



Outcast

Book One of the Worlds Apart saga

DJ Stoneham

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by DJ Stoneham

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Dedicated to Johanna Östman

Contents

Introduction: The Institution	1
Session 1: The Beast of Westwinds	
Session 2: Rock Bottom	
Session 3: Rainchild Rising	
Session 4: The Search for Truth	
Session 5: Eagles and Catch Tanks	
Session 6: The Awakening	
Session 7: The Battle for Westwinds	
Session 8: Beware the Sandman	
Session 9: The Lady of the Glade	
Session 10: Cancer in the Tropic of Love	
Session 11: Birds of Parasites	
Session 12: Violent Amber	
Session 13: For the Love of Lorian	

Sye ran his fingers through his wife's hair. His other hand held the cold blade at her throat. How many times had he stroked her red tresses to soothe her troubled soul? Now he clenched strands of muddied hair in his fist to tilt her head back so he could draw the knife slowly across her windpipe. The soft skin separated and became a gaping black maw. How could he still love her yet spill her blood onto the sand? So much black blood.

Introduction: The Institution

"It was not the passing away of my mother, one of the castle's oldest breeding maids, that shocked me. It was the manner of her death; sacrificed to Herneth, the sun god, at the hand of my childhood friend."

That was the exact moment I started to pay more attention to Simon, as he lay in his hospital bed, babbling incoherently to anyone that was unlucky enough to walk by. I overheard just that one random snippet of information – nonsense really - but it was about to change my life forever.

An old-fashioned propeller airplane droned far overhead. Not that my brain deciphered the sound. For all I knew, it could have been a bluebottle trapped in one of the ward's fluorescent ceiling lights.

I remember the moment well because until then Simon had just whined on about himself; how people had bullied him as a kid; how everyone had lied to him; how unfair life was. You know the kind of person; one of those you manage to sit next to on a bus or train, who at first seems sociable, then gradually turns it into the journey from hell. This time, however, as Simon spoke about his mother, his voice became passionate, more animated, like a train picking up speed. True, the term 'breeding maid' also made me prick up my ears. It took political incorrectness to a new level. Even the sound of the phrase was offensive. Then came the mention

of her sacrifice by Simon's friend. A secret cult murder perhaps? Yet there was a third and more profound reason why this scene stuck in my mind. It was the precise moment I began to hatch my master plan to become the next Tolkein.

Like the medical facility's pervading smell of ether, Simon's deep voice spread effortlessly from one end of the ward to the other. There was nothing to stop it. The place was otherwise empty.

"The Lords consented to my mother's chosen life in procreation. Breeding maids were the only females in the whole castle allowed to fornicate and bear children."

'Fornicate and bear children'? This guy was straight out of a Dickens novel. On the other hand, a cynic might say that fornication and bearing children accurately summed up the pros and cons of a job as 'breeding maid'. Good job I wasn't a cynic.

Simon went on to explain that with the castle's future on their shoulders (a little lower down anatomically might have been more precise), breeding maids were respected and revered throughout the castle. They had certain privileges that no other citizens had because of their importance to the nation's existence. Also because they tended to pop their clogs at an early age (my turn of phrase, not Simon's).

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The doctors had diagnosed Simon as clinically insane – paranoid schizophrenia or something along those lines. A 'psycho with verbal diarrhoea' would have been my dad's description. As long as no-one interrupted Simon (and people seldom did), he talked. And talked. Which suited my devious little scheme down to the ground. The more he talked, the more chance I stood of reaching fame and fortune in the outside world. The real world. Let me explain.

Outcast

Part of me (albeit not a large part) felt sorry for Simon. He seemed to inhabit another world much of the time and spoke of a castle called Westwinds, of his troubled youth and his unlikely rise to a position he called High Lord. He talked of betrayal and bloody battles in the castle - all the stuff that any half-decent fantasy novel contained. He talked of murdered children and rape (admittedly nothing I remembered coming across in Harry Potter). Yet there followed a crusade of such magnitude, such torment and glory, that even his exploits at Westwinds Castle, seemed nothing more than a children's story by comparison. And this was just what the doctor ordered – for me not for him.

Outside, the wind hurled rain and autumn leaves against the window panes as it tried to muscle its way into the secure wing of Bodley Hall. Ironical, as most of the patients were dying to get out of this place. Literally, dying. One a week on average. The exterior of the building was as dark and depressing as the weather. A brick façade of grey granite had been all but covered by ancient ivy, which clung precariously to the walls as if wondering whether or not to jump. After visiting hours, lamps were kept on only in rooms where light was needed. Even then they emitted no more than a ghostly yellow as the administrators thought more about saving energy than saving lives.

You had to be mad, suicidal or preferably both to be admitted to Bodley Hall. Once in, there was little chance of leaving as the whole place was apparently designed to nurture a terminal melancholy among the patients, from the moment they arrived. There was little chance of recovery. Bodley Hall's brochure promised a "restful paradise in the heart of the English countryside, where you will find peace away from the stress of the outside world." An apt phrase for Simon, as it turned out. But I shouldn't get ahead of myself. Suffice to say that to me, the institution felt more like a warning to outsiders about what might happen if they dared to forget what day of the week it was.

I was visiting my Mum, who had been a resident there for the best part of a year (the staff invariably used more colourful names than 'resident')

to describe the patients). I had persuaded her to move in after her dementia had progressed to the stage where she had twice bitten the postman and had ground shards of glass into my Dad's granola. The latter incident posed no risk as Dad had died ten years earlier. Not that it stopped Mum from setting the table for two at every mealtime.

True to its advertising, Bodley Hall had indeed made a difference to all our lives, I couldn't argue with that. Saturated with chemicals on a daily basis, Mum lay in a catatonic state until a familiar word would trigger an hour-long monologue from her lips. You never knew what the catalyst would be. On one occasion, I told her that I had unsuccessfully tried to secure the services of a literary agent, who subsequently suggested I might try writing in a warmer climate, Spain perhaps. That prompted an hour's diatribe from Mum on the time she and Dad had visited Benidorm and how the 'Spaniards couldn't even make a proper cup of tea'. Another time, the word 'music' set her off about Mary Poppins. Other key words turned out to be 'Buckingham Palace', 'television' and, to my acute embarrassment (since I had proved the word myself), 'euthanasia'.

The patients of Bodley Hall reminded me of the old one-penny mechanical toys in glass cabinets at the fairgrounds of my youth; the laughing clown or haunted house. You put your penny in and watched as the exhibits came to life, entertaining you with quirky little surprises, until the money ran out. That's how the patients were. All of them except Simon. With him the money never ran out.

I had come across Simon a few weeks earlier than the 'breeding maid' comment. To be honest, I had been eavesdropping on him now and then as, with the accuracy of a sniper, he fired off snippets of his life history to passing nurses, cleaners and visitors (Simon had no visitors of his own). If people gave his bed a wide berth, Simon would simply raise his voice. This allowed me to hear what he was saying from the other end of the ward, where Mum lay and I sat. As there was no real dialogue between Mum and I (I had already heard everything she said at least ten times before), I was able to listen to Simon's ravings from a safe distance. He shouted and

sobbed, laughed and sighed, often with a frustration or urgency that implied he thought he should be somewhere else. On occasions, he begged to be sent back home (didn't all the patients?). After a few visits, I began to look forward to Simon's rants with a perverse excitement. It was a good way of passing the two hours I was compelled to spend with Mum every week. After a while, it became the only way I could stand being there.

In between laments laced with self-pity, Simon talked about a whole range of supernatural things; of Westwinds, a desert castle inhabited by horned people; of deformed savages that lived in treacherous rainforests; of fantastic beasts and wise but jealous gods; of seduction, loathing and love. It was a mish-mash of random fantasies and I was both fascinated but angry at the same time. Let me explain why.

