



|---[Chapter 16]---|

Illuminating Darkness

by The Wildcat

The air was remarkably crisp. Not a wintry chill, but frigid nonetheless. Even for a cool desert night, the air felt thick and moist... and cold.

Worse. Something unnatural was in the air. Kain could feel the hair on his snout twitch with anticipation.

A mere five hundred meters distant stood the outer perimeter of the Black Mesa Research Facility. Interlocked strands of metal with concrete at the base and barbs of coiled wire and steel across the top.

Amusingly simple, but not the real security. The fence was obviously a visual deterrent. Spaced apart at fifty-meter intervals, the true fence was a grid of electronic sensors and cameras along the length of the perimeter.

Even that barrier was lifeless now, powerless and full of shorted circuits. Beyond lay the expansive desert base washed with blackness. Flashes and glimmering flames dotted the distant horizon. The site with such growing forces only complicated an already tedious objective.

The main blast crater, a mock-hillside to the casual eye, had become a focal point for the humans and the ERCU droids. Around the rim, three towering machines struggled and waded, bashing debris aside with each step. They were bipedal, but hardly humanoid.

The body itself pivoted on an elaborate and well armored structure, gimbals and servomotors. The two legs emerged as shoulders rather than hips. Twin batteries of missiles

straddled the top of the body like over-sized shoulder-pads. Dual 50-caliber machine guns jutted out beneath the rounded pod on either side of a single massive mini-gun.

Successful missile strikes rolled off the outer armor, casting minimal debris into the air. In response the machines unleashed a flurry of high-caliber fire. The mini-guns spat bursts of flame. Rockets screamed into the air seeking more distant victims and an occasional airborne foe.

Human aircraft cut back and forth above the surface, drilling the towering machines, but finding no effective mark. During the battle, attack helicopters had followed initial bomb runs. Now, with an unseen black terror slicing through the night sky at rippling speeds, the humans had withdrawn one weapon in favor of another. Jet fighters.

The design was familiar, but the beast did not know their designation. The change offered limited success, but the sudden burst of ground fire that rained out of the crater indicated opposing foot-squads.

The wolf bowed his head and allowed it to rest on his massive paws. Obviously, the battle was starting to spiral out of control, but it would likely continue well into the following day. Kain snarled and glanced back at the city, now only a glow on the horizon.

He was tired. Too tired to have slept for three days. His body ached for sleep now.

After arriving in time for the opening exchange of rockets, he had decided to delay and wait out the firefight. He would hunt the command droid, but an onslaught of heavily armed warriors would slow him down and possibly injure him.

The giant walking tanks would be more trouble. Moreover, such battle could even announce his intentions to his desired prey.

The beast had sniffed around several rock formations and decided on a large pair of boulders. Digging a narrow ditch between them, Kain had dropped down and curled into a tight ball. Then he had shoveled the loose sand over himself. A nest fit for any desert predator.

During his long wait, he had struggled to stave off the weariness. He had watched a second human unit approach... one that appeared much more prepared. The black aircraft had descended outside of the main fighting and the black-clad troops inside had been far more talented.

Only one of the three craft had been destroyed and the soldiers had advanced in near silence. When they entered a secondary doorway outside of the main crater, Kain realized that he could seek an alternate entrance. Conceivably from the other side of the old military base.

Truthfully, now he only waited out of exhaustion. Waited and watched. And thought.

Doubts had been growing for hours, but taking the time to really think about his few true memories had fueled his curiosity. He had already decided that the "command droid" would likely not be inside the base.

It was too much of a war zone. No self-respecting commanding officer would step foot into the actual battle. The risk of losing leadership would be too great.

So why had the sour humans wanted him to attack the base?

Perhaps his target lay inside, but as a machine of war, this was unlikely. Maybe they had hoped the battle would consume Kain. Maybe they wanted him present for some new experiment.

Groaning, the great wolf rolled slightly onto his right side. Why had matters become so complicated?

He no longer desired to hunt his original prey. Even at that moment, he could smell the human approach... masked by chemicals and metals and battle. But the scent was present. He would be near soon.

Yet the will to hunt was lost.

