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Chapter

1

*An Unexpected Lesson*

0x414F:C:8 – 9:5 – Alignment Standard Time

“Naikila’s dripping yellow *koola*!”

It was Zo’s favorite curse, only to be used in the most life crushing of moments. Ze glared at zeir hover speeder’s turbine which was now billowing a pungent green smoke that smelled of garlic and piss. Ignoring the possible chips the aluminum casing might leave on zeir impeccably manicured claws, Zo levelled a stiff kick at the turbine.

Naturally, this was followed by another string of decreasingly creative and increasingly foul curses as other Tenglings, or *tengs*, tried to walk by without catching Zo’s eye. They shielded their children’s ear slits and directed dirty glances over their dark veils at Zo’s cursing form.

Zo couldn’t be bothered to notice the offended stares of the city dwellers around zem. In two months, Zo was expected to traverse the Zaron Ocean, crossing the great expanse of open sand between Du’Akar and Du’Aldin, where the testing would be proctored.

Zo was a S*hifter*.

Or, at least, ze might be. One day. Hopefully.

What was troubling Zo other than zeir speeder’s turbine compressor, which ze was about to discover was irreparably fractured, was that ze had finally gotten to meet zeir new personal tutor, Mozin.

And Zo was convinced that the ancient teng that zeir family had hired to instruct Zo in the ways of Shifting was insane. Or senile. Or possibly both.

And now, even as ze flipped open the turbine’s service panel and discovered the shattered component within, all ze could think about was the fact that all zeir hopes now rested upon an ancient and possibly senile teng whose mind seemed to be *at least* as cracked as the compressor spewing garlicky piss smoke before zem.

On top of this, there was also the more practical concern of how Zo was going to *cross* half a thousand miles of open sand to take the admissions test.

It was something zeir parents had been putting off discussing, a topic which had finally come up that morning when Ixen had attempted to research the price of a ferry.

Six Hours Earlier

0x414F:C:8 – 3:C – Alignment Standard Time

“So, what’s the damage?” Oza said, as ze tore off a piece of *toroti*, a crunchy flatbread made of water, oil, and insect flour.

“Don’t know. They don’t have a website,” said Ixen, as ze heated two more *toroti* on the stovetop.

“Not surprised. Did you call them?” said Oza.

“I’m sure ze did,” said Zo, “but who would answer? I’m sure if they actually answered every call from each desperate lowlife who wanted to leave this city, they wouldn’t have time to dig the sand out of their *koolas* in between phone calls.”

Oza rasped a low, throaty chuckle, but Ixen turned away from the stove and directed a sharp glare at the both of them, oily spatula levelled menacingly at Zo.

“Do not speak that way of your home. This land is fertile. It has provided for you, your bearer, your grandbearer, and *zeir* grandbearer, going back hundreds of generations. Thousands!” Zo buckled in for zeir watcher’s favorite rant.

“Just because we don’t have all this new…*technology*,” said Ixen, painting the red sandstone wall with droplets of green oil, “doesn’t mean we can’t find things to love about our home, things to be grateful for.”

“Yeah, and that’s why you spent an hour this morning trying to find a way to get me the six hells out of here,” said Zo just loud enough for Oza to hear, but hopefully quiet enough that Ixen would miss it.

Iko, one of Zo’s clutchmates, choked on zeir *toroti* as ze stifled a giggle*.*

But Zo had miscalculated.

Ixen’s scales flared in outrage as ze continued to ignore the hissing *toroti*, which were now audibly burning a foot away from zem. Malik, another of Zo’s clutchmates, frowned at the burning flatbreads, zeir plate still empty.

“I spent a whole hour so *lovingly* trying to get you ‘the six hells out of here’ because you are my child and I want the best for you! You have something special, Zo! A wonderful gift from the great Watcher! Think of what you can do for your people!”

Zo couldn’t help but turn away from zeir watcher as ze gave zeir impassioned speech. Ze was tired of hearing what seemed to be Ixen’s favorite refrain as of late.

*Think of what you can do for your people*.

It made Zo feel sick to zeir stomach.

“Ixen,” said Oza, giving zeir mate a significant look that Zo noticed, “It’s fine. We’ll just go down to the docks next weekend and see what they say.”

Ixen’s scales began to settle, and ze gave zeir mate a nod. But Zo could see worry in zeir eyes, the true source of the morning’s sour mood.

Zo knew they wouldn’t want to talk about it in front of zem, but Ixen and Oza were worried about the trip across the Zaron. News of friends and family travelling abroad had been all but non-existent in recent memory, which likely meant the price of the ferry had increased substantially.

The two tengs ran a lucrative business scavenging, trading, fixing, and selling Alignment tech, mostly for speeders, but with twenty-two children, zinc was still tight, especially with the added cost of Zo’s new tutor, a retired university professor named Mozin who lived in the city.

Many of Zo’s siblings had moved out and started their own families, but there were still twelve living in the burrow that Zo called home.

Carved into the sandstone by creatures that had been extinct in the civilized areas of Du’Akar for millennia, the grand networks of stone burrows the city was built upon still formed the suburbs that surrounded the city and were almost all populated by teng families. Zo knew zeir family had a relatively large and spacious burrow, but with so many living at home, it never felt that way.

And of course, all of them were expected to work, contributing to the family business in some way. Zo, among with a few of zeir siblings, was a parts scavenger. Ze spent much of zeir time rummaging through junkyards and trying to find good deals at the city’s southern bazaar, where zeir family ran their shop.

Today, however, Zo wouldn’t be scavenging anything. Today was zeir first day of tutoring. Which meant Zo would be going into the city to meet Mozin, whom the family had hired to instruct zem. Mozin, of course, was not a Shifter.

No Shifters lived in Du’Akar that Zo knew of; why would they? But as a history professor, Mozin had specialized in Alignment history, and thus probably knew more about the Alignment and Shifting than anyone else in Du’Akar.

And today, Zo would be meeting zem.

Zo, who couldn’t stomach much food this morning anyway, left half zeir *toroti* to a grateful Malik, and nervously ran to zeir room to grab watch, veil, and loin cloth. Ze paused briefly to pinch Nali, Zo’s third and final clutchmate, who was still sleeping in zeir cubby. Nali flailed an arm around in response to the pinch, but Zo had already danced to the other side of the room.

“Breakfast is burnt!” said Zo cheerily in response to an impressive curse Nali levelled at zem from bed as Zo rummaged through zeir drawers.

Zeir belongings in hand, Zo crawled out into the backyard to scrub zeir skin and scales in the rough sand.

Zo liked being clean, and today would certainly be no exception. After scrubbing all the dust, grease, and grime from zeir skin, and taking care to meticulously polish each of zeir auburn scales in a mirror so that they gleamed in the red sun—a process which took well over an hour—Zo donned veil, loin cloth, and wrist watch.

Zo checked that watch.

Only one hour to go.

Zo felt like zeir stomach was going to boil over, even though ze hadn’t finished zeir *toroti*. Ze nervously made zeir way back inside, through the burrow, and out the front to where zeir speeder was parked.

The street was alive with throngs of tengs beginning to go about their days. Many wore jewels, a few had loincloths or veils with striking patterns of expensive dyes, but most were dressed simply, like Zo. Their scales ranged from pale white to onyx black, with every shade of sand in between.

Zo ignored them all, unable to focus on anything but the jittering electricity ze felt racing through zeir scales.

