

Outcast

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# OUTCAST

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From Session 8: Beware the Sandman

One day, Sye was not sure if it was the thirty-second or thirty-third, he saw large human footprints in the sand. Their edges were blurred but he was able to make out that the print of the left foot was deeper than that of the right. This told him that the person was either lame or carrying something heavy on one side. He thought of Salm's withered limb and how it might cause unevenness in her gait. Although these were relatively fresh tracks, he could see no-one around and the wide-open wastes offered no concealment. A mystery if ever there was one.

Sye dismounted and wound Nole's reins around a small boulder. She pricked up her ears, snorted and rolled her eyes. She smelled what he could not see. Deep in a pouch on his belt, he heard Jin-wag muttering a muffled warning. For his own reassurance, he slid the heavy barbed lance out of its holder before following the tracks. The shield of Loran-Obis was tightly strapped to his left arm.

Nole stamped a shoe against the ground and moved restlessly. A short way away, the tracks stopped as suddenly as they had begun. The fine red sand lay undisturbed from this point on. The plot thickened. Sye, Nole, the desert, the sky and the sun. Nothing else.

A strangled cry came from above and Sye pointed the lance skyward fearing an attack. It was just an inquisitive desert eagle but in raising his face, he failed to see the sand shift at his feet. The next thing he knew, his right ankle was being crushed in the powerful grip of a large, rough hand. Hairy knuckles the size of small rocks squeezed tight, threatening to snap his tendons and bones as if they were twigs. Pain like the touch of hot metal shot up his leg. More out of instinct than anything, he brought the heel of the lance down on the creature's wrist which cracked and buckled in two. A terrifying roar from below the ground was followed by a fountain of sand spraying upwards into Sye's face. Something large dragged itself out of a sandy hollow.

Sye staggered backwards and wiped the grit from his eyes. He then stared in horror at the beast in whose shadow he stood. Since the age of ten, no living thing on two legs had stood taller than him. This behemoth towered over him by half his height again. Although it had the basic facial features of a man, the head resembled that of a wild boar. Hoary tusks curved obscenely from its cheeks. Whiskers and matted hair grew in patches over its dirty sand-covered hide. Its mouth was contorted in a savage, guttural roar and it shook with rage. Coarse hair sprouted from the sand-creature's giantish head and haunches to the bottom of its massive, muscular legs. It stood on human feet. Its shattered wrist dangled on the end of a few tendons and dripped a white froth to the ground.

The crazed look in the beast's red eyes bore no trace of humanity. This was a feral predator of the hot wilderness. It had sprung from its subterranean lair and now

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pawed the ground like a wounded bull, with only one thing on its mind - to tear Sye limb from limb.

Before the clouds of dust had a chance to settle, the creature was charging towards him, head lowered. The desert floor vibrated under its weight. With no time to ponder tactics, Sye lowered the point of the lance at the oncoming nightmare. Seemingly oblivious to the threat, the man-boar ran headlong onto the iron spike, its inertia carrying it along the lance and onto the cruel barbs. Using his attacker's forward momentum, Sye wedged the heel of the lance into the desert floor and hoisted the impaled sand-creature into the air. It roared and thrashed about above him, its clawed fist smashing into the shield that Sye held in front of his face. The sharpened metal edge of the shield gouged lumps out of the beast's arm. White bile oozed from the man-boar's ruptured stomach and ran down the length of the lance onto Sye's hands. It was warm and smelled spicy.

Weak and trembling, Sye could no longer hold the lance upright and the beast toppled to the ground. With fearsome strength, it rolled to its knees and staggered to a standing position. Its one good hand closed around the shaft of the lance and with an almighty effort, wrenched the weapon free of its stomach. The barbs ripped chunks of pale flesh away from the man-boar's gut leaving loose flaps of skin to cover the cavity in its belly. Between these flaps of skin, creamy viscera and body fluids dribbled out. The beast moaned and fell onto its own entrails.

With the singular aim of destroying Sye, the creature dragged itself over the slime on its elbows, snarling. Terrified and nauseous, Sye drew his sword. With one long sweep, the blade bit deep into the sand creature's sinewy neck, spilling more of the creamy lifeblood. A second stroke severed the head completely. The sand-creature's arms twitched in death spasms and the torso continued to cough gouts of rich white soup from its oesophagus. The beheaded beast lay in a stinking white swamp of sand and gore. Trusting it could no longer move, Sye turned away to retch.

