

# Waystone, Circus of Stones

By Alps Sarsis

## Chapter 5

### *One Size Fits Everybody Else*

Travelling with the Ibians was, in a word, entertaining. In two words, culturally awakening. In three words, it was poetry in motion. Literally. Unadi was treated to such depth of character and prose as she'd never experienced by Nakia and Nanda, the two brown-toned Ibian brothers. The ancient works were their specialty, and they were delighted to find that Unadi was interested. The Mitanni female enjoyed poetry already, but the passion at which it was presented, and the skill and knowledge the two had made it so that Seile was nearly sick of it before they even neared the next town.

The theater troupe had already been heading in the direction of Arun, a decent-sized village that dealt with border trade almost exclusively. That was, by some providence, the location of Baldur's shop. Crisod's Ibian contact, Baldur, worked and lived there. He dealt in nearly any type of item, so it was agreed that this would be a good first contact to Unadi. It was with this in mind they had crossed the border initially, but they certainly did not assume they would enjoy a welcome escort to the town.

Mihr remained as dead weight in cricket-bat form. He had no intention at all of being a djinni in front of a single Ibian. Unadi tired of lugging him around, but enjoyed the little quiver she got from him every time she moved her hand from the handle and the cooler air swept over it to remind the djinn that she was sweating on him, leaving him wet wherever her hand had been. The Keeper girl had no idea djinn could be disgusted so easily by something so simple, but when it came down to it, did they sweat at all? Did they have any cause to be associated with that exuding of water for cooling purposes? Was that a particularly gross function that mortals alone shared?

The trip was laid out before them on flatter ground, thankfully, but it was a little unnerving to Unadi. There was not a clear path, so it was as if they were just cutting straight through a very old forest. It was obvious that it was old because the dense canopy overhead that created the perpetual shade over the ground below left nothing but silent greyish brown leaf litter. There wasn't a single shrub, blade of grass, or green vine anywhere. Unadi had never seen a forest quite like this one. It seemed almost completely lifeless under the bird-laden canopy above. Only the sound of leaves shuffling under foot could be heard if Nakia and Nanda were not talking. Perhaps it was why they almost never stopped.

After about four hours of unyielding plodding along, the trees began to wane, stumps here and there showing where they had been claimed for lumber. Then, those more sparse

trees gave way to fields and farms that looks like they had been there forever. This gave Unadi her first real impression of how Ibian homes were designed.

They were made primarily of stone, and had rooves that were high and heavy. The homes themselves were very large, but that made sense to the Mitanni female. Ibians themselves were not small. Swinging double doors were the most common that she'd seen, and she found it interesting that they almost never appeared that they locked. She commented on that, and was informed by Shon, the black-furred Ibian, that most homes had an outside 'stoop' that was before the actual door that led into the house. It could be seen almost like a storage area, but it was most typically used to wipe ones feet and shake off from the rain in a covered, dry area before going inside. It was large enough to stay for a bit and dry if one got soaked.

The windows were pointed at the top like those of a cathedral typically. Shon explained that this was less common in the interior of the country, and that it was really only fashionable near the border. The interior preferred small windows that were just at head level, and numerous clear or even colored skylights in the roof. The high angle of the rooves for Ibian homes made it so that these typically slate-shingled structures did not stay wet long in a rain, and would dry quickly.

Still, as it rained a great deal in the highland areas, many of the rooves ended up being green with moss, which was considered in keeping with the local style there. Even the cobblestone roads were green in those typically cloudy, foggy villages. The description was not attractive to Unadi, who preferred sunshine at least some of the time.

As they approached the village of Arun, they came up to a very heavy-looking wooden fence. The posts were about ten feet tall, and the railing was wide enough that Unadi could slip through it easily enough, but she was sure that an Ibian would have a less enjoyable time of it.

Shon assured Unadi that the wall had long ago stopped serving much of a function in this village. Long ago, it kept bandits out, but lawlessness was a thing of the past under the last two emperors. Anymore, the wall just separated the traditional 'main' part of town from the surrounding area. When they went through the unguarded, wide open gate, Unadi could certainly see that.

The homes were neatly spaced in lovely rows along a nicely tended cobblestone street. And there were Ibians everywhere. They were different sizes, patterns, and colors of Ibian, and she was sure those things all meant something to them that she failed to see. Class, origin, anything could be read into even the color of a Mitanni's frill, and that was, to Unadi, a little difference. There were much larger differences between the Ibians.

And then there were the female Ibians. When she had been informed of the difference between them, their more feral form versus the taur-like form of the males, she had assumed incorrectly that they would be much smaller as a result. Their beastly forms were just as large,

if more slight and light of frame. Lacking the upper torso, they were not as tall, but the difference outside of that was not a grand disparity. She glanced at her hyena companion. He was going to bond with one of these heavy, powerful Ibian girls? Drink really must have ramped up the courage on that one!

They were just as varied as the males in color and size and form. They were moving about in such a fashion at times that she forgot that they were just as sentient as Unadi herself was. Conversations that she'd catch from them every once in a while would snap her back into the realization that they were not as feral as they looked.

She spotted some Ibian kids, male and female, playing in an open area by some shops. They were casting a ring back and forth with a bamboo rod that had a hook at the end. The girls would catch it with surprising skill in their teeth, and fling it back, and the boys would catch it with their sticks. At first, Unadi considered maybe it was to avoid getting their hands wet from having been in the girls' mouths, but that idea went right out the window when the next girl caught it in her mouth as well. The cleanliness factor of it was not at issue. Maybe it was just seen as more challenging for them.

The whole experience reminded Unadi that the general idea she got at home about the Ibians was that they were violent, unfeeling monsters when it came to outsiders, and were under the heavy weight of oppression in their towns and cities so that they lived out their dull lives with violent contests being their only source of distraction. What she saw in this place was more like a normal town or village. Everything was different in design to accommodate their body-style, but the feel of their town wasn't savage or cruel or even unhappy. It was normal.

