

# Waystone, Circus of Stones

By Alps Sarsis

## Chapter 4

### *A Lesson in First Impressions*

After Unadi's playful confession about her close company with Siele, Mihr had decided to watch the camp from a little farther away. This didn't bother Unadi, as there was actually a tactical advantage since there was a much taller stand of trees a bit away from the comfortable ring of evergreens that the pair had chosen to make camp. After a good three hours of continued walking, which was also at the end of the better part of a day of travel on foot that stretched well into the night, Unadi was glad to stop.

She was glad of the distance they had gained between them and the burned down town of Emora. It had given her some time to mentally work around the tragedy. She initially felt guilty for not being able to do anything to help those who perished there, but after a while of walking she got over that, knowing that even if she *had* been there, it was unlikely she could have done anything. For a town that size there were likely already two or three Keepers there who were more experienced than she was, and they had obviously not been enough to protect the place.

It was rare for Unadi's legs to be tired, but they actually ached. It was likely because after passing the river, the trip had been largely uphill. Ibian territory on the southern border wasn't very level, she found. Siele hadn't complained much, but the Mitanni lady knew he must have been feeling it too. With the seriousness of matters at hand, perhaps he just felt like that was the least of his worries. She could understand that, certainly.

Unadi sat down as Siele spread out the sleeping bag and bedroll, and considered her situation a moment. She was in Ibian territory. She had made it at least that far and already she'd seen signs of war. The trip was far more dangerous than even *she* had assumed with the insight that Roche had provided her. She had originally thought it might just be an investigation. She would be looking for proof, documents, any kind of evidence that would show that a stone was involved. Now she had seen enough evidence to know there was proof to be had and she would have to risk her life to get it. She looked at the spotty-furred male as he patted down the sleeping bag to make it nice for her. He glanced up and saw her smiling at him. She took off her hoodie, which still bore the Keepers' seal, leaving her in a grey, lighter shirt and her shorts. She climbed into the bed roll, followed by Siele who still wore his trousers but had taken off his shirt.

"Thank you for... you know... not making me go back," he spoke softly into her ear.

"I am sure you will be taking that gratitude back before this is over," Unadi stated calmly. "But thank you for being willing to come with me. I admit that, knowing what I know now, I didn't look forward to doing this completely alone." She turned onto her side, hooking a leg over Siele's. She winced a little, her own leg being sore. She cursed the hills she had to climb. At least the trek to Aurora had been mostly flat. She caressed his bare chest, letting his fur slide between her fingers. She liked the way that felt. Siele seemed to like the way her smooth skin felt since his hand slipped around her and up the back of her shirt, claw tips running casually

over her flesh. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. She hadn't assumed that this would happen on her journey but she felt good to be held. She also hadn't dated a great deal before becoming a Keeper. It just never felt like a serious thing for her to do. With the great danger ahead of her, however, it brought her a lot of comfort to be close like this.

"I can't believe you told Mihr," the hyena chuckled softly, not wanting the cricket to hear him say his name, and come fluttering down to pester the pair.

"He'd have figured it out soon enough. He's not daft!" Unadi laughed. "I'd rather he know that way than figure it out when he flew over to check on us or something and interrupted the moment." She allowed her hand to drift from his chest down to his tummy, dexterous fingers splaying wide and enjoying the tenseness of his midriff. He might not have been terribly useful in a fight, but he was toned well enough. He could learn, perhaps.

"I know today was... rough..." Siele started. "We don't have to if you are not feeling up to it." Unadi smiled, glad that he cared enough to say it. He would forgo his own pleasure for his friend's comfort. She looked up to him and touched her mouth to his, letting the kiss deepen naturally into a long, slow, unified moment. He relaxed through it for a while but she didn't break the kiss until she felt him begin that tense-and-relax thing that let her know that he was becoming very aroused.

She broke the kiss and murmured tenderly, "Yes, today sucked, but we aren't gonna let the whole day be terrible, are we?" Siele grinned at that. Even in the dark she could tell he was blushing a bit. Was it wrong for her to want so much to do this to him? She decided she could worry about that when she was plodding endlessly uphill tomorrow. She pushed her fingertips under the waist of his pants, feeling the warm, firm shape of male lust, fingers parting in a V around it. She pushed and rolled her hand against that spire of bare flesh, letting him push back against her touch, his hips rising and falling slowly. He put his arms up under the back of his head, just letting the Mitanni girl spoil him. Unadi didn't mind. He was willing to possibly throw his life away to travel with her. He should be allowed to enjoy this. She peered in the direction of the taller trees. She wondered how good the eyesight of a Djinn was.

"I... I was curious if doing that... is entertaining to a girl?" he cautiously posed as her careful fingers curled around his swollen masculinity. She gave it a slow, pulling squeeze and thought about that a moment. It was an odd question to ask but she was glad that Siele was relaxed and comfortable enough around her to provide a question like that.

She considered how to answer that and responded in a whisper, "Is it entertaining for you if you pushed your fingers inside me, getting me to roll my hips and make happy sounds while *you* do it?" She felt him throb hard in her hand at that, and she drew her tightening digits up his shaft, feeling a little bit of pre spilling into her fingers. She slicked it back down his length and smeared that natural lubrication into her palm to rub him between her flattened hand and lower tummy. He huffed a little and nodded.

"Yes, I suppose maybe it is kind of the same. I like making you feel good." He arched a bit at the slow undulating rubbing he was getting.

"It feels good inside, even as this feels good outside," she whispered. It was true of course. It got her terrible riled up, also. She could feel her loins burning for the flesh she worked diligently in her hand. More pre trickled against her palm and made it easier to smear

while stroking him against his tummy. He trembled a bit at that. Slowly, Unadi sank into the sleeping bag, making Siele lean up a little.

