

# Waystone: Circus of Stones

By Alps Sarsis

## Chapter 3

### *The Town of Embers*

Unadi was relieved that for the two days that followed, there was no more rain. She didn't mind being wet in her homeland; it actually wasn't unpleasant for her at all. But this place, as they traveled north, had a bit of chill in the air if it happened to be cloudy and windy, and much more so when she was wet.

For a great portion of the time it remained partly cloudy, so she found herself fairly comfortable. They went only a bit farther north in the little vehicle of Siele's, but the power cells he brought were not sufficient to make the whole trip. They gained enough distance to feel sure that no one from the group that had attacked them was following them. Being on foot was much more familiar to the young Keeper, since the journey she had made from her home up to Aurora was primarily made by walking. Having access to a vehicle, even a poor one, apparently took the resilience out of her hyena companion's legs, however. He made it a mere five miles before he began dragging his feet.

Even though Unadi was determined to get wherever they were headed, she wasn't in a huge hurry to get there. The slowdown wasn't a real bother for her. Mihr, on the other hand, wasn't quite so content with the slowdown, and made no secret of it. He was faster than either of them because he could fly, and his wings showed no signs of tiring. He finally grated Unadi's nerves enough that she snapped at him, so he trailed behind a bit on a tree limb then flew ahead a good distance, stopped and relaxed, and then trailed again. He told the pair that he was looking ahead and then making sure that they weren't being followed, but it stood to reason, to Unadi at least, that he was just offended at being chastised.

The young Keeper's lack of experience with Djinni made it hard to tell if they really were prone to taking things personally when it came to non-djinn. It seemed to the girl that they should consider themselves *above* that level of care for mortal opinions.

Siele's biggest concern, understandably, was his father. He was worried that Shandhi might give him up to the authorities if they came asking around for him, but Unadi assured him that was not likely since she was already guilty of aiding a fugitive if it came down to that. This didn't seem to comfort him much, but after a while he dropped that subject. The discussion went from that to finally a topic more prudent to the tasks at hand. Siele started talking about what to expect when they got to Ibia. This was a something the Keeper felt much more interested in than the djinn complaining or the young hyena lamenting his poor, injured pop.

"I'm aware of the social dynamics of their governing body..." Unadi started, moving a little faster to catch up to him. She had cleared her shoe of an annoying stone. "However, you have actually been to their country, yes? This is not your first time?" she inquired.

"That's right. I've been a few times with my dad. He's not been taking me there long. He only just recently decided I was old enough to make the trip. Not sure why he thought it was

such a big deal. I've had more trouble locally than in Ibia, but I guess times have been changing, so there is more and more concern from those from outside the country going in. A few countries are already banning travel to Ibian territory because they don't want to dedicate resources to getting folks back out if they need to. It's a political nightmare to do apparently, even if someone gets locked up for a simple thing. These days, there's a lot more attention to the larger population centers in Ibia and not so much on the smaller, outlying towns. The punishments for transgressions are the same everywhere and they're kept pretty well under control. Those who operate...outside of the rules, shall we say...tend not to be idiots about it, so pop and I... we could generally trust that our contact wasn't going to screw us over. Making enemies in a shady deal is a really bad method of operating in Ibian territory, I promise you." Unadi fell into step beside him and nodded at that.

"It sounds like you almost prefer dealing with them," she offered.

"In some respects," he answered with a shrug.

"So..." She glanced up at him expectantly.

"Uhhh... Oh..." He leaned in and kissed her sweetly, tongue tasting her thin warm lips. She narrowed her eyes, flattening her frills.

"Nice gesture, but I meant... Tell me about the Ibians, Siele. I've never been there. I want to know the right and wrong ways to deal with them. You're gonna be parting ways when I get where I'm going, so I want to know what I'm doing." There was a slight pause from the hyena as he considered that. He then nodded a bit and spoke up.

"Of course, sorry, I thought you just wanted to make sure I remembered that we..." He went silent as Unadi slapped him on the back.

