

A Game of Keeps

After the stars were born, but before the moon had her course, when mighty Yggdrasil first connected the realms, the Myth Wood began. At first it was an idea, then a place, and finally a being as well. All three at once, and all three individually. For a time the Myth Wood was content.

Connected to the World Tree as all realms are, she stayed removed from the conflict of order and chaos. She was the idea of paradise for the transcended beings. The glorious forest realm of the Gods' childhood. Finally the green haired girl who was nature personified.

*excerpt from "Teachings of the Druids"
Third Age*

A game of you

In a forest no human has ever walked, a man stands by a stream musing about possibilities, and balance. The place resembles a pine forest in the cold of winter. Snow clings to the pine boughs, weighing the trees down with its frozen mass. A wind blows through the place, its biting chill never daring to touch the man. The man would be considered tall by human standards, he had a long white beard that he pulled thoughtfully with his off hand, as he thought carefully about his next move. He let the stream carry his thoughts as it would. His long brown robe seemed to drag in the dirt, where one ended and the other began was academic at best. For he found himself playing a game in which every move either prolonged existence, or eroded it.

It was at this moment that the girl seemed to form from nothing, and rushed his way. She had long black hair with dark green highlights. She was short compared to the man, yet tall by human reckoning. Her appearance was that of girl just entering puberty. Slight and delicate, yet deceptively strong. Her clear skin was tanned dark brown as if she had never seen the inside of a house. She stopped a few feet from the man, just out of his reach.

"Father, you must intervene. Validus and the Void have overstepped their sphere of influence." Her voice too was that of a young girl.

The man turned from the stream. He looked the girl up and down. Raised one bushy eyebrow then asked her "after several millennia you finally evolve enough to have a form other than that of your Place, and this is the one you chose?" His voice was deep and ageless. His mirth was not hidden in the asking of his question.

"Father I do not see what my form has to do with Spectra interfering in my sphere." Her stance was petulant and her foot tapped impatiently. Her gaze locked on his and did not waver.

"Though it is through my existence that you came into being, I am as much your father as a sentence is the child of a book. As for Spectra interfering in your sphere. It could not happen if you were not torn between order and chaos. That, after all, is its sphere." His words were spoken matter of factly, but his amusement was evident.

"Father... I do not believe you are taking me seriously. I stand before you in a form of my choosing. I have not only become fully sentient, but omnipotent in my sphere. I come before you now because the rules of the realms, your realms, have been subverted. As the highest power in the realms it falls to you to uphold these rules." The rant was delivered with all the certainty of a child. The girl fell silent before the blank stare the man gave her.

"I begin to understand your choice in forms. I think it falls to me to educate you, my 'child'... First if you were omnipotent in your sphere, Spectra could never send Validus or the Void Shadows into your realm. Second, look around you. You stand in a forest of World trees. I am but one tree in this forest, I am by no means the 'highest power'. Third in as much as the rules are concerned, I have always felt it falls to the individual to uphold them or be diminished by their inadequacies." His words fell like a hammers blow on the girl. She very much looked like a child who had discovered her belief was misguided. "With all of that said. I may have a means that will balance your stature with Spectra. Have you met or heard of your 'brother' Ordo?" He waited patiently for her reply.

The girl's desperation was such that any perceived help was desired. "Ordo... Is he not one of the realms of order, something to do with harmony, from the upper branches?" She sounded like a student guessing at a test question.

"You are partially right, he was a realm aligned with Order. But his placement is much closer to you then the upper branches. Spectra decided to play with him in much the same way it is playing with you. Spectra is the idea of chaos and order in conflict. As such its presence in the realm of Ordo forced a split in his self perception. Now he is a realm divided, he perceives himself as two separate personifications. Now he has become Ordo, that part of himself that is still alined with Order. Yet he is also Abyssal, that part of himself that now embraces Chaos. This conflict is tearing him apart. If he had been an older and stronger realm he could have separated himself smoothly. This is not the case however. So I have placed his forms in the chamber of games, in the hopes that he will decided the issue between him-selves. This is not working out as I had hoped." He took a moment to let his words sink in. Not only was he informing her of the activities of the other spheres, he was warning her of a possible outcome for her.

