

Down the Road -- Part 21: Dead End

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image chef

Beneath the surface...

The grave was only 2 feet deep. The rotten wooden handle of the shovel broke and left splinters in Mr. Gardiner's hands. The sun was shining behind the old rotten log cabin. Gardiner finished looking at the sky filled with clouds swirling. The clouds were dark and thick, bursting with lightning and rain. The sky directly over the cabin was clear like the eye of a hurricane. The sun shine down on Mr. Gardiner's head like God trying to stare down all of humanity. When it was done, it was done. The rebel cherub, confusing little road guide, the boy with a dirty gossamer wings was dead. "If he could go anywhere he said he wanted to sack Carthage," said Mr. Gardiner to himself

"What the hell did he mean by that?" asked Mr. Gardiner. He had traveled the worlds before with the road guide TiVo. That time it'd only been a series of unfortunate events. He never had to face avatars. Without a road guide he couldn't make his way back. He didn't have an hourglass or life map. He didn't fear the dark winds. He had beaten them once before. Looking at his hands he felt like he was in his early 40s. The cabin didn't look that run down. With some work and some time he might be able to make something out of the place. The tool shed was stocked with rotten but usable equipment. The twisted ugly trees around the property were growing apples.

"Well, there's probably a market in town. That is if this realm has a town. I'm sure I'll make it one way or the other," said Mr. Gardiner. He was interrupted by a ringing telephone. It was the old metal claxon sound. He wandered into the cabin. Inside the kitchen he saw a wall phone with a old-style hand receiver. He picked up the shot glass size speaker and pressed it into his ear and tried not to look at the Sprint logo and name neatly carved in to the wood.

"Mr. Gardiner?" asked a male voice.

"Speaking."

"You don't know me or my brother Bob. We've just received word here that an associate of ours named Phyllo was killed. We're sorry for your loss," said the man.

"I appreciate that. You couldn't possibly tell me how you know Phyllo's dead if I just buried him a few hours ago?" asked Mr. Gardiner.

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"Why am I not surprised? Well, it's been a long day. So unless you know a way out of this realm and the way back to my own world...," said Mr. Gardiner.

He was interrupted, "My brother is about ready to get into a fight he's going to lose. I need your help. He's going to fight the cook at the diner," said the man. The voice was beginning to sound a little bit more frantic.

"The creature at the diner is a dark agent. Who is his road guide?" asked Mr. Gardiner. He thought about leprechauns, red caps, small imps, maybe even a chupacabra himself.

"He has a relic missing from your dimension and a cursed knife," said the man.

"That is pathetic."

"Please, help my brother. Do this for me and I'll try to get you to any realm or dimension you would like. Prolife, afterlife, you name it," said the man.

"Where do I go from here?"

Hey good looking, what you got cookin...

Alice tried to push past the waitress. Her arms were as strong as leather straps. Her body was anchored to the linoleum floor. She could hear Penelope screaming. She heard the sizzling skillet. Penelope's screaming was dampened by a gunshot. The waitress released Alice's arms. A sticky brown liquid was leaking from a fist-sized hole in the waitress's forehead. Above the smell of gunsmoke, Alice could smell maple syrup pouring from the open wound. The waitress slumped forward. Alice looked up and saw a balding man in a leather duster covered with objects. He was holding a gun in his hand.

"Bob?" shouted Alice.

The reunion was broken by more screams from the kitchen. Alice turned from Bob and tried to focus on Penelope. Her adrenaline was kicking in and so was the baby. She felt dizzy and lightheaded. Her feet didn't seem real beneath her. She pushed past the swinging doors. The fat cook was holding Penelope's hand firmly against the grill.

"You monster! I will rip your balls off, you sick freak!" shrieked Alice.

Penelope tried to pull her hand free from the grill. The skin had liquefied and was sticking like a bad omelette. Her hand came free, losing a layer of skin. The little muscles under the skin of her fingers were turning gray.

