19980810-1204 \ BOOKS OF AEIRN \ RESTORED

Aeirn. A world torn by paradox. It hovers very close to the threshold of the Absolute. The greatest mysteries of existence lie raw and bare to the senses. In more ways than need be reckoned, it is a world literally shaped by the will of its inhabitants. A world where power of the most personal and accessible nature is recognized and accepted as real. A world where few possibilities are not practiced and fewer still remain untried.

Aeirn I: Ascendant Immortal

A world whose gods are dead, but which is not free of their old influence, Aeirn has been scarred by the ascent of new wielders of power. Dually scarred by the rise of magic and rarer technology. On this scene appears a child of paradoxical origin or nature whose coming was foreseen as was its destiny. What was not foreseen was that it would have a twin... Tainted by a blind sighted bid for power, motivated by the knowledge that this child would thwart his bid, a Powerful religious and political figure acts to destroy Vaiel at the outset. And at every turn possible... Vaiel and Vaielien, caught up in this intrigue, learn much about themselves and their destiny. More and more, each comes to question and resist what to them is only machination, in hopes of salvaging their own integrity.

Vaiel, Vaielien, Lutori, Acivda, the Hierarch, and the Shadowyn

Aeirn II: Shard Heir

Having achieved a state of grace, the wholeness of self so difficult to such a paradoxical entity, an unexpected problem comes to the fore. Due to the extreme circumstances of their upbringing as Vaiel and Vaielien, a formidable urge to pursue a life untainted and unmolested by the schemes of others, the wholeness is once more fractured. The incarnation of this desire manifests itself in a part of the world profoundly unlikely to impose a great and all-powerful destiny upon her, as the abandoned child, Ashley. For many long years, this assumption proved accurate. Then something snagged the attention of withered shreds of a malignant soul. Drawn to the seeming helplessness of the shard of Vael that called herself Ashley, Khreastus converges.

Ashley, Khraig, Khreastus, and Vael

Aeirn III: Lone Absolution

Orphaned, and plagued by nightmarish memories of having been sold into slavery to some dark magus, Aerial is confronted with a choice that compels her to seek out her unknown kin, her lost brother, and... something else. Somewhere within her burns a nameless desire. A purpose, the likes of which she has no conception of how to pursue. Aided by the older, and much displaced mate of Ashley, she leaves behind the simple life in which she had sought refuge from her horrifying childhood. Following the pull of her purpose, she is lead across the wilds of Aeirn towards the embrace of death, and the destiny which neither her mother, nor any other aspect of Vael, had yet embraced.

Aerial, Khraig, Seand, Harbain, and...

Aeirn IV: Shattered Mist

Still on her quest, Aerial enlists the aid of a consummate thief and bounty hunter, to locate the one being she believes is capable of locating her mother for her. They find Vaiel in the East, studying the arts of assassination under her former touter. Drawn into this venture, Vaiel learns of the withdrawal of her counterpart, the continued ascent of Initiates, and the repercussions this is beginning to have on life. Once again, she begins to question what is to come. When the confrontation with Khreastus’ shattered soul comes, they are all suddenly forced to realize the responsibilities their destinies demand of them.

Vaiel, Aerial, Chae, (and Khreastus & Ashley...?)

[prelude notes]

Beginning with the eve of the birth of the new initiate, as the opposing forces gather to influence the outcome of the event. Some to preserve, others, to disrupt the new turn of the tide.

[opening scenes]

The royal house of the North Isles Corind, and the anticipation of the birth of the favored son's first child. Hints of the church's decree revealed in harsh anticipation of the entire court. A glimpse of the sire and dam of the awaited child.

The arrival at the castle of the Hierarch, ostensibly for the observation of traditional rites for the midwinter's night. In actuality, his presence is to ensure that the royal house obeys the decree of the church. A decree which could mean the child's death...

The quieter arrival of two silently powerful guardians against the capriciousness of fate, and the malice of men.

North Isles, Corind: Morning

The eve of Myrenight (1299/1300), the winter solstice. The commemoration of the death of an old year and the birth of the new, is held on this, the longest night of the year. Myrenight is a grim and frightening event in a land too familiar with the faces of paradox. It is met with almost fierce celebration, by a people bred on the memory of a mid‑winter's night on which the world almost met its end in the wake of an awakening and absolute paradox. A celebration which is ultimately dominated by the presence of the Church of Corind, and its self‑appointed Hierarch, as a testimony of its resurgence. However, the rest of the world had long ago witnessed the coming of various formidable magical arts. The abuse of magic, in all-out war, contributed to the most significant scarring of the world, resulting in a tear in the fabric of this reality. The Rift is manifest and bound to Aeirn, as potentially dangerous as an anti‑matter universe should it ever become unbound. Due to the unique placing of the sun in the constellation, as the closest star in the constellation, even the inhabitants of its worlds are able to see the whole group as a day‑time constellation at the apex of a revolution, and a night‑time constellation (without Archeus) at the other extreme of the year. The constellation has only been evident for the past two‑thousand years or so, close to the time which in legend, the god Theastus ascended beyond into the universe to protect Aeirn. Believing it to be the physical manifestation of this act, the constellation was named Theastus, the Guardian, by mortal‑kind.

On the eve of this winter's solstice, unexpected twins are born to Aloe and Jheric just barely nine months after their wedding. A Daughter, Vaiel, and a son Vaielien, in that order. Unfortunately, this event is witnessed by the Hierarch of the Caerinate, who is visiting to deliver the papal decree that no female child shall be allowed to obtain the title of firstborn and heir in Corindish society, lest the entire family be stripped of all rank and punished by the Church. The Hierarch demands that, as a part of the royal family, the House of Jheric Tranellyan Corind, comply with the dictates of the Church and expose the infant Vaiel to the winter night, to set an example to the people of Corind. Powerless against the Church, Aloe complies, while secretly arranging for her mid‑wife to deliver the babe into compassionate hands. Originally disturbed by the multiple birth, Lutori and Acivda see this to mean that Vaiel is the child chosen to become the first Initiate, as she is accidentally delivered into their hands by the woeful mid‑wife. Unknown to all, the Hierarch has placed a geas upon Vaiel and her brother to inhibit the potential power they possess from manifesting. Thus, do they grow up entirely unaware of their true nature.

Daelwyn, Seat of the Royal House of North Isles Corind. Lutori and Acivda arrive inconspicuously by ship at the harbor. They assume the roles of travelers, find a moderately reputable inn, chosen more for its proximity to the castle than any other qualities, await news or omens, and reflect on the events which brought them both there. The Hierarch also arrives expecting the hospitality of the Royal House of Tholmiand L'lyrn Corind, for the duration of the celebrations. The House itself is in somewhat of a stir as the wife of the king's favorite son goes into labor with their first child, during which she and her mate reminisce about the events leading up to this glorious and terrible event, as they dread too the edict of the Church regarding the birth of heirs...

The king himself spends some time in anticipation of a grandchild, reflecting on the doubts and fears that nearly threatened to prevent his son's marriage, gives the Hierarch an audience in which the resurgence of the Church is discussed, regarding the recent disposition of the High King, and the many harsh edicts being imposed, though the Hierarch effortlessly defends and justifies each action and dissuades the king's brooding fears. The Hierarch pays a visit to the expectant mother and contemplates the potential outcome of the child's birth and his own fears regarding the indications regarding this particular child. The visit brings neither of the impending parents any comfort, but much distress. The labor begins to go into complications and the physicians dismiss all but those deemed absolutely necessary.

Preparations for the evening celebrations fill both castle and city with an uncommon amount of hectic activity, and benevolent chaos. Amongst themselves, Lutori and Acivda discuss the difficulty of approaching the predicted child of omen within such close proximity to the Hierarch, being wary of initiation a confrontation at such a delicate time. Unsure of the true power of the Hierarch, they shy away from attempting to approach too close, if that would even be sanely possible. For the two of them, and the father to be, the night becomes a long and tense vigil. Before beginning the ritual celebrations, the Hierarch takes pains to remind the king of the church's most adamant edict and pointedly illustrates how important it is that the royal house be seen to be obeying the higher authority of the church. The stage set, when the child is born, the worst holds fast, and the Hierarch leans a silent pressure on them all, forcing the issue... and all are equally stunned at the second child's arrival, though it clinches the fate of the first. following a heated confrontation, and elsewhere, a moment of immortal panic, the edict is formally obeyed, though discretely rebelled against. The girl, the firstborn, is given into a nurse’s care, to be delivered from its decreed fate into the hands of fate... in this case, literally by accident, delivered into the hands of Lutori and Acivda. Awed by the immense and formless resolution of fate, they take the act as omen and decree, and disappear into the night, to escort the child to its harsh and demanding future...

Things to be revealed through conversations, hinted at through reflections and confrontations. Over the centuries Acivda, the Lore Bringer, and Lutori, the Rift Warder, became as Gods in the way they guided and watched the races of Aeirn. However, they were not the only ones to find immortality and eventually Ascendance in the magic arts. Far in the East, a cold Mage of Necromancy, Rynhark (Death Bringer, as he is often referred to) appeared and came into godlike power and reveled in the secrets of Death. He was soon followed by a young, talented Demonologist and Warlock, Khiertok, the Soul Stealer, who was the nucleus of the Deamon‑an in Edau. Though, none know the evil god whom he himself had served. Further implications of the awakening of alien gods' interests are given grave consideration. It is believed that such a malign god could not have been of Aeirn. They also reflect on the chaos caused back when Khiertok, the Soul Stealer, rose out of Edau‑Terinth to acquire an unholy following, from which he created the Cairntyrin cult. This cult became his unholy worshippers. The counterpoint argument involves some of these sentiments and digressions, which reveal some of the history. Not all users of magic were quite as powerful or as corrupt as those, other schools of magic that had sprung up over the course of the years included the Myrecyrn, which formed for the purpose of opposing the Cairntyrin cult in its advance. The Lutori’an, which broke from the Na‑Acivda as the growth of rift magic began to mature on its own. The Ny‑Mira formed for its own reasons, oblivious to the attempt by The Necralin to conquer Edau. The most benign, and technically the first to do so, the Aeirnthanes broke from the way of Acivda to begin their own faith long before any other. The Necralin, who broke from the Na‑Acivda in conjunction with the beginning of the Alin ‑ Corind War, did so to perfect their distorted uses of Acivda's lore. This was where Rynhark arose from. Another splinter group, the Myrescryers, broke from the Aeirnthanes after the Rift opened, paving a way into planes of limbo and ascension or descension.

