



|---[Chapter 6]---|

A Bad Situation

by The Wildcat

Decay. A pungent, sour odor. It was a mingling of the smell of rancid foodstuffs and the stink of putrid humans. Beneath the weight of the odors, the creature could barely focus on his surroundings.

He surveyed the city landfill. It was a sprawling wasteland. Garbage heaps and shanties. And there, amidst the rubbish, stood a steaming pile of volcanic ash and rock. The creature's new hunting partner, Shk'Rha, had strange taste in nesting sites.

The scent of evil hung in the air about the smoldering heap of soot. Two abandoned police cruisers guarded the perimeter. Both cars appeared unharmed, but traces of blood and tattered garments littered the threshold of Shk'Rha's den.

Shk'Rha lingered behind in the city streets. For someone so small, he was surprisingly slow. In his absence, the beast decided to explore his newest surroundings. Bowing, he began to rummage, his feral snout nuzzling through the debris.

The first, most glaring inconsistency in the junkyard was an absence of anything child-oriented. No species was without offspring. And offspring learned by playing and breaking anything with which they played. Plus, young often produced various remarkable odors and byproducts as they learned to consume various types of nourishment.

The creature could find barely a trace of youth amidst the garbage. A handful of children for the entire town. Either

the humans had become experts at concealing their offspring, or the city was filled with sterile or old humans and barely a dozen mating pares.

With a bit of digging, the creature's canine muzzle detected a flatulent mesh of smells. Each was more disgusting than the last. He found it strange that the humans could be so caustic. Still, he had to admit that the only valuable refuse were chunks of metal and rusted vehicle hulls. With a little work, primitive weapons or transports might be plausible constructs for the scrap.

Then he noticed a tiny crusted metal shape. It looked like gold. The beast stood and wiped a few bits of waste from his nose. He considered the shanties for a single moment, but dismissed them as discarded homes. More trash by their appearances.

The only lively structure was Shk'Rha's volcanic mound. He called it his "altar". But would the imp have carelessly discarded such an artifact? The creature gathered his discovery and started for the molten heap.

After only two steps he heard the snarling voice of the demon, muffled minimally by distance. "Wait! Don't... go over... there yet." The imp was gasping for air spastically.

Apparently, he really was running and bounding with his best speed. It was sad. A pitiful display. Still, the creature waited. When at last Shk'Rha finally arrived, he was visibly winded.

"Wait... I need to... speak with my hydras. I need... to inform them... of our alliance. Unless you... want them to burn your tail. No offense."

The creature cast a glance at his stub-like tail and snorted a firm harrumph. He watched Shk'Rha approach the mound. Bursts of lava flowed from the sides of the altar. But they were not mere founts of molten rock.

The blazing figures took form quickly. Beasts that looked as though they might give proper challenge in battle. Snarling creatures dripping with liquid fire. Shk'Rha too seemed to ignite, glowing red and hot.

A moment later, the hydras splattered back into the mound and Shk'Rha returned. "The alliance is set. My hydras will no longer view you as foe. Make yourself at home. Pardon the mess. It is a junkyard after all."

"Indeed," the creature growled. "Where can we best draw our plans?"

"Perhaps inside my altar. Unless you would rather a different location."

"I may," the beast grunted in disgust. "Tell me, what do you know of this?" He offered the gold figure to Shk'Rha.

"I don't know anything about that. Looks like some kind of idol."

"It's more than that. I can smell the power. More. I can sense it. Feel it burning."

"Who is it then? It must be someone. Don't you think?"

"I don't know. But... In my mind... I can't remember anything of my path to this point beyond this evening's hunt. But I know this. How... But I know this. I recognize it from somewhere. It looks like... Cthulhu."

"Cat... hella... what?"

"Cthulhu. He was priest to the elder gods. Shub-Niggurath for instance." The creature's growl had become a soft, thoughtful whisper. His primal instincts had subsided for the moment. He was entranced upon the golden figure. He gently polished the muck away with his paw. "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhaagu. This is used in a

summoning ritual. Perhaps that is why you are here. Someone summoned you.”

