

## The Desert

The desert lay in front of us, vast and dead. At the beginning of the road that we would eventually take through the dunes, there was one sign... it read: Tsunamis Common.

Our group of specialists had been searching the land for weeks, and it was nice to come close to our destination, sort of. Somewhere in this desert was a spot of relative shelter. Until we reached that spot, we were in mortal peril. Our group was a 'top secret mission' directly from the High Council. We were a team of government archeologists, specially trained diggers that knew how to tackle the planet's biggest problems with our fists as well as with our brushes and shovels.

Recently, the Council had been having trouble with a cult called Odin's Fist. They were a pseudo-religious cult that believed priests should rule the planet and make sacrifices to Odin, their god. The common name for these demons was "The Ravens" for two reasons: the zealous acolytes looked like ravens themselves with the black garments that they wore, and in the old myths, the god Odin had two ravens that went around gathering information for him. The followers of this cult went around gathering disciples for "The Great God Odin".

Ravens were also a sign of bad luck. If the Ravens visited a village, five or six people were always missing a few days later. Shortly after that the Ravens would leave and go to the next village. This had gone on for a few months now and things were coming to a head. Angry mobs of villagers were attacking the Ravens with pitchforks and torches, but strangely the Ravens always escaped without any injuries. It was almost as if they were hiding something. Perhaps a mysterious defense system? Finally, the Council decided to put a stop to things. They sent out troops to combat the rising tide of the black demons, but the Ravens seemed to know their every move.

Finally, the Ravens made a mistake. They got overconfident in their ability to escape and went on the attack. In the middle of the night, they attempted a skirmish. The government troops were more than prepared, and the Ravens had to run for their lives. One of the Ravens was left behind, and was killed by a soldier. The corpse (the only specimen of a Raven in existence) was examined, and then the body unmasked for all to see.

The lower body of the Raven was covered in the black leather leggings that all of its kind wore. The torso was sallow, but undeniably strong. The arms were like those of any normal human being. But what stood out most were the hands and head. The hands tapered from the

wrist and branched into long spindly fingers with talons at the end. The head was more gruesome. Protruding from the face was a long obsidian beak. It seemed to most that the protrusion had grown there. It definitely wasn't natural. A little higher were two beady, cruel eyes, that even in death glared defiance at their captors. Instead of ears there were two holes in the sides of the head, and covering the head were oily strands of black hair. Lying on the ground beside it were the black robes that all Ravens wore, and on top, the silver amulet that always hung around a Raven's neck.

Arising from the body and spreading around was a horrible stench. Soon, the whole area smelled like a two week old kill. It was the unanimous decision of all of those with tents near the site that they should burn the body. That was a month ago.

Now, we were on the hunt for the mythical spear of Odin, a treasure that was believed to have been lost in a "shifting of the earth". That area of the planet was said to have terrible "earth shakes" as well. Apparently, whole landmasses had shifted, making deserts where once there were oceans. The spear of Odin is said to have boundless power, enough to annihilate planets, and now, the Ravens were on the move and looking for it. They had just as many leads as we did, so it was a race to the finish. We all had a lightweight bedroll on our backs, as well as a two-gallon jug of water. Each man had enough food for a fortnight, and a hat to keep off the burning sun. We had to make our way through the desert without getting burned by the sun or killed by the Ravens, go into the sacred temple of Odin (which probably had many traps in it), get the spear and get out.

When I had heard this in the briefing, I almost quit my job. Only my buddy Sam stopped me. Sam was my best friend in the world. Only a few years younger than me, I loved him like a little brother, and he comforted me in turn.

I remember him saying in his strange accent, "We'll stick together. You're my friend, I'm yours. I wouldn't leave you behind, and I know you'd do the same for me." His speech touched me, and affirmed my friendship with him. I told myself that I would go on the mission to protect Sam, if nothing else.

All of the men in my group had been specially trained to fight as well as dig for artifacts, but the odds against us were astronomical. On the other hand, if we failed, the Ravens would most definitely get the spear and use whatever "magic" was left in it to wreck havoc on the

planet and on the universe. Either that, or it would blow up with enough force to destroy a whole planet, or more. So, it was up to us to save the universe and do it within two weeks.

My group passed the sign, one by one, and stepped into the desert. The air immediately changed from the slightly arid grassland where we had been standing, to the intense heat and scorching sun of the desert. The boundary line between the two biomes was drastic, as the long grass ran up right to the top of a dune that stretched the length of the edge. Our boots slid in the dry sand, and were immediately filled with debris. We toiled onwards.

