

Dust and Desolation, an actual play of The Anomaly

by Todd Zircher (2012, CC0)

The Rules

The Anomaly by Britt A. Willis (<https://feelingfickle.itch.io/>)

The game is played round-robin with the active player drawing a card from a deck of playing cards that have been assembled by suites. You can think of it like a four act structure starting with character interaction as the tension mounts. After the active player answers the card, the other players can riff off of that if desired and in any order. Once you get a feel for the characters, this felt very natural even in solo play and I did not need any additional solo tools to keep the flow going.

Spoiler alert, I mention the game questions in the gray text (the main game mechanics). Each game of The Anomaly is different, but at the same time knowing the questions in advance might spoil some of the mystery and fun of the game. If you plan to play The Anomaly, you might want to only read a page or two to get a sense of how the game plays and then set my actual play aside until you had done your own.

Content warning, I don't know the questions up front, so messy adult situations are possible. Turns out there are some swear words, but the gore is minimal.

The Tools

Zero Dice (https://tangent-zero.com/zero_dice/zero_dice.htm) has thousands of images served up as a dice roller. Also has dice, cards, and runes as needed.

The Play

Wilderness Type: Arid Desert (rolled a 4)

The squad consists of four team members; two scientists, an explorer, and a military member. I rolled some zero dice images with modern icons enabled in order to get some inspiration for the names and character details. To get their home towns, I placed an imaginary grid over the US and rolled two dice, like a quick and dirty latitude and longitude.

Name: Lt. Jon 'Deuce' Baracardo
Job: Military
Looks: Black hair, brown eyes, well built, Hispanic, from Phoenix – Arizona

Name: Dr. Mercy Helsinki
Job: Scientist
Looks: Dirty blonde, blue eyes, average build, Caucasian, from Saint Paul – Minnesota

Name: Dr. Wilson Smith
Job: Scientist
Looks: Black hair, brown eyes, lean and tall build, African-American, from Oakland – California

Name: Grace Norton
Job: Explorer
Looks: Sun bleached brown hair, hazel eyes, athletic build, Caucasian, from Albuquerque – New Mexico

The helicopter took off, leaving the team and their gear in a dust halo illuminated by the morning light. The squad was dressed in desert camouflage, but only one wore it like a uniform with combat boots. The Lieutenant carried an M-4 assault rifle while the others had pistols in their holsters. Each had a large backpack, although the contents varied with their profession. The sun was to their backs as they looked west to the mountains.

Dr. Smith draws the six of diamonds. You've been to these wilds before. How does that shape the way you behave in it now?

Wilson hefted his back pack, "You know, this isn't my first time in this desert. My dad was a geologist and he'd sometimes drag me out of the city." Grace chipped in, "Glad to be back?" "Not really, I hated it back then, but now I'm feeling a little nostalgic. The desert never changes."

Ms. Norton draws the nine of diamonds. Do you come across any wildlife as you enter the wilds?

Grace points out a desert cotton tail before the rabbit bolts for under the desert scrub. "Well, that's a good sign. If things were really bad out here, they would have been long gone." Mercy stops to consider, "Could be. Then again, maybe rabbits don't care about strange electromagnetic anomalies." Deuce barks out a laugh, "It was smart enough to run away from us. I trust its instincts."

Lt. Baracardo draws the queen of diamonds. A strong smell overtakes you entering the wilds. Is it sweet, revolting, comforting, sickening? Does it stay with you or fade away?

The squad continues walking towards the foothills. Deuce turned around, "Anyone else smell that? Like roses." Mercy nodded and then frowned, "It's gone now." Grace added, "The desert is funny like that. Sometimes a scent will carry for miles and then disappear with a twist of the wind." Deuce shrugs, "My mom would like it. She has a thing for roses."

Dr. Helsinki draws the four of diamonds. What do you find enchanting about the wilds?

Mercy plucks some small leaves from a scrawny bush as the squad moves through the desert. "I'm always amazed at how life adapts to its environment. Take the small size and waxy coating of the leaves on the creosote bush. Designed to minimize the lose of water." Grace points to the base of the plant, "Their root system is so efficient at collecting every drop of water that nothing can grow around it."

Dr. Smith draws the two of diamonds. Why are you particularly adept at navigating this type of wilderness?

