



## |---[ Chapter 9 ]---|

## Rebirth

by The Wildcat

The satellite laboratory was a dimly lit shack not five short miles from the fallen military base. Of course, the shack was only a facade. No one would suspect the run-down shanty of deviant purpose. It was an unassuming little wreck.

A crumbling ruin, but one with many tire tracks freshly gouged in the desert sand about it. For beneath the creaking timbers was a clustered and intricate basement. A listening post. A hideaway for defectors. A laboratory for continued experimentation in the event of CRI's failure.

On the second sub-level, an office sat quiet with door open. Wood paneling made a futile attempt to conceal the drab concrete walls. A worn green couch and faded coffee table gave little comfort to the seldom used office.

The desk sat in a corner, its hutch permanently replaced by a set of monitors and a control console. The active displays gave flickering radiance to the dim interior.

The first screen was a placid image. The vacant desert exterior as seen from a security camera hidden in the old house's attic.

The second monitor revealed a sterile room. The black suited figure, fallen in battle, lay shackled to an operating table with hoses protruding from his face mask. Scientists in scrubs surrounded the table.

The word “mute” emblazoned in green captured one corner of the monitor. It was a stubborn reminder that the experiment’s audio log was being overridden.

The third monitor revealed a questioning face. With neatly kept hair and a short beard, in the early stages of graying, the man seemed almost fatherly.

Doctor Weller sat slouched over the console his attention given wholly to the paternal figure. The angled microphone of a communication headset hovered beside his chapped lips. Clutching a black pen and tapping rhythmically on the desktop, the scientist listened quietly to a question.

He spoke with a clear, even tone as if his words might be lost if he mispronounced a single syllable. “Yes. They are completing phase five now. Phase six marks the increased hormones and... aggressive behavior. We believe the contingency will be as effective as with previous attempts.”

Weller paused to listen to the querying response. A subordinate entered the office quietly and tapped Weller’s shoulder, an effort to deliver a freshly printed data form.

Impatient hands snatched the slip and waved dismissively, though the subordinate had already begun his retreat to the corridor. “No. He has some form of locking mechanism inside each seam. We were unable to cut.”

The scientist paused to glance at the fresh data then returned to his discourse. “That suit is marvelous. A few minutes after we collected him, a set of vents along the back seam of the face mask opened. Either he had a finite air supply or it detected that his heart had stopped and started to prepare him for medical intervention.”

Apparently disinterested, the stern face redirected the dialogue.

Weller nodded and began another explanation. "Yes sir. Doctor Colt is on hand. It took some coaxing from Doctor Hillcot for her to agree to the required... preparation, but she finally submitted. She no longer trusts me, but Hillcot... being a woman and all..."

Another silent question.

"Yes sir. Kain arrived at the main facility nearly twenty minutes ago. Doctor Fields has him completely placated. The data Doctor Cox collected proved quite useful.

"Kain brought that other creature back with him. But it refused to stay in the laboratory. Fortunately, it did go down to the warehouse compound. Either it will rid us of the infestation and subsequently the droid instability, or it will be butchered and we can examine the remains."

Again uninterested, the next question drew a scowl from Weller's face. His expression created creases in his skin and furrowed his brow. "No, we have not seen that menace. Assuming he really does work for... he... he couldn't have escaped Black Mesa without..."

Even with the cups of the headset fixed firmly, the response was loud and violent, filling the room with muffled accusations.

"No, I didn't mean... He simply has not been sighted since the blast. Doctor Peters was the last to arrive. Two small bands of refugees reported to the city early... before the detonation, but they have been detained in the secure wing of the local hospital since."

Wishing to change the subject himself, Doctor Weller posed his own question. "Uh, has the decryption team made any progress on the Government's data? Surely they know more about..."

The answer was firm and concise.

"I see. And the government authorized its implementation on HIS whims? Without protest from the State Department? Our merc has been a busy boy hasn't he," Weller commented while tapping the middle monitor with his pen. "Still, given the current data, I do not believe..."