Simon was quite mad, of that there was no doubt. In the words of dad, bonkers. Yet the products of his imagination, his capacity for bizarre creations in extraordinary detail, enthralled me. You see, alongside my career as a copywriter in a small advertising agency on the outskirts of the capital, I had written the manuscript for a trilogy of fantasy books. I was proud of my achievement and especially liked saying the word 'trilogy' to people. Despite the certainty (mine) that I had created the world's next best-selling fantasy story, excerpts from my books had failed to generate the slightest interest among literary agents or publishers alike. I had lost count of the number of rejection letters I had received. As a result, six hundred and twenty A4 pages of my soul were neatly held together by a large paper clip and lay suffocating in the bottom drawer of my bedroom cupboard, under two speeding fine receipts and a well-read adult magazine, none of which I had had the heart to part with.

More than one person wondered what I was doing writing fantasy when I was lucky enough to have an exciting, well-paid job in advertising. They probably imagined I shot TV advertisements on Oxford Street and filmed female models in Trafalgar Square. I used to tell them to picture themselves sitting through a six-hour meeting about the wonders of industrial safety valves in order to come up with a headline that the client thinks is the next best thing since sliced bread. With a similar exercise awaiting them the next day and every other day until death. This might explain my illusions of literary grandeur. It was the only way I could survive the boredom of a dead-end career and self-loathing at my own inertia. So that's why I wrote in my spare time, to escape the real world. If only someone had told me how many real worlds there were.

The more I wrote about myths and monsters, heroes and sorcery, the more I convinced myself that I could match anything that Moorcock or Tolkien had produced. I attended writing workshops and joined communities where published and wannabee authors alike, all unheard-of, would jockey for the 'most insightful comment-of-the-evening'. I poured my energy and soul onto crisp sheets of 80g photocopy paper while regularly pouring myself gin and tonics. I wallowed in endless edits, in the knowledge that my story was all the time approaching perfection, soon ready to be unleashed on hungry readers the world over, to receive critical acclaim and catapult me to instant fame. Then reality slapped me in the face.

One day, out of the blue, my wife of twenty years left me for the CEO of an industrial pump firm (oh, the irony!), who was bent on showing the world he was even more ambitious than his father, the founder of the company. Now, I'm not stupid and I understand that to get on in business, women have to be as predatory as men, but did mine have to poach the CEO of one of her client companies? Friends, experts and even my wife assured me of what I already knew – cheating on your spouse is just a symptom of deeper problems. As to what that deeper problem was, I never found out. It could have been because my wife had wanted another child and I had refused to take a dollop of my sperm to the local clinic to

be counted, who knows? It could have been the drinking. Or was it my failure to rise above the insecurity of my humble working class background, which I carried on my back like a sack of coal? Or something far worse – sexual inadequacy? I convinced myself that the ‘deeper problem’ was something so dark and monstrous that it was best not to dig deeper. I settled for a root cause near the surface of our soiled relationship – her adultery. Having said that, not knowing the real reason for our split didn’t stop me from engineering a bitter divorce and an unnecessarily cruel and prolonged battle for custody of our son. The fact that I had moved into a studio flat, earned less money than my wife, had no living parents that were remotely sane and had been caught by the police spray-painting unmentionable words onto my wife’s car, didn’t bode well for the court case. When it was over, the social worker said that I should count myself lucky to have been granted access to my son every second weekend and vacations.

My subsequent long evenings in solitude allowed for intense periods of writing, which proved therapeutic though, according to the reviews I commissioned, “uninspired”. Only PR consultants pitching for my money seemed to be “thrilled” and “impressed” by my manuscript. That was until I politely declined their advances. My parents brought me up to believe that if you kept your head down and “did unto others as you would have them do unto you”, you would be rewarded in life. But it doesn’t work like that, does it? Some assholes kick you in the teeth and laugh as you crawl to the dentist.

On more than one occasion, I wondered if I had subconsciously let my marriage go to rot in order to secure time for writing - to spend more time with my literary mistress, so to say. For with her, I could retreat into my very own world. In fact, with her I could create whatever fantasies I wanted. Here was a world with people and relationships I could control, a world where people behaved as people should. Here was true justice, love and honesty. The way I thought it should be in real life.

I must have contacted a hundred literary agents and publishers, several more than once. The response was similar to that of my careers adviser at school or my first job interview - no experience, no credentials, must try harder. A couple of hack agents corresponded with me, mainly to point me in the direction of writing courses or coaching, which they themselves invariably offered on the side. Most were unimpressed with my manuscripts (without reading past the first three pages) and most of them too busy even to be polite about it. I had reached an impasse. I wasn't even close to the proverbial creek let alone in search of a paddle. Stagnant career and failure as a writer, husband and father (not necessarily in that order) - not many can put that on their CV before they are forty years old.

A few select friends (those not held hostage by my ex-wife) agreed to read a sample of my manuscripts. They were feeling sorry for me as it was around the time Mum was admitted into Bodley Hall as an aggressive dementia patient ('aggressive' presumably relating to both the dementia and the patient). The positive feedback and kind words encouraged me to make bolder changes to my text and further revisions. But although I conjured up still more fantastic characters and creatures, bit by bit, I came to realise that they would never be a patch on Simon's creations, the head case that ranted and raved in Bodley Hall. It was as though I had drawn in wax crayons and he had woven a silk tapestry; my nursery school scrawl to his academic masterpiece. It was infuriating. Unbearable. Until I hit upon an ingenious plan. It was such a brilliant and devious scheme, I actually laughed out loud when I repeated it back to myself.

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"I knew she had murdered him, though no-one else believed me."

During those first weeks, I never saw Simon. However, listening to him speak from the other end of the ward, I could hear in his voice that he believed he had actually ridden an eight-legged meatbull, a creature that often featured in his desert tales. As if he had not only met deformed inhabitants of a place he called the Lowlands, but that he had eaten, fought and taken drugs with them. You never knew what he was going to

say next. Put simply, he created a story that literally came to life as he told it. And for that I was both jealous and angry, feelings that far outweighed any guilt I might have harboured at what I was about to do. You see, I wanted my readers to feel with the same intensity that he made me feel. I wanted it badly. Badly enough to steal his ideas from him.

On the evening Simon talked about his mother, the breeding maid, my Mum fell asleep soon after I had arrived. Not entirely unlike an oven-ready turkey, Mum's boney chest rose slowly as she breathed deeply. Her frail arms dangled each side of the bed like turkey wings, dappled with bruises from all the injections that the staff had given her. Her leather arm restraints hung loose like vines, made redundant thanks to a regular and healthy dose of incapacitating drugs. Throughout my life, I had looked up to her strength and conviction, but now I loathed her weakness and confusion. I probably would have been ashamed of my cruelty had I not been wallowing in self-pity. Probably.

As she gently snored, I found myself free to turn my full attention to Simon's voice. He was pestering a hospital porter, who hadn't realised that coming into the country to do odd jobs in a secure psychiatric hospital would also require him to interact with the resident lunatics.

"My earliest recollections of Westwinds were some of my happiest," said a voice that I had come to recognise as Simon's. "The ones of my home. Where everything was pure. I did not comprehend the importance of my childhood home until long after I had left. Home to a child should be as safe as a mother's womb is to a foetus."

Though probably not as dark or damp, I said to myself, giving a big thumbs down to that analogy.

"With the innocence of any child, I thought my mother knew it all. And I worshipped her. These things I remember as the sun remembers its path across the heavens."

The hospital porter's eyes widened. Even though English was not his mother tongue he had thought he knew enough to get by. He had passed

the job interview, hadn't he? But what language was this bed-ridden man talking? The porter began to tighten the nut and bolt on the bedpost a little faster and, deciding that safety worked both ways when it came to Bodley Hall inmates, he made a hasty departure for the canteen. I, on the other hand, wanted to hear more, for it was time to put my plan into action. I had lost a lot – wife, son and half my life in a pointless job. I was damned if I was going to miss out on a short-cut to becoming a best-selling author.