Among their discussion, they will reflect some on the things which led them to this point, somewhat with questioning and reminiscent awe. The Demigods had eventually decided to oversee the initiation of new Gods on Aeirn, to protect and guide the people of Aeirn, in payment for their part in the death of the true Gods of Aeirn. They chose their disciple, Acivda, to lead the way to finding and guiding the best possible candidates, they gave Aeirnholme to him and Lutori and bid them to guard against the rising of new Dark gods, such as Death Bringer and Soul Stealer. Lutori and Acivda began searching for initiates, and between them, they began to find clues as to the identity of their Initiates. Until they were distracted as Death Bringer entered into the unending Edau wars, in a bid to take over the entire continent. Pausing in his search for the Initiates, Lutori sought out Death Bringer in Edau where they met in an unresolving battle. In the next few years, Acivda disappeared without a trace, not to be seen again until after Lutori returned to Aeirnholme in 1287 AA and began to pour through the Gods' Prophesies.

Emphasized conversations and seedings

The King and Jheric: A conversation in which the implications of an Alin attack are briefly considered, along with the most likely form it might take, a decisive sweep to flood the Isles and a relentless march overland.

Lutori and Acivda reflect on: Lutori found a prophesy foretelling the birth of the new Initiate, and implemented the necessary elements, beginning the task of finding, identifying and protecting the infant. Further research revealed that the Initiate would be descended from the lines of Acivda and Lutori. The child would reputedly emerge under the influence of the Adversary, the next aberrant Initiate. Together, Lutori and Acivda searched for the child in hopes of saving it from that Influence. And quietly, in the background, Alin has been quietly gearing up for war with Corind, over ancestral hatred, and hopes of taking the Corindish lands.

Aloe and Jheric reflect on their mutual experiences, unaware of another hand behind much of it: Lutori's observation of the meeting of Jheric and Aloe, his generations removed grand‑son and Acivda's even more distant grand‑daughter, and witnessed their predestined relationship, as it eventually grew together and they fell in love. (But, as the prophesy warned, a dark cloud loomed over Corind. The Church of Corind, the Caerinate, had become very powerful and is instituting oppressive and covertly corrupt reforms, usurping the rights of much of the population. At the time, Acivda had had reservation about Lutori's meddling in the lives of mortals. The valiant actions of Jheric, in the face of the oppressive church, saved the life of Aloe and freed the way for their future, as Aloe accepted Jheric's proposal to wed. Due to the dangerous atmosphere in Corind at the time, Lutori had contrived to isolate Aloe and Jheric within the Rift to ensure the safe conception of the promised Initiate, away from the influence of the Adversary mentioned in the prophesy. Upon seeing the newborn twins, the Hierarch placed a geas upon Vaiel and her brother to inhibit the potential power they possess from manifesting. Then decreeing that the edict be followed before dawn...

Seeds

1300‑06 Vaiel and Vaielien grow up unaware of the other's existence in their separate worlds, Vaiel in the incredible world of miracles and magic as Lutori and Acivda train her as an Initiate, and Vaielien in the heady world of politics and power of the more human nature. In truth, their training is very parallel, as Lutori was the progenitor of the Corindish Royal Line and raised Vaiel in much the same manner as her great grandfather, seven generations before her. The way Vaielien was assuredly being raised by his own father and grandfather. And despite the geas placed by the Hierarch, Vaielien proved to possess rift-sync and was initiated by the Lutori’an and trained the things that Vaiel was learning from the Master of the Rift himself.

1306‑12 As they grow, they both begin to see the way the world really is, as they, in their natural innocence try to be a part of other people’s lives only to encounter the vast differences between themselves and normal people. Even this early, they have gained subliminal contact with each other as their innate nature tries to fight off the effects of the inhibiting geas that is upon them. Also, over this time, the Church is festering like a cancer in Corind. Lutori and Acivda are called away from Aeirnholme, where they are raising Vaiel, at which times the geas falls on Vaiel more powerfully without their influence to negate it. Vaiel begins to chaff under the conservative influence of her caretaker...Vaielien begins to rebel against the inequity of Corindish society and begins to fight the wishes of the Church and Throne in order to find an acceptable path in life.

1313 Lutori and Acivda become aware of the geas placed upon Vaiel. The Hierarch consults with his spies and sets his plans into motion.

1315 Alin is gearing up for war with Corind, hoping to take advantage of the moral decline inspired by the Caerinate's reforms.

1316 The Hierarch's plans are coming to a close and his power is growing to rival that of Acivda. In fact, their battle, resulting from Acivda's attempt to thwart the Hierarch is a draw, serving only to reveal that the Hierarch is none other than the prophesied Adversary.

1318 Vaielien returns home from the Seate, a more tame‑seeming and mature individual. His thoughts turn to the changes in the land that had been his home before he'd been sent away, to the people that once knew joy and contentment under the gentle rule of his Grandfather, and the death‑like state the Church had brought to this once proud nation. Awakening in the true union of their one soul, Vaiel and Vaielien finally understand what they are, rift-child, a single entity heir to both male and female gender, the True representation of the Soul. Only Aloe and the mid‑wife realize who Vaiel is at first, but eventually the Adversary becomes aware of her presence and denounces the House of Jheric Tranellyan Corind for blasphemy. Trouble within the castle occupies them, as a desperate attempt to find and stop a hidden assassin before he finishes what Deyrni started. This finally succeeds as a long-trusted captain under the king is revealed to be a doppelganger and the assassin.

Prelude: One

Even from the prow of the ship, edging its way into the harbor, it was impossible to discern the bustling activity which was stirring even at this early hour throughout the entire city. Not that he needed to be able to see through the obscuring fog to know that was indeed what he would find beyond it. An entire city dragging itself out of the comfort of warm beds and warmer arms, to go out and challenge the biting chill of the early morning. No matter; even the sun had the good sense to slumber couple of hours more before facing a day as harsh as this. True, the land was not held in the grip of ancient ice that plagued its northern sister, but it still slumbered beneath a compellingly thick blanket of snow. But he knew, that on this day of all days, no man would even entertain the thought of shirking their responsibilities in exchange for the least of comforts. The man smiled a secret smile. As much as ever, mankind was so at odds with nature. He sucked in a deep breath, embracing the great expanse of timeless nature. Something he had come to understand over years his flesh didn't even begin to show. Only his eyes. Eyes which knew they need not waste any effort trying to pierce the dual veil of dark and fog. Knowledge served as well as vision, and he knew what he'd find.

Instead, he turned his attention to the ship. Beneath and behind him, he could feel as much as hear the timbers straining as it cut across the icy water under the weight of the charging sky. He could sense the power of the elements channeled through the sturdy ship, and it gave him a strange sense of simple pleasure. Perhaps that had something to do with the eerie and elusive thrill that rushed through his very core as the ship leapt and dove with the irregular surface of the water. He turned from the prow, and with disturbing ease crossed back to the rail which overlooked the main deck below. There, his companion stood, chatting amiably with the captain, who he had befriended almost immediately upon boarding, all the way back in Aornia, in the south. With the same disarming charm that had compelled the two of them to their own friendship all those years ago. The other man, noticing his companion’s attention, dismissed himself diplomatically from the captain's presence and clambered up the steps to the foredeck, and approached. Upon taking the other man's measure, he also delivered a warm and good-natured laugh, before speaking.

"You seem uncharacteristically happy this morning, my friend! Travel has been good for you," He spared a glance across the prow, before musing, "We are almost there, Acivda, and without a day to spare. I would have never expected you to have suggested such a risk." He smiled, dispelling even the slightest traces of criticism from the comment.

Acivda smiled stoically back. "And you seem to be suffering no discomfort from your homecoming, Lutori," he responded with the slightest show of an edge. The implications of the comment showed, briefly, in Lutori's face. "It has been a long time. We are not the same people who found friendship on this island. It seems fitting that we come back to it now... at the time we do." Acivda shrugged, as the shadow fled the face of his companion. "True, another storm like the first could have delayed us enough to prevent our arrival until it was too late, but the risk was worth it. We are here, and there is still time."

The subdued humor smoldered in Lutori's eyes, as he weighed the necessity of responding or adding to Acivda's observations, and chose to let them ride. He turned to face out over the prow, took a share of his own pleasure from the ship's progress. His thoughts remained his own though he felt no need to hide his sentiments from his friend. If he valued them, no doubt he already shared them. Acivda caught a hint of his mood and respected his silence. Ahead of them, beyond the curtain of the morning, the great city of Daelwyn was teeming with dedicated activity, and they would soon enough become caught up in it. So, they stood there, soaking up the peace and power of the sea, and looked ahead to the day's demands. It was little enough, as the darkness gradually ebbed, and the fog thinned in the lessening distance. Soon sounds, and even smells, began to steal upon them from the shore. When they finally reached it, there would be no more cause to relax, and they would waste not even a moment before confronting the city and its inevitable complications. As the docks rose out of the mists, Lutori flashed a wry smile at his companion, and peace translated to anticipation without any other noticeable transition. They were back onto the main deck even as the shipped bumped against the pilings, and stepping onto the gangplank even as it was blocked into place on the dock. They spared nothing on belongings, for they carried on themselves the only things which they valued enough to bring. As they set foot on the pier, each made a seemingly inconsequential gesture, laughing at each other as they noticed each other. They eyed the activity around them. Then, wasting no more time, they pressed towards the mainland, and the city.

They were not the only travelers arriving in the early morning, and they attracted only the most negligible attention from the busy inhabitants as they pushed through the throng. Though even a casual glance informed those who encountered them to be wary enough of them. This ensured them unmolested passage, as busy people were compelled to go enough out of their way to give them ample space to move. This reaction from the crowds made little impression on the two of them, as they had long provoked such reactions even from those who knew nothing about them. The common people had a very deep respect for power, in any guise. And neither one of them could quite hide their power from even the common man or woman. It rankled each of them to see it, after the lengths they had gone to in order to arrive undetected and unrecognized in Daelwyn. Fortunately, there were enough men of obvious power who would be compelled to show themselves here on the coming night, and only one of them did they need to avoid at any cost.

All things considered, though, they succeeded in what they had intended. No one noticed their arrival in the Seat of the kingdom of North Isles Corind. Perhaps someone might have. On any other morning. But this was the morning of the eve of Myrenight, the winter solstice. The commemoration of the death of an old year and the birth of a new. Myrenight is a grim and frightening event in a land too familiar with the faces of paradox. It is met with almost fierce celebration, by a people bred on the memory of a mid‑winter's night on which the world almost met its end in the wake of an awakening and absolute paradox. A celebration which is ultimately dominated by the presence of the Church of Corind, and its self‑appointed Hierarch, as a testimony of its resurgence. Myrenight is observed in all of the lands of Aeirn, with differing degrees of ritual and festivity. Regardless, it is hardly a night that passes without leaving its mark upon the people, which is something that people have come to anticipate. It was enough to keep everyone jumping, and much too busy to pay too much attention to the doings of strangers. Fortunately for them, the one whom they sought to elude would himself be easy to spot. After all, he would no doubt arrive with much pomp and fanfare. No doubt.