Silently, a pasty man stepped up to the office door. His black hair was trimmed and authoritative. His suit, blue in the florescent office light but purple in the halogen of the hallway, was free of lint and pressed smartly. He observed Doctor Weller for a single moment and then continued down the corridor unnoticed.

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Doctor McClure was grinning at her again. His comment had been dry and witless, but he thought it was funny.

Being a man, he simply could not understand why Ellen was covering herself. She felt naked. The air conditioner was deliberately cooling the laboratory below room temperature.

Her paper-thin scrubs were devoid of warmth and partially sheer. She had promptly realized that her chest was protruding inopportunely.

The pre-experiment examination had been worse though. She had experienced genuine fear while standing naked beneath the drizzling sterilization shower.

She could still feel the strangers inspecting and probing her body as if she were livestock about to be slaughtered.

Ellen had refused the process initially, only to face the blaring voice of Doctor Weller over a public address speaker.

At that time, she had contemplated a dash for the door and a flight into the desert. It was Doctor Hillcot that truly persuaded her. She passed through the process first and

insisted that it was purely for sanitation in the experiment.

Indeed, all of the science team endured the same humiliation. They all donned the same scrubs, but Ellen was sure that the men had received undergarments.

Nevertheless, Doctor Colt knew that she would cooperate or face unimaginable repercussions. She was convinced that Doctor Weller might have her murdered and then order experiments on her corpse.

Thus, she decided to play along until the experiment concluded. Then she would slip away during the night and travel across the desert. On foot if necessary. She intended to escape to civilization and put the entire incident behind her.

Of all the scientists in the experiment, Doctor Colt was the most useless. She could not understand the reasons for her presence. She had not been briefed and her knowledge of the experimental nanotechnology was elementary at best.

Yet Weller had been adamant that she be present for the duration. Her few activities had been menial at best. Fetching vials and collecting discarded tools.

Predominantly, she stood behind Doctor McClure and crossed her arms in an endeavor of modesty.

“Phase six, section three-A.”

Doctor McClure was a fifty-something scientist stereotype with black rimmed glasses, grey hair receding to the back of his skull, and a whiney nasal voice. He was also the chief technician.

He was tending a series of hoses fed through the vigilante’s helmet. He would insert a vial and make vocal observations. Then he would order Ellen to retrieve another vial.

“This section is the most volatile. Previous subjects displayed increased hormones and... for lack of a better word... aggression. With the increased muscle mass and overall physical prowess, subjects could be dangerous if left unbound.

“Though subject Alpha is unconscious, he is shackled firmly to the operating table as a precaution.

“Doctor Hart, give me...”

The lights flickered and dimmed. Blackness covered the room. Then the brilliance of florescence returned.

“Control, what the hell was that?” McClure was frowning at a security camera above the operating table.

Ellen stood silently behind McClure. For a single instant, the thought of strangling the distracted scientist and dashing to freedom dazzled her mind.

She even considered flagrantly discarding the scrubs in a pompous and jiggly display, streaking out into the sand to certain death. But also, freedom.

A choice that mattered. A choice that, although viewed by most as lewd and stupid, would mean she was truly free.

She clicked her tongue reflexively.

Free... and suicidal.

She could imagine some stranger driving along an old stretch of highway only to see a blistered naked body slumped over a rock. Vultures pecking at her exposed breasts, tearing way fatty tissues and squawking happily.

Did vultures squawk? Admittedly, Ellen wasn't certain.

**“-The server indicates a brownout. Nothing serious,”** a crackling voice replied from the PA speaker.

McClure was visibly angered, but he continued his experiment without a complaint. "Doctor Hart give me subject Alpha's status. Doctors Welch and Smith report to the staging room.

"And before you ask Doctor Colt, no. I want you here."

Ellen felt a well of fear forming in her stomach as the two scientists exited. Dread swept over her already chilled body. Her eyes followed Doctor Hart across the room.

He was a middle-aged brute with "womanizer" written in his eyes. She feared him. Feared him as she feared Doctor Weller.

