



|---[Chapter 13]---|

Darkness Before The Dawn

by The Wildcat

“Are you out’a yo mind?”

Three of the four teenagers roared with laughter. Miles found his friend’s criticisms difficult to tolerate on any ordinary day, but having his two female interests join in the laughter was insufferable.

Miles was a silky black seventeen-year-old with bad hair and no concept of danger. He sat atop an old iron dumpster with his back against a four-story apartment building. His glare of anger flashed from face to face in frustration

“Will you shut up! You’re gunna get us caught.”

“Whoa, easy does it man. Just think about what you said. Do you actually think we can just walk down to the nearest community pool and go for a swim? During a lock down?”

The girls erupted in a pair of mindless giggles.

“Travis, you know they can’t do anything to us. It’s the government. Worst they could do is take us to the jail and call our parents.”

Miles was staring intently at Travis. His friend was a short blindingly white sixteen-year-old. For some reason, Travis liked to wear his shirts open revealing his painfully underdeveloped chest.

“Well,” Travis choked, “I’d much rather stay here and find out what goes bump in the night.” He drew one of the girls

close, believing that his analogy had been subtle and seductive.

Angie was easily taller than Travis. She sported a mottled tan and a forcibly stuffed push-up bra. For an instant the torpedo-like protrusions beneath her ripped, molded green shirt seemed to envelop Travis's head.

"Get down boy," she chuckled while pushing him away. "You gotta think of somethin' better than that."

When his friend began virtually begging, Miles turned his attention to his date for the night. Beth was a pretty brunette with glistening brown eyes and a better tan. She wore a string bikini bra that had been drawn taut in attempt to accent her breasts. Unfortunately, the bra simply flattened her chest.

Still, she was pretty. A shy girl as evidenced by her blushing cheeks and her efforts to look away.

"Anyway," Miles began, "I think we could find one of the indoor pools that weren't guarded tonight."

"Are you crazy?" Angie blurted. "After everything that has happened tonight. Those buildings were downtown. Those monsters could be wandering the streets."

"Don't worry," Travis said, again trying to pull Angie closer. "I won't let the big bad monsters eat you up."

"Please! You can't even button your shirt."

At last, it was Miles's turn to laugh. He was almost snorting with pleasure when the white SUV pulled into the alley. It stopped directly in front of the small group. The unmistakable mesa emblem was emblazoned in black on the door.

“Ah crap,” Miles began. “That’s gotta be one of those agents.”

Travis took the arrival in stride. Thoroughly overconfident, the boy approached the door with a swagger. He tapped on the glass and started to wave a greeting.

Miles jerked back in astonishment as the bony hand shattered through the tinted window. With skeletal fingers on its crown, Travis’s head slammed onto a shard of glass as quickly. While the boy’s body fell, the sullen face peered out of the vehicle and the door started to open.

Beth darted down the alley, but Angie began shrieking uncontrollably. She backed into the side of the dumpster and sank to the ground. Miles reached down to her, but a sharpened spine struck Angie’s chest allowing blood-soaked tissue paper to dangle from the wound. She jerked for a moment and then stilled.

Stunned, Miles rolled off of the dumpster and followed Beth’s path of escape. He could see her reach a maintenance door and begin banging on the metal surface. He raced to her side and began yanking at the locked handle with fruitless tenacity.

Beth hysterically bloodied her hands against the door, but Miles was ever mindful of the creature. It was with great disgust that he realized the fiend had vanished. The abandoned vehicle remained stoic and empty. Travis’s body remained a lump beside it. Angie was sprawled beside the dumpster, but the weapon had been removed.

Beth was still screaming incoherently, but there was no other sound or movement in the alley. Slowly, the realization of opportunity found the young man. He pulled the handle one last time and then started to search for a fire escape or open window further down the alley.

“STOP IT! Look for another way out!”

Beth's screams became raspy wheezes. Miles spun to find the bone plated freak holding Beth by the throat. She kicked aimlessly. Her hands clasp its arm in desperation.

Miles took one hard step and the creature drew the long ugly blade along Beth's exposed belly. Then it dropped the girl and left her to wail with pain, desperately trying to hold the wound shut to contain her innards.

"You bastard. You fuc..."

The impact was tremendous. It pinned him to the wall. Miles never realized the irony of that moment. He never saw the immense strength of the seeker as it tore the locked door from its hinges. Nor did he understand the skill it took to pitch the metal obstacle as a shuriken. He only had time to recognize the force that ended his life.

Kain was dizzy. His body felt rested, but his instincts told him to sleep. Ignoring the sensation, he passed through a curtain of mist and into the dimly lit laboratory.

