



She moves...

Alice looked over at Penelope. "Take a left up ahead," said Alice.

"That's towards the rip," said Penelope, taking her eyes off the road in looking at Alice.

"I know, that's what it's telling me. We're going to try to make things better, I hope." Alice ran her fingers over her stomach. She hadn't eaten much but she could feel her tummy had become a little bit larger. Just enough to be noticeable to her fingers.

Penelope reached over and twisted a dial. "It's all right. It's all right. It's ALLLL right, she moves in mysterious ways," sang the radio.

"Radio's work in this world," said Penelope. She looked over at Alice with a meaningful glance. After a few moments Alice shrugged.

"What's that mean?"

"You haven't traveled much." It was more of a statement. It almost sounded like an accusation.

"And you have?" asked Alice.

"Yes," answered Penelope.

"If you knew who he was, why didn't you stop me?"

"Because, your guide had decided to bring him back. That decision trumps all others. I couldn't override their will any more than you could."

"Yes I could, I can not do with the guides tell me," said Alice defiantly.

"And then you would lose them all. Those echoing decisions. Not having to make the difficult choices yourself. It's so easy, isn't it? Just do what they tell you," said Penelope in a mocking tone.

"You don't understand nothing, bitch," said Alice as they rolled towards the scar.

The Hanged Man...

They passed by a judgment tree. Same as the one Alice watched Toby tied to as they beat him. From its dead branches hung the nooses. In front of them was a maze of tract houses. In its center was the municipal building, a firehouse, and the map room. Penelope turned off the road towards the judgment tree. "Let's pull over at the judgment tree," said Alice.

"Why?" asked Penelope.

"If this town has been corrupted then, I want to talk to its criminals," said Alice.

Alice thought she saw the faint hint of a smile on Penelope's face. The sun was setting behind them as they pulled up before the Joshua tree of judgment. The nooses hung from it overgrown with vines. Only one man still hung from the branches. He was hung by 1 foot with his other foot resting behind his knee. His legs formed it upside down four and looked like a dried out cornhusks. Small flowers grew from his hair to resemble a halo. A black scarf was tied around his eyes.

"Unfortunately he looks dead," said Penelope.

"No he's not. He's breathing and listening," said Alice.

"How the hell could he still be alive?" asked Penelope.

"Hate. Isn't that right? I could see the vines have grown into your skin," said Alice to the hanged Man.

"Yes, I am still alive. As are those who judge me. I would not make the sacrifice. I know the entropy comes. I live on its threshold. Those in the town choose not to accept it. It comes for us all. Take heed children. For a sorcerer lives in town that has damned my eyes."

"So what would happen if I untied the bandage around your eyes?" asked Alice.

"I don't rightfully know. I know that they were damned and I shall see beauty only once more before I die. That is what the sorcerer said," said the hanged man.

"Let's just set him free," said Alice.

"No, you can't. You're not the one he sinned against. You can't cut him down. He needs to be forgiven first," said Penelope

"She's right, you have to find the man who accused me first," said the Hanged Man.

In town...

As they drove in a large billboard to read "Willis whirlpools." The sign was blue, at the bottom was frothy water. It had a plywood cut out of a seemingly naked woman smiling and submerging herself in the water. The machine in the billboard would make the a woman oscillate between submerging herself in the tub and rising out of it like a giant pop-up book. In its time it probably looked very nice. That time had long since passed. The mechanism had ceased working and liquid rust had bled through to stain the frothy water red. The smiling face on the billboard was warped now and looked like she was afraid and half submerged.

Weeds popped up through the cracks in the pavement. The tract houses looked near futuristic to Alice's eyes. Each one similar to the next. All of them had different arrangements of flowers and wind chimes to distinguish them from each other. Each one had different dragons in their driveways.

"Prothero, Pern, Typhon, Barney, I had no idea there were so many different types of dragons," said Alice.

"Yeah, I really wish you people just call them cars," said Penelope.

"Okay, I didn't know there are that many cars," Alice put extra emphasis on the word. It seemed unnatural to her.

"So you traveled a lot," said Alice. The question was implied even though she said it as a statement.

"Yeah," Penelope left it at that.

Sleepy time...

They pulled into the parking lot of a Motel 6. Penelope told Alice to go across the street and buy some food. Truth be told, she didn't want the towheaded girl making things more awkward as she checked into a hotel room. She was still quite young and didn't know how the people would react to her. The last thing she needed was some towhead wielding a knife in making stupid assumptions. As Penelope checked in, she saw a big urn sitting on the counter. Its place was somewhat conspicuous. The leering man behind the desk kept asking if she would need anything and made extra sure to let her know that he was just a phone call away if ever she changed her mind.

Alice, suffering from a state of culture shock, wandered through the Dollar General trying to make heads or tails of the odd assortment of items. Everything seemed to be coated in the shiny slick material she was coming to know as plastic. Every time she touched or felt it they reminded her of Bob. She wondered how he was doing. She regretted leaving him behind but knew that the guides said they had their reasons. *I can defy them, can't I?* she asked herself. *But then I would lose them. Do they have my best interest in mind? Or do they have some other agenda?* As she checked out, she wondered how long the bags of shiny sand would last her. She had burned through almost a quarter of her money. It only had been a day.

