

Halcyon II

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- PRELUDE -

For nearly a century, The Board of Policy had reined with absolute authority and after its ultimate fall, came a period of reconstruction. A time when freedom of men once again reined supreme. But freedom, as it turns out, always comes with a price and during these troubling years, the price for freedom was chaos. For without The Board's iron will to govern and regulate through intimidation and fear, there was no order. And without order, the law of the land was the final judge and its jury was violence. For under this rule, the strong flourished and were rewarded with power and riches while the weak submitted or perished.

This was a turbulent time when accusations flew and paranoia abounded. A time of mistrust and a time of sorrow. And it was in those years that Enforcement began to change its presence. Began to reformulate itself and began to grow. And as it gained momentum, it gained power. Slowly at first, but as the beast grew, so too grew its insatiable appetite for souls.

Enforcement had always been the strong-arm of The Board of Policy, administering its will without mercy or pardon. But in the years before the collapse, it had existed on a leash. It had been controllable. The Board of Policy wielded absolute control in those days and Enforcement was the instrument of their bidding.

But in the post order shambles that were left, large holes in the power structure developed that had to be filled. There existed an almost *witch-hunt* like atmosphere as fear and ignorance drove people in search of an answer. Drove them in search of any

answer and they grasped for any morsel of help they could get their hands on.

With absolute freedom comes absolute chaos and the world yearned for order even at the expense of liberty. Everyone was pointing a finger and everyone wanted someone's head. It was easy for those in left in Enforcement to step in and fill the vacuum. Violence administered under the pretence of control somehow mitigates the end result. It's as though everyone became blind to the fact that the monster was returning. As if no one could see that it once again was eating and breathing fire. All they could see was relief that was a byproduct of order. All they could see was the effect that it had on outward appearance of things. But no one was looking any deeper and Enforcement continued to gain strength and power.

Death squads were established whose sole purpose was to seek out and destroy any and all responsible for the anarchy. Root out those responsible and execute them mercilessly on the spot. No wasted time spent on trials and no drawn out legal battle, just the process of cleansing the system and moving on. Judge, jury and executioner neatly rolled into one palatable package.

And as Enforcement reestablished itself as a force to be reckoned with, the process of rebuilding The Board of Policy was undertaken. But those longing for positions of power would only see their aspirations met after paying the appropriate pound of flesh to the one true authority; Enforcement.

So the government was rebuilt with a mere façade of its former self. A weakened house of cards held in place by the power of the fist. And with each passing day,

Enforcement seized power from those weaker and continued building its government veneer. The new Board of Policy was a ghost of its once mighty being. A grim replica, acting only a painted marionette.

Enforcement was now the omnipotent policemen and a dark presence always lurking in the shadows. They were everywhere and everything. The Board of Policy and The Board of Enforcement were no longer referred to as separate entities. They were known as one in the same and there was no clear understanding of exactly who was in charge or how the inner politics worked. For an over zealous new comer stepping into the massive machinery, it was an all too common occurrence to be chewed up, digested and then shat out onto the cold earth.

And as always, with absolute power came absolute mistrust. Those who ruffled feathers too easily disappeared. Too many questions...too many accusations and that old paranoia resurfaced and swept them away like a piece of insignificant dust. No questions...no trial...just gone.

So people learned to count their blessings and keep their mouths shut. They learned to accept what had come to pass and see it as a necessary way of life. See it as a better way of life than the alternative. For when things change slowly, the perception is of no change at all. And during the wind chilled clutches of the darkest nights, they'd look back over their shoulders and shiver.

1.Kirk Desert 1

Kirk Anderson wrapped the thick, protective scarf tighter across the front of his face and then adjusted his goggles. With his face adequately protected he turned his attention to the oversized, protective suit he was wearing and snugged the zipper up under his chin. The outfit made him look like a frogman, but the attire was absolutely necessary in order to survive a full blown, desert sandstorm. The storms in this part of the country were fierce and had a long history of taking the lives of those who chose not to show the appropriate respect. One of the first rules of survival that Kirk had learned was to show respect.

He had been taught that a sandstorm could sneak up and engulf you before you had time to react. The sand was swift and stealthy and the way you survived was by planning ahead—not by reacting. The swirling sand will blind and suffocate while the skin is rubbed raw from your bones. For most that perish in the desert, there is never a memorial or service of any kind for their bodies are simply absorbed and eaten by the sand. They become a ghost whose story remains a painful reminder of the consequence of not showing respect.

At the peak of the dune, Kirk stood where the wind was the strongest and the blowing sand bit like flying fire. This is where he needed to be so he knelt down, dropping his backpack in the sand in front of him. Overhead, the sky darkened as the wind howled its melody of death.

I hope you know what you're doing.

Kirk unzipped the pack, reached inside and pulled out a small metal dish about the size of a tea saucer. That was followed by a little black box with a dial, a couple of switches and a needle gauge on its face.

It had taken Kirk only one terrible brush with a desert storm 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 descended on him like a swarm of locust. 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, but the storm had been a relatively mild one. From that experience, Kirk had been left with the scars of a painful lesson and he had never again made the mistake of under estimating the desert. He had never again failed to show the proper respect.

With a pair of metal legs now attached to the dish, Kirk readjusted the scarf across his face again and then propped the dish up in the sand. 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 out the fury of the blowing menace and, although miserable, he new that wearing the suite and the goggles was the only thing that keeping him alive.

In the four years that Kirk had spent in his forced isolation there, he had come to hate

the desert. It had also come to understand and respect the desert. The desert was something to be revered and stand in awe of. And the desert was to be feared...but most of all, respected. In the desert, the hand of death was constantly laying in wait. Constantly ready to destroy anyone that failed to respect it. Constantly eager to suffocate and crush in the sweltering heat of the day or, just as willing to slowly squeeze out the essence of life in the bitter cold of night.

Four years...

Had it been that long? Kirk felt disconnected from reality as he twisted a short strand of wire from the back of the black box to the bottom of the metal dish. It didn't seem like that long ago, but it had been four years. Time, like the desert, could be both your enemy and your friend. Time healed wounds and tempered aggression. Time melted feelings and time softened sorrows. But time also stole from you. Little by little, it would sneak up on you and take your youth. Until one day, your left feeling tired and worn out—with your dreams all neatly faded so their nothing more than a distant glimmer.

But, as sorry as his desert incarceration felt, it was a picnic compared to what he would've faced if he hadn't have run. Instead of fighting the sand, he be staring at the inside of a wretched, moldy cell right now. Forced with drugs and pain to reveal secrets that would harm his dearest friends. 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 constantly 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 Kirk Anderson. He had no delusions about the bitterly cruel arm of Enforcement reaching him even in this place. There was no place that offered completely safe haven if they decided they really wanted you. No place.

Kirk finished tightening the connection between the metal box and the dish and then set the dial to zero.

Four years. It was so hard to believe, but it had been four years. And after the initial heat had died down, Kirk had to concentrate hard not to be overcome by complacency. He was pretty sure that his face still graced Enforcement bulletin boards around the world. He 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.

From within one of the front zipper pockets on his protective suit, Kirk pulled a small compass and flipped it open. Holding the compass up and squinting through the swirling sand, he took a reading and then rotated the dish in the sand.

After the desert had nearly taken 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 no home of his own, Kirk, although reluctant, was happy to accept their gracious invitation and he became an official member of their traveling community 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. They taught him

where to trade for weapons and provisions. Where to hide when things got too hot and 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 soothe 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."

2.Villa 1

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 rode 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.”

3.Pantera 1

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 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.”

4.Villa 2

“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.

5.Pantera 2

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 cris-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 that 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 sheer 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.”

6.Chang 1

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.

7.Chang 2

“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.

8.Kirk Desert 2

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 cris-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 is 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 shear 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 here 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 his canteen and thinking about his new religious affiliation.

9.Jail 1

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 too 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 that 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 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 whether 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.

10.Chang Chi 1

"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’ 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.

11.Chang Chi 2

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 quancents 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 solders and concentrated on his work. For now anyway, that was the most important thing in his life.

12.Chang Chi 3

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.Torture 1

“Let’s try it once more, from the top.” Lieutenant Commander Samuel Drake spoke in

an even tone as he walked around the man strapped in the chair. “You say your name is Achmead something or other and you’ve never seen either one of these men before.”

The Commander was holding up two photos as he spoke. The man he was talking to was strapped tightly to a large wooden chair. It was elevated slightly and tilted back like a recliner. The whites of the man’s eyes were all that was visible through the blood and the torn flesh.

He had been beaten and interrogated for several hours and the Lieutenant was pretty sure that they’d gotten everything they could out of him. He didn’t seem to know either of the fugitives, but he had been very helpful in divulging nomad campsites and hidden provision caches.

“I’d like to make this as painless as possible for you Achmead.” The Lieutenant continued to walk slowly in circles around the man in the chair as he nodded to the gentleman hovering over him in the lab coat and bloody rubber gloves.

A gut wrenching scream filled the room as the man convulsed violently and reared up against the leather straps. The wooden structure was a modified electric chair that used to be employed exclusively for executions. Now, with its electric current lowered to just below the point of killing, it had become one of the more useful methods of extracting information. And from where Commander Drake stood, it was just plain fun too.

The Commander waited for the man to stop twitching and then he continued with his playful monologue. “Because it hurts me to see you suffer like this.”

Again the Commander nodded at the rubber gloved technician and again the awful

screams filled every crack in the room from top to bottom. The Commander stopped pacing and held the photographs up in front of Achmead's face.

“Any ideas . . . any at all?”

The man was whimpering and mumbling. He didn't know them, he'd never seen them. Blah, blah, blah, it was the same old shit that he'd been blabbering on about for the last hour or so. And when he started to get little spittles of blood on the picture, the Lieutenant had a fit.

“What the fuck is this all about?” He reared back in disgust and walked around behind the man in the lab coat. There, he wiped the pictures off, slowly rubbing them down the guy's back.