My scheme was as ingenious as it was simple. And unethical. What if I could harvest and adapt Simon's bizarre fantasies for my own books? After all, his stories were falling on deaf ears in the institution and he wasn't going anywhere, ever. No-one visited him. No-one stopped to listen to him. His stories would die with him and that would be a crime. Wouldn't it? And yet his visions might just give my books the extra boost they needed to catch the eye of a bona fide agent or publisher. Dire situations call for desperate measures. Without a publishing deal, I was facing two dozen years or more writing headlines about building insulation, so I figured there were few writers in the world that could be as truly desperate as I was. In fact, I would be doing the world a great service; stealing his ideas was a much lesser crime than depriving the world of possibly the world's greatest fantasy story. In my line of work, they call this 'spin'. In the criminal world they call it 'appealing to a higher loyalty'. I felt guilty at the thought that someone might accuse me of plagiarism somewhere down the line. Imagine winning a literary award only to get caught out and exposed as a fraud. But I told myself that Sye would be merely a source of inspiration for ideas that I could adapt. My muse, if you like. Of course, I knew that if I were to go through with my plan, my best course of action was not to get caught.

I walked slowly towards the other end of the ward, preparing to confront the man, whose voice I had listened to for weeks from a safe distance. The autumn storm had ceased to rage outside the window as if holding its breath. The quiet black night kept pace with me as I reached the half-way mark. Simon's voice had stopped. I passed empty hospital

beds, which were as quiet as coffins. And then there he was. Even though I was several beds away, Simon had fixed me with a cold stare. It was as if he knew I was making my way to his bedside. How could he know? Perhaps I didn't have the look of professional indifference that the nurses and occasional doctor bestowed on him. I swear that the stare in his eyes was growing icier with my every step. My heart began to pound. What if he had guessed that I was coming to steal his ideas?

Simon lay very still on his bed. Beneath him were clean white sheets that looked as stiff as he did. From the timbre of his voice, I had imagined him to be older than I was. I was therefore shocked to see that he was in his early thirties, far younger than any of the residents in the other wards. A once handsome face was marred by sallow cheeks and boney eye sockets. But those eyes! An impossible clear blue; dry pools of hidden power; clouded windows to another world; infinitely more breathtaking than the oxymorons I could muster up (yet I made a mental note to use them in my book). I would have sworn he was wearing coloured contact lenses but I knew patients weren't allowed to wear such things.

He had short-cropped, white hair and was unshaven. Grey whiskers among the stubble completed the picture that he had lived through some tough times. He wore a striped, collarless grandad shirt and baggy brown cargo trousers. Although underweight, his muscular body suggested three grown men would struggle to hold him down, an assumption confirmed by the heavy-duty leather restraints that gripped his wrists and ankles. An odour of antiseptic mingled with forest smells lingered around his bed but it was not unpleasant.

Simon craned his head towards me, tensing up every muscle in his body. "Excuse me. Would you loosen my bonds, please? Just a little."

I smiled like an undertaker might smile. My mouth was dry and I had to swallow to find my voice. "I'm sorry, I can't do that," I croaked.

"I have to get back. Now!" he insisted. Although he whispered the words, it was though a thousand angels screamed them inside my head and I instinctively covered my ears.

Once he realised that I had no intention of releasing him, Simon relaxed. He sank back onto his thin, hard mattress, breathed deeply and smiled. "I've been waiting for you," he sighed, with a voice lined in weariness, desperation and dread all in one.

It was both uncanny and unnerving how one moment Simon was wild, distraught, and the next seemed calm and calculating. His was not the only transformation. Within the space of a minute, this shackled madman had reduced me to a nervous wreck. I had never felt such presence or influence in another human being before. My instinct was to turn around and walk quickly back to the safety of my Mum's bedside, like a schoolchild, caught doing something they shouldn't. Only by reminding myself of the magnitude of the potential prize, and double-checking Simon's restraints, did I manage to stay put.

"I can't help you. I don't know you," I replied, talking as much to myself as to Simon.

"You do not know me." His voice was cracked like the glass of water he reached for. "Yet here we are, already talking to each other." He gave me a bitter smile. I was hooked. Terrified but hooked.

Paranoid though it was to think so, I feared that he had already sensed my intentions were not honourable. I forced a polite smile and tried to sound relaxed. "You talk as if you know why I came over here." What made me say those words? Of all the stupid things to say.

"I am sure you have your reasons. They are of no concern to me. It is enough that you came over and that you now stay."

"You want me to stay here with you?"

"And listen."

"Listen? To you?"

"Nothing else."

Sye made me uncomfortable in every way, yet I had to admit that his request for me to stay and listen to him served my sinister plan perfectly.

No small talk, no pleasantries, no conditions. I would not even have to come up with an excuse as why I walked over to his bed.

"Do you want to chat about your life in here?" I asked, imagining I was going to be a shoulder to cry on. "About how you came to be in here? I can maybe tell you about what's happening in the world outside. The latest news maybe?"

Simon's sudden laughter soon turned into a hacking cough and he took a drink of water as long as the glass itself. His head fell back on the white pillow and he gazed up at the ceiling.

"The less you say the better."

It wasn't said as a threat, yet I couldn't help feeling I might live a longer and healthier life if I complied.

"That's why I persuaded you to come to my bed," he continued. "To listen. To hear my story."

I did a double take.

"You made me come over here?" He was mad. I had decided to make his acquaintance over the course of several weeks, so I had no idea why he would claim such a thing. Not that it made any difference. For the sake of my plan, I put my own ego on hold.

"There are many ways to influence others," he continued. "I could feel you listening to me. I could sense your interest. Your hunger made you vulnerable. You need me, I need someone like you. So I chose you."

"But you didn't say a word to me."

"And yet you came."

There was a frightening depth, a certainty to his words, which stopped me from saying anything else on the matter. Little did I know the true power behind his words, a talent he had used to influence a whole world. Had I known, would I have stayed? Most probably.

I'm not sure what it was about the man - his confidence, calmness, insanity, arrogance, indifference - whatever it was, in all the subsequent weeks I spent with him, I was never able to totally relax in his presence. Even so, I understood right from the start, if I was to succeed in getting him to divulge his stories, I had to win his trust. Being on first name terms

might be a good start. "My name's Luke. Luke Boyle." I didn't mean it to sound like I was auditioning for the part of 007.

Instead of introducing himself, he looked long into my eyes as if trying to see behind my words. Needless to say, there was nothing there, so at length, he spoke. "I am Sye. Known as Rainchild too. They also call me the Snow Lord."

Wow, I thought. Totally off his rocker. Those were certainly not names I had come across growing up in Eastbourne.

He saw what I was thinking (my amusement, not Eastbourne). Fury flashed across his eyes, then suddenly he smiled again. "It matters not what you think. It matters only that you listen."

Ready when you are, I said to myself. But I still needed to know one thing before he handed over the goods. He was my meal ticket out of the rut I had gotten myself into, but success depended on no-one else eating from my plate. I would triumph only if none of his relatives sued me for plagiarism at a later date. I glanced down at his medical chart, which hung on the bedpost by his feet and risked another question.

"It says here your name is Simon Coe. Do you come from a big family? Why no visitors?"

He laughed long and hard as if he knew my real reason for asking, then looked at me wearily. He heaved a sigh before speaking. "As I said, my name is Sye. S-Y-E. The staff wrongly thought that was short for the name 'Simon'. They deemed that Coe would be a fitting surname."

Simon Coe, I pondered. Sye Coe? Oh, Psycho.