As they progressed along the streets, their trained eyes easily noted that changes had occurred in Daelwyn. Something subtle. Something which even the sharpest inhabitants of this city hadn't even begun to suspect for themselves yet. Most likely. If they did, they most assuredly did not know what these changes might mean. These two, though, knew very well that the gradual decline in the overall appearance of the streets and buildings, the intermittent shop boarded shut, and the frozen bodies of nameless vagrants all indicated a profound lapse in the standards or policy maintained within the kingdom. Once almost obsessively enforced by the Court, indicating problems plaguing even the King. True, even now there could be seen crews at work cleaning the worst of the signs from the street. Removing the bodies. That there were bodies to be left on the street to freeze to death in the night, was an irrefutable sign. Lutori turned an unhappy look on this, as they paced briskly up the street, and Acivda couldn't help but to notice it. He knew, too well, that it could only get worse, and there was nothing they would be able to do. For a while at least.

Even at the pace they were walking, it took them a good twenty minutes to reach the heart of the city. and a bit more than that to find the inn which they wanted. They had assumed the roles of travelers, and deliberately selected this moderately reputable inn, chosen more for its proximity to the castle than any other qualities, at which to decide their best next step. When they entered, there was no way they could expect to avoid drawing attention. The door opened into a good imitation of a tavern, though it was a bit more of a restaurant. Within, there were a dozen or so groups of people, siting at tables laden with steaming plates of hot food, and mulled drinks. Probably more than a few nursing a stronger brew even. As one, heads turned to take in the new arrivals, some motivated by curiosity, some out of habitual self-preservation perhaps, some for... well, their own reasons. People are known to have them, after all. They all took in the two men, who stood there for an infinitesimally long time as if to humor the interest they couldn't avoid. They were both simply yet efficiently dressed. Both somewhat light complected and bearded, one with impenetrably black hair, the other with a fiery mane. Their clothing bore no traces of decoration; being instead, hardy, practical leather and course grained fabrics which provided the best insulation for the little weight they had. They carried little, indicating a clear emphasis towards free‑roving. Their weapons were minimally adorned, but of an obvious quality, and clearly the single greatest obvious investment of either of them. This brought a few looks of approval from a few of the hardier sorts. And the number of weapons (which could be seen) accorded them the distinction of being persons of some consequence. Of course, their demeanor earned them the greatest respect, be it wary or honest.

Out of habit, they each took in the room and its occupants with a single, sweeping glance. Then, they made their way to an empty booth near the back corner of the room. When they had made themselves comfortable, a serving girl approached. They listened to the fare‑list and chose on both meals and drinks. The girl gave a quick nod and left them for the kitchen. Across from them, a lone man in a tough, worn cloak with a generous array of scars on his exposed skin rose from his seat and approached their table. Lutori and Acivda noticed this and refrained from speaking as they appraised the man. He strode right up to a halt at the edge of the booth and set his tankard on the table with a resounding thump. He was obviously foreign, as his sun weathered hide, and black eyes attested, and well into his prime. Other clues were revealed by his wardrobe and arms to justify the assumption that he had seen and done much in the world. Noticing that he had their attention, the man spoke.

"Welcome, travelers. Good Myrenight to you. I couldn't help but notice that one of you was a Lutori’an," Lutori raised an eyebrow and focused his attention on their 'guest. ' The man merely went on, "I am called Garrik, and I would appreciate your company for a moment," Then he smiled. Lutori and Acivda shared a look and then invited Garrik to sit. Lutori slid over to give him room as he sat.

"Greetings Garrik, Good Myrenight. Though it is still an ungodly early hour of the day. I am Talon and this is Lodric," Lutori lied easily, using familiar aliases for himself and Acivda. "You have a very good eye, I am indeed Lutori’an. As are you, I see." He said with a wry smile directed at himself, proscribing a suitable penance to himself for not noticing sooner. As in immediately. Yesterday.

Garrik misinterpreted his smile and returned the compliment, took a long swallow from his cup before continuing, "I can imagine what must bring you out so early on such a cold morning," an easy smile passed around the table at that, Myrenight being the first thing in just about everyone's mind. "You also appear to be more prone to these parts than I, Talon." he said referring to Lutori's wild red hair and pale coloring, typical to a highlander. Lutori nodded, as Garrik went on, "But you haven't been around here much recently, have you?"

Acivda gave the man a curious look and then looked to see Lutori's response. "That is so. How could you tell?" Garrik smiled, took another drink, leaned back and resumed smiling. "Actually, I guessed. A working Lutori’an is generally away from his own parts more often than not," he took obvious pleasure in the look that the other two turned on him. Then he made a placating gesture as Lutori made to speak, and cut him off, "No, I am not trying to make fun of you. I came over to see if I could gather any rumors from abroad, word from the Seate, that type of thing."

Lutori spared a look for each of the others, "Actually, I have not been by way of the Seate for..." counted back on his fingers, for effect, "For nearly a year. Though we were in Aornia for a bit on our way up here. I imagine that there will be some special recognition for the passing of this century included in the ritual ceremonies, of course. I personally felt that this would be a more... appropriate place to observe Myrenight." This was met with an enthusiastic nod from Garrik. It was on this very island that the tide of paradox was turned from its relentless assault on reality, allowing the world (and who knows what else) to continue to exist, and where the Lutori’an was first seeded.

As Garrik nodded, he added, “Obviously, that sentiment is shared by the Hierarch of the Caerinate."

"So I have heard," responded Lutori dryly.

Garrik looked at him and prodded, "So you already know about that. Has word gotten out abroad about that?"

"No. Not really. I found out from an associate of mine," Lutori said, giving Acivda a look, maybe only he could read. "Needless to say, I try to keep up on what happens in Corind when I am away." Lutori decided to feed out some line and see if the man would bite, "What I've heard does not sound good. The High King, the Cooling trend..." Garrik blanched obviously, and gave a terse nod.

"Well, your associate is worth whatever you are paying him. The Hierarch will be arriving today and presiding over the proceedings of the entire celebration and probably will choke us all on the formal ritual and so forth." He drained his mug and looked into it with a funny sort of longing, before setting it down on the table. Acivda caught Lutori's eye, and silently inquired with remarkable subtle expressions, if he wanted to indulge their 'guest' for much longer. Lutori vaguely expressed his opinion that he be given a few more moments and returned to the conversation. "The High King was deposed more than a year ago, of course," Garrik went on oblivious to the exchange between them. "And that has given a lot of power to the Church." Lutori nodded, prodded further, but that seemed the limit of Garrik's opinion. A few more questions proved that Garik had no knowledge that would be of much value to them. Mostly he only confirmed what they both already knew far better that he. When their meal arrived, Garrik excused himself and left.

The food was too hot to eat right away, so they talked. Acivda looked at Lutori sharply. "Profound thoughts?"

Lutori scowled, "It always bothers me when that happens," making a vague gesture of reference to Garrik's vacated seat. "I always expect them to recognize me, and that would be a disaster right now." There was, of course, a very good reason that his name bore such a blatant resemblance to the name that mages like Garrik chose to go by. They were his followers. In a backhanded sort of way. Or rather, what he was, they had a vague potential to become. "At least he mistook me for just another Lutori’an."

Acivda thought about that for a moment, then commented, "Well, if he had had a little better information, it could have been in our favor that you drew his attention to us. No matter what, we must not turn our backs on free information. Especially if it seeks us out."

Lutori chose not to take offense, or retort back about how the fact remained that Garrik had not had any information of value at all. Rather, he added, somewhat lamely, "At the very least, he will spread word around that we are Talon and Lodric, and not Lutori and Acivda, who could not know a moments peace if we were recognized. And, whom if recognized would lose the chance of preventing a disaster far worse than the awakening of paradox could have been." Acivda frowned and glanced around to make sure that no one could have heard Lutori's comment and directed his thoughts at his companion. That was careless. You really should be more alert against revealing our purpose so casually like that.

You worry too much, Acivda. No one hears things like that. That's how Paradox works. Acivda could not argue with that. Lutori was the foremost authority on paradox, for good reason. Though more than a millennium had passed, he knew well what forces had shaped the world up to this point. Once, gods had walked the various faces of Aeirn. They had protected and taught mankind. Even raised children which descended from men and gods. Children who had at one time risen up and destroyed the gods under the corrupted lead of one of their brothers, who was utterly destroyed himself for his crimes against his family, his race, and his world and its inhabitants. Leaving only the Demigods. The half bewildered, and half lost children of gods who could no longer help guide and comfort them.

Acivda could still picture clearly what had happened next, though he had not been around yet to see it. Traumatized by their part in the Cataclysm, the Demigods purged Aeirnholme, the eternal home of the gods (Still, the single most impressive and awe‑inspiring example of architecture known to man.) They mercilessly scourged it clean of all life and banished themselves from the world, staying isolated from humanity. After its purging, Aeirnholme remained inviolate, until the day that a human child was left abandoned by a dying, shipwrecked mother on its empty shores. Feeling an inexplicable pity and responsibility for the only survivor of the wreck, the Demigods came down and took the child and raised him. Acivda still wondered at the incongruity that beings who had obliterated an entire population without regard for age, sex or even race, would have been compelled to shelter and nurture such a wayward orphan. This child, raised by powerful immortal beings, was endlessly exposed to feats of inconceivable power. An intelligent child, though, having borne witness to the great Mysteries, he eventually learned how such things were done. Acivda 's training was unintentional he was sure but came to be the event which most dramatically shaped the world Aeirn would become.

When he was of age, the Demigods sent him out into the world, to learn from his own kind and perhaps find his humanity. A mortal man, with power and ideas unshared by any other human, the world was a profound shock to him when he found it. He smiled, remembering the confusion and the bewilderment he had felt in those first few years of his wandering. When he had begun to understand the limitations that normal men and women faced in their harsh existences, he made a commitment to find a way to better their lives. Perhaps that made him a good man. Perhaps, he was being self‑indulgent. It was very hard to tell as things went on. He remembered how it had worked out. Inevitably, he began teaching in the lands of Aeirn and become known as Lore Bringer. He possessed knowledge hitherto undreamt of, and he willingly taught it to any with an aptitude who came to him. Following this, it was only a matter of time before magic lore took hold in the world. Quietly, during that time, the Demigods had returned to their Exile.