Then he took a deep breath and regained his composure. It was late and he was getting tired. No need to act rashly, though. So he walked back around in front of the man in the chair. Then he reached forward and started tapping his finger on the man's chest. Almost like he was checking to see how full the guy was or something.

“I think you're telling me the truth, Achmead.” The Commander leaned forward to study what was left of the man's face. Then he turned sharply and headed for the door. With his hand on the handle, he turned and made eye contact with the technician. Nothing was said, but the message that was relayed was crystal clear.

As he closed the door behind him, Samuel Drake could hear the muffled screams rise in pitch and turn into a bubbling, staccato gurgling kind of sound. All in all, it had been a very productive day so far.

“Bring me the other one,” the Commander spoke curtly to one of the guards as he leaned against the wall smoking a cigarette. “Anderson, I think. Yes . . . Kirk Anderson and I need to have a little chat.”

14.Break Out 1

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 form 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.

15.Break Out 2

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 he 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 islands 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 my self.”

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.

16.Sheri Dies

“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 Franklin Tosh and Leah and they were covered with sweat and panting heavily.

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

He was leaning against the back of the closed door, desperately trying to catch his breath. Leah had wandered over to the corner of the room, leaned her head against the wall and was 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 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 sat and quietly cried. Rick was in shock. He couldn’t believe the scene that was playing out in front of him.

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

Sheri?"

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 tried 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 questions about Technology and where she worked."

"So they've got her? She's in custody?" The intensity in Rick's voice had reached a fever pitch. "We've got to go get her. Where did they take her? Do you know, Leah?"

Leah shook her head gently back and forth as she continued, "He was hinting around that we'd have to come in for questioning and a background check."

"She's is in custody right?" The panic in Rick's voice was an insidious indication of worst fear. But, he couldn't face it. He just couldn't bring himself to believe what Leah was about to tell him.

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

"And that's when they took her? THAT'S WHEN SHE WAS CAPTURED?" Rick was frantic now. His eyes were great big 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 would pry the *right* information out of her.

“WHERE IS SHE? WHERE IS SHERI NOW? TELL ME.”

Leah took a deep breath and wiped her cheek with her sleeve. She looked down at Franklin and then over at Kirk, who she didn’t know and didn’t need to at that moment. Then she looked sorrowfully 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 as the tears started flowing down her face again. “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.

“No. 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. These people wouldn’t have been there if he hadn’t of acted so irrationally and so irresponsible.

With Rick's head still buried in Leah's shoulder, Kirk walked over and placed his hand on her back.

"You didn't see anything else? Was there just the one shot or others?"

Leah looked up at Kirk. "No. Just the one shot...and we were running so hard that all I had a chance to do was get one quick look at her there on the ground. She wasn't moving."

Kirk surveyed the room as he thought, pushing back his own overwhelming need to grieve. "We don't know that she's dead."

"She wasn't moving." Leah looked down and mumbled at the floor.

"And we don't know how close they are to finding you. I think it's probably real important that we get out of here right now."

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. "Do you have someplace we can go? Someplace to hide from Enforcement?"

Kirk's empty stare went right through the middle of her. At the moment he wasn't sure that they could hide from Enforcement. He wasn't sure that they were going to be able to get out of this one at all. For all he knew, soldiers were questioning the man at the front desk at this very moment and they'd be knocking down the door within a minute or two.

"Ahhu." Kirk answered without emotion.

Kirk watched as Leah turned and walked over to where Franklin was still sobbing on the floor. She pulled gently on his shirt but Franklin didn't budge. Then she turned and

looked at Rick, frozen on the bed behind her.

And then there was a knock on the door that was so loud it shook all of them into a dead panic. Kirk's brain was locked up. He couldn't think. Between the realization that he was probably responsible for Sheri's death and the terrifying thought of re-incarceration, Kirk was absolutely stuck to the floor with indecision.

Again the deafening knock echoed throughout the small room as the anonymous somebody outside pounded insistently on the door. With each resounding thud, the door shook violently and lurched inward. As Franklin drug himself to his feet and backed away, 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."

Kirk leaned forward and grabbed the handle on the door, but as he opened the door, the dark skinned man from the lobby pushed the door in and then turned and closed it just as quickly. He stood for a moment, pressing the side of his face up against the door before reaching down and gently opening it just enough to look out through the crack. Then he turned the knob and pushed the door carefully closed.

"They're doing a door to door." The man spoke directly to Kirk. "I started them down the other corridor, but it's not going to take them long—maybe only a couple of minutes. You've got to get out of here now."

Again, the man turned and opened the door just crack. 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 let’s go. NOW!”

Shocked, confused and still dazed by what had happened to Sheri, they all obeyed the man and followed without question. Down the corridor and through a utility room covered in conduit and metal boxes. Through a back hallway and then, finally out into the searing heat of the day.

They were in the alley, behind the building and someone had already assembled five horses for them. Each one equipped with provisions, rifles and plenty of water. After mounting up without a word—not a question about where they were headed or why—everyone just sat there staring at the single empty horse.

“Pantera’s men said to meet up with him 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. “Suppose that means something to you. At least I hope for your sake that it does.”

With glazed over eyes, Kirk took the leather straps in his hands and nodded to indicate his understanding. At the same time, a single tear ran down Rick’s cheek. 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 into pieces of bone. He lingered, frozen in time for just a second as blood gushed from the huge hole, soaking the front of his shirt. Then, in slow motion, he fell forward to the ground, landing limp and lifeless with a dull dry thud and a puff of dust. The last look on his face seeming to urge, “Go.”

“Heeya!” Kirk yelled and mashed his feet hard into the horse’s side. The other three followed in a spastic bouncing gate. Although Leah had been on a horse, she was not a proficient rider. Rick had ridden a lot when he was younger so he immediately found his stride, letting 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. Bouncing and jostling, he clung to the animal as if participating in a rodeo bull ride. Luckily for him the horse seemed to be a veteran of this kind of activity and knew exactly what to do.

Kirk wrestled to keep the thought of Sheri out of his head. He knew that he was going to have to focus all of his energies in the present if he wanted to avoid a repeat of that incident. He knew that he’d need every bit of wit and finesse he could muster. Otherwise, this time there’d be four 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.

Without looking, he knew they were behind him. Without thinking he knew they’d be flanking him on the side streets and instinctively he countered by heading for a tiny

alleyway.

A shot ricocheted off of the brick wall to Kirk's left, right before he cut hard and turned down the narrow pathway. The others, heads down and hanging on for life, brought up the rear as three more shots sprayed splinters of brick into the air in front of them.

Kirk knew that he'd have to concentrate on his advantages. One of the most immediate was his knowledge of the streets and alleys in Chi. Over the years, he'd spent many hours in these back alleys and pathways brokering deals and forging seedy business relationships. Hours spent buying weapons and explosives. Searching for those that could provide the best papers and those that could get things done inside of the corrupt structure of the political system. These were all things that could be arranged undercover and in the shadows.

Chi spread out and etched by a labyrinth of tiny crisscrossing streets. It was a city that was built and rebuilt on top of itself for centuries. It was a virtual maze of multi-level streets, alleys and small passageways. Streets that didn't connect to any others, or that connected only in certain places certain, almost secret places. The confusing navigation was part of the culture of the town and it was something that was used extensively to keep outsiders feeling like outsiders.

And as Kirk could hear the jeeps turning the corner behind him, he was keenly aware that this knowledge would be his only hope of saving his friends. Kirk yanked the reins hard to the right and guided the animal down a narrow stretch of stone steps into the old

part of the city. The part of the city with the most complicated network of tiny streets.

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 to make sure he had everyone before pushing on. Rick and Tosh were there but Leah was just starting down the steps. Then, he watched in horror as three Enforcement jeeps pulled up at the top of the hill behind her. The jeep screeched to a halt and the men poured out like lava from an erupting volcano.

Kirk took one quick look around to make sure no one had been injured. He felt trapped. The prudent thing to do we be to go now. To ensure the safety of the three and hope that the fourth would be able to catch up later. After all, she was born and raised in Chi and would have no trouble with finding her way.

But Kirk could not leave her. He could never leave anyone again. Without consciously making the decision, he had already decided that they were all going to make it out together or they were all going to die together. There was no other option. So he watched helpless as Leah's horse seemed to tip-toe down the perilous steps. There were steep walls rising high on either side of the stairway and Rick and Tosh were positioned out of sight from the officers up the hill. Kirk was the only one visible to them as they took up a position at the top of the stairs and drew there weapons.

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, bounced once and then rolled forward onto her feet. If she was hurt, she had too much adrenaline in her body to know it. Without a thought or the least bit of hesitation, she jumped up onto Kirk's horse and grabbed him tightly around the waist.

Kirk had no time to be thankful for what had just happened and he had no time to start feeling like they'd be able to get out of this with their skin. He still had to focus on the task at hand so he quickly got his crew moving again and, to their dismay, turned immediately down another rock stairway.

"Watch out, it's slippery," Kirk shouted back at the others.

"Crap!" Tosh yelled as he kicked his horse in the side three times trying to get it to comply.

The opening was smaller and darker than the other one and in lead down into complete darkness. At the bottom, only thin strands of sunlight penetrated into the cramped passageway between the buildings. The air was damp and there was an old musty smell to it that seemed to permeate from the surrounding moss covered walls.

Another turn, into an even smaller corridor. This time, everyone had to duck down close the horses back to keep from being knocked off. In one of the archways along the sides of the corridor, a woman stood in holding a small child's hand. With nothing more

than a look from Kirk, she turned, as if on some invisible queue, and disappeared into the darkness.

Kirk threaded his team through the spaces between the buildings, making a special effort to avoid anyplace that was visible to the street. Then, somehow they appeared in the daylight right in the middle of a huge ravine at the outskirts of the city. A ravine, that to everyone's disgust, was filled with the untreated sewage from the inhabitants of Chi. It coursed downhill and ended its journey at the water treatment plant a mile or so out of town.

Kirk looked back at the others. "Come on," he said, "it's our best chance. But we've got to move now."

And with that, he nudged his horse into the river of muck. Leah held her forearm up to cover her nose while Rick and Tosh scrunched up their faces in unison, as if to say 'You've got to be kidding.'