Wilson took a sip from his canteen. "Well, there's one benefit of being the tallest one here. I can see over almost all of this desert brush. I didn't have that advantage the last time I was in the Chihuahuan Desert." Deuce Baracardo smirked, he was a head shorter

than the doctor, but he could easily pick him up and throw the lanky physicist if he needed to. "Keep your eyes peeled."

Ms. Norton draws the seven of diamonds. Is there safe food and water in the wilds? If not, how long will the group survive on the supplies provided by the government?

Grace reviewed her topographic map. It looked very complicated, but she knew the meaning of every curve and symbol on it. Sure it pre-dated the event, but she knew where the springs were and what to eat in the region. Their rations would last a week, but they only carried four days of water. Deuce glanced at the map, he probably was the only other person here that could read it. "Problems, Grace?" Grace smiled, she was on a first name basis with the team after their week long orientation training. "Nothing, I just like to keep my orientation fix." She pointed to a V shape in the foothills. "We're doing fine."

Lt. Baracardo draws the seven of diamonds. What is the temperature like in the wilds? Are you comfortable or uncomfortable with it?

Deuce's boots crunched as he walked. The desert was a drier and vegetation was a lot more sparse compared to the desert he grew up in. It was also a lot cooler than the blistering temps Phoenix could reach. "Just another day in the park." Mercy almost choked on the water she was drinking, "Your definition of park needs some work."

Dr. Helsinki draws the eight of diamonds. What do you take samples of as you enter the wilds? Why?

Mercy plunks at another leaf and examines it. Her process is random, but there is a reason. She's looking for mutation or damage. The desert has a long memory and it bears its scars for a long time. So far, she's found nothing out of the ordinary.

Dr. Smith draws the ace of diamonds. The wilds remind you of a day in your childhood. Why does that frighten you?

Wilson thinks back to his time in the desert with his dad, about running around exploring and poking things with a stick as kids are wont to do. He also remembers the time that he stumbled on a rattle snake under a bush. It scared the shit out of him. The only thing that saved him from getting bit was a few little twigs that blocked the snake. He involuntarily shuddered. Mercy lightly touched him on the shoulder and whispered, "Trouble?" The doctor shook his head, "Nah, just thinking about snakes." He unconsciously looked at everyone's feet. Everyone was wearing hiking boots or combat boots in the case of the Lieutenant.

Ms. Norton draws the five of diamonds. What do you find repulsive about the wilds?

Grace being a native of New Mexico loves the desert. Becoming a guide for hikers and sometimes working at the state parks during tourist season helped pay the bills. But, the one thing she really hated was people. More specifically, people that had no respect for

nature. Trash for migrants, smugglers, or careless people would last for centuries, the desert took that long to grow and heal.

Lt. Baracardo draws the jack of diamonds. You trip over something man-made as you enter the wilds. What era does it seem from? Is it familiar to you?

Deuce's boot catches on a half buried length of barbed wire. "What the hell?", as he catches himself and recovers. "What is that doing there?" Grace knelt down and looked at the rusty snare, "Glidden two-point." Deuce looked back, not quite in confusion as much as waiting for what that meant. Grace continued, "Invented in 1874, that hunk of wire could have been waiting there for a century for you to come along." "Somehow I don't feel special as much as embarrassed." Grace shrugged, "On the bright side, your foot caught it between the barbs, otherwise we'd get to see how good your tetanus booster shot is."

Dr. Helsinki draws the ten of diamonds. What plant life is in these wilds? How does it look or behave differently than it should?

Curiosity got to Mercy, something didn't seem right. She reached down and gave a pull on the barbed wire. It ran right into the base of the creosote bush. She pulled on the other end it also ran into the base of a creosote bush. "I've seen trees grow around wire fences before... but nothing like this." Grace nodded, "It doesn't make much sense. It is absolutely the wrong kind of plant for making a fence." Deuce pulled out his folding shovel and moved to the other side of the bush and started digging, it didn't take long to uncover more barbed wire heading to another bush. Wilson pulled out something like a radio, but it had two antenna sticking out the sides. It made a loud squawk made everyone flinch. He turned down the volume, "Sorry." He looked at the display and nodded sagely. "Yeah, we're in the EM field for sure. I'm not even picking up satellite signals."

Dr. Smith draws the three of diamonds. How do you discover the map you've been provided with is incorrect? Who do you tell?

