

CHAPTER FOUR



Excerpt from Monumental Change: A Brief History of Rift Effects, 2020-2060 AD, by Ansaj, Ph.D, et al. Chapter 5, "Andromorphs"

"The first andromorph was not officially recognized until Sept 16th, 2032, although it is strongly suspected that a number of them had been identified before that and kept secret by their respective governments. Sydney Lorraine Neeley was born on Sept 14th in Denver, Colorado. She was taken from Swedish Hospital where she was delivered and brought with her parents to US-REC the following day.

To stem the tide of rampant rumors on social media, the CDC announced the girl's birth publicly, stating that '... although in stable condition, the infant appears to have been born with a number of distinct birth characteristics that have not been seen before.' Both baby and family were promised 'the best medical care possible' as well as 'exhaustive research'. Photographs were not released.

The child was kept out of the media for the first year of her life, but 12 months later, she was released from the care of the US-REC and became an instant celebrity: The first recorded member of species Homo andromorphix felis – humanoid felines.

The world had its first official andromorph, and humanity would never be the same."



“WELL, after all that excitement, I'm afraid we quite forgot introductions!" said the Raj.

We had been hurried off the deck of the ship, the Raj and his retinue of guards (which had quickly grown in number in the minutes after the attack) leading the way, followed by a cadre of important-looking people (mostly cats) and a more distant halo of various onlookers (also, mostly cats). I was somewhere in the middle, being prodded along, trying to focus on the amusement of being surrounded by walking, talking cartoon characters, and trying to ignore the creeping sense of alarm that this was no ordinary dream.

Sunlight rapidly waned in the hazy sky, making it hard for me to get my bearings. We walked along a series of expansive stone terraces laid out against the side of a mountain, connected by cobblestone paths and short staircases, and lit by small lamps like the one I had somehow managed to blow up.

The guards seemed keen to usher him away from the site of the ambush, but the Raj appeared energized by the whole event. On one of the larger, upper terraces, he suddenly halted the procession, spinning on his heels with a dramatic flourish that would have made a runway model proud.

"I am Khalim al-Bozni," he said with a well-practiced bow, taking his turban in one hand and the seam of his cloak in the other. "Rajarma of Bastion, Protector of Tanth, and..." Straightening, he briefly tried to reposition the turban, which resulted in crumpled failure, so he just held it out to one of his functionaries. "... and, well, a lot of other things" he finished with a wink.

"And what may we call you, my lady?" he asked.

I couldn't help giggling. I almost expected him to take my hand and kiss it like some Arabian puss-in-boots. If the Raj took any offense, he certainly didn't show it, although several of his procession cast disapproving glares at me.

"Katrina," I replied, trying to be as mature and serious as I could under the circumstances (which wasn't much). "Katrina Pike."

"And you are from Earth? Truly?" He seemed impressed.

I nodded.

"My fellow bastir and dervishes, may I introduce Lady Katrina Pike, of Earth," he said with a grandiose gesture of his hands. "Welcome to Bastion my lady, the shining pearl of Tanth. May your stay with us be as fortuitous as... well, as it was just now. I say but you do know how to make a grand entrance. Well timed, to be certain. Was that how you planned it, Astromancer Sebastian?"

The bespectacled cat had been trailing behind us in the greater entourage and had to be pushed forward to make his answer. "I, um, yes, your majesty. More or less. Yes."

"I do think we owe both of you a debt," the Raj went on, smoothly preventing Sebastian from any further reply. "Certainly our good minister narrowly avoided a ghastly fate. I say, how are you feeling?"

Minister Zala-Tashet, arm now bound in a makeshift bandage, had been walking along to my left, suspiciously appraising me the whole way. "Looks worse than it is," he said with a forced smile, despite holding the arm gingerly and wincing occasionally.

The Raj then launched into a long-winded introduction of the assembled personages, calling them out one by one to take a bow. In addition to Minister Zala-Tashet and Sebastian, there was the Minister of Earth, Minister of Fire, Minister of State, and Minister of Dust, a handful of viziers, a Master of Guard and Master of Seals, along with half a dozen guild masters whose names and titles all blended together. Except for Zala-Tashet, they were all cats.