17.Reservoir 1

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.”

18.Nomads 1 -

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 un-crossable 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 by 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 were heading."

19.Nomads 2 -

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 breath. 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 building's 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."

20. Lab Problem 1 -

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 you 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

programmer left in by mistake. I wouldn't stress over it if I were you."

Chang was feeling sick right now. It was easy for Dakmar to be flip about it because he wasn't going to be the one sitting in front of the Chairman of Technology and explaining what had happened here. This was Chang's neck out on the line and it was started to feel stretched.

"How could such a thing happen?" Chang could hear the Chairman's voice echoing in his ears.

"Well, sir . . . we're still working on . . ."

"That's not acceptable, Chang. Not at all acceptable. I want some answers and I want them before I leave here today."

What Chang didn't realize was how far off this imagined conversation was from the real one that would be taking place in just a couple of hours. Already phones were ringing and people were being informed. Within the hour, there would be a buzz of activity at The Board of Policy and the two predominant topics would be Chi and Chang.

Chang's forehead was covered with tiny beads of cold sweat and his mouth was sour and dry. He swallowed hard and tried not to think about how bad he needed to throw up right now. Dakmar just smiled and studied his fingernails.

21.Dakmar's Boss 1 -

The man sitting behind the desk, covered in dark oppressing shadows, was now lighting another cigarette and leaning forward. The office was lit by a single desk lamp and as he man moved forward into its eerie light, the bottom of his face began to emanate

an evil glow.

“Well.” The man let the word hang for a long time, as if it were strong enough to stand alone as a complete sentence. “It sounds as if this could work to our advantage, Dak.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Dakmar chimed in without hesitation.

Dakmar was seated directly across from the man in a straight backed wooden chair. Even on the uncomfortable piece of wood, Dakmar was lounged back with one arm cocked over the back of the chair, hand dangling next to his head and legs crossed in front of him.

“Yea, this couldn’t have happened better if I’d planned it.”

The man leaned further into the ominous glow of the desk lamp with an increased look of concern on his face. Dakmar read the expression and anticipated his next question.

“Oh, we found the whole within fifteen minutes. I just let Chang sweat awhile thinking it was more complicated than that.”

Some of the concern dissipated from the man’s face but there was a lingering sense of something more. Again, Dakmar answered the unasked question.

“It was a router . . . some of the original network hardware in place in the building when we moved in.” Dakmar paused for a moment as the man took a drag on his cigarette and then returned to the shadows. “It’s been replaced.”

“Good.” The man stated in confidence without really understanding the explanation but trusting Dakmar’s conviction in the matter.

“Is everything else on schedule then?”

“Yes sir.” Dakmar dropped his arm off the back of the chair and sat straight up. “I’m really about three weeks ahead right now.”

Dakmar placed both feet squarely on the floor, leaned forward and pressed his hands into his thighs.

“And Chang?” The question seemed to follow a puff of smoke from deep within the shadows behind the desk.

“Trust me.” Dakmar began to smile. “We’re not going to have a problem with Professor Chang.”

22.Chang Puppet 1 -

Chang talks to officials in Chi about the little problem last night.

23.Nomads 3 -

The next morning, Rick spent almost a half an hour asking everyone in camp if they had an aspirin. No one did. And they probably wouldn’t have told him even if they did. It was quite amusing to the nomads to see the tortured, death-like expressions on those who failed to heed the appropriate respect for the root wine.

So around eight-thirty, he finally gave up his quest and drug himself over to the

smoldering remains of the campfire. Kirk picked up a thick piece of rag and grabbed for the blackened metal coffee pot that was nestled comfortably in between the glowing coals.

“Thanks.” Rick’s voice cracked as he picked up one of the rust colored metal cups laying on the ground. “What the hell was in that shit?”

“You don’t want to even know.” Kirk was hoarse and sounded worse than Rick. There were deep gray rings underneath both eyes and the skin on his face seemed to just hang limp off of his skull.

Rick sipped on the dark sludge and pretended that it actually was coffee. He stared aimlessly into the remaining embers and then, without warning, began to cry. Not a loud blabbering kind of cry, just a quiet rhythmic sob.

“What am I going to do?” The pain and desperation rang through his voice like a cannon.

Kirk didn’t have an answer and was starting feel queasy. He knew, intellectually, that blaming himself was destructive and dangerous. But he couldn’t help it. This was his fault. The big question right now was how he was going to deal with it and get on with things.

He’d lost friends before. Seen death and even looked into the face of it himself on occasion. These were not new feelings to him but they were, non the less, very painful. Mourning the death of a dear friend was always painful and Kirk knew that it had to be. Because if it ever stopped ripping your guts out then you’d stop being human. So he

endured his own overwhelming sense of guilt and sat quietly with his friend. Not saying anything but just being there.

And the longer they sat, the angrier he got.

“Those fucking bastards,” he mumbled under his breath.

And then he felt his old friend returning. Just as he had in the stinking jail cell down in Chi. Just as the anger had helped him stay focused and forget about his fear, now it returned to help shield him from the pain. A soft, insulating barrier of warm soothing anger. It was red and tasted sour against his lips. And the longer and harder he thought about yesterday’s events, the madder he got.

Anger was turning into rage and rage was turning into a strange clarity of purpose. The lingering effects of the hangover seemed nonexistent now and Kirk was beginning to feel like he was drawn. Somehow being led to the answer. And the answer was action. The answer was to strike back and strike back hard.

But with the recent build up in Chi, they were horribly out-gunned and under manned. Could these kind of odds be overcome with a surgical, chess-like plan of attack? A way to systematically carve up the enemy until they lay battered and bloody at his feet? Putting the final bullet through the middle of their head only after laughing at their miserable pleas for mercy.

“How’s everyone doing today?” Tosh hadn’t realized what he was walking into until it was too late to turn back. Kirk was paralyzed, staring into the remains of the fire like a madman and Rick was just weeping quietly under his breath.

Tosh looked around nervously. “Not too good?” It wasn’t really what he wanted to say, but it just kind of slipped out before he could stop it.

Then without warning, Kirk stood and turned to face Tosh. The muscles in his jaw were rippling and he ground his teeth back and forth and there was a red hot rage burning in his eyes.

Franklin turned to look behind him, hoping that it was somebody else that was the intended recipient of this intense stare. But no such luck. There was nothing behind him but the lose opening of a tent, flapping in the breeze. Tosh turned around slowly and to his relief, Kirk looked down at Rick. Every muscle in his face seemed to draw tight across his face.

Then he looked back and Tosh and said, “Come with me.”

Tosh followed him the best he could as he through the nomad camp looking for something. When he came across Pantera teaching a small boy how to bridal a horse, he stopped dead in his tracks.

“I need to talk to you.”

Pantera stood with a somber look on his face as he read the tortured look on his friends face. “Okay.” Pantera muttered softly and then patted the boy gently on the back.

Together, Tosh and Pantera followed behind Kirk as he headed toward the com-tent, occasionally looking at each other with questioning eyes.

Several steps inside the tent, Kirk stopped and surveyed the room. Franklin and Pantera stood quietly behind him. Then he lunged forward and wiped a pile of computer

parts off of one of the folding tables. It looked like it had used for a workbench. Then he walked over and squatted down in between two cabinets of tattered looking electronic gear and emerged with a overgrown ragged looking typewriter.

Kirk heaved it onto the table he'd just cleared and then opened a little panel on the back and dropped out a wad of black wires. Tosh and Pantera were mesmerized and said nothing during Kirk's performance.

Kirk pulled up one of the folding metal chairs and sat down, facing the other two men. He pointed anxiously to the other chairs, indicating that they should have already been seated in front of him.

"How many of the other tribes do you have a relationship with?" Kirk spoke directly to Pantera.

"There are . . . several in the area that I would say are good friends."

"Apparently you've got sympathetic friends in town that I was unaware of."

Pantera smiled coyly. "A few."

Kirk rubbed his chin and thought hard while his eyes bounced back and forth between Pantera and Tosh. The earlier rage in his eyes had been replaced by something else. Something almost indescribable. A purpose . . . or maybe it was a direction. Anyway, there was nothing to lead the other two to believe that Kirk was a raving lunatic out for revenge. A crazy man bent on destroying the enemy at any cost.

No, Kirk seemed very much in control of his faculties at this moment and it was a look that both intrigued and scared Pantera.

“I’ve got an idea,” Kirk announced after several minutes. As he spoke, he stood and walked past the men and went straight over to a large map that was pinned to the side of the tent. Again, Kirk rubbed his chin and then he turned to see if the other two were paying attention.

They had shifted in there chairs and were both sideways, looking over their shoulder at Kirk and the map.

“For years, we’ve had a problem with the outposts.” Kirk pointed quickly to one of the two dozen little red dots on the map. “They’ve been the eyes and ears of the authorities in Chi and our continuing strategy has been to just avoid them.”

Kirk raised his eyebrows and waited for some kind of response from Pantera. After a sideways nod from the big man, Kirk continued. “We found out early on that any attack was futile.” Kirk was now facing Franklin.

“They’re miles apart,” Kirk continued without waiting for any reaction. “And if we could successfully smash one of them, there was no way to get to the next one before the helicopters arrived.”

Pantera respected the passion in Kirk’s voice and also afforded him the courtesy of a close friend. But he was tiring of this history lesson and was anxious for Kirk to make his point.

Kirk stood and looked back and forth at the two men sitting sideways in front of him. Neither of them had a clue as to what he was talking about and in showed.

“What do you think the authorities in Chi would do if we found away to systematically

decimate a line of these outposts in a matter of minutes?" Kirk turned to the map and drew a line with his finger from the outer edge, right into the center. Right into the heart of Chi.

Pantera pursed his lips and lowered his eyebrows against his darkening eyes. "You're talking about a coordinated attack on half a dozen outposts."

Pantera let the words hang in the air as Kirk turned slowly from the map to face him. The tone in his voice was obviously intended to scold Kirk on idiocy of his idea. Even with the help of the other nomad tribes, it would be utterly impossible to mount that kind of a coordinated offensive. Their ill-fated attempt at just one of these outposts remained as a constant reminder of the futility of that effort.

