Aeirn - 0

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

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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 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 appearant need of light. After a great distance, the corridor led to a stair, which he followed up unhesitatingly. The flightended 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 firy 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.

Twilight edged the ancient spires of the forbidden stronghold. Incalculable tons of graceful architecture thrust upward from the sea. The dark stone defied the endless fury of the elements with its sheer mass. Rain slashed at the veil of mist blanketing the isle, its sibilant hiss answered by the roar of the restless surf.

A cloaked figure emerged from the fog, crossing the damp, black sand of a secluded cove. The dissolving haze revealed a shore devoid of any clues to the manner of his arrival. Accompanied only by the steady sound of his footsteps, he made his way through the rocks beached at the foot of the cliff. High above, light appeared, spilling from a window and he glanced up. He nodded once and continued on, following a path cloaked in shadows, rising through the curtain of stone separating the shore from the structures above.

A riot of nesting sea birds launched themselves into the air, as he emerged at the top of the ravine and confronted the towering wall. He strode the length of the narrow ledge, stepping right off the edge and landing unerringly within a natural alcove. At his touch, the rock face crumbled into smoke, offering little resistance as he strode through but hardening back into solidity in his wake. Shedding water with a single, slight flick of his fingers, he continued on. The narrow passageway leading under the abandoned outer city delivered him to the heart of the massive inner complex.

Mounting the stairs at the end, he began what seemed like an endless ascent. The final flight emptied out through a concealed door into a cavernous stone gallery. Cutting across the echoing chamber, he entered one of a dozen halls, tracing a route leading from the depths of the fortress, through a series of corridors, a confusing number of turns and several additional flights of stairs, to the only door on the island that bled light from its edges.

The door opened at his approach. He stopped just inside the room and gazed at its occupant. The tall, well-built man stood in thoughtful contemplation of a dying log, blazing in the firepit in the center of the chamber. His tunic was cut broad enough to accommodate his chest, but snug at the waist where it tucked into a wide, leather belt—its buckle fashioned from a whole dragon scale. The sleeves were loose fitting, with vertical pleats from the shoulders gathered at the cuffs. The legs of his trousers were straight-cut and tucked into plain, sturdy boots comfortable enough for roaming the endless, 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 Heirarch..." he leaned forward for emphasis, "your own homeland is facing an inquisition, a second Age of Intolerance. The people are to be purged. This Heirarch 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 percieve 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 Chruch of Corind? The Caerinate? It has influence, but to acheive this would take decade 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 to 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 ammend 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 praytell 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 writen in the Prophesies is very ellusive, and I admit, they were almost too damnedably misleading for even me. I nearly ignored the references I was loking 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 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 Heirarch 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 Heirarch 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 reppurcussions. 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 commen 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 forseen 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 decalared 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 over estimated our role in this whole crisis. I think we need to be willing to accept the possability 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 some day 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...