

# CHAPTER FIVE



*"Did she arrive safely? The human girl from Earth?" asked the tiny, glowing Dust figure. Fazeed al-Hazir thought he detected an uncharacteristic trace of anxiety in the voice.*

*"Yes, the Astromancer whelp fetched her here," he replied, holding up the Dust Glass containing the swirling, indistinct female image. "She isn't human, you know," he added dryly, "At least, not entirely."*

*"Yes, I know," said the figure. "Good. Keep her there until I come for her."*

*"What is your interest in her?" the minister replied. "Should I be worried about her safety? Perhaps I should keep her well secured? Only as a precaution of course."*

*"That shouldn't be necessary," replied the figure in an irksome tone, "Just keep her away from your schemes, and no more clumsy assassination attempts until I have retrieved her. After our business is concluded, you can do whatever you want."*

*The image lost all form, collapsing into a sparkling heap of Dust at the bottom of the glass. Al-Hazir flipped a switch on the top of the device, and set it down on his desk. He knew the girl was of no consequence to him; his plans were well underway. But he didn't like variables unaccounted for; even the smallest detail could be a disruption.*

*If the Djinn was so interested in this Earthling, he doubted that she was just a small detail.*



**I** lingered in the moment between waking and opening my eyes.

I enjoyed one last thought, a fleeting conviction that this was all still just a dream. Surely I'd be home by now, in my own room, with a really crazy story to tell. I took in a deep breath full of cool morning air with a hint of roses, pleasant despite being strangely alien, and let out a last sigh. I was laying in a not-quite-comfortable bed, in one of the almost-hospitable guest rooms of Minister al-Hazir's house.

The green mechanical bug, like a faithful dog, rested on the pillow beside me. It lay completely

still, but as I turned my head to look at it, a single antenna raised up, slightly angled, like a fishing pole suddenly bent with a catch. In the morning quiet, I could hear the faintest clicking and whirring as the tiny mechanism spun into action. Sleepy green lights began to glow inside its left eye.

"Oh, look," I said. "I'm still here." I glared at it.

"Vrrrrrrmmmm," said the scarab. It made no attempt to disagree.

The curtain across the doorway of my room was suddenly drawn back, and a young feline figure appeared, bearing a silver tray with two pieces of spiky yellow fruit. She set the tray down on a bedside table, and with a shock I realized that she had the same shadowy, colorless appearance as the Tassir did.

I sucked in a breath and scootched back. The girl just stared blankly at me.

Another figure entered the doorway a moment later, carrying a set of folded clothes, and placed them down on a large wicker trunk against the far wall. She was tall and straight-backed despite being quite elderly. She wore a plain grey linen shift tied around the waist by a leather belt, otherwise unadorned. Her snowy white hair was raised in a bun atop her head, with a pair of bamboo skewers holding it up.

"That will be all, Dim," she said curtly.

The feline girl quietly, abruptly left, like an automaton or zombie<sup>1</sup> or something.

The woman crossed over to the tiny window high on the wall opposite the doorway, and opened the curtains, letting a little morning light in. Despite her confident movements and strong posture, her face looked positively ancient, with deep wrinkles and papery skin. A black patch covered her left eye, adding an unexpected touch to her contradictory appearance.

"Fresh clothes for you," she said, while her gaze lingered on me for a while longer than was comfortable.

I stared at her, trying to clear sleepy cobwebs from my brain. There was something different about her.

"Hey! You're human!" I blurted out with sudden realization.

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<sup>1</sup>Not too far from the truth, actually, but at least they don't eat brains.

"Well, you're an observant one," she said with a brief smile. "Are you..." she started to ask, but quickly dropped her gaze. "We're glad that you have arrived safely. The Minister, I'm sure, will attend to your every need while you are here."

"Is this a dream?" I demanded. "Where are we? This is a dream, right?"

The woman chuckled. "Maybe," she said, gazing sidelong at me with her good eye.

"Maybe?" I repeated, flabbergasted. I vaguely gestured toward the doorway, where Dim had gone. "Who are these people? How did I even get here?" I folded my arms. "This has to be a dream."

The woman's gaze faded. "I'm sorry I can't answer all your questions right now," she said, turning toward the doorway. "It'll be okay, don't worry. Have some waterfruit. Dim can show you where to freshen up. I'll see you again soon." With that, she disappeared through the curtain.