Watching the Ibians as they came and went, Unadi realized that not only were the female Ibians more slight in frame, their bells were smaller too. In some cases they were downright petite. The males occasionally had smaller bells too, but that was also accompanied with the fact that they had a simple ribbon holding it on their neck, while the larger bells were usually accented with a necklace or other ornamentation that suggested far greater value. This was true of the females as well as the males.

The Keeper then noticed a curious oddity.

"I've seen a couple of the lady Ibians without bells," Unadi observed, then briskly silenced herself. She wasn't supposed to inquire about them. The pained sound from Seile reminded of that a good second too late.

"Oh no, she mentioned the unmentionable!" Kanoa gasped.

"Oh, now she's done it," Nanda informed. Unadi initially felt a pit in her stomach over it, but their grins made it appear that they were not seriously upset.

"As a rule..." Shon noted, moving in closer to Unadi as he spoke under his breath.

“... I know, I know. Outsiders should not ask about the bells. I apologize. I forgot.” The lady Mitanni was genuinely sorry she’d made that mistake.

“Right,” Shon stated clearly, “But, most of us, particularly near the border, don’t care so much about that. It’s actually better that folks do understand that they can ask questions. Hiding important things about our culture actually creates some of the misunderstandings that we have with the outside world... and overreactions about some taboo gives them the impression that we are humorless savages. That’s really not the case.”

“As I discovered with your wine joke,” Unadi remarked.

“Yeah, that really was wine, I couldn’t feel my nose after downing the whole bottle like that,” Shon laughed. “But seriously...” He used a near whisper as he leaned in closer to Unadi, a large, strong hand over her shoulder as they walked. “Ibian girls... If they have a necklace or neck-guard with a bell, that bell indicates their family. They change out the bell to that of the family they marry into, and their original bell goes on the hearth.” Unadi nodded in understanding, assuming the neck guard was their word for the collars the lady Ibians were wearing. She tried to burn that into her mind so that she did not make the terrible mistake of actually calling them a collar. That sounded like a very taboo thing to do.

“I actually appreciate the richness of culture they represent, and yours in particular is eye-catching.” She remembered that complimenting a bell was favorable.

“This ancient thing?” inquired Shon, baring his teeth with a smile. “It’s been in my family a while. I am pleased you notice it.” He nodded in self-agreement. Unadi inwardly thanked Seile for giving her that tidbit so that she could save face a little. “Anyway, a girl’s original bell is kept as a matter of pride, but she will not wear two. This is taboo. It suggests that intimate matters for her are... complicated.”

Unadi nodded slowly at that, pretty sure she understood the implication. “Gotcha,” she responded.

Shon continued. “If a girl has a neck guard, but does not have a bell, it is not a happy thing. She has lost her mate while he still lives, and it’s a dishonor. Usually this is due to the breaking of a great promise. There are many great promises made by lovers, and to break even one, deemed such in agreement, is a thing done at the cost of one’s own bell. That bell is destroyed and the girl will never have another. Even in taking another mate, she will be known as a promise breaker. Now... the same happens to a male, before you cast aspersions about the treatment of our females.” Unadi blushed a little at that. She actually was about to bring it up.

“I apologize if I seemed tense about that. It didn’t seem to mix with what I was seeing. I did not believe you to be unkind to the Ibian women. They seem light-hearted enough. I do not

doubt they are happy. Even the ones with no bell that I saw... they seemed happy enough." She looked around curiously, wondering about how many kinds of bells there were. Could the Ibians tell at a glance who was in what family? Unadi could tell what part of town a Mitanni was from by the cut of the clothes they wore, often enough. That might seem very subtle to Shon. Maybe it was like that with the bells.

"Now... you might see a lady Ibian wandering about... a grown-up, mind you. I'm not meaning the little ones... You might see one walking around without a bell *or* a neck guard. That indicates something else. You'll not want to keep company with a lot of those if you don't want the wrong sort of attention." Unadi was fearful of asking what it meant. It seemed like the kind of thing that they didn't talk about.

"So, I will avoid such company then. I thank you for that." Unadi nodded again.

It was Kanoa who answered her silent pondering. "They are hired to keep warm company for those who lack it. It's not a terrible thing. Shon's just a stuffy old man." He laughed at that.

Shon scoffed scandalously. "It's undignified. Unadi's cultured. I'll not have it," Shon grumbled back to him.

Kanoa crossed in front of Shon, seeming more passionate and animated suddenly. "So they've got debts. We all do eventually. You make it sound like they are no better than thieves. There are certainly worse ways to apply oneself." The Mitanni girl glanced back at Shon and he rolled his eyes.

"If this is about my sister..."

"It's not," the smaller of the Ibians interrupted.

"We define our own value. It devalues them," Shon insisted.

"Their value to who, exactly?" replied Kanoa.

"To herself? To her father? To her friends? It's important. You're young! You don't see it that way. I know that. But you'll understand eventually," Shon stated.

"I sure hope not!" Kanoa laughed, and fell back again. Unadi found that whole conversation curious. What she got from it was that if they didn't have a necklace or 'collar', the girls were prostitutes. Maybe that wasn't actually true, but that's how the conversation made it sound. She wasn't about to suggest what she felt it meant, on the off chance that it didn't. She also got that there was not a consensus on whether or not this was entirely a bad thing, but it certainly wasn't the most respected trade to have where she Unadi herself was from. She

agreed with Shon that the reason that it was considered unsavory was ultimately about the value of a person.

They should not offer themselves as a commodity because people were worth more than a mere commodity. Where the waters got murky, however, was the question of whether they really felt that was even what they were doing. She knew that in speaking to a few of her fellow cadets about the subject, those who did that for a living did not see it as selling themselves, but like providing a very critically needed service instead. It was no different than massage or even some kinds of healing. It was needed, and it did absolutely no harm. Unadi wasn't interested in that herself, but someone with fewer options might find it more appealing. That seemed to be the understanding that Kanoa had. The two brothers, originally so talkative in their journey, stayed completely out of that conversation.

"Here we are!" Seile, who also had remained completely silent up to that point, announced. They stood in front of a very tall door. The lettering above it was unfamiliar to Unadi. She didn't read Ibian. At least the Ibians spoke common tongue around her. She wondered silently a brief moment if Seile could read it. He lived literally right outside Ibian territory.

