Aeirn - 3

A very early draft introduction of a Child of Paradox tale.

pages ∙ words

It was an unforgiving wind that blew in off the coast. It raged and screamed, biting harshly at exposed flesh. Of course, the wind always complained at this time of year. It would only take a few quick strides, she knew, and she wouldn't be bothered by the wind, back within the sheltering stone of Aeirnholme. A few steps she would stubbornly refuse to take. Instead, like on many harsh afternoons before, she clung there on the cold stone balcony, reading every breath of air for signs of arrivals. And maybe something more...

There was something about today that strained her anticipation more than usual. Something that almost plucked at the very fiber of her being, incessantly catching her attention, like a glimpse out of the corner of her eye. But, as so often happens with such glimpses, when she turned her attention to it, it dissolved into insubstantiality. By now, she was practically driven to distraction trying to notice the plucking without paying attention to it.

Out of distracted tension, she thoughtlessly pulled on the ends of her fading hair with small, anxious movements. Her hair, once a blazing shade of crimson, was fading more every month. Now it was little more than a glinting pale‑copper. As she pulled on it she gathered the strands together and twisted them, absently, into a tight cord‑like braid, which bound her hair together for about a foot of length, and then released it into a loose sort of pony tail. Detached from her fidgety hands, her eyes scanned the vast, blue horizon piercingly.

Her treacherously expressive mouth plainly revealed her otherwise secret emotions. Her anxiety showed itself in little frowns and subtle partings as she nibbled on her lower lip. Her thoughts turned to her guardians. She hadn't seen either of them for nearly a year, living in near solitude on an island fortress so huge, she had not fully explored the whole place in the past four years. The lower city had been recently populated by the families of craftsmen, and merchants; those who had been willing to risk the ghosts of Aeirnholme. Now, they had become a whole community that catered almost solely to the small, strange household that occupied the fortress proper. Herself included, but she did not yet see that her small world was considered odd by any normal standards. Aside from the household she belonged to, and its supporting community, there were no other human inhabitants. The massive fortress itself was largely left to her wanderings alone. However, her expeditions had been reined in quite a bit lately, by her nurse. She had vanished for a whole week, exploring a secluded wing of the abandoned home of the Gods, without leaving any word. Her mind drifted over these musings, largely untluched by either them, or the elusive plucking she was trying to grasp. For an instant, the back of her neck crawled with an electric charge, causing her to twitch, but failed to break her reverie.

When the wind blew up at her again, she drew the sheet wrapped around her bare shoulders even tighter, and furrowed her eyebrows in concentration. Right away her sense of her own perceptions altered, the change was so slight as to be unnoticeable, but the effect on her state of consciousness was significant. She began to sense the wind as a pattern within an overall system, intricately linked to the subtle flow of natural forces. With this, her mind became sensitive to the subtle factors that would define how the wind could be manipulated. Her focus built up within her like a song, and she applied it to the pattern in hopes of deflecting the flow of the wind. Unable to gauge the effect she was having, she increased the tension to the point where she began to get a headache. It pulsed sharply, building up behind the peculiar sensation prickling the sensative skin between her faded eyebrows, forcing her to ease up. She knew instinctively that she had done everything correctly. But, for some reason, even simple tasks, like trying to 'push' the wind away, defied her abilities without her guardian mentors present. That bothered her a great deal, making her wonder what they would think, returning from their journey to find that she had actually regressed in her studies?

