



Illusionary Constraint

by The Wildcat

The flicker was a rainbow of electronic snow. It was a momentary flash of white and a burst of static that filled the monitor. Rolling down the screen idly, the image soon regained focus.

It was the likeness of fading light during a late afternoon sunset. The back lit remains of CRI's main complex choked smoke into the sky. In the distance, the profile of the ERCU fighters flashed out of view, hidden by an unusually damp haze.

The tap of a key froze the image. For a moment, Mister Eldridge could see his reflection in the monitor. He looked tired. Tired and old.

Worry lines and wrinkles marred his once handsome features. His graying hair had started to recede and diminish around the top. Even his skin had started to grey.

The old man rubbed his face and tried to clear his head. He considered replaying the video for a fourth time. Surrealistic as the moment was, he found fascination in the sheer power of the attack.

The reality was difficult to reconcile with his emotions. He was watching aircraft bomb American soil. An entire compound was laid waste in seconds.

He knew of the damage of the Black Mesa bomb, but this he could see. He had witnessed the attack live through the eyes of The Wildcat's dash-cam. Awe filled the old man as he began to grasp understanding.

He was sitting at the epicenter of a war.

“-Mister Eldridge?”

The smooth, mellow voice of Jay Hollen pulled Eldridge away from his reverie. He mashed a button on the intercom’s face and spoke in a slow, almost too deliberate tone. “I am here Mister Hollen.”

“-I need to speak with you in the main garage before I leave.”

“I will be there in a few minutes Mister Hollen.”

“-Thanks.”

The old man had not intended to elaborate so completely. He merely feared the loss of part of an important communication. He never truly trusted modern technology. It was so utterly brittle and fallible.

Eldridge stood slowly and arched his back in a contorted stretch. Age apparent in his posture, he slowly moved toward the door. A somber frown tugged at his face.

At first, working for the government had seemed a clever notion. The pay was decent due to the nature of the city. Of course, the government benefits were excellent. Full health insurance, full retirement plan, paid vacations, paid sick days, compensatory time, full disability insurance. Indeed, benefits were the best reason to work for civilian government organizations.

He had toiled for years. Long enough to face retirement. But then something went wrong. His employers “strongly encouraged” him to resign and take a custodial position at CRI.

The entire incident was incredibly crooked. Nonetheless, the custodial job at CRI offered better pay and the same

benefits for a substantially lighter workload. Still, Mister Eldridge only took the position when he realized that he could not actually afford retirement, even with his government pension.

At first, he was quite pleased with his duties at CRI. Certainly, the tasks were menial. But between the pay and the freedom to self-regulate, he was relatively happy.

Then one day he was informed that he would be “on call” at all times. It was a frustrating announcement. Enough so that he began taking a greater interest in the facilities he maintained.

He inadvertently found a project transcript and was discovered with the document. It was then that he was “offered” a transfer to the satellite laboratories. Of course, he would be living in a provided dorm room in one of the sub-levels.

Any thought of resistance disappeared when the old man found himself surrounded by soldiers trussed up as over-equipped security guards.

Eldridge shook his head in disbelief. The entire ordeal began only a month prior. How great was the change that overtook his life in that time?

Of course, the appearance of Mister Hollen had been a welcome relief. And given the knowledge that he had obtained since the vigilante claimed the satellite laboratories, Eldridge was more than content to remain in the facility.

In some ways, he felt that assisting the crime fighter was a civic duty. The old man viewed himself as a deputy or employee rather than prisoner or quarantined victim.

Mister Thomas Eldridge, assistant to The Wildcat. Perhaps it was a fantasy, but given the chance of meeting Jay Hollen in

person, he had developed a great deal of admiration for the vigilante.

Eldridge rubbed his temples and shook his head wearily. Having witnessed the destruction of CRI, he knew that his circumstance had changed once again.

The old man paused beside the commissary entrance. In its simplicity, it was a dining room with a built-in kitchenette. Dim, mellow lighting added a touch of warmth to an obviously faux wood paneling. A pair of oak tables with matching seating labored to provide suitable comforts.

And seated at one table, Doctor Colt and Mister Hollen shared an early dinner. Hollen was adorned in his full body armor, with his helmet resting in the seat to his side. Doctor Colt sat opposing the vigilante with carefully tended hair. Though her garments were still plain, she cast an image of youth and beauty.