“Where are you going?” he asked, as if she might be leaving camp. She undid his belt and the clasp of his trousers. “Uhh...” he murmured with uncertainty. Unadi flitted her frill a bit. It was so warm inside the sleeping bag. She opened the front of those trousers and cupped her mouth over the tip of his cock, still keeping it pushed against his tummy. She began grinding her tongue along the underside, at the tip and he dropped his head back to the ground hard, arching. “Oh my G-“ He shook a bit as she cupped his sack, feeling so full in her hands. The Mitanni girl grinned sinfully around his offering as she caressed his inner thighs up and down as she let her cheek rest against his tummy. She was pretty comfortable like this, and loved how frantic he seemed. She felt very powerful for the amount of reaction she could get with how little work it took.

Occasionally she engulfed the first few inches of his salty cock with her mouth, not minding the taste or the feel of his slick pre on her tongue. He stroked her frills, which she thought felt a bit odd, but she decided that was a natural response to creatures with fur. She accepted it, and pushed her hot mouth further over his twitching member. While she wasn't a complete stranger to sex, Unadi had never done this. She'd seen it done before at a party with a few friends. It was just as effective this time as it had looked then. There was no doubt of the pleasure it was causing.

But, just in case there *was* a question, Siele helpfully announced. “Uhhnn... Unadi, I think... you will want... to move your mouth soon...” He wasn't speaking cryptically, but he was obviously nervous about coming right out and saying it. She wrapped a hand around the base of his cock and moved her mouth to a position with about a quarter of the 8 inches of pulsing flesh beyond her lips. Her tongue swirled and pushed and darted and stroked him as he tensed up very tightly.

“By Qadesh's blessing, Unadi, you – I... Oh gods-...” He put both hands on her shoulders pushing her away slightly in obvious worry for offending the girl with what was absolutely going to happen. Unadi didn't budge. She liked making him squirm. Even if she decided she didn't like it, she would do this for the possibly doomed hyena at least this once.

It hadn't taken long to get him to this point, but she had all night and she felt that Mihr would give them space. Her tongue slowed down as he began to shake, his legs parting a bit, feet coming up off the bedroll. “Unadi I'm gonna spill-...” The Mitanni girl moaned loudly, mouth closed, around his cock. Even as he started to say it she tasted that thick release indeed spill first, then spray hard right in the middle of her tongue. She lowered the pressure in her mouth, suckling on him as he cried out in surprise at the sudden rich and overwhelming sensations. His sack shrunk closer to his body as he jetted hard in his companions tightly suckling mouth.

The first thing she discovered was that the taste was actually not bad, and the texture was certainly tolerable. The second thing she realized is that her clit was practically humming with need the moment she felt him burst. There was a deep sexual satisfaction in making the hyena blow in her mouth like that. She closed her eyes and didn't let him slip out an inch, swallowing down every pulse he gave her as he fidgeted and whimpered about it. Unadi heard another whimper too, though it wasn't in pleasure, it was in distress. This unhappy noise was further away. Apparently, Mihr wasn't far enough from their camp to be blissfully unaware of what was going on.

Finally, after a grueling minute or so, Unadi released the male from her lips and slid back up, looking at his weak, panting face. He really enjoyed that. She didn't regret it. She caressed his warm tummy slowly as she licked her lips. It was an exotic experience that she had no negative feeling about. She would do that again given the chance.

"Feel better?" she inquired warmly. Siele took a moment to answer. He was obviously surprised by the treat, which only pleased the girl more.

"I didn't think you would..." He faltered, sounding unwilling to just say it.

"What, you thought I would let you blow it all over your fur when we are possibly miles from water to wash it out?" she pried.

"Oh, so it was a tactical decision - that makes sense," Siele laughed in a raspy tone.

"No, I just wanted to make you flood my mouth, Fluffy," she practically purred. Unadi could tell it was making him shy to talk about what he did. He rubbed his face, and then made a cute 'mirp?' sound as she rolled over upon him and pinned his spent cock against his tummy with utterly soaked folds.

"Uh, I need a moment to... to..." He stared at her in what looked a little like fear and playfulness combined.

"To recharge? No, I don't feel like waiting," Unadi growled playfully. The hyena weakly struggled, pleasing the girl quite a bit. She held his shoulders, grinding herself against him in a way she knew felt far better to her than it did to him by how he whimpered.

"Please, it's too sensitive!" he whined just a little too loudly.

"Oh gods why?!" a tiny cry from the trees filtered down to them.

"Now look what you've done. Mihr is inconvenienced." The Keeper giggled a bit at that. She then slid forward, a devious idea slipping into her head. A sigh of gratitude came from the spotted male as he found his cock left bare again for a moment, but he then made another curious tone as she continued to move forward.

"Everything okay?" he asked, perhaps worrying that she was going to leave the sleeping bag, offended by his inability to keep going.

"No, but I'm not going to wait for my pleasure. It's this thing or the other." She grinned down at the anxious hyena. He didn't seem distressed at all. He smiled and closed his eyes, his dark rounded ears folding back. Unadi held her breath. Would he actually do this for her? It wasn't a popular reciprocation. His mouth cupped right over her bare, soaking, tangy sex. The girl sucked in a startled breath as a broad, powerful tongue pressed and spread her puffy, engorged folds wide around it and began to drag back and forth against the point of greatest pleasure. "Fuuuuuuck!" she whined, crumpling down to her hands and more widely parted knees. The unexpected nature of his participation only increased the immediate wealth of pleasure this caused. Mutual oral instantly became a sensational lust for Unadi. She quivered as she felt that seemingly impossibly long hyena-tongue delve deep into her body, hooking and darting and pushing in flexible ways that no other part of his body ever could. She held herself fairly rigid, unable to fully process the amount of pleasure he could cause. She surrendered

herself completely to the moment, huffing, panting loudly as that tongue pushed and slathered and hooked and darted with clumsy, lucky skill.