Sye sat for long moments staring at the mess, trying to calm and ready himself. If there was one, there were likely to be more such creatures, he thought, and stood tense and alert for a long time, before allowing himself to relax. He observed an army of carnivorous lizards and insects, gathering to make short work of the feast that Sye had provided them with. It was not the most appetising of meals, but scavengers rarely get to pick their menus. Satisfied the danger had passed, Sye allowed himself a smile. One of the proverbs he had never quite understood in Westwinds was 'Don't admire the sky if the sand is shifting'. Assuming attacks by sand beasts had happened throughout history, could they have been the origin of that particular saying? Perhaps the once literal warning had become advice for all risks in life.

Sye knelt and grabbed handfuls of sand to wipe the gore off his lance before strapping it back onto Nole's side. Miraculously, she had stood her ground throughout the attack. As he sheathed his sword, he noticed that it had picked up

specks of white, the man-boar's fluids, which he could not remove. It seemed a crime to have blemished such a marvellous weapon though he wouldn't have relished the alternative. For days after, he looked not just to the horizon, but also to the sand around him, for signs of hidden sand-creatures.

Sye continued due east, though he could no longer be sure that Salm had gone in that direction. Not that the land was void of things to see. Once you knew where to look, there were many new sights to see in the desert, wonders that the people of Westwinds were totally unaware of. Sye was left with a sobering thought - there were creatures out here far uglier than he was.



Forty or so days had gone by. Nole's sores had worsened and the sporadic fevers which racked her frame gave her a terrible thirst. Some species of insect seemed to have laid eggs in her wounds and their larva fed off the discharge.

Worse than this, they were down to their last skin of water. The food had ended a few days earlier and Sye was now forced to eat lizards and suck on sunbaked rock weed. He became deft at pinning the fatter, slower lizards to the desert floor with his silver knife. As it turned out, the fat lizards contained mostly liquid, which soaked into the sand as their skin was punctured. The satisfaction at watching his knife find its target, and the lizards' fat sacs explode, soon changed to disappointment on retrieving a handful of skin and bone. In time, he succeeded in stopping the leaner, faster lizards whose meat, though meagre, was strong-flavoured and nourishing.

Time passed. Jin-wag slept peacefully in the darkness of Sye's pockets, needing neither food nor drink, or so it seemed. Nole's condition, however, plummeted. She could no longer chew the coarse rock weed or swallow moisture. Her vicious lesions had spread and become so painful that she could no longer carry Sye. For several days, she had chosen to sleep lying down, and in the morning had been reluctant to rise and continue their infernal mission. Each morning, Sye had forced her on, hoping that they might reach the end of the desert or a settlement where she might be revived. He was being optimistic for, as Young Nole, his horse's namesake, had said, Westwinds was probably the last settlement in the whole world.

In forty or fifty days, he forgot how long, Sye had seen only one sign of vaguely intelligent life - and that had tried to tear him apart on sight. Little did he know, as he looked into his horse's bloodshot eyes, that he was being watched and would soon encounter a second.

It was a desert night like any other. Nole lay trembling in a fevered sleep, her sores infested with parasites. Sye sat wrapped in his blanket and stared into the flames of his rock weed fire, thinking how he used to do the same as a child in

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Westwinds, when he would imagine himself an intrepid adventurer in the desert. He smiled at how his childish fantasies had come true, though now devoid of the romantic scenes he had conjured up. Unable to sleep, he ran his eyes over one of the decaying maps of the outlands. To the far east, it said, lay water, to the south more deserts. In the north, stood towers of ice and in the west, from where he had come, the maps showed mountains. The other maps gave conflicting information; a castle and a lake of fire in the north and a mountain range in the east. Like the One Way of Life, it seemed they were full of false hope.

Reluctant to carry anything that was not going to save their lives, Sye threw the maps onto the fire and watched their dry lies burst into flame. In one simple movement of his hand, he had destroyed the world around him. If only it were that easy.