For the next few days we slid down dunes and climbed up others again. During the nights we had to make do without a fire, for fear that the Ravens would see us. Everybody in the government and troops had seen the body of the Raven that was caught, whether in person or from a picture. We did not want that to happen to us. Even so, it was sometimes bitterly cold during the nights. Once when it was cold and Sam wasn't feeling well, I gave him my blanket to keep him warm.

We traveled in the early morning, when the sun wasn't as hot. During the middle hours of the day, we set up our tents, and dug a hole in the sand. The reason that we dug a hole was that during the night, the temperature dropped to about -15 Celsius and the sand cooled down. During the midday heat, the sand three feet down was considerably cooler than the outside heat. We then sat in the hole until it was time to move again, towards the end of the evening. We sent a scout ahead, to make sure that we weren't going to stumble accidentally on a group of Ravens.

At the end of our first week on the desert, tempers as well as temperatures were running high. It was the middle of the night, and it was my turn as the scout. I crawled up to the top of the dune and looked down into the valley beneath me. There was nothing there. I looked behind me, and could see my group struggling up the slope that I had just climbed. I started crawling down the slope, but stopped before I had gone more than a few feet. My eyes tried to penetrate the darkness of the dune opposite me. The hair on the back of my neck was tingling.

A lot of the dunes had felt somewhat like this, but now something was different. I strained my eyes into the darkness, wishing the shadows to go away so that I could see. I looked back down at my group, now halfway up the slope. I crept down the other side, staying as close to the ground as was possible. As protection from unwanted eyes, we all had special cloaks that camouflaged us against the sand. I used this as I slid down the dune.

My first warning that there was something wrong was a flash at the top of the next dune. This bit of light was most likely unnatural, and frankly it scared me. I knew what could happen if we were discovered. I started moving back up the dune, the way I had come. I had to warn the group if we were in danger. My movement caused a miniature avalanche of sand down the dune and my breath caught in my throat as two more flashes came from the top of the dune. I waited silently for a moment, praying that they hadn't seen me. When no more flashes were seen, I slithered up to the top of the dune.

*“What’s wrong lieutenant?” The peculiar croak of the Raven scraped across the midnight air. Another dark figure beside the first answered: “I thought I saw something General.” The first grabbed a telescope with a spear icon on the top from a pouch on its belt. Throwing back its cloak, it put the telescope to its beady right eye. It uttered a single word: “Where?” The second pointed to the dune opposite and croaked “There.”*

I met my group at the top of the dune, and as soon as they saw me they started whispering fiercely. “There were signal flashes on top of the next ridge. Probably Ravens.” They all looked at each other with worried expressions all thinking the same thing: if the Ravens had camped on the dune, then our only choice was to go around them, and that would take hours.

One of the other members of the group spoke up.

“If the Ravens are here, it means that either we’re close, or they’re as lost as we are.”

“True,” I replied. “We have to go around.”

After several more hours of walking, we made camp on the side of a big dune, completely in the shadows. My friend Sam and I put our tents next to each other.

“What do you think we’re going to do next?” whispered Sam.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “We’re probably going to have a meeting, and send a spy to see what’s going on.”

“You think?” Sam questioned; I nodded.

A voice from outside interrupted our conversation. “Meeting in five minutes,” the voice hissed.

“Hey,” Sam asked me, his voice worried. “I hope they don’t pick me to spy. What if the Ravens get me?”

“Don’t worry Sam,” I replied. “I’ll try to convince them to pick someone else.”

Later at the meeting, it was the unanimous decision of all present except Sam and me to send Sam on the spying expedition. Later that evening, I wished Sam luck, and saw him off.

*“Lieutenant! Are the preparations ready?” The General stood up from his ebony chair on top of a sand dune.*

*“Almost General, we are almost ready,” the lieutenant hissed. He stood up, his robes shifting in the moonlight, to match his commandant’s posture.*

*“Very well... but we must hurry” the General croaked, surveying the landscape. He jerked his head up in half-concealed surprise as a scout rushed up to them, and prostrated himself at their feet.*

*“Yes?” the General asked.*

*“Oh Mighty One!” the scout rasped, “We have captured a spy!” Two guards appeared below the scout, hauling a human-shaped bundle. The General looked over the unconscious figure.*

*“Excellent!”*

I woke with a spear prodding my middle. I opened my sleepy eyes to the brightness of the midday sun. I grabbed a canteen of water, but it was knocked out of my hand by the spear. As I was about to turn and fight my captor in anger, a second spear poked my stomach. There was no choice but to comply.

I stepped out into the heat and quickly put my hat on. In the sun, one could get skin cancer in a matter of minutes. Apparently that didn’t affect the darkly garbed Ravens that were pushing me to a shadowed part of a dune. There, partially sheltered from the sun were several Ravens and a few of my teammates. What really caught my eye was a bigger-than-average Raven, whose black cloak had a red stripe down the middle.