If the hyena could read the sign, he didn't share that information, as he knocked twice, then pushed the door open. Unadi could not help but wonder why he'd knock on a shop door, but then it occurred to her that it might have been a custom. There was so much to learn in this new place. She became acutely aware that she knew lots of other customs in the places she grew up because those races were represented in those places. Ibians were not generally willingly anywhere else. The other Ibians who had been traveling with them remained outside, or continued on. It was odd they didn't say goodbye, but that led Unadi to suspect they were just going to meet back up later.

The inside of the shop was similar to most that the Keeper had been in with the exception that selections were duplicated. There were high shelves and low shelves. Low shelves had the same items in little woven grass baskets. It didn't take a lot of thinking to figure out why. It made it easier for the Ibian females to pick them up. There had been larger baskets by the door, but that was pretty typical to any shop. It was more rustic than what Unadi was used to in the places she had been from. It felt more wild and simple and pure. At the same time, the fixtures themselves spoke of more refined craftsmanship, higher technology, and no small amount of precision. The Ibians were not backwards, they just seemed to really love their traditions.

The Mitanni's quiet musing was interrupted by the gruff voice of someone who could not possibly have been hiding in the shop.

"Whoa-ho-ho-hoooh! How lost is *this* young one!" the massive Ibian boomed. Unadi turned to meet the gaze of keen yellow eyes on a backdrop of solid obsidian fur. He was nearly

half an Ibian larger than the largest one the Keeper had been walking with so far. He wore a gold or brightly polished bronze bell on an ornate three-tiered chain and literally nothing else.

“Hey, Baldur!” Seile chimed in a happy tone. That relaxed Unadi a bit. If this massive creature did not want her in his shop, he could have been very physically persuasive in making her leave!

“What is hot, little spot?” the beast-like Ibian laughed jovially. Unadi was unable to stifle the short bark of a laugh. It wasn’t really so much for Seile being called ‘Little Spot’ which made sense, as his father was likely the ‘big spot’ as it were, it was just... how intensely out of place the gleeful charm of Baldur was with his massive size. He felt like he should be brooding and stiff and serious, but... Unadi couldn’t place why she immediately assumed that. He was a shop-keeper. Folks who ran shops, sold wares, and wanted a reputation of being easy to deal with were very frequently boisterous and friendly and outgoing.

A successful Ibian shop owner was exactly like every other kind of successful merchant. Unadi silently cursed the disservice of her assumptions about the Ibians. They were different, sure, but at their core they were very much the same.

“I’ve brought my friend, Unadi. She’s travelling with me, and we encountered something troubling on our way here that we need to discuss with you.” Seile glanced side to side, then leaned back, craning his head to see around the next aisle. “Something in private, if you will,” he noted.

“I see. Well, that will have to be left outside, you can’t have that in here.” He nodded to the lady.

“That’s my friend, Unadi,” the spotted male proclaimed. “She’s kinda the one with the questions.”

“Not her - that.” He pointed up a little. The smooth-skinned lady blinked and then looked over her shoulder where she had Mihr resting, still in cricket-bat form.

Oh. Oh no.

“This?” she asked warily, holding up the bat.

“That. Very much that. Put it by the door, outside. Please, if you will and thank you for that.” He still sounded super friendly, as if he expected there might be some confusion about the request, and he should need to be patient with them.

“Why?” Unadi pried, not wanting to be separated from the Djinn.

"It would be safer outside." The answer was delivered in a no-nonsense tone that hinted concern, not aggression. There was a soft vibration in the Keeper's hand to indicate understanding from the djinn. The whole thing made Unadi uneasy, but she did as she was asked, placing the cricket bat directly beside the door outside. Maybe it was a rule about weapons in the shop. It might have actually been making Baldur uneasy, fearing being robbed. Who in their right mind would attempt to rob this wall of Ibian muscle, though?!

After doing as requested, Unadi returned. Seile did not seem overly flustered about the exchange, and was holding up a black metal statue of an Ibian female, sitting rather doggishly on her haunches and smiling. She seemed to remember Seile saying there was little art of female Ibians done after the change. Maybe this shop had rare curiosities. Or forbidden ones.

"Sorry, I hope I haven't caused an issue, I didn't know the rule," Unadi offered. "Not having a weapon in a shop is kind of a no-brainer," she surrendered, both to apologize and to test her theory that this was the reason it was requested.

"Nah!" chimed Baldur brightly. "You bear the mark of a Keeper, you can be armed if'n ya want. Nah, I can't have ya bringing a Djinn in this shop."

Seile dropped the little statue onto the shelf but managed to catch it before it fell on the floor, very obviously startled. Unadi's blood ran cold. This was it, right? The journey ended here? The blue-toned girl remained very, very quiet a moment.

"You can... tell?" she pressed.

"One of maybe three in the whole of Ibia who can!" he stated brightly, crossing his arms and puffing out his chest proudly.

"Why did you even let us in?" inquired Seile.

"Makin' sure your friend was actually your friend," answered the Ibian.

"Oh, yeah! I forgot about that!" Her friend brightened up like their cover had not just been blown to smithereens.

"What?" murmured Unadi.

"Oh!" Seile looked back to his lady companion. "If Dad and I bring someone with us and call them our associate, Baldur knows they are not our friend, and... well... some discussions and the like are immediately off the table."

"Like if you are being investigated by a Keeper." Unadi rolled her eyes. She found it so easy to forget sometimes that she was technically dealing with a smuggler.



"I needed you to leave the Djinn outside because I have things for sale in here that... don't react well to his kind. It's not safer for you or me to leave him out there, it's safer for him." This immediately comforted the Mitanni far more than the previous part of the discussion. Maybe Baldur really was someone that could be trusted.

"So... anti-Djinn weapons and such?" questioned Seile.

"Gods no. I don't sell weapons in here - you already know that!" scoffed Baldur. "But I got a whole rack of bells a few aisles back and surely half of 'em got anti-Djinn warding that gives those buggers a nasty pop of energy if they get too close. Your little servant would not have thanked you for walkin' him past all of those!" A hearty laugh drew a sigh from Unadi.