Kain had started to think of his origins. Had the human really murdered his mother? That was a good reason to kill him. But... for some reason, he no longer believed his father's words. Some unsettling instinct had trapped his desire for fresh meat and carnage.

Thunder rolled over the desert floor and Kain looked again at the city. The clouds above it were darker now. And a green flash was followed by a tremendous thunderclap. Something had started moving. A green and blue glow had formed near the heart of the cloud wall. And the storm had started to rotate.

Truly, the storm had a new danger hidden within. And...

Kain sniffed and licked his snout with pleasure. Purest of oils. Blended herbs. Slabs of freshly aged meat. Smoke from the broiling furnace. How wonderful!

Her tail swished into view from behind the moss-covered stone wall. Another swipe. She had yet to learn to control her tiny rear end. Kain stifled a pleased chuckle and began inching toward the corner of his bedroom. Peering carefully around the corner, he found the pup huddled in a tight ball, giggling wildly.

His great head bowed and nudged her rump. With a shriek, the little one hopped into the air and sprinted three steps into the kitchen, tripping over her mother's tail.

A subtle growl followed. "Must you sneak up on her so."

“Why not?” Kain answered. “It’s how she’ll learn to prowl without being seen.”

The female turned slowly, her long main draped over her shoulders. Her slender white snout and black cheeks raised in a canine grin. “Really? And suppose she doesn’t want to be a prowling, snarling, huntsman.”

The little one giggled and ducked behind her mother’s legs. Peering out beneath her mother’s slender tail she cocked her head to one side. “I wanna spy.”

At this, Kain allowed his stifled chuckle to erupt in hearty, growling laughter. He wanted to speak, but his mate laughed as well and interrupted his thoughts.

“Okay, don’t.” She wagged a pointed claw at Kain. “She’s not really made up her mind yet anyway. Save your gloating for when she’s grown up.” Looking down at her pup, the mother grinned again. “Not while I’m preparing our evening meal.”

The pup giggled and scampered outside. Then Kain found an opportunity. He crept closer. She was distracted by her cooking. Or so she seemed.

He was close now.

The slender white tail flashed into his face and swatted his snout from what must have been at least three meters. “Not now. Not if you plan to eat a fresh meal tonight.”

Quickly refocusing. Kain made a clumsy attempt to hide his defeat. “She was going to pounce you, ya know.”

“Aye, but she doesn’t pounce the way you do,” his mate answered with a knowing chuckle. “Go on.”

Kain snapped awake to the sound of a horrendous explosion. A flash of green and a streak of red. The

battle was intensifying again. As was the storm. Cursing silently, Kain forced himself to sit up. How could he have allowed himself to doze off so easily?

On the crater's edge, a string of tiny silhouettes had materialized along with one large beast. The battle had continued in their wake. These new shapes bore the unmistakable appearance of refugees. Battered, dirty, and injured.

The human woman had said nothing of refugees inside the ruins. This hunt had certainly taken an odd turn. The machines were still firing on unseen targets, which meant the refugees were of little value. That being the case, Kain removed them from his concerns.

Suddenly, his head seemed to twirl. He rocked from side to side and groaned. Concerned for his own safety, he scanned his body for new wounds. Yet he seemed uninjured.

'...she doesn't pounce the way you do,' the voice echoed in the darkness.

Kain leaped to his feet, but stumbled.

He could find no scent. No shadow. No crouching form. No one.

His dream replayed fresh on his mind, and the thoughts terrorized him. He growled and barked a curse. He needed to focus on his hunt. He must not be distracted by dreams.

Slowly, the dizziness faded and he stretched with a displeased growl. Lumbering in half-careless form, Kain bounded across the sands and sprang up to the top of a pillar-like rock formation. Moving south and west, he soon found the stone cliffs of a canyon around him. Further ahead, he could see a human structure. Massive pipes and walkways hanging from outcroppings and ledges.

Steady waterfalls, three in all, cut at the rock face and seemed to have dislodged some of the human construction. Concrete was exposed beneath the flow near the top. One of the waterfalls gushed from the mouth of an old pipe. Another from a crack in the concrete. The third was a spring of water from a newly opened cave.