The couple attended each other with focused gazes. Mister Eldridge watched with a fond remembrance of an earlier age. He remembered the feelings of want and desire. He grinned approvingly.

For the sake of decency, Mister Eldridge turned away. He continued to the elevator at the passage's end and selected his floor. Beneath the rumble of the elevator's motion, the old man sighed. Memories of his first great love dazzled his mind for but a few seconds.

The elevator doors opened with a chime and allowed the ruckus of the garage flood in. Mister Eldridge stepped into the chamber and waited. The plastic and metal wall panels were gone. Bare concrete encompassed the interior.

Three bays divided the expansive room. The first was empty, save for computerized maintenance utilities. The middle bay was host to a simple white van, one of CRI's default stock.

Screeches and pops hissed out of the final bay. Its lone occupant was the chassis and major components of a new and largely incomplete vehicle. Automated equipment manipulated parts. Bursts of sparks tumbled away from fresh welds.

“I had hoped that the truck would be finished, but you may need to use the van.”

Startled, Mister Eldridge turned to face Mister Hollen. “You already finished yer... meal?”

“Unfortunately. I had to hurry. I even left my car outside. I’m afraid we may be out of time.”

“You think’n ‘bout Black Mesa?”

“I think this entire mess... everything... centers around that base.

“I called you down here because I have one last job for you, and I don’t want Ellen to hear all about it. She’s worried enough as it is. I said my good byes but I don’t think she was ready to accept them.”

Concern painted a clear pattern on the vigilante’s face. His voice dropped to a low murmur. “Based on what the survivors said, power may be out and the regular transportation will be offline. It could take weeks to search the base thoroughly. But...”

“Yer not expect’n to come back.”

Hollen nodded. “I have a feeling. I sense something on the horizon. After I leave, I want you to pack whatever supplies you can into the van. You should be safe in here, but I want you and Ellen ready to leave at a moment’s notice.”

“I can do that.”

“Thanks,” Hollen said and proffered a hand.

Mister Eldridge accepted the gesture and smiled. A new sensation of dread filled the old man. His future had taken an unpredictable turn. Still, he was faced with the option to make his own choices. For the first time in years, he was grateful for that simple liberty.

He watched as the suited figure mounted his helmet and turned toward the nearest garage exit. Bursts of compressed gas spewed from the joints in the black armor. A soft tone chimed the activation and a synthetic voice announced, "*The Wildcat... is... online.*"

High above the skyline, the grey and black clouds appeared to churn and pulse. A surprisingly cold northern breeze swept through the streets. The clouds had developed rapidly bringing the possibility of a severe storm.

Unbelievable. Not only had the apartment complex been evacuated before dawn because someone decided to kill four teenagers. Not only had he been turned away in the early evening because the investigation was incomplete and the killer at large. But now he would be forced to check into one of the public buildings by a thunderstorm.

Doctor Otness hated public places. People were always too nosy. The middle-aged scientist blamed humanity at large for his receding hairline and its suddenly graying strands. He missed Black Mesa. At least at work he was left alone... mostly.

A warm arm crossed his back and produced a gentle squeeze. The scientist sighed pitifully and looked down on his diminutive companion. Nora's russet colored face, through strands of black hair, peered up lovingly.

She was the only person that at least tried to understand the doctor's dread. She began to rub his chest soothingly.

“Maybe we can find someplace at least a little private. Wouldn’t that be nice Philip?”

Otness grunted a neutral response. He fully understood the woman’s intention.

Philip stopped before a storefront and stared at the reflection in a plate glass window. He was an average man. He was young compared to many of his former coworkers. With chiseled features and brown eyes, his face could be handsome save for a double chin.

Beside the sweater clad man of the reflection was a lackey. A five-foot nothing lackey. Adorned in a silky, all too revealing blouse and a short denim skirt she WAS enchanting.

Nora, despite her size, was built to perfect proportions. Additionally, she was a twenty-eight-year-old dynamo. She spent hours at work, then showered affection and attention on Philip when she could at home.

Though she worked as a shopkeeper in the city, she was always infatuated with Philip’s work. She studied regularly and admired Otness for his every scientific achievement. Of course, she had been hopeful that sleeping with a department head would land a cushy job at the base. It was all any woman wanted from a relationship with Doctor Otness.

“Come on,” Nora pled. “Let’s just check-in somewhere. I’m getting cold.”