"Yeah, thank you for that, then!" laughed the hyena.

"So... what did ya want to discuss?" diverted the massive Ibian. His tone was more serious.

"You know Emora?" asked Seile.

"Yeah. Hate that place. Super stuck-up for a border village." He crossed his arms. Unadi cringed at that.

Her companion flinched at it as well, but responded, "It was burned to the ground. Not sure there were any survivors."

The expression of the merchant fell.

"I... I didn't hate it that much," he murmured softly. The taur-like Ibian plopped the haunches of his lower half down, obviously feeling very bad for what he had said. "Bandits, maybe? Our patrols don't go outside the border. We couldn't have done anything to help em out."

"No, the fires spread from inside the materials," informed Unadi. This was her role. She was a Keeper. She could investigate. She *should* be asking the questions and it felt far better to her that she actually was acting in accordance with her duties instead of as a refugee fleeing from her homeland.

"Flame magic..." hissed Baldur. "This is... this is bad. So close to the border? Really?" he whispered scandalously.

"Looks like it," Unadi offered in a hushed tone. "We're investigating the possible use of a Stone in this crime."

"Please say you jest!" groaned the Ibian. "Let me make it through to the end of my life and this crap not start again, it's all I ever asked!"

"We don't know anything for sure, but we need someone who knows a lot about magic attacks and relics capable of helping someone destroy a city."

Baldur sighed slowly. "Well, the Keepers are investigating, even across borders, so at least there's that reassurance. This is ... a joint investigation then? With the Imperial Guard and the Keepers?"

"Not exactly," Unadi responded with tension in her voice.

"Does... Does the Imperial Guard know about this at all?" he inquired.

"We don't know. They may. We haven't spoken to any of them," Seile explained.

"Are you... are you even supposed to be here, investigating in Ibian territory, then?" pressed Baldur.

"No. I am not here officially." She knew full and well that this might prevent Baldur from helping them, but based on what she'd seen and heard, dishonesty was more toxic than nearly anything else.

"Are the Keepers officially investigating crimes committed with Oracle magic?" the Ibian shrewdly counter-interrogated.

"No. I can't offer much in terms of explanation, but I will say that those at the top didn't want an investigation at all. There was a similar attack some time back at a university. I have gotten myself inseparably involved in that investigation which... has led me here." Unadi felt a wave of anxiousness. She was sharing too much. Seile trusted him, but she might be making a very foolish mistake.

"The... The Keepers themselves are covering this up?" he hissed. Unadi lowered her head, staring at the floor. It made her order seem so unsavory, particularly to another culture.

"It would seem so. I appreciate any help you can give toward stopping these crimes. I feel certain they are not over and done." Seile was anxious too, from the look of it.

"So... A Keeper who isn't supposed to be here, with a Djinn who she's hiding, is travelling with a small-time smuggler asking for help from a merchant to investigate a thing that can't be happening but has been blocked from open investigation?" clarified the black, massive Ibian.

"About sums it up, I think," the hyena responded glumly.

"We're so fucked," deadpanned Baldur.

"That's the spirit," Seile tossed back.

"I know someone who can help you, and he's not far, but you might not like the price of doin' business with him." The tone of the merchant was pretty dark and Unadi's heart dropped.

"Anyone else I might get help from?" she asked.

"No one this side of the country," replied Baldur, "...And I should add... Ibia's a damn big country."

"Gotcha. And you think he can actually help?" Seile stood a little straighter. Unadi understood why. They were making progress. They were moving. It felt good to make some kind of headway, even if it was risky.

"If anyone can, my coin would be on him. He knows more about magics... new and old, than damn near anyone I've ever heard of."

"That's good I suppose. We can leave immediately to head to him. You said he wasn't far away, right?" Unadi was hopeful. A high price to pay for services was something she expected from anyone who might really be able to help, but she didn't have much to offer. Perhaps Seile might have ideas to help make money when they got there if that was the object.

"Not far away in Ibia is still a hike for anything on two limbs, girl!" laughed Baldur merrily. "It would take you well into the night to get there if you left now, and a trip on dark roads might get you lost on top of that. And Layja won't do you no favors for wakin' him to help you when the sun's closer to rising than setting!"

"Okay..." Unadi rubbed her chin. "Would there be... an inn or something here?" She felt stupid immediately for prying. Seile immediately spoke the error.

"There's no place that will have us in a bed without coin, Unadi."

There was a loud laugh from the jovial Ibian. "What?! You're runnin around askin favors in Ibia without coin for a bed? Ah ha ha haaah! Oh you are gonna have a fun trip, lady Mitanni!" Baldur got off his haunches and moved toward the front of the shop.

"Not much choice here," grumbled Unadi.

"Worry not for tonight. I owe some small debt to little spot's dad, so you have a bed for the night in the guest room. I trust by your scent you don't mind sharing it." Unadi went scarlet.

She hadn't really been in a bath or anything in their travels, so she guessed that might be pretty obvious to someone so observant that they could, at a glance, recognize a disguised Djinn.

"Th-thank you," Unadi half-whispered.

"There's a bath across the hall from the room. Even got a hot-water boiler. Use it. Trust me on that. Bahahaha!" Baldur continued laughing and excused himself to the back of the shop.

There was a long, drawn out sigh from Seile as he leaned back against some shelving, his arms crossed over his chest. "Guess what story Pop gets to hear next time he sees Baldur?" the spotted male groaned.

"Sorry about that. I had no idea Ibian noses were so keen."

"It's alright. I think Pop'll be happy about it, honestly. Surprised, but happy." Seile shook his head.

"He said a bath, right? I mean... I really, really want that," expressed the lady enthusiastically. "I really, really want that. I want a bath. Can we have a bath?" The more she talked about it, the more coveted the idea became. She liked bathing, she liked swimming, but she hated being cold and wet. If they could have a hot bath, the Keeper felt like she could sleep better than she had since perhaps even days before her flight from the capital.

"I take it we check out the bath first and foremost?" Seile chuckled.

"Absolutely!" Unadi chimed. She put her backside out a bit showingly and wagged her whip-like lizard tail. That got a sharp laugh from Seile.