Climbing to the precipice Kane drank. When satisfied, he scrambled over the top and found a cluster of rocky hills. Jogging, he ascended one and sat.

He was faced now with a new view of Black Mesa. Old buildings, half-destroyed gathered in one small corner. A branch tributary, a man-made channel broken from the canyon and turned across the desert plains. The concrete dam stood crumbling in the distance, water easily over-spilling a rupture.

There, on either side of the damn stood possible entrances to the complex, but on closer inspection they proved only to lead to warehouses or other useless structures. The stink of decay and old battle drifted above this scene. But something else was present.

A less pungent smell. An old scent. The stench of human aircraft. Many. Coming and going. Some form of landing zone prior to the battle. The scent was ancient by Kain's standards, weeks if not months old.

Inexplicably, Kain winced. Not pain... fear. Something... some instinct warned him to turn back.

But he was determined. Ignoring the feeling, discarding his new misgivings about the woman's story, he focused and began flexing his powerful legs. With a tired ache, his body launched into the air above the base. In the distance, he could see an open crevice beyond the canyon. A sink-hole maybe... but humans had been traveling into it.

Crashing to the sand above the sink-hole, Kain sniffed and examined the world below. It was a deep gorge, perhaps six stories. A mono-rail track crossed the opening nearly half-depth. And a square concrete pad with bright yellow markings spanned the floor. The scent ended with that pad.

The blow fell from above. Crushing and stabbing, three more jabs followed before Kain rolled clear. Towering above him a long slender shape swayed and stabbed at the sand. The end of the growth was a hard spike. At first glance, two red eyes stood on either side of the curved tip. A mouth with several small mandibles and possibly a suction cup-like mouth rounded out the face on the underside.

Two more forms emerged from the sand and began slamming the ground randomly. Kain would have rolled clear and prepared for a counter-attack, but one of the tapping creatures found his chest. To his shock, the tip pierced his chitin breast plate with ease.

Then, with concerted effort, the tentacle-like monster bit down on his left leg and dragged him into the air. Struggling and kicking, Kain oriented himself in a painful back-bend. Then he lashed out with both claws and slashed deep cuts in the head.

He found himself tumbling into the sands and out of purest instinct, he rolled aside and toppled over the ledge. Howling with rage he dropped to the landing pad below.

Smashing to the concrete, he looked back up at the three creatures and sniffed. Regardless of his mission and his pain, he wanted...

He sniffed again. Then he growled and sat. The three creatures were not flesh and blood. He could smell the flowering odors. It was some form of plant. One plant.

The eyes were deception. A natural camouflage. Kain watched the three tentacles slap the sand several more times before giving up and sinking back into the sand. It relied on vibrations. The root was somewhere below the surface waiting for prey.

Disappointed and now bloodied, Kain turned to his surroundings. Before him stood a concrete entrance tunnel. Twin blue steel doors rose two meters above his head. It was as if the humans had built the doors especially for him. The fact would have been pleasing, had the doors not been firmly secure.

Looking back at the mono-rail tracks, the single metal rail wound deeper into the complex and offered Kain his entrance. Regrettably, he would need to rest now. The plant above had wounded him seriously. The attack had been so natural for the plant, Kain wondered if he had stumbled upon something more familiar than he could remember.

No. Not more concerns about his lost memories.

Kain backed into a corner and began digging a fresh nest beneath the tentacles.

The wolf growled a curse. He had been careless in his doubts and had wandered into an ambush predator's claws. Every part of his life and experience should have prevented that type of wanton recklessness.

He committed to avenge his father. Surely that would end his mistrust. It would focus him. It would bring peace to his mind. It must.

Freedom. How wonderful the night air tasted!

Eli relaxed slightly for the first time in weeks. He was sitting on the old highway, watching the young and fit

travel slowly toward the city. He would follow soon, but for the moment it was enough to know that his family would be escorted to safety.

Escape from the base had been a harrowing dash through old passages and scorched garages. To finally see the sky after so much time in the bunker, Doctor Vance had been horrified to find smoke blocking all starlight.

The machines, not just the foot soldiers but those towering behemoths as well, had lain siege to Lambda sector. Only a black operations task force had answered with their own incursion. Certainly, the base would be completely leveled this time.