“I can see that,” the scientist quipped.

“Please.”

Doctor Otness groaned in agony and shrugged his surrender. Nora’s face immediately brightened and a broad grin formed.

“You won’t regret it Philip,” the woman whispered while tickling the doctor’s chin.

Philip's hand slowly inched around the woman and encroached upon one of her breasts. Even as Nora nudged the doctor and giggled, a cold chill raced down the man's spine.

He hesitated and glanced down through the storefront. It was an electronics store, with an assortment of televisions displayed proudly. Each unit was tuned to a local station which at that moment seemed to be delivering a weather bulletin. The radar image for the city revealed the extent of the storm clouds above.

"What now," Nora whined.

Glaring at the image Otness took note of the red and yellow colors. He waved his hand over the window in an exaggerated motion. "According to this, we should be standing in the center of a downpour."

"All the more reason to go inside."

Otness nodded and the couple began a slow stroll down the street. The man allowed his fingers to wander covertly. In response, Nora slid a hand under his sweater and began lightly caressing the small of his back.

As the couple approached the nearest intersection, they barely noticed the commotion at the entrance of the city hospital. They stopped only when their path was obscured by a man in a Black Mesa security uniform.

A slow but steady trickle of hospital patients exited the building and disappeared around the next corner. Occasionally, a doctor or nurse would wander outside with a wheelchair bound patient.

When Philip noticed two men wearing military uniforms across the street, he became incensed. "What is the meaning of this?"

The security guard turned and gestured at the sparse line of patients. "We're evacuating the hospital."

"Why?" Nora asked with legitimate concern. "What happened?"

At that moment a police siren interrupted the guard. The squad car screeched to a halt and its occupants exited. The driver turned his attention to the men in military uniforms. The other officer approached the guard.

"What the hell is this?"

"We're evacuating the hospital."

"Might I ask why?"

"It isn't safe. Our marine friends over there managed to make contact with..." The guard hesitated. He suddenly seemed concerned. "Look, we're leaving. If you're smart..."

"With who? No. Forget that. You aren't taking these people anywhere. Who do you think you are?"

The punch was stunning. Philip stood shocked. Nora began to squeeze him tightly. She was trembling uncontrollably.

The police officer toppled backward, falling at the guard's feet. "I'm Black Mesa security."

"Good God! What have you done!" Otness screeched.

Across the street, the Marines snared the other officer and carried him toward the hospital. Panic stricken the couple began to back away.

"If you know what's good for ya," the guard said softly, "you'll get out of the city. Our little band here is going to join up with the survivors and lend a hand."

"What survivors? What are you talking about? Forget it! I don't want to know!"

Otness pulled Nora with him and started to walk briskly away from the commotion. He just wanted to get away from the crime scene. He turned down the first alley he found and began wandering aimlessly.

After a few minutes, Nora began to whimper softly. "We have to do something."

The flash of light was almost blinding. At first, neither man nor woman could identify the source. With a bass rumble that shook the windows of on-looking buildings, the thunder was tremendous.

Glaring upward, Philip could see the spidery branches of more distant lightning within the clouds. A web of white-hot energy filled the cloud with a green tint.

Suddenly a new bolt lashed out, blasting some unseen and distant ground antenna. The peel of thunder was more subdued by distance, but Philip was more concerned with the intensity of the storm.

Then he saw it. Standing ten feet beyond the couple the beast was a leathery, broad monstrosity. It stood more than seven feet in height. With four arms sweeping the air as if feeling the storm, the beast's lone eye came to rest on the man and woman.

It reached toward them displaying a blue claw at the tip of one arm. No. It was not a claw. It was holding onto the arm like a beetle clinging to a tree limb. It had three large mandibles that gnashed and gnawed in anticipation.

Philip almost missed the thin sparks that danced on the tips of each jaw. The blast of energy struck his shoulder and singed his sweater. He stumbled backwards forcing Nora to tumble onto her side.

The scientist hesitated for a moment as if to consider the woman that reached for his hand. Tears streaming down her

face, Nora pled for his protection. Philip whipped away and scrambled toward the nearest bend in the alley.

It was a cowardly act. He knew as much. But he was not thinking of bravery, or love, or even lust. His only concern was his escape.

On hearing Nora's muffled screams, he cast a vacant, fleeting look back. The grisly beast held the woman up, dangling by one leg. Her blouse hung loosely around her head exposing her naked abdomen to the world.