"I appreciate the warning, but I fail to see how his current inconsistencies can be of help to me." Though blunt, her words were not spoken cruelly.

"Do you remember how the Realm of Asgard gave shelter to the realm of Valhalla when she could not decide on a form or choose between Order and Chaos?" He did not wait for her to respond. "This benefited both of them. She was planted within Asgard as a mead hall for the dead warriors. Now Valhalla has grown stronger and far more powerful then Asgard. She has even been able to help the people, who call you home, against the Shadows of the Void."

Understanding blossomed on her face. "Do you really think Ordo, and Abyssal could help me if I help them now? They could possibly be formed into a beneficial item or a weapon for the people to use against Spectra's agents, and return me to a state of natural balance?"

"I do. It would be easier if he just returned to one form, then all his power would be consolidated in one place. That of course is up to him. The means to help him will be painful, and he will not want to help you. He is very much focused on him-selves right now. Still his presence

alone in your sphere may be beneficial for you. It will give you a way to control chaos and order more fully within yourself." No amusement colored his voice now, just grave facts.

"What must I do?" Desperation filled her words, but determination as well.

"Let us make a game the two of you... That is three of you can play. It will be a game of Keeps, a game of **you**."

Myth

She hurried down the halls of the world tree, with the freshly made game board under her arm. The physical pain she felt in the making of the board still lingered, yet she forced it to the back of her mind. The taking of a physical form for her realm granted her a new perspective on all things, but often she felt it was too acute. Still it was part of her evolution.

She neared the gateway to the chamber of games. As far as gateways went it was unimpressive. An arched threshold made of light grain wood. She stood in the archway observing her brother for a minute before committing to the Encounter.

The inside of the chamber of games was currently just as unimpressive as the archway. The entire chamber was of one shade or another of hardwood. Furnished with a wooden table and enough chairs for four. On the opposite sides of the table sat inverse twins. Both had the form of a young man, clean shaven and clothed in hooded robes. One was covered in black robes with red trim. The other wore white robes with blue trim. It was not just the robes. The one wearing white had eyes of white as well, and so too were the eyes of the other one black.

They stared at each other from either side of the table with undisguised hostility. A flipped over and forgotten game board on the table before them. Its pieces scattered around the table and laying on the floor, as if they had been thrown with force.

She entered the chamber but was ignored. She placed the board on the table, its forest green border contrasting with the table's oak color. The board was made up of a grid of 8x8 squares, half in gold half in green, alternating. Ancient images engraved over the entirety of the board. She used the edge of her board to push the discarded game board on to the floor with the rest of its pieces. She then carefully arranged her board in between the two of them.

The board seemed to peak the curiosity of the one dressed in black. "What have we here?" He looked at the board then up at the person who had placed it before him. "And who do we have here?" he asked with a sarcastic baritone.

"That would be a board, I would surmise it is used for a game. Even you should be able to ascertain that. As for the bearer of the board, that would be the realm the little gods talk about in their myths and legends of their childhood." The same voice came from the body of the man in white, but it was delivered with dripping condescension.

"So that would make it another game I can beat you at, and her our sister, Myth." Still sarcastic but slightly acknowledging her.

"I will admit that one could perceive us as siblings, but you have yet to beat me at any game." Condescension.

"It's a forgone conclusion. Really no point in starting when you already know the ending." Sarcasm.

"Fear of losing should not motivate you to inaction." Condescension.

"I do not fear you, I will destroy you." Sarcasm and rage.

"Really? I seem fine to me, couldn't be better, too bad someone is too scared to play a game."

Condescension, and sarcasm.

