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Kirk Anderson wrapped the protective scarf tighter across the front of his face and adjusted his goggles. With his head wrapped tightly and the oversized protective suit zipped up under his chin, he looked like a frogman. The sand storms this year had been particularly fierce and this was one of the worst so far.

At the peak of the dune, where the wind was the strongest and the blowing sand bit like flying fire, Kirk knelt down and dropped his backpack to the ground. Overhead, the dark sky loomed incessantly with the storms wrath. He reached inside the pack and pulled out a small metal dish and a small black metal box covered with knobs and switches.

It had taken Kirk only one terrible brush with one of these storms to realize how dangerous they could be. He'd been trapped one night, without one of the protective suits, when the full force of the desert came down upon him. Unprotected and out in the open, he remembered huddling up against the side of a dune, trying to cover his head with his arms. He remembered the sand tearing at his clothes and burning across his bare skin. He also remembered thinking he was dead. It was a miracle that he had been found at all, half buried and only half alive. From that experience, Kirk had taken with him the scars of a painful lesson and he never again made the mistake of under estimating the desert.

Kirk screwed a pair of small legs to the bottom of the metal dish and then propped it up in the sand. Again he readjusted the scarf across his face. Again, the sand burned into

his cheeks and crawled into his eyes through tiny cracks in the side of the goggles. It seemed as though nothing could keep the fury of the blowing menace out.

In the four years that Kirk had spent in forced isolation in this part of the world, he had come to not only hate the desert, but to understand and respect it. To not only loathe the day he set foot in it, but to revere its awesome force. The hand of death that lay in wait. Ready to destroy anyone that failed to display the appropriate respect for the living breathing monster. To suffocate and crush in the sweltering heat of the day or to slowly squeeze out the essence of life in the bitter cold of night.

‘Four years,’ Kirk thought to himself as he connected a short wire from the back of the black box to the bottom of the silver metal dish. It didn’t seem like that long ago, but it had been four years. He couldn’t decide if time was his enemy or his friend.

Occasionally, Kirk allowed himself the luxury of thinking about how lucky he had been to escape at all. About how he could be rotting in the bottom of a wretched, moldy cell right now. Forced, with drugs and excruciating pain, to reveal everything he knew. Tortured and eventually executed for what he had been a part of.

But even in this God forsaken hell of a place, he had to be weary. There were still those at The Board of Policy that would pay handsomely for his head. Those that would spare no expense to make an example out of him. Kirk had no delusions about the bitterly cruel arm of Enforcement reaching him here. There was no place that was a *safe haven* if they really decided they wanted you. No place.

Kirk finished tightening the connection between the metal box and the dish and then

set all the dials to zero.

It was so hard for him to believe, but it had been four years. And after the initial heat had died down, Kirk had to fight hard not to be overcome by complacency. He was pretty sure that his face still graced Enforcement bulletin boards around the world. And was certainly still posted on the Inter-Link. Kirk had to remind himself daily that this was not yet the time to become lax. He had seen what laziness and over confidence could do to a man. Or more precisely, what Enforcement could do to a man.

Kirk reached into the pocket of his sand suit and pulled out a small compass. He flipped the lid open, squinted through the swirling sand and then turned the dish in the sand.

After the desert had nearly claimed his life, Kirk had been adopted by the nomads that had saved him. They took him in, cared for him and nursed him back to health. With nowhere else to go, Kirk was happy to accept their gracious invitation and he became an official member of their traveling family. The relationship turned out to be mutually beneficial and over the years, Kirk had come to think of them as his family.

The nomads knew the country and taught Kirk how to survive in it. Where to get weapons and provisions. Where to hide when things got too hot. Who was to be trusted and who wasn't. As Kirk found out, the nomads were involved in a political struggle of their own. Local laws and power had been shifting like the sand for over a thousand years. But more recently, the current governing body was bearing down on the nomads ability to act, and think, autonomously. Under the guise of making society safer, it's

always liberty and freedom that suffer first.

So, in turn for their kindness, Kirk taught them things they could have never imagined. He set them up with remote Inter-Link access and then hacked into several of the local government's protected systems. After dealing directly with the computer systems at The Board, this stuff was a piece of cake. The security systems were almost non-existent and the ones he did run into were easily circumvented. Kirk was almost embarrassed to call it hacking – it was too easy. But the nomads thought Kirk was a God and they loved him dearly for it.

And Kirk loved them too. These people were his friends and his colleagues. He road and fought by their side – somewhat of a feat in itself, considering how long it took him to learn to ride a horse. Kirk had never been what you'd call an outdoorsman and it seemed like each day was filled with new challenges and new discoveries.

He had to learn what you could eat and what was toxic to the touch. Where to find water when it looked like there was none and when not to drink it. It was 'desert survival 101' and he'd stumbled across the people that had written the book. They had never known any other existence.

Kirk forced his attention back to the his task at hand. Kneeling next to the dish, he double checked the connection between it and the black box. He knew that he'd only get one shot at this and it would have to work the first time. The storm wasn't letting up any and he knew he had to work fast. Kirk looked at the compass one more time, nudged the dish gently to one side and then crammed the compass back into his pocket. He took one

deep breath and then flipped a small toggle switch on the side of the black box. It started emanating a high pitched squeal mixed with static.

Kirk adjusted one of the knobs, slowly, until the high pitched squeal dropped to a low frequency hum. Then he turned another dial until the static changed into metallic human voices. Kirk quickly reached into his other coat pocket and pulled out an electronic stopwatch.

With the stopwatch in his left hand and his right hand positioned in front of the black box, Kirk flipped two switches on the front panel and then started the stopwatch. A brief glance at the watch face verified that it was running and Kirk set it on top of the black box so that he could watch it while he worked.

Kirk unzipped the front of his jacket, just enough to get his hand inside. Reaching carefully, he produced a small plastic case. Inside the case, he gently removed a small silvery disc about two inches in diameter.

Kirk quickly popped open an access door on the top of the black box, shoved the tiny disc into it and mashed the button labeled *transmit*.

As the disc access light flashed in cadence with his heartbeat, Kirk looked nervously at the stopwatch on top of the box.

“Come on, come on . . .,” Kirk tapped on the access door as a small gauge over the top moved from left to right, indicating the progress of the transmission.

Kirk looked at the gauge then the watch. The watch then the gauge, his tapping becoming more frantic with each passing second on the watch. The electronic readout

had just passed one minute and he knew that he only had about three before he was in trouble.

“Shit . . .,” Kirk said softly, eyes fixed on the face of the flashing readout.

He always tried to give himself a little breathing room. He knew that anyone with the right equipment could triangulate on him within about four minutes. And he wasn’t really sure exactly what kind of equipment the local authorities had, but it was always better to be safe.

1:27, 1:28, 1:29 . . .

“Damn it, come on.”

Kirk looked around at the wind and the sand and then stared into the dark foreboding sky. His heart was climbing into his throat and he was soaked with sweat. Inside the tight fitting sand suit, perspiration was collecting between his shoulder blades and running down the middle of his back.

2:10, 2:11, 2:12 . . .

The electronic stopwatch seemed to be taunting him. Toying with him. It didn’t look like it was displaying time correctly. It was moving too fast and every time Kirk looked away, it jumped sporadically forward. He looked nervously at the progress gauge and then back at the watch.

2:58, 2:59 . . .

Kirk yanked out the cable on the bottom of the dish, ending the transmission before it was complete. Then he pushed the eject button on the black box and removed the disc.

Without the care that he had displayed in setting up his little communications center, Kirk grabbed the dish and threw it into the open backpack. The black box and disc followed as Kirk crammed them all quickly into the open pouch and cinched it shut.

As he picked up the still running stopwatch, Kirk wondered what had gone wrong. He'd repeatedly done dry runs on the transmission. Each time it had completed in under a minute. Kirk grabbed the pack and stood as he pondered the question, fiddling with the stopwatch. He knew he could work on the problem later, right now he needed to get moving.

"Shit," Kirk stood frozen in place clutching the pack, "it was the carrier."

An overwhelming sense of stupidity engulfed him like a thick layer of chocolate syrup. What Kirk had just realized was that he hadn't considered the quality of the connection he'd be able to make in a storm. In a howling, stinking sand storm.

'It must've stepped down the transmission rate,' Kirk thought as he held the bag. He was so stupid. Of course that was it.

Kirk tapped the stopwatch to his forehead as he continued to reprimand himself. "You know better than that. Damn it."

He smacked his head repeatedly with the stopwatch and then stood, motionless and listened through the howling wind. It was singing its haunting melody as it whistled and howled across the dunes, creating an eerie screaming ballad. Kirk's heart was pounding and he thought he heard something through the wind.

"Goddamn, you're jittery today," Kirk said to himself, trying to sooth the turbulence

in the pit of his stomach.

But, it was more than just a late breakfast having trouble digesting itself. It was a throbbing. A low frequency pulsing. And it wasn't coming from his stomach. It was coming from out there.

Kirk clutched the pack tightly to his chest and listened hard through the wind's howling fury. There was too much sand in the air to see anything clearly and the wind was loud enough to cover up any other sound. Then, he looked in horror at the watch he'd been holding in his hand.

4:52, 4:53, 4:54 . . .

As the helicopter appeared suddenly in front of him, Kirk dove head first over the top of the dune. Shots rang out and sand filled his mouth and ears. Over and over, he rolled down the side of the hill, tumbling out of control and losing his scarf and goggles.

The helicopter spun around 180 degrees and dropped down the hill on the back side of Kirk. Again, automatic weapon fire erupted from the front of the helicopter and sand geysers flared all around him.

At the bottom of the dune, Kirk sprung to his feet and bolted toward a rock ledge. Behind him, a hundred feet or so away, the helicopter quickly came to rest on the flat area between two monstrous sand mountains. Three uniformed officers jumped from the aircraft before it had completely settled and took off in pursuit.

Kirk ducked, stumbled and fell as more gunfire filled the air and struck the ground all around him. He tumbled and rolled and again, filled his mouth, and every other open



orifice in his head, with sand. Still clutching the bag, Kirk turned over in the sand, but before he could get back up, one of the officers was standing over him with a semi-automatic pistol pointed directly at his head. The other two were bringing up the rear, now jogging instead of sprinting.

“What’s in the bag Anderson?” the panting officer asked without moving the laser sight from Kirk’s forehead.

Kirk lay flat on his back with his head cocked forward slightly to see the officer above him. The other two were now directly behind him, with their weapons pointed straight at the ground.

Kirk lay clutching the back pack to his breast, with both arms wrapped tightly around it.

“Hands where I can see ‘em,” the one with the gun on Kirk’s head barked sharply.

Kirk’s arms flexed and started to move.

“Slowly, big guy.” The officer’s grip on the handgun tightened.

Kirk shook his head to clear the sand from his eyes and spit a mouth full off to one side.

“Not a problem,” Kirk indicated his submission to the officer’s request with an even tone in his voice.

Slowly Kirk’s hands emerged from under the back pack. In a gesture of, almost opened armed friendship, Kirk spread his arms wide in both directions, palms up and fingers spread. On his chest, the back pack lay limp, half open to one side.

“Shit!” The officer’s eyes went quickly from Kirk’s hands to his eyes.

Kirk had a huge smile on his face and now, the officer looked like he was going to throw up. His eyes were wide open and his face had gone white. Because what he saw in Kirk’s open hands were a dozen or so grenade pins. No grenades, just the lonely pins. Now, this in itself could’ve been a clever bluff. Kirk Anderson had a reputation and the local authorities considered him a very clever adversary. But the officer standing over him saw first, what the other two leaned over to catch a glimpse of.

On the ground next to Kirk, beside the mouth of the half open back pack, were two Enforcement issue, incendiary grenades. Both of them without their safety pins. Both of them with the actuation levers released.

As the officers turned and bolted, their helicopter exploded and was engulfed in a huge fireball of flame. All three of the men were knocked backward onto the ground. Before they were able to figure out what had happened, Kirk grabbed the two loose grenades, flung them into the open bag and then lobbed the whole thing, in one smooth sweeping arch, toward the three dazed men. Then he quickly rolled over four or five times and dropped off the side of the rock ledge just as the bag full of incendiary grenades went off.

Two of the officers were immediately swallowed by an enormous plume of yellow-orange flame, while the third crawled away with his leg on fire. He dropped down and rolled back and forth in the sand in a desperate attempt to put out the flames.

As the officer sat up and patted sand on the remaining flames, the air was once again, filled with the sound of gunfire. Several shots tore into the officer’s leg, right where the

flames had just been extinguished. In horror he looked up at the hill – at the two dozen nomads on horseback. Three more shots caught him square in the chest. He gurgled once, spit blood from his mouth and then dropped backward into the sand like a marionette whose strings had just been cut.

“Cease fire!”

*Bang!*

*Bang! Bang!*

“Hold your fire!!” came the voice of one of the nomads. “Kirk? Kirk are you alright?”

Slowly, Kirk emerged from behind the rock ledge.

“Your watch a little slow, Pantera?” Kirk stood and held his head forward as he brushed as much sand as he could from his hair.

“No . . . it’s fine,” the nomad who had called the cease fire spoke directly to Kirk. “I just like seeing the look on their faces when you do that thing with the grenades.”

The large nomad let out a gigantic laugh and then motioned to one of his men to bring a horse over to Kirk.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said sternly, looking around at his men and the blazing fireball in the background, “Now.”

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Rick and Sheri spent most their time out on the huge stone terrace. It was their sanctuary. The wicker chairs and wrought iron table sat near the center, overlooking the pristine beach and the expanse of the mountain bordered harbor beyond. The water was littered with small sailing ships but the occasional barge or freighter was not unexpected.

The summer breeze blew across Sheri’s face, whisking her sandy red hair across into her eyes. It had lightened considerably in the sun and she’d started to freckle along the rim of her cheeks. Although tan, her complexion was still fair.

Rick, on the other hand, was almost as dark as the villagers. He’d let his hair grow out so that it nearly covered his ears now.

The villa behind them was spacious and open. They’d bought it shortly after arriving; with the money Kirk had left them. Sheri and Rick had both fallen in love with the place from the start. Coffee on the terrace . . . a stroll into town. The island was beautiful this time of year.

The people here had accepted them with open arms and Rick and Sheri had felt at home almost instantly. It was the kind of place where few questions were asked and it was easy to fit in.

Franklin was a different story. He was miserable from the start. Whining constantly

about the taste of the water and the horrendous state of the local health standards. Always afraid of eating anything that he hadn't prepared himself.

