I

She turned, struggled inside the black ice. The slight lift of pressure made the spirit sigh, chains quickly wrestled to capture any release she carved. They strained, and rolled inside her, crawling – tearing through.

The Dark Womb quivered in response.

She grimaced at the release from her bleeding wound, a rift which desired to swallow, to undo. To wake – was never pleasant and as the Bearer she felt all their desire and rage. Linked chain by chain bound with a tiny piece of what she had been – flowed through her. The small piece which chained her.

Her name. They screamed it, summoning her. She was Shadow’s Bride, but there was a whisper, a small voice which echoed after each chorus - Dream Maiden. A scar of what she had been once, but it was enough.

The whisper of her Self peeled her infinite form from the dark. Black Ice shattered. Stars burst with light only to be drowned in cold waves, the push and pull of the Fallen.

Ice crashed – harmonized with the increased zeal of needles. The quick chime of needles synced with the screaming waves. Dark chords strummed by red unseen hands created electric currents of blue, crashed like lightening against the struggling breath of stars. A dark harmony which was second to the powerful melody of the heart.

The drum which all gods, all creation slaved to, it rang clear and strong with each push. The waves were driven back by the steady, consistent stroke of Weaver. The heart pounded, smooth and undeterred, it called. A soft whisper which wrapped itself inside each heart. The melody piqued and dove, worming its way inside each thread of the Web.

The Fallen moved to the drum, on their backs moved stones of bone. Thirteen stones which formed a rectangular box. The waves whispered, their voice was lost against the heart, it whipped around the waves like a mist, a soft mewling sound echoed from inside the stones shook.

The Fallen wrestled, they bit and consumed each other, only to be consumed by the stones. Black stones which suspended the half dead girl in the Dark. Stones shifted, bones snapped and scurried into play, grey flesh dressed the bones, sewn together with black veins. Red lashes criss crossed against the pitiful skin. The Fallen groaned.

The stones moved toward the intricate woven web, pulled by their Master’s hand.

The tentative gleam of light scarred her sight, the cloud of grey drowned in glittering flashes of violet. Something moved, something living moved across the watery sky. Her muddled mind tried to understand, but she had woke in the After.

Elvira woke to his cry - a dragon’s cry. Elvira’s dark eyes fixated on his glittering scales of violet. Elvira was curious more than repelled to see the dragon rip a tooth from the White Dragon who Spider had tied to her web. Elvira was slightly groggy, the stones were pulling her somewhere, draining her of what little energy – life she had.

That was the price of the tomb, of being Kept from the end, and waking to the beginning. The stones would take Elvira to her master, but she had woken too early. Had woke before the Island. Not unusual, she had witnessed the beginning of the cycle plenty of times.

Yet, the dragon? *This was* different.

The dragon shifted into various beasts, which wasn’t alarming, but it was that each beast was a different blood. From a different element and line. Elvira watched with alarm and wonder as this entity sailed unchallenged through the winding planes and more impressively Weaver’s Web.

Elvira didn’t like Spider, she had been bit several times over the course of her cursed existence, but Elvira had accepted that was the condition of entering the Web. Yet, this dragon – this being went uncontested.

He shifted from a giant centipede to cockroach, each were a shade of violet like the dragon. He was a spider and then a beetle next. He was beautiful and Elvira wished she were as vibrant and sacred as him.

Yet a dark, bitter part of her -which had survived and evolved over her existence waited for him to get caught in the webbing, all the gods had long since time been caught in the webbing. The gods were Kept, they worked in the Web for the Orb. Elvira knew what they wanted, what they all wanted was to change their fate. To unravel the web and Lines.

Elvira watched as he shifted shape into King Snakes of Fire and Ice. Even the red ribbons which reminded Elvira of an old child’s game – Cats’ cradle couldn’t contain him. He went unchallenged into the Orb.

Elvira wondered which of the Thirteen Realms he would curate? He must be a Realm Beast? Yet every being who entered no matter how sacred or in her case cursed entered without Spider’s fangs on their neck. Elvira shuddered, where was Spider?

Elvira hugged her knees to her chest, she rocked and sang to drown out the Fallen. Elvira could still hear them, taste them – dead was dead, even a half dead parasite like herself had difficulty accepting such a simple truth.

She was dead.

Elvira’s ominous eyes flickered over her newly dressed bones. Spirit and bone, she had been remade- summoned, but she still needed blood. Elvira sighed, she was here because someone had called her, someone had her bones.

Whomever this master was, he was different than the others who usually summoned her after the Orb was stable. Elvira was as cursed as a Jin, to have her spirit summoned and enslaved to whomever held her bones. The stones would deliver her to the Orb, and then theses bones would take her to her master.

Yet, what vexed Elvira they never had them, her insipid masters only had a passage from a book, or some jewelry she had worn. Something, but never what she wanted – her bones. Never what she needed to realize who she was in this little game of Halo.

This game of Reverse.

Elvira cracked her neck and stretched her thin arms, she wondered where these bones had come from? They were that of a young woman, at least she wasn’t a child again. A child’s bones were the easiest to steal but their bones didn’t last too long – not for her.

These were strong bones, bones which may last her and entire turn – a cycle of the Orb. The price would be steep, the memories, knowledge of the bones would trap her, may even hinder her from realizing her Self.

Elvira accepted she couldn’t remember everything, but what she did know would be shared with these bones, and the bones would aid her against her master – who may or may not have her bones. There was the nagging issue of the spirit reclaiming their bones, but sometimes the spirit never reclaimed their bones. Elvira sighed, but the bones always called the spirit nonetheless. The bones would tell her, share with her, and together they had a chance of surviving. She had to bide her time, had to play and obey her master.

The question of whom placed her in the tomb? Who buried her with another’s bones crept in her mind, but such questions would only sour her tongue. There wasn’t any use in dwelling on what *They* would never let her know.

The *They,* she bit her tongue with the thought, but was it her own will? Or did *They* – the unseen hands, and Council of Shadow and Blood make her do it? Elvira laughed to herself, she smirked as the Fallen tried to mimic – to learn and be what they could never be.

Flesh.

Not now, not without the Symbiosis Tree, there was nothing for them. The Fallen wanted her to find the small spark- the piece of life, the link from the Time Before which was inside them. Elvira was not the Soul Tree.

Even if Elvira found the spark, the small speck of soul which had survived the bite of Shadow and the clamoring of regret and death- Elvira could only consume it, not re-gift it – not give it a new life. No, only the Weaver or perhaps the All Father could do this, but it would be inept.

So many beings walking around being inept. Elvira sighed, she was such a being -a pitiful being stitched together for some design which never fulfilled her. Elvira tried to push the thoughts away, her tongue was shredded. No matter how many times Elvira bit- chewed on her tongue and cheek the thoughts wouldn’t stop. Whose bones were these? The thoughts were strong, so strong she began to see the dark move – see white wisps, and the dark bend as her spirit linked with the bones.

Her thoughts were being realized.

Elvira heard the snap of the Fallen, heard their jaws as they tried to consume the smoke like wisps. The outline was growing more distinguished, but it faded and reformed further and further away. Elvira watched as the threads were lost in the folds of Shadows Bride.