She writhed helplessly until the blue insect pinched her belly. Otness refused to watch as her half-naked corpse snapped ridged with each successive shock. He could hear her weakened shrieks, triggered by the convulsing muscles more than awareness of her vanishing life.

He ran. He raced down the alley distractedly until his foot smashed into a partially exposed drainpipe. Slapping onto the concrete, the man rolled onto his side. Rubbing a fresh cut under his chin, he saw them. A pair of dumpy little beasts galloped toward him on stumpy legs.

Single sickle claws capped each arm and slashed the air. The beasts were faceless, their eyes pressed firmly to the sides of their body. An array of bony spikes jutted from their chest.

The creatures stopped sharply at an adjoining alley. They were focused on something else. Hopping and tapping the ground with their claws, they seemed to be mounting a threat display.

As quickly as they had appeared, they darted out of view. Philip dragged himself to his feet and took one step backward. Then the remains of the little creatures, neatly sliced halves, spiraled back into the alley.

The white figure sauntered into view. The skeletal face, a permanent scowl, turned toward Doctor Otness and offered only a split second of awareness. Then darkness.

Another violent jolt. Utilizing a black operations Osprey was a sour duty for the taskforce. It was a fall from grace to use such simple and often dangerous transportation, but it would arouse less suspicion during the initial raid.

The interior of the vehicle was poorly illuminated. Each member of the squad meditated in silence as they awaited their deployment orders.

Their uniforms were black and gray. Designed for urban combat, they were bland and angular. No skin was visible.

Each man or woman boasted the same powered combat vest and night vision equipped helmet. Each voice, should they ever choose to speak, was masked by the same vocal distortion device. None of the troops were distinguishable from the others save for markings on their chest.

Sitting at the command position, Sienkeitto was fully aware of his environment. Outside the Osprey, a storm. A torrent of updrafts, crosswinds, and general turbulence.

The main black operations force had diverted around the clouds. But the ETM squads were more than capable of navigating a simple thunderstorm. It made better cover for their attack.

The other two transports under his command flew in formation. They would begin drop procedures soon. Then... Only time could tell what would happen then.

Sienkeitto turned his attention to a forward monitor. Pressing a unique sequence into the provided console, he

accessed the mission objectives and displayed them for his team.

In silence, they read their instructions. As commanding officer, Sienkeitto had been fully briefed by General Thurber, but it was standard procedure for an ETM operation to reserve the task force's briefing.

With one final buckling thump, the three Ospreys passed out of the storm and into the hazy dusk sky over the desert. To the west, the first volleys began. The black operation advance team was pounding ground zero in hopes of diminishing early losses.

Their attack would also provide cover for the primary force moving quietly toward the battle. The ETM task force would as usual, bypass the melee and enter a secondary access. Once inside, they would carry out their mission. No one, not even black operations, would know they were present.

Sienkeitto nudged the paneling beneath his seat with his heel. After the drop, the pilots would journey into the desert and camouflage their craft until the ETM's issued a retrieval order. The entire process would need to be perfect, within seconds of an ideal time trial.

With a subtle gesture, Sienkeitto gave the order. His team reacted instantly, checking their weapons one last time. The cabin lights faded and then blinked off.

In the blackness, as one, the glowing lenses of light enhancing goggles filled the transport. Door panels on either side of the vehicle opened at the hands of the assigned soldiers. And the aft hatch descended.

The three transports spread their approach. Their speed had greatly diminished and for a brief but harrowing moment, they began to shudder. The pilots skimmed the desert sands at extremely low speed toward the drop.

As the maneuver brought the rubble and scorched earth within feet of the vehicle, four men secured a crash sled and tripped the release pin. Seconds later, the crash sleds, one from each transport, slammed into the sand. Clouds of dust rolled and broke as a wave.

Sienkeitto took a deep breath and exhaled. Without looking down, he stepped out of the transport and began to run. The vehicle buzzed over his head, easily out-pacing him.

He knew his teams were hurriedly duplicating his actions, but he needed not witness the act. Rather, he needed to secure cover. The ETM's each struck the ground and began their assigned duties.

A javelin of light, a streaking missile tore one Osprey asunder. The hulks of debris crushed those that attempted to escape from within. Tumbling end over end, the hull became shrapnel and the fuel tanks erupted. Unwavering, the two remaining transports held course.