I rolled my eyes and cast an accusing glare at the rock-bug. "Maybe? Well, that's just great," I said. "Super helpful."

I sat there on the bed a moment longer, while the scarab clicked and whirred and did whatever it was that scarabs do when they aren't being interdimensional kidnappers. I closed my eyes and tried to get a grip.

Have you ever been absolutely convinced that a real-life stressful situation was actually just a dream? Me neither. It's easy to confuse dreams for reality, because that's how your brain works in dreams, but it doesn't go both ways. No matter how much I tried to tell myself that any second now I would blink and all the Talking Cats and Bigger-Eyes-Than-Me People would vanish, I knew it wasn't true.

I was here. Wherever here was.

"Well," I said to the scarab. "At least I'm a 'Honored Guest' – whatever that means." I grabbed one of the wierd fruit, and turned it over in my hands. It was banana yellow, covered in thick, scaly peel and pointy spikes, sporting a hard, curled stem on top. I was lost on what to do with it.

The shadowy cat-girl named Dim appeared in the doorway again, unsettlingly quiet and slackjawed. I nervously fiddled with the spiky fruit. Dim stood motionless, staring in my direction, but not really at me. "Do you, umm," I said, vaguely gesturing with the fruit, "know what I am supposed to do with this?"

Her eyes swiveled toward me, focusing somewhat. She pantomimed grabbing the fruit by the stem and pulling against the curve. I did so, and was a bit startled to discover that not only did

the waterfruit pop like a soda can, getting a little splash of water on my hand, but that I could peel back a third of the rough, spiky skin, to reveal watery, light green pulp inside.

I didn't wait for the girl to make little nom-nom motions with her mouth. I slurped the pulp up ravenously, gulping away at the juice, and then scraped the insides of the fruit with my teeth. It was wet, sticky, and about the best thing I had ever tasted<sup>2</sup>. I did the same with the second one, with a little less klutzy mess. They were surprisingly filling.

As I finished, trying to figure out how to get the sticky juice off my chin with some semblance of dignity, Dim slowly turned about, moving past the curtain and out of the room. Despite my misgivings about her creepy zombie groove, I followed.

The guesthouse was a domed, half-circle shaped building made of the ubiquitous white stone<sup>3</sup>. The five guest rooms sat upstairs, radiating out from a central column, with a connecting hallway on the outer half-circle. The rooms had vaulted ceilings with small openings that cycled the hot daytime air down the column, while cool air came up through vents at the floor. The base of the column was a fireplace, which kept the rooms toasty at night. At one end of the semi-circular hall, there was a stair down to the main floor, and the other, a bathroom.

The girl motioned me to the bathroom, and stood outside the curtain without saying a word. I offered her my name, but she gave no indication she heard or understood. Instead, using slow, listless movements, she showed me what to do in a game of Cat-People Bathroom Charades.

It was more-or-less intuitive. Thankfully, I was not expected to go in a litter box (I had been stressing all night about this). Making myself more presentable involved washing my face not with water but with the slimy, lemon-scented juice of an aloe-like plant. It dried on your face (or in your fur) and then you rubbed it off with a rough towel, taking all the sand and grime with it. Surprisingly, it worked really well and left my skin feeling better than anything I had ever used that came out of a skin care boutique.

The downstairs was comprised of a single hemispherical room, dominated by a large fireplace in the center of one wall, and a long, open kitchen opposite it on the curved side. It was fronted by a crescent-shaped bar made of polished marble, along with several stools of a curious design. There were a few tables as well.

"Well, you're finally up," came a voice.

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<sup>2</sup>Waterfruit really are cool. They grow out in the middle of the desert, no water in sight, in huge bunches, slowly absorbing water right out of the air. They can grow to the size of a basketball. They taste like Lychees. If you've never tried a Lychee, you should. Yum!

<sup>3</sup>It's actually a kind of clay called mulik. It comes out of the earth in these big blocks, then fired down into gleaming hard white (occasionally brown or yellow) bricks. Just about every structure in Tanth is made out of it.

The human woman briskly crossed the room to the kitchen, stepping behind the bar, her back to me as she busied herself returning items to cupboards.

"So where are you from, anyway?" I asked, taking a seat on one of the stools.

She turned around suddenly, and to my surprise, I realized it wasn't the same woman at all. She was dressed in the same plain grey outfit, but her hair was grey rather than white, and she seemed younger, perhaps in her 50's.