"You worried I might regret it? I regret not waking your ass up in the middle of the night and doing it again, now out with it! I want to know about Ibia." She gripped the dock of his tail as they walked, which was an act of rather open affection even across cultural lines.

"Ah! Uhh... Well, I guess the most important thing is you'll want to be open to their ways. They're a bit different culturally, just as much as physically. There's stuff you always want to do around them, and stuff you never want to do around them, but they *do* understand that if you are an outsider a certain amount of grace is given if you offend them. But don't think they'll pretend as though you didn't... they'll definitely let you know." He spoke more confidently with the smooth-skinned Keeper holding his tail. Unadi wondered briefly if he'd really been worried about that so much. It was a chance encounter, not something that was supposed to hold some deeper meaning to her. She wasn't offended by it. She enjoyed it and would not likely say no to a second chance, though she suspected they might not have that kind of latitude with the cricket-djinn appearing to suspect they were closer than necessary. Unadi spoke up again.

"Okay, so tell me some big things *not* to do around the Ibians. I think knowing that first and foremost will help me."

"First, do *not* fuck with their bells." Siele said this with deep and punctuated resolve.

"Bells? The big things they wear in the pictures I've seen of them? Those are like family honor things right?" she confirmed.

"They're more than that, and I honestly don't know the whole story behind them either, but if I meet an Ibian and I just reach up and touch one of those bells, I might as well have emptied a bucket of manure on their dead mom's face for how they react to it. I've not dared to do it myself, but I've seen a guy in a medical ward who did. It ain't pretty. I'm sure you can get an Ibian to explain it in full but I've been shy about even asking about the bell," he stated solidly.

"Got it, so bells are off limits. I think I'll avoid asking about them as well. Anything else I should know?" requested the inquisitive girl. She bounced a bit, happy to talk about things of interest to her with someone who could candidly answer in a way a book might not. Her curiosity had been a boon to her time as a student, and later as a Keeper in training.

"You've seen the pictures right?" he inquired. "I mean, you know they aren't like us, right? They look...different..." He walked a little slower, seeming to enjoy having the dock of his tail held.

"Of course. Everyone knows what Ibiens look like, even kids, Siele. Hence my talking about knowing which bells you meant." She nodded. "I know they look different. The girls are quad, right? Four legs? The guys are quad too, but also have a torso with chest and arms and all like ours? I've seen some rare snap images of them too. They don't like having portraits done that don't involve a brush and dye. Those are hard to find."

"Right, I just wanted to make sure you didn't act too out of sorts just seeing them. You think everyone knows, but I've seen folks just jerk right back and it's obvious their education was lacking in the world-view department. So yeah, they're different, but I bring it up not so much because I suspect you had no idea what they looked like, it's more... Well... When they are so different, everything else is different too." He shrugged again at Unadi.

"Well, yeah, I'm not dumb, I would expect their homes and everything to be different; you don't have to tell me that," Unadi grunted. She wasn't a school girl. She could figure some things out for herself. Siele grinned at the scoffing Unadi and murmured casually,

"Good, you already know then. I won't have to explain how to use an Ibian loo, you can figure that out on your own." Unadi gritted her teeth at that. That wasn't fair at all, but she didn't dare backtrack her words and give the snide male the pleasure. This would be one that she might have to fumble through on her own later. She huffed through her nose and stated,

"So what else? What's a bad idea? What can I not say or bring up?"

"I would avoid bringing up any issue you might have with what's going on in their country. They *are* concerned, many of them, but they don't talk about it, particularly not to outsiders. If you bring it up, expect them to talk about the road that leads you *out* of their town. Oh, that's another thing. If one of them starts talking about all these neat things to see far away, it's time to leave. That's like... a warning things are going bad." Unadi rolled her eyes at that.

"Oh great... symbolic warnings, that will make things easy," She groaned.

"There's a reason that Ibia's not really a popular vacation destination. And there's a bunch of shit I don't even know. You'll figure that out while you're there, I'm sure, but it's not going to be without errors. The hardest part of all is that you have *that* with you." He pointed ahead to the flying cricket-djinn.

