

## The Desert

Silas opened his eyes to a blazing sun. His face felt baked, the skin at his eyes tugging to squint. He pushed himself to a sitting position and felt sand shifting under his hand. Once his eyes adjusted to the brightness, he scanned the surroundings. He was at the top of a great sand dune with an unfamiliar orange desert in all directions. Despite the aggression of the sun, the air was a comfortably cool temperature. The air was still, and there was a constant low hum coming from no specific direction.

Silas's first impression was that the desert was barren, but a closer look showed it was not featureless. He could see that far away was a ridge that stretched into the distance. Sagebrush and yucca were scattered about the landscape. He could see a bird circling overhead and an anthill a few yards away. He saw something shining in the opposite direction of the ridge, but he could not tell how far away it was. It was the only feature that indicated possible human impact in the area.

He tried to recall how he got to the desert, but the last thing he could remember was standing at the edge of Kane Lake, alone. There was no road nearby and nothing to indicate tire tracks, so he assumed he walked. But with no shoes and no memory of ever being in this place, he thought it was possibly a false assumption.

Out of habit, Silas thought of water first. He was not thirsty, but he would need to find water soon, and he had no idea which direction to go in. On the one hand, going to the ridge would give him a better vantage point to see possible water sources. On the other hand, it would take quite some time to get there, time that could end up wasted. He decided that the shining object could mean people, and people might have water.

He set off towards the shining object. A raven perched on a rock gave Silas a strange sense of irony. The bird watched him walk and flew to catch up with him every few yards.

“What do you want?” Silas asked, speeding up the pace.

“It wasn’t your time yet,” the raven answered.

Silas spun around to look at the bird. He must have imagined it. The raven looked back without moving.

“It wasn’t my time for what?”

The raven perched on his shoulder, claws dug into the muscle. He expected it to hurt more, but it was just the sensation of pressure. The bird did not say anything more, so Silas kept walking. The landscape constantly shifted ever so slightly, just enough for Silas to notice and feel disoriented. He chalked it up to being a mirage of the desert.

From behind him, Silas heard a deep voice say, “Someone must have interfered. The only question is, why?”

Looking for the source of the voice, all Silas could find was a collared lizard. It stood still but seemed to be looking at him. Silas stared back.

“Can you speak?”

“Of course I can speak. You should be looking for shelter soon, it is getting dark.” The lizard started to slowly walk towards Silas.

Silas looked at the sky for an indication of the time.

“It was midday not too long ago, how is the sun so low already?”

The raven made a noise that almost sounded like a scoff. “Time does not obey the same laws Here. You should know that.”

“Where is here?”

The raven once again scoffed, and with a hint of irritation said, “You ask too many questions that have answers you don’t want.”

Silas kept walking. He tried to remember what happened before this. Only scattered clips of memories came to him. He remembered going to Idaho, thinking he’d be safe. He camped at the base of a mountain, near the lake. What was he trying to stay safe from? He couldn’t remember.

As if he could read Silas’s mind, the lizard said “In due time.”

The sun was going down quickly, and the shining target Silas had been aiming for was no longer visible. He changed his course for the large rock not too far away, hoping it could provide some sense of shelter.

“Should I be afraid?” It felt like an immature question to ask, but given the lizard’s advice, he thought it was a good clarification.

“Fear is relative. You cannot be harmed Here, technically. Not by us anyways.” The raven hopped off the shoulder and walked a bit in front of Silas. The lizard said nothing but looked at Silas every few feet.

By the time they had reached the rock, the sun had completely set. There was no moon out, but the stars shone brightly in the clear sky. For the first time since he woke up, he felt truly lost.

“What is the humming noise?” Silas asked, noticing it had grown steadily louder as the sun set.

Plainly, the lizard said, “The desert,” as if that was enough explanation.

Silas looked around, noting the new sounds that were occurring. A faint scuttling sound seemed close. Far away some sort of primal howl could be heard. He listened closely, trying to

locate the sound of moving water but he heard nothing besides the hum and the animals. He looked again to the sky in puzzlement, “I don’t recognize this sky.”

The raven, continuing the aloof persona, said, “You will.”

“Why don’t I remember anything before this? How do you two know me?”

“You haven’t been Here before; your mind will take some time to adjust. We know you because we must.” The lizard looked around absentmindedly. “When you get to the rock, try to sleep while you can.”