"That's adorable," he pointed out, following the girl toward the mentioned bath.

"I'm not the adorable sort, *Fluffy*." She grinned coyly over her shoulder to him.

Seile whined softly. "Please don't call me that here. It's hard enough with the fur-pile thing having gotten spread around a bit. I don't need *more* teasing." The Mitanni female walked into the bathroom expecting something familiar. It was most assuredly not. The covered hatch in the floor had a pretty obvious function, she was sure, but her eyes trailed immediately to the bath. Five stairs lead down into a channel that was lined with smooth stones. It looked more like a small pool than a bath. Due to the shape of the Ibians, it was actually pretty obvious they would need something like this, but it was far more inviting to Unadi. It would feel like a vacation compared to what she was used to.

"I'll get some hot rocks from the boiler and you just open the sluice there." He pointed to a little rope that could be pulled to lower a pipe down to the bath. Unadi did that and watched the cool water rush in. Collected rain-water was the most likely source, from those tall, angular roofs.

This would then be heated, like Seile said, with hot rocks from the other room. He returned quickly and dumped about 20 of them into the deeper part of the bath. It filled pretty quickly. The stones were a unique sort that held heat well because of their density. Unadi recognized them from text-books. In the capital, Djinn energy was plentiful enough that the older methods for this were not needed. Using them here felt exotic.

"There... we just give it a few minutes, and it's all set and ready." Seile crossed his arms in front of him. Unadi began undressing. She actually felt the slightest ping of self-consciousness. For all they had done together so far, she hadn't really seen him completely naked. Seile had not seen his female travelling companion fully undressed either. He did not immediately start to disrobe, appearing more interested in watching her pull off her own clothing. When she was down to the smooth, bare azure, he finally began undressing. Unadi tested the water, finding it at least already comfortable, but she sat on the floor at the edge of the recessed tub for the moment, letting just her feet go in.

"It's still a bit chilly, but I can tell it's warming," she announced.

"Looks like you're cooling nicely in comparison," he claimed with a smirk.

"Huh?" asked the Keeper, before peering up at his eyes and tracking his line of sight back to her chest. Of course. As she was shirtless, those darker nipples were obviously perkier. Unadi flattened her frill with mock-irritation. "We're *guests* here, cut that out!" she scolded.

"Guests in a house where we are definitely already seen as a couple," Seile pointed out casually.

"We're friends, Seile, but that... doesn't make us a couple. I... I hope I haven't been making it seem like I am pursuing that kind of relationship. I mean... right now, with everything going on..." She crossed her arms over her chest a little self-consciously. They *were* having sex. It wasn't a ridiculous thing for him to assume. She couldn't be mad. Still, she certainly couldn't consider adequately fostering a genuine relationship in such a crazy, dangerous situation. It was every distraction Roche ever warned her about rolled into one.

"Oh, yeah! No... I know," Seile clarified after a moment of perhaps trying to figure out why she said it. Unadi let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. That was a quiet relief. She has not even considered that would be an issue. She was glad Seile was apparently on the same page. The hyena continued as he leaned down and tested the water with his whole hand. "You're very dedicated to the solution of *whatever* problem you are dealing with,

but you still enjoy closeness. I get that. I really do. Since I don't trust easily, it actually makes me feel kind of better that you feel that way. I can get closer and not worry that anything is... being forced. I like that we can enjoy the things we do as friends."

Unadi watched him a moment. Why did she feel bad? She wasn't wrong to hold back in this situation. But it felt like Seile didn't allow anyone in, and the moment he did, Unadi was practically heading for the door. It had nothing to do with *him*. She just couldn't be that... involved. She tried to dismiss the concern as she stepped down the stairs into the pool-like tub and gave an aching groan. She relished the magic that the warming water did for her whole body. She leaned back against one of the sides of it, the water coming up almost to her sternum while she stood. Unadi put her arms along the edge and settled happily in the practical indoor heated pool.

Seile moved around behind her at the side of the tub, kneeling and putting his hands down over her shoulders and beginning to rub. Unadi pulled in a very slow, calm breath and then just let it out in a melting sigh.

Seile spoke with his muzzle just behind her smooth head. "Even if things... don't end up okay... Even though it's pretty horrifying and dangerous, all this stuff in Ibia..." He paused a bit, lost in thought. He finally continued. "... I'm actually glad I'm with you. I'm happy even if you aren't interested in a big relationship or anything... But, don't take my casualness for not caring. I like you. I really enjoy being with you. I guess... I just needed to say that." He touched his cool nose to the side of her neck. That comforted her. She wasn't sure how he knew she was feeling regret about not being able to give more, but it only made her spotted companion more endearing.

She heard the chuff of clothing falling away, and then smiled, regarding the bare chest of her companion as he came back around to the other side of the tub to come down the stairs. He had a lean, but toned body. It was easy to appreciate him. His chest-ruff drew her eyes, of course. She wanted to touch it. She wanted to stroke and tease it. What genetic purpose did it serve? Did it attract girl hyenas? Mitanni frills were used as a measure of attractiveness, was hyena fluffiness the same? Did Unadi have a handsome hyena? Was Seile homely? She wasn't sure she would know the difference. Shandhi seemed to think he was nice, but she wasn't a hyena either.

Seile moved down into the tub. The Keeper's eyes tracked down his body to catch a glimpse of his heavy-looking member as the darker flesh bounced against his thigh while he stepped in. Oh yeah, he was definitely a distraction. A delicious distraction. Unadi watched hungrily as her sexy hyena friend submerged himself, pulling his dark hands over his dark snout and washing his face under the water of the huge Ibian tub.

Roche would understand Unadi's need for comfort like this. It wasn't a distraction when she needed her wits about her, and he'd proven useful getting her this far. She could enjoy him when time allowed like this, right? She could at least appreciate him. He certainly appreciated

her. She was reeling slightly from being told that he liked her. It was a simple gesture, but how many people had ever said those words to her? It was generally the kind of thing left to assumption. It was the kind of thing you knew, but never heard, and it was a little jarring to hear the words actually stated like that. It meant a lot to her. Unadi leaned forward and moved in the chest-deep water to be in front of Seile when he reemerged. She intended to kiss that dark muzzle when it came up.