"I know about that," Unadi expressed sullenly. "But, I'm better off with him than without him, I'm afraid. And I know his maestro would have wanted me to stay with him." Unadi paused a moment tensely, having not mentioned much about her past to Siele but he seemed to ignore that as he was focused on just telling his companion useful things.

"Right, uh, now there *are* good things to do as well. The Ibians are big on first meetings. I mean *really* big. It's not like there's a ceremony or anything, but your attitude when you meet someone new is important. Dad was real clear about this. You have to be happy when you meet one of them. Don't be afraid to smile big and even offer a hand in friendship. They'll take it as a compliment that you're so happy to see them, despite how different they look."

Siele continued, "If you're sullen or angry...even if you're in a bad mood at the time, that's who you are forever after you meet them. It's hard to get around it. You don't want to be known by say, a local magistrate as 'Unadi the Bitch.' if you're hoping to be able to move around freely, right?"

The Mitanni girl glared at her spotted companion. That was common sense upon meeting someone new. However, she didn't mock him for saying it, as the way he told her that made her think they were perhaps more strict on those common sense rules of socializing. She would take special care to smile.

"Anything else?" Unadi pressed, shooting a sideways glance and raising an eyebrow at the hyena.

"Erm...Oh! While you probably don't want to ask about them, you can compliment their bells. They love it when you compliment the bell. Like you said, most of them are heirlooms that are passed down generation to generation, so complimenting a bell is sorta like paying respect to the entire family."

Unadi chimed in, "Ahh...sounds like an easy way to soothe egos if they start talking about nice, far away places...so that takes care of how to make them happy, but what can I do to gain their trust?" she queried.

"Different for each one I guess, but actions speak louder than words, particularly over there." He shrugged again. "If you help them with a task, that goes a long way, but I'll be honest, you aren't going to have any Ibian trusting you if you're running around with Mihr." The cricket was close enough to hear him that time.

"Mihr knows! Mihr tells Unadi this already. It is worst place for us to be going!" he barked.

"Why do they hate Djinni so badly?" Unadi posed, feeling perturbed at this fated handicap.

"Wait, you've seen pictures of the Ibians and you don't know that part?" Siele asked incredulously. The sleek female growled less than under her breath. The male held his hands up defensively. Unadi spun around in front of him, blocking his way.

"Just tell me, I don't need to explain every gap in my education concerning this xenophobic pit!" she barked. Unadi didn't like sounding short, but she was dealing with a very

serious possible lack of future for her if she couldn't learn this stuff fast and it was not amusing to her that the lack of planning in this sudden flight from her home continent left her appearing foolish to the ones that she ultimately might be responsible for saving if a rogue Waystone, or worse, a Primestone was loosed upon their region.

"Fine, fine, jeeze. Relax will you?" Siele grumbled. "You saw that the boys and girls were very different right?" he pried.

"Obviously," Unadi answered, calming a bit now that she was being informed again.

"Well, they didn't always have those differences." His words made her stop dead in her tracks, which caused him to crash into the back of her. That didn't bother her. She turned and stared at her companion quizzically.

"What," she responded in a blank tone.

"They used to be the same more or less. I mean, the girls weren't missing that whole upper torso and arms thing. They were more petite, I'm told, but they looked more like the males and they could do all the delicate things they do, crafts, trade, all of that." Unadi blinked at that. That made no sense at all.

"Is this a story? Like a legend to say they were the same or are there records that they were?" She couldn't believe it. One doesn't see that kind of change in the span of time that would have been recorded. She thought it had been that way from the start for the Ibians, a unique aspect of their creation before the first Great War.