"Stop it, both of you. I think you are giving me a headache. It is a very new experience for me, and I do not much enjoy it." Myth squeezed the bridge of her nose to stop the ache that was developing. "I was told by Father that you two would be here playing games. So I wanted to share with you a game that is favored in my sphere." Just like that she had both of their full attention. She found it a bit unnerving. Ordo had been a very powerful realm, having the two sets of eyes boring into her reminded her of that fact. She would have to handle them just right if things were to work out for her.

"So Father sent you. Has he realized that we are no longer one but two separate forms now?" What made it creepy was that they said it together, exactly in sync.

"I believe he has, yes. He fears however that separately you are too weak and will cancel each other out before one of you becomes strong enough to dominate." Her words affected them both. They shared a look of worry, and fear for just a moment. "So I have brought my game. Father feels it will be a good way to decide who gets to dominate your sphere. The winner will be given the power of your realm, the loser will cease to be." She paused and looked at both of them meaningfully. "Before we can begin you both must agree to these rules."

As one they answered. "Agreed."

A game of Keeps

"In my realm the game is played with 32 pieces total. 16 blue pieces on the one side which is called Order, and 16 red pieces on the other which is called Chaos. The sides consist of 4 soldiers, 4 mercenaries, 2 rangers, 2 paladins, 2 mages, a champion and a keep. The point of the game is to capture or destroy your opponents Keep piece. Each piece has a specific way it can be moved, as well as how it can attack and defend. Black and white dice are used to decide damage." The two looked at the board, they took note of the missing pieces and dice, then looked at her curiously.

"Of course this is not a typical game of Keeps. This board has been made especially for this game. You will each take a side, Order for you Ordo. Chaos for you Abyssal. With your hands on the board, your being will pass through it in order to influence my sphere. You will pick different people of my realm to act as your agents. You will not be allowed to control them directly, but you can use any means at your disposal to influence them onto the course of action you wish. The game is won when either Order or Chaos rules the Wood. Do you both understand?" They both nodded affirmation. "You both wish to play?" Again nods of affirmation.

"One last rule. There is a Gray Elf by the name of Gadin. He is just returning to me from other realms. He wears armor made of me, and a gauntlet that holds a curse as well as a soul. He is off limits to both of you. Any attempt at controlling him will end in your forfeiture from the game. Do you still understand and wish to play?"

"We do." In sync.

First Match

As the two competitors took their places and started the connection with the board, Myth observed that they were so alike, yet opposite. They moved in time with each other and reached for things at the same time. Yet Ordo dressed in white, sat rigidly straight, his movements precise and economical. His twin, Abyssal dressed in black, slouched, and moved carelessly as if anything that happened was fine with him. They were the picture of avatars for order and chaos.

As they connected with the board and their beings fell into her realm, Myth felt a jarring sensation of union. She closed her eyes and witnessed the actions of the two. What had not been admitted to the competitors was that she was participating as well. They were so evenly matched that she spent very little energy keeping the balance between them. Her biggest obstacle was preventing Validus or the Void from giving an advantage to Ordo or Abyssal.

In what seemed like only seconds the two came back to themselves. "That was an enjoyable game. Even more enjoyable was the ease in which I beat you." Ordo was proud, confident.

"I can agree that it was one of the most amusing games I have ever played, but you had no victory, so I am lost as to your feelings of triumph." Abyssal filled his voice with confusion, but it was still colored with sarcasm. "I will give you points for the strong start. Getting Riven to close the book, was brilliant, that took away my use of magic. Filling that Barbarian's head with visions of grandeur was a nice touch as well. Normally a Barbarian would fall under my sway. But closing the book backfired on you. As far as champions for me goes, I could not have asked for one better than Vigo. He had been trapped in Victus' subconscious as long as the Chained Book remained opened. Closing it buried Victus in Vigo's subconscious, and freed the most natural agent of chaos to walk freely in the Wood again." Abyssal's smugness radiated off him like the rays of the sun.

