



## Down the Road -- Part 18: The Devil You Know

Hitting rock bottom...

Phyllo's hands tore at the sand. "First they want him to end entropy. Stop the dark sand. Now they want him back. I wish these goddamn voices would make up their mind. You hear me? Do you even care?" Phyllo continued to dig the sand.

In his old life, Phyllo shuffled papers. Traveling from cubicle to cubicle. A cherub in the fast-paced world of conscience. The sea of telephone calls reaching out to people in multiple planes of existence. Trying to get through and make the world a better place, or were they? A cacophony of static noise and competing interests. The people at the top wanting different things, bending to the will of the masses. Revenge, forgiveness, justice, and love were all just bargaining chips. Are any souls really saved? Is there any thing like redemption?

"Phyllo, these are not the files on Martha Johnston. What's with you today?" asked a multi-armed green creature named Anna.

"I'm sorry I'm just ... not having a good day," answered Phyllo.

"Experiencing a little bit of burnout?" asked Anna.

"I guess, I'm thinking about transferring over to a field position. Somewhere out in the barren plains."

"Do you really think you could take a field position? Life out there is pretty rough. A friend of mine decided take a haunting gig somewhere in one of those realms. Her job was to inspire fear and imagination in youth. She was pretty good at it too. Eventually inspired some kids to run around with a digital video camera. They stood around in the field staring into the camera looking scared. The movie was pretty successful but they ended up tearing down her haunted house. Thereby destroying her physical link to that world. In the end they made some crappy remakes of it and the whole thing ended up forgotten. They transferred her back here. The expenditure of shiny sand necessary to maintain that kind of exposure within another realm more than what the people upstairs really wanted to invest. Especially considering it didn't bring about any new religions or any larger movement for good or bad. In the end, all she did was make a bunch of kids think they could be Steven Spielberg using a Fisher-Price camcorder. Do you know where my friend got transferred after that?"

"No," said Phyllo.

Anna put her one of her fingers to her lips as a hag pushing a mail cart rounded a corner. The old hag handed Anna a bundle of mail held together with a rubber band. "Thank you, Blair," said Anna. The old witch just nodded and continued pushing her mail cart the next cubicle.

Phyllo looked up at Anna and cocked his thumb to the witches back. Anna just nodded. "They wouldn't even let her change her form. Not within the budget."

"So, if I decide to leave for field position, you think I'll just end up back here like she did?" asked Phyllo.

"If you're lucky. Some just get destroyed outright. I heard about one guy that tried to manifest himself in tortilla chips. He appeared in over 7,000 bags before one old lady noticed. She noticed his likeness shrugged and just ate it. Jesus works over in accounting now. It's just not a world for the spiritual realms any more."

What about not relying on those upstairs to give me the power? What if I just do for myself? God helps those who help themselves?"

You really believe in God?" asked Anna.

Isn't that what all this is about? Aren't you a representative of God?" asked Phyllo.

If you asked me that a few thousand years ago I would've smited you for questioning my divine authority," laughed Anna. "I am just one more construct among many trying to keep the light of the other realms from burning out. The doors between the realms of man are locked shut by ignorance and stupidity. Fewer and fewer people visit the realms of imagination when they have worlds of it that's already been invented for them. Television spoon feeding them banal storylines. Massively multiplayer online games that simultaneously link the world and kill the storytelling art all at the same time. Children don't imagine. They don't even go outside. They just watch Youtube, thinking they can be a star if they put a bed sheet over their head and wear some mascara while crying about a made-up celebrity."

Wow, I thought I was nihilistic. The least I try to do something. Why do you even show up every day?" asked Phyllo.

I have to make a living somehow. Otherwise I'll fade away," answered Anna. "Take these black files over to the other end. Some idiot got them mixed in with my casework."

he manila folder felt as cold as ice in Phyllo's hands. Purple fog rolled off its edges like steam on dry ice. *Those damn folders*, Phyllo thought as he tore through the sand. *How deep was the old man now?* Phyllo wasn't sure he was even in a place he could reach. Thinking about that day with the black folders made his stomach sick. As he crossed the cubicle farm, Phyllo stopped by the break room. Inside a nimbus cloud was floating in front of the vending machines. A pseudopod-like hand of pillowy white cotton poked out of the cloud and punched in its order. Sitting at the table a small gray alien sat next to an angelic little boy in a toga. The boy's wings were the feathers of a dove. His curly blond hair formed tight little locks around his innocent face. He unwrapped a soft pack of Newport lights and lit one. He leaned back in his chair and opened up a can of grape soda. Phyllo couldn't stand Roth. Never liked smelling the smoke.

