



The Walker in the Dust
Book I

BROKEN

by Russell Ackerman

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Second Edition

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ISBN-13: 978-1493704941

ISBN-10: 149370494X

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my wife Kim, who hates apocalypse fiction but loves me dearly. You make my life worth living.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to acknowledge my father Edward Ackerman who always marked up my essays with lots of red pen, and also my creative writing 301 teacher Bruce Pratt who taught me that the best stories are about people, and my wife for putting up with me while I write fiction.

1 DECISIONS

Should I leave her to die? I look down at my wife's bruised, tired, unconscious body. I haven't had a woman in a long time.

Oasis is far away but I am too weak and dehydrated to carry her. Dark is coming and the giant scorpions will be on the prowl, along with slavers, mutants, and goddess knows what else. "Bless you. May the sands of time take you to oasis."

The traditional prayer I whisper on tired lips. I have heard of others in situations like this. They always end badly. I put my gun to her head, turn away and fire. I check her pulse, just to make sure. I cry. I set off into the evening twilight, wondering about what I had done.

The wastes. The heat. The death. You lose your humanity in the end.

At least, I console myself, she is at peace, and did not die at the hands of someone less than human. I wipe the tears from my eyes. There are none.

Welcome to the dust.

2 SENTENCED

They have sentenced me to being flayed to death. I grip the bars of the cage and hang on my arms. How long will they keep me here, waiting? And for what?

I have broken the law of the wasteland. There is only one law in anarchy, "do no harm."

I had killed her, yes, but I had saved her from suffering. The guard looks in my direction with red swollen, cataract eyes. Once, he and I had been friends. We had scavenged together, laughed together. We had found tech together, cried together. He's sunblind now. Always hated wearing goggles.

"Don't cry old friend," he says.

My eyes sting. At least there is water to shed here, in oasis. The laws of men are harsh and unloving. What goodness is fulfilled by punishing an honest heart? I had told my story about the girl I murdered last night at the fire-pit. I feel like I did the right thing. What do we do when the laws of men fail? I look out from the bars at the glinting sun. I am no criminal. I am a good man.

In the dark of night the guard releases me. He says, "go to the wastes and don't come back. Oasis is no place for you. Civilized folk.. They don't understand the wanderers, the hard choices we make between death and worse death. You can't come back here again."

He gives me a .22 pistol and a few bullets. I hug him and look out into the night. Where will I go? How will I

survive? I have no equipment. All my years of gathering tech, wasted. Taken from me by the lawman.

But I know already. The scorpions will take care of me. It's the less worse death than being flayed alive by the 'civilized folk'. My old comrade saved me in his own way. The wastelander way.

I go out into the night and as I stumble forward I listen for the tell-tale clicking claws of the giant scorpions, who will at least kill me mercifully. But if I can make it a few miles, just a few more steps, I might survive the night.

3 THE FACTS

Untold years ago there was an end of things. Nukes rained down on the earth and the world was destroyed. The combined nuclear fire set off uranium deposits in the Earth and afterwards, only the wasteland remained. Many chemical and biological weapons were released. Only the very strongest people survived and carried on.

Humans kept reproducing, having babies, raising babies in the safety of the underground vaults. Most were not so lucky. There were babies in caves, babies in the wastes, babies near trash, babies suckling the nutrients out of mothers who could barely survive themselves. But over thousands of years, the wasteland changed.

No longer can you find a can of beans, or evaporated milk, or packaged jerky and twinkies, just empty packages where someone else has gotten there before you. Humanity learned to hunt the mutated creatures of the wastes to survive.

For uncounted generations wastelanders have feared the giant scorpion. They say the scorpion was once a the size of a cat but over many generations it grew larger as the smaller, more stupid ones were killed off. Soon the tables were turned and we became the hunted.

No one ventures out at night when they are out to feed. It is certain death. Unless you are lucky enough to have a rocket launcher, let alone a supply of rockets. Most wastelanders carry a spear, and if you've traveled the wastes long enough they called you a tribal.

Things are evolving. The wasteland is changing. Mutant fruit trees grow in the cracked earth. Iguanas wander the wastes, consuming what insects remain, and they are hunted for their succulent meat.

Eat enough of anything and you'll die of radiation. Everyone dies of radiation. You don't see any old folks, just young, fearful faces, and you learned to eat less or perish even earlier, and if you're really unlucky, you'll go feral, lose your humanity and become an animal.

To live is to die. That's the first thing every kid learns in this god forsaken hell.

4 DEATH

The pack of giant scorpions gather around me, claws clicking, teeth chittering, and I collapse from exhaustion that I put off for too long. My death does not come.

I wait. Still, I do not feel my flesh tearing, my body burning from their poison. I wait. Finally I open my eyes. A stinger hovers above my face, and a drop of poison hangs glistening in the moonlight, an offer of quick death. Noble death.

I look at the scorpion in front of me. It's small black eyes twinkle and the mouth-pieces vibrate, making that awful sound. The claws open and close. Open and close. It is the sound of death.

I open my mouth and lift my head with my last strength and drink the poison. I burn. I burn and I burn but I do not die. My vision turns black. The sounds of claws and teeth disappear. I see a place, green, full of life. Deer and dragonflies and palm trees.

Flying above, I look down over the verdant hills. The vision disappears. I am scorching. I scratch madly at my skin, I scratch and I writhe in agony. All I can see is the scorpions eyes. Dark black marbles set in the face of an angel of death. I lay there in pain and wonder when death will come. I look up at the moon, a sliver smiling down at me.

The scorpions turn in unison, their legs tapping at the scorched earth, their great bodies rotating until all but one faced away from me. Are they like wasps? Will

they drag me back to the nest, implant me with eggs? Have I been saved from one fate, only to come upon one worse than being flayed alive?

Or did they sense something in the darkness? I look up at the stars, the beings that guided me on so many trips into the wasteland. How long will it take for the poison to kill me?

I feel stronger, wide awake and I want another draught of their liquid death. To finish me. To end the life of countless days, wandering, starving, thirsty, an eternity of choosing between bad and worse. Fuck this planet.

"Finish me!" I scream at them, on my feet shouting, but they do not move.

One of them still looks at me with beady eyes. Why did they wait?

"Kill me you goddamn bugs!"

But she turns away. I pound on her chitin with my bare fists but she merely closes her eyes. I clamber over her and fall on my face beyond the circle of guardians. I make haste and soon they are distant, and the crickets fill my ears with song.

I feel more alive than ever. Alive. I am alive and I have no thirst, no hunger. Will they hunt me in the morning? Were they just ripening the kill? Sweetening the meat? My body tingles, as if it is finding new life, and the familiar feelings of sore feet and back are gone.

What have I become? I look into a mirror as it lay there in the broken remains of a concrete road. In the pale light I can make out my face, and I wonder. Am I broken? Dreaming? Have I finally lost

what sanity I have scraped and saved all these years? I slowly realize, I am not broken. It is only the mirror.

5 OLD PINE ELEMENTARY

I am hot and tired. The venom of the giant scorpion lingers in my veins. It's the end of the day, time to hole up somewhere and be very, very quiet. The sign outside says Old Pine Elementary and I enter.

I see a filthy mattress with a body strung up in the air above it, dried blood, body parts and head missing. I touch it and it swings a little in the air, creaking back and forth, and my heart jumps as though it is a scorpion. My sixth sense tells me I am safe. The doors are all closed, and this man... He had died a long time ago.

I drop my pack and collapse onto the mattress. This dead man, he had sought solitude. Oasis is not far away, a few days

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