"Exactly" said Sye, seeing that the penny had dropped.

I knew a lot about hostile working environments, so I couldn't really blame the joker who'd come up with that one. I was sure I could work that into my books too.

"So that's why they call me Simon Coe in this world. But rest assured, I have no family here."

"In this world?" The logical next question would have been: "Are you from another world then?"

I'd already heard him talk at length about the imaginary world he claimed he was from and to which he desperately wanted to return. But I knew I would find it hard to ask him that question without smirking. Stark raving mad he may be, but I had no wish to make him lose his temper. And I could see that he was tiring of my questions.

"Before I begin my story, I have one request," said Sye. "Even though I have no right to demand this of you, I will. Why you wish to hear my tale is of no concern to me. I will tell you my story regardless. But you must promise to hear it from beginning to end. You cannot stop listening part way through, you must hear me out until it is told. Do you swear to do this?"

With such dramatics, I half expected him to want me to sign in blood or make a circle in salt. Fortunately, he was satisfied with a simple 'yes'.

"And you will listen until the end?"

"I will, though something tells me that this will take me more than one visit to hear you out."

It was time to present a condition of my own.

"How do you feel about me recording your story?"

I produced a digital voice recorder from my jacket pocket. I carried it everywhere with me to capture those moments of creative genius that had got me precisely nowhere in life. But now it was going to help me tap into someone else's mind. It felt like espionage, although I was asking for permission. What if one of the staff caught me recording one of their patients? Was it illegal? Sye stared at the device, eyes wide open. He couldn't have looked more surprised if I'd pulled out the Holy Grail.

"I would welcome you to use such a machine."

Sye had clearly not seen, let alone used a digital recorder before. Perhaps he was about to tell me that he had time-travelled from a bygone era, from a time when electricity was just a twinkle in Benjamin Franklin's eye and dodos still walked the Earth. Although that would have been entertaining, time travel was not the kind of thing I was looking for in my books. I wanted myth and magic. As it was, I needn't have worried. What

he was about to tell me would stretch my mind far beyond the limits of my own puny imagination. Even with little insight into his story, my pulse already raced at the thought of having access to his fantastic ideas, inspiration that was hitherto out of my reach. I was already using words like 'hitherto' and it hadn't cost me a penny!

Although I knew I was about to do something highly unethical, perhaps for that very reason, my pulse was racing. In a good way. I felt like a child on Christmas Eve; not sure what I was going to get but sure I would get something. A clatter of trays sounded from far away, another ward perhaps, and I was reminded of the fact that we were not entirely alone. What if the noise had woken Mum up and she was about to call for a nurse? Before I dared to begin, I scurried back to Mum's bedside to make sure she was still sound asleep. She was lying deathly still, not even breathing. I touched her arm to see if her skin was warm or cold. My heart sank when she opened her eyes and smiled at me (not because she was alive but because she was awake and now I would be unable to return to Sye). I asked her if she was comfortable and to my dismay, she began to talk about why spring mattresses were superior to foam. I used the time she talked to make a mental note of the holes I had already spotted in Sye's story. First of all, why did he think that loosening his restraints would help him return to his magical world? Did he have to click his heels together three times to disappear in a puff of smoke? Or paint a pentagon on the floor and light a candle? Fire up his space rocket? Secondly, why would someone claiming to be from another world automatically speak English, albeit in an archaic way? And why would a man frantic to return to his world have moments of calm and patience in between? I realised that I might have to fill in the cracks in his story myself if I used his ideas in my own books. I looked across at Mum and she was gently snoring. Her breath smelled of stale cabbage. I still had time to walk away and forget I'd spoken with Sye. I had the feeling listening to his story was only going to get me into trouble. I could just sneak out of the building and return to my routine life.

Back at Sye's bedside, with its own distinct smell, I knew that if I were going to listen to him at length, I would have to sit down in the visitor's chair. It was not only uncomfortable, but uncomfortably close to his bed. In spite of Sye's restraints, I knew that I would not enjoy being so close to a potentially violent madman.

"You will have to sit, you know," he said. "Otherwise you will drive me mad."

Sye delayed his smile just long enough to let me think he was serious. Then he spoke again.

"Make no mistake, Luke, without these shackles, I would be gone in an instant. I don't belong here. You cannot fathom the extent of my torment at being here."

He suddenly stiffened and spat out the next words in anger. "I am still there! In here," he said pointing to his head, "I am still there!"

I was petrified. What the hell was I doing conversing with a maniac? He saw my distress and forced himself to relax.

"I am sorry, Luke. My outbursts help no-one, I know that. But listen to my story and you might begin to understand my anguish. As to your safety, I can assure you that I will not harm you. Furthermore, I promise to try to keep you safe should something else seek to hurt you."

I did a double take as my mind shifted from "Great, he's not going to attack me" to "What the hell wants to hurt me?".

"As I tell my story," he continued, "you may feel a change in the air at some point, sense danger. Do not be alarmed. Just tell me if such a thing happens."

I swallowed as hard as my dry throat allowed. I slowly sat down, wondering if any other writer had gone to such lengths to become famous.

The red light on my digital recorder flashed and we were in business. Sye breathed deeply a few times, savouring the fact that he finally had a captive audience, even if he himself was the one chained up. He took time to compose himself, as if telling his story to me was a prerequisite for his return home.

I must admit I was having second thoughts about the whole escapade. I tried to suggest to Sye that we should start proper on my next visit as there was less than an hour left of visiting hours, but he was keen to begin. He also refused to consider any other way of telling his story than in chronological order (I was impatient to hear about the monsters and battles).

"Otherwise, it won't work," he said. A single glance from him told me that there was no point asking him what exactly wouldn't work. As it happened, Sye began his story all wrong.

"I cannot tell whether the conflicts I am constantly faced with are inside my being or outside. Sometimes the whole world seems like an elaborate manifestation of my mind."

If this was how he was going to carry on then, for my part, it would be a short story. I had promised to listen to the end but to be honest, my Mum spoke more sense than this on a bad day. It was corny and clichéd. My books were going to be the filet mignon of science fantasy, not luncheon meat. If I had learnt anything at all about writing, it was that he should have started his story with a hook to draw the audience in; maybe a line about killing his wife, the breeding maids or a fight with a hideous monster. I forced a smile to avoid showing my disappointment and let him continue.

"Listen, while I try to remember what I was about to tell you. Watch, and if I think hard enough, you will see a fleeting memory. Like a dream that hides in the morning shadows, in the corner of your eye, just out of view."

Marginally better. But I was going to end up yawning before long. In preparation for that eventuality and another violent outburst, I made a mental note of where the closest exit was and stole another glance at his restraints.

"Imagine a thousand such memories and you will begin to understand my plight as I try to recall the events that time has clouded over. If fortune is with me, I will paint a picture of a place where dreams have meaning and memories a life of their own. In this place, you may begin to lose your mind. And find mine."

Perhaps if I stripped away the phony language, I could make his ideas more compelling. It was hardly surprising that no member of staff or visitor had been able to listen to his ramblings for very long. I was sure my future readers wouldn't be able to either. His melodrama and language were simply too far out for anyone sane or sober to digest. And that, of course, was where I came in. I would interpret his story in my own words as well as steal it.

And so, with the sole intent of gleaning material for my books, I listened to Sye's story. The whole of it. By recording his tale in separate sessions, I was able to interpret his thoughts and write them in a form that hopefully people can follow, even if there are many places where Sye's antiquated language shines through. Occasionally I have let Sye tell parts of his tale himself, especially his feelings, in his own words, as he told me. What follows here is a fraction of everything he told me, but hopefully the core of his story and enough to amaze readers, as it did me. As to the question of whether Sye was indeed from another world or not, and if his incredible adventures had any truth in them at all – well, by reading his story, others can be the judge of that. And so many other things. About him. About me. Maybe even about themselves.