"If we are giving points, I can admit that Vigo did a fine job of rallying your cause. Also, the whole backstabbing fiasco between the paladin and the gray elf was a great way to circumvent Myth's little rule about Gadin. I'm still not sure how you did that?" His compliment and open curiosity was too much for Abyssal.

"I made him think it was what his King wanted. Arsten was so determined to please Balin that it was child's play to make him think a nod was permission. These humans are so much fun to influence I think once I am the dominant form of our sphere I will invite some in." Now it was Abyssal who filled his speech with Condescension.

"I will grant you your victory at the battle of Hammer's Hold, if for no other reason than Tirza's brilliant sneak attack, but by no means does that give you victory of the game. Order has spread throughout the Wood. They have chosen a King, the very symbol of order. One hold held out against me, but all the others were mine. The town, and it's people all chose order. I won, not you." Complete confidence filled Ordo's speech if not his bearing.

"That's the best part. You and your "King" missed that Eric freed the other Holds from Balin's control. Not to mention Balin never did win the crown. Half the people chose to side with Daemons before they would kneel to Balin. Chaos ruled the Wood today." Abyssal matched Ordo's confidence. They turned as one to see what Myth thought of their arguments.

She almost missed it, so deep in thought was she over all that they had missed. While they rallied their fighters, she had been busy as well. Gadin returned to her and managed to stay out of

the fighting long enough to bond his spirit to the Wood. Thereby, giving up his old body and becoming like the rest of the new generation of people of the wood. He also managed to seal the White Hammer away, as well as make a deal with the Daemon Mara to seal away the Black Sword. Finally when it looked like Ordo might win, she was able to get Gadin to side with Vigo to tip the balance back to the side of chaos.

Myth returned their look for only a moment. "It was a tie" she deadpanned and could see the frustration form on both of their faces. She had to keep them playing. Now to see if it would work. "I recommend a rematch." Their frustration disappeared immediately.

"What a wonderful idea my dear sister. I will truly enjoy beating Ordo again." A smile spread across Abyssal's face as he spoke.

For Ordo's part he simply nodded then squared his shoulders and put his hands back onto the board.

Second match

Again they faced off from across the board. Each closed his eyes and his being fell into the board. Myth felt the connection but it was smoother this time. They had begun to unconsciously align themselves with her sphere.

They smiled and frowned. Laughed, and cringed. Twitched and became as still as stone. Then they opened their eyes. Myth would have noticed all these things but her eyes had been closed as well, while she watched their maneuverings and did her own in kind. She opened her eyes only a fraction of a second before the other two.

"Let me hear you gainsay my victory this time, brother... Balin, and his King's men brought all of them to heel. Vigo was a fine piece in our first match, but mostly useless in this one. Even his closest friends turned on him." Ordo could not hide his exaltation.

"I will admit, publicly killing your Paladin because I was able to influence him last match was a bit more than I thought you capable of. Vigo however, was able to steal the death swing from you." Ordo's excitement left his face and was replaced by frustration at Abyssal's words. "While you focused on Vigo, I was able to get the book opened again. In fact I got the people of the Wood to choose to open it. Councils, in the end, are just controlled chaos. They also made sure you will not be able to close it again. Oh and I should ask how your little Ranger is feeling?" Biting sarcasm ended his statement.

Very stiffly Ordo responded. "Your going to try and take credit for Riven embracing Order? How amusing, that was me sacrificing a piece to strengthen my position. As an Ordian he is more under my influence than ever before."

"And allowing Vigo to distract you was not me doing the same? They are all just pieces to be used so that I can win. Even your little Ordian is just a piece. They can be used by me as easily as you." It was obvious that Abyssal was drawing attention away from the match's outcome.

"What about the Daemon getting her soul back? That is one more piece I took from you." Again Ordo was sure of his victory.

