

Waystone: Circus of Stones

Alps Sarsis

Chapter 1

The Acrobat, the Elder, and the Cricket

"Well, it's a little late to change your mind at this point, but are you still glad of it? This silly course you plot for yourself?" The tinny voice cut through the darkness. The dull, soothing hum of a djinn-powered turbine spinning up put the substance of sound to the darkness. There was no motion right away, just the sound. A female voice broke in after a pause, having waited to see if motion might start right away.

"I hope they lift off soon." Her uncertain answer was evasive. "I'm not comfortable waiting here if we aren't goin' anywhere." She leaned back against carefully tied down freight inside the cargo hold of the vessel. She spoke quickly and breathlessly, still calming down from their escape.

"The first thing they'll check are cargo ships. Mihr doesn't want to be stuffed in another library, Unadi!" the somewhat shrill voice hissed. Unadi clicked her tongue with irritation.

"And here I got the impression you were all about 'not-boring things'. What's a little bit of adventure without a little bit of risk, Mihr? Isn't this great fun? Here we are hiding and hoping not to be discovered, our very throats and freedom on the line, and soon we will be hurled through the sky four thousand cubits up by energy borrowed from a Djinn probably just as impatient as you. Oh, I should add... over an ocean which, if we survived the crash into it, we'd be trespassing as soon as we hit the water!" Unadi smiled wryly at the lack of protest that followed, but ultimately, that somewhat shrill, hissing voice spoke up in the darkness, just as the ship lifted off.

"As least there they would offer a fair trial, compared to what we are probably heading to." This seemed intended as a means of self-comfort. Unadi laughed nervously at that. She had never flown before, and she was glad that she wasn't able to see outside. It would have unsettled her so. She thought a moment about Mihr's comfort and then offered to shatter it.

"*You* would get a fair trial, but I fear that it wouldn't end in your favor, as it would be at the bottom of the ocean." She chuckled at that. This served its purpose of derailing Mihr's satisfaction, but far more her own. Mihr, an arguably immortal Djinn, could stay alive in such a situation, though the Vaal who owned that ocean might make him wish he couldn't. Unadi, a very mortal Mitanni girl, could not. To the Vaal, this would be her folly, not theirs.

The ship lurched forward finally, tilting as it did to begin its forward hovering. This ultimately sped up as altitude increased slowly. Unadi's stomach lurched with it and she held some of the webbed cargo net that held all the supplies and freight together. There was a little rocking early on, but things smoothed out a little, and she stared into the inky darkness.

"I don't imagine that we'll be checked on down here at this point," Mihr expressed quietly. The orb mounted on his back started to glow suddenly, making Unadi flinch a little at the sudden

illumination of the cargo hold. The greenish-cobalt-tinted lizard-like female, fairly typical in appearance for the Mitanni, let her eyes adjust as she looked over to the strange creature with which she shared the crowded hold. The light hung close to him, so his browns and greens were illuminated in almost a glassy vibrancy. He was formed like some manner of insect, most closely a cricket. His colors suggested a grass-hopper however, save for the violet plating of his thorax that made it clear he was no mere bug. He was about the size of a small dog compared to Unadi. Djinn were renowned shape-shifters, and this odd appearance was, for the time being, Mihr's chosen form.

Unadi sat, knees pulled up against her, arms around her legs. She was about five and a half feet tall, a lizard-like form with bright red irises, pupils similarly shaded to make the entire circle seem uniformly red. Her features were slight and feminine, her face round and pretty. Upon her head were three crests of raised scales. The middle crest was much taller and tipped in red-to-yellow. On either side of it were uniformly blue, shorter crests. Her skin was smooth in appearance, though slightly rough to the touch. It was dry and tight over a lean athletic body. Her attire was rather simple: a burgundy-colored hooded jacket over a black halter-top, and cottony short running shorts. Her figure was strong but attractive, with her hips beautifully flared and her chest generous enough without being a diversion. She was dressed for a day on the track, not a day on the run. This female was a young adult, perhaps barely into her twenties, healthy and as well-kept as one could be. At her side was a black canvas sack which held all that she'd taken on her hasty departure.

"The trip won't be short. I brought food and drinks though, so don't go worrying about arriving alone." She gave a warm laugh, and leaned back against the uneven boxes behind her. The cricket hopped into the air and his wings hummed as he hovered right in front of the girl suddenly.

"Good. Since it's going to be a long trip, perhaps you can tell Mihr *why* we are leaving Aurora so quickly and committing as many crimes as we can on the way out?" Unadi sighed a bit at that. She leaned forward a bit, putting her chin on her knees as she looked up fearlessly at the strange creature. So much had changed in a day. What would tomorrow be like, she wondered? She leaned back a bit and regarded the glassy creature before her. Why didn't he want to be a cute little dog or something? Was it alright to ask that? It would probably be rude.

"Do you care to hear it then? We have time, so I suppose since you've inadvertently been pulled into it all, you have every right to know." The girl was honestly sorry at that.

The creature responded, "Not rights, as you say, Mihr is a djinn after all...Mihr serves. But it would serve to add clarity to this madness." He buzzed down and landed on a box across from Unadi. She inhaled deeply and took a metal bottle out of her pack and sipped the nectar from it before clearing her throat a bit. There would not be much of that where she was going, she was sure. "Well, I will start with this of course. Introductions have been short so... I'm Unadi Singh. I am a newly appointed Keeper in the city of Aurora under Roche." The cricket gazed at her blankly.

"Mihr knows who you are; you've been in his house countless times with his maestro. Mihr doesn't know much about you, but he thinks we can skip introductions. How came you to his master's house? He discussed little of it as he preferred Mihr not have too much gossip to be harmful with... as Djinni oft are, apparently."

“Okay, well, I will start with where I’m from,” Unadi whispered. The light softened, perhaps showing that the Djinn was relaxing a little. “I was born in a little village near Nalii, far to the south. I grew up there with my family. It’s tropical. It’s very calm, very pretty. It’s a bit boring if you like adventure. Most who make their home there do not, so that’s just fine by them.” The cricket-like djinn settled upon his box as he listened without interrupting. Unadi felt like even her description of her former home was boring to this city-dwelling Djinni. “My family is, and has been for many generations, employed largely as performers. We do lots of different things. Some do magic tricks, some do plays and sonnets, and some do comedy and prop stuff. Me? My brother and I wanted to learn acrobatics, like my mom had been known for. She passed beyond the Veil when we were little and we wanted to give that back to her I guess.”