The Urn...

On the way back to the hotel Alice saw more people placing urns on their porch rails. Looking around she saw every house had one of those urns on it. Some of them were swinging from chains suspended over the doorway. Others simply sat on porch tables while others rested on ornate pedestals.

A pack dragon painted black drove down the center of the street. The scroll, symbol of the Map Keepers, was painted on the sides. "Place your sacrifice outside for the dark wind. Dirt mites come this evening to claim that which is not needed," shouted from loudspeakers. The vehicle came to a stop when it saw Alice.

The man in black...

"Run along, child. Say your prayers and read your index, the dark wind is coming," said the man in black. Long wispy gray hairs that were combed and clean framed his handsome old face.

"I'm staying at the hotel. I don't have a sacrifice. Will I need one?" asked Alice.

The old man's presence seemed to tower over her making her both comforted and awed. "Yes, you most certainly need a sacrifice. But it's so late. There's no time to make one. But I do have one that you could borrow. As long as you're willing to make sure to replace it," said the old man smiling.

"Thank you so much. My friend will need one too. Can one sacrifice cover us both?" asked Alice.

"Why, yes it will. But you'll both have to pay the price. Come, quickly into this humble vehicle of the cartographer's work. We can work on paying for the sacrifice there," he said over eagerly. It set Alice's teeth on edge and she felt the knife in her pocket grow cold as the old man's hand reached out for her shoulder. His hand spasmed as he winced in pain. "You have ...," he didn't finish his statement as he looked at her stomach. Alice placed her free hand over her stomach and could feel the small bulge in it as her stomach fluttered. "There is nothing I can do for you. You've made your bed."

All alone...

Penelope and Alice looked through the food. For once, Penelope seemed pleased and she picked up a candy bar labeled "Smirker Bar." Alice drank soda pop for the first time. The two girls got into a belching contest. Alice felt Penelope was beginning to warm up to her and they started to feel like friends. Alice had been the leader of her little gang but she never really had a friend. She had always been in charge. It wasn't until Toby put her in her place that she wasn't in control. It was unusual for her to feel that loss of control. She'd never felt it with another woman.

Originally, she purchased it as an icebreaker, but now it felt downright silly. Alice had it at the bottom of the bag but thought it would be a good time to bring it out. "It's one to replace the one you lost. Well, the one Phyllo lost," said Alice. She put air quotes around the word lost. It was a gesture she picked up from Penelope. Although she only use one finger on each hand, the middle finger. Alice never understood why it cracked Penelope up so much when she did. Penelope only giggled for the few seconds before Alice held a pinwheel in front of her. It was rainbow colored and sparkled in the lamplight. Penelope's face fell and she ran into the bathroom. Alice could hear sobs through the door.

Where no one can see...

The hotel manager gave her a room with only one bed. Penelope didn't ask for two beds because she didn't want to be obvious about her friend. They laid in the bed together, Alice in her small clothes. Alice had never been shy around other girls and didn't see any reason to be. Penelope was still wearing her clothes. "You should change. But then wash your clothes in the sink and hang them out to dry. It's okay, I understand the marks those people left on you are ugly. I don't see them. I also don't judge you for them. You didn't do those things. You're just the bearer of the marks."

"Okay, but just turn out that light, please," said Penelope.

As the night stretched on the room got colder. In a moment of sleepiness Alice reached over and felt the warm shape of Penelope's shoulder. So soft and comforting. It wasn't the shoulder of a man. It felt so different. In this moment, it also felt right. Alice had a friend. She hadn't had a friend and a partner in so long. She ran her hand down her forearm and around her waist. She pulled herself closer to Penelope, careful not to wake her. Her warm body next to her felt so good. She pressed her face into the

shaggy mop of hair that now smelled good from the hotel shampoo. She ran her fingers down her friend's stomach and began to feel a scar on her abdomen. Alice nearly jumped out of her skin as Penelope seized hold of her hand.

Truth or consequences...

Penelope's body shook with tears. "The Rider, did he...," asked Alice.

"Yes...," said Penelope in the weakest voice Alice had ever heard.

*My God, How young was she when he ... ?* Alice thought. "You're not to blame for this. That thing is a monster. It can't be reasoned with. It can only be destroyed."

"I'm not crying because of what he did. I'm crying because of what I did," said Penelope. Alice reached over and turned on the nightstand light. Its soft yellow glow illuminated them both.

"What did you do?" asked Alice. She had a parenting, comforting tone. Things like this happened even in her little town. It wasn't right, but it wasn't her fault. She needed to know that.

"The Rider wasn't in Alex when he made you. You are a product of Alex's seed. I could see it in your face. But when he fathers a child with the Rider in control it makes a guide. A counterforce to correct the evil," said Penelope.

"But guides are always good," said Alice.