Ze tapped zeir watch against the speeder’s dash, which lit up immediately, flicked the ignition, and frowned as the turbine crackled loudly but didn’t start. Ze turned the ignition again, slowly this time, and mercifully, it started.

There was traffic heading into the city, of course, but nothing unusually heavy. Although the great expanse of sand between Zo’s suburb and the city was almost empty, hover speeders like Zo’s couldn’t navigate it. The speeders were made with Alignment tech that worked by temporarily shifting the laws of physics from two other Alignment universes into Ol’kir’alkhai—zeir home planet—in a small bubble around them.

One of the two source universes had much weaker gravity than was found in Olkira; that was Gravitum A, an odd alignment universe in that its position in the alignment was not centered around a planet—as there were no planets around which it *could be* centered—and pulling laws from that universe allowed for the speeder and anything atop it to be effectively weightless.

The other universe the speeder drew laws from, everyone knew about—Electrum.

Centered around one of the most important worlds in the Alignment, a gas giant known as Moxwyll, Electrum’s oddly powerful electromagnetic fields supplied Alignment tech with an effectively endless supply of energy, and the speeders tengs often used to commute in Du’Akar were no exception.

A highway had been lain under the sand when the city was planned, made of perpetually magnetized iron which had the dual purpose of keeping away sand beetles and providing the means for speeders and other hovercrafts to use it for travel.

The speeders, from their combination of near weightlessness and perpetual electric charge that powered their large turbines, could zip over the highways with only air resistance to slow them down. Well, air resistance, and the throng of thousands of other stubborn tengs trying to get into the city at the same time.

There were vehicles, of course, that could cross the open sand, like the ferry that would hopefully take Zo across the Zaron in two months’ time. But they didn’t use Alignment tech, and personal vehicles that could let one bypass the traffic were quite expensive to own and maintain. Only the rich could afford such luxuries.

Zo hoped that zeir knowledge of Alignment tech learned over years of scavenging would impress Mozin. Still, sitting in traffic made zeir scales itch.

By the time Zo had finally made it to the address ze had been given, zeir nerves were frayed and ze felt like zeir scales were going to shake themselves onto the sandy pavement.

Most buildings in the city were skyscrapers constructed of steel frames with concrete walls, and this one was no exception.

Zo looked down at zeir watch, making sure ze had the right address.

2E4A Oceanview Ave, Apt 8F

Zo found the apartment’s number in a small screen at the building’s entrance and rang for room 8F.

Nothing.

Zo rang again.

Still nothing.

Zo was about to call the number the tutor had given Oza last week when the door opened with a loud buzz. Zo stepped into the dirty lobby, which held an empty desk ze figured may have once been a porter’s workstation, and made zeir way to the elevator.

OUT OF ORDER

Sighing, Zo made zeir way to the ‘up’ staircase, which like all teng staircases, was only about one span tall, and required Zo to stoop down on all fours to begin the climb.

It was a comfortable position, but an unrefined one, as loincloths did little to cover the view from directly below. Zo hated old-fashioned staircases. The only commonly accepted places for nudity were the home or the beach, and Zo clung to those norms passionately. To Zo, nudity anywhere else was impolite, and even worse, unhygienic.

Zo climbed the eight flights, trying to enjoy the exercise and ignore the odd noises ze heard coming from rooms near the various stairway entrances—mostly yelling, loud music, and other sounds that made Zo’s scales lie flat in embarrassment.

Finally, ze made it to the eighth floor and exited the stairway, gratefully stretching back up on zeir hind legs. Zo immediately noticed a blonde teng with horribly dirty scales collapsed in the hallway, veil scandalously askew.

A quick glance at the small glass vial and discarded needle told Zo all ze needed to know.

Nervously, Zo approached the teng, the strong smell of acetone permeating the air. Zo held zeir breath and skirted past the wretch, who twitched and ruffled zeir scales, but otherwise seemed completely out of it.

Finally, Zo made it to apartment 8F at the end of the hall. Ze raised a brown paw, ready to knock on the door, when a stooped teng with age-bleached scales yanked it open, wearing a squint that made zem look like ze’d just bit into a particularly sour *zupa* fruit.

“You Zo?” the teng asked in a gruff voice.

“Uhh, yeah. I’m looking for Mozin. Do you know if zey’re…are you…zem?”

“Naikila’s *koola*,” muttered Mozin, employing Zo’s favorite curse, “So you’re the lucky teng who’s going to save my planet from economic collapse.”

“Uh, I’m just here for –”

“I know what you’re here for, *ti*!” ze said, using the term for a teng youth, which Zo felt was a bit patronizing. Ze was sixteen years old after all, well into zeir adult years. Though, perhaps it *was* fair, the old teng looked well over a hundred.

Mozin shuffled into the apartment, and Zo got a good lock at zeir bone-white scales.

Maybe nearing a hundred and fifty, Zo mentally adjusted.

“I said come in!” Mozin barked, gesturing into the apartment. Zo stepped into an impressively furnished studio, tiny thought it was.

Every wall was lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves full of dusty tomes and manuscripts. Some, Zo recognized from zeir schooling, limited though it had been. *Elementary Mathematics for Students. A Complete History of Du’Akar, from 1300 B.A. to the Present Day.*

There were also several, hundreds perhaps, that Zo had never heard of. *Advanced Theories of Gravitation. A Survey of String Theories. Introduction to Decryptonomy*.

Zo had never even heard of ‘decryptonomy’.

“I said sit!” barked Mozin, gesturing to a steel table with a red reading-orb resting upon it.

Zo jumped a bit, fairly certain the old teng had said no such thing. But ze sat at the table anyway, crossing zeir legs beneath it. Mozin did the same, opposite zem.

“Now. Tell me everything you know about the alignment. And be quick about it; we’re almost out of time.”

Zo was dumbstruck by the demand. *Out of time?*

“Well, the Alignment is a federation made up of representatives from several worlds–” Zo began, but Mozin cut zem off.

“No, no. The *alignment*,” ze said impatiently.

This was one of the more confusing things about discussing the alignment. It was both the name of the physical and, some thought, spiritual alignment of several universes as well as the name of the representative government made up of individuals from planets in the universes *within* said alignment.

In *Xutili*, Zo’s native script, the two were easily distinguishable, as the government organization was a proper noun—*The Alignment*—while the physical event was simply *the alignment*. But when spoken aloud, context was all one had to go by.

The old teng looked frustrated by Zo’s perfectly reasonable misunderstanding.

Though, perhaps zeir face was just stuck like that.

“Well,” Zo said, “the alignment is an ongoing cosmological event in which thousands of universes with differing laws of physics are constantly coming into a sort of physical alignment with each–”

“What kind of physical alignment, how does it work?”

Zo was caught off guard by this question. “I…well I don’t really know. Does anyone?”

“Not really. I was hoping you might, though” Mozin mused as ze dug a long, untrimmed claw into zeir ear slit, much to Zo’s disgust. “Maybe some of the older Pharphesians know something about it. Not that they’ll ever share their knowledge, the old bastards.” Zo wondered how old the Pharphesians must be for the ivory teng to be calling *them* old.

“But as far as the general populace knows, it’s something which has simply been happening for tens of thousands of years and nobody knows the how or why of it. But there *are* some theories, which we will get to eventually. Continue.”

This lesson was not going at all how Zo had anticipated. Zo was expecting for there to be some kind of introductions, maybe followed by a summary of the topics ze’d be studying. But perhaps those would come later.