"How long have those been sitting out there?" he'd ask a merchant, pointing to an open cart of 'not quite dead yet' fish. Then he'd shudder and pull out a handkerchief to cover his nose. 'The soap's too harsh' . . . 'the sheets make me break out' . . . it seemed to go on endlessly.

Until he met Leah, that is. She was the daughter of a watch-smith in the village and she was lovely. Quiet and shy, Leah had lived most of her 31 years at home with her father. She helped her father in the store. She went to mass on Sundays and she dreamed. Dreamed of other places and far away lands. Of a different way of life, filled with – well, she really wasn't sure what – but, something different than this tiny little island had to offer.

The first time Franklin had seen her was at the open-air market in the village and it was the first time he had removed the handkerchief from his face without making that gagging sound in the back of his throat.

Rick and Sheri had noticed Franklin was gone and turned to see him staring at this woman. She had long wavy dark brown hair the color of coffee and her skin was dark and smooth. For a moment, she looked up at Franklin with eyes the same color as her hair. Large, round, inquisitive eyes. Eyes filled with wonder and innocence.

Then a little kid on a bicycle road by her and knocked the basket from her arms. Without hesitation, Franklin sprung forward and helped her pick up the fish. Raw, dead,

slimy fish that he gently returned to her basket.

Rick and Sheri almost fell over. They turned and looked at each other then back at Franklin then at each other again. He was actually touching dead fish and not gagging. In fact, he had a ridiculously calm look on his face as he just gazed straight into those huge brown eyes. Funny thing was, that she was looking back at him with the same kind of silly expression.

Rick and Sheri looked at each other and started to laugh. Maybe this was what Franklin was missing all along.

In the weeks following this first encounter, Franklin and Leah spent almost every waking moment together. They were inseparable. Franklin would draw a bucket of water from the rain collection barrel and then sit for an hour while Leah washed her hair out on the terrace. They'd spend all day together shopping and then all evening, side by side, before spending the rest of the night eating and drinking under the stars. They looked like junior high school kids in love for the first time.

And today seemed no different than all those that had come and gone in perfect harmony before it. At least it had started out that way. Franklin and Leah had returned from town early and Rick and Sheri were lounging on the terrace.

"What have you two been up to?" Franklin called through the open French doors from the kitchen.

"Well, let's see," Rick pondered loud enough for Franklin to hear him in the house.

"What day is it?"

“Tuesday. I think.” Franklin stopped pulling groceries from the bag for a minute and looked at Leah with a questioning stare.

“Yes,” she nodded and then reached around him to get at the bag, “it’s Tuesday.”

“Yea,” Franklin yelled out the open door, “definitely Tuesday.”

“Well then,” Rick readjusted himself in the chase lounge, “I believe that we’re up to . . . nothing.”

Sheri reached for her glass, took a sip from the straw and then smiled at Rick over the top of her sunglasses.

“Hey, you guys want to go over to . . .,” Franklin’s question was cut short by a punctuated round of static coming from the living room.

“What the hell’s that?” Rick leaned forward in his chair and peered toward the open kitchen door.

“I don’t know,” Franklin said as he moved toward the awful sound. “Sounds like the wall screen.”

They’d had the wall screen installed shortly after arriving on the island but, as they all soon found out, it was more of a security blanket than anything. They hardly ever used it. It afforded little reception this far out and, in reality, was probably more than just a little dangerous to use for communications. The Board had certainly set up a standard monitoring sweep after they had fled. No telling how long they would keep it up, but generally speaking, The Board didn’t usually let go of things like this. Anyway, Rick had lost his taste for sitting hours on end in front of the screen, chasing links to the most

current info on everything from security fraud to debit card protection algorithms.

Something about the sun and the climate here had that affect on people.

“Franklin,” Rick shouted half irritated, “what’s going on in there?”

The sound was now louder and Rick could make out, what sounded like, talking. It was talking. It was a person talking.

Then, like a firecracker exploding in mid air, Franklin yelled at the top of his lungs.

“Rick, get in here . . . get in here now!”

Rick and Sheri looked at each other with a strange questioning look.

“What the hell?” Rick mumbled as he rolled off of the chair and followed Sheri into the villa.

All Leah could say was “What is it? What is it?” Over and over in response to the three of them standing in front of the screen speechless. Just staring at the broken image on the screen.

“What is it?” She probed insistently.

Franklin was the first to break his gaze and figure out that Leah was saying something. “It’s Kirk. The guy that helped us . . .”

“Shhhh!” Rick snapped at Franklin and then walked toward the wall screen straining to make out what it was that Kirk wanted.

*“ . . . strong hold in Chi . . . forces building up . . . in danger . . . ”*

The screen sputtered and popped. The picture was getting worse. Rick leaned a little closer and put his hands up on the screen.



*“ . . . hate to ask . . . else to turn to . . . so little time . . . need help . . . need your help . . . ”*

There was a poof and a little pop and the broken image disappeared into a tiny dot of white light in the center of the screen.

“Franklin,” Rick turned away from the screen to face him, “get him back, you’ve got to get him back.”

With a quick glance to the panel over the screen, Franklin shook his head slowly. “The carrier’s gone. Signal’s cut off at the source.”

The room was silent for a while before Sheri spoke, her hollow voice ringing through the large expanse of the living room. “What was he trying to say, Rick? What was he try to tell us?”

Rick scanned slowly around the room, briefly making eye contact with each person and ending up at Sheri.

“It sounded like he needed our help. Like he was asking us to come and help him . . . in Chi.”

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Pantera was a big man, almost six and a half feet tall. Over time, Kirk developed, not only a deep respect for the big man, but a sense of warm admiration for him too.

Kirk had originally thought that he could gain leadership of the nomads that had saved him. But it didn’t take him long to figure out just how ridiculous that idea was.

What Kirk came to see behind the jet black beard and the sand burnt face, was the kindness. The love he had for his people and their wellbeing. Pantera was born to lead and those that followed him did so with unbridled energy and enthusiasm. Kirk had often thought that the nomads would follow Pantera naked, into an active volcano if he asked them to.

Through the years, they had fought side by side and saved each other's ass on more occasions than either of them cared to remember or acknowledge. It was Pantera and his people that had found Kirk and saved his life when he first came to this unforgiving place four long years ago.

And through it all, Kirk had followed Pantera. Although, not actually one of his subjects, Kirk followed willingly and without reservation. And, in turn, Pantera drew heavily on Kirk's knowledge and experience. Knowledge that was foreign to him; computers and Inter-Links; electronic communications and high-tech sabotage. It all sounded like gibberish to him and he made his feelings well known to Kirk and to his people.

"Battles are fought with muscle, bone and blood," he would proclaim to the group of men lounging around the evening fire. "Not . . . wire and . . . circuits!" He'd scowl with a sour face and make a motion of dismissal toward Kirk.

The crowd murmured its agreement with their leader and each in turn made mock jester of disapproval in Kirk's direction.

"And when your enemy has satellite communications and can track your every move

with infrared technology?” Kirk stood, looking around at all the smug ignorant faces.

“When he knows exactly where you’re going . . . before you get there?”

Pantera would grunt and wave his arm toward Kirk in disgust as he turned and sat down on a large rock.

“The communication of the desert is all we need to survive.” Again the crowd murmured in agreement. “The land speaks to us and protects us. The desert destroys those who do not understand and abide by its laws.”

And so their arguments went, year after year. Each year, a closer understanding of the other was achieved. Each year, the differences in ideology were blurred. Each year the two men became closer and more alike.

In the end, it was Kirk that gave the speech about the land. It was Kirk that talked about the importance of listening to the desert and heeding its warnings.

And, strangely enough, Pantera was known to occasionally mumble something about the necessity for learning new things. About the importance of obtaining the knowledge of one’s enemies. About not being afraid to move forward.

The qualities that had made him a great leader, continued to burn brightly in him. Although he pretended to have a fiercely closed mind, it was only an act for the benefit of those who interpreted that quality as strength. He was always capable of listening to vastly opposing points of view and then rendering a decision based on what was best for his people.

In the four years that he knew him, Kirk never once remembered Pantera displaying

selfishness. At times, he bordered on rude and arrogant, but those were public displays, in front of his men, and not at all indicative of his private personality.

In their personal discussions, Kirk had always found him to be a very compassionate and caring man. His only thoughts were for his people and how he could make their lives better. He bleed deeply inside anytime he lost one of them or anytime one of them suffered in some way.

And it was this part of his character that made it so hard for Kirk to face what was happening to the nomads now.

“Pantera . . . good friend.”

Kirk placed his hand onto the shoulder of the big man. He was sitting on *his* rock, picking his teeth with a small twig. Pantera turned from his deep gaze into the fire and looked up at Kirk with an inquisitive stare.

“What’s the matter, my friend? You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I’ve got something to show you, in the com-tent.” Kirk turned and dredged through the sand into the moonlit darkness.

A small torch burned brightly outside of one of the tattered tents. This tent was slightly larger than the others and set, halfway over one of the dunes, away from the other cluster of tents in camp.

Kirk grabbed the thick material that hung across the front opening and held it back for his friend. Pantera ducked and proceeded through the opening into the dimly lit enclosure.

In the background, a small gasoline powered generator hummed and sputtered. Two incandescent light bulbs hung from a strand of wire draped between two of the tent stakes. On a portable table in front of them, were several archaic looking computer screens. One of the systems had no cover and the back of the CRT glowed like an amber piece of charcoal.

Cables and wires ran across the floor like a seething ocean of reptilian life. A montage of metal boxes with dials and gauges, cluttered every last square inch of the table. Other pieces lay in scattered heaps around the corners of the tent. It looked like some kind of electronic graveyard. A place where old radios and computers crawl off to die.

It was all Kirk's doing. He had spent years trading and stealing and collecting. Days upon days of testing and hooking and trying and re-trying. Hours and hours of tuning and calibrating. All to create this feeble link. A fragile connection to the outside world. A precariously insignificant *edge* he gave to their cause. A place of information gathering and assimilation.

Kirk sat down at the console without a cover. He tapped several keys while Pantera stood behind him in silence, still picking his teeth. This room still made him nervous. All that . . . *electricity* . . . in one place. He glanced nervously around the room, as if he expected the wires across the floor to begin to move and wrap around his legs in a feeding frenzy. Like a hungry anaconda that could wrap its deadly coils around you and then squeezes until the life was gone from your limp body.

“A couple weeks ago, I started monitoring communications from The Board of

Foreign Affairs, to the public officials in Chi.”

“Chi is miles from here, Kirk.”

“Please listen to me, Pantera. This is important.”

Pantera readjusted his stance in between the cables and leaned toward the screen that Kirk was fooling with. He did so more out of respect for Kirk’s apparent sincerity, than for the sake of his own curiosity. He had been quite content sitting in front of the fire picking his teeth and he would certainly be content in continuing his evening in that fashion.

“Chi is the military authority for this area . . .”

“I know all about Chi . . .,” Pantera interrupted until Kirk snapped around and shot him a disapproving look.

“Sorry . . . sorry. Please continue with your child’s history lesson.” Pantera turned and sat on an empty ammunition crate.

Kirk turned his attention back to the keyboard and plucked out a staccato burst. The screen cleared, flashed twice, then filled with text.

“I intercepted this transmission yesterday.”

Pantera’s attention turned to the hanging light bulbs overhead.

“It’s from The Board of Policy,” Kirk paused, feeling the words hang in his throat.

“I tire of your *BOARD*. I know nothing of this place or its leaders. It has no affect on my people and therefore no affect on me . . .”

“Enough!” Kirk stood and turned to face Pantera.

If they had been in public, surrounded by Pantera's men, this conversation would have been over. The big man would not have allowed such an overt display of disrespect in public. But, this was different. In private, the two men had the luxury of maintaining a different relationship. Pantera had a deep respect for Kirk and for his past. For his experience and his teachings.

Tonight, sitting on the empty crate, surrounded by all that . . . *electricity* . . . Pantera saw something in Kirk's eyes. Something he hadn't seen before. Not in all the battles or all the gun fights. Fire bombs and midnight raids. He'd never seen fear in Kirk's eyes. Deep, thick, overpowering fear. Until now.

"This does affect you. This does affect your people. Goddamnit, Pantera this affects all of us!"

Pantera sat, quietly studying Kirk's face.

"Okay," the big man said calmly, "tell me your story."

Kirk took a long, slow breath and then sat back down in the chair. Pantera grabbed the crate and scooted forward to see the flickering computer screen better.

Kirk leaned to one side and Pantera read the screen slowly.

"What does it mean?" the big man asked, sounding more like a child than a benevolent leader. "What does it mean, Kirk?"

Kirk turned the chair around to face Pantera. He studied his face and could easily see the warrior within. He could see the fierce determination of will and could see the power behind the man.

But here tonight, away from his men and alone with Kirk, he could see something else. He could see the fear of a child witnessing an eclipse for the first time. Or being left in the dark or lost in a crowded place. The fear of not knowing and the fear of not understanding.

From bits and pieces of the stories Kirk had told, Pantera knew . . . or felt . . . that this was a bad thing. Sensed that things were about to change. He just couldn't quite put it into his terms of understanding.

"The government in Chi has been an embarrassment to The Board of Foreign Affairs for long enough. The Board of Policy has stepped in and declared martial law in Chi. They've instructed Enforcement to send as many troops as necessary to obliterate *all* opposition. At any cost."

"I know that," Pantera's voice was soft and calm, "I can read, Kirk. But, what does it *mean*?"

Kirk's eyes bounced back and forth across Pantera's face. He studied the deep cracks in his leathery skin. He looked into his eyes and felt, somehow, responsible. Felt like it was his fault for bringing Enforcement. Just by virtue of the fact that he was aware of this evil. That he knew about it and they didn't. As if not knowing somehow exonerated them.

"The Board does not take kindly to being made a fool of. They're going to commit *whatever* resources it takes to make an example out of this place. They're going to end it cleanly and decisively."

Kirk watched Pantera as the realization began to slowly sink in. Then he flicked the



computer screen off and waited for the crackle from the high voltage transformer to subside.

“It basically means we’re fucked, big guy.”

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“What do you mean, ‘go help him?’” Sheri’s tone was one of absolute confusion.

“I’m not sure . . . I didn’t really get all of it.” Rick said rubbing his chin.

“Who’s Kirk and where’s Chi?” Leah chimed in almost nonchalantly.

“It’s an independent province off the mainland coast . . . about a thousand miles due east of here.” Franklin spoke mechanically without looking at anybody.