Wilson roots through his back pack and pulls out a compass. "Huh", he then makes a show of walking in a small circle. "I thought we were walking west." Grace lifts an eyebrow, "We are." She pulls out the topographic map and her compass and points. "West." "My very expensive compass says that's north." Grace walks over and watches her compass change heading. "Damn." Deuce unscrews the end of his survival knife and looks at his compass. He points in a completely different direction, "West." Wilson frowns, "Magnetic field distortions are not localized in nature. Grace, when were we supposed to enter the edge of the EM field?" "In about two miles, if we keep going 'West'." Wilson just shakes his head.

Norton draws the six of hearts. What did the government promise you in return for joining this mission?

Grace is tempted to crumple her map. "This is some kind of bullshit. What else did the agency get wrong?" She makes a frustrated noise, "They didn't pay me enough to get lost in the desert." Deuce chuckles, "You got paid?" Mercy presses her palms together

and makes no motion to touch Grace. "It's okay. Those mountains are not going anywhere." Grace sucks in a deep breath, "Yeah, we got landmarks... and stars. Those never change."

Lt. Baracardo draws the two of hearts. What happens that makes the rest of the group cautious of you?

Deuce puts his compass and folding shovel away. "This isn't the worst cluster fuck that I have been in. No one is shooting at us, yet." He makes an obvious show of checking his assault rifle. "I'd rather not be a sole survivor... again. So, keep your shit together."

Dr. Helsinki draws the nine of hearts. The government doesn't trust you. What have they done to keep tabs on you during this mission?

Mercy unconsciously rubs the back of her neck at the spike in group stress. She can feel where the Agency embedded the chip. While she knew it was one hundred percent safe, but it made her feel like a lab rat.

Dr. Smith draws the ace of hearts. Who has the most power in your group? Why does that make you feel uncomfortable?

Wilson looked at Baracardo. Yeah, no subtly there. If shit got messy, the L.T. was in charge. He and Mercy were dead weight. It was an ugly thought, but then he grew up in an ugly neighborhood. The pistol at his side felt like a lead weight, he never fired a gun until last week when you had some basic training with one.

Norton draws the four of hearts. Who do you already know in the group? Why do you keep it a secret?

Grace glanced over at Wilson. He seemed to be deep in thought. He looked so much like his father from the old pictures she had back home. I bet he would freak out if he knew that I was his half-sister. Yeah, Mr. Smith got around back then.

Lt. Baracardo draws the seven of hearts. What tool or weapon did the government forbid you from bringing? Why did you bring it anyway?

Deuce looked at the rest the squad that had gotten quiet. "Hey, hey, I didn't mean to spook ya. My mission is security and safety first." He gave them his best disarming smile as he remembered the two thermite grenades that he had in his pack. Sometimes you needed some extra insurance.

Dr. Helsinki draws the five of hearts. What makes you feel distant from the rest of the group?

Mercy blinked and then gathered herself together. "You heard the man, his job is to make sure we can do our job. Let's quit wasting daylight." She kept her face neutral, they didn't need to know that she had her own special training and secret orders before the team was assembled.

Dr. Smith draws the ten of hearts. What unexpected role do you begin to serve for the group?

The squad forms up and begins to head out, the mystery of the buried barbed wire, the strange magnetic fields, and general sense of dread begin to sink in. Wilson starts humming to fill the emptiness as they walk. Then he begins quietly singing some uplifting church hymns, he has a great singing voice. Mercy gives him an approving if questioning glance. "Church choir, my dad was on the road a lot and my mom thought it would keep me out of the gangs."

Norton draws the jack of hearts. Why is it hard for you to fully express yourself to the rest of the group? How do you do so regardless?

Grace listens to the singing and if anything it aggravates more than calms her. Their discovery back at the creosote bushes keeps bugging her. She's used to moving at a slow pace in tune with nature and the scientists kind of just blew off what they found. Grace stomps to a halt, since she is the explorer/scout for the team, they can all see her. "Damn it! It's not right, creosote bushes can grow for a hundred years. You don't bury barbed wire in the ground and let it rust for decades. It don't make sense." Wilson smiled. "You're right. But, we don't have the time to dig them up and search for more clues. We have to accept the facts as given and work on a hypothesis." Mercy nodded, "Science moves in jerks and stops. It's never smooth or easy. Trust me, we been thinking about it as hard as you."

Lt. Baracardo draws the three of hearts. Who were you trying to get away from by joining this mission?

I'm trying to get away from the ghosts of my old team who all died on a mission that went bad. Yeah, Deuce might be damaged goods and he may be expendable, but he did pass the psych eval.

