



## |---[ Chapter 5 ]---|

## Stranger Things Have Happened

by The Wildcat

Scant light filtered into the alley. It was a flickering, dim haze from the streetlights of the intersection. Heaps of rubbish bags lay piled beside overfilled dumpsters.

The alley was otherwise unpopulated to an untrained eye. Even with the ruckus of a half-naked woman screaming down the street and the ensuing gunfire mere blocks away, none of the locals seemed to notice.

The CRI security team was a well-armed clump of shadows. Equipped with the finest weapons and technology available, four guards made slow progress toward the corner of a concrete parking garage.

At point, the first guard produced a tracking monitor from her form-fitting armored suit. The dull green indicator provided direction and distance information on demand.

A tall, broad shouldered guard stepped forward and adjusted his collar. *"Observation,"* his synthetic radio voice ordered. *"Combat ONLY if necessary. DB, top level. Watch for nosies and blue birds, but eye on the targets. DC, six o'clock. Watch for suits and blues. DD, I'm point. Tracker and SkyLight for local traffic."*

With the smooth effort of a finely trained military task force, the team dispersed. Two of the guards slipped deeper into the alley. The third disappeared behind the nearest dumpster.

The leader, designated DA, approached the street. He donned an advanced night-vision headset and tapped a switch on the

back. His vision slowly brightened with a phosphorescent hue. He fingered a dial between the lenses for focus control.

A port near the base of his headset readily accepted the connection of his radio transmitter. A click in his right ear announced positive contact.

*"DT-One to One."*

DA received a grainy response. **"-One, go ahead."**

*"DT-One on mark."*

**"Ten-Four. DT-One hold for tie-in."**

Hold? Had the van been delayed?

A short crackle broke the silence. Then a new, more mature voice crossed the signal. **"-Two-oh-five to One."**

**"-One, go ahead."**

**"-Tie-in active. We'll take it from here."**

**"-Ten-Four. DT-One proceed."**

With a quick glance into the alley, DA pressed against a concrete wall and sank to a half-squat.

**"-DA, DD. SkyLight confirms targets Alpha and Beta. Three blocks north."**

**"-DA, DB. Visual. Confirm target Alpha. Negative target Beta. He's in the alley."**

DA retrieved a small black box from his suit and removed an adhesive strip from its base. He mashed the device against the wall, its lenses aimed toward the northern intersection DD had indicated.

He then produced a thin attachment cord. The instant he connected the camera to his headset, the vision in his right eye vanished. Seconds passed, but the camera's feed did eventually appear.

*"DB, DA. Candid Camera's on. Turn up the volume."*

DA waited patiently for his subordinate to assemble and activate a ranged microphone. The images before his right eye were straight-forward. Target Alpha, a merc or vigilante of some kind.

He was regarded highly during the mission briefing. His gadgetry and creativity drew subdued accolades. Most interesting, of course, were reports that he had withstood armor-piercing bullets and small explosives during some of his endeavors.

Still for such a remarkable character, he seemed rather simple. DA was watching the supposed mighty-man inspect a parked pickup truck. According to SkyLight, a nearly four-meter-tall hulking beast was less than six meters from him. Yet, the merc was checking license plates.

The Wildcat, as he called himself, casually stepped back. He gave the vehicle's bumper a soft kick and proceeded into the street.

Unbelievably, he was about to examine the truck's inspection and registration stickers. DA had started to frown at the disappointment before he finally caught on. The merc was sneaking a glimpse at his stalker.

**"-DA, DB. Audio good to go. Wait one... Target Beta confirmed. He's in the open."**

The bulky shape slouched into view. His chitin exoskeleton gave the creature the appearance of a living tank. By all indications, the battle would be short.

**“-Two-oh-five to DT-One. AV feed is prime. En route. ETA ten minutes.”**

*“Ten-Four,”* DA replied.

“Well, aren’t you a smart one.” The unexpected, belching grunts temporarily confused DA.

He regained his composure as his camera feed tracked the beast. The lumbering form approached the merc, who had backed into the street. The Wildcat’s focus was clearly set on his adversary.

“What? Were you expecting something short?” the creature growled. As if in exhibition, he clasped his paws and stood ridged as to concentrate.