She swallowed dryly, and cast a furtive look over her shoulder, just barely managing to not ward herself against ill omen. A bad habit she had picked up watching the easily unsettled nurse her guardians had placed over her. *I mustn't do that, they'll disapprove for sure...* That thought spurring another, deeper concern, *what am I going to do if I've disappointed them? If I've failed them?* She folded her arms around each other, gripping her shoulders tightly, and tucked her chin into the nook her elbows provided. Strange, but now that there were more people on Aeirnholme she was having a more difficult time. Things used to be so carefree and idlewild. Now she had to keep looking over her shoulder, guarding her mind against theirs, and compromising herself in order to avoid raising their offense. Until people had come back to Aeirnholme, she'd never borne the brunt of hostility nor been treated like she was an object rather than a person. She suspected that other people were going to become her greatest trial in life. It was from people that she had begun to learn the most disturbing things about life. Again, a little charge passed through her that she failed to notice. In response to some mounting stress she alone seemed to sense, building like a palpable wave, she had become more and more reclusive. Oddly, the awareness which nagged at her, was an inconsistency. For some reason she was only capable of unintentional or subliminal uses of the abilities she had been tutored in. Again, she turned her will back to the insistent wind, now fervently trying to ignore the crawling charges nipping down her spine, and tried to tame it. In her mind she went over everything she had ever been taught, trying to see what she might be doing wrong. She was so distracted, that she didn't hear her nurse come up behind her until she spoke.

"'Come take us! Child, what are you doing out here with naught but sheet to clothe you?" Gasped the matronly woman, her sense of decency obviously offended.

"Khriesha!" squeaked Vaiel, stunned and furious at herself for allowing herself to be startled by this plump, middle aged woman who had not even an ounce of stealth built into her. Her neck itched with the remembered tingling. Whirling around, Vaiel was instantly overwhelmed by the turbulent flood of the woman's emotions, and her head reeled as she tried to respond, "By Theastus old woman, there's none here to see me. What should it matter that I ran in skin alone throughout the entire island?" she retorted, shocking herself as much as her nurse. The child had greatly over‑compensated for the combined physical and emotional assult of the nurse and her own irritation at suddenly being faced with reprimands for doing something she could not see as wrong. Struggling to regain her lost form, she ammended with slightly less hostility, and more sarcasm, "Gods only know that its usually hot enough for it!"

"For mercy, watch what you say child!" cried the exasperated woman, positive of the child's certain doom. Masterfully regaining the breath which had only just escaped, with an indignant gasp. No child of her's would dare hand her elders a retort like that. This affront was immediately added to a list of others, real or imagined. The only way she felt she could endure taking care of the child was to think of it as her duty to save her from inevitable damnation. Once again, she was of a mind to tell the two who were supposed to be responsible for the child, just what she thought of the way they were corrupting the child with their ridiculous notions and disrespectful ideas. She often debated over either complaining, or stridently refusing to admit, that at times this child was just too much for her. As far as Khreisha was concerned, Vaiel just simply did not seem to be able to understand the slightest bit of morals that any good child was expected to. There was no question in Khriesha's mind that the girl was good and decent minded, but she obviousle did not think the way a child was supposed to think. She felt she had to make the child see the consequences of her rebelliousness. "This is the Gods' home you're defiling! Now get you dressed, ere I take a rod to you!" she threatened, hoping to scare some sense into her.

Unfortunately for the poor woman, that was the wrong approach. Vaiel had already been made immune to the threat of physical punishment over long, hard hours of training in acrobatics, dancing, and especially self‑defense. Even without that, Vaiel was almost distracted beyond reason by her silent efforts to screen out the thoughts that washed over her like an onslaught. Doubly immune, she grappled with herself in a heroic effort to concentrate upon responding to what the older woman was saying rather than what she was thinking. Defying of the nurse's view of the confrontation, Vaiel responded to the accustaion of blasphemy rather than the threat.

"Defile?! By preferring to be as I was created and not smothering in layers of concealment? I'll not! I hate them, they bind me up so I can barely breathe." Vaiel cried in youthful defiance. Unremarkably, this had long been a point of contention between them, the elder Khriesha relentlessly trying to impose the concept of moral right or wrong over the child's more reliable instinct for the correct flow of nature. Vaiel 's unappreciated clarity of vision confused and alarmed the proprietary good sense that governed the traditional, religious minded Khriesha. A vision that revealed Khriesha's alarm and sense of affront to Vaiel, along with the righteous self‑importance which motivated her to dominate Vaiel herslef. But Vaiel could also see the befuddled sense of matronly love the woman had for her, and was at odds as to how to maintain her views, and sense of self, without increasing the strain between them. Ultimately, she always found herself playing Khriesha's own emotions against her. Though for each instance, the degree of conflict increased dramitically. She sought, and quickly found, a way to divert the impending course of their conflict, as she relied once again upon her failsafe cloak of defiance. "I'll throw myself off of here if you force me," the young girl declared indicating the precipitous height of her balcony.