Dr. Helsinki draws the eight of hearts. Why are you suspicious of the government that sent you on this mission?

I know they are holding back information and for some reason they're expecting things to go bad. It eats at me. I know more than the squad but at the same time I know I don't know enough.

Dr. Smith draws the king of hearts. What trait do you dislike about yourself and how does it prove useful during your journey?

Wilson drops his voice an octave and strives for a calming effect. "Hey, I get it. No one likes to leave a mystery undone. Focus those pretty eyes on what's in front of us and we'll keep working on it." He felt dirty, his dad had that voice and it got him into a lot of trouble and eventually broke up the family. He could see the effect on Grace, but then a strange expression crossed her face. He thought she was going to blow up at him but instead she shook it off and turned back to hiking.

Norton draws the queen of hearts. How do you bring a moment of levity and laughter to the group? How do you feel afterwards?

Grace considered what just happened. Damn, now she knew how old man Smith worked his magic. Grace shouted back, "Hey Wilson, remind me to jump you bones when this is all over." He stumbled and almost walked into a cactus, his train of thought completely derailed. "Wa-What!?" Grace laughed, quickly followed by Deuce. Mercy chuckled and told Wilson, "She's certainly got your number. I didn't know you had weapons grade mo-jo." Wilson shook his head, "It's a curse."

Lt. Baracardo draws the three of clubs. What has made you feel closer to the rest of the group during this journey?

Grace's ice breaker reminded Deuce why he liked this group. They trained hard in the week before the mission and quickly got on a first name basis with everyone. He didn't pull rank and the doctors did not fuss with their title. They acted more like family and that was good for the squad's morale.

Dr. Helsinki draws the nine of clubs. You take on a task for the group you all know is likely to fail. Why do you try anyway?

When Deuce called for the next rest break, Mercy sat down next to him. "Can you show me your map? With the compasses out of commission, I'd like to be able to read it better... um... in case we get split up or something." Deuce gladly obliged, explaining the symbols, the grid system, and how the contour lines worked. But, he quickly saw that the doctor was not getting it. Deuce folded up the map, "Don't sweat it. Just remember that notch in the hills is West and that mountain there is North."

Dr. Smith draws the seven of clubs. What essential resource do you lose? How do the others find out?

Wilson was feeling pretty good although he could not quite figure out why. So, he was surprised to see the Lieutenant giving him the stink eye. "What?" The officer shook his head, "Doctor Smith, where is your pistol?" Wilson dropped his hand down to his empty holster. "Ah... I... I was looking at it... inspecting it when we took our last break." He looked back the way they had come, "I guess I didn't re-attach the holding strap." Deuce barked at everyone else, "Check your gear! Did we lose anything else?"

Norton draws the eight of clubs. Why do you argue against making camp in a spot others find ideal?

The next time Deuce decided to call a rest break, he suggested a dry gulch. The brush on the banks offered shade and a steep sides offered some relief from the blowing wind. It sounded like a good idea to Mercy and Wilson as well. But, Grace would have none of it. "Guys, this is what the locals call an arroyo. See those clouds in the mountain? It could have been raining there while it is bone dry here. Prime conditions for a flash flood. People die from those every year." Deuce rubbed his chin, "Good call, Norton. Okay everyone, let's climb up the other side."

Lt. Baracardo draws the king of clubs. You discover a helpful tool or resource. Do you share it with the group?

After they resumed hiking, the team crossed a north-south trail that wasn't on the Deuce's map. "Grace, what do you make of this?" "It's probably a migrant trail. Smugglers set up hundreds of these all over the south-west." Deuce knelt down and looked at the tracks, all kinds of footwear and most of it heading North. It was from that angle that he noticed something that was hidden from the air. "Water jugs?" He trotted over to get a better look. Grace followed, "Oh, a water drop." "Why hide it?" "Well, if the Border Patrol spotted it from the air with a plane or drone, they would destroy it." Deuce shook his head, "That's insane." "That's politics." He pulled out his map, "Either way, write down this location. It might be a life saver if we have to spend time out here."

Dr. Helsinki draws the queen of clubs. What action do you take that endangers the whole group?

They continue on, getting closer to the foothills. It starts with a tremor in hands and it gets harder to think. Without warning, Grace pulls out her combat knife and starts screaming. "Get out! ... Get IT out!" She lunges at Wilson and manages to stab his backpack. He scrambles back, "Mercy!" Reaching down, he only finds his empty pistol holster. Mercy howls but is sucker punched by Deuce. She collapses in a heap.