Perhaps it was less skill and more that it really got into her head... but in less than thirty huffing breaths, she lowered her head and gave a stifled, low, shaking moan of hot, heavy release, her inner muscles clutching fruitlessly on an organ that would give nothing but pleasure. Siele cupped his mouth on her quivering sex and ground his tongue harder and faster still as she cried out, arching her back, pushed right back to the brink, and held there by a slowing of his tongue for a bit. It was hard to tell if he was orally fatigued or if he meant to hold her in that point of near bursting, but his tongue did eventually win. She swore lewdly and lowered her chest nearly to the grass as her hips bucked slow but hard in undulating passionate heat. She finally folded her arms under her chest to keep it off the dew-lined cooler grass, panting in pleasure as that tongue stopped. There was a shifting behind her as the hyena moved out from under her thighs, which was fine; she felt that she was ill suited to changing her position for a moment.

“You aren’t the only one who likes doing that.” The soft masculine tone rumbled behind her. She held her thick rudder of lizard tail aloft to display the soaking smoldering heat that Siele was responsible for. It was more a rewarding view, not intended as an invitation exactly, but she felt him push her from behind, hands on her shoulders right before she felt his thick, very much ready-again cock spread her achingly wide. He drove himself to the hilt in a single lusty motion, getting a hard moan from the Mitanni female as she clutched responsively around that turgid flesh. Oral seemed to do as much for him as it had for her. “Are you okay... with this position?” he asked, as if it might be offensive to the more aggressive and dominant lizard girl.

“After that tonguing you gave me you can mash my face right into Anubis’ lap, Fluffy. Less gabbing, more pounding.” Unadi chastised herself silently for how depraved that must have sounded, but she gave up on her self-criticism as she felt her body begin to rock with motions from behind, that slick cock stroking in and out of her still-spasming depths. She was close enough on the heels of her previous climax that she knew she could easily cum around him again if he managed to last. She gave him control in hopes that he would, because she didn’t think she would be satisfied with tongue again if he had to stop with her right at pleasure’s gates.

“You just seem more... of an on top kind of lady...” panted Siele happily as he kept a delicious pace. “Just...wanted...to...make...sure.” Unadi groaned deeply into her folded arms, head ducked into them. What part of no talking had he missed? She just needed the hard, eager physical thing now!

“Well, now you *are* sure,” she grunted, pushing back against him. He was a little wider this time, perhaps even more deeply aroused, and his cock strummed her clit each time he bottomed out in her. She wanted to get him to push faster and keep him deep. He didn’t seem to realize this as he kept his pace even. Unadi knew she would still hit her peak like this, so she didn’t try to make him change what he was doing. Her past experience with sex had been disappointing in that regard but Siele was practically designed exactly for what she needed. She huffed hotly into the grass. A little more. He just had to keep going.

The damn fool hyena stopped to caress her back lovingly. He likely didn’t want to seem like he was just fucking her for his own pleasure. He was being romantic. Every cell in Unadi’s bluish body cried out ‘fuck that’ and she hooked her tail hard in a near perfect loop to the side of

her, the hard tip making a very audible *crack* at his rump. The spotty male cried out in a shrill girlish tone.

“What was that f-...” Unadi cut him off.

“If you stop again I swear I will cram half the length of my tail right up your tight, spotted ass, ‘yeen!” She bit her arm to shut herself up. Okay, that was pretty damned depraved. Unadi groaned as the intended effect was successful. Not only did he begin moving again, he was a little faster and stayed deeper. The motion was perfect and she just rolled her eyes back a little and gave a long, raspy moan as she gave in to the moment. This time, Siele didn't falter or stop too soon. She felt herself tightening up, coiling like a spring. A little more. She wanted a little more, and he gladly gave it. Her inner flesh seized around him hard enough that even the male groaned as Unadi felt herself flare up in climax around that still rapidly pistoning flesh. He held her hips tight and redoubled his efforts to let her enjoy it as much as she could.

“Good...fluffy...poofy...silky...boy!” cried the Mitanni girl in playful abuse. The words seemed to have a weird effect on him. He whined loudly as if his pleasure was actually somehow stoked by it. She remembered instantly why. She tormented him like that their first time too. He was remembering what it was like to fill her then, nervous and anxious and intense.

“Unadi, may I-“ He faltered, still appearing to have issues with the words to use for what he wanted.

“Yes!” she cried. He put both hands on her back just below her shoulders which wasn't the most comfortable thing, but it worked wonders for the hyena. At any rate, he could drive her face right into the Styx and she'd only want more. He only had about four or five more heavy, fast thrusts and then slammed his hips hard into her backside, pushing himself as deep as he would go while she felt him twitch hard again and again. That thick cock bounced wildly inside her as he panted hotly, giving her everything that she'd not already taken from him. Unadi groaned again helplessly as the very different sort of pleasure played through her. A sensation of satisfaction that was completely feral in nature consumed her as she felt his heat welling inside her, a completely unanswerable primal promise made that would have only mattered under the right moon with the right male.

For now, the feeling was enough! He finally drew slowly out of her, and she immediately cupped a hand just under her sex as she felt his seed pour out, not wanting it to spill all the way down to her breasts. It pooled in her cupping hand. He remained still, obviously watching that display.

“Aheh... I'm surprised it's so much after... ahh...” He sat back on his haunches and Unadi grabbed the closest thing she could find, the hyena's bandana, to tidy up. He held up a hand like he might protest, but it was too late. Unadi then slipped back down into the sleeping bag casually, as if she'd *not* just been ravaged out in the open not far from a well-known path. The hyena panted a while, overheated and unwilling to get back into the sleeping bag for a few minutes before the chilled air that rolled down from nearby mountains finally chased him in and he cuddled up against Unadi. She kissed him warmly, glad that he didn't try to dodge it given her oral activity earlier. Tasting herself on his lips was different, but not unattractive to her - particularly not as heavily sedated as she was by afterglow. In mere moments she was peacefully asleep. Despite all she had seen, her dreams were not unpleasant enough to be

remembered at least. It was a restful sleep under the watchful eye of a likely highly offended cricket Djinn.

