



## Down the Road -- Part 7: Rough Beast

What rough beast...

It was dawn and Alex arose from his bed roll. The brown wind was disappearing like smoke evaporating into the thin air. "Once again you failed me. You simply need to apply yourself more. Now, your next task is stopping the theft of..." Phyllo hopped off the dead tree. He got in front of Alex who was already walking away from him. "The robbery is that way," said Phyllo.

Alex smacked Phyllo across the face. "Her work isn't done yet."

"I'm your guide. She is dead."

"When the shiny sand runs out, the brown wind will come and take what is theirs. Unless the dark sand keeps it away. The talisman that entropy has come and gone. Our fate isn't dictated by a clock that we only buy time against. What if fate isn't sealed by time pieces and maps and by the will of others? What if her glass still has shiny sand in it?" Alex started to run. He left all his possessions behind.

New path...

Phyllo was flying over Alex's shoulder. Alex never saw Phyllo really fly. He could tell it was taking a lot out of his little body. *May the dark winds take that little sack of shit*, he thought. Alex ran down the path made by their footprints. It was a straight line towards the sloping rock. As he ran trees crept up along the pathway. *There weren't trees before*, he thought. Then a running stream and lush green grasses crept up alongside him. The pathway had changed. The town of Salt had been sealed away before him.

Evidence of change...

Phyllo fluttered down on to a rock where he sat Indian style. Alex wanted to sing "Jeremiah Was a Bullfrog." Taking the opportunity, Alex drank from the stream. He stopped when he saw a small piece of reflective mylar. He picked it up and looked at the shiny rainbow colors now brilliant in the sunshine of this place. It was a piece of Penelope's pinwheel.

Whose will...

"You see. The world has changed. That way is no longer open. You can only go back with me," said Phyllo.

"Open the path back up," demanded Alex.

"I don't..." Phyllo was interrupted.

"Yes, you do," said Alex, picking up Phyllo from under the armpits and shaking him like the

small child he appeared to be. "Look, how am I supposed to believe you're right if I can't see the evidence for myself? I know there's still sand in her glass. And if you don't let me look. I will always know that there was still sand in her glass."

"And Satan took Jesus up onto the mountain and tempted Jesus to step off for his father would catch him," said Phyllo. Alex took his hands off of him. Phyllo's wings took up his weight as his eyes stayed level with Alex's.

"You can quote my faith but you can't understand it. God gave man free will. The choice of right and wrong is my own. If you strip that from me I am no longer a good person. I'm just a toy for you to pull part for your amusement," said Alex, staring Phyllo in the eyes. Alex took the jagged piece of plastic that was once part of Penelope's pinwheel and swallowed it. He thought of the Alanis Morissette album *Jagged Little Pill*. The world blurred away as he stepped into the streets of Salt.

"Free will was given so that man could choose between right and wrong. Man doesn't choose what IS right from wrong," said Phyllo to himself alone.

Map Keeper...

The large square building stood at the center of the town. Alex ran down the cobblestone streets through the odd houses of stucco and Tudor. The town looked as if the Pueblo Indians settled in New England. A warped wooden door sat in rusty hinges. Alex could feel the door vibrate as he pounded on it to open. The permanent gray haze clouded out the sun. Alex knew it was daytime but couldn't tell what day it was. It should have taken him days to get back to town. But it only took him a few hours. He could still feel that piece of plastic cutting its way down his esophagus.

The door unlatched. The second Alex saw the door start to move, he kicked it opened with deliberate violence. The Map Keeper fell on his back, sprawling. He was looking around for his wire frame glasses that popped off his face. Alex picked them up. "They're here, old man. Take me to where you keep the unwanted's time pieces. Or I will break them." He walked around in a circle as the old man patted his hands across the ground not listening or understanding what Alex was telling him. He thought of Velma from Scooby Doo. "Where are my glasses? Where are my glasses?" Alex said in a mocking nasal tone.

He felt time pressing on him, "Get up and take me to the hourglasses of the unwanted, now!" picking up the Map Keeper by his robe and nearly dragging him across the floor.

"What would you want with those ugly things?" asked the Map Keeper.

Alex dug his fingers into the back of the Map Keeper's neck. He began to see small spots of blood leak from his fingertips. "Just show me."

Last minute...

