

Waystone, Circus of Stones

By Alps Sarsis

Chapter 6

Stick

"I love the design of these bells," Unadi mentioned to Baldur as he milled around in the shop just behind her. The Mitanni lady was dressed again and felt renewed from her shower and the enjoyment of a hyena an hour before. She was trying to dismiss the possibility that the merchant was aware of what he'd kind of walked right through the middle of earlier. He hadn't mentioned anything at least, and with how much he seemed to like to tease the hyena, Unadi felt certain that had he actually known he'd have prodded the lad somehow. She continued reverently, "These are... These are the smaller type so they are for girls?. But if bells are handed down in a family, do folks still buy new bells? Surely they don't sell old ones?"

Baldur swayed his tail fluidly behind him. "Naw, they don't sell bells once they're donned. That would be a thing you don't get used lessen it was bestowed through family. But! Bells get handed down to eldest only. First child. Younger ones don't get the traditional family bell. Bells that don't get passed down go with the owner. It's considered unfortunate to go to the pyre with your bell. I'm surprised you're so interested in them. Most visitors won't mention them at all for some reason." He put a box of some kind of metal pins on the shelf.

"Do non-Ibians ever end up with bells?" asked Unadi. Surely there were non-Ibian families in Ibia. Would they follow Ibian culture on such things?

"You generally won't see that," replied Baldur with a wide white grin. "You can get yourself a bell only one of two ways. You either get one from being born into an Ibian family, or you marry into an Ibian family. You fancy a bell, it's gonna be an interesting ride for you, girl." He flicked his tail side to side faster.

"He's flirting, so you know," Seile commented with a smirk.

"Mind your business, boy," Baldur playfully shot back. "Maybe she'd like a bell! And she can't get one from you no-how."

"If Shon's sister had been serious and not just teasing me!" Seile countered.

"She said she's up for another dark place. Be a good sport, boy!" laughed Baldur. Unadi couldn't help but laugh as well. She was perhaps not supposed to know about that embarrassing event so the shopkeeper was dancing around the details a bit.

Unadi decided to spare her friend and push the discussion back on track. “Are there lots of infused bells, or is that pretty rare? We don’t have as many items with magic infusing hanging around in the general open public where I’m from. That stuff’s pretty tightly controlled except for simple stuff like light or tracking. Djinn are used to do that too, how do you manage that?”

“It’s not extremely common here either, except for bells,” explained the massive black-furred Ibian. He fixed yellow eyes back on Unadi. “It’s usually the older bells, and usually a ward *against* Djinn. We don’t have much trouble with them these days, of course, but it’s kind of tradition nowadays. We get the metal or any other material already infused, we can fashion it just fine afterward and it doesn’t lose too much of its effect. All simple stuff, like you say.”

“Okay... so you guys not being very reliant on much else but your own strength is not a complete misrepresentation,” Unadi expressed cautiously.

“Ahh, already starting to worry that some of what you learned ain’t right, eh?” laughed the Ibian.

“I already hinted at that, really,” Seile added.

“Some’s true. Be careful how you go makin’ debt.” He gave a broad grin.

“She’s been cautioned,” offered the hyena.

“I can take care of myself.” Unadi crossed her arms in front of her chest.

“It ain’t what’s forced that you gotta worry about. It’s what you can’t resist. A debt you can pay off. An addiction you can’t.” Baldur laughed at himself as Seile groaned.

“So, tell me a little about the guy I’m meeting tomorrow. Should I be careful not to get myself indebted to him? You said I might not like the cost.” The question, Unadi felt, was fair given the topic, however playful it might have become.

“What, Layja?” asked Baldur.

“I’ve never met him,” the hyena informed.

The shopkeeper shrugged. “He’s a bit odd, and a wild card at that, but from what I hear, he’s got a taste for the exotic. I’m not really sure how uhh... how deep that runs. So yeah... Handle with care as it were.”

“Not especially encouraging.”