"Bastion," she said. She had angular features and an unpleasant expression.

"Oh, um," I stumbled. "Sorry, I thought you were someone else."

"I am Nali, the housekeeper. You may call me ma'am," she said.

I introduced myself.

"And I understand that you're from Earth, hmm?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "Seattle. Well, Boulder, now, actually. We just moved. I--"

"No one lives on Earth," the woman interrupted in irritated tones. "Everyone knows that. You'd better get a different story, or you'll be sweeping floors tomorrow."

I just stared at her, taken aback.

"Where did the other, um, housekeeper go?" I asked hesitantly.

"There's no one here but me," she said brusquely, sweeping out from behind the bar, straightening chairs at tables, with businesslike energy but little enthusiasm.

"The Minister will meet with you as his schedule permits," she announced, not looking back.

"I'm sure your questions will all be addressed. In the meantime, you are welcome to explore the Ministry grounds as much as you like. Lunch is at brightnoon, dinner at dusk."

With that, she strode out of the room, leaving me feeling like my favorite old granny just smacked me in the face.

"Well that was weird," I said to the little scarab, who had resumed its perch on my shoulder as if it had always belonged there. I'd totally given up trying to shoo it away.

I wandered outside into the morning light. I didn't think I had slept very late, but the bright sun directly overhead and bustle of activity suggested otherwise. The Hydromancer's Guild grounds

weren't terribly large, but they looked much bigger than the previous night, when al-Hazir had brought me to the guest house.

In the center of the flagstoned compound, between the entrance to the guest house and the main gate, sat a single fountain. Standing in foot-deep water were a pair of stone statues, their backs merged together like siamese twins. One held out a large book, while the other raised his hands in supplication. Neither had a face, but both wore smooth, conical hats, each half as tall as they were. Fine jets of water arced out of holes in the hats, raining down into the surrounding pool. The spray of cool water felt good against the rapidly rising heat of the day. To my left squatted a long, rectangular building with two stories, tucked up against the wall of the compound. Close to it were a jumble of thrown together structures that resembled the kind of build-it-yourself sheds that you might buy at a hardware store.

To my right, many times larger than the guest house, sat a gorgeous structure that could only have been the guild headquarters. Like the others, it was built of white brick. Unlike the others, much care was put into its aesthetic.

In front of the building was a series of connected square diases, elevated about 10 feet off the ground by broad stone steps. Beyond that, a zig-zag curtain of fifteen foot tall arcades, topped by onion-shaped domes, formed the outer facade. The building rose up above the arcades, two or three levels in some places, with a central dome twice its height. Flowering plants in hanging baskets decorated the arcades, while gardens and porticos occupied the top of some of the half-levels, leading to entrances on the upper floors. A number of blue and white flags, with the emblem of a wave, decorated windows.

A multilevel pool surrounded by a garden of potted trees and shrubs occupied the far end of the building, while on the near side there was a covered walkway connecting to the guest house. An intricately paved path, in the shape of undulating blue waves, wound from the front gate, to the fountain, and finally to the building entrance.

It seemed a bit pretentious. "I wonder what he's compensating for," I murmured to the scarab. The scarab did not reply. It was deeply engrossed in the most complex grooming maneuver yet, cramming a hind leg deep into the mechanics of its neck, hunting for some grain of sand or smudge of dirt that was monkeying up the works. It looked like a six year old cleaning out their ear with a Q-tip.

Two dozen blue-garbed cat-people bustled about the courtyard. Most had airs of urgency and importance, but a few lounged in the shade of the arcades or by one of the other buildings, shooting the breeze with each other. Apparently slacking off at work was more than just an Earthling pastime. For the most part, I received nothing more than curious glances.

The entire place, as impressive as it was, paled in comparison to what loomed above: the mountain. In the gloom of the previous evening, it only appeared to be an immense shadowy form, blotting out some of the stars. In the morning light, however, it positively glowed – a

massive edifice of steep rock that looked like it had been driven into the ground by the hand of a god. There were no trees on it, no scrub or brush. Just solid grey stone, almost vertical, looming a thousand feet above us, disappearing into the blue haze above.

They called it "Bastion Rock".

"What happened to the tour I was promised?" I asked the scarab, after taking it all in. No tour seemed forthcoming, so I started to wander around the place, checking out the statue, the pool, and poking around the arcades of the main building.

