



## |---[ Chapter 11 ]---|

## The Calm Before The Storm

by The Wildcat

Deep and blue, the color of each eye was a pool that cascaded through darker hues as it neared the blackness at its core.

His eyesight had not changed, at least not at a discernible level. But his eye was different. With variations in the available light, his eye resembled more that of a cat than a man. And the blue had intensified, deepened.

Indeed, the man in the mirror was no stranger. Nevertheless, he had... changed. Had grown.

He was more than a foot taller. His muscles were bigger too. He could feel the added strength and density.

With a firm harrumph, Jay Hollen rinsed his razor and placed it on a small glass shelf over the sink. A clean shave, a good shower, and a fresh meal all aided his recovery. However, he knew that sleep would be most critical at that stage. Turning back to his study, the man collected a cotton t-shirt.

The study was shrouded in warm colors. An oak desk supported overhanging computer consoles. An empty executive's chair waited patiently. Wood paneling and a fine couch gave the room the feeling of comfort.

Reclined on the couch, the delicate form of Ellen Colt watched the man's every move. Where it not for her presence, he would have ignored his garments completely. But given what had once been planned for her, Ellen might not appreciate brazen nudity from her effective captor.

She yawned and stretched in effort to remain awake. She had chosen one of Jay's new shirts for night clothes. As she allowed part of a breast to drop into the open air, Jay stifled a chuckle and tossed his t-shirt aside.

He might have been overthinking the situation.

After two hours of capturing CRI scientists, Jay had returned to find the woman sound asleep. She had been serene. Peaceful.

Waking her was an unfortunate necessity, or the man would have left her to slumber. Obviously, she had been fearful and surprised by the strange man that welcomed her back to consciousness.

Seeing the drastic evolution of the offices of her torment and eventual respite drove her to suspicion and panic.

Jay had taken great care to explain the FBG device and calm her. Given more than thirty minutes of coaxing and nano-technological discussion, the woman had finally agreed to see her quarters. Yet even when presented with fresh clothing, she insisted that Jay stay by her side as she changed.

To replace her tattered scrubs, Ellen had chosen a clean, black pair of slacks and grey shirt that seemed to caress every curve of her torso. She had decided against shoes upon realizing the breadth of her furry, three-toed feet.

Then after a gentle interrogation, the man had excused himself in favor of his own study and a needed cleansing. Nevertheless, he found the woman at his side, still stroking her hair anxiously and changed for a night of sleep.

She was calm, collected, and committed. Reclined on the couch. Studying the man extensively, as she might study a new discovery or research topic.

Jay brushed a fresh thought aside and approached a metal cylinder which stood across the room from his desk. Through a clear view port and past lengths of hoses and circuits, a black mass was nearing completion.

The scowling shape of the angular brow and chiseled spikes of the backswept ears gave haunting form to the lifeless silhouette. It seemed to stare back, calling for its master.

It boasted no upgrades, save for a handful of safety features. It was merely intended to replace the old with a better physical match in size and shape. The previous suit had been rather unforgiving of his unexpected growth-spurt.

The man rubbed his head which continued to throb from the pressure he had experienced.

He turned back to the woman, to face her gaze. She had a look of unquenchable curiosity with a hint of lust. "So, these so-called friends of yours... are they American?"

"No. They don't claim any nation."

"Who... sorry, I forgot. Uh... Can you at least tell me what they needed you for?"

"Not really. I'm sorry Ellen. Like I told you before, I'm not going to discuss the details with you. They're a peaceful people and I think it would be risky to discuss them. Especially in light of current events."

"But I can keep a secret. I just want to understand. If they could build the FBG then surely they could..."

"I'm not going to discuss them further. The FBG uses nano-technology only slightly better than the stuff these people were using on us. I told you as many details as I could earlier. That is all you need to know about how it works and who made it."

“I’m sorry.” Ellen’s eyes plead for understanding. “This is just way too much for me to swallow in one night.”

“I know. And the hormones they worked into our changes won’t help any part of this. It clouds the thoughts and feeds animal urges.

“But there are some subjects I simply can’t discuss for both our safety and the security of those that have helped me in the past. To put it simply, they don’t officially exist.

“Please, come with me. I need to discuss something with you and the other two.”