“But, you said ‘he wants us to go help him’, didn’t you?” Sheri couldn’t clear the lost look from her face.

“Yes,” Rick continued rubbing his chin, “he did say that he needed us . . . I think.”

“Who’s Kirk?” Leah spoke calmly, seemingly unshaken by anything the other three had just seen.

“He’s the reason we’re here. In more ways than one.” Franklin turned and spoke directly at Leah.

“Something about a military buildup in Chi . . . and something else . . . I couldn’t make it all out.” Rick turned to Sheri. “But he does need our help, I’m sure of it. I can sense it.”

Sheri couldn’t compose herself and she was having trouble focusing on the

conversation at hand. It was too much to think about all at once. They hadn't heard anything from Kirk for four years. Not a word. And then he just pops up on the wall screen for a few seconds and says he wants their help.

"I don't understand, Rick . . . not any of this, I just don't understand." The emotion was bubbling out of Sheri's voice as it cracked in despair and disbelief.

Rick tried to look reassuring but he was feeling pretty much the same way she was. Where had he gone? He had left them the money and then just vanished. And to Rick, that really was it in a nutshell; Kirk had left them the money.

Enough money to buy the villa and set them up for a very long time. Of course it was Kirk's fault that they had to run and hide in the first place but Rick still couldn't shake the sense of loyalty he felt for Kirk. After all, he could've just up and dumped them there to fend for themselves. But he didn't.

"I don't understand any of this." Leah announced in an even tone to the room of zombie like faces.

Sheri sat down and stared into the air, at nothing. Leah just kept looking around the room to see if anyone was going to pop of with some great explanation and Franklin just looked at the floor.

Rick walked over to the now black wall screen and put his hands against the silky surface. As if he could feel the residual signal that had since left its surface, he rubbed his palms, gently, in tiny little circles across the screen. Slowly, Rick looked up to the top of the screen and then dropped his hand to his side before turning to face Franklin.

“He did say that he needed our help . . . in Chi? Didn’t he?”

Franklin looked up from the floor and fidgeted nervously. “Yes,” he paused for a long time before continuing. “He said that he needed our help. In Chi.”

Sheri looked up at Rick with a sickening realization of what he was leading to. “Rick,” she pleaded, “we have a life here now.”

Rick looked surprised and turned to face her directly.

“Sheri, he’s the reason we’re alive today. The reason that we have this beautiful house and the reason we have a *life* here now.” The tone in his voice was sharply disgusted and as he spoke, he turned to address each person in the room in turn.

“I’d like to see Chi. What kind of place is it?” Leah’s childlike response was in stark contrast to the look of grim despair that was creeping across Sheri’s face.

“It’s a little hole in the wall smack dab in the middle of the desert.” Franklin continued to fidget.

Rick took several steps out of the living room and then turned to make a statement to the entire room. “I’m going. No ifs ands or buts . . . If Kirk needs my help, then I’m going.” And with that said, he turned and left the room.

“I want to go,” Leah cooed in Franklin’s ear. “I’ve never been anywhere except this island. Can we go Franklin? Can we go to Chi?”

Franklin looked down at the floor and then up at Sheri. Her face was filled with that ‘please no’ look and it made him queasy down to the bottom of his stomach. Leah looked insistently at him as his gaze turned to the hallway where Rick had just stood.

“I’m afraid we don’t have any choice, honey.” Franklin snapped a look at Sheri that was half ‘I’m sorry’ and half ‘I’m ashamed of you’. Then he followed Rick down the hallway.

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The constant ebb and flow of the desert provided less and less cover for Pantera and his men. Their camp had been moved three times in the last three weeks, as the ever increasing air patrols criss-crossed the sky.

Even the darkness of night was no longer a safe sanctuary. Kirk taught the men about blackout procedures and the dangers of satellite thermal imaging. With few fires and smaller torches, nighttime became, not only a cold, but a scary time. The years of debating that had taken place between Kirk and Pantera had, in a way, prepared the nomads for the hi-tech war they were about to engage in. Or at least prepared them for the *idea* of it. It was scary and confusing but somehow familiar. And it gave them a closer connection to the man that they had already grown to love and to trust.

Whenever possible, Kirk would logon to the Inter-Link and try to download as much information as he could before his carrier was detected. It was much safer downloading information than it was uploading, but he still maintained his vigilance. He had learned that Chi was now the military center for all of Enforcement’s activities in the region. Planes flew around the clock, transporting weapons and ammunition, soldiers and supplies. Chi was now a fortress.

Kirk had been right. The Board of Policy was prepared to do whatever it took to send a strong message about their presence in the region. And about their ability to control it. Under the feeble leadership that had been in control of Chi, The Board had gotten egg on its face and it was time for vindication.

Not only were the nomads on the lookout for the ever present Enforcement patrols, but now there was a new enemy. Enforcement had placed a bounty of one pound of silver for the body of any nomad and the bounty hunters were out in swarms.

The desert had been decreed off limits without a permit. Without one, the penalty was death. In fact, there were a lot of new laws that carried death as a penalty for noncompliance. This was the worse that Kirk could remember Enforcement ever coming down on a community. Even from his early days back with The Movement. It was bad and getting worse by the day.

The world of the nomads was shrinking and Kirk could feel the noose tightening around their necks. What could they do? It seemed that wherever he went, death followed him. That people he loved always died because of him.

Kirk closed his eyes and remembered kneeling in the wet dirt outside of the little concrete building almost twenty years ago. He remembered hearing the shots as he pushed his face into the mud on the ground. As he lay there cold and wet and utterly helpless while his best friends were murdered. Killed by Enforcement for what they nothing more than what they believed.

Now Kirk was terribly sorry that he had contacted Rick and Sheri. Sorry that he

could've imagined putting their lives in danger too. They were safe where they were. He had seen to that. Maybe the one good thing that he had done that he could be proud of. He had provided them with the money and the means to stay out of The Board's way for the rest of their lives.

But would they be safe that long? How long before Enforcement overruns everything and everybody? How long? Would anybody dare to make a difference? Would anybody try to stop them?

And then one night, sitting around the fire drinking homemade root wine, Kirk had an old familiar feeling. A sense of duty that he hadn't truly felt for many years. Those first few innocent years as a member of The Movement; when they all believed that they were doing the most important thing anyone could do in an oppressed overpowering society. When Kirk felt the focus and meaning in his life as if it was cold clear water circulating through his veins.

"The Movement," Kirk whispered to himself as he lay on the ground looking up at the stars.

"What's that, my friend?" Pantera turned toward Kirk and took the clay jug from his fingers.

"We were all so young and so idealistic," Kirk started, not at all expecting his friend to understand what he was talking about, but just to listen as good friends do. "We thought that we could change the world. That we could make a difference."

Pantera sat and listened intently, not really understanding what his friend was talking

about. But, what the big man had no problem hearing was the sound in Kirk's voice that said 'listen to me . . . I need to say this'. It was unmistakable and Pantera was perfectly content to oblige his friend.

"Until they all got . . . killed . . ." Kirk's voice cracked and faded out as he swallowed hard and forced back the tears.

The two men remained still and silent together, studying the stars in unison. Pantera had heard pieces of this story before and had pretty much pieced the rest of it together. He knew that Kirk had been involved in 'a movement' of some kind a long time ago. He knew that the military power that was building up in Chi was part of The Board of Policy and that this 'Board' was something that he and his 'movement' had fought passionately against.

Pantera had fought against those in Chi that were intent upon restricting the nomad's freedom. Those that would be perfectly happy to have no nomads to deal with at all. Pantera understood the passion in Kirk's voice and could understand the feeling behind it, if not the actual places and events Kirk spoke of. But up until a few weeks ago, he thought that Kirk's 'Board' could never ever affect his life here in the desert.

And these stories gave him a deeper look into Kirk's soul. Into the make up of his character. He knew that Kirk was a good man with a good heart. A man that cared deeply for those around him and would do anything to keep them safe. Pantera didn't always understand Kirk's ways but he always took him seriously and always respected his input – even when he didn't agree with it.

“And so the time comes again . . .” Kirk slowly pulled himself forward and sat up on the ground. Still looking at the stars, he talked slowly, but with a heightened sense of urgency. “If we don’t fight for our freedom . . . whatever the cost . . . then we live for nothing.” Kirk took the jug back from Pantera and took a large gulp.

Pantera turned from his gaze at the heavens to look directly at his friend. Kirk stood and began to pace slowly back and forth. Pantera’s eyes followed him like a pendulum.

“The Board will continue to roll forward. An unstoppable mass, devouring everything and everybody in its path.” Kirk’s voice was rising in intensity as he took another swig of the wine.

“Somebody has to stand in their way. If only for a little while. Somebody has to do that. To send a message to others that it’s possible. That it’s possible to slow the machine down. To put a wrench or two in its gears.”

Kirk had started walking toward the com-tent and Pantera rose to follow him, just a little concerned about the intensity that was mounting in Kirk’s activity.

“Goddamn it, if enough of us stand in the way, we could even bring it to its knees for awhile.” Kirk stopped just short of the opening into the tent. He turned to face Pantera, finished off the jug and then held it in his hand as he pointed at the big man’s chest. “And just maybe, send it back to where it goddamn came from.”

For a moment, the two men stood, locked onto each other’s faces as if afraid to let go. Then Kirk dropped the empty jug into the sand next to him, turned and flung open the flap to the tent and disappeared inside.



Pantera sighed heavily and reluctantly followed Kirk into the tent. Something was about to happen. He could feel it. It was in the air like heavy syrup. He wanted to pretend that it wasn't. He wanted it to just go away, but it wouldn't.

But the worst part was that he knew something needed to happen. Because something that he truly didn't understand was invading their life. Destroying their way of life. And in some vague confusing sort of way, everything that Kirk was ranting about made perfect sense to Pantera.

Inside the tent, Kirk flicked switches on as black boxes hummed and screens filled with light.

"What are you doing?" Pantera asked cautiously as he circled around behind him. The whole time carefully avoiding the cables that littered the floor.

Kirk didn't answer, but continued to tweak, turn and adjust.

"Is this a good idea?" Pantera didn't know much about what went on inside this tent . . . mostly by his own choice . . . why learn to use a tool when you can direct someone else that knows how? But what he did know scared him. There were patrols out all over the place tonight. Patrols with black boxes of their own. Black boxes that could find other black boxes from great distances away. Strange signals in the air that could betray one's existence as surely as a man with a sour heart.

"I mean . . . should you be doing this now, my friend?" Pantera could see Kirk's reflection in the screen that was in front of him. His eyes were tightly squinted together and the muscles at the corner of his jaw were drawn up against his cheeks. He had an

eerie determination in his eyes and it was beginning to scare Pantera.

Kirk was now, either not listening or just not paying attention. It really didn't matter. He grabbed a small disc and shoved it into one of the drives and then hit several buttons in a short punctuated sequence.

Pantera stood staring at Kirk perched behind all of that crackling electricity. "What are you doing, my friend?" Pantera's voice was filled with a mixture of anxiety and fear.

Kirk turned slowly from the console and Pantera's heart nearly stopped. He'd never seen his friend look like this before. There was a stranger sitting in front of him and he didn't recognize him anymore. There was a fire burning deep in the back of his eyes and all the skin on his face was drawn tightly around his clenched teeth. With the orange light from the tiny little incandescent bulb hanging directly over his head, the look on his face sent chills down Pantera's right leg.

"What are you planning, my friend?"

"I'm going to goddamn commit us," Kirk said softly through his teeth, his eyes sparkling with the green light from the flickering display in front of him.

"Please come back to the fire and have some more wine."

Kirk teetered for a moment with his hands poised dangerously over the keyboard. Every muscle in his body was tight in preparation for this moment. Aching and straining to attack the helpless keyboard in front of him.

"Please, Kirk." Pantera's voice had a penetrating sense of concern. But it was also mixed with something else. It had a smooth understanding sense of empathy about it.

“You know that you can’t do anything to endanger us. Not here in our home.”

Pantera paused as Kirk brought his finger tips in contact with the surface of the keys. For a moment, his trembling fingers brushed up and down on the smooth plastic. As if he was communicating with the strange device through shear tactile contact.

“These people trust me,” Pantera continued softly as he took a step toward Kirk, “and they are my responsibility.” Pantera reached down and touched Kirk on the forearm.

The back of Kirk’s hands rippled and pulsated as sweat started to drop from his forehead. Kirk turned from the screen and looked up at Pantera with glistening eyes.

“But, we’ve got to do something . . .”

“We will.” Pantera gently lifted Kirk’s hands from the keyboard and then helped him stand. “We will, my friend. We will.”

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Chang sat across the table from four of the project engineers that worked for him. It was five in the morning and the unadorned meeting room at The Board of Technology was dark and stuffy. But this morning, nobody was complaining.

“Say that again,” Chang’s face, eager with anticipation, bounced back and forth between the men on the other side of the table.

Chang was only twenty-two years old, but was considered to have no peers in his profession; the field of genetic engineering. Chang’s small frame and demure appearance hid a powerfully active mind and an extremely aggressive personality. At just under five

foot four, he was shorter than anyone that worked for him. Yet, he commanded a respect worthy of a six foot four inch lumberjack. This five o'clock meeting was a testament to the way he drove himself and expected the same of his team.

The man that spoke first was Caucasian with light brown hair hanging in front of his eyes. "It's absolutely reproducible, sir. 100%"

"And the new restriction enzymes," continued the blonde man with long fingernails, "are cutting the strands perfectly." With the excitement in his voice, he could've just as easily been talking about his son's first homerun or the way that he'd won a pile of cash playing his first slot machine. But, the fact was that he was excited about how they had all worked together to make a bunch of genes act in a certain way. Excited about sharing the victory with his colleagues and performing well for his boss.

Chang sat and studied the brown haired man and quietly watched each of their faces as they spoke. In turn the other two men gave their report on the situation. The one with the red hair and high cheek bones talked at great length about the new protein he'd developed before being cut off by the man with the fingernails.

"We've been completely successful with the new compression algorithms and the bio-carrier performs flawlessly."

The last man, the older gentleman with the round pock marked nose, just kept agreeing with the other three. "Yes, that's right." Then he'd nod vigorously and wait for one of the others to speak. "All night . . . yes, sir. Since the first experiment yesterday . . . yes, sir." All the time nodding flamboyantly.

This is what Chang had devoted his life to. This was his big chance and he wasn't going to let anyone screw it up for him. Again he studied their faces as they all looked at each other and then nodded their agreement in unison. He had to be very sure about this before he went and spouted off to the Director of Technology. It would be his neck on the line at that point.