Elvira shivered feeling needle-like punctures on her forearms and neck. The Fallen were growing bold with their impatience. The stones which she sat on were shaking.

Elvira found her mind moving- reaching and seeing through – with the Fallen. Twelve beings, shrouded in shadows and hoods stood in a circle. A long structure, which bent and twisted from the head to foot.

A snake, it was a snake though she didn’t understand how she knew. The beings were gathered around the snake like table. At the center were two pools which flanked the snake’s belly.

A dark blue pool, which made Elvira’s spirit rage against the false bones. The other pool was milk white which made her bones and her mind lash out at her spirit. Elvira screamed as she felt her Self being split.

The hooded beings turned toward her.

The bell tolled eleven times and an eleventh lantern was lit by one of the figures. Elvira could only see eleven lanterns but she knew there was thirteen, one for each realm? Elvira wanted to stop she felt the stones slip from underneath her.

Forming a winding path which would lead Elvira through the Planes and to Spider’s fangs. The Stones were singing – rebuilding and multiplying a tune which was as dark and animated with pain as it was with life. The image of the Council was lost as the Fallen were pulled apart.

The bones had spoken, had all but bent the womb around her. The bones were silent now, which Elvira was thankful for. Elvira was exhausted but she was eerily aware and troubled by what must have been the fate of the spirit of these bones.

Elvira didn’t doubt these were bones from a child of Eater. A child who had the power of the Third Eye. Had the mind been drained? Had the spirit and Mind been used by the Dark Trinity to see and cage others of its Kind?

Elvira stared transfixed at this body which the bones had created for her. Someone had left them for her, but why? Strong bones, powerful, and tainted with the mark of the Third Eye. Only a small amount, her spirit was her own, and Elvira did not have the Third Eye.

The bones were calling, pleading with the spirit to return, the bones were trying to summon the spirit. Somehow the spirit was connected to the Council. Elvira didn’t like this new twist.

Elvira needed to be unseen in the Orb. Those of the Third Eye, who had the spirit of the Mind, were hunted and used. If, there was such power in these bones, just a sample of what it could do with the right spirit, than perhaps she should secure another.

Those of the Third Eye were too known, and what was known once would be realized again. What Was. Is. and will Be.

Elvira stared at her hands before her attention turned to the Fallen. Elvira sighed, “I will try to give these back to you, but I am not a Jin and I am not a Soul Tree.” The Fallen were a raging storm, they didn’t like the bones. Was the spirit of the bones in there? Probably not, but it may be in the Orb.

Elvira didn’t think anything would really change for her in this cycle. The Fallen would bind themselves to these bones just as they had done to the others. That was part of the price.

Elvira needed marrow inside the Orb, and the Fallen would give her time, would swarm the bones, nest inside her. Prevent the spirit and the bones from finding each other. Yet the Fallen would take from her, as much as they gave.

A gruesome bargain. Whomever had given her bones, had sealed her in the tomb. Whomever this was had guaranteed her compliance, and her existence long ago. No matter how long she searched, or what abilities she acquired, whomever had saved her – cursed her was never revealed.

Elvira grimaced at the truth, some things she had to accept. Her attention turned to the Star Web. Elvira could see the tail of the dragon, she heard the lapping of the waves as the Spirit dragon, Sheng-Lung nurtured the thick mist which Kept the pools.

The mist is what kept Eater and Dark Water from turning their appetite to the Orb which Dream Maiden held in her hands. Sighing Elvira glanced again at the impressive web which Weaver had spun to protect the gods, and inadvertently the Orb.

The Wheel rested underneath the Orb, red lines filtered through the Wheel and embraced the orb, lacing through Dream Maiden’s palms. The Mountain was thick and ominous as it pierced the center of the Orb. The Mountain was formed from the rock -veins of Dream Maiden.

Cold.

The Universe was cold and unforgiving, but beautiful. Just as the Fallen were, Elvira couldn’t hate them even though they would burrow deep inside her. Force her to be a puppet for them for most of her existence. Yet, she didn’t hate them, they were just trying to survive just as she did.

The Heart was pulling, trying to get someone to answer its call, but there was something else there - a song. A song of resistance and chaos which made most recoil from the call. The box within the box – the heart inside the heart.

Elvira smiled, she looked down into the Pool through the Mists. Elvira saw the broken tree, but it was more what she didn’t see that made her pause - where was the Coin? Elvira knew the gods had yet to break their chains, she was proof of that.

Elvira leapt from the stones, into the cold embrace of the Fallen. They swirled around her, burrowed inside her – pushing and pulling. Forcing her Self further and further apart, forcing Elvira further from the Web and moon but into the Orb.

II

Lock moved as fast his thoughts through the winding halls. Each toll of the bell was a wound in his fragile Self. Master would devour Lock if he failed to deliver the Jackal to the Table by the thirteenth toll.

Lock was vulnerable without his master. He had to move quickly and unnoticed, which is why Lock took this quest as a sign of trust. Perhaps, his master would reward him with more time? Perhaps, he would be given a body? Lock tried not to get too ahead of himself, but his existence was dependent on his masters’ pleasure.

Lock needed another path of existence than the one which was crudely carved out for him. Lock knew his existence of a spirit was precarious and when Rising came he needed to be inside the Orb if he didn’t want to be returned to the Fallen.

Lock skidded to a stop, the doors were open! The two large doors were to remain closed, no being crossed the Threshold, but it seemed Jackal had. The doors – the Gates of Infinity had no beginning or end. Lock quivered at the thought of crossing the Threshold – would he survive?

The creaking of the Wheel made Lock step back. There wouldn’t be anything for him – not when the Rising came. If, he wanted to please his master he had to deliver Jackal. Lock focused on his reward…

What hair would he have when he was flesh? Blonde, he would be blonde – all the powerful people were as bright in color as the gods. Lock would be tall too, not too tall, nothing attractive or useful about being gangly.

He’d have eyes like the Island sea, rich colors of gold and green with a touch of lavender. Wings? Yes, he’d have glorious wings – not fluffy but hard durable maybe dragon wings. Something a warrior would have, something someone important would have.

What line? He’d be a star, yes a great glorious general of the Star Kingdom. A general to the Second People, the Kingdom of Blood - those who civilized the realms. Lock smiled, yes he’d have everything then – he’d be important, but most importantly he’d be remembered.

What was remembered would not die.

This seemed like success to Lock who just a sliver of someone else, someone that the Council, Kept to feed on. A thing to watch and listen through, a lowly piece – but with powerful ties. Lock sighed, he would be remembered after this.

Lock would be winged too, yes he’d have to have wings, as all the ancient Stars had wings. Not the fluffy winged kind no, Lock wanted to be a warrior. A general maybe – someone important.

Lock stared at the doors again, they were as dark as the night. The doors were waves of the dead. Many a man and spirit had gone made from staring at them, from walking by, what they saw and heard from the gates…. Lock shivered. The doors were open.

Lock didn’t want to go out into the Dark, if – if he made it past the doors. Lock didn’t want to step into Threshold, and if – if he didn’t sink into the pools. Maybe, maybe then the Wheel wouldn’t surrender him. Maybe Lock wouldn’t be caught in a spoke, and find himself buried under the Wheel.