"His vitals are strong," Hart declared. "The damage to his internal organs is completely repaired. His growth has been steady. NTE mite dispersion is ninety-eight percent."

"Doctor Colt, fetch the vial labeled N-T-E-zero-zero-six-two," McClure commanded.

Ellen carefully selected the glass tube from the holding rack of the sinister looking NTE machine. Doctor McClure quickly made use of the cylinder.

He attached a nozzle and connected one of the hoses that penetrated the vigilante's face-plate. With a puff of white and a hiss of moving gases, the vial was discarded.

"Uh, Doctor McClure." Doctor Hart was instantly pale. Ellen's fear grew and she started to back away from the table.

Without glancing back, McClure barked, "Stand still Doctor Colt!"

The low growl was distinct. The vigilante's head twisted to face McClure. Even at a distance, Ellen could see the anger behind his blazing eyes. *"What do you think you're doing?"*

“Take it easy son,” McClure said coolly. “You’ve been in a terrible accident. I’m your attending physician. We are trying to treat your wounds.”

*“Don’t lie to me. Stop this now!”*

“I’m afraid we can’t do that son. The experiment must continue.”

The vigilante began to strain against the shackles. Ellen again began to retreat in fear.

“Doctor Colt I said stop!”

She froze instep. Her eyes locked with the vigilante and she felt her body quiver. *“Miss. Please. You know this is wrong. End this.”*

“She can’t help you son,” McClure laughed. “Now, I suggest that you relax. You can’t possibly...”

The crack and moan of twisting metal was deafening. McClure was slammed to the floor almost instantly. With one arm free, the vigilante found leverage to break his other shackles quickly.

Doctor Hart made a fruitless attempt to access the main computer console. He never saw the hammering blow.

Ellen shrieked as the suited figure approached. He was easily seven feet in height and his muscles rippled beneath the fabric of his suit. But his eyes. His eyes spoke of desire.

McClure clasp Ellen’s shoulders and held her fast. She struggled, but the man was surprisingly strong. Her body ached from his grip alone.

“Sorry my dear. This phase is always the same. The subject has simple needs. It’s time you served your purpose.”



Ellen was shocked. One swift tug and McClure had ripped the front of her scrubs apart. She wanted to scream. She tried. But her voice had failed.

The air was so much colder as it could reach her naked breasts.

But something else was happening. She felt a flush of warmth to her skin. She could smell something nice that she hadn't noticed before. And something bitter and unpleasant as well.

Even through her tears, she could see the lust in the vigilante's eyes. Yet she didn't fear that. Everything she knew had fled her mind. Instead, she was dizzy with senses and thoughts.

Unfocused and confused.

One massive gloved hand rested firmly on her shoulder, the metal claws lightly pressed into her back. She closed her eyes and waited for what she assumed was inevitable.

*"Get down."*

In an instant she was on the floor. She glanced up at the seemingly monstrous crime fighter, his clawed fist pressing her under the operating table. Then he turned toward McClure.

"What are you doing?" the man shrieked.

*"I appreciate the offer, but she didn't make it."*

"No subject ever rejects mating! No man can turn down a... What are you!"

*"I am the darkness that fills a coward's soul. I am the plague that victimizes the brutality of the world. I am a defender of justice. I am a purveyor of vengeance."* As if

for emphasis, the crime fighter shoved McClure into a corner.

Ellen watched in terror and disorientation. The vigilante clutched McClure's throat and hefted him off his feet. *"Now... Tell me what you know of this... Kain."*

Blackness filled the room. Ellen instinctively curled into the fetal position and held her breath. In the darkness, she heard the shuffling of feet. The thump of one body striking another. Then silence.

Ellen finally noticed the glowing red eyes. They moved lazily across the room and then disappeared.

When the lights returned, she saw the vigilante first. He was standing before the NTE machine in silence. McClure and Hart were piled atop each other beside the main computer console, Hart still reaching for the controls frantically.

