

CHAPTER THREE



Excerpt from lecture series by Donovan Mach Durdin, Ph.D, entitled "Beam Me Up Scotty – The New Realities of Transrift Portation". April 10th, 2041. San Diego State University.

"It took five billion years for a rift to open on earth, unless the dinosaurs were holding out on us, but only another eleven for a second one. The Origin Rift outside of Boulder, Colorado, was studied for a decade purely as a power source. At that time, it was merely eleven millimeters in diameter, and, of course, only two-dimensional.

The first Kaehler Experiments were designed to open the aperture and increase power output. Can you imagine their surprise when Dr. Kaehler's team discovered water instead? Salt water, tiny amounts, coming out of a hole in the fabric of space barely wider than your pinky, and only every once in a while. Dr. Kaehler herself wrote that she was absolutely baffled.

Transmission of matter and energy into the Origin Rift had been attempted numerous times in the first few years, but they were always repelled. The Origin Rift was output-only. When the second rift opened, they became a properly linked pair. Rift energy still flowed, but now there was a realspace connection. Dr. Kaehler wrote that she could put her face to the aperture and see the sky, smell the ocean air, and even feel the occasional saltwater spray!

They managed to find a satellite GPS unit only one centimeter wide and put it through. Although they were disheartened when the second rift destabilized and disappeared after only a couple days, they were elated to discover their transponder happily signaling away from a beautiful spot on Cable Beach, Australia.

To celebrate, Dr. Kaehler invited her entire team to go to Australia and fetch the transponder in person, right after she sold all her stock in the airline industry.



SMELL was the first sensation that came back to me.

My eyes were still blinded by an acute case of green overdose, but I could smell a dry, dusty scent on the air, mixed with something sweeter, like a faint, exotic perfume. It definitely did not smell like the Things' bedroom (God help us if they actually survive to puberty... the stench will curl the paint off the walls).

The soft breeze that carried those scents caressed my cheeks and played with my hair. Did someone carry me outside? Did the bug somehow cause a fire? The ground beneath my body and hands felt hard and solid, like stone, but also gritty, like beach sand kicked onto the sidewalk. It was definitely not the grassy lawn in front of Julia and Dave's house.

There was a voice. At first, I thought it was my dad. It didn't sound like my dad. It was speaking loudly, shouting almost, but the words seemed garbled.

I finally opened my eyes. I was blinded by the sun, seen through a film of residual greenness. I squeezed them shut again and groaned as I tried to sit up.

Then the voice spoke again, this time I could recognize that it was saying. The voice was high pitched, almost lispy, and not one I recognized.

"... and so, my fellows of Bastion, I grant my blessing to this ship. Let her soar high in the skies. Let her sails carry her before the winds of good fortune. Let..." The voice trailed off, to be replaced with a low chorus of gasps.

Having reached what I hoped was an upright position, I opened my eyes again. The green film had receded some more, and now I could see that I was kneeling on a hard, grey surface, which was indeed speckled with scattered sand. To my right stood a low-roofed building made of a material I didn't recognize, dark slate colored, with a smooth grain that was not quite like wood. A lamp hung on a hook next to an open doorway in the center. To my left, the surface spread out and away, with several staggered rises connected by short staircases, almost like the deck of a ship. In fact, very much like the deck of a ship.

I put a hand to my head.

In front of me, not five steps away, stood a creature straight out of *Alice in Wonderland*. He was about my height, and wore a fancy outfit comprised of a white silk jacket and pantaloons, gold belt, chains, and pauldrons¹, and a silver cape wrapping it up. At his side hung a fancy saber, and atop his head, a matching turban with a sparkling clear jewel mounted on the front.

That wasn't the strange part.

Hand on the hilt of his sword, he tilted his head at me quizzically. "I say!" he exclaimed.

¹Pauldrons are like shoulder pads. They tend to be fancy, with tassels and decorations, but are still pretty embarrassing looking.

That wasn't the strange part either.

The strange part was, he was a cat. His face had all the proper feline features, including a cat's eyes and a cat's whiskers. The part of him not covered in the outfit was covered in black fur with white streaks. His hands, however, were prehensile, like a human's, with smooth dark skin on the palm, and the same fur on the backs.

Even stranger still, he wasn't the only one. Four more cat people, standing at attention like soldiers, flanked him two by two. They wore complex armor made of white scales of an unfamiliar material – not metal – linked together by tiny chains, running from shoulders to knees, tucked in by a belt at the waist. Silver cloaks similar to Turban Cat's adorned their backs. They carried spears tipped by serrated wedges of an eerily familiar purple crystal.

Beyond them I saw only a late afternoon sky, as if they were standing close to a ledge.

I stood woozily, becoming aware of more people behind me. I turned to find a crowd of them. Their fur was a mixture of blacks, browns, and reds. Most wore head-coverings of some sort, although not as fancy as Turban Cat. Some were garbed in robes, while others had jackets and trousers, or armor of some kind. Scattered among the gathering were a few who looked more human, standing at least a head taller, but otherwise clothed about the same.