Reemerge he did.

And Unadi forgot all about kissing her possibly-handsome, fluffy friend.

The weight of water pulled all his fur downward and it completely changed the shape of his whole body, head included. His eyes were pinched shut to keep the water out, his muzzle was all scrunched up, and his cheeks just sagged with trapped water.

The Keeper couldn't help herself. She exploded with laughter. What cruel joke of nature was this? She'd seen wet fur before. She'd seen folks in the rain shaking off and appearing a bit poorer for it, but she couldn't remember ever having watched someone furry come up out of the water before. Where she or her brother would be pretty much unchanged by being in the water, Seile looked completely different and it was inexplicably hilarious.

"What'd I do?" complained the sopping male. It only made it funnier. Unadi had to turn around. She couldn't bring her eyes to him. She crossed her arms in front of her at the edge of the 'pool' and lowered her head into them, practically crying. She couldn't even get the image out of her head. "Unadi?" he asked, sounding more concerned than hurt.

"Oh gods, Seile, I'm not used to what wet fur looks like!" she squeaked out. She felt bad because she was obviously teasing him, but she couldn't help it! She glanced over her shoulder to clarify that it wasn't a bad thing and watched as he shook off. His fur, particularly the fluff along his neck, stuck out wildly as a result. Unadi stifled a delighted scream and turned back around to laugh into her arms again. Seile moved up behind Unadi and embraced her tightly, making her gasp as she felt his warm, strong, taller form against her. He pushed her to the wall of the bath.

"No teasing about the fluffy wet fur," growled the hyena. She felt his teeth pinch the back of her neck. Her flesh was supple enough, and easily seized that way, and she found that the effect left her weak in the knees.

"Ahh... Seile... Baldur could just walk right in, and I don't think I locked the door," protested Unadi.

Seile's soft, gruff voice responded, "And he'd do what? Sit and watch? He's got a shop to run." Unadi gave a stifled huff as strong hands cupped over her firm, youthful breasts. She lowered her head again, only to get her neck tagged by teeth once more. Where was the shy

hyena uncomfortably squirming in the sleeping bag? Maybe it was just because he wasn't as afraid here. Less exposed, less nervous.

"Just... try not to make... much noise..." Unadi could scarcely believe she'd said it. She just... gave in to the moment. Okay, so, her fluffy friend was definitely distracting. But the water felt good, and it was very much her element. She liked being in it. It made her happy. Water made her feel safe. It always had. Also, this water, unlike the rain from before, did not chill her to the bone. It was warming her. It made her more active and invigorated. It was easy to give in to just a little more pleasure, still in the arms of her eager companion... for now.

The Keeper slipped a hand behind her, those blueish fingers curling around his already swollen member. It didn't take much to get the young male going. She didn't blame him though. Her heart was racing too. It was safer than it has been before. It was quiet. Mihr couldn't interrupt. Unadi felt bad just leaving him in stick form outside the door, but he certainly didn't want trouble, so he was willing.

The sensation of that hot, turgid flesh literally twitching in her gripping hand incensed her. When had she ever been so eager? Surely it was just an effect of all that was going on. She needed to be close to someone.

Another bite to the back of her neck, and a soft growl pulled her from that self-assessment. Oh, growls. Mitanni didn't do that. They had kind of a gasping hiss to convey the kind of emotion that her hyena was conveying, but the thrum of a growl had a very exotic and dangerous emotion attached to it. It made her immediately want the thing that she was so cautious about just a few seconds ago. With her fingers wrapped around captured flesh, she just stirred him against her backside, down into the cleft where her legs met. Playing in the water was not as easy as it sounded. It had a tendency to make things wet, but not specifically slick. The heat helped, but for the moment, she felt glad to just tease him against her slit as he held her from behind.

Seile rumbled into her ear breathlessly, "You can't say you don't like this. Not with how that feels."

"You're twitching almost in time with your own heartbeat, dumb boy," laughed the Keeper. "I don't know why you think suddenly *I'm* the one who's desperate."

At the same time, her mind was reeling with ideas of how she was going to take him. Would she sit at the edge of the tub up by the stairs that lead down to let him have her there? Would she stroke him off for a while and then let him in at the last second? She wouldn't get hers, but she could always have him pleasure her after. He certainly seemed willing.

"I sure won't deny that I enjoy this. I wouldn't dishonor you with such a lie," he huffed, pushing his hips forward. It got a soft groan out of Unadi, and his tight hands gripping her chest with rolling squeezes continued to prove that he was not quite as awkward about this as before.



He knew what he wanted. The smooth-skinned female turned to face him finally, her back to the recessed edge of the tub, frill buckling down as she cupped her mouth to his, accepting his tongue.

They had kissed before, but it was a little different. There had been a sense of alarm and hesitation in it before. The feeling that Seile was not sure he was allowed to do what he was doing. This was different. He knew what he was doing. He felt confident that it would be something he enjoyed. He trusted Unadi. She trusted him. She enjoyed kissing, taking his flat, thin tongue into her suckling mouth, stroking the soaking wet fur pressed tight along his lean but strong shoulders. She stroked over his cheeks and chest. She wanted, almost alarmingly, to just put her hands on every single part of him.

Oh the fur along his chest. Fur itself wasn't an unsavory taboo, honestly. Not where she was from. There were a few cross-species pairings she knew about but she'd not really been interested herself until this trip. But, it was taboo in the sense that it was different. She understood completely the draw as she stroked her fingertips through it..

At the same time, Seile seemed to experience a similar attachment to her smooth form as his claws traced down over her form again and again as if her were trying to reform her out of clay. His clutching and pulling were more and more insistent, so she knew he had been patient about as long as he cared to be.

She could tease him. She could have him sit on the edge of the tub and give oral, then walk away as if she intended to leave, then go back to it. There were lots of fun things she could do, but without really thinking about it, instead she arched her back, pulling her feet off the bottom of the bath. She wrapped her powerful legs around his hips.

"Oh gods, yes..." rumbled the hyena.

Her careful fingers slipped down between their tensed bodies. They were in a stranger's home. Surely this was not his intention at the offer of the bath.