When the merc stepped under a street-light opposite the beast, the parked truck heaved and leapt into the air. Crashing end-over-end the vehicle crushed a car. DA was certain that the creature never moved.

“I’m waiting. It’s your move,” the beast snarled, “Or are you afraid?”

To DA’s surprise, the merc responded in a menacing rumble of his own. *“Very well.”*

His speed was jarring. A single sweeping motion brought the sniper’s rifle to bare. It was a startling flash with pin-point accurate aim.

Yet, the creature stood unfazed. Its massive paw had risen to protect its face as quickly. The bullet barely scratched the chitin armor.

“Not bad,” the beast grunted. The entire hulking form lunged forward. It covered the distance with ease, claws outstretched.

But the merc stood his ground. Stoic. Unmoving. Waiting.

At the last possible moment, he fell away and rolled to safety. The beast hammered the suddenly exposed light post head first. Sparks exploded as the bulb struck the nearest building. Stunned, the creature staggered away from the crumpled fixture cursing his human opponent.

In his daze, the creature stepped on the sniper rifle, apparently abandoned as useless. The burst of a cartridge in the magazine was audible without amplification. DA was surprised to see Wildcat abandon his weapon so easily. It was an unprofessional act.

Strangely, the merc appeared to be inspecting the damaged streetlight. He grabbed the base of the lamppost and strained to shift it further. A crashing blow from the creature's claws battered the merc onto his side.

**"-DA, DD. Blues en route. ETA four minutes. Two cars."**

At last, the locals had started to take concerned notice of the strange goings-on. With explosions near the city landfill and the typical curfew patrols, the local "police force" seemed abnormally careless and undermanned. One squad car had been following The Wildcat earlier, but even then, they had given up rather easily.

"I think I've found your weakness," the beast growled.  
"Don't think I can't see your plan."

The merc was cowering behind the crumpled streetlight. Naturally, the creature would not duplicate its headlong mistake. It stepped around the buckled light and raised its claws for another pounding blow. The fight was all but over.

*"I don't need you to be blind to my plans,"* Wildcat growled.  
*"I just need you to be close enough."*

The merc wrapped his left arm around the beast's leg. He thrust his free fist into the base of the lamppost. A fury

of sparks erupted from the impact as he ripped the power cable free and mashed the exposed wires.

Arcs of white-hot energy coursed over his suit and into the creature's chitin. The beast bellowed with agony as its exoskeleton became heated by the voltage. The cry shattered nearby windows and triggered car alarms.

Soon, other streetlights began to fail. The entire neighborhood was bathed in darkness. Current ceased to flow from the cable and the creature collapsed.

For a moment, DA sat on his heels in silent awe. It was impossibility.

The Wildcat arose and deftly collected the barrel and damaged magazine from his rifle. However, he seemed on edge and clumsy as his step became a stagger. He must have been injured more seriously than he wished observers to witness.

**“-DA, DD. Blue cars. Four blocks north.”**

**“-DA, DB. Confirmed. Visual contact.”**

The twin squad cars screeched to a halt in the intersection. Four officers and one “federal agent” took their positions around the vehicles. Their weapons, 12-gauge assault shotguns, were trained on The Wildcat.

“Hold it!” one young officer cried. “Put d-down yer weapon and p-put yer hands on yer head or... I-i’ll shoot.”

“Cool it kid,” a more experienced officer grunted.

“Stop where you are!” the federal agent barked.

*“Agent N-north,”* Wildcat stuttered in his mechanical growl, *“I see you have a b-b-bigger gun.”*

At that moment, the agent seemed to notice the creature, perhaps because it was crawling to its feet. The little man dropped his weapon and turned to run.

The resulting blast and ricocheting pellets were the only prompts required for the edgy young officer. He began firing wildly at the merc. In the ensuing chaos, the other officers opened fire. Scarce buckshot found the intended target. And DA was impressed to see every successful shot spatter harmlessly off the armored merc.

Understanding settled on the officers slowly. Unsettling silence followed.

**“-DA, DD. Blue bird in-bound. Plus, three nosies with orders to lift.”**

Distant and soft, the bass thumping of the police chopper was audible in the ranged microphone’s feed. An active airborne searchlight soon flickered over the street in the distance.