Baldur waved dismissively. "There's laws, so don't go thinkin' you'll get filched. It's not like that. But if there's a legally contestable thing that's owed that you can't immediately give back... well... you'll be hanging out a while in Ibian lands till it's paid. That's the rules. And some find faster ways to pay it off and that's where the stories about all that come from. Then there's those who like payin' debts and keep getting in deeper and they never cross the border again. You'll be fine, girl. I wouldn't keep worrying. He'll help because what you ask is interesting to him.

"Anyone ever pay you a debt like that?" Unadi asked, and immediately regretted it. She glanced up warily, but only saw a wry smile spread over his muzzle.

"Feelin' guilty about stayin' the night for free?" Unadi grinned and rolled her eyes, recognizing that for the playful banter that it was.

"Baldur..." The tone from Seile suggested that the hyena felt like he'd gone too far.

"I'm okay with that, since Seile said he's paying." Unadi gave her friend a little shove toward the hulking taur. Baldur burst out into a fit of laughter that nearly shook the items on their shelves.

"Unadi, I swear on my spots..." grumbled the hyena.

Unadi reluctantly interrupted the light-hearted discussion. "I should probably check on Mihr and let him know we're staying the night. Maybe bring him just inside. I don't want him causing any trouble."

"That's what that... thing... is called?" asked Baldur uneasily.

"Yeah. Sorry to have to have him, but... circumstances." Unadi lowered her head a bit.

The shopkeeper nodded resolutely. "Go on and bring him in, but don't go no where near any of the shelves. I don't even know the range on half those wards."

Unadi stepped casually over to the double door and went outside. It was much later by that point. They'd wasted a pretty significant amount of time in the bath and it was yet more time used up with Unadi stalking about the store and learning as much as she could about what things were even sold there. It was odd not saying any clothing in a shop at all. There were a lot of things that were made differently for male or female Ibians to use, for obvious reasons, and a few things that Unadi couldn't figure out at all.

Her thoughts about that were derailed completely when she realized a fact that made her blood run so cold she might as well have not bothered with the bath at all.

Mihr was not where she left him.

“Mihr?” hissed Unadi. There was no reply. But maybe if he remained in stick form he’d not reply. Unadi looked around the immediate area of the entrance. “Shit. This is bad. Bad, bad, bad....” She turned and went back into the shop. “Seile!”

“What?!” cried the startled hyena.

“Mihr’s gone!”

“He actually can’t just leave you, can he? He’s gotta be close!” He moved over toward Unadi.

“I’m not involved. I’m not involved. Not involved.” Baldur plodded up the wide stairwell to what Unadi assumed were the more private areas of the building. The hyena and Mitanni bolted outside. It was quiet. It was getting late. The town was not a densely populated place anyway and it felt like everyone was just done for the day. All the interesting variety of Ibians were tucked away in their tall-roofed cottages.

“Did you try calling him?”

“Of course I did! And I know he’d not just be flying around in this place. Do you think Baldur-”

“No way,” Seile quickly insisted. “He’s not the type. Not even with a Djinn. He won’t betray a trusted client and Dad and I have been dealing with him for years.”

“But he said no one else would know what he was. Who would take a darn stick?” Unadi stumbled to a stop on the street the moment she said it. “Oh no.” She remembered the adolescent Ibians playing in the street when she and her entourage initially arrived. They might never have seen the sport that stick represented, but it might have seemed a perfect treasure to those who were playing that ring toss game.

“What? Do you see him? Is it bad?” Seile eased up behind the Mitanni girl and put his warm, strong hands on her shoulder supportively.

“The kids,” Unadi blurted. “The kids had to have grabbed him. They were all playing with sticks.”

“Oh shit.”

“There!” Unadi pointed over to a space between what seemed to be a bakery and a large but quiet home. In the little alleyway stood a stunned-looking Ibian girl with black and white fur. Wide blue eyes centered on a furious-looking Unadi.

“Ehr furk!” she half-shouted with the handle of the cricket bat between her teeth.

Unadi was off in a snap. She didn’t even look to see if her hyena friend was following.