"Quiet!" Unadi hissed.

"Fuck!" whispered Seile, tensing up as those fingers pressed him to the puffy, blue-toned folds. The water was originally a tiny bit too cool for Unadi's taste, but suddenly it felt downright steamy. She was sure it was not entirely the heating stones.

"Like this for a little bit... I wanna just feel you..." Unadi moved her hips slowly, a gentle rocking motion that felt almost tidal in its relaxation. As she moved her hips, she kept the first few inches of his dark-tone cock pushed wetly to her sex.

“Don’t tease, Unadi, we could... be interrupted...” His anxious, wavering whisper absolutely delighted her. She would be out of luck too if they were interrupted, but she loved watching his frantic features and controlling his pleasure.

“What, can’t you pop if you only have a little bit in there? I didn’t think it was so difficult...” The smooth-skinned female began to just slowly undulate her hips, working those bare inches sinfully. She loved the way he shifted from one foot to the other. She relished the sounds he made. She enjoyed the feel of his nearly fearful claws upon her hips trying to pull her against him but not making any progress.

“Haahn!” huffed the struggling hyena, “Unadi, if I cum this shallow in you it’s going right in the water, and then all in my f-fur!” The keeper let a coy grin spread as she looked up at his pleading eyes.

“It won’t get in myyyy fur though...” She pushed her hips forward finally to let her body claim nearly every inch in a slow, heavy stroke. Her pubic bone bumped him solidly, and then she stroked back and slammed in deep again, getting a hot puff of breath from him before reaching down between them and seizing his cock in her fingers again. She wiggled it just in her entrance, making him put his arms around her and pull at her desperately. “Already close?” she asked.

“We’re gonna get caught, Unadi...” whispered Seile.

“What’s he gonna do? Join in?” She giggled and jerked her hips hard into Seile again, making him grunt, but she held still and just ground over him, keeping that thick hyena flesh deep inside her. He put his hands down over her lower back to make it hard for her to pull back as he groaned deeply.

“Don’t... hah... Don’t pretend for a m-moment that he won’t. Females with actual hands... It’s a f-fucking hot kink here... Please... I’m close, I don’t want to have to stop now...” His lady companion finally began to move her hips again, but she drew them way back so his cock was only about two inches inside her again. She had limited experience when it came to sex, but playing with Seile was somewhere between sinfully alluring and mirthfully entertaining. The little sounds he made, how he tensed up anxiously, his gasps when something pleasurable overtook him unexpectedly. It was all fast becoming a favorite pastime for Unadi.

With some shame, she realized that she understood why the Ibians probably teased Seile. He was completely ripe for it. Some folks just had the best reactions to being prodded sweetly. She rocked her hips slowly so as to continue the tease. He deserved this. He was soft in more ways than one. He honestly seemed to enjoy the attention. It certainly wasn’t like this was hurting him.

Rather suddenly, Seile put both hands on Unadi’s plump backside. The Keeper barely had time to cry out before he drove himself deep inside her, teeth bared. Okay, so maybe...

maybe teasing was over for now. He snarled in pleasure and the water splashed upwards as his hips collided with hers again. She groaned as he drove himself into her hard. The teasing made his cock so achingly tight and swollen inside her. She felt another impact, and was pressed against the wall of the recessed tub, her shoulders just above the water.

Before, when entangled with the hyena, Unadi very much did the fucking. Now, for the first time, she was really the one taking it. She tilted her head back. She just let herself take a moment to enjoy it. Another loud snarl and Unadi had to stifle her cry. Seile tagged her shoulder with his teeth. It might be an annoyance to Unadi if it didn't also make her so wet. The water sloshed as he huffed with passion and began bucking his hips hard to hers.

"Ahah... N-no self control?" asked the acrobatic Unadi.

"Ah... F-fuck... You tease... too much... The Ibians will love you!" he grunted. Heavier motions under the water made for more spillage outside of the tub.

"Seile, quiet!" hissed Unadi again.

He didn't say anything, but there was a thump as Unadi's back hit the side of the tub. He was almost bestial in his aggression. This was not about his personal pleasure anymore. He was devoting himself to taking her in the tub, and as Unadi was taking too long, he was making sure he got what he needed before they were interrupted. Even a week ago, she might have been resistant to this level of eager force, but as she felt his hips strike hers, the emotional pleasure of how much he needed her was mixed with the pleasure of being taken so roughly by him. How hard he was willing to take her was too much to ignore. Her frill snapped down and she cried out despite her earlier order of being quiet. She couldn't help it. She finally did something she wasn't used to.

She bit Seile. That was taboo for Mitanni. It was lustful... animal. It was so dark and primeval that it wasn't generally accepted as anything but the basest behavior, but there it was. Her mouth. His shoulder.

And Seile went nuts for it. He drove himself harder, faster, and most certainly deeper, his twitching girth tapping at the ring of her cervix. This was not the same as making love. This was almost a forbidden drug. He was ravaging her. A closer, almost Tantric style of emotional transfer was common to the Mitanni. This, Unadi decided, was born of the heat of her hyena-lover's blood. It wasn't a bad thing. It was raw. It was intense. It was immeasurably hot. In mere moments of such treatment, his lover was trembling, clutching tightly to Seile's shoulders. Her already tight channel shuddered around his pistoning girth as she peaked almost violently around him, far sooner than she expected she would. Cumming in the water made her a lot more slick and that only made her tightening heat around Seile more inviting to his desperate claim.

“Sh-shh-shh-shh!” Her hissed warning came out in hot puffs through her clenched teeth. It was more for her sake than his. Her inner flesh was rippling around him and she had to shush herself or call out in waves of pleasure from it.

This was not careful.

It was not quiet.

Then there was the sound of a door.

“Shit!” gasped Unadi. A tiny whine from Seile told the story of his crushed desires as the powerful thighs of a Mitanni acrobat trapped him so he couldn’t keep pounding her against the side of the bath. She grabbed the plentiful fur along the back of his neck and jerked stiffly to make him hold still.

“Fahk!” he huffed.