“Well,” Zo continued, “as I was saying, these universes are aligning with each other, usually centered around a planet or star in that universe, unless that universe has no celestial objects, like in Gravitum A…”

At this, Zo paused, as Mozin had closed zeir eyes and began to lean forward as if about to collapse on the table.

*Is ze dying?*

Abruptly, the teng snapped back up, eyes open.

*Did ze just fall asleep?*

Zo decided to just ignore the pause and continue. “…And there are often species on these aligned worlds that include people who can interact with the alignment in special ways.”

“Like you,” Mozin said simply.

“Yeah,” said Zo, zeir scales pulling close in embarrassment.

Morin pointed zeir dirty claw at Zo. “Don’t be embarrassed, *ti*! This is a rare gift!”

Zo braced zemself, getting ready to hear those scarring words.

*Think of what you can do for your people.*

“Think about what kind of adventures you’ll get to go on! The sights you’ll see, the friends you’ll make! The empires you’ll overthrow and worlds you’ll conquer!” Mozin came alive as ze spoke, and Zo was about to interject that ze didn’t have any desire to conquer anyone, but Mozin plowed right through without pause.

“Alright, while we’re on the subject, what do you know about what you can do? Or rather, what you’ll be able to do once you’ve mastered your abilities?”

“Well, I’m…*I will be*…a Shifter. I’ll be able to teleport to other worlds in the alignment. I’ll also be a law bender, able to draw the laws of physics from other universes into my own, to warp reality,” said Zo, zeir confidence growing as ze said it all aloud.

It had been a few weeks since ze’d first started showing the signs, but ze hadn’t actually *said* any of these things aloud yet. Childhood dreams that had long lain abandoned in Zo’s mind were reawakening. It was exhilarating.

And terrifying.

“Almost everything you just said is wrong for several reasons,” Mozin said. “But good enough. How are the two abilities related?”

The question caught Zo off guard.

“Uhh…you mean law bending and Shifting?” Ze had no idea what the old teng meant, though as ze thought about it, it made sense that they would be related. There was no such thing as a teng that could Shift but not law bend, or vice versa.

Mozin sighed into the long pause that had revealed Zo’s ignorance. “And this, *ti*, is where we shall begin. Once we get to actual channeling. Before we get to any of that, however, we need you to become intimately acquainted with some elementary physics.” As Mozin said this, ze stood up and walked over to one set of shelves.

Mozin began pulling down massive books with extremely daunting titles from the shelves. “I said *come*,” ze barked, glaring back at Zo.

The old coot hadn’t said it, though, and Zo was sure of it this time.

*This teng is losing it…or already lost it…probably decades ago.*

Still, Zo came, and Mozin began holding out the books to the side, clearly expecting Zo to take them. Zo obliged, but the growing stack of tomes quickly threatened to overwhelm zeir slender arms.

*I bet Mizn could carry these without batting an eye. One stack in each paw.*

Zo snapped back from the daydream as it dawned on zem that ze was probably going to have to get all these down the stairs somehow.

Among the tomes was *Advanced Theories of Gravitation*, and Zo felt zeir stomach bubbling once more.

The teng finally turned around to regard Zo over the tall stack of books.

“I want you to read the introductions and first chapters of each of these books. Don’t worry, you won’t be reading these cover to cover.” Zo sent a quick prayer of thanks to Naikila, the great watcher of the stars.

“But I expect you to intimately understand everything in these books as if you’d written them yourself.” Zo struggled to comprehend how that would be possible without at least reading them.

“Most important of all is this one,” ze gestured to the book on top of the pile—a smaller, leather-bound book simply entitled *The Laws That Bind Us*.

“This one I *do* want you to read cover to cover, and I want you to read it first, then do as I said for the rest. Once you intimately understand the intricate details of theoretical physics that allow for the discrepancies in the laws of physics in the various alignment universes and have a university level understanding of quantum mechanics, as well as an understanding of the arguments necessary to refute string theorists, I want you to go back and read this one again. It explains what laws of nature *unite* every universe. I cannot stress how important it is to remember what *unites* our worlds. Even if your law bending will rely on the discrepancies between them.

“Remember that what you do is *not* magic, despite what you’ve heard from ignorant fools and old stories. It’s completely rational, and if you intimately understand how it works, you’ll find quick—or at least quicker—success in your attempts at bending those laws of physics. I expect you to understand everything these books are trying to explain by next week.”

*You can lick my koola by next week if you think I’ll have time to read a single one of these by then.*

“I *will* have questions to ask you about them, and if you don’t answer them correctly, you’d *better* have an excellent excuse for your ignorance. You are my pupil now, and I will treat you as if you were my own child. I hate my children. The ones that are still alive, anyway. Now, that’s enough teaching for today. I’ve told you to leave once, and I won’t say it again.”

Zo was flabbergasted by this comment, as by zeir reckoning, the old teng hadn’t taught zem a damn thing yet, and ze certainly hadn’t asked Zo to leave. The white-scaled teng, however, was already pushing Zo to the door with surprising strength for zeir age.

“Wait, what are we doing next week? Will I be able to start channeling by then?” Zo asked over the tall stack of books as Mozin finally got zem out the door.

The old teng simply laughed in Zo’s face, a high rasping hiss, and slammed the door shut.

Zo glanced down the hallway, trying to ignore the teng still sprawled near the stairwell, and began to worry in earnest about how ze was going to get this great stack of tomes down those stairs.

At that moment, the door suddenly banged open once more behind zem, causing Zo to jump and almost drop the books.

“The elevator works, by the way, I just put the sign up to keep the crazies from coming up here. And do mind Erex on your way out,” said Mozin, nodding to the passed-out teng, “looks like ze’s enjoying zeir nap,” and ze slammed the door shut again.

Zo glanced at poor Erex, then back at Mozin’s door, and wondered what ‘crazies’ the old teng could have possibly been referring to.

Chapter

2

*The Laws That Bind Us*

0x414F:C:9 – 7:F– Alignment Standard Time

Zo let go of Oza, who had graciously given zem a ride into town on the back of zeir speeder. There was hardly enough space for the both of them, but as Zo’s speeder had broken down the day before outside Mozin’s apartment, Zo had no other options.

Luckily, Ixen had still been closing up the family shop when Zo called zem, and ze was able to tow Zo’s speeder back to the bazaar before giving zem a ride back home. The family had a small transport vehicle used for moving large parts and vehicles between the junkyard, the bazaar, and the occasional client who paid extra to have their vehicles towed.

Now, Zo was back at the shop and needed to see if ze could find a good deal on a new turbine. Well, a *newer* turbine.

First, Zo was going to see if Mizn had any leads. Mizn was a brawny teng who worked at a mech shop nearby in the bazaar. As Zo’s family specialized in installation and basic repair of Alignment tech and components, and Mizn’s family specialized in general vehicle repairs, the two families often worked closely together.

Zo also happened to be quite taken with Mizn, who was just two years younger than Zo’s sixteen years.

Trying to quell a flutter in zeir neck scales, Zo strolled over to Mizn’s shop, attempting to gracefully sway into the shack the way Mizn zemself seemed to do so effortlessly.

The effect was ruined when Zo accidentally tripped on a grav wrench and nearly faceplanted just as Mizn looked up from the counter.

“*Shit!* Who left that right in the entry way?” called Mizn to the other tengs in the shop.

