



|---[Chapter 3]---|

A Hot Night

by The Wildcat

The gurgling of magma flow was serene. Steamy gases mixed with soot made the air thick. Crimson as blood, the sky was a void filled with smoke and the occasional disfigured creature.

Amidst a rock formation, the imp slept. In such a state of being, its spike covered body appeared gangly and frail. At barely seven feet in height, he was far from intimidating to his brethren.

He was an assassin. A scavenger. He survived by hiding until opportunities presented themselves.

And with a gurgling roar, one such opportunity arose. The imp awoke instantly, his instincts urging him forward. He crawled to the peak of his rocky camp and cast a diligent gaze across a lava sea.

Islands of stone penetrated the boiling surface. It was a wash of molten rock. A shallow island attracted the imp's attention. Two burly horned beasts faced each other with opposing ceremonial displays.

They were of a species nick-named and often taunted for its abnormal coloration during youth. But the mocking of their young only served to toughen them and harden their exposition.

The first was younger, a juvenile with its lighter pink skin and smoother features. His opponent was more mature, a gray colored missugen, with bionic upgrades and battle scares of previous victories. Both were natural predators and powerful

threats to the imp. Yet, if one were to fall in battle, he could siphon a generous portion of energy. Therefore, he pressed low and eased toward the shoreline.

The two pinkies charged headlong at each other. When their horns locked, their skulls met with a trembling crack. The ground shook with each crashing blow.

A subtle impact wave swept across the lava as bionic hind legs stomped a younger chest. The imp waited for the wave to pass before hopping to the first rocky island. His progress was slow for fear of a slip. Though his skin could tolerate the churning surf, lava scalding still created much pain.

The concussive force of a leaping head butt on the island vibrated the rocks beneath the imp. He needed to hurry. A victory was imminent. He increased his speed, more visibly leaping from one rock to the next. His loss of stealth was forgivable, for he knew the pinkies were too busy to notice.

As the youth gasped desperately, his opponent reared back and readied its claws for a finishing blow. Its experience fully observable, the victor drew energy from its environment and brought a blazing strike down.

Even as the corpse turned to ash, the young pinky had already started to re-spawn in his original clan altar. Perhaps he would be a bit wiser the next time. For the moment though, the mature missugen would claim its victim's lost energy.

It dipped its horned head and held an aggressive stance, low to the ground. It began to grunt in a rhythmic pattern similar to a chant. Cracks formed beneath its feet. Flames and fountains of lava danced around the tiny island.

It was a narrow window of opportunity. The imp scrambled over smaller rocks and dove into the ring of free and flaring energy. Huddled beneath metallic hind legs, the imp went unnoticed until the fires subsided.

Angered growls ruptured from the victor. The first pulverizing stomp fell mere inches to the left of the imp's head. He had only seconds to flee. Fortunately, he was a natural escapist.

Bounding from rock to rock, the imp hurtled ashore. He made no hesitation to check for pursuit. Instead, he scrambled into a clump of rocks. With a small dose of his ill-gotten charge, he used the surrounding shadows to disappear.

In the brief moments that followed, the world was again silent. The missugen had not seen fit to give chase.

Suddenly, a bolder shattered. Startled, the imp searched his surroundings. A crack beneath him pulled his vision down. A pentagram formed as a glowing radiance under his feet. The shape and accompanying glyphs scorched the rock.

White-hot energy erupted from the shape and engulfed the imp. It was blinding and blistering. But he was calm for he had experienced a summoning portal before.

His vision returned slowly. A tower of flames was the gateway out of his native border world. In a slight daze, the imp stepped into an open field.

Mounds of debris and rubbish consumed the landscape. The odors of rot, decay, and sulfur were a rancid potpourri. The night sky twinkled with the tiniest of stars.

Fear. Weakness. The imp focused on the welcome sensations. Before him lay a cowering animal. A human.

The trembling man wore a scorched uniform and clutched a small handgun. His face and hands revealed burns. He was a pitiful specimen, even for a human.

The imp had visited the human world before. It was a welcome diversion. A chance to hunt. But portals to the human world were rare. Even the more powerful brethren had to join their

energies to open a single portal. Only if the gates were reopened would the full powers of the brethren be made known.