Pantera's scowl softened and then a smile started across his lips. "Kirk, my friend." The man's tone was now warm and sincere. "I do understand what you've been through . . . I do. But what you speak of is madness."

The sinister grin on Kirk's face gave Pantera an upset feeling in the bottom of his stomach. Kirk turned to Tosh and pointed at the thing he had placed on the table behind them.

"Do you recognize that?"

"It looks like a typewriter."

"No." Kirk barked as he walked quickly between them and over to the table. "It's a teletype machine." The tone in Kirk's voice seemed to indicate some great revelation, but it was apparently lost on the other two men.

First Pantera looked at Tosh – as if to say ‘do you know what he’s talking about?’ – and then he turned back to Kirk. The grin was steadily creeping across his face and it was obvious that Kirk was about the reveal something to them. Something that neither of them could figure out.

“How do the outposts communicate with their headquarters in Chi?” Kirk spoke directly to Pantera.

After a brief delay, the big man pointed to the table. “With one of those things?”

“With a teletype machine.” Kirk reaffirmed the tentative answer.

Again, Tosh and Pantera exchanged a quick, confused glance. And again, they both stared at Kirk with the most bewildering looks on their faces.

“Can you fix it, Tosh?”

The question took him by surprise. Then Franklin stood and walked over to the table and studied the . . . thing. It was old technology. Transistors and relays. No chips or microprocessors. Whatever it did, it couldn’t have been too complicated.

“Yea, I guess.” Franklin squeaked timidly, still studying the strange piece of ancient electronic hardware.

“Then I can show you,” Kirk turned his attention to Pantera, “how to eliminate six outposts in a matter of minutes.”

Pantera shifted in his chair and tried to remember what exactly it was that he had had for breakfast. Because it didn’t seem to be sitting too well right now.

24.The Plan 1 -

Pantera had assembled the elders of the tribe in the area of camp reserved for meetings. At one end, a make-shift easel made out of two broom sticks and an old rifle husk, supported the map from the com-tent. Next to it Kirk paced back and forth as he peered out over the men walking up and sitting down.

He had been running the plan over and over in his head since he'd thought of it just a few hours ago. It seemed so perfect then, but now every time he ran through it, he encountered another pitfall. Nothing major . . . just something else that needed to be thought of ahead of time. At least if this was going to come off without anyone getting killed. And it was important to have the actual details worked out before presenting this thing to the elders.

The nomad elders were a group of twelve men that, in times past, had been some of the groups most revered warriors. Although Pantera was the undisputed leader of the tribe, all major decisions required input and guidance from this group of men. Their knowledge and experience were just about always welcome.

Pantera had outlined Kirk's idea to them earlier and they immediately had a lot of questions about this hair-brained idea. It was almost not worth listening to, but the men had come to, if not completely understand Kirk's ways, at least to trust his belief in them. Kirk had given them quite an edge over the years with all his new fangled contraptions. And, although they believed this idea to be driven completely by Kirk's recent loss of a friend, they gathered to hear him out.

“The important thing is to give the impression of superior force.” Kirk launched in before the last man had been seated. “It’s absolutely essential that we convince them of this up front. Otherwise they’ll leave too many men behind in reserve.”

Kirk paused just long enough for everyone to get settled in but continued before anyone could ask a question. “We’ve got to be able to get them to throw everything they’ve got at this one assault.”

Kirk turned quickly and pointed at a region of the map that was beyond the last outpost. “Everyone knows that these outposts are virtual turtle shells of concrete and steel. Well able to hold off most attacks until reinforcements arrive.”

The group seemed to nod in unison as well as mumble their joint acceptance of the explanation.

“And they believe the same thing we do: that the outposts are indestructible.”

Again the group nodded and looked around at each other.

“So if they were suddenly faced with an attack fierce enough to bring down all six outposts in a matter of minutes, I’m sure they’d react with an all out defensive – throw everything they’ve got at stopping that attack.”

“Kirk,” came a voice from the middle of the group, “that kind of muscle is just not possible . . . even with help from the other tribes. It would be suicide.”

Kirk smiled and nodded. “I know that . . . and I’m not proposing that we attack the outposts.” Kirk paused just long enough to look over the group once. “I’m proposing that we attack Chi.”

The group of men erupted into a frenzy of chatter and commotion. It was completely expected and Kirk used the next few moments to his advantage by running over the details again in his mind. Finally, when the noise level had come down enough to be heard over, Kirk returned his attention to the map.

“Fifteen men on horseback, right at the outskirts of outpost number six.”

The men were still talking amongst themselves, but Kirk paid them no mind. Still pointing at the map, he turned to face the elders. “That’s enough to show up as a pretty good blip on thermal satellite imaging. It’ll act as the catalyst for the sequence of events that we put into motion from this point forward.”

There was a collective feeling of uneasy apprehensiveness anytime Kirk started talking about these high-tech things. Most everyone in the group was aware of satellites and networks and those things, but they didn’t understand them. They had trouble seeing their importance as it related to most anything that they did. They were just strange and mysterious things from a faraway place. Nothing that could effect me out here in the desert today.

“When these fifteen men move on outpost number six, the first teletype message will hit in Chi. One of the reasons I’ve never considered doing anything with the outposts was those damned old teletype machines. It’s just a wire from the outpost straight to Chi. There’s no way to hack into it. And if you cut the cable, the helicopters will be there in minutes. And even if you could, what’s the point?”

The elders sort of understood what he was saying. They knew that because the typing

machines where the only means of communication from the outposts, Kirk couldn't do anything to them from within the com-tent. They scary place with all of the electricity on the floor. They also knew that, over the years, Kirk had done some pretty neat things from within that com-tent. So even though they didn't understand the means, they did have a deep understand for the effect. So they continued to listen in earnest as Kirk laid out the plan.

Now, Kirk pointed to an area on the map that was between Chi and the closest outpost. "I want to splice into that cable here. Patch into it with a teletype machine of our own."

Some of the men squinted, others just continued staring.

"And as we move our artificial attack forward, we'll systematically cut the teletype cable here, here, here, here, here and here." Kirk popped the map with his index finger at the location of each outpost.

The men that were squinting continued to do so. The ones that were staring began to squint and one of the men started to smile.

"The whole time, we'll be sending coordinated messages of our own to the headquarters in Chi. Carefully constructed messages about the size and power of the oncoming attack."

Two more of the men began to smile.

"Ten, fifteen seconds apart. Right up the line. So it looks like a massive force is pouring down on them out of the west. Each successive teletype message will be short and cut off abruptly as essential pieces of information are relayed back to them in chaotic

spurts of disjointed confusion.”

Now there was a rise in conversation between the elders. Quiet whispers and speckled with animated head movement. And all but two of the men were smiling.

“How will we coordinate the attacks at all the outposts?”

Kirk smiled at the question because if they were buying into it then chances were very good that the Enforcement officials, faced with scattered information, would too.

“We’re only moving on the first outpost. They’ll be the ones to send the first messages to Chi and we’ll need to intercept those to get the coding and sequencing right for our messages.”

Nobody knew what Kirk had just said but they had no trouble reading the confidence in his voice.

“After that,” Kirk turned back to the map, “the original fifteen will ride off in every direction. Scatter to the wind. On the thermal imaging, it’ll look like the blip just dissipated. Disappeared, gone. They’ll think that they’re either having a malfunction or that we’ve found away to shield ourselves from the sensors. Either way, it doesn’t matter. It adds to their confusion at a crucial point and forces them to make a decision – blind – about the perceived threat.”

Kirk smiled and turned back to survey the group. There was a flurry of head shaking and head nodding combined with broken sentences and chopped responses.

“Do they commit . . . or not?” Kirk asked the question calmly and then watched as the smiles grew all through the crowd. Because they knew what he was going to say next.

They knew what the culmination of this was and it was actually starting to sound pretty good to them. Starting to sound very good, in fact.

“Because then we come up on the east side of Chi with every last nomad for a thousand mile radius and we put some serious hurt on their infrastructure.”

“And what about that thermal thing? Won’t it see our force assemble to the east?”

“We’ll keep spaced out until the last minute. They’re not going to get a reading ‘til two or three men and horses bunch up.”

“What happens when they figure out they’ve been duped?”

“Coming in from the east puts us in . . .”

“The old city . . .” Half the group murmured together.

“There’s really no good way to get to it with a vehicle. At least from the west side where everything’s been built up over the rubble from the great earthquake. We’re banking on the fact that by the time they figure out what’s going on, they just react without thinking and dive headlong into the old city . . . on foot.”

“And that would be stupid.” Pantera seemed to emerge from out of nowhere and stood behind the elders. “Because by then we’d be hidden in every nook and cranny. We’d be around every corner and under every stone. And as the narrow streets and alley-ways of the old city divide and separate our enemy into little bit-sized pieces, we’ll chew them up and spit out their dead remains.”

25.The Plan 2 -

Pantera spent the next few days riding and visiting the other tribes. At each meeting,

he'd outline the plan to the tribe's elders, in a fashion similar to the meeting Kirk held with Pantera's men. He'd field their questions and explain, the best that he could, the technologies that would work for them in this arena. He talked with them about the strengths and the dangers in the plan. And then he'd ride off, horse watered and fed and, hopefully, with a commitment for support.

There wasn't a nomad tribe in the desert that hadn't been fighting these people for years. So, for the most part, it was an easy sell. They we're already on the lookout for any and every reason they could find to strike back. And they respected Pantera. He was more than just another tribal leader. He was more of an informal organizer of all the tribes. It wasn't an elected position, but it was an earned one. He was diplomatic and empathetic to all concerns and throughout the years had proven himself as a solid politician and negotiator.

So it was, that he returned to the camp weary and tired on the third night. He'd been riding almost constantly in an effort to meet with as many of the other tribal leaders as possible. And pretty much the sentiment was the same across the board.

"They're all in." Pantera slid off the horse and handed the reins to one of the young boys.