“Uhh, wasn’t that you?” called Irit, one of Mizn’s siblings.

“Yeah,” said Hirun, another of Mizn’s siblings. “When you were taking apart that turbine so you could fit it through the front door ‘cause you were too stubborn to take it ‘round the back like we all said you should?”

Mizn pulled zeir scales close in shame, and flashed an embarrassed grin at Zo, who melted under that smile.

*Naikila’s mercy, why is ze so adorable?*

“It’s fine,” Zo said lamely.

“No, it’s not,” said Mizn, as ze left the counter and walked up to Zo, now standing only a couple feet away from zem. *How does ze sway like that?* “I know you work hard to keep your claws neat,” ze said, lifting Zo’s well-manicured paw, which made zeir heart racing faster, “Maybe I could buy you lunch later, my treat?”

Irit and Hirun, both several years older, chuckled and glanced discretely at each other. Mizn shot them each a dirty look.

Oblivious to the subtle exchange, however, Zo raced to come up with a response.

“Uhh, I can’t today. I mean I really want to, but, well, I mean I don’t *really* want to, but. Shit.” At this bumbling response, Zo finally noticed Mizn’s siblings, who had broken into outright laughter, and ze noticed that Mizn actually looked *crestfallen*.

Realizing what had just happened, and the critical mistake Zo had just made, ze desperately tried to regain control of the situation before it tumbled off a cliff.

“I really need to get a new turbine for my speeder! That’s actually why I came here today. Maybe you could help me find something? I’d love it, I mean it would be cool if you, ah, do you wanna join me?”

*Naikila smite me now.*

Mizn’s grin returned, and Zo felt zeir scales give an involuntary shiver.

*How is ze so tall? I’m older than zem!*

“Hmm, I don’t think I can actually leave the shop for that long.”

It was Zo’s turn to look crestfallen.

“But I do have a good lead for a new turbine. A great one in fact! You ride a Mazu A27, right?”

“Yeah,” said Zo, feeling bubbly that ze knew the make and model.

“That turbine I, *ahem*, took apart to get through the front door is actually from an old Itaki LE, should work just fine in your Mazu…once I reassemble it,” ze finished, with an embarrassed grin.

“Oh,” said Zo, not expecting zeir search to be over so quickly. “How much?”

“Well, for you–” Mizn began, but Hirun cut in.

“Why don’t you let me handle the sale, little Mizzy, something tells me you won’t be an impartial negotiator where this one’s involved,” ze said, tilting zeir head toward Zo.

Zo felt like ze must have compressed to half zeir usual volume with how closely ze was pulling zeir scales to zeir body.

Ze noted, however, that Mizn looked almost as embarrassed, and Zo’s heart fluttered again.

“My family will pay for it,” said Zo, snapping back to the present moment, “I was only curious. Just bill the shop for it, my *bara* knows you’ll give a fair price.”

Hirun nodded.

“Do you wanna help me reassemble it?” Mizn asked casually, as ze walked with that devilish sway over to the turbine that was disassembled at zeir work bench.

“Yeah,” said Zo breathlessly.

“You can bring your speeder over when we’re done, it’s at your shop right?”

“Yeah,” Zo said, equally breathlessly.

“Can you grab that grav wrench?” ze asked, pointing in the general direction of the wrench Zo had tripped over.

“Yeah,” Zo said, admiring Mizn’s strength as ze lifted the turbine’s heavy compressor onto the work station.

At this, Mizn looked up at Zo over zeir veil with a quizzical smile.

Zo realized ze was leering and quickly rushed to bring the wrench over.

*Naikila’s koola, and I’m supposed to be the mature one.*

Irit rolled zeir eyes, though neither Zo nor Mizn noticed the teng’s exasperation.

Zo walked over to stand by Mizn, whose pervasive cologne of dusty mech grease made Zo wish ze could stand a bit closer.

0x414F:C:9 – 7:F– Alignment Standard Time

**ADYN’S PIECE**

Chapter

3

*To Cross an Ocean*

“Four-THOUSAND combs?” Ixen hissed. “Who do you think you are to demand such an outrageous price? And a MONTH in advanced! *Bazdin!* When I made this trip as a hatchling with my grandbearer, ze paid four-HUNDRED combs for the BOTH of us!”

At this point, Oza stepped in, placing an onyx scaled paw in a calming gesture on zeir mate’s golden forearm. “We apologize,” said Oza, as Ixen began to hiss and splutter in indignation, but Oza gave Ixen a reproachful look. “But why is the price so steep? Surely you can’t expect many to pay a small fortune for simple passage across the sea, and in summer no less.”

The stubborn dockteng at the platform fluttered zeir neck scales in annoyance and turned from Ixen to Oza, who was still doing zeir best to keep zeir mate calm. “In case you haven’t noticed, zinc isn’t worth what it once was. You say your grandbearer paid four-hundreds combs for each of–” but ze was interrupted by Ixen’s outraged, “FOR BOTH OF US!” Oza glanced worriedly at zeir mate, who seemed ready to pounce at the dockteng.

“Fine, fine, four-hundred combs for the *both* of you. That was what, seventy years ago?”

Ixen glared silently over zeir veil at the dockteng in response. Clearly, zeir guess was not far off.

“Well, since Alloisis joined the Alignment, the price of zinc has been dropping steadily,” ze said slowly, as if explaining this to a child, “and with times as hard as they were to begin with…”

The pair didn’t need to hear the rest.

Zo stood at the docks with zeir parents, listening to the dockteng explain how the price of zinc had gone down and the planet’s economy was slowly crashing. The teng got some key facts wrong, but the general point of zeir rant was spot on.

Zo’s family knew the unfortunate consequence of Alloisis’ arrival all too well. Their planet, Ol’kir’alkhai, resided in the universe known as Olkira, and had little to offer the federation of worlds.

Coming from a universe with banal laws of physics, and home to a civilization relatively primitive by Alignment standards, Ol’kir’alkhai’s citizens had come to rely upon their planet’s meager contribution of undersea zinc deposits to generate any interest from the Principal Worlds.

As a Shifter-in-training, one of Zo’s odd lessons with Mozin had involved studying zeir planet’s history and position in the Alignment’s vast economic and political landscapes.

It wasn’t good.

With the addition of Alloisis to the Alignment not two decades past, the Principal Worlds were rushing to try to bring the new planet into their exclusive coalition. Zo wasn’t clear on the details of what this entailed exactly, but ze was sure there was more to it than the Principal Worlds simply agreeing to bring Alloisis into their fold.

Their goal was clear, however. Give the Alloisians the technology necessary for them to conquer and colonize their resident galaxy, so that they may, in return, supply the Alignment with a vast new source of rare metals.

This was possible, as Mozin had explained the day before, because the universe that Alloisis resided in was bound not only by stronger gravity, like the laws found in Gravitum B, but also had a more powerful strong-force. This allowed for stars to undergo higher levels of fusion than those in most universes and speed through their life cycles at an incredible rate. The result was a universe teeming with planets, and even stars, which were incredibly rich in several heavy metals.

Every Tengling knew some version of this story, as the economic effects were impossible to ignore, but few understood the gravity of the situation as well as Zo did. And it was for this reason, that Zo decided to interject.

“You’re right, of course,” ze said, the interruption drawing surprised looks from both zeir parents, as well as the dockteng, who all appeared to have forgotten ze was there.