Maybe.

Lock had to pass through the doors if he wanted to invite Jackal to the Gathering. Not that Jackal didn’t know of the Gathering, but that was one of his demands, a silent demand but one all adhered too. Jackal had to be invited, his membership was not a guarantee of his attendance, but failure was if *he didn’t* attend.

The White fur was a beacon of light in the dark, Jackal was still as he felt the grinding of the Wheel vibrate under his feet. He listened. Frost grey eyes observed the bleeding pulse of the spirits below him, surround him. Jackal was aware of Lock but the spirit was an insect who watched with feigned interest.

Lock had heard many stories of Jackal, but seeing the White fur made him dizzy. Lock blinked trying to focus what there was of his Self to the task at hand. The White fur made Jackal look far more imposing from a distance than he actually was- *at-least Lock hoped that was the case*.

Lock tried to reassure himself that the stories were untrue, yet he couldn’t deny what he saw- leagues away stood a White Sinagoth. A mysterious species which was a hybrid between gods and beasts, which resembled a monstrous white gorilla.

Sinagoths, were one of the first breeds to fill the Orb, they were immensely powerful and strong, averaging around twelve feet. Lock knew from the stories this was Troll Sinagoth and was nearly twice the size of an average Sinagoth. Lock shuddered to think of the weight, the beast must have been at least a few thousand pounds, but that was Before.

Now there was only the Jackal.

A ruthless man – a god from the Ice who prided himself on being a great hunter of man and beast, even gods had fallen against his strength. Jackal was a savage who killed and wore the skins of sacred beasts and men of each line. There were rumors he took the organs of the beasts he killed – they were not any beasts but Realm Beasts.

Beasts which shouldered the Realms on their back or in their bellies. Beasts which held great power and had given this spirit born – this Ice Man the strength which rivaled gods. A member of the Council who stood in Lock’s path dressed in the skin of a White Troll Sinagoth.

Lock wasn’t sure how he was going to reach him, once he stepped over the Threshold he would be in Infinity. The intersecting points of creation and paths – the Wheel. Lock could hear it moving, shifting and pulling the red strings which made them all dance.

Lock couldn’t touch the Wheel or the strings, and what surrounded the Wheel was the Web. Weaver would pull him, bind him – dismiss and dissect him. There wasn’t any means he could survive the shifting of the Wheel.

The rush of voices pulled Lock through, he didn’t want to look but he couldn’t stop – he was only a spirit a sliver of something which the Council wanted. Not badly though, maybe not at all – perhaps this was a means for them to end him – whatever sliver he was. Lock was helpless against their power.

The Forgotten, the severed pieces of the Fallen moved under Lock like an overzealous sea. Faces – broken and misshapen moved under him, they weren’t dragging him under, but they were pulling him. Pulling him towards Jackal.

Lock was curious more than afraid, how this god or Barbarian of the North as his master called him, had cowed the spirits. His master had spoken of Jackal in spite and rage – Jackal was only a man. One who had lived too long, and had too many secrets – he was a split face. A true vessel of power, only revealing half of his face the other was kept hidden, kept in shadows and power.

Master said this was the secret to Jackal’s power, split face – keeping his Self hidden from them. Creating and nurturing deals which hurt him but benefited him more than the members realized. Their weakness of rage and shadowed alliances strengthened Jackal, their thirst to kill him tipped their hand.

The members needed to know Jackal’s weakness, what motivated him – what he feared to lose? Lock was trying to prepare himself, to reassure himself this was just a man -a man who had killed a Troll Sinagoth with his bare hands. A man who cowed the Forgotten.

A Master and a Member of the Council who stood on the Wheel as leisurely as he would a sidewalk.

Lock marveled at how the Sinagoths’ arms were preserved in a bone crushing embrace around Jackal’s broad shoulders. Lock wanted to see the claws, but he couldn’t – not yet. The beasts head was covered from Lock’s view by intricate White braids of Jackal’s hair.

His White mane entranced Lock with an occasional a glint of silver, what was braided in his hair? Lock knew warriors often braided metal coils or bone in their hair, and Jackal’s hair was as thick as rope. Lock knew from rumors that Jackal wore the Sinagoth’s feet as boots which covered his knees.

Jackal turned he caught the spirit and set him right on the wooden spoke beside him. The stupid fool had been taken aback by Jackal’s sudden movement tried to free himself. “Stay,” Jackal growled.

Lock opened his mouth to speak but he could only feel the cold rushing into this Self, cutting and shaping him. Something was happening to him, something? Lock blinked, he steadied himself, but Lock did the strangest thing – a reflex, Lock breathed in the cold which rolled off Jackals tongue.

Lock vaguely realized he had almost fallen, but the thought which screamed at him was – its true! The stories were true. Lock wanted to look away, to spit out the invitation of the Gathering but all he could do was stare at the claws of the Sinagoth which were imbedded in Jackal’s chest.

Jackal’s chest was broad and muscular and as white as marble, but it was scarred and gruesome which made Lock want to look away – but he stared transfixed by the horror of it. The claws were as thick and long as a child’s arm, they were sealed in the chest. The claws couldn’t be removed without shredding the heart altogether, the heart had healed around the claws.

Lock’s eyes moved to Jackal’s hands which had picked him up and moved him around like he was nothing. Spirits were contrary to flesh, they weighed more and were far stronger. Lock blinked again, there was something wrong with his vision, there was color – Lock saw color.

Spirits saw in black and white, but not color it was something which exemplified the difference and misunderstandings between spirits and flesh. Somehow he was seeing, somehow he was standing, could feel the element which had forged the Wheel – wood. Lock was feeling as much as he was seeing, he was overwhelmed by all of it but his eyes locked on Jackal again.

Lock looked at the huge boots –no feet. The Sinagoth feet the Northman wore, they reached his knees just as they said. The claws were still in them, they were sharpened and made a tapping sound against the wood.

Was this how Jackal could stand on the Wheel? Lock didn’t understand how he was, let alone Jackal? The rushing of waves inside his head was deafening, but the crackle of sound he heard was new. Lock blinked again and concentrated on Jackal.

Lock felt if he didn’t he’d be thrown from the Wheel, somehow he was connected somehow his existence would be decided by this Ice Man. Lock grimaced at the fur shorts, made from the Sinagoth, which Jackal wore.

“Speak boy,” Jackal rasped, he was annoyed with having his solitude disturbed. Jackal liked to watch the Orb – watch the gods work and the ghosts inside the Orb move about their lives as though they still lived. As though they had just woke from a nights rest. The Orb – the womb itself was old.

Life was not lost only transformed. The Orb couldn’t be rid of those who had once filled it, they were there – walking ghosts waiting for the Coin. Waiting for direction – for the game to begin.

Once the Coin was summoned, and the Wheel shifted- life would have order. The ghosts would have opportunity. Jackal sighed, he watched the Dark Womb flex under his cold gaze.