Kirk and two of the elders approached him with outstretched arms and a goatskin canteen. After a huge drink of water, the big man slapped the elders on the back, put his arm around Kirk and drug him over to the fire.

"I've got a commitment for nearly a thousand men." Pantera tipped the bag of water

up to his lips and sucked the rest of the fluid from inside.

Kirk was speechless. One thousand men. This was incredible. His original plan was predicated on the possibility of getting a few hundred men together. But, a thousand. This was going to better than he could've ever dreamed.

“A thousand men?” Kirk’s eyes were as wide as saucers.

“Give or take.” Pantera sat down and grabbed a hunk of dried meat from a platter next to the fire and then proceeded to devour it in three massive chomps.

Kirk remained standing and started to walk in little circles behind Pantera. The big man pretended not to notice as he grabbed another chunk of meat and a piece of bread from the tray.

“That means we’ll be able to canvas the old city from top to bottom.” Kirk was still walking in circles. “There’ll be no place they can turn without being slaughtered. Around every corner . . . death will be waiting.”

Kirk stopped dead in his tracks and then stepped forward to sit down next to Pantera. “This is great news my friend.”

Pantera nodded and swallowed hard on a piece of crusty bread. “I know.”

Kirk reached for the clay jug and carefully took a swig. “It’s going to be a massacre.”

Pantera nodded flamboyantly and belched loudly before taking the jug away from Kirk. “Now we have to put our money in the place where are mouth is.”

Kirk didn’t bother correcting because the absolute truth of what he was saying had just struck home. If this thing wasn’t timed just perfectly . . . if, for some reason, they didn’t

buy the severity of the attack . . . if someone actually read the whole thing as a ploy and dug in without moving . . .

All of a sudden there were a lot of ‘ifs’ and Kirk was wondering if a thousand men were enough. Pantera turned to him and knew exactly what he was thinking. He knew because he’d had most of the same feelings himself in the last twenty four hours. He also knew that worry was useless unless it led to action.

Pantera held the jug out and Kirk took it slowly from his hand and tilted it to his lips. “Every man dies, but not every man truly lives . . .” Pantera said with a deep Scottish accent.

26.Attack 1 -

The sky was the color of dirty gold, delicately laced with thin strips of ominously dark clouds. Behind them, the last rays of daylight were breaking up and dissipating as the sun dropped gently toward the horizon. A warm glow encircled the edges of the dark gray ribbons that hung on the horizon like traces of smoke from a dirty fire.

Kirk sat on top of his horse and felt the mild evening breeze on his face. Although the days were deathly hot year round, the evening air began to cool substantially in late October. This was going to be one of these wonderful nights in the desert before it actually started getting dangerously cold at after dark.

But this would be the only chance Kirk had to enjoy it. Looking out over the desert, he was overcome with a unnerving sense of surrealism. He was flanked on either side by five hundred nomad soldiers ready for battle. One thousand men in all who had made the

commitment to strike. One thousand men who had mad the commit to die . . . if necessary, to preserve their freedom and their way of life.

In the days leading up to this moment, Kirk had spent a lot of time with, not only the elders of each tribe, but with the men that would actually be doing the fighting. He went over the plan again and again until everyone was sick of it. And then he'd make them explain it to him. Not just an overview but in exacting detail. Because the whole thing was predicated on timing and surprise. Lose either one of those key elements and their pitifully armed armada could me in for some real trouble.

But properly executed . . . with everyone understanding the whole plan and understanding how their part fit into it . . . Kirk hoped that this would be one of those stories that was recounted around the evening campfire for generations to come. One of those stories that just got better with time as it's told and retold by countless thousands of nomad elders.

Kirk drew in a deep breath of the almost sweet smelling desert air. Then he surveyed the landscape carefully around him. All one thousand and eighty men were perched, almost motionless on horseback, and not closer than twenty feet to each other. This spacing was instrumental in confusing the thermal imaging equipment that had been specifically tuned to pick up groups of people. Kirk wasn't exactly sure if there'd be nothing on the screens back in Chi or if there nomad army would just show up as a haze. Either way, it didn't really matter. As long as they were confused by it long enough for Kirk to get the men into position. As long as it muddied and delayed their crucial

decision making process at the critical moment.

Kirk looked down at his watch and thought about Tosh sitting in his little sand blind. Early that morning, right before dawn, a small group of them had ridden to the outskirts of Chi and located one of the teletype poles right past the reservoir. After carefully splicing into the line – Tosh had built some kind of impedance matching gizmo just in case they had the ability to monitor that kind of change on the line – they set up a tiny tent at the base of the wooden pole. It was barely big enough to house Tosh, the modified teletype machine and its battery pack. Then, with Tosh tightly nestled inside the uncomfortable lair, the other men carefully sprinkled sand over the top and shoveled big drifts up the sides of the tent.

Kirk worried about him out there all day by himself, but Franklin had insisted on doing it himself. He had modified the teletype machine to accept input from a laptop computer and all of the messages had been preprogrammed from there. Tosh was worried that if anything went wrong at the last minute, he'd be the only one able to correct the problem. Of course he was right and Kirk was forced, reluctantly, to agree with the request.

But now it was time. Time to put all the planning into motion. Time to strike a brutal blow to their oppressors. Kirk raised his arm high into the air and waved a white handkerchief. The mass of horsemen spread across the sand began moving like a wave. From the front, a ripple of motion rolled quietly over the army as the ranks from behind started to move in response to the men in front.

Nervously, Kirk looked around at the men spread out across the desert, as far as he

could see in either direction. He was deathly afraid of them not paying attention to his instructions and bunching up. Even if for a minute, it could be disastrous. It was the part of the plan that he'd gone over and over with them.

"They can measure the heat of just a few men riding together." Kirk remembered repeating it for what seemed like a hundred times.

Now he was afraid that he hadn't impressed upon them the importance of this little thing. And now he was overwhelmed with a terrible sense of anxiety. A terrible sense of being totally out of control and helplessly at the mercy of others.

But the nomads were flawless. Absolutely perfect. Once the regiment had begun to move, it synched up with itself and then maintained the most amazingly perfect grid-like pattern as it moved inexorably toward its destination. Kirk was in awe and felt suddenly guilty for the thoughts he'd had about these people. After all his sleepless nights and all his fears, these people were probably taking this more seriously than he was. They were focused and disciplined and Kirk was proud and humbled to be riding with them today.

27.Defense 1 -

In the basement of the Municipal building in the heart of new downtown Chi, Commander Edward Franks was just arriving for the evening shift. The crew of twelve, mostly technicians and clerical, had already been rotated out. This happened in five minute increments over the previous hour to keep from ever having an unmanned station. This was Enforcement's nerve center for everything that happened a hundred miles in any direction and it was manned constantly, twenty-four hours a day without interruption.

Especially during shift changes.

The Commander launched into his standard routine without thought. A cup of coffee from the freshly brewed pot – something it had only taken him one day to train his second in command to have there when he arrived. And then came the walk through.

He'd sip the hot coffee and walk slowly around the dark room that continuously hummed with the sound of electrical activity and quiet chatter. Luminous computer screens flashed and flickered. Technicians spoke mechanically into headset microphones as they monitored and directed field activities. The Commander looked at the imaging screens and asked the radar operator how it was going.

“Anything unusual, Hartman?” He asked the communications officer and then continued on after the man replied with the usual ‘no sir’.

But there were already things out of the ordinary. Earlier in the day there'd been a strange rash of technical problems and Edward Frank's immediate superior had made a point of asking him personally to keep an ‘eye on things’. And then on his second walk around, something caught his eye.

They'd been testing a new filter for one of the thermal imagers and now there it appeared with a strange pasty colored haze across its screen. The Commander stopped, sipped from his cup and just stood for a minute behind the man seated at the console in front of him.

“What do you make of that Beckman? A Glitch?”

“Well, sir,” the man responded with a timid air in his voice, “that's what I thought at

first.”

The Commander responded with nothing more than a large sipping sound.

“But now . . . well, I’m not so sure.” The man leaned forward and tweaked several small knobs next to the screen.

“What do you mean, son? It’s not dark enough to be anything more than a heat spot in the desert or calibration error on the lens . . .”

“Yes sir . . . but . . . it’s moving, sir.”

The commander coddled the hot cup of coffee delicately between his fingers for a moment as he pondered the implications. He rotated the cup around in his hands and then leaned forward to get a closer look at the screen. “Could just be a mass of warm air over the sand.”

“No, sir.”

“Why not son?”

“It’s moving in the opposite direction of the wind.”

28.Attack 2 -

Franklin Tosh had spent the day nodding in and out of sleep. He altered between the fetal position and sitting with his knees up in his face. That was all the room that he had. They had rigged a small airflow system with a water cooling component, but it was still stifling inside the little tent.

Throughout the morning, Franklin bobbed in and out of several horrific dreams. In one of them, he found himself briefly on horseback in front of tens of thousands nomads. A

mass of men so enormously large, that it completely obscured the desert in every direction, as far as the eye could see.

And then the roof of the tent was being ripped off. Franklin squinted up at the blinding sky through his fingers as the Enforcement soldiers raised their rifles and shot him several times. The bullets tore into his chest and face and Franklin tried desperately to stop the bleeding coming from his mid-section.

Franklin jerked back and woke, covered in sweat and panting heavily. For several minutes he sat, still tasting the lingering images of his own death. But as they faded, Franklin wiped the tears from his face and forced himself to breath normally again.

He knew that he'd have to be in control for what he needed to do in just a couple of hours. He knew that the lives of over a thousand men hinged on his performance in this tent. Hinged on how accurately he executed his part of this perfectly timed plan.

And he began to shake thinking about the responsibility. Thinking about how many people were depending on him. He was infused with a wonderful feeling of importance and purpose, while at the same time being more terrified than he'd ever been in his life. It was a feeling that bordered on being physically ill and Franklin felt like he needed to concentrate on his breathing just to keep from puking in the tent.