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They broke camp early in the morning, just as the sun cast its dull light through the ground-hugging fog. There were no travelers encountered as they walked. They suspected that in this area they were likely to be the *only* travelers, as normally any others would be associated with the border town which was now gone. Unadi plodded ahead of Siele, who found his legs were a little sore from unfamiliar kinds of exercise from the day (and night) before. The Mitanni girl considered the problem of the ruined town. If Siele was right and the Ibians weren't responsible, did they know it had happened? Would they be investigating? From what she knew they were champions of order inside their borders. Would there be an investigator for the Ibians that Unadi could work with? Maybe if she approached them from the standpoint of wanting to help them, it would help more than if she were somehow accusatory or abrasive.

For three hours they walked steadily and fairly quietly. Unadi had Mihr resting on her shoulder as she walked, forgetting about the conversation the previous day about him liking being carried by her. She knew why he was in weapon form. He didn't want to be recognized from afar by Ibians. They were hours beyond the border and he knew he wasn't really welcomed there. Unadi didn't chide him for being afraid. It was in her best interest that her first impression wasn't "That Djinn-loving Mitanni girl". After the mostly silent and cautious period of arduous journey they arrived at the base of a rather impressive hill with a bit of a cliff on one side near the top. Siele inhaled deeply and spoke up.

"I am going to go up there and try to see if there are any obvious camps nearby. I don't want to come stumbling up on whoever did that village in. Not without knowing ahead of time, at least." Unadi looked at the hyena skeptically. This was uncommonly daring for someone who was petrified days before when his dad was attacked.

"Are you sure you would not rather I come with you?" the Mitanni girl asked.

"Uh, I need to do some stuff on my own." He sounded a little nervous and that made Unadi anxious. Was he hiding something? Did he not want to worry the Keeper about something he knew about in this area?

"No, I would very much rather come with you," she clarified frankly.

"I'll be fine, I really should be able to do at least a little without help," he insisted. There was a pause, an uncomfortable silence. Unadi's heart hammered. What was this all of a sudden? Finally, it was the vibrating voice of her weapon which startled her focus away from the hyena. It was easy to forget he wasn't an inanimate object when she carried him for miles.

"Mihr thinks you should let him go. He needs to go. It is important." Unadi was becoming angry, something she found she did very easily around Siele. She turned and faced him fully.

"I'm not letting him go anywhere unless he can give me a really good reason why I should." She tapped the cricket bat impatiently on her shoulder. She didn't want to seem abrasive and bitchy, but this was his life they were talking about. She was in an unfamiliar land and her only companion was suddenly acting squirrely. He glanced away, seeming irritated and uncomfortable.

"Mihr can help with this argument," the djinn stated flatly.

"Do try," Unadi said through her teeth.

"You and the hyena have been travelling for more than two days." His words implied that was good enough reason.

"Mihr, it's not normal for most mortals to just get completely tired of travelling together after two days." Unadi tried not to sound crass about it, but the djinn really didn't seem to understand relationships well. Even simple companionships.

"This is known. But Mihr also knows it is not normal for most mortals to go three days without relieving their bowels."

"Gah!" Siele flailed. "Shut up, you! That's not any of your business!" Unadi blinked at that, and then, in spite of the hyena's humiliation, enjoyed a bit of heavy laughter. Siele pulled his own hair a bit.

"I was brought up polite! The opportunity never came up so..." He was visibly frustrated about it. Unadi tried to comfort him a little.

"I woke up before you, so I got the opportunity, but I didn't think you were so shy about it. Sure, scout ahead a little, Siele. I'll go to the stream down the hill and fill our canteens. If you need me, just shout." Siele sighed at that and turned to head up the very steep hill. She gazed back with concern. "Don't fall off." She then turned and headed down to the brook. She put the cricket bat down, and he immediately shifted to an insect-style djinn again.

"Are you are sure about the... friendship you have with that one? It can be foolish to trust so easily. Particularly when you are traveling in an unfamiliar land." Unadi smiled at Mihr. He should have known her well enough not to worry about her safety in that hyena's company, so was it possible he didn't want her to be sad if he left her? Surely not. The Keeper spoke softly.

"That rule would go for us both. He's taking a likely fatal chance staying with me. He does not know me so well himself. You know that we're better off with someone who at least knows the customs and has contacts. Besides, for his physical shortcomings, the boy is pretty well conditioned upstairs. I think we can use that." The cricket flitted his wings.

"Need it yes, but what will it cost you?" he asked. Unadi flattened her frill a bit. He did care about her. She spoke up again.

"I don't think that Siele intends to demand anything unreasonable from me. Certainly no more than I've given willingly," she explained. Did the Djinni misunderstand why she was sleeping with Siele?



“That is not what Mihr means,” he stated. Unadi glanced up at him curiously, capping her canteen.

“Well, what do you mean? What can it cost to have his help?” she inquired.

“How will your spirit fare, Keeper Unadi, when you see him die?” The words were like a drop-kick right to her heart. She looked away quickly. She had considered he might die on the trip, but she hadn't really thought how she would feel after that. She just figured he knew what he was getting into and left it at that. Would she really be okay *after*? What if he died and it was directly her fault, a moment she wasn't paying attention or he was trying to save her, and it cost him his life? Even Mihr himself was in danger, and he was even less responsible for Unadi having taken him here. She suddenly felt awful about the entire mission. She tried to pull her mind away from that. It was too important to let emotions drag her down, but emotions were there. She wasn't heartless, after all. Even if Mihr or Siele passing was *their* fault or no one's at all, Unadi would care.