Lutori noticed Acivda's preoccupied thought, and turned his attention to his meal, daintily chewing the still too hot meal, a spiced meat pastry, with crisp tubers of a winter variety, and cooked fruits in a thick cinnamon sauce. Acivda absently poked at his own meal, as his thoughts roamed on. Much had happened throughout the course of his life, though time eventually began to wear on his heart, if not his flesh. After seventy‑three years with his disciples, and the loss of his wife, Acivda left the schools he created and subjected himself to torture and strife. Facing the inscrutable judgement of the Demigods, he underwent what has come to be known as The Testing. Having passed, he was declared an Ascendant. Unsure of what this title meant, he had wondered off on his own, until his attention was drawn to the seeds of awakening conflict. A cooling trend, ending the warm recession that had followed after the Cataclysm, began threatening the North with an Ice age. In response to nature's prodding, the northern born Alin started raiding the Corindish nations across the narrows of the Asailen and Maesolin Seas, to the immediate south. They sought simply to escape the freezing wastes that were taking over the pole. But they could not bring themselves to ask for sanctuary from their old enemies and cousins of Corind. They chose instead to take it. In this time of chaos, rose a rare leader, who united the kingdoms of Corind to push back the Alin attack. Acivda , the Lore Bringer, came north and was befriended by the High King of Corind, Lutori Corind. Compelled to act on the behalf of his charismatic new friend, he aided him in the defense of his Kingdoms.

It was sort of funny how things worked in circles, he suddenly thought. It had been on another Myrenight, several centuries ago, when the whole world witnessed the folly of power. The Northern Barbarians had surprised them all. Powerful mages appeared among the Alin to counter Acivda's power. The strain of this meeting brought about consequences the Gods themselves had feared to cause: The world began to shatter! A Rift splintered open from a weak spot in time and space. The spot where the destruction of the corrupt Demigod, by his brothers, had weakened the fabric of reality. The raw force of paradox slowly splintered its way across and through the planet, ponderously shattering the world. By the time it reached the attention of the combatants in the north, it had grown too powerful to oppose. Of course, no one had known that then. Facing this new threat, both sides had quickly ended their dispute and tried to halt the Rift in its slow, fatal advance.

Nothing had any effect. The wave of paradox was relentless. But still they tried harder. One of Acivda’s attempts to thwart the Rift had had a most definitely unexpected result: Lutori suddenly, inexplicably exploded into nothingness! Or to be more precise, he exploded into a Rift-like substance. Acivda stopped in his halfhearted picking at his food and studied his old friend. To this day few people have even been able to conceive of what he must have gone through. All that most people have realized is that somehow Lutori had had some innate link to the Rift ‑ some resonant quality. Because of this, he found a way to bind the substance of the Rift to himself, his soul, and mastered it. Unfortunately, he could not undo what had already occurred. But as time has told, there were few other things he could not accomplish with the pure forces of paradox. In some strange way, he had actually bound the Rift into the world as he had bound it to himself! He learned that he could shift the Rift anywhere and through anything on Aeirn, shape it in any way that did not abate the volume of Rift manifested prior to his transformation. Anything else that he added to this amount, he could disperse at will, though. Further, he learned that whatever was displaced by the Rift translated within it. In theory, there was no real break in the continuity of reality, just that a certain portion was sundered from it by paradox. That which slid into the rift remained much as it was as an island of reality in a sea of paradox. Inversely, paradox existed as a part of reality itself in proportion to its manifestation. But even to this day, Lutori had said nothing to anyone about what he had gone through in those fleeting moments.

"Eat! You are wasting away before my eyes! " Lutori declared abruptly, with a piercing stare into Acivda's eyes, surprising him. In the moment between this, and the slight fraction of a moment it took to collect himself, Acivda's fork speared a bite (with the mindless intent of being eaten.) The glint of humor in Lutori's eye softened the blow, as Acivda snapped back to reality in time to deal with that bite.

By sheer force of will, he chewed and swallowed before breaking into a startled laugh at his overall reaction. He was joined by Lutori, and more than a few eyes jerked towards them, drawn by the laughter. The moment dispelled the air of brooding Acivda's reflections had summoned, and they turned their attentions back to the meal and the place they were in. Garrik was slumped on his bench contemplating the bottom of another emptied tankard, with a very thick manner. For a moment they were reminded how a surprising majority of the city's population would most likely celebrate this holiday. Lutori scowled at the rapidly intoxicated Lutori’an, and drawled acidly to Acivda, "Behold, the noble representative of the most feared and respected clique of mages on Aeirn."

"All men have weaknesses, my friend," Acivda placated.

"Except for us, eh? No, we are not allowed to have weaknesses... We have too many responsibilities!" Lutori growled with markedly less bitterness than the words implied. He would always be too proud of his responsibilities to resent them. Then he brought things back to business, with a curious transition to intent clarity, " Speaking of, what are we going to do next?"

Acivda straightened, took a drink of his mulled wine, and replied evenly, "We wait." He set down his tankard purposefully and added, "For news or omens."

From atop the battlement of the city walls, a spotter called out the approach of a convoy. The captain of the guards stationed there at the main gate, climbed up to the right tower and looked out over the road. Within minutes, he could make out the features of this new arrival. Unlike the steady stream of travelers flocking like pilgrims into the city for the past week, this convoy was arrayed in rigid formation. The captain could make out three coaches and a train of supply wagons all protected by a hundred outriders on horseback. Taking only a moment to be sure, he then turned and shouted down to the guards standing at casual attention on the ground, to send a messenger to the castle. The Hierarch was arriving. He watched, to make sure the messenger got on his way, aware that there would be no chance the message would be forgotten or misdelivered. He turned back to the rampart and gazed cooly out over the road and swore cheerfully to himself. Things were going to get worse, he knew, and he was glad that he would in no way bear responsibility for any of it.

In his lavish coach, the Hierarch had no concern, what‑so‑ever, for the opinions of anyone as inconsequential as the captain of the gate. His thoughts were on the tasks which would await him from the moment of his arrival, among which, the celebration rites of Myrenight were of only minimal importance. He sat, eyes closed, contemplating the immediate future, and the sheer immensity of change that must occur before things would be back in balance in Corind. In all of Corind. Corind had long proceeded without suitable supervision. Grown too incorrigible, too undisciplined. Irreverent. Corindish thinking was approaching mindless liberality, which left unchecked would eventually lead to the dissolution of the race and its faith. He would not allow this to happen. Not to his people, and especially not to his Church. He knew well that more often than not, you have to take something apart in order to fix it. That had been his reply to the complaints that had arisen when the High King had been deposed at the behest of the Caerinate, the Church of Corind. People always want to resist change. But he knew what Corind needed, and he would ensure that what was needed would be done. He could be strong enough for the demands of change.

His people would have a glorious future guided by his strong perception and genius for administration. But first, he must bring them all through the trials of the future, and the necessary evil of breaking down the growing corruption in the people to permit them to be rebuilt without their present flaws.

The Hierarch also arrives expecting the hospitality of the Royal House of Tholmiand L'lyrn Corind, for the duration of the celebrations. The House itself is in somewhat of a stir as the wife of the king's favorite son goes into labor with their first child, during which she and her mate reminisce about the events leading up to this glorious and terrible event, as they dread too the edict of the Church regarding the birth of heirs...

**Prologue**

An eerie predawn glow starkly accented the sturdy, ancient spires of flawless stone. They rose, incalculable tons of impossibly graceful architecture. Dark stone penetrating the sudden fury of the ageless elements, by sheer presence of mass. A sharp rain ferociously stripped away the veil of morning fog from around the base of the brooding isle. Far into the distant interior of these island structures keened a sibilant chorus of mournful rain‑song, echoing out into the false dawn. Below, the vast sea roared and frothed in its endless assault upon the rocky shore.

A dark, cloaked figure appeared out of the parting mist, stepping down onto the damp, black sand of a secluded cove, where the fog was being rent from the ocean rock like the souls of the dying harvested upon a field of battle. Behind the figure, the fog writhed up, from land and sea, to reveal no vehicle by which this being might have arrived.

Slowly, with measured steps, he ascended from the beach as if completely immune to the elements. Gradually, the damp rocks began to glow red as the dawn pierced the churning clouds, staining the world in gore. From somewhere within the sleeping stone of the keep came a guiding light penetrating the reddened rain from above. The cloaked figure changed his course in response to the light, as if to some prearranged signal. It gradually became clear that the light originated from deep within the walled fortress, up in a high tower of the keep, descending through a curtain of rock separating the beach from the structures atop the sea cliffs.

A flurry of nesting sea birds launched themselves into the air, as he mounted a narrow ravine‑trail that lead up toward the protective walls of the ancient fortress‑city. Before reaching the wall, he turned from the path and strode unerringly into a natural alcove protecting a concealed entrance into the fortress. With but a meaningful glance from the figure, the massive stone gate was compelled to open itself, with an unnatural silence. Inside, protected from the storm, was a narrow passageway, leading under the abandoned outer city, into the heart of the massive complex within.

Sealing the gate behind him, the figure glided down the passageway, without apparent need of light. After a great distance, the corridor led to a stair, which he followed up unhesitatingly. The flight ended and emptied out through a concealed door into a cavernous stone gallery. Crossing this, he strode to a more modest corridor leading deeper into the fortress. Through a series of corridors, a confusing number of turns and a dozen or so flights of stairs, the figure pierced the silent depths to finally arrive at the only door on the island that seeped light around the edges. At a small gesture, the door withdrew, and the man entered.

Inside, a tall, well-built man dressed in rich reds and misty greys, stood thoughtfully contemplating a dying log, blazing within a recessed hearth‑pit in the center of the chamber ‑ a hearth roughly the size of a small room. His tunic exquisitely accommodated his broad chest, yet snugly fitted his trim torso, belted at the waist with a wide, leather belt, its buckle fashioned from a whole dragon scale. The sleeves of the tunic were loose fitting, with lateral pleats along the outer length of the sleeves to where they were gathered at the cuffs. Accenting the fiery reds of the tunic, his trousers were of a deep, rich grey extending from under the tunic's plated bottom hem at mid‑thigh, into plain, sturdy boots, obviously chosen for comfort rather than style, walking around within these bare stone corridors.

Addressing his guest without turning, he spoke:

"Welcome to Aeirnholme, my friend. Or perhaps I should say 'Welcome back...' What brings you all this way on such an unpleasant morning?" he inquired, basking in the heat of the blaze. "It's not like you to run over so... spontaneously."

The cloaked figure regarded this man silently for a moment, then pushed back his hood, revealing a pleasant, yet somehow troubled face. A face somehow ageless, rather than eternally young like that of the man standing in the glow, stroking a well-trimmed beard. In contrast to the wild mane of that man, which seemed so much a blaze in its own right, the cloaked man had short, tawny hair, liquid, questing eyes, and a look of endless wisdom ‑ no doubt aided by the permanent furrow of concentrated awareness on his brow, and the slight greying in his own well-groomed beard, down from his temples and streaking his chin.