"Now that would be an unkind way to thank our hospitality, wouldn't it?" mused a voice on the wind, with barely concealed humor.

Stunned again, yet uncaring considering the evidence of her own hearing, Vaiel wheeled around to peer out over the balcony's retaining wall, just as tall, robust man deftly hauled himself over it onto the balcony. The collision that resulted easily melted into a fierce hug and a muffled squeal of joy. "Oh, missed me did you?" the man laughed as he tousled the coppery hair. Over her head, he caught the look of relief and curiosity, with its characteristic mix of general disapproval, that Khriesha sent him, and answered it with a look that promised explanations and asked for patience. Khriesha merely nursed her offended sensabilities, and thoughts of how exasperating the man was to show up when and how he did.

As the torrent of happy squeals, and excited babblings tapered down to a steady contented murmuring, they made their way inside. For Vaiel, this happy distraction effortlessly obliterated the oppressive mood summoned by the clash of wills. As they crossed the threshold of the tall arched door that connected Vaiel's chambers with her private balcony, the wind subsided and gave up against the dark granite of Aeirnholme's walls. Vaiel did not even note the sighing departure of her headache. Inside, the light was dim, issuing from the cavernous fireplace, until the enchanted stones of the ceiling began to glow brightly in response to their presence. One of the amenities of the ancient magic the fortress once witnessed. In fact, much of Aeirnholme was magical, retaining the powerful enchantments placed by the Gods themselves during its construction. Much of the world's moonstone had been quarried and enchanted so that once in place within every ceiling in the fortress, they would eternally light its passages. These luminescent stones were powered by the world itself now, and would endure as long as the world did. The lights functioned autonomically, to compensate for the time of day, and required no direct regulation from the inhabitants other than a desire for the lights to be on or off to suit the needs of the inhabitants.

The doors, too, were magical, sealing permanently when closed, responding to the direction of the rooms' inhabitants. Still, in this household, they functioned more for privacy than for restraint. Aside from the semantic differences that divided the household, they all were strongly trusting of each other, and the doors rarely came between individuals. Such occasions usually being the skirmishes between young Vaiel and her nurse.

Without pausing in Vaiel's chambers, the man strode deliberately through one of those doors, and down the hall. Following in his wake, Vaiel and Khriesha marched out after him. A look af strained aggrivation gripped Khriesha's face as he lead them all out of their suite, into the fortress proper. Vaiel noticed pointedly that he had not changed a fraction of a degree since disappearing a year or more ago. Secretly, she concluded to herself that the man must not age; since her earliest memory, he had looked just as he did now: A tall, robust man with the physique of a warrior, and a wild mane of furious red hair that her own hair had once matched, a king's kind, strong eyes, that sparkled with the kind of humor that could glow even in the shadow of soul‑crushing disaster, with their mellowing laugh lines; a face that could simultaneously inspire confidence and trust, as well as hold the secrets of the Universe, like a dreadful promise.

And now, that face was shadowed by a hint of pain, like some personal hurt, or shade of self‑blame, as if he held himself responsible for some terrible disaster.

In a sense, maybe he had cause. But, she could not quite grasp what it could be.

It soon became appearant where he was headed. All of the way to the Ascendant's den, Khriesha practically writhed with a mixed desire to request the disciplining of her charge by Lutori himself, and the visceral urge to accuse him for Vaiel's corruption. But perhaps she could sense enough that he was troubled, for she managed to restrain herself until they had arrived and seated themselves on the wide circular couch, embedded in a sunken section enclosing the vast hearth‑brazier that was less for heat than it was for atmosphere.