Back in school, Chang had been the nerd. An outcast. He was the one who was always off to the side somewhere reading a book or studying a paper. Back when it wasn't cool to be smart, Chang was pulling down straight A's. But being shunned by others didn't slow him down. Even at an early age, he was driven. Driven by desire and driven by knowledge. And although he couldn't quite put his finger on it a yet, he was driven by power.

Chang was keenly aware of the fact that there always seemed to be a Board of Technology scientist behind the scenes of any big Enforcement raid. Just quietly in the background, directing and controlling all that power. The thought of it was intoxicating to him at a subconscious level and it drove him to succeed.

Now, at five in the morning in this little concrete block meeting room, his dream was materializing before him and he wasn't sure that he knew how to take hold of it. For so long it had been the chase, the striving for the unobtainable. Now here it was, just six months into his first major research grant from The Board . . . here it was.

"There's no mistake then?" Chang asked the question with guarded optimism, as he carefully watched the men respond.

“No sir,” long fingernail man replied. “We’ve been reproducing the effect since about nine o’clock last night.”

Chang’s head felt like the cork on a bottle of Champaign that was about to blow. Like he was going to explode and there was nothing he could do about it. A strange mixture of excitement and exhilaration had overtaken him.

“No problem with the enzymes breaking down prematurely?”

“No sir. Steady as a rock,” stated red haired man confidently.

“What about the sedimentation levels?” Chang was repeating himself, but trying to cover all the bases. Although he knew that they wouldn’t be having this meeting if his staff hadn’t already check and rechecked again.

“Way below what we expected . . . and stable.” Brown haired man brushed the hair from his eyes.

“And the program itself?”

Everyone in the room just smiled wryly at each other and then nodded in unison. There wasn’t a question that he could ask. They’d already been through all of this. Over and over for the past twelve hours.

“Well then, congratulations are in order.” Chang stood and with a formal air of politeness, extended his hand to each of the men in turn. “I’ll be meeting with the Director this morning and you will all be quite visible in my official report.”

There was a round of polite thank you’s and then the men were gone, leaving Chang alone in the dark conference room.

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“Dakmar,” Chang said while standing in the doorway to his office, “can you step in here for a moment. The blonde haired man with the long fingernails paused and then smiled and nodded.

Dakmar Weisman was one of the first scientists to be assigned to the project. Chang had taken a liking to him almost immediately and now he was his invaluable second in command. If Chang needed to be sure that something would get done, then he’d ask Dakmar to see to it. He was a trusted colleague and, as much as Chang could say this about anybody, a trusted friend. He frequently asked for his opinion and believed in Dakmar’s intelligence and common sense.

This morning, only a few short hours after the meeting in the musty concrete conference room, the halls of Technology were a buzz with activity. Chang had met with his superiors in the early morning hours and a chain of events were set in motion that would soon be impossible for anyone to stop.

As Dakmar stepped in to the plain understated office, Chang sat down slowly behind his desk with a manner of reserved concern.

“Is something the matter, sir?” the overly polite and always obsequious Dakmar asked intently.

“It’s happening so fast.” Chang breathed heavily and stared straight at the surface of his desk. “I mean . . . this is what I’ve been working for all of my life . . . and now it’s here.”

Dakmar's look of worried concern melted away, culminating in a big round smile. "I, see."

Chang looked curiously up from his desk to see the blonde haired man smiling at him intently.

"You're suffering from what we call 'Traumatic Post Success Syndrome', sir."

Chang's look of concern intensified. He had been feeling a strange emptiness since the meeting this morning. He was worried about his reaction to his victory. Worried that he wasn't 'excited' enough about it. And now this comment from his trusted friend.

"Yes sir," Dakmar continued in the most serious tone he could fabricate. "It's called TPSS for short and is a common occurrence among extremely intelligent young winners. It's pronounced Tee-Piss."

Chang held his serious expression for another second or two and then it dropped into an exhausted look of amusing disgust. "You just made that up."

"Yes sir, I did." Dakmar smiled warmly at his friend. "You've been working so hard for so long, that it's hard for you to see where you are right now. But trust me, this journey's a long way from being over."

Chang mused carefully over his friend's words. There were only a few people that knew what had been discussed this morning behind closed doors at The Board of Policy. The plans that were set in motion and the changes that were about to take place. Yet Dakmar spoke as though he was keenly aware and it was this natural sense of intuition that endeared him so to Chang. He always seemed to understand a situation deeper than



anyone around him.

“What you need to do right now, if I may suggest sir, is to take the rest of the day off and reflect on your accomplishment. Get out of here for a few hours.” Dakmar intentionally referred to it as “your” accomplishment rather than the “team’s”.

Chang’s immediate reaction was ‘no way’. There was far too much to do. But the words written all over Dakmar’s face were ‘it’s alright . . . I’ll take care of everything . . . don’t worry’.

Chang smiled a wry little smile and shook his head. “Sometimes I don’t know if I like the way you ‘manage’ me, Dakmar.”

“Me sir? No sir, I’m just trying to look out for your best interests sir.”

Chang felt lucky to have been able to surround himself with good people. Their success was his success. And as he locked his desk, he thanked Dakmar Weisman for everything he’d done.

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The day was blisteringly hot and Kirk was soaked with sweat as he studied the rock overhang at the bottom of the monstrous dune. It was big enough for a man to crawl under and would provid good cover from the sun. He was only partially aware of the subconscious thought process that he’d developed after years with the nomads. Always be on the lookout. Always scope out every situation. Always have a fallback plan. In an emergency – like a sandstorm – these little pieces of information could keep you from

having your skin peeled away by mother nature's furious sandblaster. Kirk dropped his canteen and bag of provisions down at his feet and then kicked them up under the overhanging ledge.

Then he started up the mammoth hill of sand. Since he was so far out, he'd need as much height as he could get. As he topped the dune, he dropped the black pack that carried his miniature communications setup. Kirk stood for a moment at the top of the huge pile of sand, studying the vast expanse of desert that stretched out in every direction. At one time he would've felt as if he was the farthest from humanity any man could be. Literally in the middle of nowhere. But as the weeks had past, the desert had gotten smaller and smaller. Kirk dropped down next to the pack and opened it.

He knew that what he was about to do was extremely dangerous but he also knew that he had very few options left. It was imperative that he transmit just one more encrypted packet to Rick and Sheri. As Kirk had replayed the original message over and over in his head, he had come to realize that he'd probably done more harm than good.

First of all, the whole message didn't even get through. Secondly, at the signal quality during the storm, he had no way of knowing how much of the message had been garbled or broken during the transmission. It was, most probably, a very confusing reception and Kirk could picture Rick and Sheri arguing about what it meant and what they should do about it.

But if they jumped in without knowing what they were getting in to and agreed to go to Chi, they could be in big trouble. And that idea scared Kirk. He just couldn't face the

thought of throwing them carelessly into harms way. And, now, he couldn't face the idea of asking for their involvement. It was just getting too dangerous.

So once again, he carefully placed the little metal dish in the sand and connected the black box to it. Once again, he checked the compass and positioned the dish in just the right direction. But now, with everything checked and rechecked, Kirk hesitated.

He was farther out in the desert this time. Much farther. And even though he was preparing to send a shorter transmission than last time, it was going to be more dangerous. Last time he had several minutes before detection. This time, because of the changes in the power structure in Chi, he guessed that they'd lock onto his position in only seconds.

As Kirk knelt in the sand and felt the sun bake down on his back, the thought of capture began to swell inside of him. Slowly at first and then it grew in intensity until it filled him with a terrible sense of dread. An incapacitating fear that kept him from acting. And so he stared, aimlessly at the little metal dish, trying desperately to come up with alternatives. But he could not.

In a matter of seconds, Kirk replayed twenty years of cat and mouse with Enforcement, from the early years with The Movement up to the helicopter explosion just a few days ago. This had been his whole life. He had never intended for it to be or never planned for it. But here it was. Twenty years of running and hiding. Of striking and pulling back. Twenty years of saying goodbye to friends and watching them die. Twenty years of fear.

And then, as quickly as it had invaded his soul, the fear was gone. The air was clear and hot and it felt almost refreshing. Like it had just blown something ugly out from inside of him. Cleansed and washed him and freed him from the indecision.

Kirk smiled and hit the transmit button just as the horses came up over the hill. There were three of them and by their looks, Kirk knew immediately that they were bounty hunters. They wore a tattered montage of nomad rags and discarded military gear. One of them had two bullet belts criss-crossed over his chest.

Kirk didn't have time to do anything but shift slightly in the sand to block their view of the dish sitting in the sand behind him. Now his mind was racing.

'If I'm lucky,' Kirk's brain kicked into high gear, 'I'm not going to have over sixty seconds before Enforcement locks onto this signal and dispatches a chopper full of armed troopers.'

"Hands in the air," shouted the man with the beard that was so big Kirk could hardly see his face. He was pointing his rifle straight at Kirk's head and even though he was a little unsteady on the horse, Kirk could tell that the man wouldn't have a problem nailing him from there. "Need to see your permit, guy."

Kirk complied with the man's first request and slowly raised his arms into the air. 'But if they figure out who I am, then I'll be dead by the time anyone from Enforcement gets here anyway.'

With his hands in the air, Kirk glanced over at the second hand on his wristwatch. It had been forty-five seconds since the beginning of the transmission. Again, Kirk shifted

in the sand to keep the metal dish between him and the slowly approaching horsemen.

Kirk looked at his watch: 55, 56, 57 . . .

“Sure, not a problem.” Kirk tried to put on his best nomadic accent while keeping his head pointed downward as much as possible. He was certain that they would have a picture of him somewhere buried beneath the pile of rags they were wearing.

Kirk nodded his head in compliance and then very slowly moved one hand toward his open jacket front. As he did so, the man with the bullet belts reached inside of his vest pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. He studied it for a moment and then looked intently at Kirk and smiled.

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves a prize here,” the man announced as he moved his horse up on the other side of Kirk.

‘Shit!’ Kirk thought, but couldn’t seem to get a grasp on anything more intelligent than that.

The man with the paper grabbed a handgun from his belt, raised it toward Kirk’s head and cocked it.

Kirk closed his eyes and wondered what religion would be the best to become a member of right now. Then he heard the shot at the same time he heard the helicopter. The Enforcement chopper came up fast from behind the hill and it came up shooting. Within seconds, two of the horseman had been cut down. Enforcement was shooting the bounty hunters!

Kirk reacted instinctively and rolled backwards down the dune as hard as he could.

Over and over, wildly out of control. Sand filled his mouth and ears and every unprotected opening in his body. Dazed and confused at the bottom, Kirk spit out a mouthful and looked up at the helicopter pivoting in the air as the shot rang out nailing the last horseman. It was times like this that Kirk could actually appreciate Enforcement's way of shooting first and asking questions later.

'But was it possible that they hadn't seen me?' Kirk jumped up and flung himself over a small mound of sand and then rolled under the rock overhang with his canteen and provisions.

Kirk quickly replayed the scene in his head. He remembered the guy pulling the gun . . . and then the single shot . . . no, it must've been the machine guns from the helicopter that he heard. And when that happened, the sand erupted all around them. The horses reared and twisted . . . there was blood in the air . . . and then he was rolling.

The sound of the helicopter jetting out across the desert at full throttle – away from him - was the prettiest sound that Kirk could ever remember hearing. It was like a symphony and it filled him with a warm soft feeling.

"They didn't see me," Kirk whispered to himself in sheer amazement. For a minute, he lay stunned, grasping his canteen tightly to his chest underneath him.

"I wonder what religion it was that I . . ." Kirk's heart stopped dead as he heard the voices in the distance. They were coming from up the hill behind him and they were getting louder.

"Can you see anything over there?" He could just make out one of the voices but the

answer from the other was too distant.

“Shit.” Kirk mashed his forehead into the sand and prayed.

“It looks like he came down over here.”

The voices were getting louder and now Kirk could hear the second one. “Yea? Nothing over here.”

Kirk eased back as tight as he could get into the overhang. Now he was sorry that he hadn’t let Pantera know what he was doing today. He didn’t want to involve them in this because he felt guilty about his rash thought process. He’d almost been killed the first time he tried this stunt and he didn’t want the big nomad or any of his men endangered by his actions.

“I see the tracks over here.”

But it sure would be great to have a big pack of nomads ride up over the hill right about now. To have them rain down on the two Enforcement officers and cut them down like ragweed.

“Nothing over here either.”

‘Crap.’ Kirk made out a third voice and it was getting closer too! Desperately he searched through his provision bag for something he could use for a weapon. Maybe a grenade had rolled in there by accident. Dried meat, dried fruit, hard bread. Pantera had watched him pack for his little outing so he had made an effort to specifically not take any weapons. Good move.

“I think I’ve got him.”

The voice originated from someplace directly over Kirk's head. So he lay there, clutching he canteen and thinking about his new religious affiliation.

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Kirk looked around the tiny eight by eight foot cell and sighed. He was sitting on the corner of the rattiest, stinkiest mattress he could ever remember encountering. By the intensity of the light shining through the barred window high up on the exterior wall, Kirk could see that it was mid-morning. The room had a rank, stale smell to it that left a perpetual gagging feeling stuck in the back of his throat. The rock walls themselves seemed to be burned with the stench of decay and death.

The night before, he'd been stripped and searched – a little to thoroughly for his liking – given a nasty rag of a jumpsuit to wear and then placed, rather abruptly, into this cell. No questions, no interrogation . . . not a word. That was the part the scared Kirk the most, because he knew that it was coming.

As he sat on the bed and rubbed the sleep from his eyes, he tried hard to concentrate on getting through the moment. To focus his energies and stay alert. This wasn't the first time that he'd spent the night in a prison cell and he certainly hoped that it wouldn't be his last.

But as the early morning light crept across the floor and up the heavily riveted steel door, a sinking feeling of despair began to creep across him. A quiet little piece of fear that was slowly overtaking him and Kirk was finding it increasingly difficult to keep



from panicking.

“Focus on the problem . . . work the variables,” Kirk reminded himself as he paced back and forth in front of the bed. “If you go off and freak out on me, we’re not going to make it out of this one.”

The sound of metal scraping on concrete shook Kirk out of his personal dialogue. Under the door, a small round metal dish with some kind of mush and a thing that looked like a rock had just appeared. Kirk was starving, but even as he moved toward the welcome dish, the gagging returned to the back of his throat. The pungent aroma was sour and shot through his nostrils like fire.