Before him, an infinitesimal human waited patiently. She was scrawny and pale. Her scent was particularly sour. To stand in the same room with her was enough to make the twelve-foot beast cringe.

Casting an idle glance to and fro, Kain realized that she was alone. The hallway beyond the woman was quiet and empty. Void of even the feeblest humans. Kain considered his surroundings and drew a guttural breath.

"Where is my father?"

"Kain, I have bad news," the little woman began in a scratchy squeak. "Your father is... dead."

"What?" the beast asked blankly.

“Our facility was attacked by ERCU forces. They leveled a warehouse and blasted a fifteen-foot hole through your father’s office. They unleashed some form of assassin on us and slaughtered several people.”

Kain stood motionless, judging the woman’s words with care. He could sense something different. The absence of life at CRI left a void of pungent odors. He could only smell the rot of the woman before him and some distant stench altogether new.

More importantly, something in his mind had changed. New doubts filled his every thought.

“We’ve evacuated to a secure location. You and I are the only ones left.”

“How long was I in this thing?”

“Three days.”

Suspicious laid heavy on Kain’s mind. He had no reason to doubt the woman’s claims, but his rest had seemed as only hours. Could his relatively minor wounds have required three days to heal?

The woman disappeared into the outer hall without a sound. Grunting with frustration, Kain forced his chitin bulk through the door frame and followed. The woman’s destination was a service elevator, the only lift powerful enough to support Kain’s weight.

As the metal doors squealed to a close, the woman turned to face the beast. “As long as the ERCU has free reign of the surface, we aren’t safe.”

“ERCU? Those are my mother’s work?”

“In a manner of speaking. They have long since been bastardized. But if we could secure the controller droid

called "Commander" we could utilize the technology. Rebuild your mother's original concepts. And secure our facility."

The elevator shivered as it halted. Its doors howled open casting an echo down the hallway. Kain winced as he smelled the stink of rotting flesh. He could see the forced office door near the end of the hallway. Even though days had passed, he could still identify his father's odor.

Together, the woman and her massive charge approached the bloody remains of four victims. Pools of blood and gore congealed in the center of the passage. Sniffing the gun powder particles that remained in the air, Kain grew more apprehensive.

He cast a discriminating eye into an obliterated office. One body dangled by a stretched neck wound warped around exposed debris, but his father was not present.

"Where is my father?"

"He led the assassin into an ambush in the main garage. Follow me."

"NO!" the giant snarled. With one massive paw he clasped the woman by her waist, squeezing her soft abdomen. The gush of breath that left her could have been a pointless effort to scream. Kain lifted the woman to his face and growled. "You give me answers!"

"Please," the woman whimpered, "Look in the garage."

Kain snarled and hammered through the office wall sending shards of concrete and plaster sprinkling into the large impact pit in the floor. He swatted the contorted man's corpse from the rebar that held him up. The body cracked against the nearest wall and tumbled into the hole.

The creature thundered into the outer wall cracking the concrete and instinctively tightening his grip on the woman's torso.

"Please," she gasped.

Ignoring his hostage, Kain pounded the wall and dusted himself with crumbles. A final powerful lunge shattered the barrier and warped the interlining steel support.

As the cloud of concrete dust cleared, Kain bounded toward the scent of his father. He covered the short distance at speed and refused to slow down. Crashing through the rear exit, Kain stopped short.

He dropped the woman and approached a small glass booth across the garage. He eased forward as though he expected the guard's booth to explode. Inside, his father lay contorted in a pool of blood.

"He was stabbed in the back."

"I told you," the woman pled. "The ERCU has a new assassin."

"I can't smell anything in here. It's as if he was stabbed by the air itself."

"Please, if you could... We know that the ERCU are assaulting a military base west of the city. If you catch the controller droid, it would allow us to take control of the ERCU and..."

Kain stepped through the garage entrance. A single blue pick-up truck remained parked on the road. A body armor clad man lay beside the vehicle in blood-soaked sand. Suspicions again filled the creature's mind.

"Never mind that, I'll go. But I want to know one last thing. Where is my ally, Shk'Rha?"

The woman shuddered visibly. She hesitated for a moment and then clutched her abdomen. "He's dead. The ERCU cornered him in the warehouse compound. He destroyed all but one droid. But it got the drop on him."

"I see." Kain hopped out of the woman's sight only to double back. With the stealth of his genetically enhanced body, he scrambled atop the garage and waited.

The woman was slow to emerge. She turned to the blue truck and retrieved a small black radio. Clicking the transmit button once, she sat in the driver's seat. There she waited.

"-One, go ahead."

"Kain is on his way to Black Mesa," said the woman in a hushed grunt.