Jackal sensed the Fallen, the broken pieces of the spirits who would remain unchanged. The Fallen watched him, sang to him, but Jackal knew the risk of using the Fallen was far greater than the benefit. The Fallen were Pieces discarded but not without purpose, not without use.

Jackal wondered which broken pieces he would find there, would a sliver be enough? For some it would have to be, those who woke from Oblivion had to appreciate the rustic nature of their Self. Not all could be saved, not everyone had their named written in the tapestry.

Jackal remembered, but could he find all the pieces? He wasn’t alone in this, but would he be first? Would he survive long enough to see it all unfold? Jackal gestured to the Forgotten, pieces cut from pieces which no one remembered.

The Forgotten moved under the Wheel, forcing the Fallen back. The Forgotten were so far removed from the Fallen that neither force recognized their Self in the other. Yet, they were all parts of the same cloth, same Self. Perhaps it was better not to know.

Lock was paralyzed by the deep gravel of Jackal’s voice, his eyes darted to Jackal’s neck where the thick band of silver hid the wound which wouldn’t heal. The Mark of the Serpent which had bit him, when he had been in the Ice. Jackal’s voice were a series of echoes which were as dark as she.

Lock studied the red thick strand of hair braided in Jackal’s silver beard. Another trophy, but one which seemed more telling than the hide of the Sinagoth. There was something about it –was this part of his power, his secret? Was it enough to tell his master and earn his reward?

Jackal rolled his ice grey eyes, obviously Leviticus had sent his spirit bitch to irritate him. Yet Jackal only pitied this boy, who obviously was a living sliver of someone else, the hope and optimism wreaked from the boys being. He wanted to be flesh realized.

Will and Fate were funny things, Jackal mused. Smoke silver eyes flickered over the Forgotten – very funny things. Jackal smiled which had an ill effect on the spirit boy, who tried again to step back. Lock looked away for a second, the man’s snarl made him look more beastly.

Jackal knew Leviticus enough to know he wouldn’t honor the boy that way – no Soul Drinker would ever give spirit flesh. Jackal didn’t doubt Leviticus was using, feeding off this spirit to gain access to the line, to find himself a host. Jackal killed spirits like this boy when he saw them.

The savage could have mercy now and then it kept their hearts from turning completely black. Jackal chuckled to himself, which seemed to frighten the boy spirit- even more. Jackal didn’t blame him, it was an ominous sound.

Jackal nodded, his hands were steady and didn’t move to sever the cord which Leviticus had on the boy – the cord was thin. Some things were best managed versus handled. Jackal stared at the boy.

“Tw-tw-twelve,” Lock cleared his throat, he was going to be thrown to the Fallen. Lock could feel Jackal’s animosity as deeply as the cold. Yet all he could do was stare at the scars which lined half of his face – was that from the snake or from the Sinagoth?

Lock wasn’t sure how someone so scarred was still attractive? Yet Jackal was, he had a strong jaw line, a prominent nose which would have made him look pretty had it not been broken several times. Jackal’s brows were arched, which made his eyes look as luminous as the stars, despite the massive claw mark which marked his face.

His skin was marked with scars from his battles but they only defined his already overly pronounced muscles. The scars on his lips made them more appealing, and his snarl more intimidating. He was strong, that Lock or anyone else couldn’t argue or dismiss.

He was the largest man Lock had ever seen, and he had seen many men of various species and blood. Many men and Masters fall or at-least bend the knee to his master, but not Jackal.

There was the cold, it moved through Jackal he could have been made of marble, “Twelve tolls sir.”  
 Jackal looked up at the Orb, Jackal’s frosted grey eyes looked to where the Box was. The dragon was bound for now to the Web, but would the dragon be free before Dark Water and Eater escaped the Mists, would the dragon even touch their appetite?

Jackal doubted it, but he knew Dark Water thirsted, the bite on his neck proved she would come for him. The poison would set in when she neared, when she came for him, but he would take part of her too. Jackal smiled, it would be a good death.

“And?” Jackal snarled, he allowed more of the Ice to pour into the boy’s face. He was a pretty boy, if he had flesh he had no doubt he would find himself among the Families of the Lines. The spirits features were a vague arrangement of white wisps – white energy which moved about him.

Lock had good energy though, too good to be used to satiate Leviticus. Jackal smirked – snarled again at the thought. The cold was taking to him, shaping him, feeding off the will of this one.

“Will you join the Gathering Sir?” Lock felt the cold enter him, it was an odd thing to feel, to be connected to something such as the cold. Yet at this moment Lock felt it, felt what most would consider a stirring, a soft pulse of a heart drumming in his ears? Odd, but he did -he heard drums, and there was a heated sensation in his chest.

“A good death is what fuels our souls, it is our rebirth. Rebirth is achieved not by right but earned. The crow will carry us far in his mouth and let us sleep in his feathers if we are so honored in death.” Jackal removed a piece of bone which dressed his ears, “the trail of our journey must be red for Crow to see.”

Jackal handed the bone spear to the boy spirit who stood beside him, with a more substantial form. Lock grasped the bone spear, he was both surprised and frightened of it. Lock was actually grasping something. What did this mean? Lock’s feet were steady, he had feet not just wisps, but actual feet to stand on the Wheel.

Jackal turned, he grabbed Lock and without a word he leapt from the spoke of the Wheel to the sea of Forgotten. He surfed on their faces, Lock wanted to place his hands over his ears. How did he have hands, not oversized or beastly hands but Two Legg hands?

Lock trembled at the song of the Lost, and abandoned – the Forgotten. A song which Jackal matched and lead pitch by pitch to the Threshold. Jackal pulled Lock with him through the doors. Lock stumbled slightly, he didn’t understand how he was semi-formed or where this blue light which outlined his body came from?

A body, how did Lock have a body – he shouldn’t, couldn’t have one, but how? Lock followed Jackal not wanting to be alone or away from him? How would he serve his master now? “The wheel is spinning, we are inside the Wheel and until you are tied you will stumble.” Jackal set his jaw hard against the pain of speaking, the bite of Dark Water had leashed his loose tongue.

Jackal smiled at the thought, the old Crone had indeed won that battle. Jackal couldn’t speak at such length as before. His words were always laced with Her, he still felt her moving inside his neck, waiting – always waiting to strike. “Stay.” Jackal growled to Lock.

The bell tolled for the last time as Jackal entered the floorless room. A path of wooden pikes filled the room. Jackal leapt from pike to pike without error or trial. Jackal snarled at the new scents, it would appear there was some new blood among the twelve members.

Apparently someone didn’t remember their pattern sequence and had plunged into the Fallen – or were pushed. Not uncommon, the pikes rotated at a current which could leave an untrained or complacent mind confused and dead before the pikes stopped moving. Then there were of course the members who were too eager to find a seat that they tripped over their own dead weight.

Jackal took his seat at the belly of the S shaped table, another unspoken rule that no one sat in his seat. Only a few heads rolled at his feet because they were too pompous to move when asked. Jackal only asked once, he found it was fair.

The room was drowned in shadows except for a few primitive torches which flanked the table and from the white water which flowed through the table. Shadows flowed, outlining the table giving a sinister depth.