The heat and the claustrophobia were building to an almost unbearable point but Franklin knew that he could not go outside. He was far too close to Chi and the possibility of being seen was too great. So he resigned himself to his duty and forced himself to think about something else. Anything else.

And for a while, he was content thinking about his first year on the project with Sheri. She had been a good boss and Franklin had always respected her drive and determination. She drove him to achieve at a pace that surprised him. He found himself pushing himself harder and harder just to please her.

But it wasn't until years later that he was able to sit down and actually evaluate what they had done through that time. What the implications of the Halcyon project had been. And when Franklin thought about it for too long at a time it made him sick. And it made him sad because he had been a key player in a plan that had come dangerously close to succeeding. A plan to strip people of their freedom at the most basic level possible. To strip them of their ability to choose their own thoughts.

Franklin shuddered and looked down at his watch. All of a sudden it, even though he was covered in sweat, it seemed cold in the tiny tent. Evening was approaching and Franklin cracked open the laptop computer to recheck the programs and the connection to the teletype machine.

The horror of what he'd done and what he'd been a part of where magnified by the fact the The Board was now trying to do it again. Trying to reserect the Halcyon project and re-institute their regiem of total control. And Franklin felt like the only way he could ever redeem himself – the only way he would ever be forgivable – was to stop them this time.

Franklin looked down at his watch one more time and verified that it matched the tiny digital display on the screen in front of him. Then he hit the 'enter' key and the teletype

machine sprang to life.

29.Attack 3 -

***** NEED A LOT MORE ABOUT WHAT THESE GUYS ARE THINKING, ETC. ***** LIKE I'M TELLING YOU SOMETHING YOU DON'T KNOW! *****

Pantera looked at his watch and then smiled to the men around him before he raised his hand in the air and slapped his horse with a flourish. Together, they rode tightly bunched up, rifles in hand and ready. As they cleared the top of the dune and headed for the first outpost, they all began to fire into the air and yell wildly.

Pantera gave the signal and the band of twenty-four men broke into two groups and flanked the outpost to the left and right, all the time firing into the air around the concrete and steel structure. Then, as expected, came the machine gun fire from within the complex. The sand erupted around their horse's feet.

Pantera kept his men moving and they did their best to, not only confuse the enemy on the inside, but also to keep from becoming a target themselves. They 'whooped' and yelled and rode around like a wild bunch of banchies.

And then, as quickly as it had begun, Pantera gave the signal and the men dissipated. Rode off in every direction and within a matter of seconds, had vanished.

At that precise moment, Franklin Tosh hit the button that fired a small electric charge, high over his head on the pole outside. In that instant, the communication from all six

outposts was cut off and from this point on, the nerve center in Chi would only receive messages from Franklin's teletype machine.

Each message had been carefully coded to match the identification and code number of that particular outpost and each message had been timed to play back at exactly the right point in time.

Franklin took a deep breath and held it while he watched the seconds tick by on the digital display in the lower right hand corner of the laptop display. Then he released it, hit the down arrow once and then held his breath again as he hit the enter key.

30.Defense 2 -

Commander Edward Franks thought hard about the haze that they'd identified across one of the thermal imaging displays. It was located east of town and was moving toward them, even though there was a slight westerly wind that evening.

The Commander poured another cup of coffee and found himself moving back to the display when one of the other officers chimed in with a decided sense of urgency. "I've got a hit, Commander."

"Go ahead Corporal, what have you got?"

"It looks like twenty or so . . . headed toward the western most outpost, number six, sir."

The Commander walked quickly over and leaned down to watch the bright red blip as it seemed to float toward the outpost. And then the ancient teletype machine [why? storms, dunes, radio unreliable, etc.] that connected all of the outposts to the central

command began to sing. ‘Rat-a-tat-tat-a-tat’.

One of the technicians ripped off the message, took two large steps forward and handed it to the Commander.

“Hmm,” the Commander said as he laid the paper down on the desk beside him. “They’re saying that they’re under attack . . . by a band of nomads . . .”

The tone in the Commander’s voice was one of mild amazement. He wasn’t reacting as if this was a big concern to him, rather somewhat of a contradiction. After all, what could they possibly hope to accomplish by this? There was no way that twenty nomads could really do any damage to the heavily fortified garrison.

“Send two units,” the Commander seemed to speak to no one in particular as he turned to look back to peer in the direction of the other imaging screen.

“Already on it,” came the reply from a faceless man seated in the shadows behind an array of microphones.

The Commander stood and slowly looked down at the screen in front of him then back toward the one a few feet away.

“What’s going on with our phantom blip?”

“Same size, same direction, sir. Still moving toward us at about ten knots.”

The Commander looked thoughtful as he set the coffee cup down on the desk and turned toward the man behind the first screen. “What’s happening at the outpost?”

Just then the teletype tapped out a short burst and then the man behind the console answered with a disbelieving tone. “It’s gone, sir.”

“What do mean, gone?” The Commander asked as he reached for the second teletype message.

“It just seemed to dissipate . . . kind of break up, sir.”

“Malfunction?”

“Checking, sir . . . but I don’t think so.”

The Commander looked down at the typed message; ‘send help | need reinfor ’ was all that was on the torn scrap of paper.

The Commander rubbed his chin and leaned forward to look at the screen in front of him. It was blank now. But, yet the message seemed to indicate some kind of superior force. Was it a technical problem? One of the screens was showing something that wasn’t really there and the other one had just the opposite problem.

Again, the teletype burst into life and before the white coat man could tear off the paper that was spewing from the top, the Commander told him to just read it.

“It’s from outpost number five sir.”

“And?” The aggravation in the Commander’s voice was apparent.

“There under attack sir . . . they need our help . . .”

Again, he leaned forward and studied the blank screen. No haze, no movement.
“Where’s the first two units we dispatched?”

“They’ll be over five in three minutes sir.”

“Tell ‘em to report at five and hold for further orders.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Commander pulled back from the screen and stood straight, just staring ahead into empty space. "Haze?"

"Still moving toward us, sir."

"First blip?"

"Gone, sir."

Again, the sound of the teletype machine filled the air and this time, nearly everyone in the room jumped. Except for Commander Edward Franks. He just clenched he jaw muscles and ground his teeth together. "What is it now?"

"It's from—"

"Outpost three." The Commander cut off the white coat man before he could finish reading the message.

"Yes, sir," came the sheepish reply.

Then he turned in the direction of the second imaging screen and squinted as he stretched his head forward.

"How soon before the haze reaches the city, sergeant?"

"It's just about here, sir."

31.Attack 4 -

***** WHEN THEY FIRST GO TO THE BLACK MOUNTAINS, I NEED
SOMETHING ABOUT HOW THEY GET SMALLER TOWARD THE EAST,
CULMINATING IN A RAGED BUNCH OF ROCKY OUTCROPS OR SOME SHIT,

NORTH OF CHI. *****

After Pantera's men had made their fake attack on outpost six seem as real and as scary as possible, the men rode off in all directions. Kirk had wanted the attacking force to just disappear from the screens of those watching. Not just move off quickly, but dissipate. The hope being that they would think the nomads had developed a means for defeating their thermal sensors. Some way of shielding their heat from the imaging satellites. And as Tosh sent out his precisely timed messages from each of the other five outposts, that thought would be easier and easier to believe.

Now, Kirk's men poured into the old city like the sand from the desert they had emerged from. As the carefully coreographed plan unfolded, they quietly filtered into the tiny streets and alleyways. Rivers of nomads flowed quietly into the walkways and then disappeared into the shadow around every corner.

Kirk was terrified and electrified as he stood at the staging area and watched the men perform their prearranged tasks with machine-like precision. The city had already absorbed a couple hundred men, but that left quite a good sized thermal blip for Enforcement to read. Kirk had made sure that they kept their distance from one another until the assault was under way. They bunched up tightly together only after they had begun entering the old city. Then, he had them slowly pulsate, as a group, back and forth. Like a huge fish tail wagging itself out of the jaws of the city. He wanted his adversary to

have as much misinformation as possible when it came to making their next decision.

Still wondering if the heard of nomads was some kind of phantom display or heat spot or just a malfunction. While across town to the west of the city, their outposts were being picked off by some invisible menace. It was crucial that Kirk force them to react instead of stopping and taking the time to think about what to do.

With everything going perfectly, Kirk took off on foot to rendezvous with the men at the point of the attack. As the nomad force slithered its way through the dirt streets and adobe buildings of the old city, Kirk met up with the lead team just as they were moving into the new city.

Kirk had expected some small arms fire by now. He knew that no matter how stealthy or how smoothly the plan went, there was going to be the inevitable guard here and there as they got closer to the heart of the city. But there wasn't anybody even out on the streets. It was perfect.

Kirk held his hand up to stop the men behind him as he ran from one side of the street to the other. They were now one block over from the municipal building. The nerve center of Enforcement activity in this sector. If they could knock that out, then they could effectively cut off the thinking breathing head of the monster and leave it with a cold dismembered body.

Kirk nestled himself around the corner of a building and then looked up one street and then back behind him. Still no one. His hope had been that they would commit every last warm body they had to defend against whatever it was that was coming out of the west.

Kirk had picked a day when the desert patrols would be particularly heavy so that Chi was left under manned. But this was almost too good to be true. Kirk looked at his watch and then looked down at the ground for ten seconds or so. By now, their entire force would be in the old city, half of which where already in the new city. Kirk raised his arm and motioned for the second phase of the attack to begin.

As the nomads moved into position, completely engulfing the white stuccoed municipal biudling, Kirk heard the first sounds of gunfire. It was automatic weapon fire which meant that it was definately Enforcement and it was coming from the west. Where Kirk envisioned them shooting aimlessly at the invisible threat pouring out of the desert toward them. Shooting blindly and anything. Deathly afraid of what they were about to see emerge from the dust and the sand.

But as Kirk cocked his head back and forth, he was filled with a strange sensation. There were other sounds. Sounds that he could just barely make out. Men screaming. Then a grenade – not loud enough to be anything but incindary. Kirk shuffled nervously and looked around him at the confused faces on his men.