From here on, although I am the storyteller (and have added a few comments of my own), this is Sye's story.

Session 1: The Beast of Westwinds

Westwinds Castle. This is the world Sye grew up in. The world he turned his back on. To be fair, he only sought what most of us ever seek; to belong somewhere and to find the love of another. But his life was not to be a peaceful one. For the people of Westwinds proclaimed Sye a messiah. In a world obsessed with myth, magic and valour, he was armed only with logic, disbelief and despair (*not terribly effective weapons against a stampeding eight-legged meatbull*). Torn between his own desires, the needs of nations and the destiny the gods had ordained, Sye's life, liked the world he came from, would be ripped apart.

Sye's story started with his home, Westwinds. It was a castle but unlike any I had ever heard of. Therefore, I will let Sye describe it in his own words.

"Picture a fortress, tall and fearsome, its age betrayed by fissured walls - a castle hewn from red granite whose heavy cold walls seem to stretch upwards beyond vision, the terrible secrets of their turrets hidden by distance."

In his disoriented state, Sye's early memories came and went as they pleased, like alley cats. However, the images of Westwinds were carved in his mind, right down to the finest detail, as if his skull was made of the very same granite as the castle.

"The height of Westwinds is many times its breadth. It stands a timeless monolith, as rusty red as the dusty desert it oversees. It towers on the edge of the vast Western Plains, set apart from the rugged purple peaks of the Western Mountains behind it; a monument to their majesty, a stone gauntlet pointing skyward, challenging the gods themselves."

I got the message already - it was a big castle. In my mind, I pictured the desert as the palm of a hand and the castle of Westwinds standing defiant, raised like a middle finger to the skies. I wasn't sure if science fantasy readers would be ready for such irreverence. However, one thing bugged me. Why was Sye talking about Westwinds Castle in the present tense? I plucked up courage to interrupt and ask him.

"To my knowledge, it still stands. Not so its people. Eons ago, the High Lords of Westwinds, dour and proud, would gaze out into the arid land, their mantles only a shade darker than the Western Plains around them. From lofty parapets the High Lords looked out, at night when the western winds were strongest. In the face of those warm winds, the Lords would issue commands and I, along with the other people of the castle, would blindly follow. But those people are now long gone."

He painted a grand scene, even if the colour-coordinated attire of the Lords was a bit over the top. Even so, apart from the concept of the castle challenging the gods above, I hadn't yet heard much that I could steal for my own books. Perhaps I really was too impatient to get to the monsters.

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A creed of "Honour, Truth and Tradition" governed the lives of Westwinds' people. Not a bad code of ethics as such, although Sye explained that the people neither opposed nor condoned this way of life, the One Way of Life. It just was. To them it was as natural, or essential, as breathing. In time, Sye began to view the people's obedience as apathy, conformity and aversity to change. Although devoid of ingenuity and

ambition, their thoughts and actions guided solely by the One Way of Life, he conceded that they were also a devout and loyal nation,.

Westwinds was Sye's birthplace. Or so they told him.

"I can remember what time has forgotten. How Westwinds was once a thriving city - a stronghold, whose impenetrability made up for the spinelessness of its inhabitants. Now they are gone. It was their own fault. Or mine."

It was clear that Sye bore some kind of a grudge against his own people. I was keen to hear why. The more I listened, the more I came to realise that Sye's imaginary castle, Westwinds, was not just a castle but a whole nation with a complex structure.

One hundred levels of skillfully hewn stone slabs lay on top of each other. Each level donated the social status of its occupants; the higher the level, the more important a person's station in life. There was no currency or trade between people. So the level they lived on, and the hierarchy that came with it, also dictated what privileges they were entitled to as well as the allocation of shared resources, such as food and water. It was a question of usefulness to the castle, of value to the all-encompassing and ever-present One Way of Life. The location of people's living and working quarters depended solely on their appointed professions and their significance to Westwinds' survival. To reach the upper echelons, you had to choose your profession carefully (*it also helped if you were fit*).

Of the one hundred levels that rose around the large, square courtyard, the lower levels were designated for the storage of food, livestock, and supplies. Was this another shortcoming in Sye's story? For if food, livestock and supplies were indeed so critical to Westwinds' survival, shouldn't they then be located on the upper levels? Sye saw my consternation and guessed what I was thinking.

“As a child, I asked the same question of my elders. So wise and forward-thinking was the One Way of Life, that its parchments had prescribed exercise for the beasts in the nearby desert and cool underground storage of the food. Furthermore, parts of the courtyard and desert on the more sheltered western side of the castle had been tilled and irrigated to grow crops, vegetables and fruit trees. The knowledge and skills related to farming were therefore located on the lower levels.”

How fortuitous, I thought. Anything that was written in the One Way of Life, the people swallowed hook, line and sinker. It was like a religion to them. A fairy tale within a fairy tale. I was about to receive my first slap on the wrist.

“Whatever you doubt about my journey, Luke, and I am sure you will come to question a hundred things, understand that I have doubted the same a thousand-fold over. At times, I doubted everything my eyes saw, everything my ears heard. In the end, we all believe what we want to, sure that we are wise to it all. That is, until the next miracle comes our way. At first, we reject what we do not understand, try to destroy it. It takes our reasoning by surprise and sends our confidence into crisis. Sometimes, we accept and learn. But most of the time, we continue to wallow in ignorance, as we judge everything by our own puny lives and reject the world around us. Analyse my story, by all means. But think on what I have said and try to keep an open mind.”

Above the lower levels of food, livestock and storage, were the many levels of living quarters. Then came the Halls of Learning and training areas. On top of these were the Infirmary, Nurseries and Breeding Quarters (*no doubt the noisiest levels*). Then came the more academic professions in order of importance; the Halls of Medicine, Agriculture, Culture and Crafts, followed by the Alchemy and Armoury levels. It seemed that most trades occupied between one and three levels each.

Higher still were the all-important levels of the Archives, containing valuables and secretive items; parchments from the One Way of Life,

maps of the outlands, priceless jewels and precious metals, ancient scriptures of the One Way of Life; supposed potions, invocations and enchanted weapons; as well as a host of objects whose origin or purpose had long been lost or forgotten. It was ironic, said Sye, that the most superstitious and least understood assets of the castle, and the fools that dedicated their lives to them, were elevated to the highest positions. But isn't this often the way in our world too?

The three uppermost levels housed the governing bodies of Westwinds. The Attendants lived and worked in the Halls of Administration on the ninety-eighth level. Above them resided the ninety-eight Wise Ones in the Halls of the Wise. Each of the ninety-eight levels below elected a representative to the Halls of the Wise, a Lord whose degree of influence was defined by the importance of the level for which he or she acted (though there were exceptions to this). And above all other levels, on the battlements themselves, were the High Lords of the Council of Judgment, the absolute rulers of Westwinds.

Sye told me more, but these were the foundation stones of the environment Sye grew up in. Credit where credit is due; Sye had created an impressive backdrop to his imaginary childhood; an impenetrable castle, a nation where order and obedience were paramount, all wrapped up neatly in the One Way of Life, which seemed to anticipate (*a little too conveniently*) its people's every need. It somehow reminded me of Old Testament stories in the Bible. What I most envied was his ability to convince me that he believed every word of it. The psychiatrists in Bodley Hall were probably having a field day with this man. However, as Sye had advised me, I had to force myself to focus on my own dark purpose and not get sidetracked by trying to analyse or unravel everything he told me.