Alice grabbed a large knife from the salad station and charged at the fat cook. He stood there and let her slide the blade into his chest a few times before smacking her onto the grill with a flabby forearm. Alice rolled as fast as her very pregnant body would let her, burning her hands

and stomach. She fell to the ground on her back. The bloated stomach of the chef oozed black blood that reaked of tar.

"That's enough. Back away from the girls or I will shoot you dead," said Bob standing in the kitchen holding the gun.

The fat chef let out a goofy laugh. He turned around and ran into a storeroom in the back where the three of them heard a screen door open. Bob thought about chasing after him but realized he had to be with the two injured girls at his feet. He looked at Penelope's hand and quickly grabbed the cleanest towel he could find and poured warm water on it from the sink. He wrapped it around her fingers. She was barely conscious. Alice wasn't too badly hurt. "You have any abdominal pain? You think you're going into labor?" asked Bob.

"No," said Alice. "Penelope needs some real medical help."

"I know. I don't think we'll get too far with him outside. Stay here and keep her safe. I'll take care of chef psychopath," said Bob. He hoped he wasn't showing Penelope how scared he really was. *Well, I shot my brother in cold blood. I shot Alice's mom for attempting to give me an undead blow job. I killed a madame in a bordello. How much different would it be to shoot a fat guy with grease stains?* he thought to himself.

As he reached the back screen door he felt the entire diner lurch.

From the mind of madness...

Being possessed by an evil entity has certain advantages. There is, first off, the absence of fear. Which is pretty good when facing down the enemy. There is the absence of pain, that is equally good in a fight. But the biggest advantage of being possessed by an evil spirit is the lack of doubt. When you're controlled by a focused entity of rage you no longer have to worry about the simple things, like human kindness or self-preservation. The dark chef slammed into the trailer hitch with the back of his GMC Norbert pickup truck. He didn't once have any doubt about pulling the trailer clear of the lattice and cinderblock supports placed around the airstream diner. He didn't doubt that it was going to make one hell of a mess inside the silver airstream trailer. He simply didn't care. The diesel fuel graciously provided by the Dark Master was enough to get that diner in the position on the edge of Tabula Rasa. In the heat haze of the open desert, he could see the line of the blacktop. He looked down the never-ending road of time that stretched into infinity. He looked backwards into the lands of down the road the twisting mosaic of incomplete worlds and half loss fever dreams. Walking towards him from the shattered realms was Mr. Gardiner dressed in white.

Rollout...

The Norbert polled the diner free from its homemade foundation. The truck stalled out once. With a quick restart he backed the truck up then threw it forward. The diner bounced free. Bob thought about jumping out of the back door, but reconsidered it looking at the two helpless

women inside. He wouldn't dream of throwing nine-month pregnant Alice out of a moving vehicle and Penelope was barely conscious and losing a lot of blood from her hand. Before he could reconsider saving himself, the diner was rolling down the road at 30 miles an hour.

"Are you two OK?" Bob asked as Alice was trying to regain her feet. Pots and pans were falling all around. She was trying to keep things from landing on Penelope's head.

"I think we're OK. Pen's hand isn't bleeding too bad. I think the stove cooked the wound closed. She'll lose a finger or two if we don't get some help," said Alice.

Bob looked at this woman in front of him. She wasn't the spoiled little girl that abandoned him at the carnival. He had no right to feel proud but he was. She was grown up and she had grown out quite a bit.

"You shouldn't have brought that thing with you," said Penelope weakly. She raised her hand covered in the wet towels. She was already starting to bleed through it.

"What, the gun? I just used it to save your friend's life," said Bob defensively.

"No, she means that," said Alice. She pointed at the frost imprint cross on the pocket of his duster.

Bob reached into his pocket and tried to remove the cold knife. It flash froze his fingers and he released it with a small yelp. It clattered to the floor like an ice cube.

"Where the fuck did you get that?" asked Alice. "I dropped that back in a town months ago."

