

KTL Side Stories

Usurper

*9th of Harvest, 776TA
Valhalla, The Cognitive Realm*

He looked on silently as their forms grew ragged and transparent, fading into nothingness as their minds were cast back to their material bodies. The process still fascinated him every time he saw it and with these new senses he almost felt ashamed to witness something so intimate. What a wonder was life, he thought once again, to meld so perfectly the body, mind and spirit. What a wonder were the Unbound, to dance so brazenly between these realms, every part of them in perfect balance. Not for the first time Andros of Telleran missed being alive.

So. The grand reveal. These five Unbound – until now nothing but carefully placed pieces on the board – finally knew their role in the grand scheme of things. Or his scheme, at any rate. His war. By all accounts, this long-awaited confrontation could have gone worse. In fact, the way they seemed to accept his reasoning without so much as a hint of resistance, had him worried. There was the problem with grand schemes. No matter how brilliant or well meaning – when put into words even the highest ideals suddenly sound like the crazed mutterings of a madman. Maybe they simply thought it best to appease him for now, so that they could plot against him in secret. Or was it simply that his madness had reached a point where even his new state of being could not keep the fragments of his mind together?

Too easy, that little voice whispered once again from the dark corners of his mind, insidious and unbidden. Far too easy. We are not accustomed to being believed when speaking the truth, and who can blame us? We lie so easily it seems only natural to expect others to do the same.

The sad fact was even if they were to make plots to destroy him he might as well let them play out. With the necessary truths imparted and the Godsmoot called there was little else to do but wait for the end, and let everything play out.

We stand at the precipices of a new age, a world where the gods are but myth and legend. We should not be shy to lead the charge to the grave as an example to all. What pieces remain on the board will eliminate each other in time, whether we are the first to fall or the last. Of course, there remains one last thing to get underway. One final throw of the dice, then we can rest at last.

Andros closed his eyes and turned his senses inward, but as always there was only the Mass there. That roiling, twisting, trashing something that he had saddled with his will through sheer force all those years ago. Even now it resisted him as he reached for it, the Investiture heeding his command sluggishly. He winced, the feeling manifesting like trying to drink a viscous syrup to still one's thirst. As always when he reached for the power of the Allfather the projection at the centre of the room responded, as if agitated by his very attention. He couldn't just feel the Mass resisting him – he could see it within the twisting mass of light even with his eyes closed. Tendrils of blue and crimson thrashing back and forth, intertwined in a million tiny battles for supremacy.

“Why do you still fight me?”, Andros growled angrily at the Mass, throwing his will against the wall of indifference within his very own soul. “You are mine! You *lost*. Submit!”

Another tug and finally, blessedly the Mass relented. Awash with relief he channelled the power of the Allfather, revelling in the feeling of true divinity. His mind cast out in every direction at once, expanding rapidly to take in the vastness of creation. There really was nothing quite like it. He could see why the Elohim couldn't help themselves, why they had cast aside their holy duty in the pursuit of power. It was intoxicating. He wasn't merely powerful – he was power itself, seeping through the fabric of reality at the seams, traversing the three realms with barely a thought. When his mind's eye opened he was flooded by an all-encompassing awareness, an infinite web of Connection spreading out in front of him reaching through the realms and projecting his will.

A mere thought, that was all it took to find the Lich. Andros' presence shifted to a point of view far, far away, to the ruins of the Argent Keep amid fallen Aurica. He let himself approach slowly to get a good look at the city, taking in the sight of devastation he had wrought. An expanse of white marble and straight, grid-like streets, still dotted with the occasional blackened husks of a burnt-out building here and there. Despite the late hour it seemed there were a lot of people on the streets, the lights of tiny lanterns making errant patterns in the darkness. Andros found himself unexpectedly relieved to see the former inhabitants of the city out and about town seemingly unmolested, despite the heavy presence of Legionnaires at nearly every street corner.

There was no doubt who was in charge of the city but at the very least he noticed no fresh pits filled with bodies or blood-drenched execution grounds.

Indeed, things could have turned out much worse for Aurica. Why, we ought to be congratulated – this particular atrocity of ours has only destroyed a few hundred lives. Or perhaps a few thousand. Why does our shrivelled heart flutter with relief now, to see some few spared from the hell we brought to their doorstep? And why oh why do we feel the unmistakable urge to vomit?