“Get back here!” cried the Keeper.

“Nuuurrr!” The panicked cry reminded Unadi a moment too late that she was not dealing with a hardened criminal. This was just a kid. She was probably horrified.

“Just drop it!” Unadi shouted. She had deeply underestimated how fast even young Ibians could be. If she were chased by full-grown ones she’d be straight up doomed.

“Keeya! To me!” laughed a sooty grey-colored female Ibian, trotting quickly up beside the fleeing black and white one.

“If’s myne!” came the grunted reply through her teeth.

“It clearly ain’t!” laughed her friend.

“It’s *mine*!” shouted Unadi.

“If you can catch us!” cried the grey one.

“Unadi! Don’t tackle them! They bite!” Seile had managed to round the corner.

“Heyyyy Little Spot! You got a girl now!” Unadi lunged for the slightly slower grey one. If they were friends she might be able to convince Keeya to give it back. It took a moment for Unadi to realize that they might not even need to chase them at all if they knew Seile. He might even know their parents. Stealing still had to be frowned on here. What she could not afford was getting too many Ibians involved with Mihr.

“Brynn! Unadi’s a Keeper! Do you know what that is?!”

“Means you’re gonna marry her!” laughed the one who was not carrying the stick.

“WHATH?!” barked Keeya. She spun to a stop and faced the panting Mitanni. With a flick of her head the quadruped female flicked the cricket bat out of her mouth at Brynn, who caught it in her mouth. “It’s yours! Keep it! Leave me out of it!” And she was off so fast that rocks and dirt were kicked high into the air off her paws.

“Heck Yeah!” growled Brynn around Mihr’s handle. She bolted.

“No! Stop!” shouted Unadi.

"She's a Guardian, Brynn!"

"Nuh-uhh!" countered the grey-toned female, looking back with a smirk at Seile. He was running too, though not as effectively as Unadi. And Unadi still had little chance of catching up to the Ibian girl, and she certainly wasn't going to outmaneuver the quadruped even if she did catch up. Fortunately, almost faster than Unadi could fathom what happened, all of that became a moot point. There was a flash of black fur and a hard thump, and the grey-furred female rolled with a comical whumpa-whumpa-whumpa alongside the cobblestone street in the grass. Mihr clattered loudly onto the street itself and lay stick-still.

Four feet out wide and braced to pounce, a much larger female stood over the stunned smaller grey one. Fearful amber eyes peered up at the snarling lady beast over her.

"Oh, God no," Seile groaned, dragging his dark hands down his face.

"What do you think you're doing, pup?" growled the older female. It was such a furious tone.

"I didn't take it, Keeya did!" cried Brynn.

"And yet, it was in *your* mouth, and you weren't walking it over to the owner, soooo..." A big front paw came up like she was going to stomp on the shrinking girl. Unadi did not want to cause trouble for anyone in her visit. This was all kinds of attention that she didn't want.

"I was just gonna make her catch me! She's fast for a twosie!" Unadi flattened her frill back. Twosie? She guessed that meant anyone without four legs.

"And you're gonna call her a twosie right in front of her? You got no manners at all!"

Thump!

At least that didn't seem to have claws.

"Sorry! I was gonna let her have it! I promise!" Unadi picked up the stick. The handle was soaked because of course it was. A quiver ran through Mihr to express how he felt about that. The Mitanni Keeper put it over her shoulder.

"You really a guardian?" asked the older female. Brynn made every effort not to look directly at the victim of their little theft.

"I'm a Keeper. Not in these lands, obviously. I'm travelling with a friend."

"I've not seen a Mitanni here in a while. Tends to stay a bit too chilly for ya'll's liking." She put a strong paw down on Brynn's ribs to keep her pinned on her side. "Sorry this had to be your impression of the place.

"We were playing is all! She left it right outside!"

"You want her to take you to the dig-pits?" grumbled the older female.

"I can't... I don't actually arrest anyone here, I-" Unadi was trying to lower her visibility here.