Jay turned toward the exit of his study. Ellen stood and clasped the man’s shoulder tightly. Her hand was soft and surprisingly warm.

It was not a gesture of anger or any emotion beyond fear of the unknown. Jay suspected that she was using some subconscious coping mechanism. Stockholm syndrome also seemed plausible. Who could say the many chemical changes that continued slowly in their veins?

In the corridor, the duo found two men waiting patiently. The first, an older black man wearing coveralls and a musty red ball cap was speaking lazily. His company was a middle-aged scientist with dark hair and an unpleasant scowl creaking across his face.

Jay nodded a greeting and said, “Gentlemen, please step into the conference room. We’re ready to begin.”

The conference room was small. Empty seats encircled a large table. One bulky presentation screen overlooked the room.

Sliding into a waiting chair, the glaring scientist lobbed his first accusation. “Jay Hollen. You’re a wealthy man. You could have given... hell, you could have sold your technology

to more capable hands. You really are just playing Batman, aren't you?"

"Batman? Doctor... Peters is it? I'm only going to explain this once. I do this because I can.

"I built an amusement park in my home town. I built the first of the major office buildings. I fought to bring in new businesses. I based my media outlets there. And as my home town grew, so did the crime rate.

"I consider all of my discoveries a blessing. A blessing that must be used carefully. It is a means to do good for mankind.

"However, an army clad in my armor would have no equal. In the wrong hands, this is absolute power."

Peters grinned, "Who are you? Why are you the 'right hands' to control absolute power?"

"I may not be the right man to utilize these creations, but they are my creations. And I know no other candidates.

"The US Government tried to and continues to try to silence the matter in this caper. They detonated a nuclear weapon on the surface of an American military base mere weeks ago.

"CRI's scientists have exposed myself and the young lady to God knows what. And against our wills at that.

"I will not discuss this issue further. I have already spoken with each of you and explained this matter in enough detail.

"Drop it, and the snarky attitude. I called you three here for a couple of important reasons.

"Introductions first, though. I am Jay Hollen. And I am also The Wildcat. Mister Eldridge was a janitor, recently hired

and stationed in this compound. Doctor Peters is a newly hired biologist at CRI, as is Doctor Colt.”

Jay took a position at the head of the table and sat with I mild growl. He observed both men in turn. Then he glanced at Ellen before continuing.

“I called you here because... this is an extreme situation. I have captured most of the science team that was operating out of this laboratory tonight.”

Jay pointed a small remote control at the display screen. The screen flickered and revealed a row of cells locked by prison bars.

“For now, I am keeping all of these people in a holding center on the third sub-level. Consider that level off limits. You will not receive access to that level.”

Ellen’s face contorted into a grimace. “Is that legal? They have rights.” She immediately frowned at her own words. Her eyes slowly dipped to her feet. She flicked the left most toe of her right foot, scraping the new claw along the floor. She stifled a sob.

“True, more or less. However, this is a situation I have never encountered before. It’s beyond extraordinary. For now, these people will be held down there until such time as I can securely transfer them to a proper jail.”

“Serves ’em right,” Eldridge declared. “From what you told me they deserve ta rot down ‘ere.”

“Why are we still free?” Peters demanded ignoring the elder black man.

“I have been examining fragmentary data from the CRI local mainframes. Based on that information, I believe that you three are not willing participants of the experiments being conducted here.”

“If that’s the case, then why can’t we leave?”

“I cannot, at this point, be one hundred percent certain. More importantly... something is happening in this desert. The nuclear blast two weeks ago was only the beginning. Of what, I don’t know.

“The CRI mainframes were booby-trapped. When my system attempted to secure the data, they self-destructed. I only have fragmentary information at best.

“A few video logs and some reports have been recovered, but it is a slow process and I don’t think I will ever recover everything. We’re talking about physical damage to computer hardware here.

“We weren’t supposed to be able to recover anything.

“You are all free to explore sub-levels one and two. This facility is secured far too well for you to do any damage. Go where you want, but respect each other’s privacy. Just try to relax until this is over.”

Ellen’s eyes widened. “You say that like you’re leaving.”

“I have found a handful of references to survivors of the nuclear incident two weeks ago. The official story is that the blast was an intentional detonation of a terrorist’s bomb. Why would there be survivors? I’m going into town tomorrow. I’ll visit the jail and question anyone involved.”