Moving on to his home, Sye described the simple rooms of stone he lived and played in as a small boy. Like all other rooms in Westwinds, they were built from the dense, ruddy granite, fashioned by the castle masons. These craftsmen had also chiselled slabs into crude tables and chairs, made softer by layers of wicker mats. Carpets woven from woaded rock

weed covered several walls to break the monotony of red. The only other decoration was provided by simple pottery and wicker baskets dyed various colours. The main doorway to each abode was covered by a wicker screen or curtain. The only windows, rough rectangular holes hewn out of the stone and protected with wicker curtains, like all other windows in Westwinds, faced inward towards the castle's courtyard. No window faced out into the desert. No reason for this was given and none was asked, for the One Way of Life was unquestionable. There were no heavy doors or shutters to block the openings of dwellings for the climate was hot almost all year round and thanks to people's devotion to the One Way of Life, crime was rare. In fact, the One Way of Life specifically prohibited its citizens from crossing the threshold of another's dwelling if the doorway was covered and they had not been invited in.

Sye spent most of his early years in these shadowy stone rooms, playing and watching his mother work. It was a deceptively peaceful life, for the most part cloaked from the tensions between the levels of the castle, hidden far away from the conflicts of the Lords. Sye's life as a citizen of Westwinds began a few years later, as a simple scholar. Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine he would walk as a High Lord on the forbidding battlements. But even this accomplishment paled in light of the quest that followed.

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Wanting to escape my life, I had read my fair share of science fiction novels. Being familiar with epic fantasies, I was not entirely surprised at Sye's next revelation – that he was different from any other being in Westwinds. According to Sye, his appearance was radically different. We're talking Elephant Man different. His affliction was as plain as the nose on his face and clear to anyone with eyes in their head.

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Now to feel different but not be is nothing unusual. Most healthy individuals at some time in their lives entertain the notion that they are special, unlike anyone else in the universe, even destined for greatness, while everyone around them invariably thinks the exact opposite. Sye had that same feeling but in reverse. He thought he was the same as everyone else. He wished he were destined for nothing and longed for obscurity, whereas everyone around him thought he was unique. But in a bad way.

I didn't need to be a psychoanalyst to work out that the man lying in front of me was projecting his own insecurity and self-hatred into the creation of a fantasy world. Something terrible had happened to him in our world and it had led him to create and flee to a fictitious one.

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Sye's realisation that he had a different appearance to any other person in the known world was a shock he never overcame until long after he had left the castle.

His mother never said anything about his looks. He had therefore lived the first few years of his life in ignorant bliss, assuming that he looked normal. He first suspected something was wrong when he was a toddler and could walk to the doorway of his dwelling. He would hear the inviting laughter of other children at play in the walkways outside - revelry which ceased the moment he appeared in the doorway. He saw fear and hatred in people's eyes without understanding the reason. On learning to talk, he asked his mother why nobody wanted to play with him, but his mother held him tight and said he was better off indoors with her.

At this early age, Sye sometimes saw his mother's friends (other breeding maids) chatting outside. They would frown at his appearance and prod him with bony fingers during their rare visits inside his home. Sye's mother chastised them each time and eventually they stopped coming. Sye had a sneaking suspicion that they stayed away because of him but his mother denied it. Sye was unusually tall for his age, but his

height was not the reason others spurned him. The Truth eluded him until one fateful day, when he was strong enough to carry a rain bucket. He looked down into the sloshing water to see how much rain he had collected and saw the face of a monster.

The people of Westwinds had swarthy features and high cheekbones (*think Mr Spock from Star Trek without the pointy ears*). But not Sye. There were no leaf-green eyes or arrow-thin lips. Here, looking up at him was an ugly face; a vulgar head with square jowls; a ragged mop of fair hair crowned a face as pallid as goat's cheese. Sye raised a hand to his face and the watery image mimicked him. He hit the surface of the water, the ripples danced and the reflection was gone. Sye looked away before the monster returned.

He wanted to cry but he stopped himself. He could recite common superstition as well as the next child: "*A bucket with tears, misfortune for years*". There was to be no crying into the water during the Festival of Rain. The One Way of Life said so.

That was the moment he joined the rest of Westwinds in thinking that he was a beast; a freak of nature; "a walking blasphemy to the One Way of Life", as he had overheard one neighbour whisper to another. He had no idea what the word "blasphemy" meant but it didn't sound good. His mother had lost her temper but the neighbor said that she had heard it from a friend, who had apparently heard it from a passing Lord. News of Sye's disorder had seemingly spread to the farthest corners of the castle.

The only feature in which Sye could find any comfort was the colour of his eyes. His mother told him that they were blue, the colour of the rain. (*The pedant in me wanted to point out to Sye that rain is not blue but I figured he wouldn't take kindly to being interrupted, especially on such a personal matter*). Unbeknown to Sye, someone else in the castle had made the same comparison and had nicknamed him Rainchild.

Sye saved his tears for later. He cried that night and on the nights that followed. There were no mirrors and little water in the castle, so he explored the contours of his mother's face with the tips of his fingers and compared it to his own. That was enough to remind him of the face of the beast. He no longer believed his mother's words that "everything would be all right" and found only momentary consolation in her embrace. At four years old, he had learnt to despise himself.

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"Remember," said Sye, "I was just four years old and dependent solely on my mother for love and acceptance. Until then, she had kept me safe. This sudden shock made me confused and frightened. My world turned upside down and yet past events in my life began to make more sense. I was confined to my home as sure as if I had contagious disease. I cannot say what permanent psychological damage this inflicted on me. I suspect that it set me on a path I have been on ever since."

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On that same night, the dreams started. At first, they came as a sickness - deep dreams that lasted through the night and long into the following day. He would lay in a state between sleep and consciousness, plagued by hallucinations that led him to believe he was in another land, another time. For days, he would babble about a strange place where the levels of society stretched not vertically, as in Westwinds, but horizontally across a green land. It was a gloriously undisciplined land where the movement of people was not restricted - a land where the elders had little say in the ways of the world - a world of noise and motion. He dreamt of marvellous objects, which moved faster than man or beast. They sped across the ground, across great plains of water and through the air. He dreamt of colours in the wind.

Long, lonely days turned into weeks. In Sye's darkest hours, his mother tried to comfort him and reassure him of her love but he knew that if he

could not love himself, how could he trust anything or anyone around him? He told his mother of the dreams and she took him to the Physicians. He told them of his dreams and they smiled and shook their heads. Worry and an over-active imagination can cause strange things, they said. It was only to be expected, they said, considering the terrible shock he had had from discovering his true appearance. (*It seemed Westwinds' Physicians were not big on child psychology*).

The visions began to creep into Sye's mind when he was awake too. He told his mother. She smiled and shook her head. Worry can cause strange things, she said.

While Sye suspected that something bad was happening, those around him just smiled. The world was against him, he concluded, and he retreated further into himself. With the help of a powder from the Physicians, Sye overcame this time of delirium, but was left with a sense of utter emptiness, numb to outside emotions. It was many moons before he turned his thoughts, like any normal child, to studying and serving Westwinds.

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Westwinds was about conformity and loyalty to the One Way of Life. Customs and traditions instilled this in the people from a very young age and influenced how they behaved. There were even sayings and proverbs that reinforced order and moulded people's thinking. '*One mother, one Way*' reflected the importance breeding maids played in preparing children for a lifetime of servitude to Westwinds and the Lords. Similar sayings included '*A mother is the closest thing to a Lord*' and '*Mother knows best*'. Some sayings, such as '*I am never alone with the three – Honour, Truth, Tradition and me*' were aimed at growing a sense of belonging in the people, especially when they felt isolated or were lured into wrongdoing. In years to come, purely out of habit, Sye would catch himself repeating this last one over and over in his head when he sought comfort.