Unadi paused as if to allow the djinn to offer his condolences. He chirped to make her continue talking. No consoling words from him, it seemed. Unadi cleared her throat. Of course. Mortal problems, not Djinni problems. He was not likely to be able to relate to that. The girl continued as prodded. “We turned out to be naturals, and I was even better than my brother. We did pretty well in shows that we did in Nalii, and I think we would have probably made an okay living doing that, but my dad and uncle took to gambling. They made bad names for themselves in unpaid debt and it was the feeling of those in town was that my brother and I were providing for him so that he did not need to work and pay back his debts. We were prevented from finding work. We had put so much time and training into our skill that we could not bear to give up our trades. We had become quite good, so we decided to leave. My brother had already fallen in love, and left with his bride to her home a bit further south. He’d be fine there, but I had no desire to be a third wheel as it were, and certainly did not care to share their abode, so I struck out on my own, here to Aurora ultimately... But, it seems as though acrobats are not in high demand these days,” she explained.

“Who would not want an acrobat, such as yourself? Are there so many? Mihr has seen you move with no shortness of skill, he should say.” He referred to the deft leap off of a moving service scaffold that Unadi employed to get her and Mihr both into the closing hatch of the ship. The cricket was perhaps unusually complimentary, but he did seem to genuinely not understand why Unadi had trouble finding work. At times the girl had trouble understanding it too.

“Competition. There were already some in a few of the places I went, or I found the act was just not popular in the few other locations. Needless to say, I tried perhaps a half dozen other towns and smaller cities in those first months of travel, but I thought when I arrived in Aurora, that I would be able to find work easily enough. The capital is eclectic and massive. I was wrong. There was far, far more competition, and while they were not better acrobats, they knew the local audiences’ preferences better, so I couldn’t really compete. It did not take long at all, given the cost of food and lodging here, for me to be flat broke without even a means to return home.”

“That is unfortunate. So you starved, but how do we come here? You hardly look as if you are starving, so there’s more. Tell Mihr how you came to know his maestro.” There was a short pause. Of course the Djinn would be most interested in how he figured into the whole thing, since the problems for mortals, like starving to death, were not that interesting to them.

Unadi answered slowly and patiently. “I should like for you to have known all that transpired to put me at his doorstep, but fine, I shall skip ahead. Suffice it to say I ran out of things I could do in order to sustain myself, so in desperation, I decided that dating was likely to be my most immediate solution. I would become close to someone, and at least have somewhere to stay long enough to get a way home,” she offered.

"Dating? You mean you intended to be a whore?" he asked incredulously, obviously not finding Unadi to be the type. She scoffed at that, but was at least happy that he didn't just nod understandingly at the concept. That would have added a more weighty insult than the question itself already posed.

She composed herself slightly and replied, "As if I would cheapen myself to that extent, but no, it was not much better. The idea was to get into a relationship with someone fairly well-to-do and try to at least keep the rain off my back long enough to succeed here. It would have been my last stop, but the fact is, I don't think anyone saw my intentions as anything so reserved. The very first person I met was a Minuran who thought a rather poor-quality meal would have been enough to, I assume, convince me to let him split me in half. Pretty sure that would have been the ultimate result. But, your master heard my protests and came running.

"Roche saved you?" inquired the cricket. His interest seemed perked more to that than the idea of Unadi getting raped. He was pretty loyal.

"I'm getting to that." Unadi was a little frustrated with the interruptions. There was a pause as she was obviously allowed to continue. She finally did. "Roche got there in time to save me, I'll give him that, but I am not helpless. I would not be a Keeper now if I were so helpless back then." She gave a kind of lopsided grin to the djinn as he scooted closer to hear the details. "So, Roche got there just in time to see me get pissed off at someone who decided a meal, a single meal, would get him some action in the flat-bed of his truck behind some storage building near the river." Unadi rested her chin on her knees as she recounted that part. "So, there he was pushing me down, I guess he didn't know that even back then, without training in fighting, I was still an acrobat. The next thing he knew, I was rolling over him like a fat, meaty, padded sawhorse to the other side of the flat-bed and ejecting him out the opposite side onto the street. I used a hard double kick, and then, after flipping up onto the cab of the truck, I vaulted from it to plant a nice kneeling knee right in the Minuran's gut. He wisely decided to just rest a bit and consider new hobbies before I left.

"But maestro Roche saw this? He saw you do that to the guy?" The cricket hovered in front of Unadi. She shooed him with her hand.

"Don't hover in my face like that! You smell like rust, what's that even about?" she asked.

"You don't like how Djinn smell? But you kept Mihr with you?" he pried curiously. There was no hurt in his voice. How would she actually offend a Djinni in the first place? What mattered to them enough that they would become angry with how a fleeting mortal felt about them? She shook her head a little and stopped investing time in that consideration. "I didn't say that, just not right in my face. I like my space." The large cricket plopped down on the hard deck. The cricket appeared fastened to the floor, though, as Unadi held onto some of the rigging.

"Go on," insisted Mihr.

"Anyway, where was I... Oh, yes, he caught up to me, and he said he saw what I did, so I told him I'd do the same thing to him and called him an old man... I was pretty rude, honestly." There was a tone of regret in Unadi's voice. "He knew I misunderstood, though. Roche is a great judge of character and has patience like I've never experienced before. Anyhow, he was not there to report me to the Keepers. He asked if he could buy me a drink and talk about it.

That struck me as weird, but with how I was feeling at the time, I responded immediately with what kind of drink and he said anything I wanted and I was sold. I needed a drink after that experience.” Unadi took a drink from her own flask. The nectar was sweet, and good for keeping ones energy up for a long and boring trip.

“He wanted to tell you about the city and make you safe, I bet. Maestro Roche is like that.” There seemed to be an actual sense of pride in the cricket’s somewhat hollow-sounding voice. This struck Unadi as a little odd, since Djinn didn’t form emotional attachments to their maestros because they lived so much longer than mortals.

“That’s part right,” Unadi stated calmly despite being interrupted yet again. She was getting used to the fact that the rules of social engagement were pretty lost on these beings. She leaned back as the craft took a straight heading again and there was not any unusual force pulling her in weird directions. She took another sip from her flask. “See, he decided after seeing me defend myself that I might do well to partake of the training to be a Keeper. At first, I declined, telling him I lacked any kind of enrollment money and had nowhere to stay while I was even training, but he eased my concerns. He told me that there was no entrance fee, as volunteering to become a Waykeeper was akin to taking one’s life into their own hands, and no great monetary price could be demanded of someone who made that kind of voluntary promise. As for lodging, this was to be supplied as it often is for any who attend the academy. It solved my biggest problem right away. So, I went with Roche and I found the training was indeed hard, but my previous life as an acrobat made me well suited to some of it. I had trouble with the book-stuff, since there was not as much call for that kind of study in my line of work, and Roche helped me personally with it when he could.”