He found Fain alone amid the emptied shell of the Argent Keep, sitting upon a crudely crafted throne of jagged metal. He lounged there leisurely despite the many sharp edges sticking out at all angles. A mass of swords, Andros realised, some still bearing the emblem of the Order of the Iris on their hilts. Hastily melted down and carelessly hammered into shape, it looked less like a throne and more like something one might find at an art exhibition.

Or a scrap heap more likely.

Rather ominously, it stood a mere hundred feet or so from the location of the original throne of the Argent Keep, where now the Rift roiled and thrashed. It had certainly grown since the last time he beheld it, the base having widened even further to eat away all but the outermost walls of the remaining structure. Such rubble that hadn't been consumed by the Rift itself had been cleared away, making the former throne room appear like a huge open-aired terrace bathed in pale moonlight and giving a spectacular view of the city lights down the hill.

The past weeks of being in charge of Aurica seemed to have only added to Fain's flair for the dramatic, for now the Lich wore purple-and black robes of the finest silks, embroidered all over with gold thread in mystical patterns. He had apparently found even more finery to adorn his pale skeleton with, his neck and fingers now heavy with even more jewellery no doubt stolen from the keep's treasury. Perched on his throne of swords, he was a caricature of a mighty emperor, a child's idea of an evil emperor.

Ah, what perfect vanity. A throne of useless weapons, for the most useless weapon of them all. The irony is hardly subtle. Let us hope we can motivate him toward success at least this one time.

At least the proximity of the Rift made projecting his avatar easier. With the boundaries between realms so thin he thankfully did not have to fight hard to give rise to the Dark One's form. Channelling the power, he let darkness drown out such light as there was,

creeping in from all sides and surrounding the Lich until even the Rift fell out of sight. Presentation, Andros knew, was important and this one in particular responded well to a bit of a spectacle. The Lich's head rose as the darkness descended around him, his skull's grin casting about expectantly.

"It reeks of divinity", Fain's voice grated in his usual mocking tone. "One-eye, is that you?"

Andros stepped out of the darkness, letting his footsteps boom and echo as he revealed himself. To the Lich he would appear as a Hobgoblin of powerful build wearing gleaming ceremonial armour, adorned by ancient goblin runes all over and cowed in a long cloak of blood-red silk. The mighty general of the Golden Legions, one eye gleaming with crimson light while the other remained hidden behind an ornate eyepatch. Fain met him with a dry chuckle, his bare spine clicking softly as he craned his neck to look up at him.

"And here I thought I would finally have some peace now that your little priest is dead. You had better not be considering making me your next Chosen."

What an excellent idea. With a more direct connection we could have such a grand time with your soul - or such soul as there is. But alas, you are simply not suited for what I have in mind.

"No.", Andros intoned instead, maintaining his persona and towering over the Lich with an imperious frown. "Another has been chosen. They will reveal themselves soon, to take their righteous place as the earthly ruler of my people."

The Lich chuckled, a sound like the grinding of dusty stone.

"Does that mean I finally get to do something? I'm sick of this damn city and its rules.. It's all, 'don't kill these Goblins, they're on our side' and 'hunting people for sport is not what our glorious new nation stands for'."

He grinned, evidently revelling in his own crudeness.

"I swear, whatever you did to Redcloak to make him the way he was, you completely ruined what they had going on in the Northern Wylds. Stacking stones and clearing fields? Bah."

He thought for a moment.

“Also, while I have you here, why exactly can’t I kill our prisoners and raise them for our army? They’re no good to anyone cooped up in the dungeons. Even those pesky resistance fighters they had me spare. It’s no way to wage a war, this.”

A mad dog really is a frightening thing. This one has been off the leash far too long, and we are not entirely free of the blame. This weapon of ours has a will of its own – and it is predictably distasteful. Still, we must work with the tools we have.

“If it is a fight you seek then your task should excite you greatly.”, Andros said, ignoring the Lich’s barbs.

“You are commanded to leave Aurica behind and venture to the Eastern Continent. You must be swift, and you will need no army. Not at first, at any rate. There is only one person I need you to kill, and I expect you will have no trouble finding them.”