"Oh no, it's no story, there's extensive documentation of this. See, previous to the Stone War there's tons and tons of Ibian art, but every single statue or painting or scrawled image of an Ibian girl prior to that was six limbs like the guys. Then... Bam. It's not seen again. It's all paws for them." He held his hands up in paw like fashion against his chest. "And they aren't real open to outsiders about how it happened, but one thing we *do* know... The Djinni were involved. Probably the gods too, but man do they hate the Djinn for it." The Mitanni girl's heart sank. She was seriously taking a chance even travelling with Mihr, but she didn't dare leave him. She could not do that with Roche trusting her.

"Is it a ... Is it a kill on sight kind of hate?" she asked.

"No," Siele comforted her a bit with how quickly he responded.

"This is good," she said softly.

"There *was* a time, I'm sure, but they have found a way to make their roles more comfortable. You might have trouble getting into a restaurant or an inn with that, but they won't just attack you for having him. Too many folks travel with Djinn for them to have been able to maintain open trade like that. No, it's a lifestyle choice for them more than anything. You won't find anything powered by Djinn bulbs there. You won't find any of them running around with a Djinn at their disposal. You won't find pictures of Djinn or statues of Djinn, and even plays and stories featuring them are taboo. They have pretty much snuffed the Djinn out of every aspect of their lives. So you won't make them mad, you will just be really, really awkward."

"Except if you run into a blue town," the cricket-djinn chirped noisily.

"Blue?" pressed Unadi. Siele sighed.

"Mihr, I've only seen one blue door in the three towns I've been to. I think that's a thing Djinn talk about to make sure no one decides to wander to where they're not wanted, causing problems for everyone else."

"What is he talking about?" grumbled Unadi.

"There's a rumor about a group of the Ibians that actually hunt Djinn, even outside of Ibia. Their towns have blue doors to let the Djinn know to keep out, period. The Emperor made them paint their doors blue because the Ibians, while powerful and fierce, are also sticklers for fair-play. Just like you get a coded warning before you get your ass kicked by way of them suggesting you visit nice places far away, they supposedly give the door thing as the only warning Djinn get that they have entered a town where someone who can and will actually kill a Djinn resides." Unadi flailed a bit.

"This stuff! This is the kind of stuff I kinda want to know. Don't overlook shit like that! I don't want anyone offing my friends just because I don't know better! ..." She faltered.

"Mihr is Unadi's friend? Mitanni form their attachments so quickly. This is good for Mihr but dangerous for you," the cricket insisted. Unadi threw her hands in the air.

"Come on, keep walking! I want to get to someplace that's actually a place before the sun goes down and I freeze again!" She couldn't believe they weren't taking the situation as seriously as she was. After all, *she* was the one trained to fight, they stood less of a chance of survival than she did, but they acted like they perfectly fine walking into the unknown. Did they have so much confidence in her that they would blindly follow the Keeper just because she won a single fight where she was completely underestimated? As much as she had enjoyed Siele's company that previous night, she did not want to be responsible for him any longer than she had to if he really didn't put much stake in his own ability to survive this.

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The next few hours passed rather quietly and uneventfully. She had more than committed herself to this trip and Siele waited *that* long to tell her a more specific reason why the trip was dangerous to her in particular. He had to have known she didn't see that side of it. Still, he did seem genuinely shocked that she didn't know the reason behind the Djinn thing. They were almost to the border, so there was little sense in turning back at that point. Unadi flitted her frills a little, something she did when a little uncomfortably warm from the walking. The weather had not warmed that much, it was just that for what felt like a mile they had been going up an incline. It was aparent, in a breaking of trees, that the hill was coming to an end. Siele slipped up close behind the reptilian girl.

"Just over this hill should be Emora. It's down in the valley up against the river that acts as the Ibian southern border. It's a trade town, so they get all kinds. You don't have to be on any special guard there. There's been plenty of travelers so they aren't likely to give you a second look. We can get one last non-Ibian meal and a comfy place for the night..." He leaned



in close. "... Maybe the cricket can stay outside." He glared way ahead at the still presumably miffed djinn. Unadi smiled as they plodded up the hill.