I drifted over to the compound gate, interested to check out all the fountains beyond. There were two cats in blue armor on guard duty. I started to stroll through, but one of them moved to block me. "You're not allowed to leave," he said, looking slightly bored.

"What?" I protested. "The minister said I could go wherever I wanted."

"Yeah," chimed in his buddy. "You can." He pointed behind me. "In here."

I glared at them as they sniggered, but the humor quickly left their smiles as they started to flex their claws at me.

I rapidly discovered a couple things about my predicament. First, despite being largely ignored, everyone apparently knew exactly who I was and exactly where I was (and was not) allowed to go. Second, I wasn't allowed to go anywhere. I was politely escorted out of the guild headquarters once, asked to please leave the hanging flowers alone (apparently they were not supposed to be smelled by Earthlings), told to keep my nose out of the storage area, and not to enter the dormitory. Forget dipping my feet in the pool; I wasn't even permitted on the steps.

In short, I was allowed to stand next to the statue of the siamese coneheads and hang out in the empty guesthouse. And I think they were starting to have second thoughts about the statue.

The sun seemed to be stuck at high noon, blazing away directly above. The unrelenting heat drove me back inside the cool of the guesthouse. At least there, I wouldn't have to endure suspicious looks from a bunch of talking cats. There was a shady, covered walkway connecting to one end of the guildhouse, lined with red and blue flowers in hanging arrangements. I lingered there for a moment, but I'd been harassed once already about admiring flowers.

Surprisingly, I wasn't terribly hungry or thirsty since I ate the waterfruit, but I poked around in the kitchen regardless. There were various food preparation implements, a cabinet of interesting herbs, and a whole collection of knick-knacks that made no sense to me whatsoever. I did find a jar with something that looked and smelled like garlic powder. I was so giddy over this discovery that I stood there inhaling the stuff like it was cocaine.

Tucked in behind the fireplace I discovered another staircase going down to a basement level. As my distress over being in an alien city had now regressed to boredom, I readily trotted down the steps. I figured they didn't care; after all, this was the one place that apparently didn't have a cat person telling me I wasn't supposed to be there.

The steep, narrow stairs led to a larger room with various bundles of foods in bulk, sacks of grains, and a number of barrels. A large copper pipe of old fashioned design, about a foot in diameter, with inch-thick connectors and ancient bolts covered in greenish rust, ran across the middle of the floor, like something you might find in a London subway circa 1900. It emerged from the hard-packed earth and dark stone of the wall closest to the stairs, and disappeared into the far wall, which was carefully constructed of starkly contrasting white stone brickwork.

Shimmering brickwork.

Puzzled, I stepped closer. A couple feet above and to the left of where the pipe disappeared into the wall, there was a section of bricks that were... different. It was like one of those black and white checkered patterns that form a visual illusion – the longer you look at it, the more out of place it seems. The bricks undulated very slightly, as if under water. It reminded me of the cloaks that the Tassirs wore.

"What the...?" I reached out a hand to touch the bricks, only to discover that my hand passed right through the wall. It *was* an illusion.

"Tippy," I said to myself. I cautiously probed the solid edges of the real bricks, tracing out a rough circle in the wall about three feet in diameter. With a quick glance behind me, I slowly put a foot in, and, finding solid ground on the other side, stuck my head through. I found myself in an ancient sewer tunnel.

"Oh, wow..." I breathed. I'd seen places like this before, in pictures of the antique underground architecture of European cities like London and Paris, but I'd never been anywhere close. The tunnel stood twenty feet in diameter, with walls of white brick on either side and a smooth, concave ceiling, supported every so often by immense arches of dark stone. The flat, concrete-like bottom surface, recessed along the center, was marred by streaks of green, brown, and yellow – the traces of sewer water that had long since gone dry.

I emerged into the tunnel through an alcove at the top of the wall. The copper pipe ran perpendicular to the tunnel, disappearing into the far side. Rusty metal ladder rungs led down to a narrow ledge five feet above the floor. The hole in the wall was plainly evident from this side; apparently the illusion was only one-directional.