He spoke with a pleasingly deep, reverberating voice; saying "I have come on a matter of grave concern to both of us," then pausing, waiting for the other man to face him. Sensing this, the red‑haired man bade his guest to make himself comfortable, indicating the lounging couches, circling the recessed hearth area of the floor, as he himself sat. The other man merely gestured, indicating that he was fine standing. That courtesy acknowledged, the conversation resumed.

"Please go on; what is this grave matter, Acivda?" He asked as the still half‑cloaked Acivda, propped a foot upon the hearthstones.

"In general, everything. There have been many signs indicating the presence of an ill influence. There are false gods rising in all the lands, the spawn of the old Gods are withdrawing further and further from the world, the slaver clans are seeping into Minetrau lands, and the Caerinate has deposed the High King of Corind and given power to the Hierarch..." he leaned forward for emphasis, "your own homeland is facing an inquisition, a second Age of Intolerance. The people are to be purged. This Hierarch is fanatically patriarchal, and religiously conservative. A self‑righteous reformist, and to him the culture of Corind has become poisoned by heathen, corrupt and godless views. He chooses to perceive the people's open mindedness as an evil to be expunged. He seeks to attack their greatest virtue, the anciently indiscriminate views of free will and equality, which has always been the root of their strong, deeply transcendent culture." He paused reflectively for a moment, then added, "I cannot imagine how this religion has gained such a strong hold."

The other man's face had slipped a shade toward ashen at the thought of the damage an inquisition could do to the minds and the wills of his kinsmen. "The Church of Corind? The Caerinate? It has influence, but to achieve this would take decades at the least! When did all of this happen?" He breathed in sudden dislocation.

"In truth, the worst of it hasn't yet, but it's already far too late to prevent. Lutori, " Acivda added, "if we don't start to take steps, things will get worse than you fear even now."

"And the false gods, and slavers and such?" Lutori asked, quietly churning through the implications of Acivda's news. His mind seeking to amend the balance of information within him on some larger scale.

"No. Those things are already begun. It was when I caught the first hint about the persecution of Corind that I decided to come here and discuss this with you," he explained. "I thought you might like to know. Or perhaps I really just wanted to make sure you did know." He gave Lutori a meaningful look.

Lutori looked at him blankly for a second, as he finished amending this last bit of information to the body of his thought, then a slight grin caught at the corner of his mouth and spread across his face. " 'Thought...' did you?" He laughed. "If I didn't know you better, I might be inclined to think this is naught but a joke!"

This characteristically abrupt lapse from intent thought, into wry humor stunned Acivda, despite the age-old familiarity of it, and he was forced to smile, "It's no joke, but it's not the end of the world, either. Yet." After a pause, Acivda shifted the topic, "What have you been doing here, of all places?" He was glancing around him, examining the walls in their armor of books, noting the eerie contrast between the life hovering in this room, and the cold distance the rest of the fortress exuded.

"Hmm? Oh, just going through all of the ancient texts, the histories, and the prophecies of old," He replied contemplatively, "I have been away for some time, in here. Perhaps too much so. But I knew that it would be left to us to discover what was coming and decide whether our interfering would result in a worse threat to the world. So, I sought out the demigods' advice. They agreed that the time had come for us to inherit the legacy of the old Gods and take up the last gift they left to the world: The Prophesies. Since then, I have been studying them for a clue or a solution," he related, then lapsing back into thoughtfulness. "I had just about reached the end of my patience with them when I sensed your arrival," he snorted. His eyes wandered to the large podium that was obviously his workspace, his attention drawn back only when Acivda spoke again.

"And what pray tell did you seek to find in them?" asked Acivda, "not to mention these others, or how you managed to even find them..." Still glancing around the room, imagining the search his old friend must have endured to gather together the books now collected in this study.

Lutori flashed him a wry smile, "Why, I haven't been completely blind, my friend. I saw the signs and began to wonder what was to come and what sort of contribution I was to make ‑ for better or worse." He gave the other man a long, considered glance, and then was all business. "Your report, my friend, has only confirmed my worst suspicions. The true meaning of what is written in the Prophesies is very elusive, and I admit, they were almost too damnably misleading for even me. I nearly ignored the references I was looking for when I finally found them. Of course, part of my problem was my lack of acceptance for what was revealed in them! That such things could possibly be happening in our world... I wouldn't quite let myself see, or guess, how maliciously those gossamer words could be translated into reality. In light of your news, I sense that my very nightmares shall be realized. I see now how very true those ancient words are."

Acivda shifted, foot still on the hearth, trying to see where this was leading.

"I found more than enough to confirm our past suspicions that, despite our potential, we both came into the power we each have, by chance. Or apt timing perhaps. Obviously, we both could easily have met other fates, leaving these fates in the hands of others. What's more, I have learned that there are other voids of power in this realm free to be filled by chance. Or worse, by maneuvering. In us, this world has been lucky, but it is not fated to be so lucky again. This Hierarch seeks power. We have seen his kind before... Remember Rynhark? Or what about Khiertok? Little do we know what new tide is rising, but this world cannot endure another flood!"

Acivda indeed had no difficulty remembering the dark consequences of those mentioned. In his mind, he foresaw the consequences of the Hierarch ascending, as he picked up the thread, "I have suspected that much," he said. "I have known better than any other, the consequences of our actions. With our power, we must choose wisely where to permit ourselves even the slightest effect in the events of the world and then move quickly. It has been a long time since we accepted our roles, watching for those few with the potential to Ascend, and prepare for their coming. But three times now I have missed the arrival of an Initiate. Each one went on to create further chaos in this world. In my failure to recognize their appearance and train them, the world has been condemned to their influence.

"Perhaps they may not necessarily be blamed for the warping in them, their power calls to them to grow. And grow they have. Those three are each a match for you or I, in their own way, and we do not have the power to uproot them. Not without grave repercussions. There is nothing with authority over such as we anymore, not since the Cataclysm. There is not a hand of Absolute free to judge the Ascendants. Their power is theirs, and they have earned it, just as we have earned our own. It is not our place to play God, and I shudder at what it might do to us to attempt it.

"We are merely what we are, you and I, and we may be the only ones who'll ever accept that. Though the common men view us as gods, in truth we are far from it. The old Gods perhaps could have dealt with an Ascendant safely, but even they died, as they had foreseen they would back when they claimed that no true God would be known to exist, for no such being could ever dare risk revealing its power to the world. Even their power would have doomed the world if they had used it in their defense."

"And that lesson came down hard upon their off‑spring, the demigods," amended Lutori.

"They did learn something from that lesson, though. They learned to pick their mistakes along with their successes. Just as we must learn to give our own mistakes their even balance," Acivda declared quietly. "I came here, because we must decide quickly where to place our interests and who to invest with means to restore the balance. To heal the gaping wound that will one day be Corind, or even the world. Or else we may have no choice but to be drawn into the conflict directly, and we both know the consequences of that."

"True, the world would suffer a serious blow from that. However, I think we may have overestimated our role in this whole crisis. I think we need to be willing to accept the possibility that we may play no true part in this at all..." Lutori said evenly, winning a surprised look from his companion at hearing this unexpected suggestion. Lutori continued "...and accept that as you may. But I believe I have found a solution much better suited to our interference."

Acivda considered that remark with a bemused smile. "I suspect, in context, that either you are about to demonstrate your ludicrous wit, or you are attempting to suggest the absurd."

"You sound uneasy, my friend, have I ever given you reason to dread my methods?" Lutori feinted, with a keen balance of sarcasm and deep familiarity, allowing the potential meanings and ramifications to hang in the air between them, before relenting. "I suppose that in some lights, what I'd suggest would seem ludicrous, but in its way, it would present a far more effective solution in the end." Lutori stood up and stretched languorously, and turned toward outer wall, framed by bookshelves thick with tombs on either side of a broad paned window, and indicated the book laying open upon a podium, like some massive, lazy animal, "As it so happens, I may have found out who the next Initiate will be."

Acivda denied him the satisfaction of reacting overly, but both of them knew how much that sudden revelation struck him, and how that brilliantly nimble mind leapt at the chance to resolve any mystery, and how much that particular secret had tantalized, yet defied his scrutiny. Straightening up and setting his foot back down on the floor gracefully, and calmly Acivda advanced upon the book and looked to Lutori, who nodded for him to take his liberty, before reading from the opened page:

*...and even as the darkness shall ever grow, consuming the light of the world, shall a child, born not of this realm yet heir to the blood and legacy of this world's eldest human witnesses, arise in the very heart of the persecution under the influence of he who would aspire to the very soul of creation. Beware the influence of this Adversary, for in his hunger he will seek to devour this one, and not even the greatest of restraints of loss injury, power or reason will stay his obsession. But in time, he will even bequeath the final shaping of this one. This one shall know life as no other mortal has, with a sight that shall concede no untruth to the world. And even from the purest taint of evil might this one still rise.*

*This one shall know not one in anything, as truly a child of Light and Darkness can abide not any single extreme, this one will stand for the beginning and the end, chaos and law, good and evil, in any form, in intricacy and in harmony, as the balance may abide. The fate of the world could deservedly rest in this one's care; pray that the world shall be worthy as it someday shall, and if it is not, there exists no sight that might See how it would hope to survive. None shall be kept to stay his hand in this one's name, as none shall be inhibited in his action, but know well that this one shall judge with pure authority, and will not pass sentence but in absolute, such that this one is not so empowered, but is so astute...*

After finishing the passage, he breathed softly to himself, "I see... and I think I understand now, as well," Acivda scanned the rest of the section, finding no reference to a specific time, but satisfied none‑the‑less seeing how much even that gave them to work with. "Very well, Lutori, we shall do as the tides of the world dictate. We have a place to begin. May we find more to guide us, but now that I understand what you propose, I agree. I can set aside my remaining doubts and work with this, for this rings true. We will find this child, if we must wait and search for a generation."

Lutori smiled, knowing that nothing more needed to be said, and looked out the study window into the weeping dawn...

**one**

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 ponytail. 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 untouched 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 sensitive 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 assault 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 amended with slightly less hostility, and more sarcasm, "Gods only know that it’s 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 hers 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 Khriesha 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 obviously 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 the nurse's view of the confrontation, Vaiel responded to the accusation 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 herself. 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 dramatically. 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 sensibilities, and thoughts of how exasperating the man was to show up when and how he did.

As the torrent of happy squeals, and excited babbling 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 of strained aggravation 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 apparent 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, erupting 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 me 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, sometime 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 whatsoever 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 onto 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 occurrences 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 apparent 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 to 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 extremes of weather...it must have been sometime 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 headboard, 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 it 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 reassuring 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 inadvertently 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 persevere 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 tomorrow 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.