"Ah," said the Raj, at the end of the lineup, "and let us not forget the Minister of Water, Fazeed al-Hazir. Or is it guild master al-Hazir? I always forget. Which do you prefer?"

At this, a stately looking calico of middle age stepped forward. He wore a snug blue outfit with white trim and matching sash and pauldrons. His fur, despite being well-groomed, still resembled an orange shag carpet, with streaks of tan and black that looked like he had just eaten a messy dinner. A single monocle on a gold chain was positioned over his right eye. He bowed deeply.

"Either one is fine, your majesty," he said to the Raj. "I am relieved to see you unharmed. Tassirs, here? In the palace? Most troubling! Security should be increased at once."

The Raj nodded, unconcerned. "We were fortunate indeed to have your men nearby," he replied, nodding to the two blue-cloaked felines who had tried to subdue the assassins earlier. One bore an old scar down his face, right across an empty eye socket to his chin. The other featured a metal plate screwed to half his jaw, giving him an enormous grinning underbite.

Minister al-Hazir smiled. "Yes, your majesty. They're both fair with the blade. I would have dashed into the melee myself, but I've no claw for fighting, and I fear I would only have added to the blood already spilled with my own." He gave a sidelong glance at Zala-Tashet.

"Who were those guys, anyway?" I asked.

"The Tassirs?" replied the Raj with an air of nonchalance, "Oh, ne'er-do-wells, malcontents. Some people are just never satisfied. They pop up from time to time. Pay them no mind." At this, several of the viziers and functionaries gave shocked little gasps and hushed admonishments. The Raj grinned.

Al-Hazir chimed in. "Truly, your majesty, your wellbeing is of the utmost importance to the realm. They should never have gotten so close."

I frowned. "They weren't going for the Raj," I commented, jerking my thumb at Zala-Tashet. "They were going for him." One of them was, at least; the two Tassirs didn't seem to be on the same side.

"Oh, I'm sure it appeared that way in the middle of all the fuss," replied the Raj, "but it's most certain that he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'm afraid that I have more than

a few enemies that would see me come to harm. This isn't the first time. Why, if it weren't for your warning and that lamp flare, poor Zala-Tashet would be quite worse off, and who knows but that I might be as well?"

I blushed a bit at the mention of the lamp. It had put a fairly good scorch mark on the deck of the brand-new ship before some cats managed to turn it back down. I firmly reminded myself that this was *my* dream, these were *my* dream people, and therefore *my* ship. I could scorch anything I wanted, guilt-free.

The Raj stepped over to the edge of the terrace, where a short rock wall formed the base of a metal railing, overlooking the descending slope of the mountain. Placing one foot on the wall, and one paw on his knee, he tilted his head and looked back at me, as if posing for a portrait. "What do you think of our aerodrome?" he asked.

I stepped closer and put my hand on the rail. Gazing down, I could see the ship we had been standing on. It was moored to a dock attached to one of the lower terraces. Each terrace, in fact, appeared to have its own dock, but only one was occupied. "Great," I replied. "But pretty empty."

"Ah." The Raj's face fell a bit. "Yes... Yes. Quite on point you are. Yes, very empty indeed." Then the smile popped back up. "Except for our newest flagship! The *Intrepid*! She's special, that one. Going to turn the tide. She's already seen battle and hasn't even taken flight yet. Fantastic!"

The *Intrepid* shared some similarities with an 18th century sailing ship. It had a traditional shape, with a lower mid-deck, and slightly elevated quarter and poop¹ decks at either end, and a railing running the perimeter. In addition to the central masts, this ship had large arms coming out of the upper part of the hull, which were then folded along the sides of the ship. The construction material certainly didn't look like any kind of wood I knew; it was varying shades of grey to black, with a texture that looked closer to stone².

Then, of course, there was the issue of water. Namely, there was none. The ship just hung there, floating in midair, occasionally drifting a couple feet this way and that to gusts of wind, secured to the dock by strong tethers.

"Well," said the Raj, "We absolutely must become acquainted with you in every detail. The Invited are guests of the highest honor here in Bastion, and let it never be said that our hospitality is lacking! You shall dine with us tonight!"