“Oh God.” Kirk clamped his eyes and mouth shut as he grabbed the plate and sat down on the edge of the bed.

With the rock thing in hand, he swished it around in the mush several times and then gnawed off a hunk of it. Kirk fought hard to suppress his body’s immediate need to expel the substance and he forced himself to swallow it. Then he spent the next couple of minutes trying to keep it down. After the involuntary convulsing of his stomach had subsided, he ate the rest of his hearty meal and even cleaned his plate.

Kirk stood and walked to the door, plate still in hand and on tiptoes, peered through the little square hole in the top of the door.

“I’ve finished my vegetables.” Kirk shouted through the opening.

Then he dropped the plate squarely on the floor in front of the door, making sure that it landed flat enough to ring loudly.

“I’m ready for dessert now.”

Kirk turned from the door, kicking the plate out of the way as he paced over to the wall with the window in it. He was getting angry now. Maybe it was his subconscious kicking in to protect him from the panic or maybe he was just that he was fed up. Either way, it was providing him with what he needed right now; the *will* to go on.

Suddenly, there was the sound of keys jingling in the door, a big metallic clunk and then the door was open. Standing in the open doorway was a very large, dark man with a scar – or and ugly burn – right across his left eye. The man just placed his hand on the gun in his holster, backed up two steps and motioned with his head toward the hallway.

This was what Kirk had been dreading. For a moment he stood, frozen to the floor. A shot of adrenaline surged into his chest and he took a long stuttering breath. He could picture himself fighting to stay in the cell. Yelling and screaming and holding on to the doorframe for dear life. But it would end the same way. So Kirk moved forward and stepped sluggishly into the hallway.

As he walked, with the guard out of sight behind him, Kirk tried hard to hang on to the anger he had embraced only moments earlier. But it had already slipped away and was being replaced by the all consuming fear. Step after excruciating step down the hall, Kirk became more and more engulfed by it. Dripping with sweat and with his heart racing, he reluctantly entered the room at the end of the hall. The room with one table and two wooden chairs and a well dressed Enforcement officer already seated staunchly on the other side.

“Lieutenant Commander Samuel Drake.” The man introduced himself politely.

“Please, sit down.” He held his hand up, indicating the chair on Kirk’s side of the table.

Kirk glanced over his shoulder to see the guard leaving the room. As the door shut behind him, Kirk studied the room quickly to try and figure out what kind of interrogation this was going to be. It was plain enough. Yellow stained white walls, dirty acoustic ceiling tile and dark swirly marble floor tiles. Maybe this would just be a question and answer period. But Kirk didn’t know what was worse . . . knowing that you weren’t going to be tortured today or knowing that you were going to be tortured later.

“Please,” the man repeated his request, still holding his hand in the air, pointing in the direction of the chair.

Kirk sat down and looked directly at the man. He was fifty or so and had a little gray on the sides. His light brown eyes had an eerie edginess about them. They were just a little too light to be normal looking but not light enough to be considered albino or anything.

Kirk pulled the chair out and sat down tentatively.

“Commander,” he forced out with feigned civility.

“Very good then,” the man broke in enthusiastically. “I’ve heard a lot about you in my short time here, Mr. Anderson. Quite a lot indeed.”

Then the man was reading from a file folder that he seemingly pulled from thin air. “Yes . . . says here that you’ve been quite a problem here locally.” The man looked up from the file and just barely smiled at Kirk.

“I do my best.” Kirk tried to regain his composure by being flip.

“Yes, I can see that you do.” The tone in the Commander’s voice had gone cold and it shot cold prickles through Kirk’s shoulder blades. He tried hard not to indicate any reaction but he felt like he was melting and failing miserably.

“Let’s talk about your friends,” the man continued in the same gruesome tone as before as he flopped the file folder closed with an animated swoosh.

“My friends?” Kirk responded with a hollow, empty sound.

“Yes. I’d like to know more about this Pantera fellow.”

The words echoed dryly in the back of Kirk’s mind. All he could think about was being strapped to a chair and having little pieces of skin torn away, one at a time, until he told them everything they wanted to know. Because this was just the ‘I’m-playing-with-you-cause-I-can’ part of the show.

The second act was going to be where the real meat and potatoes were. That’s where the screams would bounce off the yellowed walls and stick in the back of his throat as one of Enforcement’s ‘*Information Extraction*’ experts went to work. With rubber gloves and a host of pretty stainless steel instruments at his disposal. And once one of these guys got started, they just about couldn’t stop. Kind of like sharks getting all worked up with a bunch of torn flesh and blood in the water. Even after you told them everything you knew, and then some, they’d continue on with their sadistic ritual. The whole time you’d be pleading for the sanctuary of death. Begging them to release you from the agony.

“Yes,” the Commander continued, “I’d like to know everything about Mr. Pantera.”

Kirk just sat and stared at the man. He had no idea how to play this to his best

advantage. He just couldn't stop thinking about what they had in store for him.

"Mr. Anderson," the Commander was firm, but cordial. "You do know that we can play this anyway you like . . . don't you?"

Kirk thought the man sounded genuinely sincere in his concern. That he was really interested in making this as painless as possible. Maybe all he really wanted was some information and then he'd let him go.

But Kirk knew the drill and he knew the outcome. There was only one way out for him. And his biggest fear was weather he could summon up the courage to protect his friends. To die like a man and not some sniffling crying baby. To keep from babbling on incoherently about everything and everybody. To just keep his mouth shut until it was all over.

The two men sat in silence for several minutes, studying each other faces. Judging each other's resolve. Making assessments on the other's true character.

"All right then." The Commander stood as the door behind Kirk opened abruptly. "We'll get started after dinner."

The Commander motioned to the guard in the doorway and Kirk stood slowly, turned and walked back to his cell without a sound.

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"I have never been so hot in all my life." Chang said half disgusted as he wiped the sweat from his eyes. Then he turned to the man pulling one of the boxes from the truck,

“If any of that stuff is damaged . . .” He stopped himself in mid sentence, not really sure how to adequately threaten an Enforcement Officer. So he just let the statement hang in the air, hoping that the tone would lend a certain severity to his message.

He was standing in front of line of several dark green Enforcement transport trucks. The scurry of activity was manic looking from the outside but, in reality, was very well orchestrated. Men unloading trucks, carrying large crates and smaller boxes. Lists on clipboards were carefully checked off as box after box left the truck. One of the trucks carried a load of new scientists as they were all escorted to a folding table where paperwork was checked and filed and quarters and assignments were handed out with eerie precision. The whole thing looked like an ant farm in full swing.

“Be careful with those boxes!” Chang’s voice carried clear down to the last vehicle. “I swear,” Chang turned his attention to Dakmar, “If this move doesn’t kill me, the blasted heat’s going to.”

Dakmar was perched against a short brick wall on the building where the majority of the equipment was being carried into. He was holding a big stick in one hand and slowly tearing smaller branches off of it. Almost as if he was making something – at least something other than a stick without any branches on it.

“They’ll be fine, sir.” Dakmar spoke with a smoothness intended to calm his hyper-active superior. “I’m sure this isn’t the first time they’ve done something like this.”

Another truck pulled up at the end of the caravan and let out a dozen or so casually dressed individuals carrying suite cases and gym bags.

“Well it’s the first time I’ve done something like this and . . .” Chang snapped his head to the side suddenly, “You’ve got to hold that level . . . up, up, up!” he barked at the two men walking past him holding a large wooden box between them.

Again Chang wiped across his forehead with his forearm to soak the sweat up. “What is the temperature here anyway?”

“You know,” Dakmar continued pulling the smallest protrusions of wood from his stick, “it’s not so much the heat . . .”

Chang cut him off with a stern look. “If you say it’s the ‘humidity’, by God I’ll drop you from this project like there’s no tomorrow.”

Dakmar smiled and finished brushing off the last of the little flakes from his new switch. Then he swished it through the air several times in a crossing manner directly in front of him.

“It’s an arid climate, sir. Very dry, very low relative humidity.”

Chang squinted, turned to watch a man carry a box of glass utensils by and then looked back at Dakmar.

“I was going to say it’s the surroundings.”

Chang looked confused.

“The color, sir. Everything’s white. The sand is white, the buildings are white. They all reflect the heat. It makes it pretty unbearable out here.”

As the drivers began to fire up the big diesel engines, Chang grunted and turned to follow the last man into the building.

“I’ve got two words for you, Dakmar,” Chang turned to see if his assistant was following, “Air Conditioning.”

Chang had been very specific in his requests for the new laboratory. He knew that, based on their successes to date, he could pretty much demand anything he wanted. So he had made it very clear that ‘due to the nature of the research they were doing’, it was imperative that a constant climate control of 25 degrees Celsius be maintained. Although it had been his superiors that had dictated the location and the timetable, Chang had been given complete control over all other aspects of the relocation.

Inside the building, Chang’s office was covered with neatly taped up boxes. Each one with a three by five square of white paper indicating its contents and intended location. Chang pulled one of the white squares from his leather chair and sat down, motioning to a pile of boxes in front of the desk. Dakmar sat on the stack, still fiddling with the stick.

“How many more men?” Chang spoke without looking up as he cleared the clutter from the top of his desk.

“Ten scientists, eighteen lab technicians and the additional troop compliment.” Again, Dakmar swooshed the stick through the air as if he was fencing with it.

Chang had successfully removed the tape from the front of the desk drawers and was now rummaging around trying to find a pad and something to write with. “Troop compliment?”

“Yes, sir. The security force. A hundred and fifty or so.”

Chang stopped digging in the drawer and looked straight at Dakmar. “A hundred and



fifty?”

“Yes, sir.”

Chang stared at him for a minute then scrunched his face up in disgust. “You mean I only get ten scientists but they can expend a hundred and fifty men from Enforcement?”

“I’m sure they’re very concerned about the security of the project and specifically about your safety, sir. This part of the world is more volatile than we’re used to.”

Chang sat for a moment contemplating the explanation. Then he continued rummaging without another thought. His primary focus now was to get this operation up and functional in the shortest timeframe possible.

But what Dakmar had left out was the fact that this was Enforcement’s first wave. This was part of, what they called, a ‘Major Presence’ in the region and before it was all over, there would be thousands of Enforcement troops combing the landscape. This region was the culmination of several diverging activities. It was no accident that it was chosen as the first live test bed for Chang’s new breakthrough.

Chi had been an embarrassment to The Board of Policy for far too long and a series of events had been set in motion to rectify that situation once and for all. And in typical Board of Policy fashion, they wanted to send a message to everyone about the outcome. A clear concise message about who was in charge and what the consequences of disobedience were.

So Chang played his dutiful role and worked around the clock for the next several days. He drove everyone to the point of exhaustion and then pushed them just a little

farther. And at each phase of completion, the accolades showered down from the highest levels at The Board. Chang was making quite a name for himself and he would soon have important visitors.

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It had been nearly three weeks since Chang first set foot in Chi and in that time he had come to accept the nearly constant movement of troops into the area. Enforcement had set up a headquarters right out of town, on the outskirts of the desert, and then begun building a virtual city of metal quantent huts. Chi was in the process of turning into some kind of military strong hold. A fortified center for something much more than just protecting the project and the people working there.

But Chang had almost stopped noticing any of the activities of Enforcement. After his first hour or two in the new facility, their actions had become a non-issue with him. He was too busy fighting a whole new string of challenges. He had to shift the whole focus of his research from purely theoretical to practical manufacturing and delivery.

Components that they had successfully created milliliters in a test tube now had to be prepared in hundred gallon tanks. Quantities of genetic material that remained stable in volumes visible only under a microscope now had to be warehoused by the skid full. Although Chang had known intellectually what his task was before coming to Chi, he hadn't actually been able to grasp the scope of it until being immersed in it like this.

New problems seemed to arise daily. What were routine and simple tasks before had

become monumental in scope and shear size. Everything was bigger and more complicated. And of course that put more pressure on Chang to deliver. His superiors wanted daily progress reports. Something Chang wasn't used to dealing with in an earlier time when expectations weren't quite so high and results moved forward at a lumbering pace.

Now the heat had been turned up across the board. Everyday there were a whole new batch of questions to answer and excuses to make. And Chang hated excuses.

"I'm sorry, sir. We've just run into a little snag over the stability of the antigens. It's really nothing I'm sure . . . maybe just a day or so . . ."

He felt like he was tap dancing with a straw hat and a wooden cane. But it was just temporary. There were only a few more obstacles to overcome and they'd be on their way. Then he'd be a hero again. Like when he'd first made the announcement to that small group of Board members.

"Ever since the mishap with the implant-able Halcyon project, our group has been exploring avenues for biological alternative."

Chang remembered how proud he was that day. And what a very special day it was for him. Of all the people that had ever sat in this room and given a presentation, he was certainly the youngest. And he could still remember the looks on their faces. Awe and intrigue . . . wonder and delight. Every eye in the room was riveted on him as he explained what they had accomplished.

"We've taken virtually the same electro-magnetic information and encoded it into a

self replicating model.”

“In English please, professor Chang. For those of us not so technically minded.” The gray haired gentleman spoke softly as he glanced at the other members for approval.

They all nodded.

Chang could hardly keep from bursting. He actually had anticipated the question and had already prepared a layman’s version of what they’d discovered. But he thought that if he led with the more technical explanation then the simpler one would have more impact.

Carefully he studied each of their faces . . . as much to prolong and savor the moment as to build the anticipation within his audience.

“It’s like a virus.” He felt like he blurted out uncontrollably, but hoped that it sounded a little more controlled. “Really, it is a virus. One than can be used to carry a biologically replicated version of the original Halcyon wave. A biological version that has the same identical effect as the original electromagnetic wave.”

Everyone in the room was silent. You couldn’t even here the sound of breathing.

“Professor Chang,” an even older man spoke, half shrouded by the shadows, “we are all aware of the outcome of the last Halcyon experiments.”

There was a slight murmur from the room as if the air itself had responded to the statement.

“What assurances can you give us that that kind of situation would not reoccur?”

Chang smiled, ever so slightly at the group. Another question that he had carefully anticipated and another moment to savor as he explained his solution.

“The problem last time was the real-time encode-ability of the signal.” The stares from the group indicated the need for further clarification.

“Under computer control, the transmission – and therefore its effect on someone – could be changed. And that’s what happened last time: a security breach gave outside subversives access to the highest levels of the Halcyon signal control . . . and yes, as you know, the results were disastrous.”