"It was at the feet of Alex. He's truly gone now. I think we have more important things to worry about," said Bob. The trailer jumped as it hit a bump. Then suddenly the trailer slid sideways as it was struck by something. Bob left the kitchen, carefully moving to the table section. He looked out of the windows and saw the powder blue Ford Eragon attempting to play bumper cars with the rolling diner.

Bob went to the front door and attempted to yell at the man ramming the diner. Just as he opened the door, Mr. Gardiner rammed the diner once again. Bob's feet flew out from underneath him and he hung on to the door frame for dear life. Half his body was hanging out of the diner trailer. His leg dragged across the gravel at 30 miles an hour.

Mr. Gardiner almost went off the road when he saw Bob nearly fall out. As determined as he was to run the evil cook off the road, the idea of crushing a human being under the wheel of a car made Gardiner sick. As he drove alongside not sure how to help the fat man hanging half out of a rolling trailer, the chef steered towards the Eragon. Gardner stepped on the brakes and pulled over as fast as he could without going off the road. The wheels dipped off the asphalt, caught the gravel berm, and sent the car spinning. Fortunately, Bob pulled himself back inside the diner.

Bob's leg was now bleeding. The tattered remnants of his pants were sticking to the wound. "Okay, some guy dressed in white stole Alex's old car and is now trying to kill us. Well at least it can't get too much weirder," said Bob. That was the moment when Angela decided to press her cold, dead, naked body against the glass. She proceeded to smear her lips and vaginal region over the window like a demonic slug. She crawled sideways towards the door. Bob pulled out his gun and fired one round into the window missing Angela completely. The slide locked open, waiting for the next round to be fed into the chamber. The finger of God was empty. All of his work to get that gun into this world and it failed him the one moment he truly absolutely needed it. Angela's reanimated sex-driven corpse, crawled through the open doorway and across the ceiling like a centipede.

Sunday driver...

Mr. Gardiner's heart was racing as the vehicle stopped spinning. He was more scared that he hit the bald guy than anything else. He turned the key and the engine started back up. The car now had a suspicious wobble to its movement and the engine knocked a little. The throttle wasn't as responsive and the steering couldn't be trusted to stay true. However, the car still moved fast enough to catch up with the diesel pickup truck.

Back in the trailer, Bob grabbed a heavy pan to throw at Angela. She easily dodged it by dropping onto her feet. The way she changed from moving like an insect to walking like an almost real human scared Bob more than if she stayed on the ceiling. "Give me back the cold knife. My master wants to have it. Do this and I won't kill Alice after she has the Dark Master's son," said Angela.

"You're not going to offer me sex and riches?" asked Bob.

"You had your chance. Question is, how many will die with you?" said Angela.

"Why the hell do you want that knife?" asked Alice. She was standing in the doorway between the diner and the kitchen.

"It's to cut the umbilical cord, foolish little girl," said Angela. A queer expression crept over Alice's face. She furrowed her brow as her pupils dilated. Her hands went to her stomach and she doubled over with pain. She slumped against the doorframe, almost passing out from her first full contraction.

"Alice!" shouted Bob.

"And with the cold knife the Dark Master shall christen his only begotten son in a new land beyond. His glorious foothold in a brave new world," said Angela. It wasn't just the grim concept of the Dark Master traveling out of the shattered realms that creeped Bob out, it was the fact Angela was two knuckles deep inside herself and strumming away. That made the declaration worse.

"You can't have her!" said Penelope at the doorway. Her face was pale and covered in sweat. In her bandaged hand she held the cold knife. Wisps of blue fog rolled off its blade.

Angela's mouth opened far too wide for a human. It was filled with sharp black teeth and she raised both her hands over her head like a wild animal. The hand she had been fingering herself with was covered in blood with a wiggling maggot stuck under a broken fingernail.