"And neither are all men good, all gods are not just, and all demons are not damned. But I am...," said Penelope. "I killed it. I couldn't bear to choose. I couldn't bear to listen. You're stronger than I am. I killed my guide, before it was born." Penelope lowered her fingers from her stomach to show a cross shaped scar just below her navel. Her cold hard eyes stared into Alice.

Alice, looked at her. Her face not changing not judging. Penelope's eyes began to waver then swim in their own tears. She crumpled underneath Alice's fingers and openly sobbed. Alice held her head on her lap and rocked her like a child. "You are not wrong, you are not evil," she brushed the hair from Penelope's face to reveal the tattoo in bold black letters. "And you're certainly not unwanted." With that Alice began to cry. She slid down and held her new friend. Reaching over to the nightstand she picked up the pinwheel. Holding it up they pressed their lips together and blew. The wheel spun and dazzled before their eyes like the little flower seemingly open. Together they shared a brief moment of joy that only they could bring each other.

The sacrifice...

Penelope was asleep, her face still puffy and tear stained but her lips still tasted of Alice. Alice, however, had grown fearful remembering how the man in black spoke of the dark wind. She hadn't prepared any kind of sacrifice. She hadn't used her woman magic since it failed to give her Toby. She tasted Penelope still on her lips. And bit into them drawing her own blood she reached inside of herself and thought of her until the flood came. Looking out of the window she could see the brown wind coming. It was blocking out the stars and the moonlight. It looked like snow falling as it began to block the streetlights. She began to hear screams coming from the street. "Sacrifice?" asked Alice. Alice attempted to clear her mind. Woman's magic required the focus of a motion. But the judgment was

beyond her. She tried not to think of Penelope. She tried not to lust for her. She tried not have selfish thoughts for her. Alice couldn't get the thoughts of her out of her mind. She wanted to be humble before the Lady guardian but her thoughts swam back to Penelope as she drew on the window hoping that she would see a sign of what she needed to sacrifice. Her her fingers moved beyond her control. It wasn't Alice's will. She wasn't her will on the map. It was something beyond her. Her fingers dropped down towards the window latch.

Alice's heart was racing in her chest. She flipped the latch and pulled the window open. She could see the dirt mites like wisps of smoke. They turned and swarmed to towards her. "What will be will be.", said Alice as she shut her eyes. They swarmed over her body lifting her off the ground. Opening her eyes she watched as they drifted off of her body leaving her unmarked and towards Penelope soundly sleeping blissful a knowing that she had been forgiven. She was blissful in knowing that she was loved. The dirt mites wasted no time on her.

"Please, forgive me," said Alice softly.

Cooler...

Alex, sat in a waiting room. The chairs weren't comfortable, the carpet was too sticky to lay down on to sleep. A stack of *Highlights* magazines were neatly stacked in a corner. If Alex looked at them for any length of time the pictures would turn into dismembered children. There were a few books in the room. They were tattered copies of *The Dark Half*. Every time Alex got into reading it, the Rider would remove one of the pages. The room was the Rider's construct. It was an exact replica of his least favorite dentist's office. The office where they screwed up his anesthesia and removed the wrong teeth.

"Do you know the way to San Jose... ," sang the Muzak.

Alex's mind was trapped inside of his body with the Rider on the outside controlling. But the Rider was inside the cooler freezing. The mental persona was trapped inside a real prison as the real man was trapped inside a persona's construct. He felt briefly like one of those Russian wooden dolls with a smaller doll on the inside. "Ogres have layers... ," said the Rider out loud in a mocking tone.

"Shut the fuck up," said Alex, looking up from a particularly gruesome *Highlights* magazine.

Alex heard a telephone ring. The glass window of the receptionist's desk slid open and a hand thrust a phone receiver out to him. "Awww, we do love Stephen King now don't we Mr. Rider?" said Alex in a sing-song, mocking tone as he grabbed the receiver.

"Well, they are based off your memories. Look, I can't leave here without you."

"Duhh!!! You only live in my head."

"Shut up assmunch."

*God, he's using junior high insults,* thought Alex.

"I can hear your thoughts too. I can't do something for you unless you consciously let me in. And you can get out of here without my help. That's the short and long of it."

His body stirred and Alex arose like a half asleep man thrown from a bed. He rushed over and grabbed the hourglass. Holding it in his hands, he thought briefly about smashing it to the ground. *That would kill me. But least I would be free.* He held it sideways in his hands. And weigh his options before he realized that it was sideways.

Decisions decisions...

The hourglass now sideways in his hands fascinated him. He tipped it back and forth. Never turning it all the way over. He was free from it. At the bottom was a small pool of golden shiny sand.

Alex opened the clasp at the bottom and emptied the shiny sand into the empty vial that once held black sand. Several vials of black sand still sat there. The choice was his. *I could dump the black sand back in or dump the gold in*, he thought. "I could also just leave the thing behind. I could even smash it if I wanted to. The choice is mine. No, I need to stop. Is it too late, for me to follow? Is it too late for me to hear the voices of God?" he said out loud, clasping his hands and kneeling before the hourglass. For once the Rider was truly quiet and Alex just listened.

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