*“DB, DA. Keep low. Hold position.”*

**“-What the hell? Uh... I mean... DA, DB... Uh... What the hell?”**

*“Do you have a problem DB?”*

**“-Uh, Adjust your cam. Max res. Five blocks.”**

DA scanned the distant intersection carefully. He could see Agent North, his back pressed against the stucco facade of a short office building. But a second figure was in front of the agent, confronting him.

The second figure was adorned in the blue uniform of Black Mesa security. His body armor was different, however. More like the new Powered Combat Vests that CRI personnel wore. It was military quality body armor.

Abruptly, the guard thrust his left hand at the agent's throat. He shifted his weight and hefted North from his feet.

Then DA understood his subordinate's astonishment. The guard had turned enough for his void-like skin to become visible.

The shouted exchanges between police and merc had distracted them from the apparent threat. Even the writhing agent's gasping screams were mute beneath the approaching chop of helicopter blades. The duo eased into an alley unnoticed, one carrying the other.

*"DT-One to Two-oh-five," DA rasped. "Request new target designation."*

**"-Two-oh-five. Targets confirmed. Designate Gamma and Delta."**

Targets? *"Uh... Say again Two-oh-five."*

**"-Five blocks north, target Gamma. Four blocks north, target Delta."**

Four blocks. Near the police-controlled intersection. DA began sweeping the contours of each building for the unseen target. *"DD, DA. Why haven't you called these targets?"*

**"-DA, DB. I got him. Sixth story, glass face."**

It was ugly. Spikes and bones. Crinkled flesh and eyes that seemed to glow. Lots of orange eyes. The new creature was so well concealed, DA could barely make out its gnarled features with the aid of his night vision lenses. Were it less repulsive he might have missed it altogether.

Remarkably, on the street below, Target Beta seemed to notice the new creature. The twelve-foot beast reacted with noticeable curiosity.



**“-Two-oh-five to DT-One. SkyLight registers an energy flux at target Gamma. Could be a portal. Maintain observation.”**

*“Understood. DD, DA. You slip’n girl? That’s twice.”*

There was no response.

*“DD, DA. Comeback.”*

**“-Two-oh-five to DT-One. Sensor ghosts identified in your sector. We register flat lines for DC and DD. Remote transmit and investigate.”**

*“Understood.”* DA paused for a moment to consider the possibilities. Equipment malfunction. Transmitter interference. Or two of his team members were actually dead.

He withdrew a small transmitter from his suit. With the camera detached from his headset, he prepared the transmitter. DA then readied his rifle and started toward DD’s dumpster.

The woman sat slumped against the parking garage wall. Her equipment littered her lap. DD was as rigorously trained as the rest of DT-One. She knew better than to sit down during an open-air mission.

Such a pose could have but one meaning. DA approached slowly to confirm his suspicions. He turned the young woman’s face to better examine the bullet hole in her sloped brow. Of course, the back of her head had exploded on the concrete wall.

*“DT-One to Two-oh-five. Looks like we’ve got sniper here.”* DA backed against the dumpster and crouched. He needed to find cover.

**“-Two-oh-five. Copy that DT-One. Be aware. Sensor ghosts, eighteen meters at your twelve o’clock.”**

DA was about to move when he saw the glint of their armor. It was then that he knew he had no recourse. At least the end would be fast.

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Doctor Colt brushed her fingers through her blond hair. It was a nervous habit that she had picked up in high school. It had been a subtle means to physically express her concern, yet maintain an “alluring” demeanor. It was silly but effective.

In college, she had taken a greater interest in science. That was when she delayed her concerns about the opposite sex until “later”.

Fresh out of university with a biology doctorate, specifically micro-biology and advanced cellular studies, she had been giddy the night CRI had offered her a position. She had never anticipated that the offer required a three-week physical and weapons training period.

As she examined the four monitors before her, Ellen understood. She had finished her final training session and returned to her company dorm mere minutes before the phone rang. Doctor Weller, CRI’s founder and head researcher wished her to participate in a specimen study and capture operation.

Doctor Colt had accepted the offer gleefully, but regretted the decision when she encountered the security escort team. A mini-gun equipped APC and a dozen well-armed “guards” waited beside the research van.