The Lich, despite his lack of facial features, seemed to sneer. The gesture was strikingly human, and unbidden Andros was impressed by his ability to convey emotion without them. So strange, he thought, to witness more traces of humanity in this pile of bones than he had in himself of late. *Or ever.*

“Oh that’s just great. For weeks you have me sit on my bones, not a king but a nanny for a whole town of happy little monsters while your beloved Chosen is out there getting himself killed. And now that he’s gone you want *me* to become your little errand boy?”, the Lich said, waving a dismissive hand.

“Why should I?”

It was moments like these when Andros missed violence. How easy it would have been to crush this worm with a spell or two, remind him who was in charge here. Some people respect only force, but without his Chosen as an anchor there was no amount of force he could muster in his state to seriously threaten the Lich. It grated at him, but this was hardly the first time he had to swallow his pride. If force was not an option then flattery would have to do. In the end, only the results mattered.

A minor debasement, perhaps, but our pride niggles at us regardless.

“You misunderstand. Your presence in Aurica was necessary – without a pillar of strength to support my people they would have fallen apart and become directionless. But thanks to you they remain focussed, united towards their common goal. You sit the throne well, even if you were never meant for it.”

The Lich remained silent, but again Andros could tell he enjoyed hearing every word. As if he were an empty husk, inflated by nothing but vanity and pride he seemed to swell with every moment, sitting upright like the king he thought himself to be.

“However, the one whom you are to slay is no mere mortal. An opponent so powerful that it will take my mightiest warrior to bring her down. Your target, my warrior, is the Empress Su Daji of the Tianshan Empire. The one known as the Vipress, who has ruled the Eastern Continent with an iron fist for generations.”

There was a moment of quiet with Fain just sitting there, pointlessly scratching his cheek with a bony finger. When he finally spoke, he did so in an oddly thoughtful tone.

“That sounds... fun. Su Daji, is it? The Chosen of Nüwa?”

He knows? How on earth...?

“The very same.”, Andros said, careful not to betray his surprise. He had no notion of how this excuse for a thinking being had gained hold of this piece of knowledge, and despite the vastness of his mind it raced fruitlessly to conceive of an answer. The Empress’ identity as a divine chosen was not known to many, especially in this part of the world. By itself that piece of knowledge wasn’t dangerous, but he couldn’t help but wonder what else the Lich might know. And from whom. There was, of course, the small chance of this being just a guess, but again it seemed that the Lich’s unchanging expression mocked him, as if eager to observe the damage done by this conversational flourish.

There is something here we are not seeing. We recognize the touch of an unseen hand, the spectre of a manipulator. But well-practised as we are at doing it to others we feel oddly violated at having it done to us. Who are you, and why are you feeding knowledge to our weapon?

“The Empress has a tenuous grasp on her realm at best. Kill her, and I’ll consider your debt to me fulfilled.”, he said, frowning down at the Lich. If there ever was a time to play this final card, it was now.

“As a reward I’ll tell you where your phylactery is, and you will be free.”

For the first time during the whole conversation Fain grew serious. His body seemed to tense, again displaying that strange lingering humanity as he looked up at Andros like a dog waiting for a treat.

Or perhaps a fish coming for delicious bait, never even suspecting the net rising from the darkness beneath.

“The Eastern Continent is at war, and everyone is the enemy.”, Andros continued, pleased to finally have Fain’s undivided attention. ”You will have free reign in the way you achieve your mission. Once Su Daji lies dead you will have what you seek, and more besides. Perhaps you would make for a fine replacement on the Jade Throne.”

All lies of course, but the truth is hardly appropriate here. Or anywhere.

Andros did not wait for the Lich’s reply, instead allowing his avatar to fade along with the darkness. He let his consciousness drift for a bit, flowing with the energy that he had cast out to meet the creature face to face. Once again the urge to simply let go of it all was overwhelming, his essence longing to be let free and be allowed to reshape itself into what it was meant to be. He did not fear oblivion. He would rather welcome it, in fact.

We are so tired. But we cannot let go of divinity. Not yet. Our grip on the leash is tenuous at best, and letting go entirely would only serve to ruin our carefully set stage. We will push on. But we are so very tired.

Focusing his effort one last time, he returned to the Halls of Valhalla. There was no good in dwelling on his misery. He was likely just weary, his spirit exhausted at constantly having to wrestle the Allfather’s investiture into obedience. But he could let go now. With Fain on his way to set his final scheme into motion, Andros could finally rest. He let himself fall into the gnarled throne of roots and closed his eyes.