I must have forgotten that old fable about the girl who went into an ancient alien sewer system and spent the rest of her miserable days trying to find her way out, because I immediately scooted over to the ladder and clambered down. The tunnel went straight in either direction as far as I could see, so I picked one and started along the ledge. I didn't get very far before I



realized that the scarab's green glow was the only light source; they didn't hang any lamps down here. As if reading my mind, his wing-covers popped out and his underbelly glowed brighter.

The passage went further than expected, straight as an arrow. Occasionally, a footbridge would span the distance from the ledge I was on to the opposite side, but otherwise, every section just like the previous. After a while, I lost track of how far I'd gone, and several times thought to go back, but every time I did, I figured that the tunnel couldn't go that much further before it came to something interesting.

Turns out I was right.

Up ahead, the tunnel abruptly halted, blocked entirely by an immense wall of smooth stone. Another copper pipe, this one several inches thick and eight feet in diameter, jutted out from the wall at about eye level, overhanging the ledge by a foot or two. Unlike the parched sewer tunnel, there was a noticeable humidity to the air coming from this pipe, even if there still wasn't any sign of actual water.

Disappointed, I was about to turn back, when I realized that there was a door on my side of the tunnel, even with the ledge. The door was only about five feet high, with a heavy lock, and made of a slate-gray material I had seen elsewhere -- not wood.

It was also slightly ajar.

"Cut the light," I whispered to the scarab. In hindsight, I realized it was odd for me to expect that my little green kidnapper would happily follow my instructions, but at the time it felt completely natural.

I was left in darkness, except for a faint sliver of illumination coming through the crack in the doorway. Spine tingling (with danger, excitement, or stupidity – you decide), I went to push the door open, when I heard a voice. Unmistakably, it belonged to Minister al-Hazir.

"I need these three activated," I heard him say. "This evening. No later. There's much left to do."

There was a silent pause.

"Oh come now," he continued. "We're almost done. What use is there in being difficult? I've kept my end of our bargain."

"*Your* bargain," replied a different voice – lower, harsher, accented. "I had nothing to do with it."

"And yet you shall reap the rewards all the same."

"Rewards? Like this?" asked the second voice.

"You've known the rules from the start, Horanim," al-Hazir said, his tone sharper. "Once we are finished, you will be free to go. Until then, you will remain my guest."

"All three activated," he repeated. "Delays are unacceptable at this stage. Don't make me regret my leniency." With that, I heard the sound of a heavy door closing and a latch grinding into place, followed only by silence.

My sparks crawled all over the door and walls. Despite the warnings of my Inner Voice of Reason, I reached out and pushed the door in just far enough to see. I winced as it made a little squeak.

The room beyond was not much bigger than the larder I had left behind. It was lit by a sputtering lamp, casting a mix of flickering light and dancing shadows on several more large, heavy-gauge pipes that ran down one wall, then along the floor. There was another door with a big lock at the top of a few steps.

In the center of the room stood a cluster of several metal cages. All but one was empty. The singular occupant of the cage appeared to be kneeling or hunched over, back turned to me. At first, I assumed the figure was another cat; it had grey fur, and little else covering its body. The pattern wasn't right, though. Its ears were too tall, in the wrong position, and the hair on the neck too thick.

Then it turned toward me. It had a canine visage, with grey and white fur, and a wolfish snout. Like the felines, it had prehensile hands that grasped the bars of the cage. It wasn't kneeling so much as squatting.

Its clear blue eyes, vibrant despite the dim illumination, fell on me and did not stray. It sniffed at the air, lips quivering, and then bared its teeth.

I gulped, scrambling out of view, and hurried back down the corridor, suddenly feeling very guilty about snooping. The scarab lit the way, but that didn't prevent me from stumbling over my own feet a couple times. By the time we got back to the larder, I had smudges of dirt on my blouse and leggings. I jogged back up the stairs.

The serving cat-girl was waiting for me. She had the same blank expression as when I first saw her. Luckily, no one else was there. We walked around the kitchen to the second floor stairs, but as we did, Nali came walking down.

"Spirits of Makesh," she exclaimed, "*There* you are. Where have you been?"

"Uh," I started.

She turned to the serving girl. "Dim, take her upstairs, get her clean. I've laid out clothes on her bed. She's dining with a Minister this evening."

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. "Oh. I didn't think he was going to meet with me so soon."

"Not *our* minister," she replied in annoyance. "*Their* minister. Zala-Tashet wants to speak with you. No doubt he plans to use you in one of his schemes."

I wasn't sure how I felt about that, either.