Aerin - 1

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

pages ∙ words

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 that the sun itself would have 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 did still slumber 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 ellusive 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 bording, 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 companoin'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 stoicly 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 deleyed 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 smouldered 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 noticible transition. They were back onto the main deck even as the shipped bumped against the pilings, and steppping 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 semingly 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 travellers arriving in the early morning, and they atracted 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 thier power from even the common man or woman. It rankled each of them to see it, after the lengths they had gone to to arrive undetected and unrecognised 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 succeded 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 commemeration 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 Heirarch, as a testimony of its resuragance. 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 intermittant 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 unhapy 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 travellers, and deliberately selected this moderately reputable inn, choosen 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 resturant. 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 infinitessimally long time as if to humor the interest they couldn't avoid. They were both simply, yet effeciently dressed. Both somewhat light complected and bearded, one with impenetrably black hair, the other with with a firey mane. Their clothing bore no traces of decoration, being instead, hardy, practical leathers 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 forign, 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, travellers. 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 pennence 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 enthusiasticnod 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 aded,"Obviously, that sentiment is shared by the Heirarch 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 Heirarch 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, proded 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 refrence to Garrik's vacated seat. "I always expect them to recognise 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 recognised. And, whom if recognised 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 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 archetecture 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 nuture such a wayward orphan. This child, raised by powerful immortal beings, was endlessly exposed to feats of inconceivable power. An intelligent child, though, having bourne 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 dramaticly 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 underrstand the limitations that normal men and women faced in their harsh existances, 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 LoreBringer. 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 Demigodsv had returned to their Exile.

Lutori noticed Acivda's preoccupied thought, and turned his attention to his meal, daintilly chewing the still too hot meal, a spiced meat pastry, with crisp tubers of a winter variety, and cooked fruits in a thick cinnimon sauce. Acivda absently poked at his own meal, as his thoughts raomed 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 inscrutible 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 LoreBringer, 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 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, suprising 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 Acivida 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 suprising majority of the city's population would most likely celebrate this holiday. Lutori scowled at the rapidly drunkening Lutori‑an, and drawled acidly to Acivda, "Behold, the noble representitive 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 travellers flocking like pilgrims into the city for the past week, this convoy was arrayed in ridgid 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 Heirarch 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 Heirarch 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. Irreverant. Corindish thinking was approaching mindless liberality, that 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 appart 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 Cearinate, the Curch 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 genious 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.