Most of the portals were generated in the destination world as a summons. And humans were too weak and primitive to open a portal by their own devices. No, the man - a “security guard” - must have been an innocent bystander. Or, better yet... a sacrifice.

The imp inhaled and stepped forward.

“N-n-no,” the man stammered, “s-stay back!” As if to punctuate his plea, the man fired a single 9mm round.

Stunned, the imp clutched his wound and staggered.

“Not so tough now, are ya? Freak of nature. This is my junkyard. Beat it or I’ll give ya another.”

The pain had already started to subside. A crooked grin snaked across the imp’s face. The little man was pathetic and foolish, a pleasing combination. In a scratchy and cracking voice, the imp spoke. “Shra nishvu rhagh, shriija serverus narato sei gharak skahorna grehsjii.”

The guard’s confidence visibly faded. “Uh... did you... what?”

The imp started to smile with a broken, carnivorous flare of teeth. “I am Sshkavi ‘shra. I said that I am newly spawned from hell and not yet adapted to your atmosphere... and that you just made the mistake of your life.”

In panic the man began to fire hastily. Bullets tore through the night air and found nothing. Shk’Rha had easily dropped to the ground and scuttled into the shadows of a trash heap. With only a little focus, his shadow-meld rendered him invisible. At the final click of dry-fire, he silently reemerged behind his prey.

“What the hell?” the man muttered as he searched for the escaped imp.

“That’s right friend,” Shk’Rha whispered. “Hell. Where you’ll be going right... now.”

Realizing his mistake, the man tried to turn and face the voice. Shk’Rah pressed the claws of his fingertips into the man’s back with ease. The man was soft.

A few muffled cracks and the imp could feel the cool breeze cross his fingertips once again. He slung the corpse aside and shook a few remnants from his gnarled hand. “Excuse me sir,” he chuckled at the body, “but is this yours.”

The smoldering remains of Shk’Rah’s portal provided enough light to check his wound. Although pain was absent, the bullet had done significant damage.

No matter. The imp crossed his arms and began to chant an ancient curse. The garbage seemed to quake with each word. Cracks split the gravel road on which the imp stood. Geysers erupted from the surrounding soil.

As the earth fell away beneath the guard’s body, a river of lava filled the gap. A wall of flames quickly engulfed Shk’Rah and his prize. The blast wave swept across the rubbish heaps. A cloud of ash veiled the night sky.

The imp strolled down the gravel road, pleased with his regeneration and hungry for fresh energy. Over the smells of garbage and soot, Shk’Rah noticed a different odor.

Smoke. Narcotic smoke. A pleasing aroma. It was the stink of easy prey.

Shk’Rha leapt to the top of an unsteady rubbish heap and studied the drifting trail of fragrance. His gaze fell on the nearest buildings. An alley, dark and barren, formed between neatly kept office and apartment buildings.

The presence of such structures neighboring the city dump momentarily distracted the imp. They were too nice. Out of place. Had the human world changed so vastly since his last visit, that the humans no longer held some of their peculiar arrogance?

Where were the residential neighborhoods? The houses and open lands? There were but a handful of smaller buildings and houses around the outskirts of the town. And even those felt too close to a dumping ground dedicated to waste.

The scene before him felt artificial. Fake in the most bizarre ways.

His curiosity faded with a subtle muscle cramp, a reminder of his freshly healed injury. He sprinted across the open landfill and hurtled the perimeter fence with ease. As he entered the alley, he dropped to a low crouch. His shadow-meld guarded his progress into the open passage.

The musty odor grew in intensity with each step. Its origin lay beside an overfilled trash dumpster. A pair of humans, bums by their filthy garb and pungent scents, rested at the base of the dumpster. They each took turns smoking and speaking.

Shk'Rha began his approach quietly but could not resist the urge to frighten. It was a matter of pride that he be a source of fear for his victims. A simple tap of a clawed toe on the hard concrete provided the desired effect.

"What was that?" one bum grunted.

His companion coughed and grunted his negative response.

"Serious man. I heard somethun'."

"Ugh... What are you gettin' on about?"

"I'm tellin' ya John. I heard somethun'."

The imp could not help but grin and tap the ground a second time. The first bum snorted and began glancing around wildly.

His friend was less enthusiastic. He stood and stretched himself. A spastic fit of coughing was followed with spit that landed before Shk'Rah's feet. "You're just gettin' paranoid. It's just a cat or rat or somthin'."