“That’s how Mihr sees you at his home,” the Djinn offered in addition.

“Correct. So you likely saw me fretting with him about how hard the material was over and over, but we managed to muddle through it, and I was accepted as a Keeper.” Unadi figured much of what her life was about during that training the cricket already knew, since his maestro, the one to which he bound himself to remain on the mortal plane, was a teacher. It’s what Roche’s life was about.

“And cricket,” he added.

“What?” Unadi asked curiously.

“You played Cricket...Mihr saw you doing that too.”

“Oh. I never saw you, you watched me play? I did that when I was in regular school down in my home town. I was surprised to know that Roche played too. We did that a lot to kind of blow off steam as the training was difficult at times, especially before exams. It always made me feel better,” she laughed.

“Especially since you beat him every game. Mihr thinks you were the only one he played with in as long as he knew.” The Djinn shook his keratin-plated head and then murmured something in a language Unadi couldn’t recognize. He then obviously realized Unadi couldn’t understand him and switched back to Common to continue. “This brings us to why and how you are a Keeper, why are we now here? Why did Roche tell you to take Mihr from his quarters in the Keeper’s tower? Why are we stowing away aboard an airship, and where are we going?” he pressed. Unadi felt a pang of guilt at how little she bothered to tell the cricket when she

snatched him from his home, only stating that Roche was in trouble and they had to leave before freedom was only a dream to them both. The threat of losing the ability to continue doing whatever it was that Mihr liked to do all day was enough to convince him to leave.

“Well, I am not sure how much he’s told you about what’s going on currently in the world, so I will kind of give you the full run down of the problem,” Unadi stated calmly. They had plenty of time.

“Please,” Mihr deadpanned flatly.

“There is a war going on right now over the sea to the west,” Unadi began.

“Mihr knows about that. The dogs from Ibia are eating the faces off the Satyr in Euria. Mihr hears it was initially an ugly business, but that they finally kind of gave in, and now it’s a tense kind of occupation... but the Keepers have to keep way out of that stuff or they will anger other States. They have to stay neutral about absolutely everything except the Waystones. That’s their only concern outside of normal law and order. That’s what Mihr was told.” The cricket hopped slightly as if to show he was right. The blue-toned girl nodded her head slowly.

“This is correct, but that’s where the problem comes in. Normally a conflict would be well outside of our domain because we are not supposed to be involved with governments and the like, but Euria was rumored to have dozens of Waystones, some of them very old and even unregistered. At first, we thought that was what had caused the conflict. The Ibians saw them as a threat due to those rumors, but now it seems more likely Ibia wants those stones themselves... and were willing to go to war to get them.”

“If one government has them versus another, what problem is that of yours?” asked Mihr, his gleaming insect-like eyes tilting side to side in curiosity. Unadi briefly wondered if he practiced his bug body language alone, watching other bugs, and how long ago he had chosen that form.

She dismissed that and replied finally, “It was not that another government had them, it is that possession of them seemed out of control and this was where Roche comes in.” She leaned forward a bit, as if fearing someone else would hear in the empty cargo hold, which was getting a bit cold as the elevation of the ship increased. They never went too terribly high, but they went up enough to encounter cooler air. “Your maestro found documentation about an attack on a school, not too far south of Rascion in Pryyus. At first, it was thought that a laboratory explosion caused it, but there were no chemicals found, and some of the students claimed one of their professors was burning everything violently as he touched it. They said he was picking up people and turning them to charcoal before their eyes... walking through walls and leaving holes where he went through was another report. Someone reported he appeared to have gone insane, talking in a weird language that sounded like a low, mournful horn oscillating and droning.”

The recounting of this information made Mihr tuck his wings in tightly. “This is very much the same as the wars of old. I hope this is not true. I would hate to think some dark stones are being dropped out there. Did they stop the professor?” he inquired.

“The report did not say. It only talked about the initial incident.” Unadi felt kind of bad for not knowing. That meant a very dangerous and possibly very deranged person was still around, and that person would be rather hard, if not impossible for and local city guard to stop. She

continued. "What I understood of what happened next from speaking with Roche is that he went to the archives and asked for information about the incident in order to find out if the person had been captured. It turned out that the original documents he saw were restricted. The bureaucrats on the Keeper Council were angry with him for prying into the case, but he didn't care. He knew that finding out what happened to that teacher was critical, and was frustrated at the council's apparent lack of resolve to do anything about the teacher's disappearance. All incidents of this nature should be investigated by the Keepers, who are tasked to prevent this kind of tragedy from occurring in the first place...but instead, the whole thing was quietly buried."

"...And then they got political on him," Mihr expressed with a sour tone. It appeared that mortal politics was as revolting to the Djinni as it was to the mortals who had to live with it.

"In a hard way," Unadi stated with a sorrowful look. "He told them he was going to go to the local Prefect with the information, and he did. Lady Nailah had met with someone from the local government already about the issue, and right after your Maestro told her everything about what he knew, she summoned three guards who took him into custody. Off to jail with him."

"Only three guards? What were they thinking?" gasped Mihr incredulously.

"Obviously he let himself be taken, but I think it was to keep things calm and make it so they did not deny him the normal rights of a citizen incarcerated. So... he was allowed to seek council. He chose me." Unadi frowned at that.

"You aren't council," Mihr expressed drolly.

"I know that. He had managed to put a message into the sole of his shoe, and when he gave them to me, he said that they needed fixing."

The cricket flicked his wings at that. "Why did he give you his shoes?"

"You aren't allowed to have shoes in jail. I guess they figure it makes it harder to escape through the briar thickets that surround the compounds ahead of the walls. Anyway, he hid a message in the sole of his shoe, and I found it, which is how I found out everything. He told me that I could not go to anyone locally about it. If I was to get it handled, it had to be with the people that were dealing with the problem closer at hand. Politicians are fat and lazy and don't want to deal with problems, even ones that ultimately will affect everyone, until it's typically too late to do much. The instructions told me to take the first ship out of Aurora because he was sure that I would likely be jailed the moment they suspected I was even aware of the case. You would likely end up back wherever he got you from."