Book I: Seeds of the Shadow

Humanity developed, in its fashion, oblivious to the events that would one day dictate the course of life on Aeirn. Populating the vast continents and raising their empires or humble kingdoms, Humanity was generally at peace with its environment. Humanity was awed by the construction of the fortress called Aeirnholme, which was to be the home of their Gods. The Demigods were born on Aeirnholme, off‑spring of chosen humans and the Gods. According to legend on Aeirn, Gods would come down in the guise of men, to be with the people, bringing wisdom and guidance to aid the growth of humanity as peers. In fact, the Gods lived on Aeirn in physical form while teaching and guiding the races, in Aeirnholme, on an island of the same name at the head of the Great Maedrienne Causeway Isles, with their disciples and favored humans, and their children, the Demigods. All of Aeirn knew that Gods walked among them, and they were worshiped as family. When the Gods would tell the people that they, their world, and even the heavens around them had been created by another, greater Being, the people fervently denied it, claiming that no god could be greater than the Living Gods of Aeirn. But the Gods knew better and said nothing. They knew that in time, the people of Aeirn would know the corruption that had afflicted so many other worlds of Man. When they, themselves, were living no more.

The Gods tried not to interfere with the course of events on Aeirn, however the increasing incidence of war finally compelled them to take action. The Gods began to direct the races in setting the borders to their lands, and maintaining peace until turbulent periods subsided, like maintaining peace between polar nations and their more temperate neighbors throughout the course of an Ice Age. The Gods interceded again when dragons were discovered; or rather, encountered in the jungles of Edau and the forests of Aeria, in order to calm the resulting panic that spread throughout the world, with the Dragon Pact. However, little did anyone know that the cause of the Gods' down fall would not be anything the Gods said or did themselves, but rather an unfortunate, unnoticed accident...

The Demigod, Khreatus, who was known to be the most inquisitive and skeptical of the Gods' children began to dabble with the arcane, prying into secrets to which even the Gods' themselves had only limited access to, attempting to steal into the secret ways of the Universe. Unfortunately, he was driven mad as a result, unable to cope with what was revealed to him. Khreatus, paranoid of reproach, began to fear the Gods, and his heart became cold as his soul filled with hatred and evil. Before long, he began to turn against the Gods' Fellowship. Khreatus began to make demands of the Gods, taunting them, testing them, his mind twisting everything out of proportion. The Gods attempted to heal Khreatus' mind but failed, without knowing it. Alone and unnoticed, twisted Khreatus began to plot in secret, acting as if he were normal.

Fate was sealed when Khreatus began subverting the minds of his siblings, who being more vulnerable than the Gods, could be mistakenly led to see the Gods as he did. In secret, he spoke aside to his brothers with great contempt for the Gods and convinced them that their parents were corrupt with evil and should be destroyed. Unaware of the events surrounding Khreatus, the God, Theastus, sacrificed himself to provide eternal guardianship over Aeirn following premonitions of coming disaster. Stunned by this, the Gods withdrew back to Aeirnholme and began writing the Prophesies. The absence of the Gods from the world encouraged certain elements of the population to defy the tradition established by the Gods at the time of their withdrawal. The Gods' reaction was as unexpected as it was inscrutable. Shocking the world, and adding fuel to Khreatus' fire, the Gods exiled an entire town's population to Deori, Aeirn's sister world, the first people to ever go there. For blasphemy, it was believed.

However, short generations afterward, a Plague swept from the East, and began decimating the population of the world, causing the world to go into a Dark Age which enshrouded it throughout the cataclysm. All Great Works were secreted away by the last remnants of the enlightenment era. In time, technology in the North disappeared completely. The Age of Intolerance soon began, famous for the horrors and persecutions imposed by church, having grown powerful in the absence of the Gods' watchful ministrations, and state, which was at the church's mercy as society drowned beneath waves of prejudice never imagined by the ancestors of the races, escorting Aeirn into the Cataclysm. Capping off the general disastrous state to which Aeirn had fallen, was The Hundred Year Night, believed to have been caused by debris from an exploded planet blocking out the sun's light for a century. The survivors of the freeze united near the equator, at which point Theastus finally crumpled under the strain of protecting Aeirn from the debris blotting out the sun, satisfied by at least keeping as many alive as he did. The Survivors began to repopulate their lands, sending Representatives to beseech the distracted Gods' aid, from Aeirnholme. Unfortunately, the Demigods had finally been swayed by Khreatus, misunderstanding why the Gods allowed the disasters to occur, and they join him in his plotting. Having committed themselves, they soon agreed on a plan and rose up and smote their sires who, strangely, did not resist. The Representatives learn of this treachery and quickly spread tidings of doom to the four winds.

When the Demigods realized that the Gods had not resisted for fear of causing the world to shatter in their wake, they turned against their brother and punished him, tearing him out of the fabric of reality itself and destroying him utterly. The Cataclysm occurred, beginning the Aeirnian Ascendancy, year 0. Right away, the balance of the world shifted, as greater disasters loomed on the horizons that before were monitored by the Gods. The Dragon Pact, made by the Gods had been ended by their deaths allowing the dragons to begin rampaging. Theastus regained sentience finally, after recovering from the strain of protecting the world, but could not resume his godhood. He was able, however, to reinstate the Dragon Pact as a representative of the Gods.

Having punished Khreatus in their grief, the demigods purged Aeirnholme of all life and banished themselves from the world, staying isolated from humanity. This became known as the Purging of Aeirnholme. After its purging, Aeirnholme remained inviolate, until the day that a human child was left abandoned by a dying, shipwrecked mother on its shores. Feeling pity for the only survivor of the wreck, the Demigods came down and took the child and raised him. This child, raised by powerful immortals, was endlessly exposed to miraculous feats of power and witness to the great Mysteries, and eventually learned how such things were done. The Training of Acivda was unintentional but has become the event which shaped the world to come. When he was of age, the Demigods sent him out into the world, where Acivda began teaching in the lands of Aeirn, to become known as Lore Bringer, for he possessed knowledge hitherto undreamt of and he willingly taught it to any with an aptitude who came to him. From this, did magic lore take hold in the world, and thus did the Demigods return to their Exile.

After seventy‑three years with his disciples, and the loss of his wife, Acivda left the schools he created and subjected himself to the torture and infamy of what is now known as The Testing of Acivda, by the Demigods. The continuing cooling trend, following the upheaval on Aeirn, caused an Ice age to engulf the North. Immediately, the northern Alin started warring against the Corindish nations to the south to escape the freezing wastes that were taking over the pole. In this time of chaos, rose up a rare leader, Lutori Corind, who united the kingdoms of Corind to push back the Alineuth attack. Acivda, the Lore Bringer, came north and befriended the High King of Corind, Lutori Corind, and aided him in the defense of his Kingdoms.

But the Northern Barbarians surprised them all, as powerful mages rose up from among the Alin and countered Acivda. The strain of this meeting brought about the Crisis the Gods had feared to cause: The world began to shatter! The Rift splintered open from where the destruction of the Evil Demigod by his brothers had weakened the fabric of reality. The Rift slowly splintered its way across and through the planet, ponderously shattering the world. By the time it reached the attention of the combatants in the north, it had grown too strong to abate. Facing this new threat, both sides quickly ended their dispute and tried to halt the Rift in its slow, fatal advance.

One of Acivda’s attempts to thwart the Rift had a most definitely unexpected result: Lutori exploded into nothingness! Or to be more precise, he exploded into a Rift-like substance. To this day few people have even been able to conceive of what he must have gone through. All that most people have realized, is that somehow Lutori had some innate link to the Rift—some resonant quality. Because of this, he found a way to bind the substance of the Rift to himself—his soul—and mastered it. Unfortunately, he could not reverse the effects of what had already occurred. In some strange way, he had actually bound the Rift into the world as he had bound it to himself! He learned, though, that he could shift the Rift anywhere and through anything on Aeirn without reversing the Rift manifestation. Further, he learned that whatever was displaced by the Rift translated within it until the Rift moved from that spot, returning it to its natural place in the condition it assumed within the Rift.

Over the centuries Acivda, the Lore Bringer, and Lutori, the Rift Warder, became as Gods in the way they guided and watched the races of Aeirn. However, they were not the only ones to find immortality and eventually godhood in the magic arts. Far in the East, a cold Mage of Necromancy, Rynhark/Death Bringer appeared and came into godlike power as he reveled in the secrets of Death. He was soon followed by a young, talented Demonologist/Warlock, Khiertok, the Soul Stealer, who formed the Deamon‑an in Edau. The world held its collective breath when Khiertok, the Soul Stealer rose out of Edau‑Terinth to acquire an unholy following, from which he created the Cairntyrin cult. Other schools of magic that have sprung up over the course of the years are the Myrecyrn, which formed for the purpose of opposing the Cairntyrin cult in its advance. The Lutori’an, which broke from the Na‑Acivda as the growth of rift magic began to mature on its own. The Ny‑Mira formed for its own reasons, oblivious to the attempt by The Necralin to conquer Edau. The first to do so, the Aeirnthanes broke from the way of Acivda to begin their own faith. The Necralin, who broke from the Na‑Acivda in conjunction with the beginning of the Alin ‑ Corind War; and the Myrescryers, who broke from the Aeirnthanes after the Rift opened.

The Demigods eventually decided that it is their purpose to oversee the initiation of new Gods for Aeirn, to protect and guide the people of Aeirn, since they are responsible for the death of the true Gods of Aeirn. Choosing their disciple, Acivda, to lead the way to finding and guiding the best possible candidates, they give Aeirnholme to him and Lutori and bid them to guard against the rising of new Dark gods, such as Death Bringer and Soul Stealer. Lutori and Acivda began searching for initiates, and between them, the gods of Light begin to find clues as to the identity of their Initiates. Death Bringer enters into the Edau war, in a bid to take over the entire continent. Pausing in his search for the Initiates, Lutori seeks out Death Bringer in Edau where they meet in an unresolved battle. In the next few years, Acivda disappears without a trace, not to be seen again until after Lutori returns to Aeirnholme in 1287 AA and begins to pour through the Gods' Prophesies.

1288 Lutori finds a prophesy foretelling the birth of the new Initiate, and implements the necessary elements, beginning the task of finding, identifying and protecting the infant. Further research reveals that the Initiate will be descended from the lines of Acivda and Lutori. This one will emerge under the influence of the Adversary, the next dark Initiate. Together, Lutori and Acivda search for the child in hopes of saving it from the Dark Influence. And quietly, in the background, Alin has been quietly gearing up for war with Corind, over ancestral hatred, and hopes of taking the Corindish lands.

