



Crossroads...

The Ford rolled down the road with Alice and Alex sitting silently inside. She no longer threatened Alex with the knife. Alex looked more bleak every time she looked at him. He kept wiping his lips and trying hard not to look in the rearview mirror. "What's this for?" asked Alice reaching forward to fiddle with the stereo knobs.

"Don't touch those," answered Alex looking away from the rearview mirror. Speaking too late Alice turned on the radio.

"Welcome to Kiss FM, I'm looking for caller number 11. We have Brian on the line...," Alex flipped off the radio.

"Where are we going?" asked Alex.

"We're going to take the left hand road up ahead," said Alice running her fingers over her stomach. "They've spoken."

Game pieces...

Phyllo sat at the base of a tree. Breathing slowly, he relaxed his mind. Silencing the worries and the voices. He opened the way within his own mind and he stepped through, vanishing from the world of maps to his own world.

The green shag carpet was wet with beer. Single blue green lights shone down on individual pool tables giving them their own circle of light. Only a few games were being played. The vast array of tables sat empty and quiet. Ahead of Phyllo was an old card table.

Phyllo took a chair and looked at the irregular chessboard sitting on the table in front of them. "It's your move again," said a voice from the other side of the table. Phyllo stared at the board. At the ever shifting white and black pieces. The number on one end of the board never matched the other no matter how many times you counted. The individual pieces shifted as if restless. Phyllo looked down and saw a fat naked man looking like Buddha. Phyllo reached over to touch the piece, "I'm sorry that piece's out of play." A bare white hand came out of the darkness and began to gesticulate as if the hand itself was talking. Phyllo looked up and saw the yellow eyes staring through the darkness. He could hear a snorting sound of breath like a large animal.

Phyllo looked again at his pieces. He saw his knight lying on its side, its limbs had been cut off. He looked at the rook burning. The queen, already beginning to show signs of pregnancy, was still sitting next to the king. The King's piece was growing a black face out of the back of its white head. He looked over at his opposition. The far side of the board spread out to hold an army of dark soldiers. Their knight was an ice cream truck, their rooks looked like the Capitol building, and the bishops looked like fat cooks.

Phyllo took a pawn into his hand. He held it in his hands for a few moments then set it down next to his queen. "Do you think she's ready? She is only a pawn you know?" asked the voice from the other side.

"I think she could become far more than that." As Phyllo took his hand off the pawn, it transformed into a knight, riding up on its rears. The knight held high not a sword but a pinwheel.

Fill up...

The old Ford Saphira pulled into the gas station. Alice handed Alex a 20 gram bag. She got out and walked towards the shop as Alex filled up the tank.

Alex dropped the bag onto a sealed automated scale that checked the bag's weight and purity before activating the pumps. Alex knew from experience that only shiny sand would activate the pumps. Was it some form of weird voodoo of this world or an ancient technology from the aliens who constructed this place? Alex looked up at the jagged sky. He could see sets of clouds that bordered worlds. The color of the sky and the stars and the light within didn't match one to the other. Staring at the sky was like looking at a kaleidoscope. Alex didn't know how long he had been staring at that same sky until Alice called to him. The pump had already stopped.

Walking inside, Alex looked over the meager assortment of junk food. Alice stood by the register holding a small vial of black sand. The woman behind the counter had her face shrouded in a tangled mess of shaggy brown hair. "What do you plan to do with that, kid?" asked Alex as he took a step closer.

"They sell it here as a fertilizer additive," said Alice.

"Among other uses," added the young lady behind the register with an ominous tone.

"You're not planning on..."

"He has answers. I'm not about ready to go back to your world before I know exactly what he knows," answered Alice.

Other uses...

Bob laid on his back naked. The woman sat at the side of his bed putting on a robe. But he couldn't remember if he had come or just given up. Either way it wasn't satisfying. It had been days since he saw his last mission walk away with the enemy. *I tried didn't I?* thought Bob. The gun he called the Yod sat on the dresser. He often thought about just putting the gun in his mouth and pulling the trigger. "What good would it do, isn't this already the afterlife? Are we all just dead?" said Bob aloud. "What happens if you die in death?" The only string he could feel was the one connecting him to the gun. Those life threads, those way lines between objects and people were all quiet. He couldn't see or feel them any more.

"I don't think about that morbid stuff, honey," said the woman

Trying to remember her name Bob fished, "Is there some way we can get in touch again for drinks some night?" She didn't even answer him she just walked to the door and left. Bob felt hurt for only a moment before letting it go. His emotions felt like they were drained through a sieve. He grabbed the bottle off the dresser. He felt the plastic collapsed lightly in his hand. *Always the mark of a fine beverage*, he thought to himself. He tried not to glance at the bottle. The ominous words printed on the side, "new tequila substitute, 100% radiation free, lifelike mechanical worm inside not for human consumption, droid safe," he really hoped that last line was a joke.