She didn't get to think about it long though. She heard a shout from across the brook, over the next much smaller hill. She gazed back in the direction of the hill with the cliff on the opposite facing side. She didn't think Siele could hear it, but it sounded like a shout of distress. It was certainly not the hyena. She stood up and held a hand out.

“Come on, that sounds like trouble,” she commanded to the Djinn.

“No way. Nuh-uh. Nopity nope,” the djinn fluttered frantically. “It's Ibians for sure. Mihr's not going.” Unadi gritted her teeth in frustration at the obstinate Djinn. Was he really so worried about this place? His kind were notoriously hard to actually kill.

“As a stick, Mihr!” she barked. She heard another shout. It sounded like a fight. Her heart was racing. She couldn't afford to stand here and argue with someone who was supposed to be in service to her. The cricket seemed to get it.

“Fine. But if Mihr dies it's *your* fault, 'Maestro!'” he chittered. He shifted and Unadi grabbed him out of mid-air and bolted. She couldn't get Siele involved until she knew she could protect him. She would check this out and be right back at the brook waiting for him.

Unadi slipped through the trees as quietly but as quickly as she could. If there was a big problem, it could spill over to where she and Siele were easily enough. If it was what it sounded like from afar, she might well need to get involved. She didn't know all the laws of this new land, but she was at least aware of some of the ones that were the same everywhere. Attacking travelers in the forest was typically frowned upon no matter where one went.

As she crested the hill in the direction of the shouting, Unadi was finally able to make out the scene, taking it in as fast as she possibly could. She pushed herself flat to the ground in underbrush and thick vegetation which was scented similar to mint. The smell was a little overpowering and she might have enjoyed it a bit if it were not for the scene that unfolded before her. The girl's frill flattened again as she widened her eyes in surprise. Sure, she had seen paintings, even snaps of these creatures, but she hadn't been genuinely aware of how large they actually were. The taur-like Ibian males stood nearly seven feet tall from foot to ear-tip, the front to back of their four-legged back half spanning nearly seven feet itself. They were a lot more formidable than even the pictures had made them seem. The picture that Mihr had been examining with the magazine found in Siele's father's storage area had been pretty

accurate, and Unadi had thought that it was merely a very small female that had been put with him to make him look larger. She froze, clutching Mihr more tightly in her hand as she took it all in.

There was one slightly smaller Ibian male, dark grey in color with a green and grey vest on his upper torso, though aside from a belt with a satchel on it, the back half was bare, leaving simply no question of gender even if there were fewer differences between the males and females of their kind. Around his neck was a red leather band on which hung a rather ornamental and gleaming silver bell. There were etchings of some kind upon it but Unadi wasn't close enough to see clearly. It was round and heavy-looking. The three others were wearing black leather-like armor on their upper torso, and a layer of metal plates in what seemed like a very heavy blanket over the back of their quad half - there to perhaps protect their lower bodies. Unadi briefly wondered what organs were where. Was there a heart in the top and bottom half? Just the bottom? She had no idea.

Two of the three others were a deep, dusty brown in color with dark-colored manes, flowing and thick with very similar bells. Did that mean they were brothers? Finally the other was solid black, and was a bit larger than everyone else with very squarish face and muscles. His mane was just as black as the rest of him but was capped in places with gold tendrils connected by thin, fine, glittering chain. It looked like that a lot of time and care went into those lion-like manes. His bell was worn from a gold chain, very heavy and expensive. It was silver like the others but gold gold filigree around it in some manner of pattern. It made him look important and wealthy. She squatted down a bit to listen as the smaller one yelled at the other three.

"It wasn't I who filched the thing! That red dog from the mountain, he was the one! You do this injustice with no more evidence than the loathsome *word* of the very cur responsible! Open your eyes, Curuzo!" He slapped his chest in a fashion that seemed meant to convey some kind of insult. His hazel eyes were bright and intense, his passion for conveying his truth gleaming in them. Two of the three others advanced, the brown-pelted ones. The smaller one was trapped where the trees became entangled with dense underbrush on Unadi's side of the trail. She could get over it just fine with her nimble form but one of those creatures, she imagined, would be pretty well penned in. The one which didn't advance, black, shiny fur gleaming in the sun, spoke. His voice was deep, gruff, and a bit guttural. It felt like a shout from him could knock down a tree.

"Commander Feldhe cares not this trivial distinction! A body given is gold earned, runt! Your last dawn has passed, show us the dignity of your clan. Drink with me." He held up a glass flask taken from a satchel at the far side of his body that Unadi couldn't see. It appeared that it was filled with red wine, but the Mitanni girl suspected it wasn't something so pleasant. She was also rather taken aback at the language used by these creatures. It was eloquent and graceful not savage and vulgar like she'd led herself to believe.

"I'll have none of your poison, thank you. You'll be giving me my words before the shogun; the truth will come out then." He glared sternly at the leader as the three others took hold of him as if to arrest him.

"Surrender and a lengthy trial will drag your entire family through the black-water, Hueto. You would be their salvation to drink of the nectar of your final memories, my wayward brother." Unadi flattened herself against the ground a bit tighter. They spoke so beautifully. She could not get over that.. She had always gotten the impression that the rule of strength over

weakness and the rumored corruption was a sign of barbarism, but these five just didn't sound the part. The black Ibian in charge stepped forward.

"Put it away, Curuzo. I'll not give you that satisfaction. It escapes me for now why you would want the real thief to go free when I have had no quarrel with you." He crossed his arms but two Ibiens on either side of him grabbed them and pulled him back a little. The dark-furred one, over a head taller than the accosted male, stepped forward and uncorked the flask.

"Oh but I do have quarrel with you, Hueto. Or rather, I have quarrel with your father." The captured male suddenly had a wild, horrified look in his eyes.

"My father's been dead half as long as I have lived, what harm would you do in ending me now?" Hueto appeared genuinely afraid. His aggressor grinned sadistically.