Then, without preamble, she lead into him. "I don't suppose it'd occurred t'ye that leaving for a year might not have the best effect on your ward. But then I surely am not one t' be speakin' o' such matters, since you seem to know ever so much more about the proper upbringing of a girl‑child than I. After all, it'd never even occurred to me to give her combat training! I admit that I was an Idiot t' not see the importance of being able to kill and maim people at a ripe old age of eleven!" The old woman's face took on a terrifying hue, as her pent up frustrations were vented. Through an act of iron will, Lutori managed to keep a calm front through this flood. No doubt, errupting into laughter at this point would never be forgiven by the woman. But Khriesha was far from done, having at last put voice to her griefs: "Needless to say, it is obvious why I can't comprehend the greater reason by which this same tender child's incessant, wanderings and nude rovings make sense!" she despaired, gesticulating wildly at Vaiel, still with naught but a light sheet draped artfully on her young frame, to conceal her.

"Clearly she has been trained by an expert moralist whose astonishingly inspired vision a doddering idiot like myself couldn't hope to comprehend! But all I have to say in the matter is this: Since this child's upbringing makes sense to everyone but me, why, by Theastus, am I driving myself to distraction with this child's care?!?" she fell off abruptly, as though her mouth had outrun her mental processes completely.

When Lutori could not recover fast enough to respond, she started again, less vehemently. "This child makes no sense to me. What is it you want me to do with her? I'm tired of threatening her to get her to obey me. And I can't bear for her to threaten to kill herself one more time, in order to have her own way." As she listened to her nurse, Vaiel realized with a flash why Khriesha could not influence her the way her mentors could.

Unfortunately, she was not able to act on what she had realized as Lutori took Khriesha aside and asked Vaiel to allow them to speak in private. Politely, she excused herself from the room and closed the door. She did not seek to listen in, as she knew instinctively what would be said, instead, she slipped away down the corridor to where their presences would be less intrusive to her senses.

When, some time later, Lutori came out of the study, he quickly found Vaiel curled up with her knees hugged up to her chest, sitting in a window seat at the end of a hall that looked out over the low stone buildings of the city, huddling at the foot of the fortress. He gave her a considered glance, as she sat there staring distantly out the window not giving him any indication of acknowledgement. *No child should look so troubled as this*, he thought silently to himself, behind deep shields. *How can I possibly hope to avoid making some terribly tragic mistake? She looks so fragile, yet she constantly amazes me with the strength with which she handles her adversity. I wonder, is she so strong because of her gifts, or is she only able to survive them because she is so strong?* He reflected back shortly to his discussion with Khriesha, as he sat down opposite her in the window.

Silently, she turned her head toward him, and gave him one of her uncanny looks that managed to convey what she wanted to say beyond words. He smiled wryly, giving her a considered glance, thinking *she has no curiosity what‑so‑ever about what Khriesha's conversation with me was about. But she burns to know what she did wrong, aches to know why she feels guilty for being herself. She knows why the problem exists, but can't for the life of her, figure out how she could resolve the problem on her own.*

He reached out and lifted her chin, saying "You haven't done anything wrong, wild‑one. You must accept that you cannot always be able to heal the hurt on your own. Some problems require that everyone see the truth, understand, and choose to heal the wound together ere the healing begins."

She furrowed her brows, and her gaze became a little distant as she accepted this. When she focused back on him, her look was less turbulent. Seeing this, he smiled and ruffled her hair, managing to eke a dazzling smile and a contented growl out of her, as she pounced on him. Laughing, he scooped her up, rising from the seat, and carried her in his arms down the hall.

"If there's really nothing I can do about it, is it just going to go on like this forever?" she asked suddenly. "I can't imagine that there is absolutely nothing that can be done," she stated, looking up at him earnestly.

He gave it a little consideration, before answering. "There always is something that can be done... but the cost of that action can be severely difficult to weigh in advance. Short of outright interference, there is no way to say if the possible solution might not well be as bad as the problem," he ruminated aloud, wondering if she could understand the answer, and feeling a strange sense of loss for that she might.