"I don't mind sleeping under the stars, but being out from under the djinn's watchful eyes might be advantageous for us, yes." She gripped Siele's tail again. "I have a little cash still, but I know I'll be earning more before the journey's done."

"Just be real careful to say really clearly that you're looking for Ibian work, *not* immigrant work," Siele stated helpfully.

"I kinda got the idea from the magazine Mihr was checking out," Unadi said, rolling her eyes. She leaned in against Siele just as the cricket buzzed back to them in a hurry. This put Unadi on guard. The pattern had been that he went on ahead, waited, let them pass a good distance, and then flew past them again. This was not the same pattern.

"Trouble ahead. Mihr thinks this is not the right place to be." He landed directly on top of Unadi's head. She pushed her frill up hard, making the heavy insect-like djinn buzz over to a bare and wretched tree.

"Someone on the road?" Siele asked, immediately and obviously uncomfortable. "Town's in view from the top of the hill, they won't likely try anything so close to where they'd be seen." He acted pretty comfortable about the place.

"No one on the road," the cricket chirped. "No one anywhere. The town's in ruins." The hyena's eyes went wide and he bolted ahead. Unadi clicked her teeth together.

"Siele, wait! Don't run ahead!" She ran along the still moist dirt road to catch up. She reached the top of the hill at about the same time her companion did. She was shocked beyond words for a moment at what she saw. The valley was pristine and quite picturesque, the kind of thing that Unadi might see in a painting in a wealthy merchant's house, but right at the base of the valley, against the sparkling blue river, was the town of Emora. At least, it likely had been the town of Emora at some time recently. But it wasn't anymore.

Where once stood two long rows of stately shops trailed by smaller less opulent stores were now black, charred and broken walls that only suggested that someone had gone through a lot of trouble to make this the trade center of the region only to have it burned down. Up the hill toward the arriving trio were four rings of larger homes which had also been scorched, though not so completely. It was as if someone had attempted to put the fires out and eventually won, only to leave it anyway. Further up the hill in two much wider rings were farms and a few more densely packed settlements. Those, by the looks of it, were done in worse than the shop district. The dock too appeared to have been smashed completely. Just as Mihr had stated, it appeared that no one remained in the town at all. Siele jogged down the hill.

"Oh no... No no no... It was fine just last month! What happened!" The Mitanni girl fell into step swiftly behind him. He seemed brave in this situation, which was odd. A few armed men and he was paralyzed, but facing whatever might have done this to the town he was quick to move. The cricket darted just a bit ahead of Unadi and in a flash was replaced by the same cricket bat she used in that previous fight. Having changed form in midair he fell into the running Keeper's path. She caught the weapon before it hit the ground. Perhaps having the Djinn around was going to be more useful than she had assumed. It took more than fifteen minutes to get to the edge of the town proper. Siele had taken off like a shot but was practically

crawling five minutes later. He was not in the best shape for that kind of run. Unadi stayed with him rather than running ahead.

"Do you think the Ibians did this?" she whispered as the hyena pushed a random door open.

"No... This isn't like them. Even when they started expanding into Euria in the northwest, they wouldn't burn places down. They could use it even if everyone who had been there before was dead. No, this... this was something else..." He managed to get the door open and went into the gutted shell of a house. Unadi moved to the side a few meters and walked through a gaping hole where the wall had collapsed.

"I'm gonna say it was not an accidental fire." She joined the hyena. "I could write it off as that with the center of town with the shops so close together, but everything got toasted. If the Ibians didn't likely do this, then who did?" Siele sighed as he stood in front of the only fully standing room in the ruined house. It was a pantry in the kitchen. Inside were two small, sooty skeletons. Unadi backed up.

"Whoever it was had no problem killing everyone in this town to make their point," he said as he leaned back against a black wooden column. Unadi felt heat still coming from one of the partially intact walls. It was recent. Perhaps in the past couple of days.

"It would have taken an army, surely, to do this. It had to have been Ibia." She turned away from the small skeletons. Were they a slight species, or had they been young? She didn't want to think much about it. They had been hiding. They thought they'd be safe.

