one out there's a frigate of the trading house Gooregan. She sails for Ciena this week. I think Master Shem will get you aboard her, if you say yes.'

With that he clapped Pridias on the shoulder — for the third time that day — and nodded amiably to Lysia.

As he left the training hall, Pridias looked out of the window again. Across to the ship for Ciena.

# About Isrogant

Isrogant has grown through decades of human writing and play. Its novels, stories and games share a world shaped by the Fall of Adjagard and the Great Flood: limited characters, costly magic, institutions with their own interests, and consequences that persist.

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