At each end of the table was a small orb of light and shadow, each rippled with pieces which whispered tantalizing bits of information. Jackal had watched many a hooded member lose their mind and soul to the whispering voices of the Fallen.

Each member was dressed in black hooded robes which hid their face, and body. Some even altered their voices to protect their identity, but Jackal did neither. Jackal was nearly twice the size as most of the members, which made him far too recognizable. Only Agtok who proceeded over the meetings, who was a Sinagoth rivaled Jackal in size.

Leviticus raised a brow under his hood, he could sense a change in Lock. He didn’t know what to make of Lock, he had thought for sure Jackal would ingest the spirit. Leviticus gritted his teeth – damn Jackal never did anything he was supposed to do.

Jackal was supposed to have ingested Lock. Which would have given Leviticus the vantage he needed to slowly poison Jackal, gain a foothold inside of Jackal. Yet somehow Jackal had weakened the tie between him and Lock.

Agtok unrolled the scroll of snake skin and began to read the incantations which would seal the members in the room. The Wheel would turn smoothly, and soon the coin would be raised. Jackal surveyed the members he knew the new members would perish, they hadn’t the experience to stomach the coin.

The Council would raise it, and those who were weak would be sacrificed given to the Pools to feed on, in exchange for the coin. A gruesome yet efficient exchange, nothing and no one was guaranteed here – not even Jackal for all his power. If anything his power made him more susceptible to the lottery.

Jackal wasn’t too concerned, he had survived the grip of the coin before, and would do it again. Though Dark Water had a taste of him, and he had barely survived her jaws- but he had. Jackal had to survive, otherwise many of those he needed in this cycle would be wasted.

The atmosphere threaten to collapse from the burden which they all faced. Jackal raised his hood, the white jewel eyes of the dead Sinagoth glittered in the dark. The head – the face of the Sinagoth masked his own, grunting. Jackal thrust his hands into the pools, he gritted his teeth as he felt the bite of Eater and Dark Water.

They flowed through him, merging with him pulling him into a warmth which made what little blood he had evaporate. Jackal stared into Dark Water’s eyes, he willed her –challenged her to take him. The Serpent’s laughter made his teeth crack.

Eater dug into Jackal’s mind. Eater turned each face and voice Jackal had carried with him. All Jackal could hear was Eater’s voice, and all Jackal could see was his failure. Jackal had failed to prevent Oblivion, had lost everything and one.

Jackal smiled, he was still alive- not all was lost. The pulse of the heart made Jackal thrash, he reveled in the battle. The Serpent was moving inside Jackal, hunting for more blood.

Jackal lurched as the dark worms burrowed in the heart, gorging on his flesh. Worms dove into his skin, their high pitch cries were a slow hiss. The body was stronger than Jackal’s mind, his spirit was fueled with an ice rage that burned through him.

The voice of the Ice was a storm which roared against the gods hate. The worms crystalized and the claws of the Singagoth punctured and tore his heart. The tunnels of Jackal’s mind and memory were empty as the cold moved through.

Eater rattled his teeth against the frigid mass. Dark Water slithered through Jackal, she laughed and chased his soul. The hardened chunks of worms didn’t concern her as the taste of Jackal lured her to the heart.

Dark Water screamed in triumph as she went to consume the heart but all she tasted was the hardened jewel tips of the Sinagoth’s claws. The jewels burned her, and the cold was moving around her trying to cage her as it had the worms.

The other twelve members watched the savage man tremble under the strain of the pools. They waited for Jackal’s screams but were forced to be content with foreboding echoes of layered growls and grunts. Jackal would have fallen had he not been wearing the feet of the Sinagoth.

The skin was tied to Jackal, tied to the heart which kept Jackal alive. They were one, for now, and it was the strength of the Sinagoth which held Jackal in one piece. Jackal opened his mouth to scream but all that came out was Her voice, her sinister wail. Bones seeped from his body as black thick water into the Pools.

Jackal blinked, surprised -he had paid his dues, he wouldn’t be taken. Jackal steadied his breathing, he felt the claws moving, digging his chest open. The voice was not his own, but it belonged to the heart, to the Sinagoth- to Karis. *You will not fall, you will sit. Sit down.*

*Breathe.*

*In and out.*

*Ignore the push and pull of the water.*

*In and out.*

Jackal sat down, he knew his hands were shaking, all his muscles were shaking and as much as he wanted –he lacked the muscle control to stop them. His body had survived, what was left of his mind and spirit had survived, and once this was over he would have a small window to heal.

In the distance Jackal could faintly hear the screams of other members taking the Pledge. Their own bones would be taken, only their bones if they were lucky, but most weren’t lucky. Jackal knew that those who did survive may be spared but only to secure the will of the Pools. There were too many who would sell themselves so they didn’t have to suffer.

Life was suffering, it was the only thing- only constant. Jackal believed this, and reveled in his pain. Suffering was a cleansing of all the burdens which the soul clung to. Every hurt, every wrong, the soul nourished and coddled like a spoiled child. When the suffering ended, the euphoria of being alive was a rebirth – a revamping of the soul.

The petty grudges and disappointments were left behind, the appreciation, the beauty of what you had endured lifted you to new levels of clarity. There was an underlying current which could steer you too far beyond to what, whom you were. Jackal had walked that line before, but he didn’t forget those who had shaped him, who had given.

Yet, no matter how one was delivered through the fire, there was clarity. There was a majestic vision of how the world looked. How for a moment the sensations of pain connected you to every being, and how every sense was heightened. Jackal was clear and his jaw was set in determination.

His mind was a muddled maze but Jackal had left clues for himself to follow, so that Jackal wouldn’t forget. There were faces and voices which were skewed by Eater but the ones he needed could never be taken. The soul was not for the taking, and Jackal wasn’t going to give it – he may lose it, and would hunt for it but he wasn’t going to give it.

The body was repairing, the fluid motion of the claws rebuilt the heart. The cold was held Jackal together, but he was vulnerable. If, Jackal moved too suddenly then he would shatter. Once the heart was repaired he would be more stable.

Jackal stared at his shaking hand, the other which the bones had been pulled from was a limp mess on his knee. The bones would regrow after his heart, after the blood flowed again. The cold fog was moving, rolling through him pulling him here and there, and leaving him nowhere.

Disconnected from the Wheel, Jackal sat. Jackal breathed. Jackal was not alone – not forgotten. Jackal had Karis. Jackal and Karis. Jackal was alive and he felt at home as the cold moved- reclaimed and lifted the stain of the serpent.

It was as if he was in the Ice once more, free and young. Jackal smirked, what gibberish the mind clung to for sanity. Jackal would never be free, he felt the wriggling of the serpent around his neck. The noose was flexible, he laughed as his body rocked. Back and forth his body swayed trying to soothe a hurt which wouldn’t ever leave.

Jackal’s eyes met and held Slades, each reveling – intrigued by the various shapes and images the other held inside their snake shaped eyes. Power had been shared, and knowledge had passed from the serpent to those who had survived the lottery.

Snake eyes.

Their eyes shifted from light to dark, revealing events the other needed to succeed. The eyes were a mark of power but there was a price. What they saw she would see, she would learn and wait.