"This was not regular fire." The voice seemed to have an uncanny amount of vibrato. The formerly cricket-cricket bat was speaking. She held it up to show she was listening. "Wait, whoa, Mihr is upside down. Don't do that," Unadi gasped and moved him back down to her normal carrying stance.

"Sorry, I – " she started.

"Mihr was joking," the djinn buzzed. Unadi narrowed her eyes. How could he joke in front of a closet full of roasted children? Oh wait. Djinn. She shook him.

"About being upside down or about the fire!?" she fairly shouted.

"A-abo-ut u-u-pside d-o-own!" he vibrated barely intelligibly through the shaking. Unadi held him still again. After a short pause, he finally responded. "The fire was magical. A djinni or an Oracle maybe." Siele did not seem as angry at the djinn about the ill-timed playfulness, but was at least on task with his own focus.

"Why do you think it's magical?" he murmured under his breath. "I can't tell the difference. The fire consumed everything the way fire does." Unadi nodded at that. It was an answer she wanted as well, as the possible consequences of this being a magical attack made it seem more likely that what Roche had been the most concerned about was a reality, and that there was serious justification in sending her here.

"In a regular fire, matter changes states and energy is released," Mihr stated matter-of-factly. "In a magic fire, at least one of this level, some matter is completely converted to energy.



With mortal eyes this is not immediately obvious, though a trained eye with some special equipment can see it. For Djinni though, it's as obvious as looking at a banana with a peel, and one without. In a regular fire, the peel has turned brown and spotted but it's still there on the banana. In a magic fire, there's just a banana with no peel that has also turned brown and spotted. At a glance, both are spotted brown bananas, but one of them is missing something."

"That seems like the kind of thing they'd teach primary school children," Siele said with a sigh. "Maybe I didn't pay attention in class very well." He rubbed his chin. "So it's a fact then? It was a magic fire?" he clarified.

"Not all of it," the djinn responded. "Just where people are. The fire continued after, regular fire at that point, and burned the structures the rest of the way. But the fires started by magic. Like this closet, scorch marks on the street... you get the idea." The Mitanni girl shuddered. Whoever, or whatever did this, was not attacking the town or the structures. It attacked the people specifically. The pattern they were gazing at fell into place and Unadi knew in an instant that Mihr was correct in stating it. She spoke up.

"The wealthier-looking homes weren't burned as badly because they were unoccupied. The people who own them were running the shops in town. Or they were shopping. The fires likely started by embers blowing in the wind from the town burning below. Then the rain put them out before they finished burning." Unadi shook her head. Siele put a hand on his head and sighed heavily.

"And the outside ring of farms and cottages, those belonged to folks who would have been home because they don't own shops in town or don't typically have the cash to afford going down and shopping and the like. So those places got hit hard." Mihr vibrated in the Mitanni girl's hand until she released him, at which point he shifted back to a cricket and spoke up.

"Mihr is thinking this is proof of things that the doe was talking about, yes? This is bad tidings indeed. There is a great deal of danger we willfully walk into while knowing so little. Is this really okay?" he chirped.

The cricket lighted upon Siele's shoulder. He did not seem to mind it so much. He didn't even flinch at the sudden invasion of his space. Siele peered up at the girl, who leaned against a less-scorched beam.

Unadi crossed her arms. "I can't ask you to take me the rest of the way, Fluffy," she murmured rather woefully. "You know from this that Shandhi was right. It's gotten bad. Inside the country might be even worse. Someone's either got themselves the services of a really dark Djinn, or even worse, there's an Oracle on a rampage." She felt a heavy sinking in the pit of her stomach, but never had she been so resolute that Roche was right. This was a matter that could not be ignored. She had to get proof, and she had to make someone act before a new, terrible war began.

"You really... actually are a Waykeeper aren't you?" the hyena finally inquired in a very soft voice. Unadi widened her eyes and gazed up at him, but his expression was not defiant or angry. He seemed sad. The Mitanni lady hung her head.