“Summoning? That would make the most sense for this welcome excursion. But who would summon me? There are far more powerful demons than I.”

“And from the sunken city of R’lyeh, the seeker travels.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I felt like saying. Don’t forget, I can’t remember anything beyond this evening.”

“Strange,” the imp seemed perplexed, but uninterested. He scratched himself violently and grunted. “Damned amnesia. I’m tired of this talk. We must make our plans and attack post-haste. My hydras have collected a small bounty of surplus energy for me. I wish to use it.”

The beast saw an opportunity. “Fine,” he said as his growl returned. He palmed the statuette and continued. “Let’s go back to the labs I escaped from earlier. It smells better, and there might be something of use to us there.”

“Okay. But let us hurry. I’m growing loathsomely weary. But... not so fast. Look back once in a while. I’m not a six-foot grasshopper you know.”

The creature nodded and grunted a chuckle. He turned back toward the city and flexed his massive hind limbs. With a single bound, he crossed more than three blocks and crashed to a halt atop a six-story apartment. There he waited for the bounding imp.

Mere blocks away, rapid bursts and pops told of the unfolding firefight. The black silhouettes of powerless buildings flashed and flickered with each exchange. Curious, the beast nudged forward. Perhaps a quick detour was in order.

The concussive force of an exploding grenade cracked windows in a near-by building. Interesting. A black-suited human was pinned down behind a police car. His foe was as yet too distant to recognize. Even as the first true flames blazed to life in the pock-marked cruiser, the human held his ground.

He seemed a fool, too stupid to move away from the fiery heap of metal. He even tried to return fire with his measly little shotgun, to no avail. He was hopelessly outgunned.

Another grenade fractured the police car and cast the man aside.

Standing at the mouth of the alley, the security guard watched in amusement. It was the funniest battle he had ever seen. He wanted to move closer. Perchance a room in one of the buildings overlooking the firefight would provide a pleasing vantage.

He turned into the alley and approached a dark shadow between two buildings. He stepped out into a second story office and approached the nearest window. The one-inch-thick pane was fractured in a half-spider web pattern. It was annoying.

He rapped the window with his knuckles and allowed the shards to plummet into the street below. The smashing of glass paled beneath the overpowering racket of gunfire. The guard was satisfied. He loved the sound of destruction and death.

Peering from the darkened room, he could see the suited human now overrun by... they were not human. Machines maybe? They appeared to be some form of droid soldiers. They could pass for large human foot soldiers in thin metal body armor and helmets. But they felt wrong. There was no aura of life or death about them.

They seemed to emit only energy and signals of some kind. They were lifeless metal men. They would be easy to crush. Even the simpleton human could have defeated them, if only he would fight them like an intelligent warrior.

Still, something else was present. The guard concentrated on the power. It was veiled heavily. Concealed from him well. The machines were connected by it somehow. Controlled by it. It was something dark and menacing. He desired the hidden strength.

The guard cast his gaze down upon the exchange below. One of the machines snatched the barrel of the human's weapon and snapped it from its stalk. Undaunted the human produced a broken barrel of his own and hammered the machine's faceplate.

A metallic crack snapped the droid's head to the side as a second blow struck home. At last, the human moron was putting up a small fight. The third blow met the waiting palm of the machine. It held fast, but the human brought a clawed fist down.

Visibly damaged, the machine released its grip on the makeshift club. The human jabbed the metal deep into a crack in the face plate and watched the droid fall slack into the street.

Then the guard felt a change in the mysterious power. The other droids began to retreat, but he could sense something else.

The human glanced about stupidly and then seemed to stagger backward. It took but a second for the guard to notice the apparent steam drifting from the defeated robot.

Seconds later, the orange and black fireball filled the street. The office building's walls shook uncontrollably. The suited man was cast aside like a rag doll. He spiraled into a parked station wagon and crumpled the hood.

An indiscernible grin crossed the guard's null face. "My turn."