Some were far more reptilian, far more her children than others. Jackal shared, he shared his burden with Karis. Power had to be shared if one were to survive enough to wield it. Jackal smiled, he closed his eyes and felt the twisted power cement inside him.

She was always waiting, but the eyes were small orbs, and were powerful enough to rebuild. Jackal pulled Karis’s face over his own. Jackal stared at the reflection in Karis’s eyes. He studied the change in his eyes they were a frost blue now. What Jackal saw in them, made him rock with a stronger force.

Jackal listened but didn’t watch as the other members were tested, their screams were poignant enough. The coin of bone crowned from the Pool. Jackal tightened Karis’s fur around him.

“It won’t be long now my friend.” Jackal pulled the Sinagoth’s face tighter over his own, he had witnessed many a men be pulled into the coin as their snake eyes lingered over the craft– the horror of bone and blood.

The coin was truly a masterpiece it was as dark and beautiful as Dark Water. The coin was forged of blood and bone, Jackal cringed at how – whom it had been forged from. The gods were cruel but like anything a god marked -the coin was beautiful. Yet it created lasting nightmares for those who sat around the altar.

The coin burst from the water, from the pools of light and shadow it hovered above the members’ heads. Only a few stared at it, the coin began to spin. Slowly, at first and then gradually gained momentum until it burst from the bearing of where the Council was Kept and hovered over their heads.

The coin stood independent, but the realms shook and changed as the coin and the Wheel merged. The blood threads were taunt, and the Wheel no longer creaked as the Coin took the burden of chaos.

*Elvira walked atop the river, the blood waves were warm and surged with rich colors of creation. Elvira meant to look ahead, but found her eyes were pulled into the thick waves. The colors were of the earth, colors which she hadn’t seen since she was a child. Yet here in the blood waves they flexed and teased to be seen and forgotten.*

*Elvira didn’t understand where she was, she was absent of the Nest and the stones. Elvira should have felt free, felt something more than what she did. Elvira felt leashed – caged, and no matter what steps she took she felt the pull of the leash – these steps, the will was not her own.*

*Powerless. Elvira was absent of her power – her will was buried under the heavy hand of the One who had brought her here. Where was here? This was not a place she had been before, this was a path which she hadn’t walked. The waves were gathering, and what rested underneath the blood waves was fertile ground.*

*The ground cried in its infancy, it was unchained – new and excited to hear its own voice. Earth called to Elvira, it was not cold but burst with a warmth which made Elvira feel the heavy chains of her own disconnection. Elvira laughed despite her unease, the chatter of the Earth was hopeful.*

*Elvira stepped on Earth, she felt life surging through her, the blood waves curled into a cyclone which was infinite in power. Elvira felt the rush of hunger brush across her face, the chatter of Earth made Elvira pity this Wild Child who didn’t understand her infancy – her vulnerability.*

*“Hush now Wild Child,” Elvira whispered. “You must be still, you must cool your excitement.” The Earth rumbled in disobedience, the Blood Cyclone curled tighter, taking on a more familiar – haunting shape. “Leave this place Wild Child, leave now.”*

*Elvira was lifted into the air -flung into the blood she flailed as she tried to fight the current which pulled her further and further down. The soft cry of Wild Child made Elvira kick to try and propel her body upward. “Hush now, hush,” Elvira soothed, unsure why she could speak when she felt nothing but the blood drowning her.*

When she stood it was on rotted land, but it was solid and barren save for the few thick roots which reached out from the ground. Light came from a Blood Moon, and shrieks of ravens made Elvira afraid. The blood river flowed around her, rising higher and higher.

Elvira felt the blood was trying to reach the Blood Moon, but she wasn’t sure, she wasn’t sure about anything. She had stepped from one thread in the tapestry to another. Elvira was trying to understand what had happened, she had somehow been touched by Weaver. Somehow the goddess had used her to speak to kill some broken girl.

Blood Girl.

The girl had been of the blood, and even that had not been enough to save her from Weaver. Elvira didn’t pity the girl she had been used and was far from being – human? Elvira laughed at the thought, she herself was dead what did she know about such things?

Bone Hands reached from up from the ground, the blood hissed it swarmed around the bone trees. The blood formed around the tree, a large twisted tree with multiple heads formed. Thick roots made the ground tremble under Elvira’s feet.

Blood swirled in the abdomen of the tree.

The Blood formed a soft silhouette of a woman’s face. Elvira shuddered at the face, it was delicate and beautiful. There was a sadness, a power which radiated from the tree. Elvira kneeled before the face, she felt the blood coursing through the roots.

“I am here Mother,” Elvira lowered her head, she was so tired. Elvira felt the roots coursing through the earth, her own chains tore through her wrists. The roots and chains intersected, and Elvira had a moment of connection. A moment of hope that this would be her end.

*We are all here. Bring me the Blood Girl, bring her to me. I need her womb. The face didn’t move, but Elvira lifted her eyes to the Blood Tree.*

“This is the cycle of Blood and Bone, new beginnings will merge with the Old.”

*Fate is fate carved from choice. What Is. Will Be. Events cannot not be rewritten only revealed. Brick on top of brick. Beginning and End. Blood and Bone. I am Blood.*

“Yes, you are Blood. Where are my bones?” Elvira didn’t want to play.

*I am Blood. He is Bone, he has your bones. I am your blood. We have given you flesh. Now you must serve. You must do. Bring me her womb.*

*Elvira shuddered, she would have two masters. Two to serve and neither could she serve. Her hands were tied, her chains were pulled –exhausted. No matter what the task- she had to do, Mother had called her. Mother had given her blood.*

III

Her fractured mind was a series of paths and windows. Memories danced and chased her like an elusive white rabbit down winding paths of her soul. She never stopped running, chasing even though he was there at every path, every crossroad, and every dream.

“Hello Every,” her white hair draped her naked body as she turned toward him. Every as she had named him sat casually in a chair at the center of her ash garden.

A garden which was as barren, as fragile - as her own mind stood before her. A garden of ashes which formed various plants and some creatures. They would litter the bone ground with the briefest of touch.

“Ah Lethe,” Every feral smiled illuminated his ebony skin and dark thick curls which trailed down his naked body. Every was impressive he had taken on the form of a drag, which echoed his strength and prestige. Inside the box they could take on any forms, they were only limited by their own minds and the walls of bone.

Every’s black wings were as sharp to the eye as they were to the touch. His wings were hard as dragon scales on the outside but inside lined with soft feathers. Wings which had both comforted and imprisoned her. Every’s eyes were depths of green and ash. Hard eyes which glittered with triumph at her constant failure. “You must be quicker than your thought if you ever hope to catch it before I do.”

Lethe smiled despite her anger, her grey eyes would have burst with tears had she any blood. Yet there was nothing here, not even herself she was a shadow of what she had been. Each thought, each memory he seemed to take from her, he was growing stronger and she was dying. Her form was becoming increasingly more translucent.

Lethe knew the box wouldn’t hold them both forever, but what was forever? Her life cycle was coming to an end, and she couldn’t even remember it all. The walls of bone were worn, and soon he would be strong enough to leave the box.