Fortunately, the two warring parties had been busy pulverizing each other. The green gargantua had cleared a strait path out of the crater and all wounded had been carried.

A flood of humanity had poured out of the old garage and stormed the crater's edge. The vortigaunts had been quick to offer their electrical powers for defense, but soon found little need. With the chaos of the battle as cover, only three young men had been wounded in the crossfire.

During the first hour of the hike back to the city, the expression on each face was one of purest rapture. The trek was over sixty miles through harsh New Mexican wasteland, but that point was moot. Open and exposed to ambush, nothing could have broken their exaltation.

In the second hour, there had been a somber moment as the survivors mourned their fallen comrades. How many lives had been given in the bowels of Black Mesa?

Deep inside, the moment of silence had cut Eli with vigor. He would always hold himself responsible.

‘Prepare for unforeseen consequences.’ Eli would never forget those words. They gouged his soul and burrowed into his mind.

It was with such memories that he looked upon the thundercloud above the city. Flashes of energy, an inexplicable green color. Hissing thunder unlike any he had ever known. Rotation in the clouds, and a distinct green and blue glow.

His thoughts jumped back to that last read-out. The printed form, all of its data at a glance indicated a new signal forcing open the same rift. The resonance cascade, relatively small and contained, had opened more than a portal. It was a beacon. A signal.

Azian and Alyx, they were the only reason Eli continued. He would see his family soon and would lead them to safety. And when secure he would continue his research, would discover the riddle behind the Black Mesa resonance cascade. His goal in life would be to end the disaster and close the rift permanently.

“I think he’s over the horizon,” someone observed.

The squirrely, nasal voice belonged to Doctor Kleiner. The scrawny, balding scientist was facing the old base. His gaze followed a lengthy trail of dust. For someone so timid, Eli noticed the excitement in Isaac’s voice.

“I’m glad to hear that Izzy. Maybe he will see something we didn’t.”

“Perhaps. If he survives long enough... and of course, if he can return to us in one piece.”

Somehow, Eli believed that their new friend would succeed. He was obviously more than any ordinary soldier or mercenary.

The first impression was still fresh on Doctor Vance's mind. The strike of lightening over the city skyline in the distance. The cloud of dust that rapidly approached in the darkness, only visible thanks to the radiance of red and amber lights. Streaks of purple luminance trailing in his wake.

The headlamps could have been furious demonic eyes. The black shape was tall, but parts of it were slicked back like ferocious back-swept ears. The blazing dual rows of exhaust continuously erupting in purple flames.

The rumble of the primary engine was a thrilling roar, the sound of a ravaging sports car. But the secondary engine, the powerhouse that had propelled the vehicle toward the survivors in the darkness... it screamed and howled as an undead beast.

After all of the terrors of the past weeks, perhaps Eli and his colleagues were prepared for such a sight. They watched the vehicle cut through the desert on the old highway. Even the marines held their fire and waited to identify the potential friend or foe.

When the black-suited hero stepped out of his car, the marines approached with caution.

Eli laughed quietly.

Glowing red eyes. Harsh edges on each major piece of body armor. Over seven feet tall and mostly muscle. The figure had looked more monstrous than his dragster inspired car. Doubtless, he could have torn through the entire squad in seconds.

Even so, the hero had approached quietly and requested the names of the leadership. Doctor Vance had insisted that he be carried forward. Corporal Taylor had also advanced, but his movements were more a warning than an offer of peaceful

talk. He seemed more than satisfied to view Eli as the leader in all matters save combat.

Over the ensuing minutes of discussion, The Wildcat had introduced himself and questioned many of the survivors. Learning that Doctor Rosenberg and a number of refugees had already reached the city certainly was a welcome revelation for the survivors.

Unfortunately, news of the battle in the downtown district and the rampant corruption in CRI both were dire warnings.

For a few moments Eli allowed himself consider the implications. He surrendered to distraction in thoughts of his wife and daughter. Eli could think of nothing further.

Azian... Alyx... What had he done? What might have been different had he refused to participate in the experiment?

‘Unforeseen consequences...’