"Bull! I know what I heard. Move your fat lazy..."

"Hey! You watch yourself Mike. Don't forget who you're talkin' too. I'm tellin' ya, you better quit playin' with all that cult crap. It's makin' ya..."

"I'LL BELIEVE WHAT I WANT! And you better watch out John, or they'll come for you."

John was silent. His stare was visibly passed his friend. Shk'Rha tried to flex his muscles as he let his shadow-meld fade. He wanted this John to feel every quivering pinch of terror.

"Uh... John? What's up man? Somethin' I said?" Mike started to glance over his shoulder, but froze with sudden awareness.

Shk'Rha could not resist. "Your practices saved you today boy... at least for now," he growled. He then glared at John. It was as he suspected. Easy Prey.

John whirled and sprinted down the alley. It was a pathetic display from a slow, wheezing human. Shk'Rha leapt and clutched the side of a building. A few quick strides carried him to the rooftop. From that vantage, the entire alley was visible. John was running toward an empty gravel parking lot.

The chase was simple at the rooftop level. Shk'Rha found his path unobstructed and his movement unencumbered in the human world's lighter atmosphere.

This John was a less than ideal specimen. Slightly overweight and unkempt, the human was winded. He hesitated and dared tempt a glance over his shoulder. Naturally, he found only a wet Mike cowering behind the dumpster. With that false assurance, John doubled over and choked for air.

Stealth seemed a waste on this human. Shk'Rha crawled down the wall and approached John smoothly. When the human finally dared look up, the imp pounced.

John's skull produced a moist crack as he slammed into the ground. Shk'Rha crouched over his victim and clasped either side of the head. "Good bye. Enjoy your stay... in hell."

With a swift twist and pressure applied to the throat, John's head tore free.

The screams of police sirens entered the abandoned landfill a few blocks away. The imp was amused by the slow reaction of the local "authorities". Even so, he would need a stronghold for protection against the humans, a place to relax. Humans were weak, but a large enough mob with weapons could be dangerous.

First, however, Shk'Rha needed to feed. Also, his soul-heal would act as an excellent distraction for the blithering human police.

He crossed his arms and spoke. Windows in the neighboring buildings cracked. Smoke and steam billowed into the air. The ground beneath the imp erupted into a towering fount of flames. Within the inferno, the imp fed on scorched flesh and absorbed ambient energy.

The blast wave shattered the nearest windows and triggered a weak car alarm nearby. Observers gathered in the surrounding buildings and the police siren approached. Yet, none of the onlookers would see Shk'Rha.

He had already started slinking from shadow to shadow on his journey back to the city dump. He even watched the lone police cruiser pass before he leapt the perimeter fence.

He scoured the landfill with a single vacant gaze. Among the heaps of refuse lay small storage sheds. And among the sheds, only one stood out as a point of light. The imp made haste to visit the security guard's tiny shack.

Inside were an active television and dim lamp. A few candy wrappers littered the floor.

"My altar," Shk'Rha hissed.

He thrust his hands into the sky and began to chant. His focus guided, the imp was unwavering. Tremors passed through the soil. The ground broke. A blaze of lava enveloped the shack. With an explosive discharge of energy, a volcanic cave formed from tentacles of magma and flame.

Twin beasts tore through the ground and settled beside the smoldering structure. With scorching eyes and translucent film over an apparent magma body, the monsters were formidable.

"My hydras," Shk'Rha said, "guard this place with your lives my friends."

As ash and soot rained down on the newly formed rock structure, the imp prepared to retire for much needed rest and meditation. Then he felt it. Fear. Dread. Vulnerability. And pain. A distant bellow beckoned him explore the city.

The buildings fell dark. Streetlights vanished into the night. A black out. It was an ideal opportunity.

Shk'Rha raced across the landfill with abandon. In the darkness that had swallowed the city, he no longer needed fear prying eyes. His appearance would be dismissible as

that of a stray dog or such useless animal. No one would pay him mind.

The police siren again entered the dump as the imp bounded over the perimeter fence. He paused for a brief moment of insidious pleasure.

Gunfire and the high-pitched screams of death. He knew his hydras would enjoy their snack. With a guttural laugh, Shk'Rha turned to the open streets. He knew opportunities would abound that night. λ