The group still had a collective look of confusion. Or more precisely a ‘And your point?’ kind of look.

“Our base signal is encoded genetically,” Chang continued in a pleasant, almost sing-songy voice. “Once the host is infected, the attachment cannot be reversed. This is a permanent mutation at the genetic level.”

“Where is the information on this encoding held now?” The man in the shadows leaned forward as he spoke.

“With my superiors. Nothing is maintained on site. And the encoding process is broken into a dozen steps.” Chang stopped to look at everyone individual before continuing. “There’s no one person that’s capable of reproducing this process.”

That was a day that Chang will remember forever. And it was shortly after that meeting that the orders came through about the move to Chi. Then very quickly, came the planes and the trucks and the troops. So many troops.

For a moment, Chang’s thoughts drifted to the army that was amassing out of town. But it was approaching five o’clock and he had a seven o’clock conference call to explain

why they hadn't made any progress today.

So Chang forgot about the army and the soldiers and concentrated on his work. For now anyway, that was the most important thing in his life.

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There were now almost five thousand Enforcement troops stationed outside of Chi. They controlled just about every aspect of life in and around the city. A moratorium had been declared on any travel through the desert without a permit. Nomad activity had been severely limited and resistance had dropped to almost nothing.

Inside his office, Chang prepared to meet with Gus Stalgarten. He was the older gentleman in the shadows during his first meeting at The Board. Mr. Stalgarten was coming down in response to a series of breakthroughs in the last several days. Chang's team had overcome all the serious obstacles to mass production and were ready to go live with the initial phase of the field operations.

The Board of Policy had never been known to take such a direct interest in the affairs of The Board of Technology. But it only reinforced Chang's notion that this was probably the single most important project ever funded by The Board.

The already heightened security had an almost metallic edge to it today. Everywhere you looked, there was Enforcement. Crisp, sharp and clean. At attention in the hallways and around every corner. There were to be no slipups today. No errant sniper fire and no attempts at rebellion. In fact, Enforcement had secured an area of about a hundred miles

or so around Chi to ensure absolute control for the Board member's visit.

As the entourage of soldiers and politicians moved through the hallways of the only completely air-conditioned building in Chi, Chang's heart began to throb incessantly. Partly because of nerves and partly because of his excitement. This was really the final hour. The finally to his crowning achievement.

There was a polite but firm knock on Chang's door and then it was opened by Director Stalgarten's personal assistant. Through the open door, Chang could see the group of twenty or so mulling around in the hallway. But, it was only the Director and his assistant that entered the room.

"Professor Chang." The elderly gentleman extended his hand across the desk as Chang stood to accept it. As he sat down in the chair next to the door he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. The assistant remained standing.

"This has got to be the most God awful heat I've ever experienced. How do you stand it?"

"You get used to it after a while, sir."

"It is cool in here, though." The Director looked around the office and then slid the handkerchief back into his pocket. "Tell me about phase II."

The Director's abrupt slide from casual chit-chat into business caught Chang off guard. "Well, sir . . . I mean we're poised to move ahead. My people have been working around the clock to guarantee our readiness. All we need now is the go ahead, sir."

"That sounds fine, professor." The Director seemed almost uninterested in Chang's

remarks. “Professor, do you understand our agenda in this part of the world?”

“I’m not sure what exactly you’re asking me, sir.”

The Director looked thoughtfully up at his assistant and then, without more than a slight movement of his lips, the assistant turned and exited the room.

“Let me be frank professor. This is a pivotable juncture for us.” The man paused and then leaned forward in his chair.

Chang sat across from the official trying not to just look like a small schoolboy. But the fact of the matter was that he did feel small. At this particular moment, he felt very small. In the scheme of things, he had not been able to see passed his own importance – until this very second. It was becoming clear to him that there was something much bigger at work here and he was just a piece of the puzzle.

“The Board has invested a great deal into this operation.” The man paused to give Chang the ‘you know I mean more than money?’ look.

“Yes, sir. That seems pretty obvious.” Chang tried to act calm, but he couldn’t seem to get the dazed look off his face.

Gus Stalgarten continued staring straight at Chang for what seemed like several minutes. Some kind of test Chang thought to himself. A test of will or of nerves or something like that. To see if he’d twitch or sweat or fidget – all of which he had done involuntarily within the last ten seconds. Chang felt like a bug under a microscope and all of his usual confidence was gone. Every bit of it. And as it became utterly apparent that he had failed miserably at this battle of nerves, Chang sat trapped in his chair while a



large bead of sweat crawled slowly over his left eyebrow and plunged into his eye.

The official must have been satisfied that he had accomplished whatever it was that he had intended to because at that point he smiled and stood, extending his hand.

“Thank you for your time today professor. We’ll be in touch.”

As the door swing closed behind him, Chang grabbed the bottom of his shirt and pulled it up to wipe his eyes out.

“What the hell was that all about?” Chang asked the empty office and then prepared himself for the deluge of questions from his staff.

- 13 -

Night was the worst time in the cell. Kirk had spent all day waiting for his second appointment with the Lieutenant. Now it was some time late into the second evening and still he was waiting. Kirk figured that it was his own fault for not guessing what they were doing. They were giving him enough time to torture himself. Enough time to think about what they were going to do to him when they did finally come.

And it was working beautifully. Kirk could not stop thinking about what was going to happen to him. No matter how hard he tried to focus on anything else. No matter how hard he tried to distract himself. He just couldn’t do it.

So he sat all night, on the stinky mattress with no sheets, nodding off occasionally and staring at the sliver of moonlight peering in through the bars high on the outside wall. It was a dreamy and surrealistic night filled with echoing sounds and blurred ghostly

images. At one point, Kirk heard his father telling him not to worry. Telling that it was going to be okay. And as he stared deeply into his father's eyes, he went out of focus and changed into somebody else. Suddenly, Kirk was looking at the reassuring faces of Rick and Sheri.

"Don't worry." Rick was smiling and leaning down toward him.

"Everything's going to be okay." Sheri's voice was smooth and silky as it filled the room with its creamy essence.

Kirk smashed his fist hard into the granite wall behind him and began to cry. Uncontrollably sobbing until he was out of breath.

"What have I done?" Kirk gasped out in horror, forcing the lingering image from in front of him.

He'd asked for their help and, most assuredly, they'd come. They come out of sense of duty or out of feeling of owing him something. But they'd come. They'd come and end up in the same rat hole he was in now. They come and be tortured and killed and they'd die because of him. Because he had asked them to come.

But no . . . he'd sent the message. The second message telling them not to come. That would surely keep them away. Or would that just give them the resolve to come and help him?

Kirk cried himself to sleep again before the morning sun splashed across his face. The rattle of the keys in the door jarred him violently from the sleep he hadn't known he was in.

Kirk squinted through the scum in his eyes at the silhouette standing in the doorway. The monstrous guard said nothing, but motioned his head to the left. It's all Kirk needed. This was it. As he pulled himself from the bed, rubbing the terrible crook in his neck, his life began playing back to him like a perfectly preserved movie.

He felt the pain of being five years old and finding out that your father wasn't coming home ever again. Felt the loss and also the love of a mother who vowed to make a difference. He saw the house they lived in and his room littered with model rockets. He could see the bike he got for his tenth birthday and remembered how carefully he had positioned the playing cards to make it sound like a motorcycle. He could see his friends in college and his first days at The Movement. Could see the light and hope that sparkled in everyone's eyes. See the faces and the ambitions.

And he remembered that day. The day his friends were killed by Enforcement as he lay in the mud in the alley, helpless. Unable to act or to even move.

Kirk had followed between two guards, through two metal doors and down a long hallway. At the other end, they emerged in a kind of office area. There was the sound of typewriters and the scurry of people moving paper from point A to point B. They all looked like human drones, just wandering around to some preprogrammed instructions.

The guard in front turned and nodded his head in the direction of a padded metal chair next to one of the desks. In a daze, Kirk sat down, totally confused as the guards returned down the hallway they had just walked through together. He had expected a dark room with a single chair, leather straps and stainless steel surgical instruments. Instead, he was

in, what looked like the administrative side of the prison. Now unguarded and unshackled.

“It’s a little irregular,” the man at the desk mused as he looked over crisp white piece of paper.

Kirk had been so enthralled by what was going on that he hadn’t noticed the skinny man with the black glasses hanging low on his nose. He was shaking his head and looking up and down, top to bottom at this piece of paper. Like it was some strange archeological find or something.

“Yes, quite irregular, indeed.” Then the man snapped the paper down and looked straight over Kirk’s shoulder. “But, everything appears to be in order.”

He was apparently talking to someone behind Kirk. But what was going on here? More time to reflect? More mind games to just to screw with him? Kirk was having a hard time second guessing this one.

“This is an official transfer document and it’s been verified through Central.” The man with the black glasses stood and held his open hand in Kirk’s direction. “He’s all yours then.”

“Thank you captain,” came the voice from directly behind him. The voice that Kirk recognized from long ago.

Kirk spun his head around to see a man in a navy blue suit with mirrored sunglasses and a neatly trimmed, bright red beard. The gentleman leaned forward and grabbed Kirk by the back of the arm and began to escort him out. But this wasn’t an Enforcement

officer or a Board member of any kind. As Kirk stood and looked directly at the man's face, he recognized him. And as he did, almost burst out in surprise.

It was Rick. And as the two of them walked toward the door together, he maintained the strictest, sternest face that Kirk had ever seen.

"But, how?" Kirk breathed softly to the familiar stranger.

"Later," Rick said without moving his mouth.

This couldn't be happening. Kirk thought that he surely must still be in his cell dreaming and any minute he'd wake up on the putrefied mattress. Or worse yet, strapped to a chair with blood gushing from several fresh cuts on his face.

"Wait a minute." The man with the black glasses shouted across the room and Rick and Kirk froze in their tracks. Slowly, Rick turned to face the man who was still standing behind his desk.

"You forgot to sign," he said holding the transfer order out directly in front of him.

Rick glanced at Kirk and then quickly walked over to the man's desk and scribbled something on the paper. Without even looking at it, the man seemed perfectly satisfied that he had now covered his ass and it was somebody else's problem from here on.

"He's all yours."

Rick returned to Kirk's side and together they walked briskly out into the blistering heat of the day.

- 14 -

It was an eerie feeling walking down the street together. There seemed to be Enforcement officers everywhere. Like a plague of locust in green uniforms had descended upon the small desert community.

Rick turned a corner and walked up a small set of concrete steps. Behind him, Kirk was stopped on the sidewalk still in a daze. Just staring around at all the activity and still not completely believing that this was happening.

“Come on,” Rick prompted from the top of the stairs. “Let’s get inside.”

Then he turned and entered the building. Kirk followed almost reluctantly. It was a motel and inside. It looked like it might have been a very nice place twenty years ago. But two decades of neglect had taken its toll. There was a multi-headed light fixture hanging from the ceiling with only two of the dozen or so candle shaped bulbs burning. Through the dim overlapping circles of light, Kirk could see discolored rectangles on the plaster walls where large pictures used to hang.

Rick spoke to the man behind the counter and then came back toward Kirk with a key in his hand.

“It’s this way.” Rick turned and walked down a hallway to the right.

Again, Kirk followed like a zombie, still studying the ancient lobby. The accusing stare from the dark skinned attendant soon prodded Kirk to hurry up, though. Halfway down the hallway, Rick was standing with one of the doors open.

Once inside, Rick threw his hat on the bed and peeled off the beard that was stuck to

his face. Then he turned to Kirk and smiled, while he removed the two bushy red eyebrows. Quickly he went over to the window and peered outside through a slit in the curtains.

“But, how?” was all that Kirk could get to come out of mouth as he sat down on the bed.

Rick removed the jacket and tie and flung them onto a chair in the corner. As he unbuttoned the top button on his shirt, he pulled up a chair and sat down directly in front of Kirk.

“How’d you know that your message to us wouldn’t be intercepted?” The glint in Rick’s eye was unmistakable.

“I used a tunneling protocol,” Kirk answered the question involuntarily.

“Yea, I figured that, but how’d you encrypt it?”

“I scanned the island’s records for your service provider then hacked in to get your account information.” Kirk was looking around the room as he spoke. “Then I just waited for activity on that port and captured the hardware address of your screen.”

Rick leaned back and smiled. “And then you built that address into the algorithm . . . beautiful. I couldn’t have done better myself.”

It was becoming clear to Kirk that this was no dream. Although it certainly had all the dreamlike earmarks. This was impossible. To just walk into an Enforcement holding area and then walk out with one of their prisoners. It just doesn’t happen that way.

Rick watched Kirk as the doubt and confusion swirled across the back of his eyes. He

was rather enjoying Kirk's bewilderment at the moment. But Rick was also also enjoying reeling the story out to Kirk just a little at a time.

"After that message, I had Tosh find out everything he could about Chi, while I concentrated on getting access to the mainframe here."

Kirk was still looking around the dingy motel room. It was ugly and old and the ornate wallpaper was peeling from the corner right below the crown molding.

"How is Franklin?" Kirk's question was delivered in a monotone.

"Tosh is fine," Rick chirped abruptly. "I figured that there'd be nothing to it. I mean it's Chi for God's sake." Rick watched as Kirk's attention slowly turned to the story.

"You found out it was pretty secure – Level II in most places – didn't you?"

"I sure did." The level of excitement in Rick's voice was on the rise. "And it intrigued the hell out of me. I mean, these were no simple encryption schemes . . . they had some pretty heavy weight talent at work here."

Kirk's attention was now focused entirely on the conversation at hand. Rick was explaining to him what he'd known for some time now.

"So, once I got into the mainframe, it was more than a stroke of luck that I stumbled across your name. It was on no fewer than half a dozen internal communications to The Board."

"What did you say?" Kirk's expression had turned hard.

"It was more than just luck that I . . ."

"No," Kirk interrupted, "before that."



“Once I got into the mainframe . . .” Rick was confused.

“I’ve been trying for a year to get into that thing and you just say ‘once I got into the mainframe’ like you were talking about going out to the garage or something?”

“Well, I can’t take all the credit. It was really Tosh that helped me over the hump.”

“Franklin Tosh?” Kirk’s face was now scrunched up into a painful looking ball.

“I’d been working on it for three days straight and getting nowhere. I’d hit a brick wall and couldn’t seem to get over it. I mean, this was the best work I’d ever come across.”

Kirk watched Rick carefully as he continued. “So anyway, Tosh walks in one night with a beer and just looks at the screen for a second – just one split second – and he says ‘It looks like a flip-flop’.”