¹I'm not joking, this is really what they call it. Look it up.

² The material is called slate. It's similar looking to slate on Earth – dark grey with black and brown striations – but not quite the same. It's created from sand and earth, produced in large slabs. It's as strong as wood and about as heavy and used for all kinds of things here.

"Majesty," spoke up one of the viziers, "You are meeting with the Tinker's Guild to negotiate their contract tonight." He cleared his throat. "Twenty minutes ago."

"Ah." He didn't seem overly concerned about the Tinkers.

"Tomorrow lunch then?"

"The Master of Seals has had that date for a month." One of the official cats nodded solemnly.

"Breakfast the following!" the Raj said, arms folded. "With dune eggs and bread with jam."

"State of the Ministry meeting."

"To the Sandmen with the Ministries!" cried the Raj, who then grinned at his entourage. "No offense." He rounded on the schedule keeper. "Our honored guest will dine with us no later than Springday," he said more forcefully than normal. "Make it happen."

The vizier repressed a sigh and nodded.

"Well, bravo to us then!" the Raj declared, and immediately he resumed a brisk pace along the pathways and steps that climbed out of the multi-tiered aerodrome to the grounds above. The various important people fell in line with him, and the drifting crowd of other folk trailed behind, or slowly dispersed in other directions.

I had been absently shooing away the scarab each time it tried to land on me. As I fell in with the group trudging their way up the hillside after the Raj, it alighted on my left shoulder.

"Tenacious little thing, aren't you?" I tried to scowl at it, but it was a little flattering to have something so completely dedicated to being with you. "This is all your fault, you know," I added, smiling. It buzzed its wings once and began to perform some kind of near-impossible contortionist grooming technique that involved its back legs and antennae.

"Don't suppose you have a plan for bringing me home again?" I asked it.

It briefly stopped its self-maintenance and looked at me. Well, okay, its face – or whatever – was pointed at me. It issued a series of short *humms* and then went back to grooming.

For the first time, I was able to really get a good look at it, and with a brief moment of startled amazement, I realized that the scarab wasn't a bug at all. It was a machine. It was largely constructed from a mysterious element-- grayish-green colored, with a texture like a mixture of smooth metal and rough stone. As I peered closer, I could see tiny gears whirring and clicking inside, while pulleys and cables the size of sewing thread glided back and forth as its limbs moved. Green lights swirled within glass eyes like brilliant marbles.

It must have become self-conscious under my scrutiny. Its eyes darted up to look at me with a petulant expression, and it quickly tucked its delicate wings under its carapace and sat still.

Dusk had rapidly fallen by the time we reached the last few steps. The haziness drifted into a black backdrop scattered with a thousand twinkling points of light. Strangely, I didn't see the Milky Way running across the apex of the sky, but then, it was my dream world, and I never was much of an astronomer.

We entered into a walled-off compound comprised of numerous long, squat buildings, made of an alabaster stone, with broad expanses of flagstone courtyard. Some of the buildings had larger doors that resembled garages, or stacks of crates and materials piled next to them. Certainly, this area housed some of their ship construction activities.

I shivered. The temperature had dropped considerably once the sunlight had faded.

Minister al-Hazir appeared behind me, placing his blue cloak around my shoulders. "Your majesty," he said, "there is the issue of accommodations for our guest. The Hydromancer's Guild has fine quarters for visitors, and our servants shall attend her every need. Lady Katrina Pike will be at your disposal whenever needs be, and in the meantime, we can give her a tour of our fine city."

For just a moment, I thought I caught a worried glance between the Raj and Zala-Tashet, but the former quickly resumed his affable countenance, while the latter his mistrusting scowl. "Why, Minister al-Hazir, you honor us with your genteel offer and thoughtfulness. I am sure she will be most comfortable in your home." The Raj grinned and winked at me. "Make absolutely certain he shows you the Nereid Device!"

Then, right on cue, he swept up my hand in his hand and kissed it. "We will meet again very soon, my lady," he said. "Until then, enjoy our hospitality to the utmost!" He spun around and strode down a path to the left, the majority of the crowd following.

"An Invited from Earth," his voice drifted back to me as he disappeared between buildings. "How exciting indeed!"