There was a pause from the Djinn, but he finally spoke in his odd brassy tone. "Mihr is glad you chose to listen. He should not have liked going back into that place. It was not an easy ordeal, even for a patient being such as myself." He seemed to like speaking highly of himself. Unadi continued.

"Well, it took me a while to even get access to the quarters at the Keeper's tower where you were still waiting on Roche who had not returned. I tried to go to his house but it was locked and I was sure it was being watched so I didn't stay long enough to be suspicious. I went to the Keeper's tower to see if there was a spare key in his quarters there. Fortunately, you were in his quarters there so I didn't need the key, but getting into his quarters was a bit of work in itself.

Through some weird stroke of luck, there was some big incident, and they left half the tower unguarded during it.” The Djinni lit up at the mention of the disturbance.

“What kind of incident?” he asked curiously. This was an interesting thing that made for a good rumor to hear of. It was exactly the kind of thing Djinn often liked. Unadi paused intentionally long to remind the creature that he’d interrupted her. She finally continued.

“I don’t know exactly what kind of thing happened. I was waiting down in the commons for it to get late enough that no one would really pay much attention to me. It was pretty dark outside where I was, by the café, and I saw Lady Nailah walking with two Oracles. I don’t know them by name, but I know they are serious business. They were in a hurry, and about twenty minutes after I saw her, I felt the whole building shake a little bit. I heard some people talking about an explosion in the guest areas. Anyway, a couple minutes later Keepers were flooding out so fast that I thought the building was going to collapse or something. I decided to run and get the key while I had the chance. There was like... no one on Roche’s level, so I found you in there. Then, we got the hell out of there before anyone started coming back. I didn’t want to try to leave at night, but things were so crazy right then, and I didn’t think we’d get a better chance in the morning.

“If all that shit was going on at headquarters, why was the skyport crawling with Keepers, then? Do you think they were after us? You should not have been *that* high priority.” The cricket seemed perplexed by this.

“I think they were after someone else there. Maybe they were all heading out to deal with a local conflict? I wager we will hear about it on the news-ports soon enough if it was a big deal, but Nailah’s been kind of secretive on stuff lately, so maybe not. But that gets us here,” the reptilian female sighed softly trying to think if she missed something relevant for the Djinni, but she could not think of anything. He spoke up after reflecting on that a moment.

“This does not really answer the where as much as the why.” He peered through those unblinking eyes at Unadi. It was a little unsettling to her, but she was growing used to the Djinn’s odd appearance.

“Well, that answer is not going to be as popular as taking you away from Roche’s home, I fear,” Unadi stated softly.

“Where are we going?” insisted the Djinn.

“It’s going to be fine once we get there... once we land and disembark, we will find the right people after, as long as we are careful.”

“Where. Are. We. Going?” The cricket was a little less friendly in his interrogating.

“Ultimately?” she offered meekly. The cricket could not make angry-eyes, but Unadi could almost feel his mood nonetheless. She answered. “Gonna be landing in Horizon City.”

“That is not bad. They have wonderful ale there. World famous,” The cricket chirped again, but this time it was a pretty, almost harp-like sound, if a little shorter. Was it...happy? Apparently he *could* express emotion with his chirps. It made Unadi curious as to why Mihr learned about the intricacies of being a cricket, but did not care so much about the lives of sentient beings. She continued nervously on to the next part.

"Yep, we can't stay long though; we have to travel north and west pretty quickly," she tried to say this with a friendly, helpful tone.

"No. You mean some other direction, I think," insisted Mihr.

"No, definitely north and west. That's where we have to go. That's the only way we can get the Keepers involved," she elaborated.

There was a very long pause from the cricket Djinn. It was painfully long, in fact, and Unadi knew exactly why.

He finally spoke. "Do you know how hard you have to try... in order to win the 'worst idea ever' award from a Djinni who is 400 years older than you *and* has bounced around from place to place with merchants, thieves, and in *government offices*?" He was very obviously exasperated.

Unadi sighed, flicking the crest on her head a few times in aggravation. "I know it's a bad deal, but I got the impression from Roche's letter that staying there would have been no less hazardous, and we could only dodge the responsibility all keepers would be facing but for so long. This will eventually become big enough that the whole deal turns into a meat-grinder and you *know* it." Unadi was unhappy with having the short-straw as it were, but she knew what her place was in all of this. She had paid close attention to the history that Roche taught her, and even some of what she had learned of it in school.

"It might not even be for your generation, Unadi." Mihr spoke with a tone that suggested they could just turn the ship around. Unadi knew he knew better.

"And then it's just a problem for who, my son or daughter?" she asked.

"So don't have kids!" the cricket chirped.

"Not helpful, Mihr." She crossed her arms.

The Djinn replied in a tone that sounded angry. "Even if you start to deal with it yourself, you might be old and grey by the time peace returns... on the highly unlikely chance you survive this mess in the first place. Don't think Mihr has not seen wars before, girl." The cricket hovered scandalously in her face again. She blew on him, which he seemed to *really* hate. It made him fall to the floor with a dry thump.

Unadi grumbled back, "How would Roche feel if he knew you were trying to convince me to disobey him?" She knew how a Djinn's loyalty worked.

"Mihr serves master Roche...you do not. You have no binding reason to literally throw yourself to the wolves like this. Fighting Ibians is like chucking yourself into an endless canyon of furiously chewing teeth. Most people don't have a *clue* what everything inside them looks like while they are alive. But you, Unadi Singh, you will know." This did not help the girl's mood but she shook her head.

“Well, I have you to help me fight. That’s why you are coming with me. If you do your job right and do well by your service to your Maestro, neither of us will have reason to know what Mitanni girls look like on the inside.” She glared at the cricket.

“Help you fight? Are you insane!? Ibians hate Djinn! Mihr isn’t going anywhere near that country!! ” he crackled with energy that made the ship hold look a little brighter.

“It’s that or we just fly back and turn ourselves in to the authorities. Don’t think that we will get fair treatment, given that we aren’t going to be arrested for fair reasons.” She crossed her arms defiantly, still leaning forward with her knees tucked to her chest. There was no backing down even from a powerful creature like a Djinni for Unadi. She had to do this.