They already knew what Kirk was just figuring out. The gunfire was coming from behind them and to the south. Somehow they'd been outflanked and before that realization had completely sunk in, the building across the street from them erupted into a blaze of gunfire. Nomads dropped as bullets tore through flesh and splintered bones. Screams of pain and panic filled the air as the compliment of men scattered in every direction.

But there was no place to go. As the withdrew back down the pathways they had used to enter the city, they were blocked by the nomads retreating from the backside of the old city. They were sandwiched in and no where to run. The streets were pandimonium as flames rolled up out of the east. Several small explosions were followed by the by the most agonizing sounds of human destruction. Blood curdling screams filled the air on all sides as the men ran back in forth, desperately trying to find a vantage point.

But there was sniper fire from the buildings around them and no one could figure out where it was actually coming from. All around the nomads were dropping and dying. Kirk was in a whirlwind and couldn't figure out what to do. They'd anticipated his move and successfully circumvented the whole plan. But how was that possible.

Next to him, a man was shot in the throat as a splinter of flying stone hit Kirk in the eye. Kirk dropped to the ground next to the man and watched in horror as he clutched his neck tightly and then just gurgled until he stopped moving.

Before Kirk knew exactly what was happening, there were Enforcement troops sweeping through the streets toward him. Through the smoke and the automatic weapon fire, Kirk lay still until one of the soldiers went to step over him. And then all of the years of death and destruction seemed to pile up on the one instant. He looked over at the man with the torn throat. His name was Rowaune and he had a woman and children back at camp who'd never see their father again. How many others? How many years more?

Kirk burst from the ground and in one explosive move, grabbed the machine gun from the soldier and knocked him down. The surrounding soldiers where already ahead of this

one and when Kirk open fired on them, he shot most of them in the back. In one huge sweeping arch from left to right, Kirk emptied the clip, clearing the street of a dozen Enforcement soldiers. Then, without so much as a thought, he grabbed a pack from one of the fallen men and weapons from three others.

Two of the nomads had kept their wits about them enough to see what Kirk had done and immediately followed his lead. Within fifteen seconds, they were joined by five others and all of the soldiers were stripped of their gear. Together they moved quickly to avoid the shots coming from the tops of the buildings. Gunfire that they still couldn't locate the source of. Everywhere were strewn the bodies of their friends. Kirk and the others gathered the wounded as they went and picked clean any fallen Enforcement soldiers.

Around the corner, they came across the back side of six soldiers that had been cut off from their company and were pinned down behind a jeep by nomad fire from across the street. Kirk's men took them by surprise and cut them down like ducks in a shooting gallery. As their bodies fell, limp to the ground, Kirk waved his arm high in the air and signaled the men on the other side of the street to move north.

Kirk was running on fifty percent adrenaline and one hundred percent rage. He was no longer thinking. He didn't know what he was doing or where he was going. The smoke and the flames and the gunfire had all culminated into an overwhelming loss of control. He was on auto-pilot and there was nothing he could do about it.

As the band of men fought their way agonizingly slowly through the streets toward the

north side of town, they met up with other pockets of nomads. Together they helped their injured comrades and formed a wedge to cut through the Enforcement offensive and protect their backside.

But on the outskirts of the city, right passed the rusty metal building that housed the town's electrical generator, a wave of soldiers stormed into the streets behind them, pinning them down right where they were.

Kirk pulled one of the incendiary grenades from the backpack he had confiscated from that first soldier. He ripped the pin out with his teeth and with a high arching swing, lobbed it into the middle of the soldiers. There were screams and moans and then another wave of soldiers appeared behind them.

“Crap.” Kirk turned and made the ‘runaway now’ sign to everyone. Then he turned back to the bag of grenades and pulled several out. With the little dark gray balls dangling from his fingers, Kirk reached up and hung the pack with the remaining grenades on the door handle to the power plant. Then he quickly threw two of the grenades, in rapid succession, into the second wave of soldiers then he left the remaining two lying on the ground – under the backpack.

With two pins in his mouth and two in his hands, Kirk rolled forward as the sand beneath him came alive with a series of sand guisers. As the nomads fell back, they returned fire and provided Kirk just enough cover to slip into the alley before the power plant went up in an enormous ball of fire. Immediately, the two buildings on either side were engulfed in flame, effectively blocking the soldiers advance.

Kirk knew that this was it. They'd only have a few seconds to move so from that position, the survivors scattered into the mountain range on the north side of town, on foot. Blending back into the desert as effortlessly as they had emerged from it. Disappearing into the darkness as night fell on the flames pouring out of old Chi.

32.Defense 3 -

“What in the sam-holy-hell was that?”

The Commander was shouting at the room full of technicians. His face was fiery red as he paced erratically around the room watching the buzz of activity. As he passed, technicians were dispatching fire equipment and coordinating the cleanup effort on the north side of town.

Although the Commander had seen through their little reuse, it had bought the nomads valuable time. Precious planning time that had been stripped from the Commander by the series of bogus messages.

“All outposts are reporting in now sir.”

The Commander seemed displeased with, what should've been good news. The lines had been repaired and communication to the outposts restored. But still he paced around in tight little circles. Weaving between the chairs and the computer consoles.

“What . . . exactly, just happened here?” the Commander stopped pacing long enough to scan the room from one side to the other.

By the level of agitation in his voice, it was obvious to those in the room that the Commander really didn't want any of them to speak right now. He was more interested in

yelling than in listening. And judging by the way everyone was carefully avoiding eye contact, they were getting the message loud and clear.

The Commander had accurately discerned the threat from the nomads and acted, almost instinctively, to defend against the attack. But hindsight is always much sharper – especially when it comes from ones superiors.

Did he act quickly enough? Did he have the appropriate compliment of men in the appropriate locations? If so, then why had there been so much collateral damage? Although squelched relatively quickly, why had the nomad attack been so effective?

“Get some more men down on that fire,” the Commander snapped at one of the white clad young men sitting at the console next to him.

“Yes, sir,” came the subdued reply from the man who was very careful not to let his eyes leave the safety of the screen in front of him.

Why had he not acted more quickly when he had realized the size of the nomad compliment? Was he really fooled by the messages from the outposts? Why hadn’t he verified with a satellite communication? How come we had no intelligence on the attack ahead of time?

The Commander looked angrily at a half empty coffee cup and then, in a large arching motion, he chopped it with the back of his hand, sending it to a spectacular death on a nearby concrete wall.

The room was silent except for the muffled sounds of radio communications emanating from the headsets of the technicians.

33.Nomads in the Mountains -

As the desert dawn brought the orange glow of the morning sun streaming across the flat sand from the east, Kirk had time to reflect on the terrible events of the previous evening. During the escape, the nomads had split up into parties of no more than 15 men. This ensured that the job of tracking them out of the city would be nearly impossible.

What had gone so terribly wrong? Somehow they'd known they were coming. Known about the plan. Had they been betrayed? Was there a traitor among them?

Kirk could feel the eyes upon him, piercing through him like the points of hardened steel sabers. It had been his plan that had failed and now it he felt as though he was left in the undesirable position of explaining himself. Although no one was actually asking for an explanation. At least not yet.

Although all the nomads had been drawn to the safety of the mountains, they hadn't been so quick to congregate with each other. The foothills were filled with small camps and disjointed bands of survivors gathering with those they were familiar and comfortable with.

It took him almost an hour of searching different campsites to locate Pantera's group. As he walked into camp there was a consolidated effort to keep an eye on the ground beneath their feet.

Kirk walked past the wounded men sitting on the ground and on the rocks. But no one

would acknowledge him. No one would look at him.

“Are you hurt, my friend?” came Pantera’s booming voice from across the camp.

Kirk tried to say no but all that came out was a little shake of the head.

34.Army Approaches –

“Wake up everybody.” Commander Franks spoke in a cold and deliberate fashion.

“There’s only 20 or so on the call sheet sir,” came the response from the Sergeant.

Commander Franks turned his head a little to the side and then stretched it like he was trying to work out a kink.

“I didn’t ask you to wake up the men on call.” The Commander straightened out his neck, walked straight up to the Sergeant, positioning his nose an inch in front of the other man’s.

“I said to wake everyone up!” the Commander shouted in the Sergeant’s face. “I want every fucking man on this base out front and geared up in 10 minutes. Is that something you can do for me Sergeant?”

“Yes, sir.”

And with that, chaos erupted on the base as sirens wailed and bullhorns barked out orders.

“This will leave Chi defenseless, sir.” The 2nd Lieutenant spoke with the appropriate respect as he voiced his concerns.

The Commander realized that he was running on overcharged emotions, but this was a point that he had considered very carefully.

“How long do you think it took them to put that together?”

“Sir?”

“That was more than one band of disjointed locals.” The Commander watched out the window as the troops assembled in caravan style ready to pursue the enemy out into the desert beyond. “That was a very well organized attack—there was a plan behind that. And that took a lot of cooperation.”

“It would’ve taken months to put something like that together,” the 2nd Lieutenant said as he began to understand just what his Commander was thinking.

Outside the window, the final preparations were taking place for a massive assault on the retreating nomads.

“Leave one squad here,” the Commander turned to face his Lieutenant directly. “Everyone else is with me. I’m going to finish this now and make an example of them. After today, it’s over.”

35.Nomads Rally –

At the foot of the Black Hills, hundreds of bands of nomads had gathered. It was like some strange migration of that takes place. As if something at a cellular level had brought them to the mountains. This was a sacred place with a lot of history, but it was also an extremely tactical position. The approach from the mountains out of Chi was most

probably not know to the Enforcement troops, but even if it had been, it would force them through narrow ravines that were already under the watchful eyes of the nomad lookouts. Even the most heavily armored force could be easily decimated from safety of the cliffs above.

The more probable approach was directly from the desert in front of them. It stretched flat for almost twenty miles with nothing more than a tumble weed or two as cover. An attacking force would be visible when they were nearly an hour out. Although the position within the foothills didn't give them a big advantage against a more powerful and better equipped foe, at least it stripped the enemy of the element of surprise.