They had gathered on a deck just a few steps lower, in front of the side rail of the ship, murmuring and pressing closer, staring at me. A large gangway connected the ship to a dock, and beyond that I could make out a series of squat, plain buildings, with taller and much fancier structures popping up in the distance beyond. An immense mountain loomed to one side. There was no water. No gentle crash of waves in the background. No squawking of seagulls. No smell of salt and spray on the cool breeze.

One of the tall, human-like people bounded up to me two steps at a time. His cloak was white with red trim, and he carried no sword, but otherwise he was dressed similarly to Turban Cat. He had a well-trimmed white beard down to his chest, but his head was completely bald. I say "human-like" because when he stepped close, I saw that his features weren't quite human. His head was very slightly elongated, and his eyes were... well, large. Larger than mine. The center irises of his eyes were greyish-blue, but the white parts weren't white at all. Instead, they constantly swirled with an orange miasma flecked with red.

I let out a deep breath and relaxed, chuckling to myself. Of course! I was dreaming! Only I could make fun of myself by dreaming up people with even bigger eyes!

"Who are you?" White-Beard demanded, puffing up his chest and standing right in front of me. "How did you get here?"

I thumped his sternum with my finger. "You're in my space, honey," I said cheekily, feeling much better about the whole situation.

His eyes shifted to a darker orange. His right hand shot out and grabbed my wrist. I jerked back, but his grip held fast. For an old dream-guy, he was certainly spritely. And strong.

"Hold a moment, now, if you please, minister," said the voice of Turban Cat from behind me. He stepped up close, regarding me in an entirely more friendly manner. "This young lady appears to be invited if I am not quite mistaken. Look, she even has a scarab!"

For the first time, I realized that the strange green alien-rock-bug was still with me. Instead of embedded into my chest, however, it had somehow come to rest on my right shoulder, perched lightly, like some alternative sea captain's parrot. It was humming lightly and scratching its backside with one of its legs in an altogether smug manner.

I violently twisted my shoulders, partially trying to escape the wrist-grip, but mostly to shoo away the obnoxious bug. I bared my teeth at it.

White-Beard turned to face one of the cats that had been pressing closer. "Sebastian," he called, "is this true? Did you bring her here?"

A rust-furred cat wearing a silk robe the color of the night sky, covered from collar to hem with stars, pyramids, circles, and other symbols, timidly stepped forward. He had a matching blue turban and wire-rimmed glasses.

Cats wearing glasses! What a great dream!

He cleared his throat. "I... uh," he began in nasal tones, and cleared his throat again. He seemed to have rather a lot of phlegm. "I sent the scarab, my lords, yes." He dropped his gaze, like a scolded eight-year-old. "I didn't realize... uh... The return portal, I mean, from Earth, would manifest, uh, that is, that she would appear, um... here, exactly. The coordinates were something something something..." He trailed off, as if someone had just turned down his individual volume. I could still see his lips moving.

White-Beard narrowed his eyes at me even more. "From Earth?" he glowered.

"Well, well!" enthused Turban Cat, "An invited! From Earth, no less! Now, Minister Zala-Tashet, do unhand her please. The invited are our guests!"

The white-bearded minister finally released me, and I stepped back, glaring indignantly at him. My arm hurt, and he even left a red mark. Of course, that's when I started sparking, and then the *other* people showed up. It figures I would start sparking at inconvenient times, even in my own dream.

The first *other* person appeared in the doorway to the ship's cabin. He wore a different kind of cloak. It shimmered with a kaleidoscope of muted colors, like flickering lights off the surface of a pool of rippling water. It was literally hard to focus on. His hood was up, and there was only darkness underneath it. He seemed to be creeping stealthily toward the minister.

Slowly, he withdrew a dagger from the folds of his cloak. Dream or not, a chill shot up my back. It was Amythine² for sure -- the same kind of knife as the one in my mom's antique trunk. The would-be assassin raised the weapon and prepared to strike. White-beard didn't stand a chance.

Like a gawking tourist, I involuntarily let out a little shriek and pointed. As I did, my sparks coalesced as they had before into a thick, undulating cord, and shot right at him. I'd love to say they hit him and blew him to kingdom come, but instead (this is me, remember?) they did something weirder. They veered over his left shoulder at the last instant and plowed right into the little lamp hanging by the doorway.

The lamplight suddenly flared, as my sparks winked out completely with another sickening rush in my stomach. The glass of the lamp exploded outward, and flame surged, enveloping the attacker's hood and left shoulder. Momentarily distracted, the assassin pulled the scorched hood away, and the strange flickering colors of the cloak suddenly vanished, leaving it a plain gray color.

The minister whirled to face his opponent, who struck with the dagger, despite his other shoulder still being a little bit on fire. "Tassirs!" the minister cried, catching the downward stroke with his left forearm. "Protect the Raj!" The purple blade bit into his flesh, and red blood -- very realistic looking red blood -- spurting out. Despite his vigor, the minister was no match for his assailant, who planted his left palm into the minister's chest and shoved, sending him sprawling to the deck.