Lethe feared when he did leave she would die, there was nothing for her here inside the box. Every, had her memories and knowledge of who and what she was. He knew why she was inside the box. Lethe knew it had something to do with the red ribbons which had suspended her above black water.

Lethe shivered to think of it, and like all thoughts she was up and running to try and catch it. She was shorter, she had to have been taller before because she was constantly misjudging the distance and heights of her surroundings. Lethe stopped at the crossroads, before her floated two islands. One was chasing the idea of why and how she believed she was taller, and the other was about red ribbons.

Lethe bit her plum colored lips, she bit them hard because something was supposed to happen when you bit your lips. But nothing happened. Another island appeared. Lethe growled she had to focus and had a choice to make. More importantly Lethe had to choose what Every wouldn’t expect.

Lethe’s grey eyes stared at her white hands, white without a single blemish without color. Nothing marked her body or skin. She was empty. Another island appeared. Lethe laughed, she leapt without thinking or care. Lethe wanted to miss the island, she leapt without a destination.

Lethe felt pain, burst through her skin it didn’t deter her, everything was painful here. Even the thought of her name, each time it rolled into her empty head or from his vile tongue. Each time it was spoken she felt a piece of herself being lost. Pain wasn’t anything new it was the only constant she had.

The rock underneath her body was jagged, and made holes so deeply Lethe knew she would have pieces of rock inside for eternity. Why did she have to make the landscapes so painful? Lethe cocked her head, she knew – this she knew. She didn’t know how to not make it painful, how to not be without pain.

The trees were bare of leaves but more intriguing was that they were bone. Lethe ran to the thin trees, they were fingers? Her fingers? Lethe looked at her white hands, perfect even though she felt the stone inside them.

She could hear Every laughing, he was had won, had consumed her memory. Lethe shrugged, she was far more fascinated by these finger trees. These weren’t her hands. Or were the hands she had not hers? Her name was not Lethe, why would this body be hers?

Islands appeared floating in the grey fog of her mind. The walls of bone moved, always moving – the box was always moving? Why? Why did the box move, but the longer she stood at the fog the more she heard a beat. A thunder of beats which created a rhythm which frightened her.

A woman appeared beside her, her hair wasn’t like Lethe’s but her eyes were like Lethe’s lips –plum? What was plum, why would a color be plum? Why, was everything here black and white, but not Every and not her lips? More islands appeared. The woman kneeled beside Lethe, the woman was tall –beautiful. What was beautiful? Why did this word rush from the fog at her?

More islands appeared. If there were so many islands could she hop from one island to another? Could one island connect to another without a bridge – what if her thoughts were a bridge? What if-?

“What if you are the bridge,” the woman smiled her amethyst eyes shined with water which made Lethe curious as to how she was here. “Ignore the Islands,” she smiled warmly at Lethe. A white strand of hair covered Lethe’s grey eyes. Vendella tucked the strand behind Lethe’s ear, her long fingers brushed Lethe’s face. “I am Vendella, I am Forgotten.”

Lethe laughed, she didn’t understand what that meant but it made her laugh. It struck her funny that a woman as tall and lovely as Vendella could ever be forgotten. Lethe stroked Vendella’s arm, her skin was smooth but Lethe was more intrigued by the color. “What color is your skin?”

Vendella shrugged, “most would call it brown. My hair is white blonde and my eyes are violet.” Vendella was dressed in a simple tunic of blue which made her coloring look more vibrant. “I am of the Forgotten Tribe, we once roamed the womb but now we are no more.”

Lethe sat down, she was tired but still curious of this woman. “I don’t understand how you are here?”

“I am here, but I am not here, I am forgotten. As long as you are forgotten I am here. Once you remember and once you are remembered you will not be among my Tribe and I will go.” Vendella smiled at Lethe, she looked at the islands which were as unique and clever as the woman beside her.

Vendella noticed the dark areas, mountains and the rivers which dominated each floating island. Substantial elements which were draining to Lethe, and could very well trap Lethe. The land was barren, void of plants or beasts, a dismal landscape one which reflected the despair which shaped Lethe’s mind.

Vendella noticed the lack of light, the box was cold, there wasn’t much warmth in bone but it was far more than that. Vendella was here to help Lethe, to help her remember why she had stepped inside the box so long ago. Vendella considered the landscape, the boundary of each island was heavily guarded in mist. Yet the water was grey, not blue but certainly not black. Yet Vendella could feel it coming, she smiled at Lethe “your islands are beautiful.”

“What is beautiful?” Lethe didn’t understand but she felt this woman was beautiful.

“It is a word which tries to capture what the soul feels in moments of high awareness. When someone or thing captures our sight or any other senses we say it is beautiful or delicious.” Vendella would not think of the time Before, of who Lethe was before. Painful thoughts would nurture a painful existence, and Vendella had to be cautious inside this tortured mind – this lost and lonely soul.

Lethe laughed, “will Every eat you?” Lethe was panicked at this new thought. What did this mean, would it happen since she thought it? Lethe cringed at the sound of another island appearing.

Vendella looked sad for a moment, “No he cannot eat me.” Vendella didn’t fear Every, but once the water turned – well they would all have to worry once that happened but Vendella believed Lethe would not be here when it did. “What is given cannot be taken. For what Is taken is lost. What is lost will be dissected spread among the sea of Dead and will shape the Never. What is taken will not reborn, what is Taken will be nothing.

What is Given will be shared, what is shared will be found. Flowing in the currents of the dark there is light. What is Given will be known, will be carried and reborn. What is reborn will be realigned and the lines which defined us, saved us will be strong.”

Lethe was silent as she let Vendella’s words rush over her, she felt a spark inside her which she didn’t understand. “Those words- what are those words?”

“These are the words, the belief of the Magi- those who believe and preserve the Blood and magic. The Magi believe that life is without end, but not sacrifice or suffering. The purpose of life is to transition, so that one can be transformed. To be and do more than what you were born into.

To learn and not only endure but to triumph over the dark which wants to cast out the light. These are the teachings of the Magi, these are your teachings.”

Lethe felt each breath pull on a rusted gear of her mind. Lethe could feel Every’s disdain at the embers which were catching – rolling into her dry valley of memory which burst in flames. Islands crashed into one another, and the fog thinned. Lethe shivered at the sound of – the beating of-? “What is that sound?”

“That is the sound of the White Dragon who keeps the box, but his time is nearing. He must rest, he must have help” Vendella would try to answer each question tenderly but there were some truths which would hurt no matter what tone she delivered them in.

“Help him. Please, you must help him!” Lethe didn’t know why she was distraught, but there wasn’t much she understood or remembered but she knew pain. Lethe knew what it was like to have your soul chipped away bit by bit. She felt it in the beating of his heart.

“I can’t help him. Only the one who was born from his line, one who shares his heart can help him.” Vendella stroked Lethe’s hair, she knew it was cruel to overwhelm her mind like this, but Roman was running out of time, they all were. “Only you can help him.”

Lethe felt her world tip, felt the fall before she was lost in a sea of fire. She tried to find Vendella but only Every stood before her. His dark wings were spread wide and his eyes were dark as what crafted him. Every was going to hurt her, he was going to punish her, but Lethe didn’t care. “I have a dragon.”