He had no excuse. He had known. He had been warned and he had been aware of equipment issues and containment faults.

Rosenberg had been insistent that the experiment be delayed. When Doctor Breen refused, Eli had simply bowed to the orders of his administrator.

Eli regained composure and concealed the cold dread that filled his heart. No one must see him in such self-doubt. He was responsible for his fellow civilians now. Somehow, he had become their would-be leader.

In time, the survivors had agreed to help Wildcat. Eli personally scratched the directions on an old set of maps. Perhaps the hero would find a better entrance into Black Mesa near the old top-side dormitories. Maybe he would discover some truth in the wreckage.

Once the hero had returned to his car, the survivors had succumbed to rampant speculation. Watching the unusual car dash into the desert with a fervent bellow, Eli made up his mind. His original plan was too sluggish. Too trusting.

Safety and escape from horrible memories would have been his future.

Now...

Now his plans had changed. He would encourage a mad dash back to the city leaving the slower, weaker personnel including himself in the desert.

The marines and any stout civilians would enter the city and help evacuate in any vehicle they could confiscate. At the very least, the families of his fellow refugees must be retrieved.

Anyone that would join the survivors would be welcome. Eli and his fellow injured would travel with the aid of the vortigaunts and the green gargantua which the security guards had nick-named "Friendly Garg".

A sort of evacuee camp would be established outside the city outskirts. Once ready, the entire party would flee into the desert in mass exodus.

If only he could travel into the city and gather his wife and daughter personally. He hated his weakness now. Before it was inconvenience. Now it was purely a curse.

The first sprinkles of rain found Eli returning his attention to the city. "We need to begin."

No other word was needed. Isaac and another scientist, Doctor Ferguson, helped lift Eli onto his remaining leg. Slowly, they began moving toward the city. Dizziness and pain swallowed Eli for an instant. This journey would

be unforgettably trying, but the heavy weight in his coat pocket intensified his will.

The photo and frame struck his side with each hobbling step. It was a harsh taskmaster which bade him move forward.

Several monitors were blank. None of them were needed, so Ellen had switched them off. She was more than satisfied with the few that illuminated the otherwise dark office space. Just so long as she could see and hear him... and speak to him.

It was silly. A school-girl crush at best. More likely a psychological trauma from being held captive and facing the potential horrors her former employers had planned. There was simply no other reason to feel so infatuated with the vigilante.

Stroking her hair, she scanned the active monitors. Somehow, she had fallen into the same job. More monitors. More radio communications. Still, this was different. She wanted to help the man she had recently come to know.

To her left, one monitor flickered between holding cells. Another monitor flashed over empty corridors. Mister Eldredge appeared on it once, apparently on his way to the garage to double check the vehicle construction again.

For a single instant, Ellen fumed. He really expected her to just leave... What was he thinking? How could she...

Ellen again reminded herself that none of her feelings could possibly be real. She was a scientist first. But perhaps that was the explanation she sought. She had abandoned relationships during her educational career and now she had

faced death... alone. No one should have to experience that feeling.

Rubbing her eyes, she realized that she had been staring at the monitors. Hours had passed. Even so, she wanted to watch... wanted to hold on to contact with him.

At least part of her feelings originated in his selfless acts thus far. Jay Hollen... a man wealthy enough to live in some ivory tower beyond this danger and evil. Yet he was the one racing toward the old military base. Toward certain danger.

Strange that he would affect her so strongly. She had seen policemen and firefighters. They risked their lives for complete strangers on a daily basis. But this man was different. He held some silent strength. A power of will that she could not explain.

He was more than any ordinary man. And his involvement in her life had changed her on a deeper level. His tenderness was muted and quiet... an introvert without his suit of armor, yet also a leader and teacher.

She wished he had not sped off into the desert, or that he would have taken her with him. School girl crush or genetic mutation or whatever, she was certain that nothing could be safer than standing by his side. She longed to know him better.

Dropping her hair, Ellen turned her attention to the monitors on her right. One flickered with a green glow. Night-vision. A camera mounted on the front of that monstrous race-car. The desert was flashing past at incredible speed.