“You have no reason to have this kind of loyalty to Mihr’s master, Unadi. Mihr could be requested to investigate. Mihr can, alone, maybe hide a lot and get information. No to the fighting idea. No to master’s pretty student being bifurcated from skull to navel by Ibian great-sword. Mihr helps Unadi get work and survive in new places, but no running around doing the crazy thing you are thinking of. You need not follow master’s commands like this Think of other ways.”

Unadi was a little surprised by how defensive the creature was being, but she had very little experience personally when it came to Djinn. She stood up, holding the cargo webbing and then pulled the note out of her pack.

“Here. This is the note. It tells me what to do. See where it talks about you? See where it says you are to aid me in any task I must undertake to that end? That, right there, is your direct written command. You don’t get to choose what it is I do, this is true, and neither does Roche, but you are commanded to assist me, whatever my path may be. If I decide to run around nicking valuables and drinking ale, you get to come with me while I do that. If I decide to run for government office, well there you are beside me. But as it turns out, I apparently fancy a violent separation of my skeleton from my meat, and you are along for the ride,” Unadi panted a bit in her perturbation.

“Unadi is really intending to do this, even knowing what waits?” the djinn asked I a soft, slow tone, his wings pressed tight to his body.

“It’s what I said. And what I promised.” She sat back down.

“Very well. Mihr will go with Unadi. Mihr will try to protect as master wishes, but when Unadi dies, Mihr will not be sad. Nobody will. If this is what you are wanting... then Mihr will do this.” He hopped up on a box level with Unadi’s head. “What are we to do first then?” he inquired. The slightly thinner, cooler air was taking its toll on the girl. Her answer came easily.

“For now, you be quiet, and I sleep. I have no idea when I will get to rest after we get there,” she huffed. “We will not want to stay near our means of transit in case they manage to figure out that we left and how. Once we are out of Horizon City it’s only their best guess where we’ve gotten to, so our chances of being snagged after that drop significantly. They will be especially unwilling to assume our actual direction of travel.”

“Indeed,” replied Mihr, “No skilled Keeper would ever be stupid enough to go that way.” Unadi grinned to herself in the pale light of the Djinn and closed her eyes, looping her wrists in the webbing that held the freight in place. She looked up after a moment with one crimson eye

to Mihr and gave a puff of her breath at him. He got the idea and the light blinked off, as if blown out like a candle flame.

There was nothing to warn Unadi about a very rough touchdown on the opposite shores of her journey. She woke to the feeling of weightlessness as the flying vessel sank suddenly, perhaps due to a downdraft or turbulence. Then she hit the deck plating in the cargo hold hard enough to really and truly hurt. Her face, fortunately, was cushioned by her shoulder in how she hit, but her shoulder felt badly wrenched. The Mitanni girl pulled herself up against the netting for the cargo and peered around pointlessly in pitch darkness. Her immediate worry is that they had crashed somehow, but the next moment, she felt completely motionless. She called out softly. "Mihr? You okay?" She was still very foggy-headed from sleep and from slightly rarified air. The Djinn answered, his light orb flaring brightly with a little hiss and crackle.

"Mihr was hovering during the landing. Just in case. Unadi should have hovered too." He nodded politely as best as his odd little cricket head could.

"I can't hover, Mihr, I... Oh, you're being cute, I get it." She checked herself over for more injuries, flexing, bending, sitting, and then finally standing. Her shoulder felt like a mess, but she was sure it was not dislocated or broken. She would have a nice dark bruise there, she was certain. Unadi glanced at her Djinn companion. "Why do you think we landed so ugly?" she grunted, knowing that she could not exactly complain to the pilot, since she was not even supposed to be on the ship.

"Mihr thinks maybe..." the Djinni started, but a loud crack of thunder outside answered the question for him. Unadi groaned a bit at that.

"A storm, of course. This *is* the rainy season." She crossed her arms. "Crap, this isn't going to be much fun."

"You are afraid of storms?" Mihr responded with a fascinated curiosity.

"No, not at all, but I do not look forward to having to dash out into one in a couple seconds when they open up the hold." She made a sour face. She didn't mind being wet, and could stand being cold, but she did not at all enjoy both at the same time.

"This is better fortune then, maybe. You are much less likely to be noticed, especially if it is raining hard when they open the door." The cricket was oddly positive for a Djinn, who often were a bit more grim in nature.

"I suppose you're right at that. Let's try not to get struck by lightning." She moved over behind some boxes just outside the area of the hold where the door was positioned. When a clearing presented itself, the agile and fleet-footed girl would bolt and, with her hood up, be almost completely anonymous in her flight even if seen fully.

"Why's that?" Mihr queried.

"What, why not get struck?" she asked incredulously. "Right, you're right of course. / will try not to get struck. You can get struck if you really want to." She offered with an eye-roll. They waited for what felt like too long before the heavy metal door opened evenly and slowly downward, making the ramp with which they would unload the cargo. The rain was indeed coming down in sheets, and the lightning, while not overly frequent, was very close. The chance to leave presented itself immediately, as the person who opened the door ran back to get a textured tarp from his truck to keep from slipping down the now wet ramp as the rain hammered down. Unadi, with the cricket hovering right behind her, grabbed her pack and bolted.

She went from the cool dry cargo hold where it was dark and safe to the only slightly more light grey of the storm. Unadi could run silently if she wished, if a bit more slowly. The din of the rain made it so silence was not a necessity, and she exited the cargo hold at full speed. She jumped as hard as she could, clearing the entire ramp as she flung herself into the rain. The Mitanni girl arched in perfect preparation for a hard but controlled landing.

She struck on her feet, bent her knees, tucked her arms and head and rolled a few times before a powerful arch of her back sent her back into the air slightly and right back on her feet in a dead run. It was the kind of thing she was used to getting thunderous applause for in a younger, simpler time. She let herself feel, for the briefest moment, that the din of rain was that coveted cheer.

Another landing ship was loud enough that every bit of her departure was seemingly silent. The sleek lizard pumped her legs as hard as they could go, carrying her easily out of visual range in the rain in seconds. They made it to a fence some way beyond the line of sight through the storm and began running to the left alongside it. The two reached a point where a gully went under the fence to let the plentiful water runoff into the stream below. Unadi easily pushed herself under that fence as the cricket flew over it. A loud clap of thunder startled her enough that she nearly dropped her pack as she slid down the uneven and slightly rocky muddy trench that the water and cut into the hillside.

She heard a tinny voice call out loudly over her head, "Mihr has been with you only a few hours and is already having more fun than he has had in a year!" Unadi, through the din, could not tell right away if he was serious or sarcastic. She just continued to move down the hill to a second fence, but that one seemed more to be a property marker and was easy enough to hop right over. There were no metal-nettles at the top of the fence to catch or cut her.