I was left in the company of al-Hazir and his two henchmen along with Minister Zala-Tashet and one of his functionaries. I noticed Sebastian loitering a dozen paces away, watching us with a jumbled mix of curiosity and nervousness.

"Well, I'm sure you'll want to get that looked at," commented al-Hazir through a forced smile. "Wouldn't want it to get infected, would we?"

The Minister of Air grunted, still gently supporting his arm. The swelling had been creeping down toward his wrist. I wondered if they had any Neosporin here. He flashed me another

"You're not fooling me one bit, young lady" kind of glower, and then marched off in the direction of one of the smaller buildings.

"Pay him no mind," said al-Hazir, gesturing for me to proceed. "He lost a few rounds of Dust Bones against me and has been cranky ever since. Definitely one to hold a grudge, but still, mostly harmless."

Minister al-Hazir guided me between several clusters of buildings until we came to a wall made of the same white stone. A wide archway revealed twinkling lights on the far side of the wall. As we started to pass through, I caught a sudden glimpse of a figure squatting on top of one side of the archway, wearing a shimmer-cloak. My body tensed. I turned to look for him on the other side, but he was gone.

"Everything all right?" Minister al-Hazir asked.

I nodded, distracted, scanning the top of the wall behind us. Whoever it was had disappeared.

The "Outer Garden" – as it was called – was the size of a shopping mall parking lot, much larger than it had seemed at first. The entire expanse was paved in precisely cut flagstones of various colors, carefully laid out in different designs and orientations. The ones under our feet formed a rainbow-colored semi-circle radiating out from the wall. Elsewhere, there were spirals of gold, waves of blue, and even some places where the flagstones were laid out to form pictures such as birds or trees.

Everywhere there was water.

Fountains of all sizes, shapes, and colors filled the courtyard. Some were the size of a desk lamp and sat on top of white stone pedestals, while others were fifteen feet tall with a pool twice as wide and deep enough to wade in. Most of them were made of stone – the same material as the flagstones – and were shaped like animals or even cat people. A few looked like twisted sheets of metal with water running down the sides. Some of them were connected by stone waterways like miniature aqueducts. Most had some variation of plant life on or nearby, ranging from palm trees to tiny, manicured gardens. Nearly all were lit by lamps of various designs, some on tall posts, some floating like Japanese Lanterns, while a few had colored lights glimmering from within the water itself.

The lamps twinkled merrily against the inky darkness of the night, while exotic flowers swayed in pools of colored light, all to the time of a gentle breeze. Faint windchimes echoed in the distance. It was pure magic.

"How do you like the Palace of Fountains³?" asked al-Hazir.

³Technically, the Palace of Fountains includes the Outer Garden, with the aerodrome on one side, and the Hydromancer's Grounds on the other, as well as the Upper Palace, which is where the Raj's fancy manor was.

"It's amazing!" I breathed.

He smiled and nodded. "Yes, yes, it is. I marvel at it every day."

We ambled between the water features toward the far side. "So, tell me," the minister said, turning to me. "You came here from Earth?"

Something in his subtle shift of tone disturbed me. The question sounded innocent enough, but it brought back the realization that I was utterly alone and defenseless here.

"Yeah," I whispered. A few weak sparks darted out.

He nodded, calculating. "What is your title there? Your position? Are you an Alchemancer?"

"I... what? No, I don't have a title. I'm just a high school kid."

He raised the non-monocled eyebrow, his eyes suddenly looking rather beady. "I see," he said. "And why did Sebastian summon you here? Are you to meet with someone? Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

"No," I said, "I mean, I don't know. This wasn't my idea. I didn't ask him to summon me here. I don't even know what this place is."

"Why, this is the city of Bastion," Al-Hazir purred, sarcastically parroting what the Raj had said earlier, "The Shining Pearl of Tanth."

We approached another gate on the far side of the Palace of Fountains. On the other side was the compound belonging to the Hydromancer's Guild. The faerie-garden charm had faded considerably. "When can I go home?" I asked anxiously.

Al-Hazir looked away and continued walking. "Oh, soon I expect," he replied without much empathy. "Very soon."