“We’re sorry to bother you, friend,” and ze nodded curtly before turning and striding efficiently back to the car.

Ixen reached zem first.

“Zo’ti,” said Ixen. “Why did–”

“There’s no point arguing with zem,” Zo cut in. “Neither of you want to admit how bad things are. Mozin says–”

“I don’t care what Mozin says,” Ixen snapped. “I’m almost regretting hiring that teng to teach you. Of all the tutors on this planet, we got stuck with that sour old coot.”

“Ze’s not as bad as you say, *waka*,” said Zo, using the common word for watcher. “Ze just knows too much for zeir own good. It’s easy to be overwhelmed when you know as much as ze does.”

“Yes,” Ixen said, “and I’m sure it has nothing to do with the fact that ze was the cheapest tutor we could find on short notice.”

“Besides,” said Zo, pretending to ignore the comment, “ze *is* actually teaching me useful information. If I’m going to pass the test, I’ll have to know how this all fits together.”

Ixen glanced at Zo, zeir eyes narrowing in confusion. “And how are you planning on getting to the test, then? Are you forgetting the entire reason we drove down to this wasteland?”

Zo pondered the question in silence as ze gazed out over the shifting dunes of the Zaron.

There might be a way.

Chapter

4

*A Scale’s Flutter*

Zo sat cross-legged as ze felt the great red sun’s glare reflect off zeir polished scales. Sitting in front of a basking window in Mozin’s flat, Zo took in the sun’s warmth and attempted to clear zeir mind of all distractions. Feeling an itch, ze raised the scales on zeir lower back and scratched it with a clawed paw, before returning to the meditation.

Mozin sat across from zem, idly scrolling through some feed on zeir mobile, utterly bored. Ze hissed a chuckle at something on the small glowing screen, and Zo twitched at the noise, annoyed.

“Tell me what you feel,” said Mozin for the seventh time that day, without looking up from zeir mobile.

“I feel like I might fall asleep if I have to sit here much longer. How long is this supposed to take?”

“It will take as long as it takes,” ze said simply.

Zo glanced at the teng and wanted to slap the mobile from zeir hands. Fluttering zeir still itchy scales, ze returned to the impossible task of trying to clear zeir mind. Of trying to ‘feel the alignment.’

It was Zo’s first lesson after Mozin had told zem ze thought Zo might be ready to try consciously sensing the alignment. Zo had touched the alignment several times while sleeping, but never intentionally, and always fleetingly. Such touches were considered dangerous, and even if Zo wasn’t accepted into the university, ze had an obligation to learn to control this ability, lest ze wander into a Demonic world by mistake.

This subject had dominated Zo’s lessons for the last couple weeks. Everyone knew about Demons. There were too many children’s stories about what happened to those who strayed into Demonic realms to remain ignorant of them.

Demons, while extremely dangerous if encountered, were not so great a threat to a trained and well-intentioned Shifter, and Zo had learned that any encounters with them were extremely rare among the established Alignment worlds, usually dealt with without much fuss.

A channeler with malicious intent, however, was another story. Demons were always looking for those who might accept their control willingly.

But before Zo had to worry about Demons, ze had to first learn how to sense the alignment. It was different for everyone, the books said. For some, it manifested as sounds, for others as feelings, or tastes, or words, or motions. Different sentient species had different affinities for the sense, and as there were hundreds of species that each sensed their universes in different ways, instruction on how to sense the alignment was generally vague.

So as Zo meditated and tried to clear zeir mind, ze didn’t even really know what ze was looking for. Or hearing for… tasting for? Zo sighed again, scratching at the persistent itch in zeir scales.

Then ze froze.

“No way,” ze said.

“What was that?” asked Mozin, still sounding bored.

Zo ignored zem and focused on the sensation coming from zeir scales. Yes, there was a tingling there. An electricity. Zo felt zeir excitement begin to well up.

All tengs could sense electrical signals through zeir scales. It was an evolutionary adaptation that had formed in order to help them sense the *khansas*, the great armored beetles that roamed the sand oceans, whose iron-rich carapaces would become magnetically charged as they crawled deep under the oceans to their lairs near the planet’s mantle, only coming back up to the oceans to feed.

Neither sound, nor sight, it was simply another sense, another way tengs reacted to the world around them. But it was probably closest to sound.

The sensation wasn’t actually coming from zeir scales, Zo realized. Ze felt it in zeir mind as if remembering a feeling that had just been there. Like ze was hearing a song continuing to play in zeir head after it had ended, or closing zeir eyes after staring at a bright light and focusing on the after image.

It was an echo of sorts.

Zo focused on the sensation in zeir mind, which was quiet at first, but as ze centered on it, it got louder. But it was chaotic. Indecipherable. As if tens of thousands of different sized *khansas* were crawling in every direction, miles away, some weakly charged, some strongly charged. It was utterly impossible to sort through.

“I found it,” Zo said simply.

Ze heard Mozin sit up sharply.

“Already? Impossible.”

But ze was sure.

“I feel it in my scales. Like thousands of *khansas* skittering around me.” Zo tugged zeir scales close and released them quickly, the Tengling equivalent of a shiver.

Mozin laughed at this, and Zo turned to zem, eyes wide with confusion.

“Well, that’s a new one. Granted I’ve only met a couple other tengs with the ability, but I’ve read of quite a few and *that* is a new one. *Khansas.* Well shit, I expected this to take weeks. I don’t have the next lesson planned. I guess… well, why don’t you try continuing to meditate on those *khansas* and see if you can pick out a single one from the noise.”

Zo slouched, realizing just how daunting a task that was. How could somebody pick out a single sound from that chaos?

“The day’s lesson was almost done anyway, want to head out early? Itze told me to cook something special tonight, and I told zem I would.” Itze was Mozin’s equally age-bleached mate who still taught at the local university, bearer to four of their children and watcher to seven. A relatively small family by teng standards, and all had left the home ages ago.

Zo had met Itze on a couple occasions, as ze was leaving. Ze was handsome for zeir age, and quite kind. Zo couldn’t figure out what had drawn zem to Mozin.

“What if I can single out one of the worlds?” asked Zo as ze began making zeir way to the door.

Mozin stopped and turned to Zo. “You probably won’t be able to do that for a while… though if today is any guide, it might take less time than I thought. How about this? If you’re able to isolate a world from the alignment, I want you to see if you can push on it. Only very gently, mind you. Do *not* try to push too hard, and do *not* pull on it. No matter what. Just see if you can distinguish the difference.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” asked Zo.

“Not sure, it’s not like I can do it myself. But every channeler I’ve met or read about has described it as pushing and pulling. So that’s all I have to offer you. Anyway, see you around, Zo’ti.”

Zo had no idea what this was supposed to feel like. Ze’d heard of this concept several times while studying. Pushing and pulling were what allowed channelers to law bend and to Shift. The concept, from an abstract point of view, was simple enough to grasp.

If you isolated a world from the alignment and *pulled* on it, you could pull the laws of physics from that world into yours. By pulling on laws from different worlds, and combining them, you could accomplish incredible feats. This is what was known as law bending.

If you instead isolated a single world, then pushed on it lightly, you could begin to sense it. Push harder, and you could project yourself into that world as a kind of spectre, unable to physically interact with the world. The harder you pushed, the more solid you became, and if you could trick your mind into believing it was truly in the new world, and pushed hard enough, you could puncture the thin barrier that separated the worlds and push your body completely through into the new world.