Dr. Smith draws the ten of clubs. What project do you begin despite the group's explicit disapproval?

Wilson pulls the knife from her senseless fingers while Deuce quickly removes her pistol. Grace keeps her distance but with her pistol drawn. That's when Wilson notices the swollen red spot on Mercy's neck. He touches it and it is fever hot. "You see that Deuce? I think she got bitten or something." Grace leans in for a look, "That doesn't look like an insect or snake bite." Remembering what Mercy said, Wilson made up his mind. "I'm going to cut it. Maybe it is some kind of infection..." Against Deuce's and Grace's protests, he reversed Mercy's knife and poked the wound. Grace's pistol wavered back and forth between Mercy and Wilson. The blood was bright, but there was no oozing of puss. He dug a little deeper and the tip of the knife hit resistance. "There's something in there." Grace's voice wavered, "Wilson..." Wilson persisted and continued to dig, blood flowed down Mercy's neck and he extracted something that looked like a blood soaked spider made of metal. Deuce mumbled something profane. Grace felt sick.

Norton draws the two of clubs. You stumble across a lifeform you're unfamiliar with. What distant memory does the encounter recall? [No, I didn't peek at the cards, they're just eerily falling into place.]

Grace blanched, "What the hell is that?" Wilson poured some water on the thing to wash the blood away. Grace put her pistol away and pulled out a first aid kit, but was distracted by the bug. Wilson flipped the thing over, "Unfortunately, our biologist is unconscious. But, I don't think she would know either. It almost looks more like a machine than a bug." Grace grimaced, "It sure as hell isn't native to this desert or any that I know of." She thought back to another time, another desert, and some nasty insect infestations. "Strip her." Wilson did a double take, "What?" "If she didn't know

that was under her skin, there might be more." Wilson's face twitched briefly, "I don't like it, but I can't fault the logic." Grace darkly smiled, "Don't worry, you're next. We all are."

Lt. Baracardo draws the ace of clubs. The power has shifted in your group. Who has it now? How does that make you feel?

Deuce silently approved of Grace's initiative. With Dr. Helsinki out, Grace stepped up her leadership game and even stitched up the doctor while everyone got checked for bugs. It wasn't a military emergency, yet.

Dr. Helsinki draws the six of clubs. What personal, daily ritual do you begin practicing in hopes of protecting the group? Who catches you?

Mercy came to while the others were getting dressed, "Nnrg... what the fuck is going..." She paused to feel her swollen jaw and then reached back to feel the gauze and tape on her neck. Wilson gently knelt down and showed her a specimen bag. Inside of it was something like a metallic spider. "We pulled this from your neck." Wilson looked at the others, "Um... we had to check everyone for any more of them." He was positively blushing. That's when she noticed that the buttons on her blouse were misaligned. It was Mercy's turn to blush, "Everyone?" That's what Grace ordered. Mercy keyed in on that, the others were looking to Grace for leadership, she wasn't surprised that her civilian leadership role had crumbled. She looked at the specimen bag again, what game was the Agency playing if that's what they injected her with?

While the others were getting ready, Mercy stopped to kneel and pray. She heard someone walk up from behind and then they stopped to kneel beside her. "Got room for another in your prayers?" It was Wilson. "Sure, but I am out of practice." "It's like riding a bicycle, you got this." After a few minutes, Grace walked over, "Saddle up, we lost time and have to make it up."

Dr. Smith draws the four of clubs. Someone in the group gets into a sticky situation. At what cost do you help them?

Wilson was surprised when Mercy let out a sharp "Fuck!". She was moving erratically and Wilson saw that there was a chunk of cactus stuck her pants leg. He reached out to flick it away when Deuce barked, "Don't!" But, it was too late. The thing immediately latched on to his hand and the pain was immediate. Grace sighed, "Jumping cholla. Wilson, you should have known better." Wilson hissed, "Sorry." He looked right at Mercy, "I guess I was too protective and forgot." It took at least 30 minutes to get all the barbs out of Mercy's leg and his hand.

Norton draws the five of clubs. You become separated from the rest of the group. How do you find your way back?