Rick raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips. “A flip-flop he says. So I’m really really tired and not in the mood and I turn to him and ask ‘what the hell’s a flip-flop?’.”

“A flip-flop,” he repeats and then goes on to explain that it’s an electronic circuit that changes state every time you provide input to it.”

Kirk’s puzzled look was intensifying.

“Every time you *touch* it.” Rick restated the sentence with a different emphasis.

Kirk still didn’t understand.

“It was a dynamic algorithm that ‘flip-flopped’ every time you tried to crack it. It was a living breathing thing that could slither out of your hands just when you thought that you had a grip around it.”

Kirk squinted thoughtfully at Rick as the statement sank in. Then a small smile started

at the outside of mouth and then gently rolled across to the other side. Rick's eyes widened and he nodded in agreement to Kirk's smile.

"So you just had to flop the flip."

"Yea," Rick rocked his hand back and forth in front of him, "there was a little bit more to it from a programming standpoint, but that's the theory."

"That little bastard." Kirk shook his head still smiling.

"So, anyway, after I came across your name on the inside, it wasn't too difficult to generate the appropriate orders for release."

Kirk's eyebrows dropped and the smile disappeared from his face. "You took a hell of chance doing that."

Rick smiled and nodded. "I know."

"Well at least you were smart enough not to involve the other two in this." Kirk started to stand but was stopped halfway by the sudden look of avoidance on Rick's face. Kirk sat back down and leaned forward to look directly into Rick's eyes. "You did leave the other two out of this didn't you?"

Rick's two seconds of silence was all the answer that Kirk needed. "Aw Christ, Rick!" Kirk stood and began pacing around the foot of the bed.

"See," Rick spoke in a demure tone with his eyes lowered, "we ran into a little trouble back on the island."

Kirk stopped pacing dead in his tracks then walked back over and sat down in front of Rick again.

“What do you mean ‘a little trouble’?”

Rick bounced his head back and forth, still looking down at the ground.

“Are you running from Enforcement again?”

Again, Rick’s two seconds of silence was all the answer Kirk needed.

“Aw Christ, Rick.”

Kirk stood and went back to his pacing at the end of the bed. Then he walked over to the window and looked out through the crack in the curtains. Enforcement was everywhere. Swarming and growing. And all of a sudden, Chi was starting to feel like an awfully small place.

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“We’ve got to get out of here,” Kirk announced, turning sharply from the window.

“But, I’ve arranged everything here. Passports, identification . . .”

“There’s a place in the desert where we’ll be safe.” Kirk took one quick glance around the motel room and then the door burst open.

It was Frankling Tosh and Leah and they were covered with sweat and panting heavily.

“What the hell?” Rick turned to face Tosh directly.

He was leaning against the back of the closed door, desperately trying to catch his breath. Leah had wandered aimlessly over to the corner and was leaning into it crying.

It only took Rick a couple of seconds to figure out what was wrong with this picture:

no Sheri. He stood and walked over to Tosh, grabbed him by the shoulders and then just looked at him as the tears welled in his eyes.

“Franklin . . .,” Rick’s voice was thin and cracked.

At that moment, all that Franklin Tosh could do was turn away and begin sobbing.

“There was nothing we could do . . . it happened so fast.”

Then he slid down the backside of the door, out of Rick’s grip and onto the floor where he just sat and quietly cried. Rick was in shock. He couldn’t believe the scene that was playing out in front of him. This wasn’t really happening.

“What are you saying?” Rick’s voice had taken on a gritty edginess.

Franklin’s shoulders continued to heave and the only thing that he was capable of doing was bringing his arm up to wipe his nose. Then Leah turned from the corner. With one last gasp and tears covering her cheeks, she proceeded to explain what had happened.

“The papers were fine. I don’t think they suspected anything . . . it was just a routine check.” Leah wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. “But then something happened. I think one of them recognized Sheri. He started asking funny questions about Technology and where she used to work.”

“So they’ve got here?” The intensity in Rick’s voice had reached a fever pitch.

“He started hinting around that we’d have to come in for questioning and a thorough background check.”

“She’s in custody right?” The panic in Rick’s voice was an indication of his realization of the story’s end. But, he couldn’t face it. He just couldn’t bring himself to

believe what she was about to tell him.

“So we,” Leah paused and made a quick glance down at Franklin, “started to run. We all just panicked.”

“And that’s when they took her? THAT’S WHEN SHE WAS CAPTURED?” Rick was frantic now. His eyes were great big round spheres of fear and anger and rage. He had moved closer to Leah as she was telling the story and now he was holding her by the shoulders and shaking her – as if that could pry the ‘right’ information out of her.

“WHERE IS SHE?”

Leah took a deep breath and wiped her other cheek. She looked down at Franklin and then over at Kirk, who she didn’t know and didn’t need to right now. Then she looked into Rick’s eyes.

“I looked back when I heard the shot.”

Rick was still holding her, trying with all his might to figure out where Sheri was.

Leah reached up and took both of Rick hands in hers. “She wasn’t moving, Rick.”

The room was silent for almost a minute, except for the occasional gasp from Franklin who was still on the floor in front of the door. Then Rick began shaking his head back and forth. Slowly at first then with increasing intensity as he spoke.

“No. No.”

At first it was almost imperceptible, but as he backed toward the bed and eventually fell onto it, he started shouting. “NOOOOO!”

Leah walked over to the bed, sat down next to him and took his head onto her shoulder

as Rick began to cry uncontrollably.

Kirk couldn't move. He felt as if his legs were bolted to the floor and there was a lump the size of a watermelon in his throat. He couldn't speak, but what he wanted to say was that 'this was my fault'. Wanted to shout it at the top of his lungs. But he was frozen in a nightmare of time. This was his fault and these people wouldn't be here if he hadn't acted irrationally and irresponsibly.

With Rick's head still buried in Leah's shoulder, she looked up at Kirk. "You must be Kirk. My name's Leah."

The introduction could've been a pleasant time. A time to meet to friends and explore the relationships that others had embraced. But instead, it was a formality. A needed response to kick start a stagnant situation. One that, apparently only Leah, was aware of.

"I think it's probably real important that we get out of here right now." Leah watched Kirk's lost blank stare and then looked back over at Franklin – still on the floor.

"Have you got someplace we can go?" Leah turned back to Kirk, but her question went unanswered.

Leah let Rick's head fall gently off of her shoulder and come to rest, limp and dangling. Then she carefully slid out from beside him and walked over to Kirk, who looked like a pale wax museum character.

"We've got to get out of here now." The insistence in her voice was rising. "Do you have someplace we can go?"

Kirk's empty stare went right through the middle of her.

“Ahhu.”

Leah turned and walked over to where Franklin was still sobbing on the floor in front of the door.

“Come on Franklin honey,” Leah leaned down and tugged on the back of his shirt, trying to coax him up. “We really to need to get out of here now.”

Leah pulled on his shirt again, but Franklin didn’t budge. She turned and looked at Rick on the bed and then at Kirk frozen to the floor behind him.

And then there was a knock at the door that was so loud it shook all three men into the present simultaneously. Again the deafening knock echoed painfully through the room. The door itself shook violently with each pound. As Franklin drug himself to his feet and backed away from the door, the others stared at the door in terror.

“Kirk?” Came the overly exaggerated whisper from the other side of the door. “Kirk, let me in.”

Leah stepped forward and opened the door, rationalizing that the men in the green uniforms probably wouldn’t ask twice before just knocking the door down. Before she could get it open a few inches, the dark skinned man from the lobby burst through the door and then closed it quickly behind him. He stood for a moment, pressing up against the closed door, then he turned around and opened the door just enough to look out through the crack. Then he turned the knob gently and carefully closed the door and let it latch.

“They’re doing a door to door.” The man spoke directly to Kirk. “I started them down

the other corridor, but they'll be here any minute. You've got to go now."

Again, the man turned and opened the door ever so slightly. Again he peered out into the hallway. Then, almost immediately he opened the door and stepped into the hallway. He turned and motioned for them to follow.

Leah started to collect her things, but was interrupted.

"Leave it!" The man whispered loudly. "Just get your papers and lets go. NOW."

Shocked, confused and still dazed by Sheri's death, they all obeyed the man and followed without question. Down the corridor, away from the lobby and through a utility room covered in conduit and metal boxes. Then, finally out into the searing heat of the day.

They were in the alley, behind the building and the man had, apparently, already assembled five horses. All equipped with provisions, rifles and plenty of water. After mounting up without a word – not a question about where they were headed or how – everyone just sat there and stared at the single empty horse.

"Pantera said to meet up with them where the sky meets the water." The man handed Kirk the reins of the empty horse and then wrinkled his nose in confusion at the message he'd been asked to give.

With glazed over eyes, Kirk took the leather straps in his hands and nodded to indicate his understanding. At the same time, tears began to flow down Rick's cheeks. Leah and Tosh looked at each other then back at the empty horse, then at each other again. Nobody could really believe that she was gone. Really, really gone.



“Go!” The man urged. “You haven’t got time for this . . .”

He never finished his sentence because a bullet ripped through his chest, splintering his breastbone to pieces. He lingered, frozen in time for just a second as blood gushed from the huge hole and soaked the front of his shirt. Then he fell forward to the ground in slow motion. Landing limp and lifeless with a dull dry thud and a puff of dust. The last look on his face seeming to say ‘Go’.

“Heeya!” Kirk yelled and mashed his feet hard into the horse’s side. The other three followed in a spastic bouncing gate. Leah had been on a horse before but was not a proficient rider. Rick had ridden a lot when he was younger so he immediately went into an autopilot mode and let his memory do the ridding for him. But, Tosh on the other hand, barely knew what a horse looked like. He brought up the rear, holding on desperately for dear life. Luckily for him, after the others got going, the horse seemed to know exactly what to do.

Now, for the first time since hearing about Sheri, Kirk felt like he could think again. Like he’d come back from somewhere and he wasn’t sure where he’d been. Because now he needed to think. He’d need every bit of wit and finesse he could muster right now. Otherwise there’d be four more bodies to add to the death toll today. And that, at least for the moment, was enough to keep him focused. Enough to keep his mind on what needed to be done in the present, because there would inevitably be plenty of time for remorse later. Too much time.

A shot ricocheted off of the brick wall to Kirk’s left, right before he cut hard and

turned down the side alley. The others brought up the rear as three more shots showered splintered chunks of brick into the air in front of them.

Kirk knew these streets well. Chi was not a large town but it was a rather complex labyrinth of tiny crisscrossing streets. It was a city that was built and rebuilt for over four hundred years. It was a virtual maze of multi-level streets. Streets that, either didn't connect at all, or that connected only in certain places. There was the 'old' part of town with its all dirt roads and there was the 'original' city with brick underfoot. There was the 'reconstructed' part of the old city that had been reworked after the earthquake and there was the 'new' city.

And as Kirk could hear the jeeps turning the corner behind him, he was keenly aware that this knowledge would be their only hope right now.

Kirk yanked the reins hard to the right and guided the animal down a narrow stretch of stone steps. Tosh was in front of Leah now and felt like an infant that was being forced to learn how to swim by being thrown into the water. His horse didn't want to go down the steps, but when a shot hit the wall in front of him, he dug his heels in as hard as he could, yelled something and closed his eyes as the beast lunged forward.

At the bottom, Kirk waited for everyone before continuing. Then, he watched in horror as Leah came and the three Enforcement jeeps pulled up at the top of the hill. The jeep screeched to a halt and the men poured out like lava from an erupting volcano.

Kirk looked around to make sure everyone else was okay, but he was helpless to do anything but watch as Leah's horse navigated the perilous steps. There were steep walls

rising high on either side of the stairway and the others were positioned out of sight from the officers up the hill.

The first shot caught Leah's horse in the hindquarter and brought it tumbling to the ground, rolling forward violently and throwing Leah to the side. The second and third shots missed Leah as she slid to the bottom face first. Immediately the men began to descend the stairs. Kirk motioned to the others to get ready to move on his command.

In one incredible move, Leah hit the bottom and bounced to her feet. If she was hurt, she had too much adrenaline in her body right now to know it. Without a thought or the least bit of hesitation, she leapt onto the horse that Kirk was still holding. The horse originally intended for Sheri.

Kirk was so amazed by what he'd seen that he was beginning to believe that they might just get out of this alive. So he quickly got his crew moving again and, to all their dismay, turned immediately down another rock stairway. This one smaller and slippery than the first. It wasn't as fast as an all out run, but Kirk was trying to get them out of sight before the officers hit the bottom of the stairs.

Another turn, a dark smelly corridor between two towering buildings and then, somehow they appeared in the middle of a huge ravine behind the city. A ravine, that to everyone's disgust, was responsible for transporting a river of untreated sewage to a sort of water treatment plant a mile or so out of town.

Kirk looked back at the others. "They're not going to be to keen on looking for us down here."

Leah held her forearm up to cover her nose while Rick and Tosh scrunched up their faces in unison, as if to say ‘No Kidding’.

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As darkness began to settle across the desert, Kirk made his way out of the cavernous ravine. The horses followed each other in single file up the narrow winding path. At the top, without a word to the others, Kirk got off his horse and led him by the reins.

There had been no conversation during the ride. No talk of where they were going or what they were doing. Each one of them left to their own quiet introspection. Occasionally the sound of a helicopter in the distance would break that personal thoughtfulness. But after a short pause and a few pensive glances toward the sky, their journey continued.

“Leave the horses here for a minute” Kirk said as he wrapped the leather reins several times around a steel hand railing.

The sun had almost completely set and the steps in front of them were lit only partially by moonlight. They were those uncomfortable kind of steps to navigate; the ones with a really long tread and a short riser. Seemingly not designed for any normal persons gate.

At the top of the short climb was a small concrete building with some large piping and valve work emanating from its sides. The muffled sound of an electric motor was unmistakable. And there was the sound of water. Gurgling, swishing water. At the edge of the concrete walkway, just past the little building, they could see it as the moonlight

caught the water's surface.

Kirk stood there, staring out over the dark sparkling water in front of him and waited for the others to deposit themselves by his side. As each of them in turn took up position next to him, they too just stood and stared at the calm quiet water in front of them. It was an odd site in the middle of the desert. Especially at night when it was difficult to see how big it was or far it stretched in front of them.

After what seemed like an eternity of quiet meditation, Kirk broke the silence.

"This is it." He spoke in a dry raspy voice.