Ellen had reacted with visible hesitation, but Doctor Weller assured her that everything was okay. He also hinted that Doctor Colt could be treated as a liability to the effort should she refuse to complete her tasks. Thus, Doctor Colt had cooperated and spent nearly twenty minutes stroking her hair.

Doctor Weller and his other scientists were in constant motion checking equipment and preparing a gurney. Radio signals reported various tidbits of information including the sniper report.

Doctor Weller had given Ellen a simple duty. She was to monitor the camera feeds from four well placed vantages. She had witnessed The Wildcat's apparent victory and the emergence of limited police muscle.

"DA is flat line," the much older Doctor Hillcot said. The only other woman in the van, Doctor Hillcot had been monitoring vital signs for the scouting security team.

Doctor Weller was leaning over a console with a radio microphone pressed to his chapped lips. "DB, report. What do you see?"

**"-Stand by," a crackling voice replied. "Visual. It's an ERCU scout unit. Probably after Wildcat."**

"Or maybe that's why he's here," Weller grunted. "He does seem to follow those things around. DB keep out of sight."

"DB is flat line," Doctor Hillcot sighed.

The van slowed to a stop. Its engine died. Only the sound of the monitoring equipment remained.

"No matter," Weller said. "We're here. DT-Two prep for capture. Target Alpha is primary. Hold for my signal."

Doctor Colt was nauseous. Four people were dead and Doctor Weller did not care. They did not matter he said. Ellen returned her attention to the monitors.

DA's camera had faded with his vital signs. Whoever these ERCU people were, they did not want any witnesses. The second monitor revealed a surprise however. The police officers that had attempted to confront The Wildcat were

hastily scrambling into one squad car. As the cruiser sped away, the vigilante claimed a shotgun and took cover to make another stand by himself.

With a hint of disgust, Doctor Colt addressed Doctor Weller. "Sir. Something's happening."

The sensation of his presence above her shoulder produced a shiver. Instinctively, the woman drew the collar of her blouse firmly to her throat. She stifled a sob and avoided looking at the man.

One of the remaining monitors revealed the cause of the police retreat. Flashing lights from the police and news helicopters highlighted the massive target Beta. It was a horrid, ugly creature.

Strangely, the beast was slowly scaling the face of a building. The windows shattered easily, but steel girders held its weight. It was approaching the Delta target with menacing ease. But the much smaller creature remained frozen in its crevice.

Ellen was convinced that the ugly little creature would be obliterated. Even as the Beta target extended its right paw the smaller beast remained unwavering. It would be such an easy kill.

The sudden steady beam from the squad car's searchlight drew a gasp from the woman's throat. Apparently, the vigilante too had taken an interest in the new creature. He stood beside the police cruiser in quiet observation.

The two creatures remained dormant. Doctor Colt could not escape the instinctive feeling that the monsters were communicating. After two minutes of unending focus, the smaller creature accepted the Beta targets paw.

"Amazing animals," Doctor Weller sighed.

“Sir,” a dark-skinned scientist called, “sensor ghosts in...”

The Wildcat’s spotlight exploded. Flashing searchlights from the choppers above caught reflective glints in their path. Then the blare of gunfire overwhelmed the audio system. Ellen could feel her heart throbbing as the swarm of muzzle flashes unleashed a blaze of hot metal on the squad car. Bullets ruptured against the vigilante, but slammed fist sized holes in the cruiser.

“DT-Two,” Doctor Weller said into his radio, “ERCU Scouts confirmed. Let’s wait them out here.”

Sweat dribbled down Ellen’s cheeks and brow. Bullets. Lots of them. Even the two monsters seemed to understand the need to flee. Both creatures leapt out of her monitor’s view and disappeared into the city.

The dark-skinned scientist chimed in on queue. “SkyLight indicates targets Beta and Delta are fleeing... uh... together. Headed north. They could be headed toward the city dump.”

“Understood,” Weller said in a sickeningly calm and understanding tone. “They could be responsible for those explosions earlier... And those missing police officers. It would fit with his behavior so far. Keep a fix on Alpha and Gamma.”

Panic began to take hold of Ellen. Doctor Weller was obviously sick. A perverted freak that got off on the deaths of others. She just wanted out of the van. She no longer understood any of the events leading up to that moment. She wished, for the first time in her life, that she had stayed a little more interested in boys and a little less concerned with science.

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