"That obvious, huh?" she relented.

"That or you're completely insane. And I just haven't seen evidence of that, so it had to be the other." He sighed slowly again. "I'm still going with you." Unadi jerked her head up.

"Siele, this is serious. I'm not joking. I'm not pretending to be brave!" she barked. "I'm terrified! I want to go back to Aurora and pretend Master Roche never said anything to me - pretend I got knocked on the head or something!" she shouted. All she could see were those scorch marks on the street. Those had been people. Maybe hyenas, even... Just like the one she was trying to save by having him turn back.

"But you can't. Because you know it's not right. You know what has to be done. That's why I *have* to go with you. I'm sorry, but there's something that makes you have to do this even though there's as many ways as there are scarabs in the desert to get out of it. I have that thing too. I'm going with you." Unadi held out her hand in a gesture that was intended to indicate the charred remains in the closet, but Mihr sprang from Siele's shoulder and plopped back into the girl's open hand in the form of the same weapon he'd been earlier. Unadi looked at the long, heavy-looking cricket bat in confusion and then furrowed her brow.

"Mihr no, I'm not going to knock him out so he can't follow. I won't refuse the help, but he'd better understand that if he gets his guts ripped out or gets reduced to grey and white powder that's his business." She shook the cricket bat, uncertain that had any actual negative effect on the djinn. The cricket did not respond. Unadi wasn't certain whether it meant he understood, or if he intended to stay like that until the hyena got clobbered. He didn't seem to see Siele's value outside of just getting further north, and he couldn't guide them much farther, either. Still, this new development *did* cause Unadi to second-guess trying to push on entirely alone. She just needed Siele to know that she could not be expected to protect them both entirely.

"Look..." Siele moved out of the room, heading back out onto the street. Unadi understood. They were arguing in front of an absolute tragedy that had still not fully sunk in for her. She knew she would not likely sleep very well that night. Did these poor people have any idea when they got up that day that their lives were about to be destroyed?

Had any of them even gotten out in time?

After they were up the street a little, Siele's hands in his pockets, he spoke again. "I know you worry for me, and I know why. I didn't do so good when it came to protecting my dad. I'm not a fighter like you. I'm not a trained Keeper. But if this keeps going, if it's really bad enough for you to be here when you obviously aren't supposed to be? I can only guess this was bound to become my problem one way or another..." Siele paused a moment, as if trying to figure all of this out. He then continued with a hint of nervousness at the edge of his voice, "At least now I *know* that it's my problem, but I can't just leave it alone. Even if I went home, I know sooner or later I'd be involved, and by then, I won't be able to do a thing about it, and I wouldn't have a Keeper on my side. Guys like me never see the first line of defense. That's miles away from where my dad and I live." That, to Unadi, made damned good sense.

They continued walking north over the thankfully still intact bridge and toward the edge of town. As they did, Unadi rested Mihr over her shoulder, walking as she might while coming back from a cricket game. It was easy to forget he was a Djinn if she was carrying him like that. She wondered if the Ibians would be able to tell he was a Djinn at all in that form. It wouldn't make much sense for her to carry a cricket bat everywhere she went, though. They would have to think of something more appropriate eventually.

Unadi attempted to not look too closely at some of the dark patches of random grass or cobblestone path. One of them had a very clearly defined person-shape and she just did not care to look too closely after that.

"Well, I suppose we want to put distance between here and where ever we're going to be when night falls," Unadi finally stated.

"So you *will* let me come?" he asked.

"I'll let you come," she answered. The bat in Unadi's hand vibrated as it spoke, which felt a little odd to her.

"Oh good. Mihr will have someone to say 'I told you so' to when pretty Mitanni girl is locked in a harness under the flanks of an unwashed Ibian male." Unadi put both hands on the handle of the cricket bat and shook as hard as she could.

"The thought's bad enough without you painting deliberately intense pictures like that!" she snapped, clutching the handle hard as she shook it. It was oddly emotionally satisfying.