"-Understood. Where is Trainer One?"

"He's indisposed."

"-Doctor what are you doing?"

"I'm leaving. If that Shk'Rha thing was right, then I must protect my baby. That thing died trying to protect it."

"Lucky for you," Kain muttered under his breath. "If he weren't my ally, I'd gladly tear your head off."

"-Doctor Betruger, you can't be pregnant. Listen, they won't let you do this. Don't make..."

Ignoring the warning, the woman pitched the radio into the road and slammed the door. Kain watched as the blue truck wheeled onto the road and barreled into the open desert. He hissed his detest for the alliance he had made.

Then, he turned toward the city and flexed his mighty legs. Thrusting himself high above the sands and crumbling road, he noticed the gleam. He considered the pleasure of

destroying the machines that marched toward CRI, but decided that finding the so-called controller droid in the human military facility would offer more gratification. Vengeance would belong to him.

To Ellen it was an accomplishment rivaling her thesis. The little flame danced about on her fingertip. It gave a warm, soft sheen to her skin. Though she held the flame, she knew that it was impossibility by its very nature.

The heat alone should have been terribly painful. Her delicate skin should have been blackened and blistered. Instead, she felt only a gentle tingle, a pleasant pressure that caressed her hand.

Ellen often caught herself doubting the substance of her deed. When she considered the pure lunacy of the puff of fire, it dimmed.

Once, she considered the possibility that her body was excreting some chemical or gas as fuel. She had gagged at the principle, a reflex that translated into a spire of uncontrolled heat in the palm of her hand.

Nonetheless, more than two hours of practice had granted her some semblance of stability. She could do nothing practical with her new found power. It was little more than a magic trick unless she completely lost control.

The entrance to the study opened with an understated squeak. Jay Hollen stood in the door with his back to the woman. Mister Eldridge waited beyond the door. The old man's face cast a shadow of uncertainty.

"I'll keep an eye op'n," Eldridge said.

"Appreciate it," Jay replied. "You might want to get some rest. I think we all have a busy day ahead of us."

"I'll knock off in a lil' bit. It helps me to do someth'n useful."

"I understand. Thanks for your help."

Mister Eldridge strolled away with a tip of his cap and Jay entered the study. His face was scared with exhaustion. Ellen could only guess as to when he had last slept.

In her view, the man was a guardian. A sentinel against the horrors she had witnessed. He was a kind man, or so she perceived. His voice was gentle and comforting. When Jay spoke to Ellen, she felt the shyness. He was far more self-conscious than he would admit.

Moreover though, it was Jay who had encouraged Ellen to tempt her unexpected power. Her initial reaction had been terror. She was blithering uncontrollably when Jay began to reason with her. He helped her to see the possibility of strength. His understanding manner and eternal optimism was more than welcome.

Ellen watched the man sink into his office chair and confront his computer monitor. She could see the sleep pulling at his face. He was working maniacally, but the truth of his fatigue was fully visible.

Brushing a lock of hair aside, she relaxed and reclined on the couch. Feeling the glossy purple shirt drape loosely over her skin, she considered allowing a bit of cleavage to obtrude fancifully.

However, she drew the fabric close. She realized, with bashful reserve, that such an act was desperately forward. The fact that she barely knew the man, effectively her captor, merely confounded the absurdity.

She realized with considerable disdain that she had been contemplating the role of a victim awaiting her rescuer or conqueror. That behavior was decidedly beneath her. Jay was

desirable, but Ellen was not a hormone crazed teenager. She was a scientist and a grown woman.

“Did you find him?” she ventured in want of a distraction.

“No,” said Jay without breaking attention from his monitor. “Mister Eldridge showed me the hallway, and we searched everywhere. I even checked the security feeds. For some reason, the security systems had been set to cycle in a sort of rolling blackout. All I ever saw was Peters walking toward the nearest dead zone. When the system returned, he was gone.”

“He escaped?”

“Probably.”

“That doesn’t worry you?”

“No. I already fixed the blackout issue. We’re perfectly safe.” Jay turned toward Ellen with a comforting smile. Then he appeared to notice the blackened scars along the ceiling. “Have you made much progress?”

Warmth rushed to Ellen’s face along with bright redness. She diverted her eyes before responding. “I think so. I couldn’t get anything at first. Then I couldn’t stop. Now, I can control it... sort of.”

“It’ll take time,” the man offered. “We don’t learn to walk, or swim, or do much else in one night. You should probably get some sleep and start again later.”

“I want to. I’m certainly tired enough. But...”

“Yeah, I know.” Jay began tapping keys on his console. He worked feverishly. Ellen wanted to say more, but could think of no worthy topic. Timidly brushing one furry foot against the heel of the other, she soon found herself distracted in thought.