The Mitanni female called out to her companion, "This is Horizon city I hope. I hope we didn't land somewhere else." She slid down another hill, and found herself skidding onto a small, narrow street lined on either side by squat, poor buildings. The loud landing strip did not attract much in the way of homebuilding unless they were in it for the cheap.

"We are fine to get away from the rain in a low shed or something here, Mihr bets," the cricket chirped. His metallic-sounding voice was barely audible against the sound of the rain. There was another loud crack of thunder and in another second, Unadi pitched herself against the back wall of a wooden shed, panting heavily, her lungs burning from the hard run. She wondered quietly if Djinn even got tired from physical stuff. Was it hard to fly? Did it take him long to learn how to do it, or did they just already know how, and chose the form that suited the ability they wanted? She knew not all Djinn chose flying forms, but why would they not?

"Do you think anyone saw us?" she asked the Djinni, who she suspected might have had the clarity in the storm to pay more attention to that.

"If they did, they didn't care to acknowledge it. Mihr maybe saw six other people running on the landing area. Everyone was running because of the rain. Also, the crew was wearing red, not much different from your jacket. Mihr doesn't think they'd have given you a second thought." Unadi sat up a little, a bit amazed.

"Really?" she inquired, panting a bit. "You could really see all that? How?" She tried hard to catch her breath. The cricket flitted its wings to dry off, spattering water everywhere.

"Mihr actually paid attention, that's all," he replied, resting on what appeared to be a crate of small potatoes. "It's how Mihr knows we were not followed. It's how Mihr knows you dropped three pair of underwear from your bag." This made Unadi go scarlet as she looked at her pack, which had come very slightly open. Smaller, balled up items were able to pop out at random in their dead run. She growled a bit under her breath.

"Thanks for that, Djinn. You couldn't have grabbed them? I only brought five." She immediately knew that would seem silly to a Djinn and dropped the argument.

"Mihr not going back for underwear. No one ever see it anyway, it is never missed." It was obvious he did not understand the purpose of modest clothing, but Unadi had to give him a pass for that. He was a Djinni after all.

"Did you happen to notice anything else that I might not have seen in my mad dash to not be a stationary lightning rod?" she grumbled. Mihr chirped musically a few times in a gesture that made her think that he was laughing. "What?" she asked indignantly.

"Mihr noticed that Unadi did not see person already in the shed." His words may as well have driven a stake into the girl's gut.

"What?!" she cried with a sudden shout, standing.

"Damnit," came a gruff male voice from an area on the opposite corner from Unadi. She gave a shout and jumped up. At first, she wanted to apologize for intruding, and then she remembered that she was in an open storage shed, and that it was not that so strange for her to duck in here to get out of the rain. She glanced in the direction of the voice, but didn't see anyone there. "Show yourself," she stated flatly.

"It's not my stuff; I don't know where it came from." The weary-sounding male voice seemed to be pleading.

"What?" she pushed again in a softer tone. She felt kind of dumb for missing something so important. She peered around the shed. The stuff that was there did not follow any rhyme or reason for typical home storage. There were several power chain links to a motorbike. There was a stack of long, narrow djinn-charged energy packs, and then some boxes with books and magazines in them that appeared to have many duplicate copies. Unadi rolled her eyes almost painfully.

She had inadvertently stumbled into a thieves' storage shed where they had their nicked goods waiting for sale. When the theft of those items had time to fade from memory, they would be moved into circulation. A lean, gaunt, slightly older male hyena pushed out of an empty trunk he'd stashed himself in. He was easily old enough to be Unadi's father, or even older than that.

He certainly was old enough to know not to leave his nick-shed open. His reddish-colored hair, streaked here and there with silvery white, was pulled neatly back in a ponytail. His sandy-colored fur was dull and unwashed, speckled in the normal coal spots. His clothing was poor, a simple cheese-cloth-colored tunic and black pants bound half way up his shins to perhaps keep them dry as he ran in the rain. "See, Mihr tells you someone is here." The lizard-girl looked up at the cricket and winked gratefully. She had not considered that he might make an effective companion, but Djinn, if close to their maestro, were notoriously useful.

"So, you have no idea where it all came from?" Unadi asked, putting a foot on the box of energy packs. This most certainly did not belong there. She knew why the guy was panicked enough to try hiding in a chest, even if it was not his stuff. On the back of the girl's hooded jacket was emblazoned the insignia of the Keepers. She could arrest him just from what she had seen so far.

"I promise, I just opened the door and there it was." He seemed genuine except that his eyes scanned the valuable items that might be the most out of place. Two of the boxes he glanced at were wet, suggesting he opened the door to store freshly stolen goods. Unadi picked up one of the lids and found thin, softbound books inside. She opened one of the books and tilted her head at the picture of an Ibian getting a blowjob from some kind of tightly bound lapine girl. Two other Ibians appeared to be watching, but the condition of the rabbit girl's fur suggested they had not been just watching the whole time. Unadi snapped the book shut and glanced up quizzically at the hyena, then held up the wet box tip, frowning her brow.

"Well, okay, those are mine," he explained.

"Multiple copies of the same publication?" she queried, holding up two others. "You are smuggling these out of Ibia." She crossed her arms.

"I didn't 'zactly 'spect a Keeper t' walk right on in during th' storm," he grumbled, seeming to realize that he'd been nabbed. Unadi's heart was racing, though she tried not to let her discomfort show. She had not handled this kind of crime on her own yet. She had paired with a superior officer on the few runs that she'd been on. Furthermore, she was not even supposed to be here, so she could not very well just trot off to jail with this guy and get him registered and locked up. She was trying not to let anyone here know who she was. She glared at him in thought just a moment. Perhaps sensing something was amiss, he spoke. "What are ye' doin'?" His tone made it sound like he just wanted to get it over with.

"I am trying to think of what to do with you," Unadi stated. Her mind was reeling and the gears were rapidly grinding against one another as a thought has occurred to her, and she was trying to turn that little seed of a thought into a plan.

"What, ain't ye' never done this before?" he implied suspiciously. He moved slowly toward the open door. The cricket landed between him and the door, making him recoil. A Djinni could do just fine when it came down to working someone over who thought they were going to be smart. The hyena appeared to know it.