“But none of that matters to us, does it?” Peters was glowering fiercely. “You’re telling us that we can’t go anywhere for god knows how long!”

“In a manner of speaking. That is all I have for now.” Jay stood and felt Ellen’s hand on his shoulder again. This time, there was anxiety in her grip.

“Well,” Mister Eldridge said as he stood, “that’s no skin off my nose. The people downstairs wouldn’t let me leave anyway. Said I was needed twenty-four hours a day. At least you’re honest ’bout it.”

“And I regret even that,” Jay noted. “I think this is something worse than I could have imagined.”

Peters sharply stood and stormed from the room. Mister Eldridge waited until he was certain that the scientist had left and then nodded. “You suspect him don’t ya?”

“Yes,” Jay replied quietly. “According to some of the data I recovered, most of those people downstairs... they worked at Black Mesa before joining CRI’s research team. So did Doctor Peters.

“I wanted to meet with each of you in the same room so I could gauge your responses. Particularly our scientist friend out there.”

“I don’t understand,” Ellen began. “I would have expected you to keep your identity hidden. Isn’t that what masked men do?”

Jay shook his head slowly, his expression was dire.

“Honestly? I have a bad feeling about this entire incident. I just don’t think a secret identity will matter anymore.

“I suggest that we all try to get some sleep. That’s what I plan to do.”

Jay walked casually back to his study with Ellen at his side. He stopped short of the door and turned to the woman.

Ellen’s face was that of abandonment and fear. “Please. I don’t want to sleep in my... can’t I sleep here? Just for tonight?”



Jay sighed. He fully understood the concerns she felt. They had been violated on an astounding scale, and the entire ordeal was far from over. He nodded and entered the study.

“The bed is in the back-most room. I’ll be here on the couch if you...”

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be a bother. I don’t want to put you out.” Ellen placed her hand on her forehead and then began to gesture toward the bedroom. “I just... I don’t want to be...” A dazzling flair leapt from her hand. It was a streak of fire that lapped the door frame.

Ellen screamed and whipped her hand about in a panicked attempt to douse the flames at her fingertips. Jay patted out the flames on the wall, still startled by the burst of energy.

As he turned back, Ellen threw her arms around him and buried her head in his shoulder. Beneath heavy sobs, the woman produced a muffled plea.

“Okay,” Jay relented. “I’ll be right here.”

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Hollen was a fool, an insect that was trying to stand in the way of progress. A man as wealthy as Jay Hollen had no need of such technology. He was just playing hero at the expense of the human race.

However, he would rue the day of his great greed. The counsel would see to that. In the meantime, Doctor Peters decided to explore the newly remodeled satellite laboratory. He knew that somewhere in the little compound, he would locate a powerful new technology.

Conceivably, he could even find the secret to the rich man’s body armor. If nothing else, he would search for a way to communicate with the scientists trapped on sub-level three.

For the most part, the layout of the satellite laboratory was unchanged. The offices had been refurbished with new furniture and more decorative interiors. Plus, several rooms had been converted into housing quarters.

The halls were more sterile, boasting metal paneling with plastic baseboards and flat LED strips for lighting. Most importantly, though, the internal lifts were still fully accessible.

Peters stepped up to an elevator and pressed the call button. The doors split open with a hiss. Inside, the button panel had been replaced with a touch-screen monitor. He pressed the icon for sub-level three and waited.

The panel flashed red and an error message appeared. Frustrated, the scientist stepped back into the hall. His next option was to locate a communications console.

For that, he believed he would need to find the security control center. There must be one. All such facilities must have a security control center. CRI did. Black Mesa did.

Then he saw him. The brilliant blue of the business suit was unmistakable. In that single moment, he aborted his previous intentions. He had been briefed on the appearance of the government agent.

Nothing else mattered. Stopping the blue suited menace was top priority. On seeing the man turn down a side hall, Doctor Peters sprinted to the junction. He raced around the turn, but found only an empty corridor.

Undaunted, he continued to jog down the corridor to the next intersection. There he faced a three-way dilemma.

However, he could see the loathsome Mister Eldridge mopping the floors in one corridor. He was an uneducated black man that had chosen to side with the rich man. He was human

refuse and would cause only problems. Of that Peters was certain.