“Hello gentlemen,” the big Raven croaked. His voice made a shiver go down my spine. It was like one thousand animals screeching in dissonance. A soldier ran up. He frowned at me, as if something was troubling him. Then he turned to the big Raven.

“General, two of the captives gave fight and were killed!” I gasped in shock. They had killed two of my teammates?

The General spoke up, “Regrettable, but sometimes necessary. I trust no Ravens were injured?”

“No sir.”

“Very well.” The soldier turned to go, but stopped as the General called him back. As the soldier came, the General flipped off the soldier’s hood. Then he looked at us, judging our expressions. I looked at the disturbing facial features for a moment, uncomprehendingly, then gasped like a dying fish. The face, under the beak and grotesque features, was that of Sam.

“Sam!” I yelled, trying to make my way to him. The two guards held me back, but I writhed and yelled, trying to get free. The Raven that I knew to be Sam simply stood there with a frown on his face, like he was trying to remember something. Then, one of the guards must have decided that I had gotten out of hand, because he knocked me on the head, and I dropped, unconscious.

When I came to, I was in a hall that had once been finely decorated, but now was in a state of decay. Gold pillars lined the room, and a delicate mosaic stretched across the ceiling. I got up and looked around, finding myself face to face with the big Raven known as the General.

“I see that you are awake,” he said coldly, “and now that you are, I am here to offer you a deal. In this temple, there are a number of traps leading to the spear of Odin. Your companions have tried and failed to deactivate these traps, and have died in the process.” I shuddered, and the General continued. “If you deactivate the traps in a timely manner, I will let you reunite with your friend.” My heart leaped at the last part, but then I remembered the traps. It was going to be a long, hard slog.

“I accept,” I stated.

“Good, then come and see the site where you will be working.”

The General called a guard in and led me down a long, finely decorated staircase. We halted at the bottom. On the walls were several markings that looked like blood.

“Here is the first trap. See if you can get us past.” He tossed a rock out onto the floor of the landing. With a whoosh, fifty darts shot out of the walls and imbedded themselves in the opposite wall. I thought for a moment, then picked up another rock and dropped it on a different floor tile to see what happened again. Nothing happened. Tense with concentration, I blew on the tile that the second rock had landed on. With the dust off, I noticed that the second tile was a little bit lighter. I looked at the General.

“The tiles that are safe to step on are the lighter ones. If anyone steps on a dark tile, we all get stuck with a bunch of darts.”

“Very well,” the General croaked.

I made it across first, with the General following close behind. Then, a series of guards followed. I let my breath out when all the guards had made it across. I noted that Sam was one of the guards.

I went on, testing for traps by continually throwing rocks and being careful. Several times an axe swung overhead, probably designed to decapitate a person much taller than all of us. Finally, we reached two huge silver doors. Two of the guards came and pushed open one of the doors, and I proceeded with my rock-throwing. I walked into a gigantic room, lavishly decorated; and standing in the middle was a gleaming spear on a pedestal. Strangely, there were no traps, and I walked right up to the spear. The General walked up behind me and pulled me away.

“Don’t get any high hopes,” he said. He turned to me, and put his hands behind his back. The General walked toward me with a smirk on his face. “Now that I have the spear, I can rule the world. You insignificant humans will be converted, and all will bow to the power of Odin!” All this while he had been walking toward me. Now, he pulled a knife from behind his back and gestured toward me. “And you, human, will not get in my way!”

“But our deal!” I protested.

“Oh yes, our deal,” the General gloated. “You’ll be reunited all right, in death!” The General lunged toward me with the knife in his hand, and thrust at me. I dodged to the side, the knife barely missing my left arm. I stumbled and almost fell, lurching to the side, avoiding another knife thrust. The General and I circled. We eyed each other. Suddenly, the General was tackled from behind by another Raven, who I recognized as Sam.

As Sam toppled over, he looked at me and yelled, “Go!”

I couldn’t leave Sam, however, so I looked around for something to fight with, and my eyes alighted on the spear. I grabbed it and looked around. The General was on top of Sam, and pushing a knife closer and closer to his face.

“Hey!” I yelled.

The General turned around and saw that I had the spear. He lunged for me, but got thrown as the ground shook under him. I was thrown to the ground as well, and I watched as the

spear tip hit the ground. I remembered the sign at the edge of the desert, and why it was there. There was a flash of light from the spear tip, then nothing.

“Shhh! Quiet class! Today we are going to learn about the Lost Planet, presumably destroyed in a terrible catastrophe so many years ago...”