1288‑97 Lutori observes the meeting of Jheric and Aloe, his generations removed grand‑son and Acivda's even more distant grand‑daughter, and is witness to their predestined relationship, as it eventually grows together and they fall in love. But, as the prophesy warned, a dark cloud looms over Corind. The Church of Corind, the Caerinate, has become very powerful and is instituting oppressive and corrupt reforms, usurping the rights of much of the population. At this time, Acivda resurfaces from his reclusion, demanding an explanation for Lutori's meddling in the lives of mortals.

1297‑98 The valiant actions of Jheric, in the face of the oppressive church, save the life of Aloe and free the way for their future, as Aloe accepts Jheric's proposal to wed.

1299 Due to the dangerous atmosphere in Corind at this time, Lutori isolates Aloe and Jheric within the Rift to ensure the safe conception of the Initiate, away from the influence of the Adversary mentioned in the prophesy.

1300 On the eve of the winter's solstice, unexpected twins are born to Aloe and Jheric just barely nine months after their wedding. A Daughter, Vaiel, and a son Vaielien, in that order. Unfortunately, this event is witnessed by the Hierarch of the Caerinate, who is visiting to deliver the papal decree that no female child shall be allowed to obtain the title of firstborn and heir in Corindish society, lest the entire family be stripped of all rank and punished by the Church. The Hierarch demands that, as a royal family, the House of Jheric Tranellyan Corind, comply with the dictates of the Church and expose the infant Vaiel to the winter night, to set an example to the people of Corind. Powerless against the Church, Aloe complies, while secretly arranging for her mid‑wife to deliver the babe into compassionate hands. Originally disturbed by the multiple birth, Lutori and Acivda see this to mean that Vaiel is the child chosen to become the first Initiate, as she is accidentally delivered into their hands by the woeful mid‑wife. Unknown to all, the Hierarch has placed a geas upon Vaiel and her brother to inhibit the potential power they possess from manifesting. Thus, do they grow up entirely unaware of their true nature.

1300‑06 Vaiel and Vaielien grow up unaware of the other's existence in their separate worlds, Vaiel in the incredible world of miracles and magic as Lutori and Acivda train her as an Initiate, and Vaielien in the heady world of politics and power of the more human nature. In truth, their training is very parallel, as Lutori was the progenitor of the Corindish Royal Line and raised Vaiel in much the same manner as her great grandfather, seven generations before her. The way Vaielien was assuredly being raised by his own father and grandfather. And despite the geas placed by the Hierarch, Vaielien proved to possess rift-sync and was initiated by the Lutori’an and trained the things that Vaiel was learning from the Master of the Rift himself.

1306‑12 As they grow, they both begin to see the way the world really is, as they, in their natural innocence try to be a part of other people’s lives only to encounter the vast differences between themselves and normal people. Even this early, they have gained subliminal contact with each other as their innate nature tries to fight off the effects of the inhibiting geas that is upon them. Also, over this time, the Church is festering like a cancer in Corind. Lutori and Acivda are called away from Aeirnholme, where they are raising Vaiel, at which times the geas falls on Vaiel more powerfully without the influence of those two to negate it. Vaiel begins to chaff under the conservative influence of her caretaker...Vaielien begins to rebel against the inequity of Corindish society and begins to fight the wishes of the Church and Throne in order to find an acceptable path in life.

\DRAGON PHOENIX \EXCERPT \LUST \A DAUGHTER’S RUIN \19980131-1858

There was a music in the motion. The fast beat of her heart, and the slower rhythm of her echoing footsteps, set a complex tempo. The wind whistled and moaned along the broad arcades, underscored by the rattling hiss of the rain. The crack and grumble of thunder dominated, reaching inside her chest and abdomen to caress her vulnerable parts. In the silences between, she heard even the endless passion of the sea, stroking the beaches, and thrusting among crevices and fissures of the rocks.

The sharp bite of ozone, and the spice of new rain, laced by the primal life-scent of the ocean, were taunting and arousing. Her nostrils flared as she drank in the heady mix. It sharpened her perceptions, opening her mind to her body, transforming flesh into some sensual flame. Her muscles moved beneath her skin like tongues of heat and light. Every motion created friction, her own clothes gripping and sliding around her in a binding caress. It was maddening. It was wonderful. It was unbearable. Her senses were overloaded and her whole being craved for release.

Like so many others, she had come here to be opened. To awaken her creative spirit, and learn to understand it’s physical expression. The more she learned about the fire within her, the more it changed her, striving to dominate and redefine her. The passion, her sexuality, had always been there, but—as if it were a stranger within herself, some prisoner—it sensed the approaching day of its release. The more she learned of the possabilities and uses of herself, the more defined its sense purpose became. In her own embrace there was release—only her hunger returned both sharper and deeper.

\DRAGON PHOENIX \EXCERPT \199801230-1752

Alex slid to a stop, pivoted and raised her guard as the onslaught continued. The dust raised by their combat was adhering to the wet film coating her body. Part of her attention was devoured by the sensation of hot blood coursing down her side. In a moment the shock would pass and she would feel the sting of the long slash cutting her open from ribs to hip. Somehow managing to keep her instructor’s blade from getting another bite out of her, she concentrated on folding the edges of the wound back together, willing the parted flesh to seal. She resisted the urge to wipe the sweat from her eyes; all she needed was muddy vision. The wound vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared, and again she was in motion.

Skirting the edge of the terrace, she got out into the open. Ciar was still pressing her, so she fell back to the center of the circle. Half of the circle nestled into the side of the temple, the other half of the circle was an unbounded drop to the rocky tops of the sea cliffs. Looking back over the way she came, she could see ocean and sky. Ciar kept his distance, flexing his injured leg. She still had not drawn her blade, using her body and her mind for attack and defense. She kept a sharp eye on him as he started to close again. Ciar still limped from her combined kicks to knee and hip. A bit too cocky, that. It probably cost her a pint of blood, taking that slash on her way out. Still, soft tissue healed faster than bones. Much, much faster than joints. A successful strike with her blade would have more lethal effect, but against one as good as Ciar, would be much more difficult to achieve.

The tickle touch of alien thoughts scurried along the edges of her mind. She readied herself for his attack. She could feel Ciar trying to break her concentration, but she had her mind wholly shielded against telepathic attack. Against another telepath, or a person with a sufficiently disciplined mind, telepathy was not enough of an advantage. It just opened one’s guard. Case in point. Stabbing into his mind with the edge of her thoughts, she punched through his defenses. Almost as quickly, her sword leapt from it’s scabbard and darted through a flashing series of strikes that crippled his defenses. In the space of a breath she landed three crippling and two killing blows. Ciar slumped to the ground, almost too shocked to hold his body together. Alex stepped back from him, flicking the blood from her sword, and looking up for the mediator. Several of the other students broke the circle rushing to Ciar’s side.

The mediator was a younger *Vai* instructor, Ciar’s usual assistant, Kynh. She found him standing behind her, blade ready. She nodded and moved aside. Kynh stepped into the opening between Alex and Ciar.

Alex held on to her discipline with a firm grip. It had happened so fast. She could hardly believe she had killed him. Ciar pulled himself together, shoving his students off, and rose to his feet. Very formally he bowed, eyes never leaving hers. She quickly wiped down her blade and sheathed it, then returned his bow and the gesture of respect.

“Cleanly done, *Nai*,” he said, as he cleaned and ran his blade home in its scabbard, “You have my respect.” Kynh received their final bows, and sheathed his sword. He had been ready to strike down either one of them from the moment the fight ended, had either one attempted to re-engage the other. With the close of duel formalities, Kynh moved away from them to reprimand the students who broke the circle. In the moment of privacy, Ciar bent close to her and challenged, “You have the skill for the arena. Do you have the substance?”

“I am willing to take the test,” she replied.

He smiled mysteriously. “I would expect a bit more apprehension, *vao*. Dying is not as easy as it looks, and it has a tendency to be permanent. You are a fast healer, I’ll give you that, but you are not immortal,” he pointed out. As the everyone moved back out of the circle, he asked aloud for the class’s benefit, “Now, tell me, why did you wait so long to draw your sword?”

Alex retrieved her shirt from one of her classmates and cocked her head. With a slight shrug she replied, “I drew it as soon as I knew I would win. If I had drawn before I was ready, I would have lost.”

“Indeed, you would have,” Ciar nodded, and addressed the crowd. “The mind is the sword of the soul, its best weapon and its best defense. The body is but a sheath to protect the edge of that sword and veil it’s lethal potential when the soul is at peace or in harmony with the dream. If Alex had relied foremost on the physical weapon, she would have dulled her effectiveness. Using her mind as her weapon, she won the fight before even drawing her blade; its only purpose was to bring the contest to a definitive end.” He retrieved his outer garments and handed his sword to Kynh. Casting a wary eye up at the sun, he joked, “A good thing, as it happens. It is much too hot for fighting out here. What say we adjourn to the gym for the remainder of class?”

As one, the class moved out of the sun and in among the columns of the *caoi danh,* the temple arcology. Looking back over the cliff top terrace, Alex ran her fingers along the split fabric of her body sleeve. Ciar had recognized her skill, but the challenge that came with it troubled her far more than her bravado had allowed. To bear a sword, one only had to be *Nai,* but to trade on that skill, to enter the lists one had to be *Vai.* She honestly did not know if her mind was strong enough to defeat death. She had proven herself the master of her body barely ten years ago. All too soon, it was time to see if she was as much a master of her mind. The wind stirred around her, rising up the cliffs from the ocean below. The chill she felt came from within.

Ciar glanced back and saw her standing lost in thought. She was a promising student. Almost too promising. He ran his hands along his torn body sleeve. It reassured him to see that the thought of the test did indeed give her pause. He turned and walked away. The temptation to name the day of her test was too strong. He did not trust it. All of his instincts told him she was ready, and it scared him. Always before there had been some doubt, some feeling that the student was not ready. He had called her into the circle, with naked steel, thinking to spot the hidden weakness, the telling flaw. The only insight he had walked away with was that she scared him. He shook his head. Either she *was* ready, or deep down inside he was willing to let her face an execution.

He would need an outside opinion. Someone who would be able to see past her martial proficiency, to judge the integrity of her spirit and the soundness of her discipline. Someone worthy of her fear as well as her respect. The memory of her luminous grey eyes piercing his gaze during the fight surged to the front of his mind.

He knew immediately who should evaluate her.

The matter settled for the moment; he stepped up his pace. Catching up with the stragglers from the class, he accompanied them back to the gym. Behind him, Alex’s hurried footsteps could be heard. She caught up to them as they were filing through the door to the training hall. He gave her an appraising look and then turned to Kynh. “We look like hell. You can manage things here. I’ll see you for the evening class,” he gave his assistant a pat on the shoulder and pulled the door closed after him. Alex raised an eyebrow once they were alone in the hall. He smiled, “You and I are going to head for the baths. You’ve earned it, and I need it.”