"You have not taken a mate, but I suspect you will soon, I have seen your comings and goings. I know what you hope to hide. I will end your family line, and that will be your father's final undoing. Your bell will burn and your name with it." He grabbed the throat of his captive and held up the flask.

A million things went through Unadi's mind. She was outnumbered in a strange land. She didn't see weapons on any of them, but they could have been easily concealed. This was obviously a crime and justice was being ignored for ambition. No one would stand for an outsider getting involved. An innocent was about to die and she knew that the Ibiens were honorable. If she saved one, he would do all he could to help her. If she fought the others, however, she might end up on the wrong side of Ibian law, and that carried the very sentence that the dark-toned Ibian was attempting to carry out.

All of these questions went through Unadi's mind rapid-fire as the smaller male struggled to keep his mouth shut. The other two who were holding him just laughed at his ordeal. Unadi fumed and stood up, got a running start, then hopped twice up the trunk of a tree. She ran along a thick branch which stretched nearly right over the group, and jumped down, landing with a soft chuff right beside them. She held her djinn-weapon out and shouted.

"You would threaten dishonor on his family when you bring shame upon your own?!" She stood rigid, unable to believe she had just done this. It was a quick end to her journey but she would not betray her civility to watch this crime happen. Every single Ibian stood there in visible shock, stark still.

"Unadi?" cried a familiar but somewhat distant voice. The hyena was looking for her. Well, that was him killed too. Surely he could weasel out of it once she was gone. He hadn't a thing to do with her interfering. Still, Unadi stood firm.

"Drop the flask, murderer!" Unadi shouted.

"You do not understand what you do!" growled one of the other Ibiens who hadn't spoken yet.

"Don't interfere; this is not your concern." insisted the other. They had a rather matter-of-fact tone to their voice. They didn't seem as mad or threatening as Unadi thought they ought to be. This was worrisome, as their calm meant they were very much in control. She relied often on anger and the bad or uninformed choices of others to win a fight.

“I’m not leaving until that flask is empty on the uncaring rocks,” Unadi said sternly.

“This is not a thing you can make happen, Mitanni Keeper. You are not in your land and you are mistaken in your endeavor,” the black one finally expressed.

“If you know what the symbol means, you know I won’t allow this injustice.” She felt a little surprised at least that she wasn’t immediately attacked. They had what they should have known was an advantage, and yet they took the time to parlay with her.

“It is not your place-...” started the dark male again.

“Drop the poison or I will interfere directly!” Unadi shouted. Curuzo folded back his ears and glanced at his captive with a frown. He seemed almost apologetic. He looked back at Unadi and approached her. She tensed. This was it.

“So...Hey there...” he stated slowly, as if trying to help her through this horrifying moment. She held up the djinn weapon. They didn’t seem to be afraid of getting smacked with it, despite how exotic the jeweled cricket bat might have appeared. Perhaps they didn’t take her seriously because it was just a cricket bat and not a sword or spear which would seem more official.

“Getting close will be painful,” Unadi growled, lowering her voice and trying very hard not to sound as horrified as she was.

“Unadi what are you doing – Oh shit!” Siele had made it up the hill. Everyone looked back at him, then to Unadi. “Unadi, don’t do anything!” the hyena shouted this very loudly, which only irritated the girl more. She didn’t want them to think she was under his command; that would get him killed!

“I don’t take orders from you Siele, you don’t know what’s going on here!” she snapped.

“Neither do you.” This time it was the victim speaking. She felt it heroic that even he was trying to pull her out of this alive, but she would not see him murdered like this.

“I know enough,” she told him.

“You know nothing, girl. This is an act. We are rehearsing. Or rather, we were before you stripped us right out of our moment,” informed Curuzo. Unadi flinched. What? Surely not. This was no stage, they were out in the middle of nowhere. The anxiety she had seen in Hueto’s eyes was very real.

“You surely don’t expect me to believe that?” she inquired with a weight of frustration. Curuzo sighed and shrugged at the others.

“If it were real, would I honestly do this?” He put the flask to his lips and drained it outright. Unadi’s heart sank. No. No he would most assuredly not have done that. She had made a terrible, terrible mistake. They were telling the truth. She had made a fool of herself and a mockery of their act. She had made her first impression on the Ibians, and this was it. She was a boorish and uneducated girl who intended to interfere with the Ibian culture. As she lowered her weapon and felt the weight of her screw-up, suddenly Curuzo, if that was even his

name, stiffened and just fell over sideways like he was made of stone. He flailed and shook a little bit, just a little, and then just lay still. Unadi redirected her gaze, since this left him rather graphically displayed. She stared at the others.

No one spoke for what felt like a solid minute. Finally, the smallest of the group knelt down to check the fallen dark-toned Ibian. This felt like it took forever.

“You killed him.” The one that had been called Hueto broke the silence with a soft, shaky voice. One of the two who had been holding the smaller Ibian gestured wildly, far less in control than he’d been a moment ago.

“No one actually drinks the poison in the script! I filled it with cobblestone stripper! I’m sorry! It was the only red liquid I could find there!” He held his canine muzzle. The other brown-furred Ibian who had been holding Hueto back staggered back toward the other side of the slight clearing. He started breathing hard, somewhere between fighting crying and trying not to puke, from how it appeared..

“I’m sorry... I didn’t...” Unadi didn’t know what to say. Hueto spoke again.

“This is your fault. No one ever drank the stuff in the play. You should never have come...” His voice was distant and pained. Unadi’s heart sank. Their act was certainly ruined now, possibly their livelihoods as well. It was unforgivable. She was foolish to try to act heroic and it cost someone so much.

“I would never! Not intentionally... you can’t think I should be held responsible. He didn’t have to drink! I made an honest mistake... your acting was impeccable! I couldn’t tell it from a real fight! You looked like you were about to be murdered, I saw the whole thing!” Unadi somewhat shamefully pleaded. She glanced over to Siele and furrowed her brow. He seemed irritated. That wasn’t the expression she thought she would see. They were really about to either die or get locked up or worse. He brought his hands up and slowly clapped.