The others squinted through the darkness out over the water and then looked back at Kirk. They couldn't figure out what 'this' was. The water? Something beyond the water? Or was the 'this' just a philosophical thing that would be explained as they went along.

"It's the reason that you're here and the reason that Sheri's dead." His words seemed to hang in the air just in front of them for several uncomfortable minutes.

'What's the reason?' and 'Why are we here?' seemed to be the questions on everyone's mind, but they were the questions that went unasked. For some reason, no one was willing to break into Kirk's monologue at the moment.

"And now we've got to do something to make a difference." The gravel was beginning to clear from his voice as he turned to face the others. And there was flush coming across his face, visible even in the dim light reflecting off the surface of the water.

"If we don't," Kirk was careful to make eye contact with each one of them before continuing, "then we dishonor her memory."

Maybe her death had affected him more than anyone realized. Maybe Kirk was going off the deep end. Again there were questions poised on everyone's lips and, again, no one was willing to ask them.

Kirk paused for several minutes, studying each of their faces with great care. Then he turned to Tosh. "There's a laboratory in Chi that's running a mutation of your original Halcyon wave."

"But I've monitored those satellites on and off for four years now and haven't seen any unusual activity. Have they modified the carry frequency in some way?"

Kirk grinned. "Yea. I'd say they've modified it quite a bit."

At least Rick knew what the two men were talking about, but poor Leah's head bounced back and forth between the two in utter confusion.

"It would have to be an awfully low frequency to avoid detection across the common bandwidth." Tosh was now noticeably confused.

"It's not using a satellite carrier system anymore."

The wheels in Tosh's brain were running at full throttle now. What did this mean? A new delivery system for a set of instructions that could control the way people thought and felt. An undetectable means of controlling how everyone acted. But Franklin couldn't think out of the constraints of his original design.

"But where's the receiver? How small have they gotten now? How is it implanted?"

Kirk smiled again and turned away from Franklin. As he stared out over the sparkling water in front of them his shoulders seemed to tense. Then he held his arms out in front

of him, palms upward.

“It’s here.” He announced in an almost biblical fashion.

Leah was lost from the word go. She was hopelessly trying to catch up to what was being said. Tosh, on the other hand, was grid locked on ‘the delivery system’. His mind was trapped between the design implications and the social ramifications of what Kirk was telling him.

But Rick, who had remained silent and in the shadow up to this point, was now walking slowly toward Kirk at the water’s edge. Being on the periphery of the conversation had given him a different insight into what was being said. And now he was starting to formulate a picture in his mind. A picture of what Kirk was talking about. And as that picture came in to focus, it sent cold chills down the back of his neck.

“This is it?” Rick whispered when he was directly behind Kirk. It was a half question, half statement.

“This is it.” Kirk said without turning around to face him.

Rick sat down on the concrete at Kirk’s feet. “God help us all.”

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They road all night, Kirk navigating almost magically by the stars or maybe by some sixth sense he’d developed while living in the desert. He’d known exactly what Pantera was talking about when he’d said ‘Where the sky meets the water’ and it wasn’t the reservoir they’d stopped at earlier that evening.

There was a place deep on the other side of the dunes where the desert was flat for miles in every direction. A salt bed from an ancient lake, long since dried up. Kirk and Pantera had traveled there a couple times over the years to meet with other tribes and barter for supplies and medicine. Upon entering the vast plane from the dune side, it appeared as a crystal clear sheet of bluish-green ice. Under the heat of the day, it rolled and pulsed – like the waters of a vast ocean. At the horizon, the sky melded effortlessly into the surface of the surreal water’s surface. Pantera always referred to the place as ‘Where the sky meets the water’.

On the far side of the plane, hidden by the heat waves emanating from the surface of the salt plane, lay the impenetrable Black mountains. A ten thousand foot range of almost pure white limestone that had been thrust up through the sand nearly a hundred million years ago. The name had come from ancient folklore having to do with the evil that lived in the rock – not the color of the stone itself. The Black mountains were riddled with a cliffs and caves and treacherous thousand foot ravines. It was generally considered uncrossable and for the most part, everyone respected that assumption.

Those who didn’t, all too frequently were never heard from again. Presumed to be taken by the spirits that guarded the great rock. Punished for the arrogance and stupidity. In reality, they more probably died from massive internal injuries sustained after slipping and falling a hundred feet to a solid rock floor. Maybe bouncing a time or two off the side of a sheer cliff face, breaking a rib or knocking out some teeth before continuing on to the horrible crunching death at the bottom.



At the foot of the mountains lay a honeycombed network of smaller limestone formations. Neatly chiseled by wind and water. Big enough to hide an entire tribe of nomads. But, because of the color of the rock and the heat curtain rising from the desert, it was nearly impossible to see without being right on top of it.

So Kirk had a pretty good idea exactly where he could find Pantera's group. Because it was the same place that he'd use if he were trying to elude detection from the roving Enforcement patrols through the desert.

After crossing back and forth through the network of smooth swirling rocks for nearly half a day, Kirk stopped and got off his horse. There water was just about gone and everyone was exhausted. The all night ride had taken its toll and the horses were in danger of collapsing soon. As each person dismounted, in turn they each dropped to the sand unable to stand.

Then Kirk saw him. He was just standing there, leaning against a twelve foot piece of smoothly shaped limestone. Kirk couldn't figure out if he'd just walked out from behind the stone or if he'd been standing there the whole time.

"I knew I'd find you guys here." Kirk announced confidently to the man, obviously aware of who he was.

The man smiled and stood up straight, pushing himself away from the rock. "Pantera sent me to find you. He was worried when you didn't show up last night."

The man reached behind the rock and led out the brilliant Appaloosa buy a rope around its neck. "We're camped about three miles east of here."

The man mounted the horse and turned him back toward the rock. “The opposite direction you where heading.”

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Pantera returned to camp late that evening. He embraced Kirk with flamboyant exuberance and then chastised him for his foolish behavior.

“We thought that we’d lost you this time, old friend. What were you thinking?”

“I didn’t want to involve anyone here.” Kirk’s rationale seemed thin and lifeless.

“If you ever pull a stunt like that again . . . this is your family here, Kirk. We stick together, uh?”

Kirk bowed his head in humble submission. What should’ve been a joyous reunion among friends was nothing more than a bitter sweet occasion. Kirk was swimming in a wash of mixed emotions. He was electrified to be free and back in the desert with the nomads.

But the pain of Sheri’s death was only now beginning to fully manifest itself. It was like a timed release capsule that was just beginning to reach full strength. Kirk felt weak and uneasy.

“Come and introduce me to your friends, Kirk.” Pantera slapped Kirk on the back and moved toward the campfire.

Together they sat around the fire and recounted the entire story to Pantera and his men. They ate and drank and then drank some more. The nomads were famous for a kind

of root wine they had been perfecting for centuries. It was strong and generally had the desired affect of keeping you from dwelling on whatever it was that you didn't want to dwell on.

They passed the clay jug around and around and as they did, the daring story of escape got better and better.

"Tell me again about the officers in the jeep." Pantera's voice boomed through the chatter and the laughter.

Kirk was standing by the fire, holding the jug and leaning slightly to one side. When Pantera spoke, his head bounced back and forth once and then snapped up to look straight at the big man sitting on the other side of the fire. Kirk smiled.

"When I first saw 'em behind me," Kirk readjusted his footing and turned completely around to make sure that everyone was listening. "I thought I was going to shit my pants right there."

A hearty round of chuckles said that the nomads hadn't tired of hearing this part of the story yet. In truth of fact, this story was probably going to be put on the rotation of stories that would be recounted around the campfire for years to come. It was an on going ritual that strengthened their bonds and diminished the strength of their enemies. And late at night with a big jug of root wine in hand, it was always a lot of fun.

"Because your plan was to run away on horseback from a jeep full of soldiers with automatic weapons." One of the nomads shouted at Kirk and then the others followed with quite a large round of laughter.

Kirk swaggered back and forth, pursed his lips and then took a big gulp from the jug. “No,” he said as he wiped his face with his forearm, “at that point . . . I didn’t even have a fucking plan.”

Again, the hearty laughter of the nomads filled the air. Kirk teetered backwards and then sat down on metal drum to keep from falling over. The man closest to him reached for the jug, took a swig and then passed it on.

“But I knew we had to get to the old city.” Kirk’s voice was now quieter and more subdued. As he stared directly into the fire, the nomads mumbled in agreement, nodding their heads and commenting quietly to each other.

Then Kirk could see the jeep at the top of the stairs. He could smell the gunpowder in the air mixed with the dry sandy dirt in his throat. He heard the sound of gunfire fill the air and he heard his friends calling out. He could feel his heart racing and the blood pounding across his forehead. He could see the look on the soldiers face as the exploded out of the vehicle and lifted their rifles to fire on the woman desperately trying to coax her horse down the stairs.

Kirk squinted hard and tried to focus on the now blurring campfire. But it was fading as the memory of the early events flooded over him like a thunderous wave of crushing water. Again, Kirk blinked hard but he couldn’t blink away the vision of the bullet tearing into the horses hind quarter. Everything was in slow motion now and the screams coming from behind him were slowed and muffled.

“H-u-r-r-y u-p L-e-a-h!”

Kirk could see Tosh to his left, leaning precariously forward in the saddle. His face drawn up in some awful strained pose that looked almost like he was melting. Another shot hit the wall next to them and the horses skirted nervously around.

Kirk couldn't breathe. His chest was constricting around his ribs and his lungs were paralyzed, helplessly trapped inside of him and unable to provide him with life giving oxygen. He felt like he was encased in a huge sheet of plastic, separated from the world and slowly suffocating.

Kirk was snapped abruptly into reality by a resounding slap on his back. It was Rick and he was standing behind him swaggering with an odd glint in his eyes.

"You're plastered," Kirk stated emphatically then turned to face downward and wipe a small tear from his eye.

"Yes I am." Rick announced proudly, more to the group than to Kirk in particular. "Show me this 'com-tent' I've been hearing about."

Kirk looked back up at Rick, confused for a couple of seconds. But then, with the light from the fire illuminating half of Rick's face, Kirk recognized the odd glint in his eye. In an instant he understood and the two men connected. Kirk took a deep breath and fought hard against the tightening that was starting again around his chest again.

"Okay," Kirk nodded in an overly animated fashion. "The com-tent it is."

\*\*\*\*\* I KNOW YOU'RE JUST DYING TO PUT SOME OOSHY-GOOSHY  
BONDING TALK BETWEEN THE TWO DRUNK SAILORS HERE SO NOCK

YOURSELF OUT BABY \*\*\*\*\*

“That’s the only security they’ve got on that gateway?”

“I’m not sure they don’t even realize that backdoor’s been left in there. It used to be the municipal works building. Now there’s some kind of research or something going on in there.”

“And they kept the buildings original router??”

“Don’t know.”

“This is like taking candy from a baby . . . and then turning around and beating the holy crap out of them.”

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It was three-thirty in the morning when Chang got the call from Dakmar. There’d been some kind of accident at the lab. At first, still not completely awake, Chang thought that he meant there was a ‘little’ problem at the lab. But as the conversation progressed, it became clear that there was major problem.

When Chang arrived at the lab, the site was absolute chaos. He couldn’t figure out what was going on. There were technicians running everywhere. Red lights were flashing. Frantic communications blared over the loudspeakers and uniformed Enforcement officers scurried about like lost ants.

“What the holy hell is going on here?” Chang shouted as he caught site of Dakmar and

maneuvered around a fork lift to catch up with him.

“Let’s go to your office, it’ll be easier to talk there.” Dakmar placed his hand on Chang’s shoulder to turn him back in the direction he’d just come from.

Once inside the office, Dakmar sat down by the door and Chang stood, staring out the frosted glass window. He couldn’t really see anything through it except fuzzy blobs moving around, but his brain was still trying to catch up with everything that he’d seen in the last few minutes.

“They called me at about two this morning,” Dakmar started while Chang continued to be mesmerized by the blurs of movement outside his door.

“When I got here, number three lab was quarantined and three technicians were still inside.”

Slowly Chang’s attention turned from the window to his assistant.

“Nobody was really sure what had actually happened, but there had been a leak.”

Chang backed up slowly until he came to rest on the front of his desk. Dakmar’s tone was calm and business-like. Inconsistent with the story he was now unraveling. It wouldn’t have been at all surprising to Chang if he’d been panting and trying to catch his breath as he mumbled and stuttered his way through the horrifying explanation. But Dakmar continued, perfectly composed and absolutely unruffled.

“Initially everything was pretty well under control. I mean they’d followed procedure by the book and everything was contained within about thirty minutes.”

Chang leaned back a little harder into his desk, but still said nothing. The words still

echoed in the back of his mind – ‘a leak’. That was impossible. They had taken every precaution. There were backup systems to backup backup systems. It was just impossible.

“And then the monitors lit up. Almost all of them at once. It was unbelievable.”

Dakmar looked directly into Chang’s eyes and squinted for emphasis. “You see, the initial leak was caused by an outside instruction.”

The look on Chang’s face said that he didn’t have clue as to what Dakmar was talking about.

“It was a worm virus.”

Chang hoped that it was just his strained powers of perception at this particular moment, but he could swear that Dakmar was enjoying the way he was telling this story. Doling out a little piece of information at a time. Dangling it right on the edge and then holding it there. It was very unnerving but Chang forced back his own uncertainties and tried to focus on the problem at hand.

“From outside the network.” Again, Dakmar hung the phrase out there like a carrot. “And once it got going, it systematically ate away at all our safety systems until we were completely down.”

“But . . . how?” was all that Chang could get out right at this moment.

“Still working on that,” Dakmar stated without hesitation. “Should have the answer in a couple of hours. In the mean time I’ve had us disconnected from the main link and everyone we’ve got is working on stopping the bleeding.”

“Did any of the agent escape?”



“Yea, see, that’s the problem. When the backup systems went down, all the sealed environments were breached.”

“All of them?”

“Every last one. That’s was going on out there right now. They’re finishing up the containment.”

“But, we’re . . .” There was a sudden look of grave concern in Chang’s eyes. Bordering on fear. A painful look that started in his eyes and slowly crept its way downward across his entire face.

“We’re fine.” Again, Dakmar’s voice indicating no need for concern. “That’s why I waited until later to call you. We had to make sure the area was clean.”

Chang stood and slowly walked back up to the door to, again, peering out at the pasty white images barely visible through the glass.

“Oh my God . . . how can this be possible?”

“My guess is that we’ll find some stupid backdoor that a snot-nosed junior