"Maa-aa-ybe Mihr lii-kes the shh-shh-aaaking! Maaa-ybe Mihr fii-ii-iinds plea-aa-asure in the shaaa-king!" He used almost a monotone voice, so it was very hard for Unadi to tell if he were joking, or how he was feeling at all.

Still, the Mitanni girl stopped shaking Mihr.

"Eew," she stated flatly.

"I wouldn't put it past him. Some Djinni get really attached to weird stuff," Siele offered anti-helpfully.

"Mihr does not!" the bat vibrated. It was actually hard to hold if he spoke loudly.

"Oh I'll bet you don't. Nothing at all pleasant about how Unadi's got her hand tight around you, how you bounce and sway as she rests you on her toned, sexy shoulder?" Siele leaned in. Unadi felt a chill. She had not considered what it might be like to the djinn to be held, carried, or used as a weapon. She was considering this when a sudden shift in the weight of the bat made it jolt forward, tapping the hyena firmly on the head. Unadi gasped, having *not* meant to hit Siele. He didn't seem to think that. He recoiled, holding his skull.

"What the dungbeetles was that for! I was teasing!" the hyena barked.

"I didn't! It was Mihr!" Unadi growled in her defense.

"Surely not! Mihr is just a stick!" he vibrated. "Unadi is such a violent girl. It's why the Keepers took her in! That or keep putting her in jail. Give her bad people to beat up to keep her satisfied. Mihr knows!" Unadi looked plaintively at Siele, afraid that he really believed that. He rubbed his head a bit more at that, and then dropped his shoulders a bit, laughing.

"I can see that, noble djinn! I will have to be careful around this girl!" he stated. Unadi sighed and continued with the walking. She shook her head.

"I'm still getting a feel for this djinn's personality. He's not very predictable." She slung him over her shoulder again. The weapon vibrated, possibly from one or all of the gems emblazoned upon it.

"This does feel not too bad though. Comfortable travel. Unadi has soft hands." The girl groaned at that and Siele laughed. She shot him a look, then took on a smug expression. A little payback was in order.

"Oh, Siele knows all about that," she grinned. She squeezed the handle of the bat.

"No! Let Mihr fly now, let Mihr fly!" He bounced from her grasp, seemingly by just shifting his weight in the weapon from one side to the other suddenly. She laughed as she let him go and he resumed being a cricket. The djinn landed on a tree limb a little way ahead and held his wings out in weird angles as if he had something on them. The Keeper laughed, following Mihr, and did a double-step up the side of the tree, plopping down on the same low branch right by the trunk, kicking her feet.

"Surely you knew. I mean, it's what mortals do!" She laughed at the poor Djinn who flitted his wings harder.

"You make Mihr think in pictures, it is unacceptable! You have no time for this distraction!" Unadi laughed at that.

"But you have time to tease me!" She hopped down with a dull thump on the rain-softened ground. Siele strode up to her quickly, as if fearing she accidentally fell from the tree. He stopped short though and rubbed one of his ears nervously between his fingers.

"You're uh... Pretty agile. I mean, I know what you are, but you can definitely tell you were honest about parts of your past. You can really move." The smooth-skinned Unadi went scarlet about her cheeks.

"Right... Uh..." She paced forward again. She didn't really do compliments well. "What time, if we stopped like we did last night, do you see us getting to your contact's house?" she inquired. Siele didn't seem to mind Unadi being unwilling to talk much about herself.

"It's likely to be almost noon. It's about what time Pop and I usually got there," he told her. "But we usually left from Emora, so maybe early to mid-morning, if we sleep alright and leave early." However, his eyes travelled over Unadi's body in a way that made her feel warmer. The part about 'if they slept alright' suggested that they might not, and the girl was not feeling quite as interested in such frolic given what they had seen in the town. Still, perhaps such an encounter with the hyena would drive some of the images out of her mind and let her sleep, so she did not immediately discount the idea. In the waning light of late afternoon they left the charred tragedy of a not so distant past behind them.