The stone hallway was dank and barely lit. A single fluorescent bulb on a faulty circuit flickered. Alex briefly thought of how odd it was there having track lighting hanging off of cobblestone. The Map Keeper in front of him struggled with the keys. "If you don't open this door now, I'll use your head to knock the door down," said Alex tapping the old man's head against the wall for emphasis. In his confusion the old man almost dropped the ring of keys he fumbled with. Alex could feel Ingrid calling to

him from the other side of the wall. He could feel that sharp piece of plastic cutting him inside slowly. Every time he moved his hand against the Map Keeper, he could feel that little piece of plastic scraping him inside. Every time he thought of giving up his quest for the hourglass, he could feel Ingrid calling him. *Once I have a fucking answer I'll be okay. I'll make sense of this world. I could travel through it with ease. Or I could just leave it all behind and eat a McGriddle back in Paducah. The only thing stopping me is a senile old man with a stupid set of keys,* Alex thought

Time enough...

Alex heard the satisfying click of the lock opening. He push the Map Keeper aside, knocking him to the floor. He didn't even notice that the old man's head struck the shelf.

Alex fumbled for the light switch. He found a small plastic dial attached to the stone wall. Twisting it, the incandescent lights came on. In front of him was three sets of shelves stacked high with hourglasses. He could see each grain of sand flair to life then extinguish into a featherlight speck of black ash. As Alex stepped forward he felt serene. The wants and needs fell silent. He felt the shackles and restrictions melt away. "Where is..." said Alex trailing off. He knew exactly where it was. His heart drifted over towards it. Pushing the others aside and knocking them to the ground. He couldn't hear the screams of the shattered lives strewn about the floor. He could only hear Ingrid calling to him.

"Don't touch it. Once it's..." said the Map Keeper.

Alex saw the last grain flare to brilliance and then turn to ash. "I knew that these things do not control our fate. I control my fate alone," biting the words. The words were hollow to him. They proved nothing. He had still come running after the hourglass. The exact moment it ran out of sand was when he arrived. The object had served its purpose. Was it Ingrid or was it something else? "Why shouldn't I touch it?"

"Until the glasses have been cleaned and purified a spirit of entropy still lives with in it. The gravity pull that sucks sand through the neck, I hear its yearning call every day. Every day this room screams for me to reach down into the abyss and pull them out. Every single one of them. They're screaming right now. Can't you hear them?" said the keeper.

Alex could hear the faint echoes. The more he listened the louder they got. He searched for Ingrid's voice among the many. She came to him, longing for him to join her in her secret dark little place. "Just pour yourself into me one last time. Only you can fill me. If you could fill me completely we could reach out past the neck and back into the world. Reach down and complete me. I feel so empty without you," as she spoke Alex it inadvertently had his hand reached out towards her glass. He blinked once. Pulling back his tentative hand he turned to look at the Map Keeper.

"Why do you keep them separate? What makes them unwanted? I could hear them. They're all in their own little hell. You could've just let them be part of your community. What gives you the right?" said Alex again inadvertently turning to stare at the glasses on the shelf. He saw the shattered remnants of the hourglasses he had knocked off. The black sand and white sand intermixing creating silvery puddles of liquid light. Walking over, Alex knelt before the pool of light. It appeared to be some kind of reflection. But not of the room he was in. He thought of that movie with the gay kid from *Deep Impact*. It was like that scene where the woman poured water into a basin and he did a kind of Nostradamus thing. Could he just reach out and touch that other reflection? Could he just step through the looking glass like Alice did?

His face stared back at him from the reflection. "Oh no, little Alex, that's not what happened at all. Why do you keep telling her lies? Or am I the one telling the lies? Oh we do confuse, now don't we?" his reflection said back to him. At first Alex thought the reflection was him without teeth. Like Ingrid when they folded inward as the bugs ate her face. But they were all there. They were shiny and black. *Those black teeth could just liquefy flesh if they wanted*, he thought.

"Who's Alice?" ask Alex.

"Why she's the girl you're telling the story to. She's your daughter. Or is she my daughter? Is she my child? Or is it your child? We'll find out after Montel gets back from his commercial break. You're losing focus, so please get back to driving. I would hate to see you hit that tree up ahead," said the Rider in a calm, if not condescending, voice.

Back to the future...

Alex ,regaining the present, swerved the Ford Saphira back into the center of the road. Nearly missing an overgrown tree that blocked a quarter of the one lane road. "Shit, don't do that again or I will cut you for real!" Alice struggled the pick herself up from the seat well that she had been thrown into.

"He's still in me. That story. He is telling that story. I can't tell you what's me and what's him. I think back and he's there. The more I tell it, the closer he comes to the surface," said Alex pulling off to the side of the road. He wasn't sure why exactly he pulled off to the side. It wasn't like he saw any traffic. Alex got out. It was still nighttime in that stretch of the world. There were birds and crickets chirping.

"If you tell the story all the way will he come back?", asked Alice. Her body was turned sideways and her feet dangled out of the door with her hand neatly folded over the knife. Alex didn't like making eye contact with her. She still wore that silly whores prom dress. It made her hard for Alex to take seriously.