Roth walked over to the automated lunch carousel and pulled out a rare GI Joe action figure. He sat down with his fellow cherubs and began breaking the fingers and limbs off of the toy. The small nimbus cloud proceeded to rain on a package of first edition Magic playing cards. "Looks like you get to go over to the dark side," rasped Roth.

"It's just some files," said Phyllo. He put some other papers on top of the black folders. The purple smoke still crept out from underneath. They made Phyllo feel uneasy just being near them.

"I had a dark folder once. Dark thoughts and evil deeds," said the alien. He looked over at Roth who very casually nodded. The nimbus cloud finished soiling the deck of playing cards and quickly left, not wanting to be a witness.

"It's not our place to question its will. People of the other realms shouldn't question it. We just do the best we can with what we're given," said Phyllo. His arm trembled at the idea of such open defiance.

"You've been dragging your little wings around this place for weeks. Always moping that you want to do more for humanity. Here's your fucking chance," said Roth.

"He's right," said the alien. "This would definitely be a blow to the darkness. But remember the balance."

"Yeah right, you watch too many Star Wars movies," said Roth.

"And you're a reckless asshole who gets teen girls pregnant by telling them to chase their true love," said the alien.

"And you think inspiring fat guys to stare at blinking lights in the sky will somehow get humanity off Earth," and said Roth.

"Look, I'm not about ready to take advice from the cherub of rock 'n roll and the cherub of extraterrestrial phenomenon. I'm sorry I've been such a drag on the workplace. I guess I'm going through some kind of middle existence crisis. I'll quit making it everybody else's problem," answered Phyllo. He felt more annoyed than helped. As he left, he looked at a document shredder next to the photocopier in the supply room. He almost took a step towards it, but changed his mind.

Enter the Dark Master...

"It's okay, you just have to hold that pillow in place for a few more minutes, then you won't have to hear that screaming anymore as you try to watch your stories."

"Of course you deserve it. After all, you're the one who works late for minimum wage. All you gotta do is run in there with a handgun and Steve will open up that safe for you. You'll split the money with him next week, then you both could retire from Convenient together."

"They all want it, otherwise she wouldn't have passed out on the floor. Just make it quick before she wakes up."

"I am right here, just step off the stool. You know how sorry they'll be then. Double check to make sure that knot is tight. I don't want to look silly."

Phyllo felt sick to his stomach listening to the dark side of conscience. The little voices that whisper that it's okay to do horrible things. The cherubs of this world looked like children suffering horrible diseases. The number on the folder took him deeper in. The fluorescent lights on this side flickered in and out. Several of the cubicle walls had been toppled over and turned into makeshift refugee camps. Several cherubs huddled around a burning copier for warmth. "Okay, the metaphor is getting a bit thick," said Phyllo out loud.

"Stop!" said a voice in the darkness. Two cat's eyes opened up within the darkness. They were reflecting the light from the burning copier.

"I have a file for you," said Phyllo.

"Just one file?" asked the Dark Master.

"Yes, just one," said Phyllo. Phyllo took one of the folders and pushed it towards the darkness. When the edge of the folder touched the shadow it felt almost solid for a moment. He pushed the folder through. The eyes smiled. "I'm going to have fun with this one. Robert Palmer, age 39, looks like he's going to kill his own brother. This should be loads of fun."

Phyllo turned to walk away. The cherubs of the dark one had surrounded him. The half naked little boys covered in sores and chancres reached up their trembling hands to stop him. Phyllo fluttered his wings but was pulled to the ground quickly. The papers in his hands scattered. The one black folder slid out from his fingers. It stood out brilliantly laying on top of the white papers.

"Cheater, cheater, cheater, cheater!" they cried.

They lifted Phyllo's body up and carried it towards the burning copier. A young boy with an obviously broken leg picked up the folder and started carrying it towards the Dark Master. Phyllo pulled an arm free to slug the first diseased child he could see. It was quickly replaced by another one covered in boils. Phyllo hesitated for one second before punching that one too. He could feel his knuckles slick from either blood or puss. He hoped it wasn't both. Phyllo wasn't sure if he could actually get a disease off of these creatures, but the fear was still there. He kicked and punched but there always seemed to be more. They crowded him towards the burning copier. He could feel the heat on his wings. A child had managed to get behind him and trip him. His head clipped the edge and his hair caught on fire. He beat at his own head trying to stop the flames.