The day Alice left, Bob returned to the bordello. He took all that was left in the safe. Bags full of keys of shiny sand. A fortune he squandered at the nearest bar he came across. He bought a nice room overlooking the rustic town of Wood. Three streets of fresh cut lumber buildings. A bazaar offering the finest handcrafted leather goods. Fine silks and linens sold by the bolt or made into clothing specifically tailored for the well-to-do man or woman. The finest iron and copper work within the known region. Oxen and horses and carriages intermingled with ladies in fine dresses that resembled birthday cakes to Bob's eyes. Bob, thought it was like something out of an episode of *Bonanza*. Until he saw the LCD displays above each shopfront.

He thought about questioning the townsfolk, why they hadn't perfected the steam engine yet had high-definition street signs, but let it go. He no longer cared. There was a soft knock at his door. He grunted for the person to go away but instead the door opened. A woman in her twenties approached Bob holding an ornate black lacquered box. From her dress he assumed she was a worker from the hotel. Without glancing at his nakedness, she opened the box and began to assemble something before him. Bob, was taken out of his ennui for the moment. He dropped some of his self-loathing and covered himself. She produced a long pipe and placed the tip in Bob's mouth. "I'm not interested," but he was. He was interested in anything that could kill the loneliness for just a few moments. Bob had smoked his share of pot in his youth. So now he was going to graduate to opium. *What the fuck*, he thought. He had been drunk, and stoned. Even tried a little bit of meth once. Why not try the Chinamen's pipe. But the lady wasn't Chinese. She looked more like a young Scottish girl. He wanted something that wasn't this world of anachronism or thoughts of suicide.

"Compliments of the Cook downstairs," she stated as she lit the pipe.

Bob breathed in. Before him Bob could see all those life threads blaze before him. The fire in his heart was extinguished. His sex drive vanished. His mind absorbed the beauty of the pattern that was whole and complete before his eyes. He basked in the moment of revelation. Slowly the moment ebbed away. It was now nighttime. Hours had passed and the beautiful redheaded woman sat there beside his bed quietly the whole time.

"I want to experience that again," said Bob.

"I know, I made sure to bring more," the lady answered his command. "Of course the first time it's free. After that there's a price."

"I have money."

"It doesn't cost money." From inside the black box she lifted the ball of sticky black paste and placed it into the ball at the end of the pipe. She lifted out of the black box an ornate brass hourglass. The bottom was filled with dark sand. The hourglass was attached to a clockwork machine of shiny brass cogs and gears. The machine mixed the dark sand down with alcohol and opiates to form a sticky paste.

Bob watched in fascination as he smoked the pipe. He could see the forms of the machine and understand each individual motion and its connection to the next. He waited for the next sticky little black ball of revelation as his eyes filled with black veins.

Tying up loose ends...

Alex, his hands mummified in duct tape that held him to a piece of dirty white lawn furniture, asked. "Honey, are you sure you want to do this?" There was a film of sweat collecting on his forehead. How he could be sweating in a cold room Alice had no idea. The shopkeeper, who Alex kept calling Cousin It, insisted that they use that room because the door locked.

"That's funny. So, my name is now honey. Not kid?" asked Alice.

"Look, I'm real sorry about what happened to you. But I don't see how bringing back the thing that did them is going to make anything better."

"How is letting you go back to your world going to make anything better? I still have a path before me. The path you helped create. I will have my answers before you have your reward. You think we did a good enough job?" asked Alice.

"I don't think he can move. That's about the best chair we got. Anything else we have in I'm pretty sure he can break it if he tried. These plastic chairs crack, but it takes a good while of working to do it." The shopkeeper stood in the back corner not wanting to get near Alex.

Alice opened the hourglass and held the vial of dark sand over its opening, "Don't do this you know better than anyone else what he's capable of," said Alex.

"I'm not afraid of you anymore," said Alice. She looked at her father, Alex, who wasn't looking at her. He was staring straight at the girl he called Cousin it. Alice looked at the young shopkeeper and saw that tears were streaming down her face when she reached up to brush them away she moved some of her hair and Alice saw the black lettering. Now, clearly visible the words unwanted were tattooed on her forehead. "Penelope?"

The vial of dark sand slipped from Alice's fingers and poured towards the neck where it flared to life.

Awakening...

"Memories, Like the corners of my mind, Misty water-colored memories, Of the way we were..." sang the Rider as he lifted his head and smiled at the two little girls with his shiny black teeth.

Your turn...

