

# Competition

"You ready to find out what it's like to be a loser?" Nilmn jovially asked his friend.

"Something you're familiar with," Thomiko shot back.

"Ha! That's funny. Who owes who thirty Coin?"

"Ah yes, but that has nothing to do with fishing. Where it really counts, we both know who's going to win."

"Admitting defeat already?" Nilmn smiled but he knew Thomiko was the better fisher. He always won.

The banter escalated as the pair crossed the market square with their fishing beasts, four Kvamda each, in tow. They pulled their cloaks to them as a strong wind whipped their long, dark hair behind them ruffling their short, fine body fur. Artisans setting up their stalls wrestled with their awnings as the blustery wind threatened to snatch them away. The air still had a bite to it despite the warmth of the spring sun.

A deep, booming voice hailed the pair from behind. They turned and spotted Zagshez running towards them. His pointed chin was the foremost feature of his face and from just above the two parallel, vertical slits of a nose, a single bony crest swept back to his spine. His features revealed him to be, quite literally, a race apart.

Zagshez's arrival did nothing to abate the banter between Nilmn and Thomiko, in fact his contributions only escalated it. The laughing trio passed under the tall arch of the gatehouse and onto the quay where the wind, unhindered as it had been within the town walls, buffeted them hard.

"Well, I'll leave you children here 'cos I gotta head upriver today," Zagshez announced. "Cirychn sighting."

"Rather you than me," Nilmn genuinely acknowledged as Zagshez departed across the stone bridge spanning the town from the forest. Cirychn hunting was dangerous work and involved underwater tracking. Although Nilmn could hold his breath for a good ten minutes, as any Meoqai could, Zagshez was amphibious with webbed hands and feet, so was ideally suited to the task. A fact he bemoaned way too often!

Nilmn and Thomiko made their way along the quay, past the pontoons where the traders unloaded and loaded their wares, past the numerous rafts used for travel on the river and finally arrived at

the fishing poles. Each pole was a tree trunk that had been rammed into the riverbed alongside the quay, with wooden pegs running up to the top. The poles were at least four times the height of Nilmn and close to their tops two wood arms stuck out either side to act as a seat. The poles swayed precariously in the wind and many already had occupants rocking back and forth on their perches.

Mocheko, an elderly, undisputed fishing artiste, was waiting for them with his cloak wrapped around his frame to keep the bitter wind out.

"At last. The part-timers are here!" he said.

"Don't you start," Thomiko responded, "I've had enough from him already this morning."

Mocheko held his hands up in a gesture of conciliation. His cloak opened and the cold wind blustered his body. He quickly snapped it shut with a shiver.

There was a shout from the town wall. Nilmn looked up to see his daughter, Ayevae, and her grandmother waving down at him. He smiled and waved back.

"So, let's get on with it then," Mocheko said. "The first to ten fish wins?" both competitors nodded their agreement. "Right. To your poles!"

With practiced ease Nilmn and Thomiko ascended their respective fishing poles, ignoring the gale threatening to pluck them away, whilst their fishing animals waited obediently at the bottom. As each reached their perch they shouted the single word that sent their Kvamda diving into the river. Thomiko's were first in and he watched their dark shapes glide a short distance underwater before their furry, round heads popped up above the choppy surface.

The pair had a bird's eye view from their posts and allowed them to pick out and track the large, darker areas of water that were, in fact, shoals of fish. On the odd occasion that a cirychn ventured close, it would be spotted and the Kvamda extricated rapidly from the river. Using crisp commands the Kvamda were guided to a shoal, made to herd the fish and then instructed to dive under to catch as many as possible. It was a team effort: handler plus Kvamda.

The contest was close and rapid. A crowd gathered and respectfully kept their comments to themselves so that the Kvamda would still hear their master's instructions. But whenever a brown head popped above the river's surface, fish clamped in jaws, a cheer would erupt. Coins were exchanged as bets were made and settled.

Nilmn edged into the lead: five fish to four. And from thereon out it was one sided. The crowd whispered amongst themselves. They'd never seen anything like it. No sooner did one of Nilmn's animals dive under than it resurfaced sporting a fish. It was incredible and by the time Thomiko had landed six fish the competition was over: Nilmn had his ten.

Nilmn beamed over at Thomiko, who was shaking his head, as they descended their poles. Reaching the bottom Nilmn enthusiastically petted his biped fishers, praising their accomplishment.

"I gotta admit, that was some of the best fishing I've ever seen," Thomiko said as he approached. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks. But it wasn't just me."

"I know. Your Kvamda were on fire today," Thomiko acknowledged as Nilmn took hold of the chain that ran down the fishing pole and yanked it three times. Underwater, at the base of the pole the chain caused a small hammer to strike a metal plate. Thomiko looked on perplexed as the contraption was only used to alert Kvamda when they were under threat. Out in the river a head popped up, smiling. Thomiko stared for an instant before it sank in; it was the amphibian, Zagshez.

Nilmn was already running back to the gatehouse, laughing loudly, when Thomiko turned to confront him.