She worried that Doctor Peters would return with an army of CRI security officers. She imagined being stripped and shackled to an examination table while strangers inserted and removed tubes.

Perhaps one of her retractable claws, an entire toe, or even a whole foot would be taken as a sample. Curious as to the reason that fur only grew below her calf muscles, they might even sever the entire leg.

Naturally, her arms would be amputated and dissected.

Ellen clinched her eyes. She had no desire to dwell on such morbidity. She tried to consider many different subjects. But her thoughts always returned to the nightmarish evening.

She had been experimented upon. She had watched monsters rampage throughout the downtown district. She had seen people die in mass, or so she believed.

Every time she closed her eyes, images of collapsing buildings and sinister creatures battered her mind. Her only escape was to observe the man and his computer. With her attention on him, she could forget. Forget, at least for a few minutes.

At that moment, Jay was watching a video clip. The low-resolution video offered no sound. It was grainy and the color flickered uncontrollably. Ellen could see a room filled with equipment. One device in particular occupied the screen.

It was a massive cylinder that dangled from the ceiling. Entire sections of the cylinder were spinning with blurring speed. Bolts of energy leapt from the machinery and struck a conical sensor array on the floor below. A single channeled blast streamed directly into the receptacle.

Alone, one man approached the spray of raw power. He was pushing a piece of equipment. The smaller device boasted a

pair of mechanical arms clutching a golden rock or crystal. Even as the device rotated and manipulated the rock, stray arcs of static connected.

The man pressed onward until the rock was fully bathed in energy. The screen flashed green and was replaced with blackness.

Apparently sensing Ellen's observation, Jay stood and approached. He sat beyond her feet on the end of the couch. He focused on Ellen and seemed to examine her face. The pair sat in silence for several fleeting minutes.

She would have enjoyed the depth of his gaze. That look of restrained desire. Unfortunately, gazing into the blue of Jay's eyes was difficult from her reclined pose. She quickly developed a cramp.

Rising to sit beside the man, she felt certain awkwardness. To cover her unease, she asked, "What's happening?"

"I don't know, but it's big."

The woman sighed. She would never sleep.

"Ellen. I know I need some rest, and you do too. I'm being silly in trying to keep working on this tonight."

"How can I sleep? This night has been hell. Every time I start to unwind, something else happens."

"I know. But we do need rest. Why don't we watch a little TV? That always helps me sleep. It'll help slow your mind down and maybe even take it off tonight."

Jay produced a small remote control from the arm of his couch. He pressed a button and waited while a panel in the opposing wall revealed a flat-screen television. The screen buzzed to life almost instantly.

The first image was that of devastation. A giant pile of rubble filled the city street. Rescuers dug ferociously through the debris, illuminated only by portable emergency lamps. Trucks of various sizes waited to cart debris away.

In the foreground, a lean black woman with makeup befitting a streetwalker spoke directly to the camera.

"...that is still only an estimate. The only confirmed reports of reestablished power have come from the west side. On the positive though, power plant workers believe that at least partial electricity will be restored to the entire city within the hour.

"Now, we are being informed that the curfew is still in effect. So, please, remain in your home or business until eight this morning. Only the rescue crews are needed at this time. And as a reminder, all communications outside of the city are to be forwarded to Agent Oldham for approval.

"We do want to inform you that we will begin recording a prepared sequence for the national media shortly. Please ignore..."

A commotion erupted in the background. A man clad in a loud purple business suit was indicating something in the rubble. Men and women scrambled down the ruins with freshly removed debris and finally something emerged. An ambulance backed into position as a cluster of rescuers moved toward the vehicle. The camera zoomed in on the center of the small band and located a small body being carried on a stretcher.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the newscaster cheered, "a survivor has been found. From our position it appears to be a young girl."

Ellen shook her head. Even the television would remind her of the horrors of that night. She was about to ask Jay to turn the television off when she noticed the tiny speck of light on his cheek. That single tear spoke volumes.

The woman leaned close to the man and pressed against his shoulder. She had forgotten her own turmoil. Her only want was to proffer comfort to the man she held.

She was tired of resisting the hormones and – frankly – she didn't want to miss out on what could be her only opportunity if the worst did happen.

She slipped the shirt off and snagged the man's hand. Pressing it to an exposed breast she relaxed and sank atop him.

"I don't want to fight this anymore. I don't want to miss out on this one good moment that we have. Please."

Naturally, Jay offered no resistance. The duo leaned against each other in somber vigil and then kissed. A quiet understanding passed through that early morning. But the energy wasn't present.

Sleep accepted them both in the tranquility of the moment.

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