Silas stared at the lizard, then at the raven, who stared back. He took a sharp inhale to ask another question but decided instead to keep quiet. The answers he got weren’t particularly helpful anyways. They all reached the rock; Silas looked around for a place to lie down. There was a small clearing without any large rocks in the way that he decided would suffice. He inspected the ground to ensure he wasn’t going to curl up on some sort of bug nest. It seemed safe.

He looked up at the stars as he lay in the cool earth. He tried to make up new constellations as a way to fall asleep. It seemed as though the stars shifted every few minutes, so every time he tried to identify a pattern he saw before, it had changed. Silas wished he knew where he was, or why he was in the desert. The lizard had curled up next to Silas’s hip; the raven was just out of arms reach under the rock. Silas slowly drifted into a shallow sleep with dreams of vague shapes and bright colors.

“You’re in my spot.”

Silas was startled awake at the new voice. He turned to face the direction it came from, but there was nothing to see. He heard someone clearing their throat behind him. A small tan fox was sitting on the top of the rock looking right at Silas. When Silas stared back, the fox averted

its eyes and moved its gaze to the raven. The fox's large ears flattened against their head when the raven looked at it.

The raven told the fox, matter-of-factly, "You're not using it right now."

"True, but it's mine." The fox and the raven seemed to know each other, but they did not give off an air of friendliness. The fox again looked at Silas. "Why are you here?"

"I wish I knew. I don't even know what here is."

The fox put its ears up again. "You're in the desert. Isn't that obvious?"

"Well, yes, I can tell I'm in a desert. But where? And why is it so off?"

The fox looked offended. "Maybe you're off."

"No need to be rude," replied the raven.

"Oh because you're always so polite, Raven. You wouldn't like it if I spent the night in your nest."

The lizard chimed in, "You couldn't reach her nest if you wanted to. We'll be on our way in a bit."

"It doesn't matter whether or not I could get to the nest, it's the principle. Where are you going anyways?"

"That's up to Silas. We are just along for the journey."

The fox and the lizard both looked at Silas as if asking for an answer. Silas, who had starting thinking the raven and lizard were supposed to be guiding him, felt lost again. "I was just searching for water."

"Why would you want water Here?" asked the fox.

Again, with irritability, the raven piped in, "Because he's human, of course. They don't make decisions out of logic like the rest of us."

“I need water though, don’t you?”

The three animals all looked at each other and started to laugh in their own ways. The fox said, “If you needed water you should have gone to a lake, not a desert.”

“I didn’t decide to come here! I just woke up, with most of my memory gone.”

“If your memory is gone, how do you know you didn’t decide to come here? Everyone comes to the desert for a reason.”

“As much as I hate to agree with Fox, they have a point. But you’re early.”

“How can I be early? Was I expected?”

The lizard sighed. “Yes, you were supposed to come here, but not until much later on. It doesn’t matter now, you’re here and that’s that.” It looked to the horizon, and said, “Perhaps we should be moving on.”

“Sure, but moving on to where?” asked the fox. Silas was wondering the same thing, still wondering about the water issue though. If water wasn’t his goal, where should he be headed? Should he try to get out of the desert, or was he safe here? If he did manage to leave the desert, where would he go? “Is there a way out of here?”

“Not by walking,” said the lizard. It looked at the raven, “Or flying, for that matter. You will be Here until you’ve found what you need.”

“Am I supposed to know what I need?”

All three animals ignored Silas’s question. The sun was starting to rise fast, lighting the sky with orange hues. The lizard started walking in the direction Silas assumed was south. The raven followed shortly after. Silas started to follow them too, and the fox asked, “Can I come with you?”

“I don’t mind, but do you know where they are going?”

“No.”

“So why don’t I need water here?”

“There’s just no need,” said the raven.

“That’s not helpful Raven. Your body does not require the same things Here as it did out there,” said the lizard. Silas thought that this answer was also not particularly helpful, but it was better than the raven’s reply.

“Is there a town or anything here? Is there anything outside of the desert?” Silas asked.

“Why are you in such a rush to leave? First you say Here is off, now you’re eager to leave. What’s your problem with Here?” The fox looked at Silas with a rather accusatory glare.

“Uh, no, it is fine here. I just want to get a grasp of things.”

“Isn’t that why you’re here?” asked the lizard, although it sounded more like a statement.

“Am I? How did I get here? I thought I was in Idaho.”

The raven paused for a second and said, “You woke up.”

The group kept walking, in silence, for some time. They took turns in the lead. By the time Silas was in front for the third time, he stopped to look around. The humming was back, coming from no particular direction. He felt a sense of *déjà vu*, but couldn’t place the cause.