From her reaction, she understood more clearly than he'd considered, as she was completely satisfied by that answer and did not seek to question him further on the subject. Reflecting on this, he felt a dual impulse to try and weed out the cause for that strange feeling of loss he'd felt, and a desire to ponder the train of thought by which she had come to ask and accept what they'd exchanged. But soon they came out into the vaulting entry to their suite. The fortress was entirely too large for them to begin to inhabit, so they maintained their household in one of the vast suites, with their host of apartments adjoining a private kitchen, sitting room, and common rooms. This suite was situated on two floors, with balconies overlooking the common rooms, and the entry as well as overlooking the cliffs of Aeirnholme, upon which this wing was situated, on the far side of the fortress from the lower city.

Setting the girl down, Lutori felt a tiny sensation of homecoming. He smiled at the way Vaiel acknowledged his feeling, and they made their way into the living room, where a small fire was on the cozy hearth, tended by one of the servants that lived with them in the suite. Giving Vaiel a meaningful look, Lutori suggested "Perhaps you should run to your rooms and put on something more appropriate before settling down to talk, hmm?" He smiled, as thoughts of the earlier conflict flashed across her face, saw her consider resisting. Then her face resolved into something between acceptance, and determined curiosity. She nodded courteously, excusing herself from his presence, and winked mischievously, as she sprung upwards, catching the lower edge of the balcony, and slipped over it. At the top, she saluted Lutori's astonished look, as he stepped out and looked back up at her, and flashed out of sight down the adjoining hall.

Shaking his head, despite his smile, Lutori moved over to the hearth and slid down into a cushioned leather couch. Silently, a servant slid up to his side, bearing a drink on a tray. Lutori accepted it with a grateful look at the servant, who smiled and winked before dismissing himself. Glancing out through the tall windows to either side of the hearth, he watched the afternoon clouds writhing over the turbulent sea, thinking *some of my fondest memories of this place are in times of harsh or turbulent weather. You'd almost think that this island weren't right on the equator...center of the world. Restless skies, and restless seas. I can't think of a place more suited to Vaiel's temperament... I wonder what made her rein her temper just now? I could have sworn she seemed ready to argue, but something swayed her decision. what did she think of?*

A short while later, as he finished his drink, Vaiel reentered the room, with poise and decorum, dressed in her Corindish *rotle*, a loose tunic‑dress, with its billowing, lateral pleated sleeves and folded bodice belted by a wide, undecorated belt of smooth, silver overlapping plates. The rotle hung down from under the belt to the knees in front and back, and was slit up both sides. She was wearing loose leather trousers that were bound tightly from the knees down into her boots, and her hair was worn loose, in a fierce copper mane. Her eyes danced with remembered mischief, though her face was exquisitely composed, and Lutori was suddenly struck by how pleasant and promising her delicately strong features were. He savored his first glimpse of the beauty she would someday possess, and marveled in the knowledge that it truly didn't influence her, that she was immune to the seduction of such values. *She has no idea that there is a difference between beauty and deformity! She can't comprehend aesthetics, or else her idea of aesthetics is far superior than that which is more commonly held... How does she view the world? Can she possibly keep that view?*

As she approached him, she noticed that he was thinking about her, and yet she did not find herself assaulted by those thoughts. She suddenly, deeply appreciated that she didn't have to endure the struggle between word and thought when she was with her touters. She slipped into the couch directly opposite his in front of the hearth. She sat there watching him watch her, with a straight back, knees and feet together with her hands resting palms together between her knees, and an intent look on her face.

Lutori broke from his reverie, and asked her to make herself more comfortable. She smiled her gratitude, and leaned to the side against the armrest, and tucked her feet under her on the couch, in a more lounging pose. Then he asked her to tell him what she'd been up to during his absence.

She thought about the things she really wanted to say for a moment, before deciding to be more abstract. "Well, after you and Acivda left, I began to spend my free time exploring, and discovered some splendid chambers, and wings. One of the best was in the south fortress, a wing so large, and empty for so long, even the lights didn't remember what a person was! I had a devil of a time convincing them to wake. It took me a week to fully explore it! I was so excited about it I utterly forgot to tell anyone. As you can imagine, everyone was very cross with me after that, and that ended that for a while...