Penelope charged at Angela. The avatar's talons tore into Penelope's face. The knife sunk into Angela's ribs. She exhaled a blue fog breath that sank of rotten meat. Bob saw his opportunity and joined in the fight. He grabbed a hold of Angela's wings and pulled her towards the door. The slick black feathered wings were stronger than he thought. Penelope continued plunging the knife as Angela wrapped her fingers around Penelope's throat.

Bob kicked Angela's feet out from beneath her. Penelope gave her one last push towards the door. Bob held tight, pinning her wings down as they both tumbled out of the rolling trailer. Bob hit the ground first on his back then rolled away from Angela who twisted away from him, only to go underneath the wheels of the trailer. Her right leg was crushed flat and her arm was bent backwards. She looked up in time to see the grill of the Ford Eragon as it smashed into her face. The cloud of blood and feathers was quite impressive. Mr. Gardiner let out a small, "Eeewww."

Gardner slowed the car down to a wobbling stop alongside Bob's body. The knocking engine rattled as he looked at Bob hoping he would move. Against logic and reason, Bob stood up. He walked over, opened the passenger side door, and sat down. From what Mr. Gardiner could see Bob had hyperextended his knee and broken his left arm as well as a few fingers on his right hand. When Bob turned his head to look at Mr. Gardiner he could see small portions of smooth polished white skull poking out from under the torn skin of his face. "Are you okay?" asked Mr. Gardiner.

"No," said Bob. With that Mr. Gardiner eased back on the accelerator to catch up with the trailer.

Decision gate...

Penelope managed to move Alice out of the doorway and onto the floor of the diner. There was more space on the counter top but she couldn't risk Alice falling off. Penelope hadn't taken part in a birth since she lived in the town of Salt. She knew she had everything she needed. There was still hot water, towels, and even a few sharp knives if they became necessary. "If this thing is born then the Dark Master wins," said Alice.

"Dear, that was said by a monster that had maggots growing in its cooter. I wouldn't be taking its word for anything," said Penelope.

"Pen," said Alice. She held up the cold knife. "This thing scarred all the worlds and opened a rift that went forwards and backwards though time. Use it. Just end this thing so the world can be safe."

Penelope took the knife from Alice's hand. She held it her over her belly. In the distance, they could hear the road guides speaking. Penelope leaned her head down and placed an ear to Alice's belly. She could hear all those voices. All those potential things inside of her. She looked up with tears in her eyes. "I can hear the voices. I haven't been able to hear the voices since I chose to get rid of it. This isn't a choice for you or me to make." Penelope got up holding the knife in her good hand. She walked to the front door to the diner and threw the knife out.

The cold knife clattered along side of the road. It's magic was done. It could kill no more. The jagged sky cleared. The shattered realms stitched themselves back together. The rip in the fabric of reality mended itself. The final break in the worlds closed 3 feet in front of the GMC super duty Norbert truck. The truck collided with the wall of reality separating this world from a small government project outside of Silver Springs, New Mexico. The super duty pickup truck and its trailer passed through the barrier one piece at a time.

Bob and Mr. Gardiner stopped before the rip in the world. "I thought this was done. I thought we closed the gap," said Bob.

"You can't really close the gap between this world and the next," said Mr. Gardiner.

"You think they survived?" asked Bob.

"I don't know, but I have to find out," said Mr. Gardiner.

Bob opened up the passenger side door and got out. He was barely able to stand. "Get back inside this car. If that doorway leads where I think it does we can get you medical help," said Mr. Gardiner.

"I made a deal when I came here. I don't get to go back. You see, I didn't make it out of that fire back in Georgia. I made a deal to go back to the beginning and find my brother. I did that. I also fucked up a lot. And I have to make it right for that to. I can't do that over there," said Bob.

"You'll die here."

"I was dead once. I'll be dead again soon enough. I just have to make right with some people first," said Bob. With that, he closed the door of the Ford Eragon.

Mr. Gardiner eased off the brake and idled towards the rip in reality.

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