Phyllo sat across from the Dark Master at the other end of the card table. The card table that separated right from wrong. The board itself appeared to be only a 16 x 16 inch piece of cardboard but from the perspective of the pieces it was a vast battlefield. Each square, no ... square is a fixed and definable thing with borders and dimensions. These places were dimensions in themselves and were constantly shifting and moving. As were the pieces. Phyllo, held his hand with the bulbous fingertips

over every piece on the board. He looked over at his fat Buddha as it turned gray on its way to becoming black. "I failed you, Bob," he said quietly.

He looked at the shadow at the other end. The yellow, impassive eyes were staring out of the darkness. The rhythmic breathing of a large bull was juxtaposed to the gesticulating hand that pointed to the hourglass in the table. "Well little man, your time is almost up. What's your move going to be?"

Penelope's move...

The Rider, now back in control hopped on his feet and charged at her headfirst like a bull. She almost wanted to shout out unfair, like she was a child again. With one arm, Penelope grabbed Alice around the waist and threw her through the door with the other hand she grabbed the handle and slammed the door shut just before they heard the dull thud of Alex's head against steel. The Rider continued to pound Alex his head against the steel a few more times before giving up. They could hear the squeak of the plastic chair as he sat back down on his ass right in front of the freezer door.

Quiet moments...

They sat in front of the door quietly contemplating what to do next. Until, Penelope suggested Alice get a change of clothes. She found Alice a pair of old pants and some fresh underwear, from her apartment in the back of the gas station. She handed Alice a sweatshirt from a box of shirts marked, "for return." "Grand Canyon, Arizona, The Prettiest Province in Canada," was written on it. They helped themselves to some dried meat marked "Jack Links" and a cup of coffee. As she ate this salty slimy meat, she thought of Bob. It had only been a few hours since she last saw him. It felt like weeks to her. When Alex told her the story about Penelope she was only six at best.

"You still remember him?" Alice asked.

Penelope's story...

"The wild cackle was what I heard first. I saw the cowboy running through the streets holding a torch in each hand, and the hourglass tied to a string and looped around his neck. He burned the houses. He started with the small ones made mostly of wood. When the fires got strong enough they started to burn the plastic roofs on the metal houses. He started in the unwanted section of town, because it burned faster. People tried to stop him, but he was either too strong or too fast. His body moved like liquid. Of course these are all memories of memories. I was so young then. He ran all the way until he reached the town center where they stored that thing they pulled out of the crate. It was the only thing that stopped him. It stopped him dead in his tracks and held his fascination."

"What was it?", asked Alice.

"It was that goddamn dragon. He killed an entire village of 4,000 people just for a dragon."

"They were the evil ones. I just brought them to their end," said the Rider from behind the metal door.

Sympathy for the devil...

"After I was released I looked at what they had done to the world in their path. Inside the Map Keeper's Temple there is a room. There's one inside every temple. The cartographer's room. Inside they alter life maps and family bloodlines. Systematically eliminating, and divining their own pattern. Life

breeds on its own. It follows its own logic. But the Map Keepers' quest for power and will over the roads ends the lifelines. We are all slaves to the will of the road," said the Rider.

"What are you talking about?", said Alice.

"In the end, the family's life map is sewn into the great tapestry. The question is where in the tapestry it is sewn. Why is it that some are marked unwanted and some are fated to marry those they don't love? When your father cut his own life map, he worked his will against the will of the road. My job is to fill the cracks in the gaps in fate."

"You fill them with dead bodies."

"If that's what it takes... yes," answered the Rider.

"And what gap in the great master plan did raping me fill?" asked Alice.

"Well, I think that answer is self-evident," said Alex. Even through the door you could hear the smile in his voice. It took a few moments for Alice to catch his meaning before her face turned red with shame and anger. Faint traces of cold steam arose from the blade she held in her right hand as she reached for the door handle with her left.

Moments of reason...

Penelope stopped Alice's hand. She shook her head. Alice pulled away from Penelope. She thought briefly of cutting Penelope down where she stood just to get at the Rider. One innocent, pleading look from Penelope made her stop. She looked at Penelope's hands, in one of them she held Alex's key ring. Quietly, they both left the Rider in the store's freezer.

Penelope took the driver's seat. With only one stall out and a couple of clashed gears they started down the dusty road together. She could swear she heard the Rider shouting from inside the store as they drove off. Looking at the sky and land Alice could see the scar.

The scar...

It was something that couldn't be unseen once you saw it. She knew it had always been there but she had always turned a blind eye to it. The vein of corruption. The tear in the fabric of her world. Could it be sewn shut? Is it just a vortex that consumes everyone who comes near it? Alice wasn't sure. To the right she saw a world without scars. A pathway without blemish and a world untouched by corruption. The thought echoed through her mind. *Should I follow the scar or should I discover new worlds?* As she thought this they approached a fork in the road.

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