“l know.” Every smiled. “It is how you both survived, it was a risk but both of you and I managed to survive Oblivion.” Every helped her stand, “You thought I’d be angry?”

Lethe nodded, she didn’t know what game he was playing his eyes told her he was angry. She was reminded of how strong he was, how much he must have taken from her to be this strong. Or had she given it? He could break her, could leave her in a pile of her own bones. He had done it before but she really didn’t understand since she didn’t have any. “I don’t have bones?”

Every laughed, “Of all the questions you ask that one.” Every shook his head, which made his dark curls dance against his waist. His muscular shoulders shook from laughter. The sharp dark notes of his laughter bouncing off the bone walls made him laugh harder.

Lethe looked around her, she was standing in a room, a white room. This was familiar to her but she didn’t understand it all. She wasn’t meant to. “I gave you everything to survive.”

Every stopped laughing, his eyes narrowed, there was an instinct – a need to break her – he hated her lies. She believed she gave him everything, but she didn’t. The need was there, to consume - Every had. In the beginning of their partnership he broke her every second of her imprisonment. He reveled in her misery her torture was honey on his tongue.

Her screams brought him to new levels of awareness which was only saturated in joining his body with hers. A cycle of pain of nothingness. Yet she broke- not against him but with him. Lethe lost he gained, but over the course of the spinning of the box Every realized she was keeping the balance.

“You did,” Every growled. His need was dark he wrestled with it with each conscious breath but he knew that was something they both shared. The darkness had held them for turns, and had seeped inside them far deeper than they wanted to believe. He was the Heart, the very pulsing piece of flesh – the bridge of Eater and Dark Water. Yet he wanted to be more, every cycle he wanted more.

He had accepted her bargain, Every had entered the box with her. Every didn’t touch the scarlet threads, the lines of the blood which she preserved. The seeds which would allow the Orb to flourish. Every had allowed her to cast the threads free, had watched and listened with her as the gods took their first breath.

“Will you share with me?” Lethe asked, it was such a simple thing yet it was the most difficult task to do. Ask for help from her enemy, she would suffer from it, this was always his price. She would be inviting him in.

Every laughed, “I must if I want to leave this damn box. The bargain was made long ago, at the end of the last cycle. Yes I will share, but I don’t hold everything.”

Lethe nodded, “it will be more than what I had today.”  
 Every laughed, “I hate you.” He grabbed her, he always liked how light her skull was in his hands. He admired the curve in her neck, he liked to bend it until it snapped but that he always saved for last. What he loved to do was savor the breaking, savor and appreciate her body and all the sounds it made when he broke it.

Lethe nodded, “I hate you more.” Her body was rigid as he tore into her, she wanted to relax it was less strain on her body if she relaxed. Yet he never wanted her too, the pain was strategic, he wanted her beg and plead before he finished.

Lethe didn’t. Lethe couldn’t speak, he was reaching – digging in depths she didn’t know she had. He had a meticulous and savage degree of patience, he wanted this to last far more than he wanted it to end – to leave.

Every gave and took more than she could have imagined. She was lost and found in those grueling moments. It was his nature to take, regardless of what he gave, or what she had given, he had to take. Every forced her to remember with every thrust what he had taken, how he enjoyed her breaking. Each desperate breath he took and chipped away at her soul.

Every left her a crumbled heap of blood and bone. Every was alive with her suffering it breathed new life into his senses. He never felt more alive than this moment, even if he had to share he had taken – no she had given him far more. He smiled at the blood on his hands, it had taken him far too long but at-last he had enough for him – a part of him to journey into the Orb.

Roman’s heart shattered as easy as aged glass under Shadow’s grip. *Shadow was out of the box*…. Roman was buried by the dark savory presence, his blood curdled as Shadow wormed his way inside dragons flesh. Shadow made Roman quiver and beg.

Roman watched horrified as the grey mist entered the Orb.

Roman grimaced as a spirit tore herself from the Dark. She was a flash of blue grey light in the dark. Scars, like tears lined her cheeks and what filtered through her veins made Roman hopeful.

Shadow’s Bride was as infinite a being as the Symbiosis Tree, she stood beyond the gods reach. Roman cooed, his voice was gruff and his song resembled a hierarchy of growls and roars. Roman was ashamed of what escaped him, but her head turned toward him.

Light flickered in her eyes, it was brief but it soothed his soul, reassured him that he was not completely lost – or alone. She reached her graceful hands to the branches and touched a leaf. She was a stream of light gliding through the branches and into the trunk. The Symbiosis Tree turned from a stark white to a rich blue.

The tree cracked from the strain, the Symbiosis Tree was not meant to hold such a being, it could not re-align Shadow’s Bride. Shadows Bride cradled the Orb in her own abdomen. Roman moaned as he watched Dark Water’s jaws become unlatched.

The snake slithered across Shadows Bride abdomen her mouth opened to take in orb. Roman watched mystified as Shadows Bride tore the snake from her body, the splash Dark Water made, made Roman quiver in fear. Dark Water had entered Eater’s pool – the Dark Womb would grow.

The tree split from the strain, Shadows Bride stepped from the tree which threated to fall. Roman groaned as he felt himself fall, he felt the threads of Weaver pull him- tie him to the Orb. The gods road where Shadow’s Bride pulled them, Roman did not know, but he trusted and stilled his bite.

Dream Maiden’s feet slashed through the roots of the Tree, her knees threatened to buckle from the weight. Her feet dug into the dead who gnawed and slashed at her. Dream Maiden appeared not to notice as she reached inside her own Self and tore out a new whirling shifting womb.

Colors moved like whispers of energy inside the Womb, and the infinite spirit felt warmth. The womb shifted in various shapes until at last it stood in her hands – an orb. Shadows Bride groaned as the Obsidian stone marked her body. Like viperous veins they shot out in her wrist forming a formidable Mountain which sliced through the center of the Orb.

It Was. What Is. And Shall Always Be.

Shadow’s Bride burden.

The greedy sphere expanded – pulling crimson threads from each of her palms. The ribbons cradled – contained the Orb between her hands. The ribbons of Blood sprang from her yet they couldn’t change her. Yet, the Blood pulled – consumed the energy – the spirits inside the Orb changed, the Orb spun in a cycle.

Spirits turned to water. Water turned to Ice. Ice turned to Bone. Bone turned to land.

Water turned to Blood. Blood to Water. Water and land.

Blood and Bone.

Blood turned to fire. Fire turned to Bone. Blood to Bone.

Blood and Bones. Flesh. Flesh walked the land, walked the calcified pieces of womb. Flesh of various sizes moved through the land and seas. Trees reached from one land to another, connecting – listening and speaking in various tongues.

Shadows Bride bound by blood and spirit lifted her burden high above her head. Her back threatened to break against the strain of holding the Orb which expanded in size with the reproduction of these new beings forged from blood and bone. The weight made her knees buckle, but Shadows Bride had to lift the spinning Orb above her head. Away from the snake which would wrap itself around her abdomen when the light inside the Orb dimmed- when Shadow fed.