Grace gave Wilson and Mercy a remedial lecture on cactus while pulling needles and applying antibiotics. With the microscopic barbs, there was no easy way to extract them without a lot of pain and some infection was likely to set in. I'm going to scout ahead and see if I can find a path with less cacti. She sighed, "We're losing daylight. You all might as well set up camp." Grace was no stranger to the desert and took her time scouting several paths taking note of where significant patch of cacti were located. It was with a start that she realized that she had lost sight of the group. But, before any panic could set in, she spotted a wisp of smoke and rolled her eyes and marched back. When she got into the clearing she was about to launch into a rant about reckless fires when she noticed a well established fire ring has been set up. Deuce was crouched by the fire and smiled at Grace, "I thought it would be good for morale. After all, we needed a hot meal and a little comfort."

Lt. Baracardo draws the jack of clubs. How do you push the group through a dicey situation?

Deuce warmed his hands beside the fire. The temperatures dropped like a rock after the sun set. He noticed Mercy and Wilson fiercely whispering by the camp's edge. "Hey!" he shouted, "Why don't you bring that conversation over here. No secrets, okay?" They turned, but didn't move. "Do I have to make that an order?" Grace snickered. Reluctantly, they approached, looking at each to see who would start talking first. Wilson looked at Mercy's neck while unconsciously rubbing the bandages on his left hand. "I think we should abort the mission. Mercy needs medical attention." Deuce poked at the small fire with a twig. "Doctor Helsinki, do you concur?" "I... I have some questions for the Agency. I don't think they are telling us everything." Deuce nodded, "I'm used to limited Intelligence." Grace snickered again. Deuce gave her a faux mean look, "That's with a capital 'I', miss." "Sorry, you walked right into that one." "Grace, what do you think?" Grace's eyes flickered between the two scientists, "While the neck wound is disturbing and that hand has to hurt like a bitch, neither one is an emergency unto itself. We would still have to walk out of here since it is a no-fly zone." Deuce nodded, "We still got a job to do and we're still capable of doing it. They would not have sent us on this mission if it wasn't important." Mercy opened her mouth to say something and then thought better of it. Deuce grunted, "I'll take that as a 'Yes'. Doctor Smith, your concerns are noted and we'll monitor Mercy's condition. Let's get some shut eye."

Dr. Helsinki draws the queen of spades. You find an item or wildlife that gives you more information about the Anomaly. What have you learned? [I need some inspiration and I rolled some Zero Dice. These two caught my eye.]



Just before dawn, Mercy bolted from her tent with a shriek. She was wearing nothing but her undies, a t-shirt, and the bandages on her neck and shin. Deuce burst from his tent, rifle in hand, apparently he had slept in his uniform. He took aim and Mercy shouted, "Lizard!" Deuce sighed and started to lower his M-4, but Mercy pushed it back up. "Look!" Deuce looked inside the sights and into the tent, something moved within and then it charged them. A shot rang out and the lizard flipped in the air and hit the ground where it twitched and went still. Grace was at the flap of her tent with pistol drawn. "What the hell! Coyote?" Deuce lowered his rifle, "It was just a liz... ard?" He walked up and poked it with the barrel tip of his gun. It looked like a lizard at first glance, but that's where it stopped. Mercy was behind the military man but leaned over to get a better look. It was metallic, parts of it were kind of organic, its eyes whirred like camera lens before it lost power and went quiet. "Let me get my kit..." Grace puts her pistol away, "Pants. Start with some pants."

Dr. Smith draws the jack of spades. How do you know you're getting closer to the Anomaly? [Also adding a bit from the previous card for Mercy.]

Grace pointed at Wilson with a fork, "You missed the excitement this morning." "Yeah, I was up late last night." Grace raised a questioning eyebrow. Wilson continued, "I wanted to check out the stars. I remembered how awesome the Milky Way was at night. Problem is, I couldn't find it." Before Deuce could jump in, Wilson waved, "Oh, it was there alright. But, it was out of focus... blurred." Deuce grunted an approval, "Now that's something that finally makes sense. If the spy satellites could not get a clear picture and the EM field messed with the drones, they would have to send someone in on foot." Wilson nodded. "The effect gets stronger as we get closer to the center."

Mercy joined the rest of the group, she was dressed by this time. She lifted a face shield and stripped off her surgical gloves. "Well, it was a lizard. It's more machine than living tissue though. The parts are seamlessly joined, like if the lizard somehow learned to consume metal and integrate it into its structure. There's some sea creatures that can do that, but nothing anyway nearly this sophisticated."

Norton draws the four of spades. Why do you suspect something is following the group? What do you do?

