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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.”