"I didn't give up then!" He dug at the sand. Remembering that day as vividly as if he was there again. The walls of the sand pit started to slide down around him. The walls, if they buried him, would be just as lethal as the pack of diseased children pushing him into the burning copier. "I'm not giving up on you now. I'm not giving up on Mr. Gardner. Do you hear me?" he shouted into the sand at his feet.

Phyllo, reached into the fire and pulled out a drawer used to load paper into the copier. He ripped it out off of its hinges and watched the ream of paper inside slowly burn. He held it out towards the children who backed away from the burning office equipment in his hand. The fire burned his fingers but Phyllo held on. One child attempted to attack, but was quickly

repelled by a decisive blow to the head. Several sheets of paper flew loose, bursting into flames. They rained down on the surrounding children like kamikaze paper airplanes.

The diseased cherubs scattered like cockroaches when the light was turned on. Phyllo spun around to make sure no one was behind him. He realized he was alone and the one cherub lay at his feet. His head was open for all the world to see. Phyllo could see the gray squishy sponge that was the creature's brain. He looked at it for a moment expecting to see it move or pulse like a heart. It lay there still somewhat inside its skull. A pool of black blood barely visible in the firelight streamed away from the crumpled body. The dark pool created a glossy frame for garbage laying on the office floor. Phyllo stared at a bottle cap, a chewed up Bic pen, and a pack of Newport lights.

"Roth?" questioned Phyllo. Phyllo dug at the sand, wanting to tear away the image of Roth's dead body in a pool of its own blood. How could he not see that he was an agent for the darkness. The sand slid in around him burying his feet. Phyllo looked up at the walls of sand around him. He saw the little boy with a broken leg carrying the black folder to the Dark Master.

Phyllo dropped the burning paper tray. He didn't look at what damage holding it had done. His wings buzzed as he flew towards the child. The limping child had almost reached the Dark Master when Phyllo tackled him to the ground. He pulled the folder from the boy's hand.

"No!" roared the Dark Master. A cloud of blackness reached out towards Phyllo. It was the absolute absence of all light. The only thing Phyllo could see were the glowing eyes. They danced like angry fireflies inside that cloud of evil. Later Phyllo would realized he had shit himself.

"Give me that folder!"

"No, you're going to have to take it. I know you can't touch it unless one of us messengers gives it to you."

The shadow reached out towards him and Phyllo held on to the folder. It turned from black to the cream color of Manila paper. Shadow peeled away from the arm revealing perfectly smooth white flesh underneath.

The Dark Master screamed as if his arm had been burned. Unable to touch Phyllo, he struck the limping cherub. The small boy screamed for only a moment like a rabbit in a slaughterhouse. Phyllo and the Dark Master stared at the little boy covered in dirt. His body was so still you would swear the room revolved around it. The Dark Master looked at his perfectly smooth white arm. "I think I like this," he said.

Phyllo took advantage of the moment and started to run. He ran as fast as he could. He ran until he wasn't in the land of cubicles. He wasn't in the world of hallways either, he wasn't in the broken down amusement park with the water tower with those 12 foot-high letters S. O. B. written on them. He was in the desert. Before him was a single lane highway. He dropped to his knees sweating and panting. The manila folder was laying on the ground before him. "Was all this worth it?" asked Phyllo. "Why did I throw away everything just for this one folder? I should've saved them both." Phyllo attentively reached one of his bulbous burned fingers forward and opened the folder.

"Well! What was in the folder?" asked Mr. Gardner impatiently.

Phyllo looked up from the sand to see Mr. Gardner standing next to him. He looked younger than ever and was wearing a white suit. "How did you?" asked phyllo.

"I fought the Balrog on the highest peak of the tallest mountain. And when it was done I passed from this world out of existence into the next...," said Mr. Gardner before being interrupted.

"That's Lord of the Rings!" said Phyllo. He was unable to keep the tears back.

"You brought me back. You dug deep into yourself and you pulled something good out. So what was the name in that folder?"

Travel time...

Alice was grinding gears and Penelope was trying not to wince. "I think I'm getting better, Pen," said Alice.

"Yeah, you haven't stalled out for a whole 5 miles," said Penelope trying not to seem to sarcastic.

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