As children became more independent, they were taught sayings that kept them on the straight and narrow, even to the extent that they were warned not to wander off to new places. *'Touch not walls before you sleep, lest Kadjul steal your soul to keep'* was one of the odder superstitions, which instructed children to go straight to bed and stay there, lest a mythical ferocious beast came and stole children. *'Should you seek to thrive and grow, keep to rooms you love and know'* was another, which counselled against exploring unfamiliar parts of the castle. Everyone lived according to the One Way of Life – Honour Truth, Tradition – and because these sayings were explicitly written into the One Way of Life, no-one questioned them. It was folly to ignore them. To oppose them would have been to oppose life.

There was another highly significant characteristic of the people of Westwinds, which is good to mention early on. The adults possessed short horns on their foreheads and tiny leathery tails at the base of their spine, which broke the skin at puberty. To be more precise, these appendages appeared on the very day that children reached their fourteenth birthday and quickly grew into proud symbols of adulthood. Although rarely longer than a finger, though several times thicker, the appearance of the horns was a jubilant and much-awaited occasion.

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Sye's mother was prone to occasional bouts of depression, which had begun long before her son was born. Sye had had an older sister, whom he had never known. One day she had simply vanished and had been missing ever since. It was a tragedy about which people spoke little. It was one reason why Sye's mother was so protective of him. Although he had never known his sister, Sye loved her dearly. He could tell that his mother often thought about her missing daughter and would sometimes lay grief-stricken on her bed for a whole day. His sister had to have been special, so Sye loved what little memory of her that his mother had deigned to give him.

Sye's mother rarely spoke of his sister. She never even told him her name. Sometimes, she would stare into space or at a bare wall for half a day without speaking. On the rare occasions Sye asked her about his sister, his mother would either weep softly or shout at him. When she wept, she fell apart and it was left to her son to comfort her. When she lost her temper, it was as though Sye became the cause of all her problems. Regardless of which, soon after she would invariably hold him tight, relate a short memory about her daughter, then make him promise never to run off. His mother's bouts of depression increased in frequency, even though, for most of the time, she continued to shower Sye with love. He followed her around the house and learnt when not to disturb her. A look in her eye or a twitch of a facial muscle was enough to tell Sye to keep his distance. It was as if another creature lived dormant inside her. Sye was determined not to wake it. As long as it slept, everything was as it should be between them.

One day, when Sye was six, a young girl arrived to stay with them. Her name was Salm. Sye thought that she was the prettiest child he had ever seen. Even though Sye had few points of reference, his conclusion was not a great surprise, as just about everyone else that saw her thought the same thing. Despite her rare beauty, Salm was sad and quiet. Her mother had apparently just died. Salm's father had died long before, although she had never seen him as he was a stonemason and had worked on a higher level. Sye shared was overjoyed to hear that he would be sharing his bedroom with the girl. But cocooned in sorrow, Salm would sit in the corner of their room and hum to herself rather than play with him. She would crouch on the floor and wrap her arms around her legs rather than be cuddled by Sye's mother.

Sye's mother treated Salm as she treated Sye. He loved his mother even more for that. In his mind, his missing sister's ghost had returned home in the form of Salm. His mother evidently thought that too because as the days went by, the girl relaxed and learnt to laugh again. Thanks to Salm, they were a proper family once more. Sye's mother held her children

when they cried at night, cleansed their wounds if they fell, encouraged them to try new things, intervened when they did things wrong and laughed at their childish antics. Salm had made Sye's mother whole again and Sye loved her for that. He loved her as much as he loved his lost sister.

As Salm began to notice that she was accepted just as she was, she learnt to trust her new family. Sye gained a playmate and before long they began to play together all day, every day. They took afternoon naps together and when one of them was feeling miserable or scared, they would share the same bed at night. Salm didn't seem to mind that Sye looked different. She wasn't afraid to hold his hand.

In due course, Salm began to talk to Sye and his mother. She told Sye that her mother had died suddenly and that now she needed new parents. Until new parents were found, she said, she would be able to stay with Sye and his mother. They both hoped that she would be able to stay with them forever. Sye felt as though he were growing up as these were things his mother hadn't talked about. Serious things. Secret things.

"I hope you can stay with us," said Sye. "For always."

"I will," Salm replied, "as long as they do not send me away. I want us to be friends for ever. I want you to like me always. Just as I am."

Sye thought it a strange thing for Salm to say. It sounded like the thing an adult would say. It was a phrase that she would use on numerous occasions and one that took on a whole new meaning later in life.

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"Certain things stick in one's mind," said Sye from his hospital bed. "Not only because they feel peculiar at the time, but that later on, they explain or have particular relevance for events that transpire. One case in point is when, one night, I awoke to find Salm knocking gently on the wall of our bedroom, near where my mother stored our toys. I asked her why she was doing it and reminded her that it was wrong."

'Touch not walls before you sleep, lest Kadjul steal your soul to keep', I told her. When she did not answer, I put my hand on her shoulder and turned her body towards me. Her skin was cold and damp. She continued to knock, even though her eyes were closed and I could see that she was fast asleep. It frightened me. She remembered nothing about it in the morning and when I asked my mother, she just laughed. I did not laugh then. And it is certainly nothing I can laugh about even to this day.

"Another time, Salm was staring into space as she sat on the floor in the centre of the room, facing the same bedroom wall. Her eyes were wide open, as if in terror, but her expression was otherwise blank. It reminded me of the distant look my mother often wore when she thought about my missing sister. I could not accept it from Salm as well. I became incensed when she refused to talk to me, so I shouted at her. I immediately regretted losing my temper and went to put my arm around her. She jumped at my touch and slapped my face. Her sharp fingernail had scratched my skin and had drawn a drop of blood. It stung and brought tears to my eyes. She kissed my cheek and licked the tiny wound clean. I was horrified and pushed her away.

'Sorry,' she said, grinning sheepishly. 'I was in another world.'

She sounded as though she was her normal self again.

'Are there other worlds?' I asked naively through my tears.

'Of course, there are,' she replied, giving my hand a squeeze. 'We will go there together one day.'"

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With one of them unable to talk to others their age and the other unwilling, Sye and Salm became the best of friends. Little by little, Salm settled in and engaged with Sye and his mother as if they had been a family forever. She became the sister that Sye had never known. She played games with him and taught him things that she had learnt from other people, things she had observed and copied. From whom she never said. She knew much more about life than he did, so it was natural that she took the place of the older sister he had lost.

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“At long last, I was able to lay the ghost of my sister to rest. It is hard to over-estimate the sudden and huge impact Salm had on me as a lonely boy. In some ways, and in a totally different way to my mother, she prepared me for the outside world, gave me courage and friendship. Even if at other times, she could be intimidating. I remember one day, when she lost a game we were playing, she turned to me and said solemnly, ‘For that, the Kadjul will get you.’ It terrified me and I burst into tears. The memory of how she said it – with total coldness - still terrifies me to this day.”

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It was Salm that told Sye they were the same age. Not only born in the same year, they also shared the very same birthday, to the day. How she knew and who had told her, she wouldn't let on. Sye was overjoyed that they shared something so intimate. Not that he felt the same age. There was no question in his mind that Salm was savvier, smarter and bolder than he would ever be. It seemed natural to him that she made all the decisions. She knew so much more than he did.

Sye's fear of the imaginary Kadjul creatures was not helped when, egged on by Salm, he became bolder and began to stand up to his mother, which prompted her to warn him of the consequences.

“Careful,” said his mother. “The Kadjul may hear you.”

His mother never lied to him, he knew that. Could the Kadjul hear what he said? What he thought? Was it safer to keep quiet, even it meant giving in to other people? Sye's mother and Salm were both unaware of just how disturbing Sye found their warnings of the Kadjul. Neither would they have guessed in a million years just how much Truth there was in their scaremongering.