At least, that’s what Zo had read in zeir text on the subject, which had been translated to *Xutili* over a century ago. The text was outdated, and a few worlds had entered the alignment since it was translated. One was Alloisis, of course. Another ze’d read about was ruled by scaleless rodent-like bipedal beings, and it caused some kind of scandal when it first joined, but it turned out to be of relatively little interest to the Alignment.

But as Zo stood in the elevator and closed zeir eyes, ze focused back in on that phantom tingling in zeir scales. That impossible swirling chaos of sensation. How could one separate a single thread from that lace, a single brush stroke from that masterpiece? Zo sighed, and began to probe at the ball of sensation, seeing if ze could make any sense of the vortex.

Chapter

5

*Within Reach*

Zo felt the low thrum of an entire universe vibrating through zeir scales. Ze didn’t know yet which universe this was. But it was there, amidst the chaos of the alignment.

Ze’d done it. And it had only taken a week. Though, that was largely due to luck.

Mozin was watching zem intently from thirty paces away, ready to bolt if things got dangerous.

Today was the day.

They’d driven out to an empty stretch on the beach so that Zo could practice zeir first bit of projection while awake.

Zo sat in zeir meditative pose, eyes closed, and examined the thread of an entire universe, felt it pulsing, and felt like ze somehow contained the entire vastness of it in zeir mind. Zo felt like ze could extinguish it in an instant if ze wished. Which was, of course, *pakk* shit. But it was a powerful feeling nonetheless.

Gently, Zo somehow grasped the world ze had isolated, and *pushed* on it.

It had all started early that morning.

Last night, Zo had dreamt ze was in a hot, moist cave system. The humidity had slicked zeir scales over uncomfortably, and Zo felt the moisture mix with the oils on zeir skin and produce an unpleasant smell.

Zo was a particularly clean teng, taking great pleasure in scrubbing zeir skin and scales and polishing the latter with high quality lacquer. Even when ze was out scavenging for parts, getting oil stains on zeir veil and loin cloth, Zo worked hard to keep zeir skin and scales clean. Some tengs saw the makeup as flashy, tacky, or a plea for attention, but Zo thought it made zem look good, and ze liked it.

Zo fluttered zeir neck scales, feeling uncomfortable, but cautiously sat down on the slick floor and began to meditate.

Yes, ze could feel it. Ze felt *two* worlds quite clearly, in fact.

One was a loud, close thrum, warm and familiar. An old friend. That was Olkira. Zo realized zeir universe was tugging at zem, like it wanted Zo to awaken and return to its embrace. Holding onto it was a natural reflex, and there was no reason for Zo to let go. It was likely the only thing keeping zeir projection alive, as the differing laws of physics of this world might tear Zo apart or melt zem or crush zem or any number of uncomfortable things. Then Zo would awake to a nasty shock.

The other world in zeir mind was more subtle, but clearly distinguishable from the chaos of the rest. It was the signature emanating from whatever world ze was on, or at least, whatever world ze was projecting into. Dreamwalking, it was called, the first step on the path to Shifting. Though, Mozin insisted it was often more useful than Shifting, and Zo could see the sense in that.

Zo could feel the rhythm, the dance of this world in zeir scales, and knew that even if ze let go of it, ze could find it again within the chaos.

Confident in that belief, Zo pushed the sound of this world back into the recesses of zeir mind, toward the chaos of the alignment, and awoke to find zemself laying in zeir warm cubby full of soft sand, the sound of zeir siblings’ quiet breathing as they slept nearby providing a calming presence.

Zo basked in the warm knowledge that ze was once again surrounded by the smooth warm sandstone of zeir family home, and by tengs ze loved and trusted. A deep excitement filled Zo with immense energy, however.

Sure that ze wouldn’t be able to sleep again, Zo quietly grabbed zeir watch from the shelf near the cubby, and made zeir way to the dresser in the middle of the room that ze shared with three other siblings.

Iko, Nali, and Zamik were Zo’s clutchmates, or *kumas,* as they were often called, born at the same time as ze was. Oza was their bearer, who bore their fertilized eggs for three months until they were ready to be lain, while Ixen was their watcher, who guarded the clutch for the three months it took for them to finally hatch. Both parents had been there when the four came into the world, of course, though Zo couldn’t remember that day very well. Just a blinding brightness and the pleasant sensation of zeir moist skin interacting with the dry air of Ol’kir’alkhai for the first time.

Although eight other siblings also shared Ixen as watcher and Oza as bearer, while the other ten had the reverse relation, that didn’t really matter in teng society. *Bara* and *waka* were just convenient ways of distinguishing one’s own parents. To ten of Zo’s twenty-one siblings, Ixen was *bara* and Oza was *waka*. That was simply the way of things.

Zo thought ze could imagine how it might feel to be a part of an asexual species, like the Pharphesians. At first thought, it seemed like it might be lonely, but they probably had their own forms of intimacy unrelated to mating, and could involve any number of people. Perhaps to them, Tengling families seemed lonely.

But trying to imagine being a part of a sexually dimorphic or trimorphic species like those scaleless rodent people ze’d read about stymied zem. Zo learned that they often mated with members of the same sex anyway, which made sense. But to only be able to produce offspring with a fraction of them? Bizarre.

Careful not to wake zeir clutchmates, Zo slowly slid open the top drawer of the dresser and pulled out a clean loin cloth and veil. Donning both quickly, ze crawled from the room out of the system of burrows where zeir family–Ixen, Oza, and twelve siblings–lived and stepped into the moons’ light, stretching and flexing zeir muscles in the brisk, dry air.

Four moons were out now, though Zo only knew the name of one of them. Astronomy never interested Zo, and with seventeen moons, Zo couldn’t be bothered to learn which was which. And with the discovery of zeir potential as a Shifter, the stars held even less interest to zem.

Who needed space when there was a great multitude of entire *universes* resting in the back of your mind?

Zo knew this was a bit of an ignorant view, as there were several planets in the alignment that resided in universes with complex intragalactic civilizations, and even a few intergalactic ones. Zo’s own galaxy almost certainly held other sentient species. How could it not? But with nothing of interest to the Alignment here, who would waste their time and resources to bother scouting out Ol’kir’alkhai’s resident galaxy? Olkira was simply one of the thousands of universes in the alignment with boring laws of physics, centered around a boring planet with a boring civilization of primitive, boring, bipedal creatures.

Standing on the roof of the sandstone structure that was zeir home, Zo could see the city in the distance, its bright lights obscuring all but the brightest stars above. Other sandstone homes filled the suburb to the left and right, as well as across the street. The road was empty save for an occasional speeder zipping who knew where.

“Kinda cold, don’t you think?”

Zo pulled zeir scales close in surprise, before turning to see Iko, one of zeir clutchmates, climbing out to join zem on the roofs. Ze relaxed zeir scales as Iko came up to sit beside zem and snuggled close. Zo wrapped zeir arm around zeir sibling and best friend. “Damn, was trying to be stealthy. Did I wake you up?” Zo asked.

“No”, Iko said with a yawn. “I always wake up at midnight and climb up on the roof like a psychopath.”

Zo glanced down at Iko, who grinned mischievously. Zo’s eyes opened wide, noticing Iko was without veil. “Woah! Where’s your veil? You’re out in public, you know?”

“You’re right, everyone’s staring at me!” Iko said as ze jokingly looked around as if unseen eyes were watching zem.