"She may have a soul, but Marta is far from being on the side of Order. Let's not forget the tavern keepers little caravan run. That was chaos at its finest. All of your pieces took part in chaos

on that one.” Abyssal started gaining steam, realizing he had done better then originally he had thought. “Your King still has no crown. Where did brother Ravenwood go.... Chaos my friend, Chaos. The people turned to it, and still no king rose up to bring them all back to Order’s lap. You did a fine job of punishing my pieces but, still, you did not triumph.”

“Fine, let Myth judge.” Ordo was obviously not as sure of victory as he had been at first.

Myth again was surprised by how much they had missed. She had spread the keys to the Chained Book out to all the members of the council. True Vigo had gotten one of the keys at first but it soon found its way to Llew. The balance of the council had worked towards her ends. Gadin gave the pure soul crystal to Marta because of Myth’s influence. She had not been happy about the arrival of the Ordin. She knew it was just a matter of time before Validus responded to the Void’s making of Daemons. She had managed to keep it down to Validus making only one Ordin at least. She realized they were waiting on her then. She cleared her mind of everything but the present. “It remains undecided. Neither Chaos or Order has gained complete control of the Wood.” Her answer did not please either of them, but it also let them know that they still had a chance. “How about another match?”

“Fine, but I’m going to crush him this time.” Ordo declared. He did not have to return to the board because he had never taken his hands away.

“One more chance to beat you will be a delight.” Abyssal too had never moved from his spot. Their lack of movement pleased Myth greatly.

Third Match

The two fell into the board automatically this time, and Myth hardly noticed it. They were there for only a moment. They returned in a rush, but neither pulled their hands away from the board.

“You cheated. I knew you were scared but cheating? You are a personification of Order, cheating is my thing.” Abyssal truly looked taken aback.

“I never cheated. They chose Balin, and crowned him king. They chose Order.” Ordo’s statement was earnest yet he too seemed unsure.

“The King bit was fine, I figured you would do it. The Bank however was complete garbage. You even managed to get your king in debt so he would be a slave to your numerical order. It is disgusting.” Abyssal was so distraught that he did not even notice his inability to move his arms.

“The Bank was not me... It came from outside the realm. Wait a minute, you cheated to. Admittedly it is your thing, but I thought you would refrain in the hope of a clean victory.” It was as if things were coming back to Ordo from a dream. He too was unable to move his arms.

“I didn’t cheat, I don’t need to, to beat you. The Gray Syndicate putting a reward out on people was not cheating, funny how fast your order loving people turned on each other for some money though” Abyssal still sounded indignant.

“Yes you did. The whole bit with Victus sealing Vigo away.” Ordo gave Abyssal a very knowing look.

“That was not me, I had given up on him after the last match... that came from somewhere else.” Abyssal too seemed to be remembering things from a dream.

“You are both right. Not about the cheating part. Agents from Spectra have been in my sphere for quite a while. I believe Validus and the Void have taken note of your game.” The two both looked equally disturbed by the news. She refrained from telling them that she had purposely made Spectra aware of the game.

This time while they tried to outmaneuver each other she was able to get the anvil of the Evermist Forge reconstructed. With Balin as king she was also able to influence the naming of the Lords. She used the lords to stalemate Ordo and Abyssal, as well as maintain her strength in the Wood.

“You should have told us of the agents. They will try to do us harm.” They both spoke the words together at the same time. Myth found it very disconcerting.

“My apologies. While you play the game Spectra’s agents should have no way of harming you.” She was by no means sure of her statement, but they needed to keep playing. “Why don’t you begin again, we will disregard this match. Fair?”

“Agreed.” They were already falling into the board.

Final Match

They fell into the Board without effort, and they remain immersed in the game for long moments. Both seemed to be deeply focused. Perspiration beaded on their foreheads. They eased out of the game, and sat motionlessly staring at each other. Eyes locked neither looking away. They broke eye contact at exactly the same time.