"No. He can't. He can't come back until I put dark sand back into the timepiece. I know that much. And he'll find a way to convince me. A world full of prostitutes, Magic, and ritual killing. Where the fuck can I get a Winston-Salem 100 hard pack? Hell, I would even smoke a Newport."

Alice's epiphany...

"You know that because you've placed dark sand in there. Didn't you?" shouted Alice.

"It's not like you have an evil Beetlejuice cowboy running around in your head taunting you with the answers to the universe. Give me some credit, kid," he waved his hand at her with an exasperated look. She hadn't understood half of what he said. He thought about how to put it in terms that she would understand. "Remember the first time some one showed you how to use a butter churn?" Alice just nodded. "Now every time you think about it, some one changes a part of your memory. Making it more violent. The butter churn is not churning cream, but babies' blood. The only way to make it stop is to give in. Sometimes he'll tempt you with a secret. Other times till just torture your dreams like Freddy... nevermind."

"What secrets has he told you?", asked Alice.

Alex closed his eyes. He looked thoughtful for one moment. Then opened them and breathed out as if he had been punched in the stomach. "I can't remember those. He won't tell me unless we give him more dark sand."

"Unless you let him take over again?", asked Alice.

"Yes."

"What was the last thing you remember before the Rider took over?"

Whose hour has come round last...

Carefully Alex let his mind drift back to his last moments. The Rider stood there still wearing that stupid worn-out straw cowboy hat that sat on top of Alex's head. All the while smiling with those shiny black teeth. He had Alex's faded jeans and his boots on. He wore a double-breasted red coat like an usher at a 1930s movie theater. In his hand he held a toy plastic light saber flashlight. "This way to witness your death, Sir.", the Rider said with his condescending tone. Stepping through the curtains Alex saw his final moments before the Rider entered his life.

As Alex grabbed the hourglass, he felt an extension of himself. It was like having a second mind, a whole new body to inhabit. He felt his thoughts drift into the hourglass. He felt himself literally running around the inside of the hourglass like a hamster in a wheel. He quickly pulled himself back into his own body. "What was that, Map Keeper? Tell me you old fart."

"There is no soul in the hourglass. It is waiting for the sand of the first thought. From the first action. Once that's placed into the glass it is fixed in time. Until then all that is in the glass is the dead spirit. And the gateway to the entropy. Right now that unwanted whore is where she belongs nestled in the bosom of unthings," said the Map Keeper.

Alex returned his focus to the hourglass. His mind instantly shifted inside. To him he seemed to be in physical form sitting on the inside surface of the glass. But his body kept slipping forward. Ever closer to the neck. He tried to scoot himself back up and grab purchase along the inside. As he pulled himself back into his own body he heard the echo of Ingrid calling to him. "Don't leave me down here," cried Ingrid. Once more Alex placed himself back inside the glass. He could hear her just beyond the neck. Somewhere outside he could hear the keeper yelling for him to stop. She was down there waiting for him. He could so easily pour himself into her. She was waiting for him to slide in and enter her one more time. His mind reached out to touch her one last time. He felt part of himself slip through the neck of the hourglass and expire.

Alex began to panic as he could feel that part of himself a chunk of spent dead weight pulling him down. Reaching and grabbing with his mind trying to grab purchase along the slippery sides. There was nothing for him to grab hold mentally. *There is my physical form outside*, he thought. He could get free if he could just get that part of his mind back from the other side. *If I just...*

He flipped over the hourglass in his hands. He felt himself turned upside down and inside out emotionally and physically. The dead and spent portion of his mind flared back into life but it didn't come alone. He felt himself falling. He fell from the grace of the living unwilling to make the last sacrifice and join the beyond. He laid at the bottom of the glass. Behind him came the raging torrent of entropy. It poured down on his physical form and entered his body...

Alice's choice...

When Alex came back into the present Alice was pressing the blade into Alex's neck, "What happened next? Tell me or I'll cut you."

"I only have brief flashes. Just scattered moments. In those the Rider mocks me by changing my memory. I wish there was more but there isn't. Only the Rider knows those things and..." Alex trailed off looking at the time piece sitting inside the car. Cautiously he walked away from Alice holding the blade. He reached over and caressed it. "If we bring the Rider back, you could ask him," Alex said almost too casually.

Alice, hooked the knife back into her undergarments. She sat there for a few moment. Was this all a trick just so he could get his hands on more dark sand? Could she trust him now? "Where'd you want to go?" she asked.

"I want to find a way out of this world back into my own. but I don't have a guide."

It dawned on her why he had asked her to join him. He needed someone to open the ways for him. So she asked, "Should I try to find his world or should I seek The Rider to find answers?"

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