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One day, just six moons after arriving, Salm left them. She departed as suddenly as she had arrived, yet more noisily. Sye stood silently by as Salm sobbed and screamed. She fell to the floor and three breeding maids, whom Sye had never seen before, had to drag her to the door. Her tiny fingers gripped the stone doorway but they wrenched her hands free. She wanted to stay but they wouldn't let her. He stood in the hallway and watched, helpless, unable to save her. They were taking his best friend and new sister away. Sye's mother was weeping but doing nothing to stop them. Sye was confused and worried. Sye's mother later tried to explain it to him. They had decided it was best for Salm. Sye wasn't sure who 'they' were but he decided that 'they' weren't nice people, whoever 'they' were. The two people that mattered most in his world were so distraught that neither could console him. Neither could make things better. What did it mean?

Moons passed and Salm didn't return. When Sye asked his mother why Salm couldn't live with them anymore, his mother said that they had found her new parents. 'They' again! When Sye asked if he could visit Salm's new family or if Salm could visit them, his mother said that Salm wasn't allowed to see others. When Sye said that it wasn't fair, his mother agreed and said that life was like that. That's when Sye decided that he hated unfairness. This unfair world had now taken two sisters away from him. He vowed then when he was older, he would make the world a fair place.

Adding insult to injury, his mother's periods of depression returned with a vengeance and she increasingly withdrew to her inner world. Sye was therefore left alone to guess at answers to his sister's fate and Salm's sudden departure. Two sisters were gone. He wondered if the two incidents were connected.

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One oddity about Sye's family was that his mother had only had two children of her own, Sye and his absent sister. Whereas most families consisted of a mother and several, even up to ten children to a family, Sye was once again the only child in his house. It seemed that after siring an aberration such as Sye, his mother and father had been persuaded or prevented from conceiving any more children.

A word here about the process of rearing children in Westwinds as well as Sye's own upbringing. Breeding maids were assigned a mate, a male carefully selected by the Wise Ones (the group of ninety-eight Lords, a representative of each level), as soon as they qualified from the Breeding Quarters, where they studied, among other things, fornication and child rearing. Both males and females of Westwinds were free to request any trade or position they wanted but it was the Wise Ones of both the level they were leaving and aspiring to, who influenced and ultimately sanctioned their choice. There was never any shortage of candidates for breeding maids on account of their high social status and benefits. Breeding maids would mate with their male partners for life, yet they saw their spouses only occasionally in the Breeding Quarters, where the main purpose was impregnation (*I think the word Sye used was "procreation"*). The rest of the time, each breeding maid brought up her children in their respective living quarters on the lower levels, while their male spouses lived and worked on the level of their chosen trade, alongside the vast majority of males and females that had not chosen or been chosen for breeding rights. Only those fathers that worked on the lowest levels, with animals, crops or water, were permitted to rejoin their families at the Festival of Rain. Sye's father, Adir, was an Armourer, so greatly revered. But being on an upper level, he never met his son.

This custom was one of the first aspects of the One Way of Life that led Sye, at an early age, to question Westwinds' creed. How could the One Way of Life be good for people if it kept his father away from him, especially at times when his mother was sad and would have needed him most?

With a relatively small percentage of the population possessing breeding rights and mating, one would think that intimate relationships between people on the same levels would have been going on in secret all over the castle. It happened but not often. Perhaps because this race of people seemed not to have a particularly strong libido. Maybe because they knew that at some point a clandestine relationship would put a strain on the working environment. The biggest reason, however, was that the One Way of Life specifically prohibited anyone else than breeding maids from being with child and few wanted to risk the public stigma of breaking with Tradition. Nobody flouted the One Way of Life lightly. The One Way of Life therefore outlawed unauthorised pregnancies but not unsanctioned sex per se. There was no such thing as contraception, so those who decided to engage in sexual activities would invariably abstain from full sex. An alternative, equally rare form of intimacy was relationships between members of the same sex. As it was not mentioned in the One Way of Life, homosexuality was neither frowned upon or condoned. It was another option if people felt the urge.

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Home presented what little succor Sye had in his life. But at seven-and-a-half years old, it was time for him to leave for the Halls of Learning, which lay on a higher level. The fact that Sye was a freak did not exclude him from the customs and rituals that awaited all children of Westwinds.

As every other child in the castle, Sye spent his youth learning and adopting the One Way of Life in all its complexity (and increasingly, in Sye's mind, its futility). The Learned Ones, who were the tutors of the Halls of Learning, taught him the arts and skills handed down to them by their forefathers; the ways of warfare, the ways of peaceful living and the difficult times in between. Sye had to study everything there was to know about the three cornerstones of life - Honour, Truth and Tradition.

It was the job of the Learned Ones to hand down Learning from one generation to the next, until their memories, like the parchments

themselves, faded away. After centuries, perhaps millennia, sacred scrolls would crumble to dust at a touch, but no new manuscripts were drafted, because by Law none could. Many facets of Learning were lost over the centuries and true to Tradition no new laws or methods could be instituted in their place. It was the Lords' decree. Knowledge of anything before the One Way of Life, written one and a half thousand years earlier, was not available to ordinary citizens. Many concluded that it was non-existent even for the Lords.

As they aged, some Learned Ones became senile or lived as hermits, taking ancient knowledge and art with them to their graves. Over generations, this rendered knowledge incomplete, distorted, irrevocable. Potent but seldom used practices drifted into oblivion. The whereabouts of sacred chambers was forgotten altogether until even the existence of such rooms and their contents was contested. If this weren't enough, the very substance of the castle was left in an ever-advancing state of dilapidation. Tradition demanded. Year by year, generation by generation, the castle became a memory of better times.

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It was clear to me that two millennia of blind adherence to the One Way of Life had bred resignation and submissiveness in Sye's people, which in turn had led to the slow decay of their society. Everything was thought out for them. All they had to do was believe and comply. I couldn't help thinking how badly I would have fitted in. Not that my own lifestyle was a model of excitement and rebellion. Nevertheless, I could understand why Sye was so critical of the apathy in Westwinds people, even though it turned out to be the very thing that allowed him to aspire to great heights – in every sense of the word.

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For most children, their first day at school is a harrowing experience. For Sye, he was the zoo exhibit that had been let out of its cage. Scholars

and tutors alike came to stare at this being, about whom they had heard only rumours. No-one spoke to Sye and he soon learnt to shut away his feelings. Yet for all their rude looks, no-one was outright hostile or mean to him, at least at first. For in the Halls of Learning, the tutors enforced the One Way of Life to the letter, which made no mention of treating freaks of nature any differently. Once or twice, he heard the words “beast” and “sorcery” mentioned but there was little or no malice intended. He told himself it was out of ignorance.

On his second day in the Halls of Learning, as he stood alone in a corner of the cloisters, he felt a small hand slide into his. It was Salm. His heart leapt and he saw the same joy in her eyes. He had not seen her for over a year. His first thought was that she looked prettier than ever. Out of all the children in the Halls of Learning, there was none more beautiful. His second was to wonder where she had disappeared to that fateful day. He looked at her and she smiled back. They hugged. He felt a warmth spread through his body and he knew that with Salm’s help, he would survive the Halls of Learning.

During the following days and weeks, much to the consternation of the other scholars and the tutors, Salm would sit by Sye in lessons and often keep him company during breaks. She was no longer the shy, timid girl that had arrived on his doorstep over a year earlier. She had grown in confidence. She was tougher, harder, and everyone wanted to be her friend. When she spoke, others listened. More than that, she had influence over other people. She used this to stop others from taunting Sye. She even stuck up for him against the tutors. The Learned Ones smiled. They thought it was quite remarkable, and a little scary, what one young girl could accomplish and how boldly she spoke for her age. Sye was not surprised in the least. He was proud to be her friend. The most beautiful child in the castle was the friend of the ugliest. Salm was the girl that stood up for this ‘beast’ among them and she became Sye’s hero. He would have given up his life for her - something, which ironically she would request of him later in life.

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