In a flat voice Ordo spoke “Nicely done brother. You tempted Samheim into working with Marta, and bringing forth creatures of death and chaos. Removing one of my pieces, Elric, and strengthening one of yours, Riddick. The gift of the helm to the King was unforeseen. I think the Hunter will be of tremendous help to you”

“Likewise brother, your choice of having Arsten work with Gadin to uncover the Gray Syndicate, and thereby removing such a great strategy from me, as well as codifying the money to bring more Order to the Wood, very well played. Not to mention influencing Llew, one of my pieces, to empower his weapon to slay my monsters” His voice was equally flat.

They both began staring at each other again. They broke their eye contact and turned to face Myth together. “Odd brother, how every move we make gets equally countered, by each other... Or at least it seems that way.” Abyssal’s voice was neutral.

“Yes brother, it is odd. I also note that the elf seems to be in the thick of it when one of us gets close to beating the other... Yet we are not allowed to influence him. Who is then?” Ordo’s voice was completely neutral. “I think we should return to the game, and see what happens when order and chaos work together.”

“Oh a truce brother, I like that, how very chaotic of you. Why don’t we show our sister Myth here the power of the Great Hunt, and how it is not wise to play games with us.” A dangerous sneer crept into Abyssal’s voice.

“We would need a King to lead the Hunt.” Ordo replied with an equally dangerous sneer.

“Oh I think we have one of those.” Abyssal commented.

“We would need the hounds of the hunt.” Ordo stated.

“What better hound than a werewolf?” Abyssal chimed in.
“What of a Master of arms and the soldiers of the hunt?” Ordo questioned.
“I think Samheim and the Troll will work for those.” Was Abyssal’s response.
“Then we have everything we need, lets have some fun.” They both turned to each other and fell into the board.

End Game

Myth had to focus. Ordo and Abyssal were running rampant. The Great Hunt was one of the most powerful merging of order and chaos. If their tantrum was not enough, Spectra too pushed it’s influence, trying to free it’s avatars. She felt Gadin get slain. She was able to influence Marta to guard the Black Sword, until Gadin returned to claim it. Yet before he could return the seals on the sword he was slain again. Spectra flexed it’s influence, and Arsten picked up the Black Sword.

Myth found herself pulled back to the chamber of games.

“Ha... how did you like that, sister?” Abyssal was very pleased.

“Yes Myth, how did you enjoy that? You have been cheating the entire time. It was not a fair game between myself and Abyssal. Not with your interference.” Ordo sounded like he was berating a younger sibling.... Maybe he was.

“The both of you are fools. I was trying to bring you both into my realm, so you could get away from Spectra’s influence. Then once you healed and returned to your original self, we could unite against Spectra.” Her declaration hit them like a arrow to the chest.

“You what?! This is father’s doing isn’t it? He can’t deal with the fact we have split from the original form, so he would tie us to you as a punishment.” Abyssal sounded petulant.

“It will not work. We have discovered your little trick Myth. You should leave us before I decide you should be punished.” Condescending and unyielding Ordo made his pronouncement.

“Again I repeat you two are both fools. Try to pull yourselves free of the board... I’ll wait, go ahead and try.” She tapped her foot as she gave them all the time in the world to discover how trapped they were. “Every time you played a match on that board, you linked more of your being with me. I had wished to make it a painless transition. However your merging into the Great Hunt had unforeseen consequences. Both the White Hammer and the Black Sword are unsealed. Now Spectra’s agents can move about as they please. Not to mention that they are slowly turning the people of the Wood into their children. Or did you think the Daemons and the Ordin were something other then the spawn of Spectra?... Fools both of you.” Myth paced back and forth for a minute or two. Both Ordo and Abyssal watched in growing frustration.

“You can’t do this to me. If you trap me in your realm I will do everything I can to thwart your desires. I will force the people of your realm to choose me or be crushed, they will turn on you and make you a wasteland.” Lost was Ordo’s condescension and command. It was replaced with fear and frenzied anger.