Ellen strained to see around the vigilante without crawling away from her cover. He was skimming the data on the machine's monitor.

*"Nano-Technological Enhancement mites,"* he growled. *"What a flowery name! No Laboratory on earth has this type of technology."*

Ellen shrieked when the crime fighter turned.

*"Relax miss. I wouldn't do anything to you without your permission. You'll need one of these too. Just breathe it in."*

He perused the vial rack and collected a pair of glass tubes. Then he offered one to Ellen. She scrutinized his hand for a short moment and then glanced back at the metal faceplate and glimmering eyes.

*"You were a part of the experiment too," the vigilante said before connecting a vial to one of the still attached hoses in his helmet. He glanced down the length of Ellen's body and then continued. "They injected you with a variant of the same 'mites' before they started work on me. And they inoculated themselves against 'second-hand' exposure with a chemical cocktail."*

For a moment, Ellen was speechless. She noticed the vigilante make a gentle nod toward her feet. The tips of her footwear had split open. Three claws jutted through the opening on either shoe.

Ellen shrieked and jabbed the vial into her mouth. She wheezed and hyperventilated until the glass tube stopped hissing.

Then she noticed the sound of scuffling. She turned to see Doctor McClure reaching for a safety cover on the main control console.

A dark blur whipped toward the scientist. The black weapon resembled a pair of sickle blades joined as a disk. It sliced the air and buried itself in the console's front casing. As sparks ruptured from the machine, the hand tumbled to the floor.

McClure wailed with pain. He stumbled toward the vigilante and inhaled the contents of a waiting vial.

The effect was almost instantaneous. As he sank to the floor, the bleeding stopped and new flesh began to grow over the wound. Nubs formed and would eventually grow into a new hand.

"Look... what... you've done," he gasped.

*"I won't ask you a third time. What do you know about the creature called Kain?"*

McClure never answered. The vigilante turned back toward the main console and began to draw a second weapon from beneath his breastplate. *“STOP!”*

Doctor Hart raised the safety cover and mashed the button before the second blade severed his arm. As he fell aside clutching the spurting stump, Ellen turned away.

She immediately clinched her eyes. Doctor McClure’s body had shriveled into an unnatural grey figure, mangled and cracking. Softer parts had already fallen out onto the floor.

The vigilante bellowed with fury. Ellen could hear him pitch the writhing Doctor Hart across the room.

Stillness settled over the room save for her sobbing. The image flashed in front of her eyes repeatedly. The hideous contorting of his decaying muscles and bones. Pieces of dried muscle flaking into the floor about him.

*“It’s over,”* the mechanical voice whispered. Ellen’s eyes snapped open and stared up at the vigilante. *“Don’t turn around. It’s still pretty bad.”*

Ellen wrapped her arms around his ankles and tried to plead, but the words would not form.

*“That little twerp triggered a fail-safe, but it’s over now. That tube I gave you was a second set of nano-mites. This slime designed them to disable the enhancers that were already in your bloodstream.”*

The vigilante lifted Ellen to her feet and draped the shards of fabric over her exposed chest. Together they exited the laboratory.

After a few minutes of gentle sobbing, Ellen mustered a single request. *“Can we leave?”*

*“Probably,”* the vigilante replied. *“But I have something else in mind.”* He produced a small metal gadget from his belt. He pressed a lone button with his thumb and held the device up to a barren concrete wall.

Sounds of crumbling and grinding filled the passage. Before long the device was sitting inside a small hole and the vigilante left it.

*“It’s a gift... from some people I helped once.”*

Without saying another word, the vigilante escorted Ellen to a small office. He helped her onto a musty brown couch and turned to leave.

She started to call him back, but she knew. She knew that he had to go. He had to catch the science team before they could escape.

She never expected to go to sleep. She simply reclined on the couch and tried to cover herself with the tattered remains of her clothing. Sleeping was just an accident.

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The steel blast door groaned and trembled with rage. Its frame shook and shed chunks of concrete and plums of dust. Beeping merrily, the access panel identified the security override and halted the massive gate.