"I worked as hard as I could on my studies, but it's so hard when you're not here... I just can't seem to quite do anything right," she slipped a sheltered glance at him while she said this, hoping he would realize that there was more to what she was saying, while dreading that he might. "So instead I've concentrated on my physical training, since nothing goes wrong when I'm alone," she explained, as Lutori remembered her ascent up the balcony. She did have some news she could enjoy sharing with him, "I've even made some friends, sort of. Eami, one of the servants brought up her children for my seventh‑closing, and I gave them so many presents, and we camped out in the fortress (this was before I was restricted), and told mysteries and adventures! Since then we've met several times. The last time they offered to take me to meet their friends. And I am so much hoping I can go, but Khriesha said I had to wait for your approval first..."

Lutori laughed, as she turned those eyes, green now in her excitement, upon him with that imploring look of childhood exuberance and deep hope, he had once feared she might never find reason to wear. "Yes. Yes, I think that's splendid. We shall make plans and arrange it at their convenience," he said, as she purely beamed with pleasure. She then went on to detail the more mundane occurences of the past year, occasionally digressing to fill him in on a few more relevant facts, until it was time to stop for dinner.

She reflected uneasily on the unspoken doubts she was sheltering, as she sat down at the table. Lutori still had not given any indication that he had picked up on what she had been hinting at, but she knew that that didn't mean that he hadn't. She did know that she couldn't broach the subject until he did, and even a direct question might not lead to her saying it, if there was any possible way to deflect it. It wasn't fear of the appearant failure on her part, or the disapproval or even disgust at her failure on the part of any other. Her greatest dread was that whatever was happening to her was beyond her understanding, but her suspicions inclined her to feel that the true explanation revealed a type of malice or ill will that was entirely unnatural. It was that silent fear, that restrained her from giving it any validity, even by voicing the possibility.

Dinner was well under way, though between her conversation with Lutori, comments from Khriesha about the improvement her state of dress made, and her own silent demons, Vaiel was almost completely distracted from the fact that it had begun. She barely even tasted the food she ate, as her mind began to wander off into the distance. She sat there, staring off into the middle ground away from the others seated at the table. She began to get the impression of being surrounded by corridors of stone, nowhere near as old as those of Aeirnholme, yet strangely more weathered and wary. Lutori began to notice her detachment as her responses to his questions became distracted and vague, and as he watched the way she picked at her food.

As he watched her, Vaiel lost all awareness of her surroundings, as she began to feel the comfort that a fire gives when the stone of a castle is chill with the bitterness of winter, and she almost thought she could smell snow. Through a strange sleep‑like paralysis, she tried to turn and see her surroundings. To see a window, thick with frost, behind which snow furled like spirits of the dead. As she tried ot grasp what she was seeing, her reverie was shattered, and the pieces of her real surroundings splintered into place. She suddenly found herself lying on the floor of the dining hall with a concerned Lutori sweeping out of his chair to her side, and a panicked Khriesha gasping and gawking, frozen to her seat. Dinner, apparently, was over.

Lutori sat on the edge of her bed, fingers lightly cupping her face and temples, looking deep into her eyes while asking her a series of questions. Some of the questions seemed redundantly academic while others were rather esoteric and occasionally beyond her capacity to answer. He gradually settled into asking questions about what she experienced when she passed out.

"But I didn't pass out!" she exclaimed exasperatedly for the fifth time, "I was seeing another place. I was in a castle, and I think it was winter, because the stones were cold and I could feel a fire nearby."

Lutori's gaze expanded to take in her whole face. "Could you see any surroundings? What time of day was it?"

Her nose wrinkled up as she tried to picture the scene again, "No, not very clearly, I remember the impression that the stone of the castle was very weathered, as if subject to harsh extreems of weather...it must have been some time during the day, because the light came from the outside, and it was very dim so I couldn't see much inside. I didn't think of trying to see anything better, because I felt like I knew what the room looked like already. The only thing that seemed worth looking at was the snow falling outside the windows." She looked at him trying to see what this meant to him.

She hugged the comforter to her chest, leaning back into the pillows propped up against the head board, as he looked out the window. "I don't suppose you can remember what happened just before you passed... before this happened, do you?" he asked reflectively.