"Don't test me, I just think I might have a way we can smooth this over and I won't need to put someone your age into a cage." She wanted to sound sympathetic and kind, but realized the second she said it that she'd be insulting.

"What, bribes, m' girlie? Yew think I got money for thet! If'n I did, this lot of boxes would be empty. Git stuffed, I'll see the magistrate, you'll get no money from me. I sware it! Yer a worse criminal than me, an' I'll not play any part in that." The Mitanni girl wanted to punch that soot-colored muzzle off his face. She got up to do just that, but the cricket chimed in.

"You misunderstand, good sir. Mihr would have to report seeing such a thing, so he knows this is not what the Keeper asks. But, if you want to go to the magistrate, Mihr will see to it your unfounded complaints and direct insult of the local Keeper's guild is addressed in full." There was no way to mistake those words. It was a very valid threat. The huffing hyena sat back down.

"You go to Ibia to get these things?" questioned the lady Keeper.

"I'll not be incriminatin' myself," the hyena stated flatly.

"Right, of course not," Unadi grumbled, aggravated. However, she pushed on. "So, if I wanted to go to Ibia, I suppose you'd know how to get me there?" she crossed her arms again, covering her chest in particular as the cold rain had her a bit more perky than she felt she could be taken seriously with.

"If I said yes, that's not a crime, y' know." The hyena wrung his charcoal-toned hands. "But no keeper would *want* to go to that place. Are ye' really what y' say ye' are?" he inquired. Unadi cleared her throat and spoke.

"In violation of the rule of law under the watchful eye of Ra, your actions forfeit your freedom. You stand accused of violation of the parcels procurement and transport act of 1017, paragraph 11. Goods may only be transported with proper documentation of legal sale over non-embargoed national borders." The speech she gave was the official statement a Keeper was supposed to give upon apprehension of a criminal so that they knew immediately with what crime they had been charged. The spotty male went pale about the nose and inside of his ears.

"Okay, yer the real thing, girlie." He wrung his hands again. "If it ain't a bribe, I take it ye think ye can get me to talk about my contacts in Ibia? Even if I told ye that, it ain't gonna help, they don't care about your laws where this stuff is coming from. Ye *got t'* know that." He shook his head in open disbelief.

"I don't care about them. I need to get *into* Ibia. That's all I need." She inhaled deeply. That sounded like the stupidest thing she'd ever told someone. It was like saying 'Point me to the burning house, I need a nap.'

"This... is soundin' more serious than my smugglin'," the hyena thought this out this in a low whisper, as if suddenly realizing the danger of the mere suggestion. "I don't think ye really be wantin' to go. I really think there better places to be." Unadi shook her head.

"Oh, I want to go, and if you want these to be overlooked, even just this once, maybe you had best take me." She was well outside of her rights as a keeper at that point and she knew it. The hyena narrowed his brown eyes at that and then nodded slowly.

"Aye, that I kin do, but I don't think you'll like it."

The djinn trilled from over on his box of potatoes, "Mihr didn't know Rasci girls were so fond of Ibians." The observation of the cricket-like being made Unadi look. He had one of the horrible magazines on the box and was looking at the pictures. Unadi initially had to fight the immediate reflex to laugh at that sight. Certainly Mihr would not really understand what that was for. It was not Unadi who answered though.

"For enough gold, everyone likes a good strong Ibian," he explained, snatching the magazine away.

"Hey!" chittered the cricket.

"Leave it Mihr," Unadi commanded.

"Yes maestro," the cricket chirped. Unadi arched a brow while facing away from him and the older male. Had he meant to call her that to further fool the hyena, or had it been a slip since he likely did not talk to anyone but Roche these days.

"What's your name, keeper?" inquired the spotted smuggler.

"Unadi, but I'll ask you keep that to yourself, seein' as I am keeping your little... business here to *myself*. We have a deal?" she offered.

"I will need to bring help where we are goin'," the hyena stated, rubbing the back of his head. "He won't likely come if he knows we got a Keeper with me."

"Why do you need someone else? Do you not know where we are going?" Unadi pressed.

"I do know where we are going, and that's why I ain't goin' alone!" he barked sharply. The cricket chirped indicatively at that. Yes, Mihr, we get it. It's terrible.

Unadi replied, "Understandable. How are you going to get them to go with you, since you are going to have a Keeper with you?" Mihr prevented Unadi from refusing the idea outright, and she knew, with a little additional thought, why Mihr was not against the idea. Unadi did not intend to come back with the guy, and perhaps he knew that. He did not want to be stuck in Ibia alone. It was too dangerous. The smooth-skinned Mitanni girl carefully thought about this problem. Perhaps they could just find their way alone, but there would be plenty of unnecessary risks they could avoid by having a guide at least over the border. Once they got there, they could not hope for more help, but at least it would get them where they needed to go. She spoke softly, finally. "You will tell him I am a smuggler, and that I disguise myself as a Keeper to get around. I can act roguishly enough, and not a lot of my kind run around with Djinni. I will promise that no legal repercussions linked to me will befall you. I do not turn a blind eye easily, but I am sure you understand... my angle... well enough by now."

"You have something much more important to deal with." The hyena glared with narrowed eyes at her. "You are way too young to have such troubles, but I know th' look. Yew got em a'plenty. I'd sooner eat gravel than help the Keepers typically, but I'm a sucker for th' girls. I'll take ye' where yer goin' but I ain't goin' far into Ibia. No farther than I know t' go." Unadi looked at him, then to the djinn, wondering if she should trust him. Still, she had little choice. This person could report having seen her since he had when the legally present Keepers came looking. He would be less trouble for her if he went with her.

"Alright, this is fair. We will set out when the rain calms." Unadi wanted to dry out a bit to be sure. She did not like being cold and wet.

"Are ye' not going t' ask my name?" he suggested to the girl.

"You can be better sure I'll keep my promise if I don't even know who you are." She had already considered that dynamic.

"Fair enough, but if'n I didn't trust ya, you'd be takin' a walk anywhere but Ibia." He sat up a little straighter. "Right upstandin' of ye to offer to ferget my name, but I'll tell it to ye. I'm Crisod. We'll be travellin' with my son, Siele."

"Say-Lay?" the Mitanni girl carefully re-pronounced the name so she did not mangle it later. "Right, well, when the rain lets up, we'll fetch him. How long until you are able to get things ready to head out? I don't have time to tarry about here." She leaned back against a crate of likely stolen tools. She did not have time to wait, but she did not feel any particular immediate eagerness to leave the dry shed either.