“Oza did always say you might have gotten slightly scrambled in your egg,” said Zo.

It was one thing to be out without a loincloth, but to be out without a veil?

Iko chuckled.

They were siblings and were naturally nude around each other more often than not. It was common practice for tengs to remove loincloth and veil when they got home, unless they were expecting company.

“So what *are* you doing up here?” asked Iko. “Any luck with your dreamwalking?

“Actually, yeah,” said Zo earnestly.

“Wait, really?” said Iko, pulling away from Zo, eyes truly wide.

“Yeah, I think I got my first world down. I don’t know much about it other than that it was dark and made my skin feel wet and smelly.” Iko frowned at that. Ze shared Zo’s appreciation of good hygiene.

“But I *was* able to fully untwine its Name from the sound of the other worlds. I could do it right now if I wanted.”

At this, Iko pulled back even further, making Zo giggle. “Don’t worry, I won’t. I’m just saying I *think* I could.”

“Woah… did you already tell Mozin?”

“I sent zem a text, though I don’t think ze’ll see it ‘til ze wakes up. I’m sure ze’ll want me to come down and see what we can do with it.”

There was a pause as Iko took this all in.

“I think it’s Alloisis,” Zo continued, happy to have someone to talk to about the experience. “Mozin said the worlds that joined the alignment more recently should be easier to find. And even though my readings say Alloisis is largely covered in jungle, their civilizations are supposedly mostly confined to underground cave systems just below the surface.

“And I figure, since I was underground when I projected there, naturally I awoke in the place closest environmentally to where I was on Ol’kir’alkhai. Which would probably be in one of the underground cave systems.”

Iko’s eyes widened again upon hearing this theory. “Alloisis… shit… Well just don’t go blowing up the house or anything… But shit, that’s awesome, *kuma*.” Iko gave zem a weak smile, but zeir eyes looked wistful, and Zo couldn’t help but feel guilty. They had both grown up reading stories of epic teng Shifters like Bini the Unifier or Kiku and zeir hundred Irudian acolytes.

When the family learned of Zo’s potential, there was great celebrating. Hell, the whole neighborhood wouldn’t stop throwing nightly feasts for zem until someone complained to the city watch. And then the members of the city watch that came to halt the festivities had asked Zo for zeir autograph. The whole thing was immensely embarrassing.

It was for this reason that Zo tried to keep a low profile about zeir powers. There were whispers, of course, of a teng from the suburbs who had the gift, but there were enough Zo’s in the city that ze didn’t really have to worry. It was a fairly common name.

Zo also didn’t want to get everyone’s hopes up in case ze didn’t get into the University of Pharphesis. So, ze continued zeir life regularly, helping support zeir family business of tech repair by scavenging parts from the junkyards and sniffing out good deals at the bazaar.

Only at night did Zo stay up reading the odd books Mozin had given zem to study.

Meanwhile, Zo’s other clutchmates had to deal with the knowledge that this incredible gift had passed them up. Their dreams were normal. As normal as any dreams could be, at least.

Iko seemed to take it the hardest, as ze’d always clung to the old stories even more intently than Zo had.

“You know,” said Zo. “If I become a master Shifter, I’ll be able to bring others with me to some of these worlds. We’ll be able to go on all sorts of adventures, as long as you’re willing to stay within my power’s range. I’m not sure what that is yet, but it should let us hang out comfortably without exploding or anything. And on other worlds like ours, you won’t even have to stay close! As long as we can find each other again, I can shift us back!”

Iko’s true smile returned, and ze snuggled in close to zeir sibling again.

“Thanks, *kuma*.”

Together they sat up on the roof and gazed out at the city as the great red sun began to rise in the east.

Chapter

6

*Daydreams*

Zo found zemself sitting on a lush growth of an odd blue fungus. A bizarre cacophony of hoots and squeals filled the air. When Zo looked up, ze felt an overwhelming sense of awe.

Zo had never *seen* so much color. There were plants, of course, on Ol’kir’alkhai. Some with beautiful flowers and bright colors. Wealthy tengs wore veils and loincloths dyed with extracts from those plants, and those that couldn’t afford such clothes often wore jewels of ruby and sapphire instead. But nothing Zo had ever seen could prepare zem for this.

It didn’t seem possible that this could be the same planet ze’d dreamt of that night. The slimy rocks and utter darkness had been replaced with iridescent flowers, pulsing fungi and other moving, swaying, wriggling things Zo had no name for. Zo struggled to make out the source of the yips and shrill chimes of the fauna above, but could see no creatures. They must be too well hidden, or too high up. Could this truly be the same place ze’d visited in zeir dreams?

Then the stink of zeir wet, oily skin filled zeir nostrils.

Yeah. This was the same place.

Zo looked around for other signs that this was Alloisis, as ze suspected, and noticed that there was a faint burning now coming from zeir chest. The air on Alloisis wasn’t very rich with oxygen. Only 9%. It was mostly nitrogen and carbon dioxide. Zo would have to take it slow here.

Cautiously, ze unfolded zeir legs and began to crawl close to the ground on all fours, looking for a break in the dense vegetation.

There it was. What Zo had taken for a great pillar of flora was actually a dense covering of moss and vines that was covering a large boulder of dark stone. Upon closer inspection, Zo quickly made out thin veins of silvery and coppery metals lacing the rock.

This was Alloisis, alright. Looking around, Zo marveled at it, the magnitude of the riches of this world coming into focus. Each of those large mounds of vegetation must contain some of that ore-rich stone.

And what of the cave systems underground? Zo made a mental note to turn up the brightness on zeir watch the next time ze was down there and see if the walls were as rich with ore as these surface rocks were.

Zo took stock as Mozin’s books had taught zem. Ze could feel the plants beneath zeir paws, and the humidity was clearly interacting with zeir skin. That meant Zo was here fairly strongly. Odd, as Zo didn’t feel like ze’d *pushed* particularly hard. Zo closed zeir eyes and focused on the rhythm in zeir scales that were the two universes: Olkira, and Alloisis. Gently, Zo released the pressure on Alloisis by the tiniest amount.

Immediately, the cacophony of exotic beasts hidden in the canopy above became muffled, as if heard through a thick layer of sandstone. The air became dry; the aching in zeir lungs and the stink of wet skin vanished.

Awesome.

Zo reached out to touch a plant, a bumpy red vine two inches thick, and could immediately tell it felt more rigid. That was odd. Shouldn’t it feel *less* solid since ze was less ‘there’?

Zo pushed hard on the vine, and realized ze couldn’t move it. Like it was made of iron. It made sense now. Since Zo’s projection was weaker, it could barely exert force upon the environment.

Ze picked out a small blue leaf from the vegetation, leaned close, and blew on it. Nothing. Ze reached out and tried to flick it with a single well-trimmed claw. Nothing, not even a sound when zeir claw made contact.

This was bizarre.

Zo, confident that there was no immediate danger, stood up onto zeir hind legs. Crawling was perfectly comfortable, and felt safer, but standing was proper, and Zo was no beast.

It was fascinating to see this world, which seemed completely untouched by civilization. Zo knew there was at least one sentient species on this planet, but much of the surface was uncharted, as aqueous acidic oceans separated the small land masses. This planet’s Name hadn’t been decrypted yet, so only Shifters could get here. Even for a master, however, trying to find it would be risky, with no guarantee of success.