“I seldom agree with the unyielding twit, but in this I do. Free me or all of your realm will be torn in chaos. I will make the little Daemon’s antics look pathetic by comparison.... The elf, yes the

gray elf, he will be my first victim.” Unlike Ordo, Abyssal seemed very comfortable dreaming up his vengeance.

“Will you to stop already. You were linked to me before the last match. I can’t undo it now if I wanted to. Don’t you understand I did this to help you. Spectra’s agents are our enemy, they are the ones that made your form split in the first place. We can work together and be stronger for it.” Ordo and Abyssal just stared defiantly back at her. “Fine, you leave me know choice. You are already linked to me. I had hoped to fashion you into some sort of weapon or object that my people could use to fight Spectra’s agents with, but I see now I will need to weaken you more then that so you are not a nuisance to my endeavors.”

Myth made a gesture, and Ordo lifted off his seat. He began glowing a bright blue until he was painful to look at. Myth looked around for inspiration, her eyes settling on the game board. A smile lighted her face. Ordo seemed to shatter into 17 parts. 16 of the parts looked like a blue set of the Order pieces for a Game of Keeps. The 17th piece looked like a blue skull with ruins carved into it.

“There your mind is trapped in the skull and the rest of your power is split into the game pieces. Just like in the game your heart is in the Keep piece. Defend it well brother.” Another gesture and the pieces seemed to fall into the game board.

Myth turned to Abyssal. “Your turn.” Abyssal’s eyes filled with fear, then hate. He was about to speak when Myth gestured and he lifted off the ground. He glowed a painful red color, then shattered into 16 red Chaos pieces and a skull. “Same rules for you dear brother.” She flicked her hand and the red pieces fell into the game board.

The Law of Balance

Myth closed her eyes and focused on herself. The balance of the Wood was still intact, but just barely. The freed Daemon Lord had turned his blade on the Monsters. He was newly released and not able to stop them from destroying King’s Rest. Eric, with Marta’s help had unsealed the White Hammer. Now Eric was possessed by the spirit of the old wizard Agamemnon. He had returned to his tower to plan his next move. Gadin’s soul waited at the Heart tree, while his body reformed. It would be sometime before she could use him again.

She was starting to plan her next move when she heard the sounds of foot fall behind her. “Hello Father.”

“As I told you before, you came into existence because I exist. That does not make me your father.” He sounded irritated. “That could have gone better. You were trying for allies and got two more enemies for you troubles. You should have been a bit more upfront with them I think.” It was a passing remark, not a judgement. Still it wounded her pride.

“They would have never listened to reason. They are convinced there was no problem to begin with. I’m starting to think they might have been right.” Myth turned around to study her father’s reaction.

“Oh there was a problem alright, just maybe not the one you were thinking of. It is true that left to their own devices they would have canceled each other out, eventually. But the real problem was a matter of balance.”

“You see some call me the World Tree, and all my branches and leaves are realms. In a way this is correct. Because I exist, all the lesser realm exist and are connected through me. In truth your all more like fruit growing on a tree. Much like fruit, some of you will begin to rot before you can plant yourselves in the ground and my job is to prevent that rot from harming the other realms.”

“You my dear are the personification of an Idea, and then a Place. A beautiful wooded land filled with everlasting life. It is a wonderful idea, and a beautiful place. You have also grown aware of yourself, hence the form you stand before me in. This is true of all the various realms and what they personify, or will someday be.”

“Some of you grow into realms of Order, some of Chaos. A very few of you are a mix of both. To stay in balance I must keep roughly the same number of you in order as chaos. If too many go one way or the other, the tree itself may begin to rot. We can’t have that now can we.” He made a gesture of cleaning his robes off with his hands. “To do this I keep some of the realm a mix of both, order and chaos, that way if a particularly promising realm begins to rot on the branch I can replant them in one of the in-between realms. Just like I did when Wotan replanted Valhalla in Asgard.” He sounded pleased with himself. Myth found it infuriating.