*“What are you doing!”*

*“This door is ready to pop. I’m not risking an accident with a hydraulic door. Not when we’re this close. We can crawl under it.”*

A small band gathered before the opening. Two of their number wore the unmistakable shell of hazardous environment suits. All others bore simple science team clean suits.

Armed with handguns and light assault rifles, they had fought for each other and for hope. Hope of escape.

“I don’t know,” one clean suit said, “it seems okay.”

“Trust me doc,” the leader replied, “it would be bad.”

Carefully the HEV suit crouched and rolled beneath the door. He studied the surroundings and beckoned the others follow.

“Doctor Lee,” the other HEV suit said in a distinctly deep female voice, “you first. You monitor radiation as we go.”

Clutching a small box-like device, Doctor Lee nodded and crawled into the open. The other clean suits followed closely.

As the second HEV suit exited the tunnel, she found the team of scientists wandering idly among the barren wasteland of a sub-level parking garage.

She recognized only a fraction of the rubble as the parking garage she had once been assigned. Intense heat had scorched the walls and chunks of concrete had fallen from every surface. The burned-out remains of Ford Explorers and a pair of military transport trucks filled imaginary parking spaces.

“We must be close to ground zero by now,” one man commented.

On the opposite side of the garage, an excited scientist began to cry out. “Lauren! Mister Blankenship! Look at this!”

Both of the HEV suited figures responded to the call. The scientist pointed toward an old tunnel. Lauren took the lead and carefully eased around a bend in the road.

Spanning an area of hundreds of thousands of square feet, the crater was a blackened pit. It was a debris field with piles of concrete and rebar jutting into the open air.

For a single moment, Lauren stared in awe of the devastation. Then she found hope above the wreckage. She had not seen the open sky in more than two weeks. The stars were beautiful. Twinkling proof that some splendor remained.

Doctor Lee staggered toward the gathering band behind Lauren. "I don't understand it," he said dumbfounded. "I can't find a single trace of increased radiation. Not even normal levels of background radiation. Nothing significant at all. Just ambient traces. It's like we walked into a clean room. Maybe this is broken."

Lauren checked her suit's built-in sensors and shook her head. "No. Not unless my suit is broken too. What about you Blankenship?"

The other HEV suit checked his readings and said, "I'm not seeing anything."

"But how can that be?" one of the scientists muttered. "We know it was a tactical nuclear device."

"And look at this devastation," an associate added.

"Actually," Blankenship interceded, "that worries me more than the radiation thing. A nuke should have collapsed pretty much everything topside and caused an uncontrolled cave in. This is so... perfectly contained."

"But what could have happened?"

"Beats the hell out of me. Lauren, take your group. Head back. Notify team two of our findings. And the people in the commissary too."

Lauren nodded and started to turn away when she noticed that several scientists had started to step delicately onto the debris. Doctor Lee practically scampered up the nearest heap onto the surface.

“Wait!” she cried. “We don’t know what’s out there!”

“Get back!” Blankenship barked.

Moments later, the fragmented corpse of Doctor Lee tumbled into the crater followed by a trail of bullets. A black shadow passed over the crater and the scientists scurried back toward the garage. Belches of fire erupted from the debris field consuming one man in stride.

Huddled inside the old parking garage, fear was dominant. But no one dared speak. Blankenship pounded his fist on a concrete pillar and cursed wildly.

As his cursing subsided, he began ranting. “What the hell is this?! That wasn’t the marines or black ops. Who the hell is trying to kill us now?!”

Lauren fought off the urge to vomit. With tears running down her cheeks, she pulled herself to her feet. She turned toward the half-opened blast door and waved for her group to follow.

She had come to one conclusion. She knew that the killing would continue indiscriminately.

For that reason, she would tell the other survivors every detail of their discovery. Whether or not escape be possible, it was the only choice. She knew then that there would be no survivors rescued from Black Mesa. And neither would there be hope of life inside the complex. Eventually, the carnage would claim them all.

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