Excited, Zo realized that if ze could Shift here, and bring the right tools along, ze could probably extract enough ore to pay for passage across the Zaron ocean.

But ze quickly realized there were two major flaws with that plan.

First, ze knew, was the fact that shifting to steal resources from another Alignment world was a major criminal offense. If ze was discovered by Alignment officials, ze shuddered to think what they would do with zem. Especially if ze was caught stealing from a world with the potential that Alloisis held. If Alloisis’ Name could be cracked, it would join the coalition of Principal Worlds for sure.

Secondly, Zo had no idea if zeir body could survive coming here in the flesh without maintaining a firm grasp on the laws from Olkira. Keeping this balance of consciousness between two universes was supposed to be difficult to do when Shifting, even though it was second nature when dreamwalking. And even a small mistake would likely be fatal.

Given that that intensity of the nuclear strong force was slightly different here, Zo wasn’t sure what would happen if ze let go of Olkira’s laws by mistake, but ze had a good guess.

There was only one way to find out. If Zo was right, ze’d have to find another safer world to practice Shifting to before trying to Shift to Alloisis.

Zo sat down and assumed a meditative pose. Emptying zeir mind, ze focused on the two worlds currently isolated from the chaos. Zo felt their rhythms and pulses sending phantom signals through zeir scales, and wanted to scratch them, but knew it would accomplish nothing.

Olkira was present, tugging back at Zo. Like it wanted to pull zem back where ze belonged. Zo pushed the world back gently, and immediately felt an odd kind of dissociation and fuzziness.

Not a good sign.

Resigned, Zo pushed on zeir world harder–

Ze awoke with a gasp, sitting cross-legged on the sandy dunes of the Zaron ocean. Mozin had predictably gotten bored and was surfing on zeir mobile. When ze saw Zo standing up looking around in wide eyed confusion, Mozin tucked zeir mobile into zeir tech sleeve and rushed up to zem.

“So, how was it? Did you see the other world?”  
Zo was surprised by Mozin’s excitement. But ze supposed even someone who’d studied Alignment history and shifting probably didn’t get the opportunity to tutor a new teng often. Zo hadn’t asked how many tengs ze’d tutored before.

“Yeah, it *was* Alloisis after all! By Naikila’s grace, Mozin, there was just so much *life* there.”

Mozin gazed dreamily out at the dunes. Seeing that look in zeir eyes stirred something in Zo, a recognition. Ze’d seen that look before. Suddenly, Zo realized where. In Iko’s eyes, when they were both younger, as they listened to their *waka* read them the old alignment stories from the family’s children’s books.

Zo realized that Mozin might have been like Iko at one point in zeir life, day dreaming about the alignment and law bending in zeir youth. Something must have drawn zem to study it, after all. Why had Zo never considered that before?

“So what happened? Get bored of it already? Did something attack you!?” Mozin seemed excited by the idea.

“No, I… I kind of tried to let go of Olkira and see how my body would react.”

Mozin winced. “I assume it was…unpleasant?”

“Actually, it didn’t really feel like anything. At first I let go just a little bit, and everything became kind of foggy.”

Zo heard Mozin mutter something that sounded like, “neural dispersion...”

Zo continued, “Then I tried to push it away completely and immediately woke up.”

Mozin nodded. “Yeah, your projection probably died instantly. If something causes you to completely dissociate or stops your brain from functioning, it’ll just spit your consciousness back out into your waking body. Keep this in mind; there can be odd effects on the mind if such a dissociation goes awry. I don’t have to remind you about Tinx…”

Tinx was a teng Shifter who was famous for recklessly jumping from world to world, stealing priceless artifacts and natural riches before jumping away.

Then one day, ze ended up dreamwalking into a Demon’s world by mistake. The Demon caught zem, but only partly, so zeir consciousness was stuck between two worlds. Eventually, ze was able to snap out of the Demon’s world, but it broke something in zeir mind, like part of zem had been left in the Demon’s world when ze lept out.

Ze had died in Volslyng, an Alignment asylum for the criminally insane, less than a year later.

“You don’t need to remind me. So, what’s next? Can I try law bending?”

Zo was eager to try bringing alternate laws of physics into zeir own world, which in Zo’s mind, was one of the more practical applications of zeir abilities.

“From where, *Alloisis*?” said Mozin, a look of horror growing in zeir eyes. “*Bazdin!* Has the sun cooked your brains? Didn’t you just say your projection instantly disintegrated when you let go of Olkira’s laws? What do you think will happen if you try to drag laws from Alloisis into our world? That nuggets of zinc and cadmium will start crystallizing in the sand before you? You’d probably blow everything within ten paces into the void! Hell, you might cause all that matter to go critical and nuke everything for miles. Wouldn’t that be a nice surprise for Mizn? And your family! What do you think they’d…”

Ze kept ranting, but at the mention of Mizn’s name, Zo’s mind began to wander.

The onyx-scaled teng who helped run the mech stand in the bazaar made Zo’s scales vibrate with nervousness every time ze saw zem. Zeir dark scales were rough and worn, zeir underclaws usually bore a caked layer of electric blue mech grease, both signs of years of hard labor and poor personal care.

But that didn’t bother Zo.

Despite the bulky teng’s strong arms and legs, ze had a soft, gentle voice, and an easy going demeanor. Zo could remember zeir eyes glinting over zeir veil as ze playfully teased Zo for putting so much work into staying clean despite working with machinery all day. And the way zeir well-defined hips swayed when ze walked across the shop to rummage behind the counter always made Zo’s mouth water.

Zo could be dense at times when it came to affairs of the loins, but even ze could tell Mizn reciprocated some attraction to Zo. A fact which made Zo feel like laying down and melting into the sand.

Instead, Zo’s scales fluttered as ze gazed dreamily toward the sandstone cliffs to the east, imagining walking down the beach with Mizn, veils and loincloths abandoned, and stumbling across a cozy secluded burrow in the red sandstone cliff face, following Mizn inside, and–

Mozin’s open pawed slap sent Zo reeling.

“*Are you even listening to me, fool?*” Mozin’s bleached scales were fully elevated and ze looked about ready to throttle Zo.

“What? Yes, sorry, yes! You’re right, you’re right.” Zo rubbed the side of zeir head, feeling ashamed, zeir scales tugged tightly against zeir body.

Mozin sighed. “Just… just don’t think of trying to channel yet, okay?” ze said, zeir scales relaxing back to a mollified position.

“For now, just work on your projections into Alloisis. Don’t try to pull their laws into ours and do *not* try to Shift there, understand? And if you see any Alloisians, or Naikila forbid, any Alignment officials, just tell them the truth, that you’re training to take your test in Olkira in two months’ time. If they ask who is sponsoring you, give them my name. I’m registered with the University of Pharphesis as a certified instructor.”

Zo nodded solemnly.

“Alright. You look exhausted. Let’s get back to the city. We should be able to make it back before dusk. I’ll buy us some dinner.” Zo could tell Mozin was feeling bad about swiping at zem, as ze never offered to treat Zo to, well, anything.

But Zo knew ze probably deserved the slap. What ze was trying to learn was extremely dangerous for an unpracticed channeler. Even experienced channelers took great care when handling dangerous laws.

They hopped onto their speeders, but as Zo mounted zeirs, ze noticed the entrance to a burrow in the sandstone cliff face not far from where they had been practicing.

Zo spent the long drive back daydreaming.

Chapter

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