"No! I ain't even done anything! I picked it up after Keeya got it! She took it!"

Seile walked up, hands in his pockets, looking a little sullen. "And yet, it's always whoever gets found with it that's the thief. Had a buddy who did a year in a wood camp for exactly that."

"Little Spot!" came a gleeful cry from the female. She turned and looked at the hyena, letting her big paw off the girl.

"Hello, Qadira." Unadi stood a little straighter, a bit anxious right away. Her hyena friend seemed really gloomy suddenly. Were they in trouble now? Unadi narrowed her eyes. Wait, where had she heard that name before? Did the theatre troupe mention her?

There was a little squeak from the black-furred female.

Oh wait. Wasn't Qadira the one who Seile thought was in the bonding hut?

"Yeah, go ahead. Let it out," grumbled the hyena.

Shrill, heavy, twittering laughter came from the lady Ibian who was so threatening just moment ago. Oh yeah. She was the one. Seile had been right. She couldn't even look at him without laughing. The ruffled younger female rolled onto her feet and snuck off while the sneaking was good, casting an apologetic expression back at Unadi in case she might actually intend to send her to whatever a dig-pit was. It didn't sound nice.

The lady Ibian finally got herself under control, panting a bit, shaking her head slowly.

"I missed you too, Qadira." grumbled the hyena.

"How do you stand hanging around this gloomy thing?" The quadruped waved a front paw at Seile.

"He's a been a pretty reliable guide to here at least." Unadi smiled reassuringly at him. He would get teased, she knew, but she would stand up for him at least a little.

"You here to see Baldur again, Lil'Spot?" Even though she was smaller than an Ibian male, Qadira was still nearly to Seile's chest at the shoulder, and this was more obvious as she made a tight circle around him, very deliberately sliding her tail around his legs. He stiffened up. Okay, so the things that had been mentioned about her teased that the hyena might have another chance in a bonding hut with this lady Ibian. Teasing aside, it didn't seem so far fetched with how she acted around him. Was it all teasing? It was seriously hard to tell.

"Err, yeah. Actually, Unadi is. My friend I mean. Unadi's here to see him." The Mitanni arched her brow. Oh goodness. The hyena was flustered. Oh, his teasing was certainly not done for the night!

"I see. So you didn't come all this way just to see me?" purred the Ibian. Unadi was reminded again how different she was from a typical quadruped beast in how much her facial expressions were able to convey. It was a constant reminder of her sentience, even if the shape of her body might suggest otherwise at a distance.

"Not this time," the hyena murmured.

"That is unfortunate." She pouted. Then her features lit up and her ears slicked back. "Howeveeeeeer..." She circled Seile again, even closer. "I just realized... I have done you a serious favor. You two would have never caught that little pup. No way. Not a chance."

Seile's featured fell. "Oh God."

"I suppose... that stick ain't just a run of the mill, every day walkin' stick. Not with all those shiney bits. Bet it's awful valuable..."

"Please, no," whimpered the hyena.

"I feel like you really owe meeee..." All the Ibian's teeth were visible in that wide, knowing, almost sadistic grin.

"Uh..." Unadi stepped back slightly. It didn't work like that, right? He didn't ask for her help. She just showed up. It wasn't like he went and asked for a favor.

"You are right, Qadira." Seile finally said frankly. "That stick could never be replaced. It's literally priceless." She lit up more and flitted her tail side to side, high over her back. It felt very victorious in how it was presented.

"Seile, why would you even mention that part?" Unadi asked with a growing sense of uneasiness. Her own growing personal feelings about him aside, he'd said he would

accompany her further on this journey. She suddenly worried that she'd be leaving the hyena here.

"However... It's Unadi's stick, not mine," explained Seile. "So she's paying." The quadruped lady Ibian walked a sort of figure 8 that had her circle around Unadi just as closely, sending a chill through her at the close contact of thick Ibian fur along her bare blue legs.

"Oh... I see..." crooned Qadira adoringly.

The Mitanni girl gripped Mihr's handle crushingly. "WHAT?!"