"Well, I was sitting at the table with you and Khriesha, and she was talking about my clothes or something, and I didn't want to listen, so I started thinking about just before you arrived. You were asking me some questions, but they were easy enough to answer without losing track of my thoughts. As I thought, I began to get these impressions, and you and Khriesha just slipped away..." she paused, "It happened so..."

"Subtly?" he offered.

"Exactly! I can't figure out what caused it. Is there something wrong with me?" she suddenly blurted, giving way to the worry his carefully guarded, but concerned manner caused in her.

He gave her an appraising look, before answering, "Not that I can tell, and if I can't name it, I can't imagine what might have caused it." He ruffled her hair, and gave her a reasurring smile. However, he couldn't help but notice that that didn't satisfy all of her fears. "Here, you're probably just tapping into something perfectly natural on accident. That's why we ask you to put so much into your studies. You have to learn to control your abilities, or else they might learn how to control you."

In her mind all of her recent doubts surfaced, as she realized the true implications of this statement, as they related to them and her.

He received a great shock to see the effect that statement had on her: Her eyes went wide, and the slumbering fears that had been haunting her face suddenly awoke into a wild frenzy, as her thoughts exploded against his shields, too violent to be contained in her head. As he reeled, his eyes locked onto hers for an instant where he saw a deep writhing terror he had inadvertantly awoken. Immediately, though, she quelled the torrent, burying it so quickly and so completely that, for a moment, he doubted that she'd had any reaction at all.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he asked desperately.

"I... I don't know. Please, I wish you knew, but I just can't tell you... I wouldn't know the words." she deflected. *I can't! If I do something terrible is going to happen. I know it!* She looked at him, for a moment a shadow of what he'd just seen crept back into her expression, as she fought without words or thought to express her conviction to him without invoking her dread.

"I don't know what it is, you have to tell me," her look told him how likely that would occur. "I'll help you if I can, but you will have to give me something to work with." Concern filled his voice.

The look she was giving him changed to a more conventional emotion, as she said in a small voice, "Why? Why me? Why are these things happening to me, and why are you and Acivda teaching me these things...? Would these things be happening to me if you weren't involved with me, if I weren't so special like you tell me?" Her hands went to her face, "Can't you see...? Haven't you noticed anything? If I help you, it might...it..." her voice cracked, and she couldn't make herself go on.

Suddenly Lutori realized what she was trying to communicate. Realized how all of her vague comments hinted at there being something wrong. Her problems with her studies, her problems with people who didn't understand her, her isolation, how distracted she'd been. Because of her intelligence and maturity, he'd allowed himself to forget that she was still a child. And now something had made her a very frightened child. Something a child shouldn't have cause to be aware of enough to be frightened of it. Whatever she was afraid of, she felt that if she so much as admitted aloud that that it might exist, she would give it the power she feared to affect her.

"Maybe I have noticed something, but whatever it is, I cannot say. I will, however, be here for you. You may doubt why things occur, and feel that fate is cruel, but you will someday be more than special if you preservere, and take advantage of the obligations that life makes of you. You will someday understand it if anyone will," he said, to acknowledge her fears, and comfort her child's resentment at being manipulated by life.

She looked at him, trying to accept the wisdom he offered, trying to lay to rest the demons she had embraced that day. "Now, it's time for you to go to bed, young lady. Keep your chin up and sleep well, for tomarrow morning we get back to your training. From what you've told me, you have some catching up to do." She smiled, and let him tuck her in, kissed him good‑night, and watched him leave.

Around her, the room glowed brightly in the soft light emanating from the stones of the ceiling. She glanced past the foot of the bed, and out through the glass doors to the balcony. With a grin, she slipped from the immense bed across to those doors, pushing by them, and out onto the balcony. Again, she felt that strange plucking, striking a resonant chord within her. She closed her eyes and felt for the source, coming so temptingly close that her head swam. By whim, she summoned a gentle wind to her, and she couldn't resist the laughter that cascaded from her out into the night.

She had been doing it right.