0x414F:C:8 – C:E7 – Alignment Standard Time

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

Buildings in the city were mostly 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.

Nothing.

Zo was about to call the number the tutor had given Oza when the door opened with a loud buzz. Ze stepped into the dirty lobby, which held an empty desk ze figured may have once been a porter’s work station, 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, requiring 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 just hoped ze didn’t meet anyone on the way back down. The only commonly accepted places for nudity were home or the beach, and Zo clung to those norms. 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, standing back up on zeir hind legs. There was a blonde teng with horribly dirty scales who looked unconscious as ze lay in the hallway, veil askew.

Nervously, Zo approached zem, a strong smell of ether permeating the air. Zo held zeir breath and skirted past the teng, 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. On String Theory. 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 sitting 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 *within* said alignment.

In *Xutili* text, the two were easily distinguishable, as the government organization was a proper noun, *The Alignment*, while the 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 reasonable misunderstanding, however.

Though, maybe zeir face was just stuck like that.

“Well, 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–”

Mozin interrupted zem again. “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” 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 lecture. But perhaps those would come later.

“Well, as you said, these universes are aligning with each other, usually centered on a particular planet or star within that universe, unless the physics within that universe can’t form celestial objects, like in Gravitum A…”

At this, Zo paused, as Mozin closed zeir eyes and started leaning forward as if about to collapse on the table. Abruptly, ze snapped back up, eyes open.

*Was the teng falling asleep?*

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

“Like you,” Mozin said simply.

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

“Don’t be embarrassed, *ti*! This is a rare gift!”

Zo braced zemself, getting ready to hear those words.

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

“Think about what kind of awesome 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 seemed genuinely excited as ze spoke, and Zo was about to interject that ze didn’t have any desire to conquer anyone, but Mozin plowed right through with zeir interrogation.

“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 at will 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 affect reality in otherwise impossible ways,” said Zo, zeir confidence growing as ze said it all aloud.

It had been a few weeks since ze’d first shown the signs, but ze hadn’t actually *said* these things aloud yet. It was exhilarating.

And terrifying.

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

Zo stumbled at this.

“Uhm…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 which 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. Ze looked back at Zo and barked, “I said *come*!”

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

Zo was getting quite worried by this point.

Still, ze came, and Mozin began holding out the books to the side, presumably expecting Zo to take them. Zo obliged, but the growing stack of tomes quickly threatened to overwhelm zeir slender arms. Zo wondered how ze was expected to get these all down the stairs.

Among the books 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 might 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 tome 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 though 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 success in your attempts at bending those laws of physics with much greater facility. I expect you to understand everything these books are trying to explain by next week. 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. 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 opened 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 Erex, then back at Mozin’s door, and wondered what ‘crazies’ the old teng could have possibly been referring to.