Alex quickly stripped out of her soiled clothes and stepped into the wash stall. As a common house, the baths at *caoi danhai* were public. One could wash in modesty, but house code required only *cleanliness* to enter the pools and basins. And little else. Washing was simply cleaning the body, but bathing was a subtle amenity. A bath was a place to relax and play, to heal and promote good humor. It was an important aspect of *avon* social life, allowing one to temporarily abandon the honor and obligation of a name, and just be who you were, without accouterment. Terrans always had difficulty making that adjustment, escaping from a mindset where morality and sexuality were painfully entangled. *Avonai* had never tried to deny their bodies. They were animals as well as people. So, they had never been so at odds with their animal nature as humans seemed to be. Of course, one had to really live with them in their own setting to really understand, despite identical chromosome counts, and compatible germ plasm, how alien humans were. Alex looked up from the wash bench as a group of familiar voices rang out in the small chamber of the bath annex.

Kali, H’Len, D’Nae, K’Mae, Jen

The bath annex was empty when they entered. The temple arcology was a vast estate, devoted to the housing of transient visitors, as well as the ruling House of the province. A place of learning, enlightenment and bureaucracy, encompassing the facilities of House, School, and Court, like all *caoi danhai,* it served as the social and cultural center of *avon* civilization. One observed House code. Av has come into the sophisticated heart of exotic society, where exquisite craft predominates literal technological advancement. Household life is full of subtle amenities, such as bathing. Washing is simply cleaning the body, bathing is relaxing and promoting healing and humor in the body. A bathed body is wrapped in house robes—never does one put on previously worn clothes after bathing.

\DRAGON PHOENIX \EXCERPT \AEGIS \OPTIONS TO CONSIDER \OPEN DRAFT \20010324-0122

Thunder rolled menacingly through the trees, echoing in the depths of her belly. She smiled at the odd sensation. The leaves danced in the wind as the storm rolled majestically on its back. The clouds were heavy, painted silver and black as they swallowed the sun. The promise of violence from the sky sat perfectly with her mood as she walked down the road. It had been an hour since she left the campus and set out to calm her thoughts. Instead, her mind had quickened with the approaching storm, her thoughts churning the misty depths of her subconscious. Her sensual smile turned into a hard grin.

Is it really too much to ask to be left alone?

Obviously, it is, she told herself a moment later, as she sensed someone turning onto the road behind her. Alex was used to being followed. She was used to the uncanny pressure which even the most circumspect pursuer created in her mind. As usual, the person following her was not alone. This one was working with a partner, and the two were so coordinated they had to be communicating with each other. The way the two presences she felt would fall periodically into a resonant state suggested telepathic contact. That only made the game more interesting. It was almost to be expected. No sooner did she try to slip out from under the oppressive cloud of thoughts unleashed in the wake of the delegation arriving to tour the campus than she picked up the presence of attention focused too keenly on her. The minds were unfamiliar to her. These were clearly not any of her regular observers. Her initial assumption had been that she had been pointed out to some of the delegates. Alex did not bother to ask herself what interest anyone might have in a mere student. Despite her age, she had a reputation as distinctive as her appearance--if not quite as appealing. The flavor of those minds was unusual, evincing the qualities of recognition and attraction overlaying quiet depths of intrigue and concern.

Alex had set out to lose her unwanted admirers--if indeed that was what they were. She had left the campus and cut through the streets of the surrounding community. She did not expect members of the senate delegation to abandon the purpose of their visit to pursue her, but these strangers did not seem to give the tour a second thought. If they truly were part of the delegation, they would have to be part of an official's entourage or security. It was difficult to read their minds, being limited to passive perception, but she had picked up enough to know that her pursuers were disciplined and motivated by a sense of duty.

They were also very good at staying out of sight. On the winding road she walked, her shadow could slip behind a tree as quickly as she could turn around. The two had dropped back once she had left behind the populated streets, but they had remained steadfastly on her tail. By this point, they knew she was sensing them, and she was certain that they were tracking her with equally enhanced senses. Unless she made an effort to perceive them actively, she could not know who or what they really were, nor could she initiate any action against them or retaliate quickly to any initiative on their part. Of course, she did not dare to initiate any sort of engagement. Within the Human Establishment of the Aegis Empire, psionic assets were strictly regulated. It was not illegal to be psionic. Not precisely. It was simply against the law for a psionic to use her abilities without a license. A typical civilian license could be obtained by any psionic who could demonstrate restraint, precision and discretion in the control of her ability, and comprehension of the rules and restrictions governing Class I Psionic Activity. Alex had a Class II license, and expected her pursuers to be at least that, if not Class III. Anyone who took an undue interest in her would know that her ability far outstripped the classification scheme. Only a fool would send someone after her who not only possessed a high potential but would be able to get away with using it.

Anyone really interested in doing her in only had to trick her into exceeding her license.

Alex frowned. She had been in the Avatar Program too long. A little bit of paranoia was to be expected of those enrolled in the program. Her experience had all but convinced her that someone was out to punch her ticket. It was not entirely her fault. Or perhaps it was. It had been almost nine years, but still no one had forgotten her reaction to her mother's death. No one had been injured, and the campus had been rebuilt almost as quickly as her mind had torn it down.

Alex stumbled to a halt.

It always happened like that. She still ached at the thought of her mother, and no matter how careful she was, her mind would wander right back to the memory of that day as soon as she became distracted or lowered her guard. Alex's eyes had snapped shut in pain, and it took her a few moments to blink away the tears that had welled up. As her vision cleared, she realized that her mind had tricked her twice. While she was preoccupied with the presence of her silent pursuers, her feet had led her back to the last place she had seen her mother alive with her own eyes. Alex debated silently whether or not to turn onto the path leading onto her mother's private estate. It was a large property, and the grounds had been the haven of her childhood. There were so many things she had not seen in the intervening years. Could she return to the haunts of her innocence and resist the temptation to visit that one spot now haunted by her mother's ghost?

Would she still find her mother's ghost if she did not?

It was the power of the mind that had finally lifted humanity from its isolation on Earth. It was the power of the mind that fueled and sustained the inter-galactic civilization humanity had become a part of. In spite of how central the mind had become to the Established Races, there was still so much that no one knew about the mind. The ghost of her mother was a mystery that had challenged Alex for almost a decade. Alex did not really mind being haunted by her mother, but the questions of how and why were torture to her, for she feared she understood the cause only too well.

Her feet decided for her, carrying her through the front gate and down the main path. Alex was not afraid to confront her mother's ghost. She simply wished for some way to do so without being forced to confront herself. As she approached the house, she paused and sent out a warning. This was sacred ground to her, and pursuers, whatever their intentions, were not welcome. A licensed psionic was free to do whatever she pleased in the privacy of her own home. As long as her influence did not extend beyond the bounds of her legal property, her mind had free reign. Alex did not hesitate to remind her pursuers of that.

Alex sensed the presence at the foot of the path behind her, pausing as the wind and dancing leaves all visibly stilled. The second presence joined the first to observe the leaves hovering silently in the grip of Alex's mind. The watched as she swiftly sorted through the collection of animate and inanimate material and released the birds and forest creatures from the static matrix of her psychokinetic field. Once she was certain she had made her point, she relaxed her grip and allowed nature to run its course. The wind could blow, and the rain could fall, and bodies could pass as before, but only at her indulgence. Alex was actively asserting herself within the sphere of her mother's estate, and no one she knew had the power to challenge her once she was so aroused.

Alex was not surprised that the pair simply stood at the edge of her mind's envelope and waited.

She shrugged and focused her attention on the grounds around her. Her pulse and breathing had unconsciously quickened as she advanced on the house. That had nothing to do with the use of her psi, and everything to do with the dreadful and delighted anticipation of where she already knew she was going. Her face became flushed and damp, and her limbs began to tremble as she tried to slow her approach. It had been nine years, but she still did not think she was ready for this.

Swallowing hard, she managed to stop and turn around.

For a moment, one of her secret fears returned to her. Could her patrons, her masters and mentors, know her dark secret? Was this some kind of test? Were those two strangers deliberately herding her here to this confrontation? Her temperature abruptly dropped, and her skin prickled with goose bumps. If they did know, she was in danger. There were several kinds of danger which evolved from such an understanding of her past. If her masters had set this up, if this was any kind of test at all, it was not a test of self-control. If they knew, and had arranged this, it could only be because they were certain she would fail--because she was intended to fail. Her psyche had been studied in detail, mapped and analyzed to the point where her sanity frayed. If they wanted to provoke her, to make her give them an excuse to take her out, they would know exactly how to do it. This was nothing like looking in the mirror and seeing her mother's face. Everyone saw the resemblance there. If she went to the house and saw her mother there, it would prove her suspicions about what had really happened that day. She did not know how she would react to that, but she did have a basis of comparison.

Alex tried to take a deep breath, feeling the part world she had taken absolute control over, and forced herself to relinquish her grip. No one had ever realized how much power she had unconsciously wielded as a child. No one had noticed her taking the campus into her mind as the final moments of her mother's life played out in the depths of space. No one had been prepared for the world to shatter when her mind was struck with the blow of her mother's death. If she had not channeled most of her power to her mother, in her last desperate defense, her grip could easily have encompassed the world, and the world would have shattered as easily as the three-hundred-acre campus. Alex stood there panting and shuddering as she considered the course of her thoughts. It was all supposition, and the basic assumption was itself too dangerous to consider. She could not afford to believe that her secret was known. What she knew about that day, that terrible moment, was instinctive, intuitive, a flash of understanding as the memory played through her. She had never dared to think it, to frame it in concepts which another mind could recognize. Her guilt was perceived as survivor's guilt. There was no way for anyone to suspect. Who would conceive of it on her own? Alex had never heard of anything like what feared she had done.

Alex managed to get ahold of herself as the realization settled in. If her masters knew, they probably would not even bother with an excuse. They would not want to risk provoking another episode like that again. They would use the resources at their disposal to get her in her sleep. She would never have a warning, if it came to that. But every moment she was alive she was assured that they did not know and that she was safe.

Just the same, Alex found herself profoundly curious about the two who had followed her. She focused her eyes back on the trail and looked at them. Alex straightened her spine as she realized that they had come into view and were approaching her. They must have taken the dismissal of her psychokinetic field as an invitation to approach. She quickly schooled her features. Her face looked calm and mildly curious as they came to a halt in front of her.

As hard as it was to compose herself before they good a good look at her, she struggled harder to maintain her poise as she realized the pair were not human. She no longer needed to ask them what their interest was.