Turban Cat (aka the "Raj" -- whatever that was) retreated several paces, as two of his guards jumped forward. The other two closed ranks around him.

²So it turns out that Amythine is this really amazing stuff. It's found in the desert in tiny grains which are a plain gray color. There are these creatures that roam the desert called Skettercrabs which literally zip along dragging their lower jaw through the sand, looking for tiny bugs. The side effect is they get a mouthful of sand, most of which just gets dumped out the back end of the crab. But the Amythine crystals are shunted into a special spot in their belly where they are melted. Amythine is a crystal which can be melted like a metal. Crazy. Anyway, when the crab gets enough liquid Amythine, it squirts that into a slot in the upper jaw, which is frisbee-shaped, but with serrated edges. It cools, turning purple, and reforms into an ultra-sharp disk. When it wants to, the crab can shoot that disk at someone with pretty deadly effect, and the disk just gets left where it landed for someone to come along and pick up. Most of the disks are about a foot in diameter, but some of the biggest crabs can make some that are 3 feet wide. You can cut Amythine with a diamond, but no one has ever figured out how to melt it like the crabs do.

Most of the rest of the assembled crowd backed away with gasps and ooohs, but several stepped forward. Two of them, cat-people in blue cloaks, drew swords and rushed onto the upper deck, repeating the cry of "Protect the Raj!"

Instead of attacking the Raj, however, Strange Cloak Guy (aka the "Tassir" – whatever that was) leapt at the fallen minister. The lamp, still billowing flames, had landed on the deck, and the assassin just stepped over it as if it were a candlestick, even as the fire licked at his legs. He roughly planted his left knee into the minister's hip, and pinned the shoulder, again raising his dagger.

Again, the minister's butt was saved at the last moment. Another shimmering form appeared, this time jumping from the roof of the cabin, crashing bodily into the assassin. They both went down in a tumble. The minister, still bleeding, scrambled away, crawling on his hands and backside, while the other two struggled.

With a powerful backhand and a knee to the chin, the Tassir staggered his new opponent, who managed to roll to the side, even as his head snapped back under the force of the blow. His hood came off as well, revealing a tangle of auburn hair over some kind of metallic mask, and the flickering colors of his cloak disappeared too. "Another one!" came a shout from the crowd, and the two blue-cloaked cats leapt at him as he tried to stand.

Meanwhile, the Tassir arched his back and flipped to his feet using one of those martial arts tricks you see in movies, and again advanced on the minister, who was being helped to his feet by the Raj's guards. Then, suddenly, the assassin stopped.

He was looking right at me.

His face was dark. Not black, mind you, but dark, as if permanently in shadow. He was one of the minister's people – tall, with big eyes that seemed to be backlit with a purple glow (like they weren't spooky enough already) with swirls the color of flame. As if transfixed by something he saw, he stepped directly toward me, but the knife stayed down. He stopped three feet away, frowning at me, head tilted slightly, like he was confused. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came.

Abruptly, he jerked his head to the side, and I turned to see one of the Raj's guards stab the assassin in the side with his spear, burying the blade. Instead of fighting (or dying), the assassin looked back at me for a moment. Then he yanked the spear out of his side without so much as a flinch of pain or a drop of blood and discarded it.

The assassin sprinted forward, right past me. The two guards protecting the Raj leveled their spears, but he wasn't going for them. In three heartbeats, his long stride had taken him past them, to the far side of the ship. With one glance back, he jumped off the edge.

By that time, I had lost all the cheekiness, and was kind of in shock. Somewhere in the deep recesses of my brain, a little voice was yelling that this was one hell of a strangely realistic/freaky dream, and perhaps it wasn't a dream at all.

I turned back to look at the minister, and instead found myself face-to-face with the other Shimmer-Cloak. His hood had come back up, and the muted colors swirled around once again. He wasn't holding a weapon, but behind him, the two blue-cloaked cats groaned and struggled to rise.

Whatever shock I was in evaporated. I stepped forward and slammed my knee into his groin as hard as I could (yay for women's self-defense classes!). I expected him to drop like a sack of rocks, but he only hunched over momentarily, grunting in pain. I stepped back, afraid I was about to get a kung-fu beat-down, but then he straightened and vaulted back up on top of the cabin roof, spinning around in a low crouch to survey the melee.

There wasn't much left. Some of the Raj's men had run to the railing of the ship, looking after where the Tassir had jumped, while the others continued to form a little protective circle. The two Blue-Cloaks had recovered themselves, and were scanning the ship, looking for the other guy, who was watching them from the top of the cabin. Either they were blind, or it didn't occur to them to look up; they never saw him. After a few moments, and another glance at me, he bounded away.

Everyone on the ship took a collective deep breath. The scarab, who had been buzzing around my head (and safely out of harm's reach) settled back down on my shoulder. I tried to shoo it away.

"Well," said the Raj cheerfully, "I'd say that was a smashing good christening! Well done everyone!"