“Have we been here before? I feel like we’re going in circles.”

The fox said, “Maybe *you* are.”

“If you fly without direction, you will arrive nowhere,” said the raven.

“It is up to you Silas. The longer you take, the longer you’ll be here,” said the lizard.

Silas looked around slowly, looking for a target. Despite walking in the desert for two whole days, he felt neither thirst nor hunger. Without those as cues, he needed to figure out what his goal was. “I want to go to the ridge.”

They changed their course slightly to start heading towards the ridge. Silas thought about many things, mainly trying to remember why he was in Idaho. And why he left, somehow ending up in the desert. He felt like he was looking for something, but he didn't know what for. The group slowly approached the ridge, which seemed much more daunting up close. The sun was starting to set once again, basking the desert in red light.

"Are you seriously going to hike up this hill tonight?" the fox asked Silas.

"Is there any reason I shouldn't? I don't feel tired."

"The ridge will be a safer place to rest than the base," the lizard said.

"I thought I couldn't be hurt here?"

"Not physically," replied the raven.

"I don't want to climb a hill," said the fox.

"You don't have to join us, but I intend to reach the top tonight."

The fox grumbled, "Fine."

Despite the complaints, the fox joined the rest as they went up the hill. The climb was steady, though steep. Silas lead the entire way. The sun had long gone down and the stars were lighting the way. Silas saw some familiar patterns from the previous night and started to recognize the way they moved. There appeared to be four different axes about which the stars rotated, instead of the usual one. The constellations near the intersections of the circles formed by the rotations were the most dynamic.

"Why don't the stars rotate all together?"

"Because Here is not limited the way There is," said the fox, as though that was an obvious fact that shouldn't need stating.



“What is Here?” asked Silas, who was starting to think that maybe it wasn’t a matter of ‘where’ he was. At least not in the way he was used to thinking about location. Was any of this even real? He felt like he was losing his grip on reality, but at the same time felt like he was getting closer to an answer he understood.

The lizard answered, “Here is what we need to find what we need.”

The sky was starting to get light again by the time they reached the top. The hum was once again quiet. Silas was hoping the ridge would have another side to it, maybe a change of scenery. Instead, it was just a seemingly endless plateau. The fox made a great sigh and the raven shot it an irritated look. The fox yawned back in response and said, “I’m tired.”

“We can rest here, I could definitely use some sleep,” Silas said as he sat down.

Silas looked out at the desert, admiring the view. He was amazed at the vastness of it, but he wished there was a visible end to it, something to aim for. The shining object he had been aiming for the first day was nowhere to be seen. The fox quickly fell asleep, the raven shortly after, and the lizard last. Silas gazed at the sky, grateful that the sun wasn’t as hot as he thought it would be. He fell asleep while watching the clouds overhead. By the time he had woken up, the sun was going down, and the hum was growing. The three animals were each watching Silas expectantly.

“Why does the hum get louder at night?” Silas asked, not expecting a helpful answer.

“It just gets quieter during the day. The sun drowns it out,” answered the fox.

The lizard said, “The desert is more alive at night.”

“As are you,” said the raven.

“I don’t think he belongs here,” the fox said.

“Not many do,” said the lizard.

“Is that what I’m supposed to find? Where I belong?”

“The desert is not your destination, Silas, but a means to arrive there,” said the lizard.

Silas thought about where he belonged, where he should be. The desert had started to grow on him; he liked the openness and the stillness. But he missed the shade of trees and the smell of wet earth.

“Let’s get moving. I don’t want to sit here all night,” complained the fox.

The group started to walk along the edge of the plateau, Silas trailing behind lost in his own thoughts. If Here wasn’t a place, did it matter how he got there? Why was he Here, and why couldn’t he remember before? The more he thought, the more he wished he was out of the desert. The humming had grown quiet and he disliked the silence.

“We stop here,” said the lizard suddenly.

“Why?” asked Silas. Then he looked up, shocked and in awe of the view. “How?”

“I think you found what you needed. We belong to the desert, though,” said the lizard.

“I’m definitely not going in there,” said the fox.

“This is where we leave you,” said the raven.

Silas was still rather surprised. “How did this get here? I know it wasn’t there last time I looked up a few minutes ago.

“Just like the desert, it is there when you need it,” the lizard said.

“Bye, then,” said the fox, with a hint of impatience.

Silas walked into the forest, and when he turned around to look at his companions, the desert and its inhabitants were gone.