Ignoring the attack, the recovery teams scurried to their assigned sleds and removed the catch pins. Pitching the padded top panels aside, they exposed the three-foot crates within. As pallbearers, they hefted the precious cargo and lugged it to the cover of a burned-out security checkpoint.

Above the sand dunes, the crater's edge seemed distant. The rumbles and tremors of the conflict were delayed compared to the visible fireballs that filled the sky. Delta shaped fighters dashed as silhouettes before the blaze of explosions.

Freshly empty, the remaining twin Ospreys broke their formation and disappeared into the dark haze of the night. While the ETM squad regrouped at the checkpoint, Sienkeitto shook his head. Without counting, he knew that five of his men were dead. He had never lost so many in one attack.

Enemy forces would soon converge on the crash site. No doubt enemy fighters were surveying the location already. Gesturing carefully, he took position beneath a collapsed wall and set his modified P90 aside. Drawing the custom sniper rifle from his harness, he focused and steadied his breathing.

Two other snipers took similar positions while the task force moved toward the crater. With barely two shanty buildings for cover, breaching the distance would require three frantic sprints across the wasteland.

With the first ETM's securing one crumbling shack, Sienkeitto and his snipers abandoned their checkpoint and trudged forward.

Within seconds of rejoining the team, the snipers had selected new positions. Again, the taskforce pressed onward. The full unit circled the three crates in a wide formation and kept pace.

High above, a fully loaded Chinook roared away from the crater. Its pursuer screamed overhead, hidden by the smoke and humidity. A small glow appeared and quickly caught the chopper. Its bulk heaved into a tumbling plummet to the desert floor.

When the team neared the second shack, the snipers again gave chase. Nearing the fragmented building, Sienkeitto began visually searching for the entrance among the jagged debris that lined the crater's outer perimeter.

Reunited with his task force, he gestured to a dilapidated ruin. Then he found a cover position and watched the squads move across the final patch of dessert. As they crossed a mental half-distance estimate, Sienkeitto leapt from his cover and beckoned his snipers follow.

A blazing mass, the remains of an enemy fighter, wheeled into a thunderous impact near the crater's edge. Soon,

Sienkeitto could hear every rumble, every crack of weapon fire. He knew that within minutes, his position could be discovered.

The snipers followed their squad mates into the former building and took defensive positions. Sienkeitto scrutinized the partial structure and then signaled. Two of his soldiers rushed to the pile of debris and placed demo charges.

Near simultaneous, the thumps shook the building's foundation. Nonetheless, the sound was lost amidst the torrent of explosions within the crater itself.

Every blast outside showered the squads with debris from the ceiling. Burns and blackened scars overshadowed the passage walls. Powerless, the entire length of tunnel was dark.

Pressing through small piles of rubble, the main parking garage became visible. The old wrecks and fractured pillars would provide ample cover with regard to stealth, but the room was an otherwise gaping expanse.

A black operations squad scrambled into the room and sought cover. As quickly, the machines gave chase. Two complete assault units scattered into the expanse. An exchange of contact grenades filled the room with smoke and debris.

The machines pressed forward. Before long, the armor piercing rounds cut through the debris field and tore one man in half.

Sienkeitto bowed his head in defeat. The battle obscured his teams' path. The ETM's would be forced to enter a running battle and hope to escape with just one of their crates.

He turned to his squad and gestured. The pallbearers placed their crate beside the wall. It would be their backup plan, should any future problems arise. As he relayed signals to the other two crate teams, he heard it.

It was a resounding bellow. A trumpeting roar that shook the walls. The black operations team panicked and fled into the open. Yet the machines refused to claim the easy victims. Instead, they began pouring their collective fire into the suspect passage.

Bolts of energy, green lightning by its very appearance, blasted two of the machines. The ground shook and a red pulse of energy screamed out of the tunnel. It struck only one robot, but the machine was annihilated in a wash of flame. Surprisingly, the machines began to withdraw.

A wave of debris rolled out of the tunnel followed by the creature. The green leviathan thundered after the machines, followed closely by a small band of sickly creatures.

Sienkeitto never expected to see humans following the beasts. Scientists, security guards, and even United States Marines poured into the chamber.

Within minutes, the chamber was clear. Sienkeitto never hesitated. With a gesture, his ETM task force surged into the garage and began the treacherous journey into Black Mesa.

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