Sye turned his thoughts to the following day and wondered if Nole could carry herself anymore, let alone the empty packs. In the firelight, he could make out each of Nole's bones, clearly visible through her tight, ulcerated hide, as she lay on the unyielding rock. He counted her ribs which undulated and shook with each irregular breath. The shaking suddenly worsened until Sye realised it was a movement in the sand - faint tremors which grew steadily in strength. They were soon accompanied by the sound of something large being dragged along. Jin-wag was strangely silent. A strong smell of animal dung hit him and into the edge of the firelight ambled two monstrous beasts with a rider on each.

The beasts blew and snorted as if they had travelled far without rest. They were three times Sye's height, dwarfing even the man-boar he had encountered. He couldn't say how long the beasts were, as their hind quarters were lost in the surrounding night. From what he could make out, their bulky bodies were covered in a kind of armour-plated hide with long hair growing from the gaps in between. From what he could see, they appeared to walk on no less than four pairs of legs as thick as stone pillars. Their heads were heavy and long and a row of three curved horns ran down the centre of their snouts. They stood passively, awaiting instructions via a thin cord, one end of which was tied to the uppermost horn. The other lay in the hand of each beast's rider.

The riders were tall, stalky beings whose skin seemed to glow a ghastly green. Draped over their spindly limbs and thin bodies was a transparent material of gossamer lightness, which only slightly dimmed the radiance of their skin. Hollow eyes were set in a long, sallow face that was mouthless. Hairless too, their skulls were covered by hoods of the same delicate material. Sye had seen ancient drawings of these mythical beings, which Westwinds people had named wraiths, for want of a better name.

In their nebulous shrouds, the beings glanced at each other, then turned their haunting eyes towards him. Having learnt that wariness paid off in the desert, Sye reached for his sword. Before he could unsheathe it, he felt a sharp but painless tap

on the back of his hand. His arm froze. Try as he might to grip and unsheathe his weapon, his whole arm, from the tip of his fingers to his shoulder, had lost all sense of feeling or motion. The cause of his paralysis was a long, flexible rod belonging to one of the wraiths. The weapon tapered from the thick butt enclosed in the rider's hand to the potent sting which had pricked Sye's skin. Assuming it was not just luck, the rider had wielded his whip with deadly accuracy.

Sye cursed Jin-wag for his disloyal silence and cradled the lump of dead meat attached to his shoulder. One rider turned to the other and seemed to communicate something Sye couldn't hear. The other rider climbed down from its beast like a luminous spider and calmly searched in its saddle basket. Injured and frightened, Sye assumed the wraith was looking for an even deadlier weapon or shackles and so dived to Nole's side with the intention of drawing his lance. He figured there was no way the assailant with the whip could be as fortunate in his aim a second time. To his extreme discomfort, he was wrong. This time, the whole of his left leg was numbed. He tried to stand but couldn't. Nevertheless, his actions had discouraged the being, which clambered back onto its beast. There followed an intense but silent dialogue between the two creatures.

"Can you understand me?" Sye called.

The beings ceased their wordless conversation and turned their ghostly faces towards him. One of them cocked its wiry arm ready to inflict on another lash.

"No!" Sye shouted and shielded his face. The sting never came.

"My horse! She is dying!"

He pointed to the sack of skin and bones that had carried him and his belongings hundreds of leagues across the desert.

"She is sick. She needs food and water. And medication."

The rider with the whip climbed down and motioned Sye away from Nole. Sye crawled to the other side of the fire and watched them from there. As the lanky being approached, Sye could see a network of black veins streaked throughout its green jelly-like flesh. Its body was so transparent that Sye could see the form of the other wraith and the two beasts, which stood behind it.

The ghost-being looked Nole over briefly and walked back to its beast. It returned with a heavy-looking metal spike the point of which he placed against Nole's upturned temple. The wraith was going to kill Nole. Fighting paralysis, Sye reached for his silver knife. If he could hit a racing lizard at twenty paces, he was sure he could stick this spectre. He was just about to let fly when a staccato of lashes hit his chest and neck. Now he lay in the dust, unable to move a muscle, numb to physical pain but not to the mental anguish of Nole's impending death. The ghost-being placed both palms above the spike and pushed down with all its might. There was a crunching noise as the metal spike punctured the horse's skull. Nole jerked twice then lay still. Under the force of the impact, the spike had broken in two. The being recovered the shaft, leaving the head of the spike buried deep in Nole's skull.

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Sye's eyes, open throughout the entire process, now closed as lashes rained repeatedly down on his head, driving him into unconsciousness.