Like so often in his life Andros would regret letting his guard down. Before he knew to intervene, *she* was there, manifesting from thin air right in front of him. Her eyes met his, and he was powerless to close off whatever remained of his heart at the sight.

“Oh my poor Andros. Has playing god grown wearisome?”, Lirian said, the pitch of her voice sending shivers of unbidden excitement through his entire being. She was radiant, and as if he was a skittering cockroach he recoiled at her light. But there was no shadow here, deep in the recesses of his realm. Nowhere to hide from her or from his shame.

“I wonder what Kinsan would say seeing you like this. Do you think he’d consider it blasphemy or divine prerogative?”

“You’re not real.”, Andros said, but even to him his words sounded hollow. Impotent.

Lirian laughed, in exactly that way she had laughed when Andros had first confessed his love for her, stammering out the words between bouts of complete and utter panic. She had laughed, just like that, and then she had kissed him.

“Someone once told me reality is ephemeral. If what you see is not to your liking you can either change your perspective or change what you see.”, Lirian said lightheartedly, locking eyes with him and smiling wide. He remembered; Jerome used to say that a lot. Andros said nothing, eliciting a girlish giggle from Lirian.

“Don’t tell me you’re still jealous. He’s been dead for fifteen years, you know.”

He could only stare at her, as if her every word and movement were weaving an irresistible spell on him. How often had he imagined what it would be like seeing her again, speaking to her again. How often had he chastised himself for his longing, cut away at his heart to resist the mere idea of her existence. But here she was, and even the rush of channelling the Allfather’s power could not compare to the storm of emotion the sight of her caused within him.

For once he was glad for the hateful little voice within.

The mere echo of affection, nothing but a specter of what could have been. Be still, our pitiful heart – this is nothing but a trick, and not even a good one. And even if it were truly Lirian, should we not show her the fury she deserves instead of this pathetic cowering?

Finally roused to wakefulness his mind returned to function. Andros remained quiet as he gathered his wits. The initial shock at her sudden appearance had somewhat thrown him, but thinking it through for even a moment there was no conceivable way this was truly her. For one, Lirian was still very much alive so this could not be her Cognitive Shadow, drifted somehow to his divine sphere of influence. A projection, then? No, even in his initial confusion he would have recognized the signs of an Unbound traversing the realms.

“Who are you?”, he finally asked, focussing his attention entirely on the apparition.

Lirian still grinned, but as she held the expression her face looked less and less like her own. Like wax dripping from a candlestick, her beautiful round face fell away, revealing the sharp lines and angles of someone else underneath.

A young man's face, no older than perhaps thirty, with an unruly mop of brown hair and a short stubble beard. He wore something that looked very much like a uniform, black and trimmed with gold at the edges. Adorned with gold chains and glimmering epaulettes he looked like a general on parade. He had an imperious air about him as he regarded Andros from behind one gleaming blue eye, the other clouded in white.

Andros growled. The reaction was entirely intuitive, and it surprised even himself. It manifested as a deep rumbling all around, the very halls of Valhalla trembling beneath his ire. But his visitor only smiled the wider for it, evidently pleased at having elicited such a reaction.

"You really are losing touch.", he said, looking about the room as if seeing it for the first time. "Truly, you were much more formidable to behold when we last came face to face."

"Why are you here?", Andros found himself saying, every fibre of his being tensing as the realisation of who had come to visit dawned on him. He need not have bothered to ask, of course. There could only be one reason for *him* to show himself.

"Why, to fight, of course. Unless of course you wish to surrender what you stole?"

As Andros looked on, blue mist began to rise from the projection at the centre of the room, streaming through the air towards the visitor's body. As it grew close it began to coalesce into tiny metal plates, covering his body like a layer of ice. Wherever they met the plates interlocked and grew outward, creating a seemingly impenetrable but flexible suit of armour around the man that seemed to adjust itself to fit perfectly on his body. Upon the sleek chest plate the gilded crest of an open eye emerged, thousands upon thousands of the tiny plates clicking into place all over his body. Still smiling, he held out his gauntleted hand to the side, the mist following the motion and coalescing into a long, slender spear.

"I would ask of you to forgive my opportunism, to do this in a moment of weakness.", Odin said as his armour grew to engulf his head, distorting his voice to a metallic growl. He levelled the spear at Andros, the tip gleaming with a murderous edge.

"But I don't recall you affording me such courtesy. Now defend yourself, usurper!"