“That makes it sound like the Sybil twins are going to use me to repair themselves. Whats left of me when they are better? For that matter what about Spectra and it’s agents?” Anger was filling her faster then she could think.

“Yes Spectra...well where do you think the rot comes from. Think about it. I need to maintain balance. I can spare you and have a little realm that is both order and chaos. Or I can help Ordo and Abyssal to get strong enough to both become there own larger realms at the expense of one little idea.” He looked a bit sad about it, but not overly much. “It is the way of nature my dear.”

“I won’t let it happen. I will fight it. What about all the creatures that inhabit me?” Desperation was gnawing at her.

“Now you choose to remember them. All of you realms forget about the mortals until you need them. I always find that funny. For you may think yourself a god compared to them, but in the end they get the last laugh. You see they decide. They are the reason I exist.”

“In answer to your question they will be fine. They will move to what ever realm works best for them. Simple as that.” He made a motion of wiping his hands clean. “You can try to fight all you like but as you pointed out to your ‘brothers’ they are already linked to you. In fact you planted them.”

“Then I will have to pull the weeds from my garden before they spoil the beauty of my flowers.” She sounded smug, but she was only stalling. She had no idea how to undo what she had done.

“Well as to all that. I remind you of the law of balance one last time. The three of you entered into a Game of Keeps. In a Game of Keeps only the winner walks away. At the end of the game, no one had won. Two of the players were altered and cast back into the game. You have a choice: keep playing to win or give up and lose. What is it going to be?” The full weight of his words settled on her.

Myth had thought she was manipulating everyone, so she could be rid of Spectra. Now she realized that she had always been a piece on the game board being used by another. "I will continue to play, and I will win, Father. Then we will speak again." She closed her eyes and was silent.

Yggdrasil the World Tree made a gesture with his hand. Myth rose up from the ground and began glowing a painful green color. Then she shattered in to 17 pieces. 16 of which looked like green pieces to a Game of Keeps. The last was a green skull with ruins carved in to it. He flicked his hand at the board and the pieces fell into it. "I have never seen a Green side in a Game of Keeps. Since she is neither completely Order or Chaos, it makes a certain kind of logic."

New game First Match

Yggdrasil looked at the game board. It seemed to grow and expand. Soon he was looking at the paths and trails of the Myth Wood. Winter had fallen and the constant battles had paused for the weather. The people of King's Rest were rebuilding. Hammers Hold was enjoying the riches of their new Lord, Lady Tirza. High Guard was in disarray and falling to ruin while their Lord Elric was stuck in the form of a werewolf. Gray Arrow was preparing for war, under the watchful eye of their Lord, Gadin the Gray Elf.

Agamemnon studied the Chained Book in his tower, planning and plotting his next move. The newly freed Daemon Lord rested easy in the Graveyard of the Fallen, consolidating his forces. Waiting for spring, and listening to the whisperings of the Shadows. In the Arena of Valor, Samheim waited on word from Validus, so he could go forth and bring Order to the Myth Wood.

As they had done in the past. All the people of the Myth Wood gathered together for the winter tournament. Two Mages, Marta, and brother Ravenwood, had captured the werewolf with the help of Calinos. They were bringing him to the Feast for judgment and a possible cure.

By the end of the Feast they would see who won the honor of carrying FairenGar for the year and bearing the title Champion of the Wood. This year other prizes would be awarded too. Eir's favor had returned to the wood, changed some, but still her favor. Also, a mysterious red skull had been brought to be given as a prize.

All this came to Yggdrasil as he looked at the game board that was a window into the Wood. "Well now, this should be a very interesting game to watch. Three sides to a Game of Keeps, I don't believe that has ever been done before. I suppose the people of the Myth Wood will be acting as the dice for the game. For once I have no clear idea of the victor, but it has always been about the journey not the ending anyhow. Who knows maybe this time the dice will win...." He closed his eyes and the game began.