In the distance, the flashes of war danced along the horizon. Periodically, white puffs burst in the sky. Tracer rounds streaked into the air and scattered to the four winds. The sight of such battle terrified the

woman. She had known of the CRI scientist's evil, but not of the other threats.

When Jay explained his knowledge of the situation, and when she had witnessed his interrogation of the Black Mesa survivors, she had been faced with an altogether darker image of her future.

Somewhere, deep with-in her heart, she felt the truth. The world had changed. She would never live her carefree University life. She would not win any great prizes for astonishing discoveries.

Even worse, she was more than woman now. She was a beast, living in a world that had started to decay.

She brushed one foot with the center toe of the other.

Monster. She hated that word. She felt that it was a label she would wear soon... and never again from which could she be free.

Looking at the next monitor, she was presented with The Wildcat's helmet-mounted camera. For the moment, he was just watching the road. Thankfully.

She would never forgive him if he drove into danger and never returned. She needed more... more of him. Needed to explore this school-girl crush.

Instinct, perhaps heightened by some part of her mutation, told her that she would have to let go. She could never explain the emotion. She never really wanted to.

By now he was nearing the garage entrance. Even on the small monitor, lit only by the night-vision functions of Jay's helmet, she could see the entrance and neighboring dormitories were still intact.

A train line passed into the midst of the buildings and then disappeared into a dark tunnel.

In the red glow of Wildcat's personal night-vision, the entire compound was a horrid ghost town... a grave yard condemned. A handful of remains still lay strewn near the entrance. The two tunnels, different as they were, both appeared as gaping maws.

"-The power seems to be out, but the garage blast doors are open." The Wildcat's mechanical growl forced Ellen's heart to race. She wondered if anyone could ever become accustomed to such a voice.

Every word was spoken in deep bass tones and blended with a deeper predatory grumble. Even the monitors seemed to tremble with each growling word.

"Could you... use a different voice?"

"-For our communications yes," Jay responded. ***"But if I find any trouble, I need to be as threatening as possible. Sometimes, intimidation can be more effective than brute force."***

The vigilante pulled into the garage and rounded a bend. Ellen was amazed by the open passages. She had expected a pile of debris or rubble scattered across the path. Instead, the tunnel seemed clear.

"I don't understand," she began.

"-Someone has cleared the area already," Jay answered before she could finish. ***"The power isn't off, it's being redirected. Someone has been working here since the disaster."***

"CRI?"

"-Probably. This is more than a covered-up accident."

Cruising through the tunnel now, only utilizing the standard engine of his car, The Wildcat slowed as he neared an open chamber. Yet another heavy steel blast door had been opened. Inside, emergency lights were active.

The room was predominantly empty, but a few wood crates sat in the corners and a metal shipping container sat beneath a heavy crane. An old cargo truck remained parked in its loading bay. Its sides were scorched by some intense blaze from weeks past.

Girders stretched across the room's ceiling, but part of the garage had been buried in a collapse. Now the debris had become a dumping site for all refuse and debris. Freshly moved rocks and concrete had been piled neatly. Spent crates and boxes were stacked beside the rubble.

In the distant corner, beyond the debris, a lift shaft yawned menacingly. The platform would need to be called, if it were powered.

Ellen sighed. Maybe he would just wander across a military salvage team. She watched the camera view exit the car and stride up to the lift shaft. There was a quick glance at a guard booth, then a focused stare into the darkness below.

"-There's a light on down there."

"What? I don't see anything."

"-It's distant. Probably in another part of the tunnel."

Jay paused and then Ellen could swear he growled without the aid of his suit. **"I think someone has been working their way to Sector C."**

"Is that... bad?"

“-Maybe. This is deliberate effort to reach the effective ground zero of this incident. From what Doctor Vance said, someone may be trying to keep this event open.”

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Author's Note: This is where the story ends for now. I've long since moved on to various other projects and probably won't return to this as a Half-Life fan-fiction crossover.

A major portion of this story is actually based on a story I've been working on for comics and the like. So, I may eventually make a novel with HL and other characters that don't belong to me replaced and go on to a finish in that one.

There is always the possibility I will return to this exact story someday, but only time and desire can tell.