"We've got men for almost a mile along this part of the foothills." Pantera drew a line in the sand with a stick as he talked with leaders from the other tribes. "We'll have to get them to close in so that we can get the attack concentrated in one area." He made a little circle in the middle of the line.

"But that's suicide," Kirk broke in from the sidelines.

He'd been off to the side, trying desperately to mind his own business. Since early that morning, Pantera had gone around and gathered all the tribal leaders together for the meeting. And as they arrived, one by one in the camp, they'd had been an unspoken with each of them and Kirk. Nothing more than a fleeting glance, but a glance that contained a measure of silent condemnation.

Even as the meeting commenced, Kirk could sense that he would not be a participant. It was as subtle as not being asked, but that was all that was needed to convey the

message.

“Last night we did it your way, my friend. Today we do it *our* way.” Kirk could read the tone in Pantera’s voice easily. It was his polite way of saying “you’re about to cross over the line.” And as much as Kirk admired and respected Pantera, this was something that he was not going to be able to hold his tongue on.

“You’re in the perfect position already,” Kirk said as he stepped inside the circle of men. “We’re out numbered and out gunned. Our only chance is to draw them in and then flank them.”

The only sound was that of the occasional wind gust through the rocky outcroppings over their heads as the men all starred at Kirk and said nothing.

“Today...we do it our way.” Pantera repeated the statement with an icy edge that stopped Kirk in his tracks. He thought that, for the first time, he felt the condemnation from Pantera.

With a single nod from the big man, the meeting was adjourned and the leaders set about the task of moving their men into a concentrated position around Pantera’s campsite. From there, they would make a stand against the attack that was coming.

At twelve o’clock, with the sun and the day’s heat at its zenith, the Enforcement troops were spotted.

“Oh my God,” Kirk spoke as he held the binoculars to his face. Slowly he passed

them back to Pantera and then turned to sit on one of the rocks next to the extinguished campfire.

“They’re bringing everything they’ve got.” Pantera spoke with the authority only a strong leader facing certain death could muster. “Why would they do that?” Kirk kicked at the charred remains of the sticks under his feet. “Why leave the city unprotected?”

“What have they got to protect it from? Apparently they want to set an example here today. Finish this quickly and decisively.”

“There’s several thousand men out there.”

“Against our several hundred.” Again, the arrogance in Pantera’s voice shown through.

These were the qualities that made up leadership. Kirk had always known that Pantera was a leader of men but this was what you’ve have to call one of those defining moments. When faced with insurmountable odds and with no hope of prevailing the leader remains steadfast. The leader remains and inspiration to his men and to all those that follow him.

And then a sense of calmness came over him as he thought about the legend of Pantera and the battle of the Black Hills. Years from now, parents would be telling their children the story of what happened here today. How Pantera lead his men bravely against the Enforcement troops. And over the years, the story would take on a life of its own as the number of Enforcement soldiers killed grew with each telling of the tale.

“You’ve got about twenty minutes or so to make it right with your God.” Pantera put his hand gently on Kirk’s shoulder. “I will have my own conversation in my own

way...and then...we fight."

36.The Big Battle –

The foothills provided adequate protection from the mortor fire which came first, but there was no way to mount an effective counter strike while hunkered down behind the rocks and dunes. They would have to wait until the army was close enough to engage directly. And in Commander Franks zeal to crush this rebellion quickly, there chance came sooner than they'd expected.

Within ten minutes of the first shell hits, the explosions stopped abruptly. And almost immediately, Pantera shouted the order to charge and 264 nomads on horseback rode out to attack and mechanized army of 5,000 men.

As the nomads took to flight, rifle fire bit through the air and the first Enforcement foot shoulder plopped lifeless over the steering wheel in his jeep as he was struck square in the chest from a lucky nomad round.

Two more solders were hit and then a nomad. First one then two then five. As bullets tore into human and horseflesh alike, the nomad attack became disjointed and fragmented. Men were dropping off horses like rag dolls and as the two forces collided, the nomads took an exacting toll on the Enforcement frontlines.

But they were only the spear tip of monster military machine and solders rolled forward nearly endlessly from the rearward ranks. As quickly as an Enforcement soldier went down, three more took his place—something that was not occurring as nomads went down.

And then, in the smoke and dust and blood, the cry went out to retreat. To take what little was left and run for the hills. Make that last ditch effort to save yourself before the slaughter was complete. For the idea of a fight to the death is much nobler in spirit than in practice and the urge to save one's skin is the most powerful of all human attributes.

So, with as quickly as they had appeared, the desert people vanished into the sand and the rocks at the foot of the hills.

From his forward position, Commander Franks quickly surveyed the bodies littering the ground in front of him and estimated roughly an even body count.

“We got about half of them,” he said turning to face the Lieutenant.

“The wounded, sir?”

Franks looked over the ground and then turned his attention to the foothills. “Attack.”

And with that order, the troops rushed the hills and poured in through every corner and crevice with one mission in mind. Kill the nomads. Kill every last one of them.

The Commander had pictured the nomads hiding behind anything and everything they could as they left the open plain and entered the front of the foothills. But there were no nomads and no gunfire. After passing the first set of hills, there were just more...and then more beyond that. It was a maze.

“They’re trying to escape.”

The Commander stood pointing a .45 auto into the hills in front of him. Next to him, the Lieutenant held his rifle pointing straight into the air as he surveyed the empty stark

emptiness ahead.

“This doesn’t feel right. I don’t like this, sir.”

Commander Franks was torn between his blinding desire to crush his enemies and the intelligent observations of his second in command. He was right, this didn’t feel right. It was too easy. Too convenient.

Weighing the operational risk against his own personal goals, the Commander turned to his second and said, “Fall back.”

“Yes, sir.”

And the order was given.

37.Retreat (The Caves) -

Very quickly, Kirk had been drug back through the several layers of the foothills by Pantera’s men. They had moved so forcefully and so deliberately that it didn’t feel like a retreat. It felt more like they were heading somewhere—purposefully and not just running blindly in panic. It felt like they knew where they were going.

Which, of course was true and became clear to Kirk when they reached the first of the caves. Pantera was standing at the entrance hurrying everyone inside while keeping a watchful eye on the trail behind them.

Kirk could say nothing. He was dumbfounded. Had this been part of the plan all along? As Kirk entered the cave, he could see other nomads pouring into caves up and down the face of the cliffs.

“There’s hundreds of them,” Pantera said as he grabbed his arm and pulled him inside.

Together they followed the others into the darkness. Ahead of them, two of the men were carrying torches to light the way and as they walked further into the mountain, Kirk could see caches of weapons and ammunition—lots of them. Boxes upon boxes pilled from floor to ceiling. Some of the markings were unfamiliar but a lot of them were Enforcement issue. Grenades and rifles and even plastic explosives.

Kirk turned to look at Pantera with a pained expression that was read accurately as a question.

“Yea...there’s a lot more of these. Some of the caves have food and water...other medical supplies. But mostly they’re full of this stuff.”

Making another turn, they walked through a smaller passageway and then entered into a room well light by oil lamps hanging from the walls. In the center of the room was a crude table and several wooden chairs held together with rope. Pantera motioned for Kirk to sit and he did.

“I don’t understand. What—”

“The Black Hills have been used for centuries to confuse and defeat our enemies. From a distance, the foothills are almost completely hidden by the heat rising off of the desert floor. And the foothills hide this network of caves. My people have always believed this to be our legacy. Our strength comes from these hills and our life springs from within the mountain.”

And as if a door was opening slowly and letting in small slivers of light to illuminate a darkened room, Kirk’s mind began to open up to exactly what Pantera had meant when

he said we do it “our way.”

“There’s more nomads aren’t there?”

It wasn’t really a smile on Pantera’s face, but Kirk could see that the answer to his question was yes.

“How many? How many more are there?”

For the first time in the last tamulchuous, turbulent 24 hours, Kirk had hope. Hope that they might come out of this alive after all. Hope that he’d be able to see his friends again. Hope.

“How many?”

This time, Pantera couldn’t help but let a little smirk out. “A lot.”

38.Masacre -

The Commander’s plan was to regroup on the outskirts of the hills and then mount a well formulated attack into the heart of the hills. He use a swept left and right force as the main group went in, keeping enough men in reserve to counter any ambush. Time was allocated for gathering and attending to the wounded, but plans were being made to quickly follow the nomads into the hills.

“Sir, you need to take a look at this.” The tone in his even keeled young second’s voice was unindictatively fraught with tension.

“What is it Lieutenant?”

Commander Franks took the field glasses and looked out over the horizon on their

right flank. At first he thought his eyes were deceiving him. That it was some cruel joke played by the sand and the wind and the heat. But after rubbing the sweat out of his eyes and looking again, it was apparent that he was looking at the largest heard of nomads he had ever seen. Thousands of them on horseback stretching as far as he could see from left to right.

“Get the men into formation. Bring up the artiliary.”

“Aye, sir.”

“These guys picked a bad day to screw me.”

But no sooner had the first heavy guns started to roll when a sentry ran up behind the Commander out of breath.

“Sir,” the man shouted and then leaned forward on one knee before standing to address the Commander. “Behind you sir...on our left flank...there’s got to be a couple thousand or more of them.”

The Commander’s heart was in his throat as he slowly raised the field glasses to view the amassing mob on the other side. It was bigger than the line of nomads on the other side and now they were caught in a crossfire. His only hope now was to quickly deploy his artiliary on both flanks. It was his major advantage against horses and rifles.

When the bullet tore through his shoulder, it shattered the joint and ripped lose all the connecting cartlidge. The Commander turned to face the Lieutenant, started to say something but was cut short by another round through the middle of his chest.

And then nomads began pouring from the foothills in front of them like angry ants

from a huge mound. Thousands of them raced toward them as the groups on the side closed in and cutoff any chance of retreat for the no Enforcement soldiers.

In the ensuing chaos, the soldiers panicked. Not clear on where the attack had originated or was yet to come, they shot at anything and everything—including each other.

In the end, the nomads rounded up the soldiers like a heard of cattle and shot all of them. Every last one.

39.Epilogue -