Baldur rumbled from behind the door. “I know, I know... No peeking, but I gotta get the box of paraffin I’m keepin’ in here... and you two are taking *forever*. I’m not chargin’ for the bath, but they’re payin’ for this, so... yeah.” The door opened and Unadi watched in near horror as the Ibian padded backwards into the bathing area, mostly watching the wall. “Don’t mind me. I know you types like your privacy. Just gotta... yeah. Sorry. Sorry.” He was at least genuinely as polite as he could be for the situation. Could he tell what they were doing? They were in the water so that probably dampened the scent of it, but they had been a little noisy. Maybe he didn’t hear because he had been dealing with a customer apparently while Unadi was getting utterly wrecked in the tub just off the main shop area.

The lady Mitanni gritted her teeth anxiously as she watched the Ibian inch through the bathing area. She was still pressed with her back tightly to the side of the recessed bath, facing the door. Her legs were wrapped, slightly trembling, around Seile’s lower back. An aftershock of her waning climax suddenly quivered over his throbbing cock.

And that’s when the hyena exploded inside her. If they were still rutting like livestock she might not have noticed it so much, but they were both holding as still as possible, so she felt that rigid flesh buck hard inside her gripping heat. She felt the heavy fluid impact her cervix and well up inside her.

Seile gave the smallest pronouncement of it through clenched teeth. “Ffk...”

And Unadi laughed. She had to stifle it and stop herself. It was just too ridiculous and her climax had her giddy to start with. Baldur walked in when it was too late for the hyena to stop his building climax. He was probably mortified at popping with his Ibian contact just feet away.

She couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity.

Baldur called out just off to the side of them. "Here it is. Thanks for not being mad. Man, I have been looking for this little bundle since like... half an hour before you two even got here and I only just now remembered it was in here. Couldn't keep old Han waiting anymore. She gets snippy, ya'll don't even know."

As he spoke, Unadi felt Seile violently throb and pulse. He was writhing very softly as, even with unexpected company, he spent himself fully inside her. It settled in her mind. She wasn't the only one who teased Seile. The entire damned universe seemed in on it.

The taboo, the risk, the fear of being caught also seemed to be a hot-button for him. Unadi hoped they would eventually just get some time alone, but for the moment, that didn't seem to matter to him. He let out a long, quiet sigh as he trembled in her arms.

"Are the heating stones okay? I'll be honest, I like my bath cold, so I don't usually use em." Unadi glanced up at Baldur as he remained with his back to them. His tail waved around casually.

"They... They're uh..." Seile attempted to answer, his voice cracking from breathlessness.

"Nice and hot." Unadi chuckled, grinning mirthfully at her horrified friend.

"Glad to hear it. The towels are on the shelf here. Stopper's right at the bottom step for the tub, I think you saw it. Sorry again." Unadi grinned as the thick flesh inside her pulsed again. Hips flexed and tummy tightened as he fought the desire to move against the Keeper. Baldur exited the bathing area and locked the door behind him.

"What timing -" started Unadi, but she was pushed hard to the side of the tub again. She grunted as hyena thighs slapped hard against hers underwater. It was renewed stronger than he'd been taking her before. "Shh! Seile! Ow! Gah!" She clutched him. Okay, so maybe she wasn't completely spent. The merchant's intrusion broke his climax, perhaps, and he needed the real thing.

"Fucking... Ibian... culture..." Seile growled and tagged Unadi's shoulder with his teeth. She jerked his fluff along his neck again to get him under control and he snarled. Oh what a delicious sound *that* was. If she was not supposed to do that, if his growl was to stop her, it had the opposite effect. Her grip tightened and she kind of shook him.

"Come get it..." growled the Mitanni lass.

"Hahh... Nnn..." Hips pushed deeper, his body shook.

"Poor Fluffy..." whispered Unadi.

"Gah!" cried Seile, "D-don't c-call me that now!" He bucked hard.

"Good Fluffy. Don't hold back!" Unadi huffed into his rounded hyena ear before seizing it in her teeth. He winced and cried out a little, hips moving faster. It had to take a lot of strength to thrust like that under the water. Unadi tightened her thighs around him to make it take even more effort. Making him work for it was the best fun she could remember having in a long while. Her own thighs began to rock and push back again. Her arousal was close to peak again and she wanted to let him finish, but she needed just a tiny bit more time.

"C-close..." he gave a pained groan.

Unadi trilled into his ear, "Fluffy, Fluffy, Fluffy, Fluffy, Fluffy..." in time with the powerful lurching of the hyena's lower body. She grinned mirthfully. He would be desensitized to that soon enough, but she would milk that fun for all it was worth for now.

"For fuck's sake, Unadi!" whined her soft-furred lover. She clung to him tighter. She grabbed that fur along the back of his neck and pulled again. His hot mouth cupped her shoulder and Unadi stifled a cry. Okay, that one hurt. His mouth full of her shoulder was probably the only thing that kept their Ibian host from being loudly informed of the corruption of his bath. Seile's cock twitched hard inside his lover and she trembled as her inner heat flared and exploded around him. It was intense, body-shaking, mind-breaking heaven in an instant and she just hissed out a pleased tone of Mitanni lust, frill back, eyes shut tight.

After a few moments of just rocking and squirming against him, she just held her hyena friend close. She panted over his shoulder. He panted over hers. The water felt good. It was cool. It pulled that heat of exertion away from them. Her muscles were sore. She tightened them so much fighting his motions to play with Seile longer. She would feel this later. And she would love remembering it.

She knew one thing for certain... Even if neither of them were after something serious, it would be hard as hell to leave this hyena behind if she ever got the chance to go back home. She was happy to have him with her, and hoped that he was serious about sticking with her for the danger and difficulty ahead. She needed someone she could rely on, and he'd been every bit of that so far.

She listened to the echoing drops of water and the gentle quiet slosh against the edge of the tub as she and Seile moved softly against one another. She let him enjoy, without any interruption, the full cycle of his afterglow. Kissing, caressing, softly savoring, they just shared the private moment, and she kept her legs around his thighs like a vice even as she felt him soften inside her, unwilling to let him go until well after her body had pulled the last drop of her hyena's twice-given release from him.