Therefore, he chose to continue to the next juncture.

He quickly reached the t-junction and turned left on a whim. To his dissatisfaction, he found himself facing a wall. He doubled back to the t-junction and stopped.

Eldridge was standing in the corridor, mopping the floors. Outraged, the scientist pushed past the old man. "What the hell are you mopping the floors for? They're spotless."

"I like to do somethin' productive. Keeps my mind off'a bein' cooped up."

"If I catch you following me again..."

"I'd watch that tone if I's you. You never know who might be listenin' in a place like this."

"Screw you boy! I..." The blue suit vanished around the corner. Peters scrambled down the corridor, his threats to Eldridge forgotten.

As he rounded the corner, he watched the suited man enter an office and quickly gave chase. The possibility that the government man had taken an office in Hollen's new base fed the scientist's desire.

He could confront the man and undoubtedly find a communications console in the same room. Doctor Peters rushed into the office and scanned the room.

But the room was empty. He began pulling at light fixtures and furniture in hopes of finding a secret door. Alas, the search was a fruitless waist. The office was almost identical to all other offices in the satellite laboratories.

Dejected, the scientist turned back toward the door and froze. Standing in the hall, the blue suited figure was watching quietly.

“YOU!”

The man walked casually forward. “I must apologize for my... eh... littllle... disssplay. I would not normally engage in such childish gamesss... but I needed to speak with you in private.”

Peters searched the room for a weapon. Any blunt object. “You! You!” He wanted to say more, but his scientific mind had given way to his primitive urges. His augmentation had taken over.

“Unfortunately, I’m afraid I must be the... em... bearer... of bad newsss. You see, there are a great many aaassets that I must oversee. Assets for which you have become... a liabilityyy.”

Peters never heard the carefully chosen words. He was frantically scouring the room for anything. At last, his gaze settled on the office chair. Hefting the furnishing above his head he screamed, “YOU!”

The light was brilliant. Flashes of white and green blinded him. The sensation was disorder itself. He could feel the numbness and disorganization settle over his body slowly.

There was a crack as thunder and then silence.

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The radios had fallen silent. No further communications were received from any of the Operation Cumulus task force. Peace settled in the room for a minute of reflection.

Then the General dismissed his subordinates. He sat quietly, half-reclined behind his desk. Through the nearest window, he could see operatives preparing armaments for the assault

aircraft lit only by flood lamps. A towing vehicle backed into position before an immobile Apache Longbow.

It was the worst scenario he could have been handed. The nuclear blast at Black Mesa had proved to be almost completely ineffective. Survivors would surely begin the great exodus soon. And ERCU forces had committed to positions inside the base's boundaries.

Another topside detonation, or rather a fully surface based detonation would prove entirely useless.

With the deaths of the recon teams, a direct assault had become the only option. Black operations. His finest operatives would again enter Black Mesa.

They would face death at the hands of war machines, trigger happy survivors, and engage possibly rouge alien and marine presences. They would enter the complex and strategically place MIRV warheads stripped from an ICBM for complete demolition.

Even at that moment, the president was preparing a resignation speech. The press had already given him a thorough beating in the polls over one nuclear detonation. This time, there would be calls for impeachment.

Staring out the window, the General considered his options. Finally, he lifted the receiver of a red plastic telephone and waited. Minutes passed.

When the line became active, he spoke clearly. "Operation Cumulus has confirmed survivors topside. Additional hostile forces where identified. Casualties were catastrophic. My recommendation has been submitted already. I will be waiting for your response."

He replaced the receiver and moaned audibly. He knew the answer already, but he waited for the executive order due to the complications that had arisen.

When the red phone finally rang, he listened quietly. His orders were given and he returned the phone to its dock.

He lifted the receiver of his primary phone and pressed the button to tie-in with the public address system. "All personnel, this is General Thurber. Report to your briefings. Repeat, report to your briefings. Operation Cumulonimbus has been authorized. This is General Thurber."

The General then chose a third telephone. He lifted the receiver and waited.

"Sienkeitto, this is General Thurber. Operation Cumulonimbus has been authorized. The situation is grave. Assemble your team and report to me. I am activating the ETM team's contingency. I will brief you personally when you arrive."

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