Grace took the lead using the info that she had gathered the day before to avoid any more run-ins with cactus. Of course, that meant that she also looked back to make sure the group was following. During one of those checks, she saw something glinting in the sun. Something that wasn't there when she had walked past that spot earlier. Grace waited for Deuce to catch up. "Don't look, but I think we got another creature following us." Deuce pointed to a rock outcrop with his chin. "I'll set up over there, keep the others moving."

Lt. Baracardo draws the ten of spades. You suspect someone is sabotaging your mission. Why? What do you do?

Deuce excused himself, "You two keep following Grace." Before either of them could complain, he trotted up to Grace, said a few words and then took off to the left. Mercy frowned and said to Wilson, "Where's he going? Is it smart to split up?" Wilson shrugged, "He's probably going off to take a dump." She looked a little nervous, "We should stop and call it a rest." "Nah, I think he didn't want us to waste more time."

Deuce moved under cover and circled back to watch the path they took. He saw something glinting in the sun, but it wasn't a creature. He pulled out his binoculars to get a better look. "What the hell?" He whispered to no one in particular. Lying in the path was a spoon. He was just about to put down his gear when he spotted something else. It was another hybrid, but much bigger. It might have been a coyote once, but now its fur was a mass of metal bristles. It stopped at the spoon, gave it a sniff, and then started chewing on it like it was so much tinfoil. Shit, were one of the scientists feeding the damned thing? It was damned stupid if they thought they could befriend it. Deuce clearly remembered how the lizard hissed and charged him. He stowed his gear and double timed back to the others.

Dr. Helsinki draws the seven of spades. What strange experience occurs that you are sure is connected to the Anomaly? Does anyone else experience it?

Mercy tapped Wilson on the shoulder. "Wilson, where are the mountains?" Wilson looked up from the path, "Shit." The distortion effect that he noticed last night was a lot stronger. The mountains wavered like they were in a heat shimmer, but they were also blurred and blending into the horizon. "So much for handy land marks."

Dr. Smith draws the nine of spades. What do you discover in your pack that you don't remember placing there?

Wilson reached for his canteen and gave it an experimental swirl. Empty. He forgot to fill it from the water jug that they each carried in their packs. He reached into his pack and rummaged around for the handle, but his hand came in contact with something he didn't recognize (and he knew everything that was in his pack.) It was some kind of can, so he pulled it out. It had some kind of weird pull ring handle. He turned it over and almost dropped it when he saw the label. It was a thermite grenade.

Norton draws the six of spades. For an hour the wilds change drastically and disconcertingly; what is the change? How do you react?

Grace noticed the change in the wind, but it was the intensity that surprised her. She knew something was wrong when she heard thunder and saw the wall of dust rushing towards her. She shouted back to the scientists, "Dust storm!" and started running towards them. She didn't get 10 yards before the dust wave hit her. The sky turned a sickly yellow and blotted out the sun. There was the crack of lightning and the almost immediate peal of teeth rattling thunder. She almost missed Wilson and Mercy, their camo gear was almost too effective in the reduced visibility. They huddled together to ride out the storm.

Lt. Baracardo draws the five of spades. What is different about the wildlife further into the wilds? Why do you think it is an effect of the Anomaly?

Deuce heard Grace's warning and got a quick bearing before the dust storm rolled over him. It was stupid to move during the storm, but he did want to leave them unprotected either. He saw what that mechanical coyote did to metal, it would have no problem ripping through people. A flash of lightning and the crash of thunder was almost as bad as a flash bang grenade. He pulled out a bandanna and made a quick mask. "Grace! Mercy! Wilson! Where are you?" The only reply was another thunder clap over the rushing wind.

Dr. Helsinki draws the ace of spades. Why do you now not want to discover the anomaly?

Mercy screamed. It seems that every lightning bolt was aimed at her heart. She was effectively blind since she couldn't open her eyes without getting them full of blowing dust. The thing they were after was too dangerous. First it was somehow hijacking or rewriting animals and now this storm. It was a warning, get out now.

Dr. Smith draws the two of spades. You see an omen you believe is directly connected to the Anomaly. Is it a good or bad omen?