“Uh...” Unadi thought he had probably just snapped. She felt like she was about to the same point herself. It would not have really surprised her. Suddenly, Curuzo simply rolled back onto his feet and stood up. Unadi staggered backwards, shocked and suddenly very irritated. What was going on here?

“Good act, Shon,” stated the one who apparently had been playing the part of Hueto. “This one’s a Keeper, she bears the eye for a lie, and you had her heart pounding hard enough I could feel it in my feet!” he picked one up in indication, the huge front paw crooked and swinging playfully back and forth.

“What.” Unadi was too stunned to feel anything right away. Shon laughed and slapped his intended victim in the middle of the back, whipping the tufted tail back and forth quickly.

“Did you hear her? She said it looked like you were about to be murdered! You keep that acting up and you’ll be shining your bell for an imperial play, I swear to it!” They all acted so happy. Even the one that Unadi truly felt could have vomited on cue if he needed to. She fought with herself emotionally. They were happy. She had pleased them because she was taken in by their act. Had she honestly done the *opposite* of screwing up in the process of all this? She inhaled deeply, processing that in her head, and deciding to try to go with it.

She lowered the cricket bat and explained with a positive tone, "It's true. I am used to traveling shows, my roots are as an acrobat. I have seen comedies and tragedies and never have I seen any of those actors put their very life into the feel. I believed at very first glance everything that I saw. Even those who said nothing conveyed their parts so perfectly that the illusion couldn't possibly be dispelled." The four all applauded for one another. Unadi peered up with a cautious smile at Siele. He still didn't look amused.

"Siele, why don't you come down here, you are welcome," Shon announced loudly. Unadi tensed. They knew his name. Oh, how deep had she trodden in it after all?

"She really could have shattered all sixteen of your legs you know. She's not helpless," the hyena growled.

"Indeed, but she is a Keeper. She'll not dare to cause a sore incident unless she's attacked. They have to obey laws, no less strict than ours." Unadi felt a little exploited in all of that, but she had to admit that it was probably hilarious from the Ibians' point of view. She felt that it was a good opportunity to roll with the punches a bit, but she would not stand for being made a fool of by habit. She wasn't sure what kind of first impression the troupe was attempting to make, but Unadi assumed that kind of thing would have gone over better with other Ibians if this was a clear indication of their sense of humor.

"Unadi, we should keep going. We're already a bit behind," Siele insisted. The Keeper arched a brow and looked at length at the hyena. He seemed to be in more of a hurry to part ways with the group of Ibians than she was. It bordered on rude, since they had just invited him down. They were certainly friendly enough, and it was a good chance for the girl to get firsthand experience conversing with the larger indigenous race.

"It's alright, I'm very happy to get to meet some local Ibians on the way." She shouldered the cricket bat and tried to look more casual despite the fact that she was carrying a Djinni. Shon spoke up, pointing to the two medium-sized brown Ibians beside him.

"Nakia and Nanda are the brothers there with me. I'm Shon, and that's Kanoa." He pointed out the smallest. An introduction was a good sign. They didn't mind being on a first name basis.

"I'm Unadi, I come from Aurora." She didn't feel the need to hide that much. Her kind were certainly not likely to be common here. Siele finally arrived in the clearing with Unadi. He wasn't able to just hop up a tree and run along a limb the way she did, he had to get around the brush which in places was bitterly thorny. He sighed.

"Hello Kanoa," Siele mentioned somewhat glumly.

"You don't seem happy to see us," The smaller Ibian leaned in. "You are not still unhappy about the party?" He didn't seem to be truly worried about it, the tone was chiding. Unadi felt like she kind of understood his reaction at that point. They had embarrassed him somehow, like they had done her.

"I'm in my right," Siele stated.

“What party?” the Keeper pressed, wanting to deflect the conversation. She felt that if they were talking to her and not him, they might just talk more about the party itself, and not what happened to her friend.

“His friend Balder had a Beacon Roast.” It was Shon who answered. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Unadi was having some trouble squaring these Ibians with everything she had heard of them. They appeared not only *un*-barbaric but actually a bit charismatic. Was it just because they lived close to the border and were used to visitors? She leaned in closer.

“What’s a Beacon Roast?” she inquired. She wanted to talk about their customs and show that she was interested in the things they enjoyed.

“It is a great social thing,” Shon replied, sitting his back half down which made it seem like he was still standing since his upper torso just straightened up more. His leonine features were hinting the slightest bit of silver here and there. He was fairly mature. He continued. “You go to the top of an open hill, and you make a big fire. You roast a great swine by the fire and you invite friends. Everyone eats and drinks and you can fight and shout and cry and be as free as you want because you won’t be tearing up anyone’s home.” Unadi thought, given their size and rumored ferocity, that it was probably the least likely place Siele would want to go. Of course something had gone wrong there, he probably got beaten up if everyone kind of went wild.

“Well, he made it out of it in one piece, so I think that’s telling of his sturdiness.” Unadi patted him on the back helpfully to try to make him feel less bad about it. She wasn’t sure she would have been brave enough to attend now that she knew what it was.

“I wasn’t in any danger, I was just very intentionally humiliated,” Siele stated with a blank face. He sounded like he didn’t want to seem ungrateful for being there, he just made it clear that he hadn’t enjoyed himself.

“Pranks are common?” Unadi asked of Shon. It was the younger Kanoa who answered.

“Mostly to outsiders. It’s a tradition.” He nodded.

“Why?” Unadi questioned, curious about where that would have started. The grey-toned Kanoa replied again.