It rained heavily for almost an hour, but as it slowed, and mottled blue broke through the grey, they did finally leave. Little was spoken in the intervening time. It was mostly just squeezing water out of clothing and occasionally mentioning the weather, or talking about the conflict in Euria for which Ibia was the aggressor. Little fight seemed to be left in the satyr of Euria, and the normal imperial law and order was still heavily in force through Ibia. The people were said to be content with the occupation and trusted their emperor, Suo, implicitly. These were not new facts, but it was helpful to find out that there was little additional security being levied to the southern borders, since no wanted to get involved in the conflict. Ibian security was tight enough on its own without there being added measure in place.

The walk to Crisod's home brought them to what what appeared to be three hovels mashed together and even tied with rope in a few places to keep them up did not take long. The entire area along this region looked like it should not have withstood the storm in the first place. There were a lot of these little hovels that lined the muddy street up and down the terraced valleys. Those who lived there had created their own pipes and drainage to keep their homes from washing away or internally flooding, but even so, as Unadi looked around, there were empty positions here and there that suggested one of these poorly patched, barely standing places did not make it through a previous weather event.

The rain started up again around the time they got into the hyena's home. Unadi did not grow up wealthy by any stretch, but she didn't grow up like this either. Sitting at the table with poorly leveled legs was a lighter tan male hyena dressed in a black long-sleeved tunic and black trousers. He had ice blue eyes, unusual to his kind, scanning the pages of a rather thick book. He had on the table a few bits of equipment, one with flickering lights on it, and one with dials. He touched two wires together, obviously not noticing anyone had come in right away. There was a little spark and all the lights on the unit went out.

"Fuck every single thing ever," he stated eloquently.

"We have guests, boy, watch yer tongue!" There was a bit of thunder outside again. He glanced up and then shoved everything on the table off the side of it with a disproportionately

loud crash. He then composed himself and straightened his hair, which was cut short save for a little shock of it that hung down in front of his ears on each side.

“Oh hi there, Keeper... what has my father done this time?” he asked cheerfully as if he’d not just tried to hide evidence. Unadi didn’t even know what she should have been investigating there since it appeared like he had just trashed a bunch of crap that was already junk, but it was probably stolen junk. It did not look like the kind of stuff someone would have wanted back. She was not as savvy when it came to technology and engineering however, so it might have all been quite valuable and scandalous for the boy to have there.

It was actually his father who spoke next. “Arrest him, it’s all his doing,” Crisod stated. Mihr buzzed into the room, making the younger hyena jump up, startled, seeing that this was more unique than he had originally thought. It wasn’t just a Keeper, it was someone important if they had a Djinn with them! He looked in hurt astonishment at his father, however.

Unadi’s eyes adjusted a bit more to the room. The table was about the only thing in it. They did not have power linked into the place, which was not a surprise. What was the point if it was in constant danger of just dissolving and spilling down the hill? There was an ice box with actual ice in it which was on one side of the room suggesting they refreshed themselves with food and water there. The other two rooms likely belonged to the boy and his father both. She wondered if the boy’s mother lived there as well. She could not imagine herself as a mother tolerating, even poor, this deplorable sort of housekeeping. There was junk all over the floor now, and there was a stack of it against one wall. After the awkward silence the boy spoke up finally.

“I don’t know what he’s talking about! What are you playing at?” he offered as calmly as his wavering voice would allow. His father could not contain himself. He laughed finally and slapped the boy on the shoulder.

“Sorry, sorry m’ boy.” He shook his head, sitting down as his son gazed at the wreck of his project indignantly and then back to Unadi and then to the Djinn.

“What the hell’s going on?” he pled.

“This is Unadi, and she ent no keeper, she just dresses the part to get around. We need t’ be getting up to Ibia way sooner’n later. Do we still got our running chest ready?” he questioned. The girl arched a smooth teal brow at that. The hyena boy, not any longer in adulthood than Unadi herself, peered back at her skeptically.

“You have *got* to be kidding. We are now ferrying people *into* that place? We should be getting people *out* of there, not in.” Unadi made a mental note to inquire more about that later.

The older male patted the lad on the shoulder and stated, “This is Seile, he ain’t much for scrapping, but he’s good at gettin’ ye *out* of scrappin, and that’s better, right?” he laughed. The boy grunted at that and shook his head.

“Seriously, Pop, why are we taking her there? You know what they do to non-Ibian females in that place if they can get them under a bit of debt.” He leaned back in his chair, which creaked dangerously. The expression on his face suggested that he was often confronted by his father with outrageous plans and activities, and this was not anything different in that regard. To Unadi though, it meant a lot more than a get rich quick scheme or some new contact

with something to sell. The boy made no motion to act or get up or to further acknowledge the Mitanni girl.

His father snapped at him in a sharp tone. "She wants to go, and she's made it worth the trip with the additions to our shed. We need to get goin quick-like though, so step-step!" he clapped his hands. The boy growled a bit and got up before stumbling over some of his own clutter and moving into his room, swearing and grumbling the whole time he prepared a set of supplies. A go-chest was supposed to be ready to go by the very *notion* of the thing. This was not a well prepared thing at all. Unadi looked at the hyenas quietly a moment. Crisod, at least, seemed less afraid and more excited. She had suspected he'd be filled with dread, but did the thought of just traveling with a younger female delight him enough to ignore the fact that he was heading to Ibia?

The day slowly washed away in the loud roar of the near-by sky-port, the occasional thunder and the constant droning sound of the rainy season on a metal roof. It reminded Unadi how temperate her homeland had been. The 'ready to go' supplies took about two hours to assemble, and with some prodding the hyenas convinced Unadi they should be armed for the trip. They both took long knives that were easy enough to conceal, but Unadi did not want to attract attention to herself if she *did* get stopped, so she opted to carry nothing but her pack, now short some underwear.

There was nothing else that Unadi herself really needed to do in order to prepare to leave. She was already as far from home as she'd ever been, farther than she ever had hoped to go. With determination she set forth with two complete strangers and a Djinni to a place that even the Waykeepers did not care to tread in such a volatile time. She did this just to get answers and draw attention to a problem that had been ignored already maybe too long. It had been a rough start, but at least now she felt like she was going in an actual direction. It had to be better than just sitting around waiting for the politicians to decide that it affected them enough to prevent if from killing everyone else.

The rain had still not stopped as they forced themselves into the cold, darkening din of storm and doubt... the hyena, the acrobat, and the Djinni.

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