The storm raged for what seemed like hours, leaving his nerves frayed. Mercy's freaking out didn't help but he held the women close anyway to lend what support he could. As the winds started to abate, he popped his head up to see if he could find Deuce. But, before he could shout, he spotted a coyote stalking up on them. It also saw him and started charging with deadly intent like a freight train, tearing up the now loose soil. In slow motion he saw it bunch up its metal muscles to leap when it exploded. He thinks Mercy or Grace might have screamed, but he was too blinded and deafened to be sure. When his senses cleared, he picked himself up and turned around. Deuce was standing over the smoking remains of the animal. Deuce noticed that Wilson was moving, "Damnedest thing I ever saw. Lightning bolt picked it out of mid-air and fried it. Act of God or something. That thing would have ripped you to shreds." Wilson mumbled to himself, "or something..."

Norton draws the three of spades. What happens that makes you feel you know what the Anomaly wants? Does the whole group agree?

Grace kicked the mecha-coyote with the toe of her boot. "Well, at least we know they are vulnerable to electricity." Deuce laughed, "Anything is vulnerable to that much electricity." "Do you think whatever generated that electrical storm was trying to protect us?" Deuce rubbed his chin, "I don't follow." Grace waved her arm in a sweeping circle, "The buried wire, the magnetic fields, that electrical storm, what if it is trying to protect itself? Maybe it wants to be discovered and protecting us would be in its best interest. Mercy walked up, still leaning on Wilson for support. "What if it just missed and we were the target?"

Lt. Baracardo draws the eight of spades. You know a path ahead is dangerous but cannot explain why. Do you convince the group not to take it? What happens if they do?

Deuce catches up to Grace as they reach a clearing. "I don't like. Sure, it is a direct line to the center and an easy walk. It's a practical invitation to continue. I don't know. We've walked through miles of rough terrain. If it can do this, why didn't it clear a direct path to the center before?" Grace nodded, "I trust your instincts. The desert is efficient, it wouldn't waste a drop of rain water if it could. Maybe it's toxic or radioactive?" Deuce shouted back to the scientists, "We're taking a detour."

Dr. Helsinki draws the king of spades. You have reached the Anomaly. Every player: take a moment alone to write or draw what you sense. Discuss. Now - do you stand against the Anomaly... or do you join it?
[I'm going to call on Zero Dice again to give everyone some inspiration.]

Mercy:



Wilson:



Grace:



Deuce:



Mercy senses something that is immobile yet also functions as a hive or machine. Wilson senses hunger, death, and destruction. Grace is dazed, she senses an inhuman intelligence and she is drawn to it. Deuce as first notices a spring between the two hills, he feels surrounded by serpents, and then he senses the remains of past battles.

Mercy followed the others around the clearing, they crested a hill and looked down where the two hills formed a V, their destination for the past few days. Water flowed from the crevice, a natural spring but it only ran for a hundred yards or so before it turned into mud and dried up in the arid desert air. In the middle of the muddy trickle stood a thing; alien, metallic and organic at the same time. Mercy could sense its inhuman intelligence and cringed, she remembered what it tried to do to her. Grace was mesmerized by it. Mercy doubted that she was even seeing reality at this point. She could also sense its hunger. Scattered in the depression, in the water and mud were the remains of the previous teams. Something she knew but did bother to share with the team. Their mission was to make contact, hers was different. Deuce was trying to point his rifle in every direction. As they advanced, they were being encircled by hundred of animals all of them transformed all of them moving with a unity of purpose. She spoke to the thing, "We come bearing gifts." She nodded to Wilson and they both pulled out a termite grenade. Deuce hissed under his breath, "Son of a bitch."

Mercy continued, her voice taking on an unusual fatalistic calm, "Just like I taught you. Follow the ritual." Wilson was acting strange, almost as if he was sleep walking. They pulled the pins and placed the grenades on each side of the thing, and released the handles. In a split second, Deuce realized that they were not going to run. He dropped his rifle, grabbed each of them by the backpack and fell backwards taking them with him. The intense heat and light melted and burned the thing. The grenades hissed and every creature that surrounded the squad stopped and screamed like they were on fire. It continued long after the grenades stopped burning. The interior of the alien glowed with an intense heat as continued to burn on the inside.

They knew it was dead when the screaming stopped, the silence was just as extreme. Wilson looked around, "Ugh, guys, what just happened?" Deuce grabbed his shoulder reassuringly, "I think we won." Grace choke back a sob, her face was streaked with tears and dust, "Either that or we started an interstellar war."

Something chirped in Mercy's backpack and she pulled out a mil-spec sat phone, the kind with encrypted channels. "Helsinki here. We have survivors and need extraction. Threat neutralized. Retrieval was not possible... this time."