“Not so terribly long ago, the families of our grandfathers or their grandfathers before them were pretty clearly not fond of outsiders. That’s still true in some places. But the youngest of us always tend to push a little father and we meet people from the outside. It would make our elders angry if we were overly friendly with those outside our borders, so we used to make it a point to do seemingly mean-spirited things to our outsider friends to make it seem less like we were so close. Between friends of course, this was harmless and a laugh would be had when the elders were not about. Outsiders around here... they aren’t such a big deal now, but the pranking tradition still lives on.” The two brown-coated Ibians nodded at that.

The keeper spoke up. “That’s actually very fascinating. Surely the prank wasn’t of great harm, Siele?” He had told her himself that one needed to be happy around the Ibians. Was it only for a first meeting?

“My father didn’t warn me,” Siele responded flatly.

“They chucked him into a bonding hut.” One of the brown-pelted Ibians spoke up. Unadi thought it was Nakia, but she had already lost track. They had both sat on their back haunches as well. A bonding hut sounded a bit more sordid than she suspected would have been great for the polite hyena.

“What’s that?” Unadi asked.

“A quick education today, then!” Kanoa laughed. “Well, if someone’s so inclined, a crude hut can be tossed together, saplings and leaves, you make it big and cavernous, but pitch dark inside. A couple of lovers go in and ... Well they bond. Like I stated, a Beacon Party is a pretty wild thing.” Unadi quirked a brow.

“How does one end up getting invited to a Beacon Party?” she inquired, not sure she would want to be thrown into a bonding hut. She thought about that picture in Siele’s dad’s possession.

“You just see the light from it,” Shon replied. Unadi glanced back to him. He whipped his slender tail side to side. “If you can see the fire, you are invited. That’s why it’s such a powerful social event. If you light the beacon, it’s an open call to celebration to any around you. It’s rude not to come at all.” Unadi at least understood why Siele would have been compelled to go.

“So you guys tossed him in there and expected him to... uh... bond with someone?” she clarified, suddenly picturing him behind the four-legged female of the race. Or had it been female at all? That was an even more harrowing thought. Her cheeks had to have taken noticeable tone.

“That’s the general idea,” Kanoa remarked.

“With who?” she continued to dig. It seemed there was no getting away from the subject. She couldn’t bear to not hear this out, even if it was making her male companion uncomfortable.

Shon spoke. “My sister.”

Unadi widened her eyes at that. She didn’t expect that. She looked at Siele but he wasn’t blushing or grinning. It obviously hadn’t worked out.

“Didn’t go well?” she asked. Siele finally inhaled deeply and answered.

“It might have, if his sister hadn’t exited the back way right before I was let in there, leaving the pelt of a mountain bear wrapped around two sacks of beans for me to drunkenly molest and attempt to romantically figure out in the dark for the better part of half an hour.” Unadi froze at that. It took so much personal will to not explode with laughter at the images that called up in her mind. The little grunts and snrks and anxious sounds from those around them made it obvious that their actor’s skills were powerless against the desire to actually laugh at that.

“You were quite thorough,” Shon laughed.



"I was so drunk I could barely stand up!" Siele barked.

"... And Qadira invited you back. She would love to be petted for half an hour like *that*." Shon laughed.

"She laughs till she cries *every* time she sees me!" Siele protested.

"It means she likes you!" Kanoa added.

"Okay, now that my companion knows my most embarrassing moment ever, we really do need to get back to walking. It's been a long couple of days." Unadi's mind snapped back into the moment and she stood taller and peered at Shon. There was good reason to deflect the conversation at that point.

"Speaking of that, I wanted to ask. Have you guys been down south to the village over the river?" Siele nodded to Unadi, snapping back into seriousness himself. Even if they had tormented him, it was worth letting them know the danger, or seeing what they knew. The largest Ibian answered.

"No, we haven't been there in a year or more. Supplies usually come find us. Not a bad thing mind you. We don't see cause to travel much." Unadi ground her teeth a little. They didn't seem to know anything was wrong right off hand. Was it worth telling them? They didn't seem like bad people, so she decided they would need to at least know there was a danger, a problem that might involve them sooner or later. She spoke up.

"It's gone. Burned to the ground." The four Ibians all stood up instantly.

"What? How? When?" they all pled at pretty much the same time in a jumble. Okay, it sounded like they cared, at least.

"We don't know exactly, maybe a couple of days. It looked like magic was definitely involved." Siele murmured this as the best possible explanation.

"A Djinn attack possibly?" Shon inquired in all seriousness. Nakia and his brother nodded at that. Mihr vibrated so angrily in Unadi's hand that it actually hurt a bit. She squeezed him tighter.

"We don't think so. But I wanted to ask in case you knew anything, and also to let you know about it so you can stay safe," Unadi offered, both to calm the four, and to calm Mihr. Shon spoke up again.

"I thank you for that. We don't go outside the border much these days, so I suspect even our magistrate does not know. We will head back to town and make sure they are aware. With things as they are, we can't afford panic."

"Thank you for that, Shon. I would prefer an outsider not be the one handing over that news if I had the choice." She nodded to Siele, indicating that they should start moving again.

"I agree. Siele are you taking Unadi to Balder's shop?" he added. Siele nodded.

“Say hi to Xiu for me,” he said with a grin. Siele rolled his eyes a bit and nodded at that. He grinned back to the Mitanni girl and lashed his tail quickly a bit as everyone prepared to leave the other direction. “And Unadi?” he asked. She glanced back to him.

“Yes?” she responded curiously.

“Thanks for not braining me with that thing. Your fearlessness is a great strength, but your restraint is what separates a brawler from a warrior.” Unadi smiled at the Ibian, and nodded, thanking him. She turned and walked back up the hill and over the brook with Siele, picking up her canteens. Their first encounter with the people of Ibia hadn't gone great, she considered, but she felt that at least she might be able to relate to those who were just here to live their lives.

As different as they seemed and as unusual as some of their customs might have been, she felt she might not be completely alone in this place after all.