He leapt into the street below with only a mild effort. To his surprise, though, the machines continued to assault the human. They dared to ignore the guard. That was a fact that enraged him.

Then he noticed the suited figure move. As grenades struck the station wagon and tore it apart, the human vaulted with the blast wave at his back. He crashed into one of the machines and struck a series of rapid blows.

It was the first truly intelligent act the human had committed. Unimpressed just the same, the guard regarded the human's black suit. "Why do they always get the good upgrades?" he mumbled to himself. "He probably even has something to protect him from my dark gates."

As the human whipped the machine into one of its counterparts, the guard plotted. The machines seemed oblivious to his presence. Maybe a quick demonstration was in order. It might even be worth the secrets of that human's suit.

The guard thrust his fist into the air and focused his energy. "Suck 'em up!"

Arcs of dark energy drooled down the neighboring buildings. The ground trembled. Black streetlights swayed on their bases and flickered despite the lack of power.

A mass of darkness formed above the street, swirling and drawing the droids toward it. Yet something was amiss. The machines were not helplessly spiraling into the void. Sparks spat from the ground as each machine scraped slowly backward.

The human was easily out of range, as were a few of the droids. It was understandable that they would continue their

own battle, but the closest droid had yet to even acknowledge the gravity that clasped it.

Finally, it lifted from the earth and spiraled into the mass. The second drifted lethargically into the vortex a few moments later. Frustrated and somewhat drained, the guard allowed his attack to subside. The remaining machines dropped to the pavement and continued their assault on the suited human.

How could the machines continue to ignore him? The guard was indignant. He slipped his handgun from its holster and targeted the head of the nearest droid. The shots deflected easily, but dints began to appear in the glimmering metal.

A thunderous explosion drew his attention to the human. He had eliminated another droid. The guard counted eight remaining machines and grew frustrated. He holstered the useless Glock and charged the target.

With droid in hand, he plowed into a neighboring building. The lobby indicated an occupied apartment building. Pleased to find an audience, the guard gripped the machine's head and pounded it into the floor.

Waving his hand as a magician, he summoned a small, concentrated orb of dark energy. The humans were hiding of course, but he knew they could see. He hefted the droid and plunged the orb through the faceplate. The machine shuddered and fell limp.

The guard watched the steam begin to billow from the metal body and then sprinted back to the street. The explosion rocked the building and gutted the lobby. Shrapnel and pieces of soft debris peppered his back, no match for his prototype PCV.

He grinned sadistically. The combat in the nearest intersection quickly returned his attention to that suit and to the strange power behind the machines. The droids were

stronger than he had expected, but they were still toys. Inquisitiveness overwhelmed him.

“You there! Useless!” he called to the man. “What are these droids? Where do they come from? And how did you get that suit?”

The man was firmly in the grip of a droid. He wrestled a hand free and drilled it through the droid’s arm. Tearing the metal appendage free he bashed the machine into submission. A single firm jab of his claws shattered the droid’s faceplate.

“I asked you a question.”

“I heard you,” the human replied in a threatening mechanical growl.

“DO YOU DARE IGNORE ME AS WELL?”

“I’m a bit busy.”

“TELL ME!” The guard was not nearly as angry as he played his emotions. He was amused by the lowly human pretending to be a worthy opponent.

A grenade blast caught the human in the chest. He tumbled backward and was swarmed under by droids. Aggravated, the guard lunged for the machine that he believed had fired the grenade.

Cracking supports and whining metal were subordinate to the firing automatic rifles. The machine seemed unaware that its left leg had been severed. It maintained perfect balance and continued to fire at the human.

Amused no longer, the guard placed a crippling scissor kick through the machine’s chest and retreated from the ensuing explosion.

Laughter. The guard turned to face a single droid. Its eyes had a fire behind them that the others lacked. Surprised, the guard restrained himself. He focused on the glow and realized that he was looking into a subdued aura. Something was using the machine to communicate.

The laughter faded and then the bass grumble of an ancient voice filtered through. **“-Dark Shadow.”**

“What the hell?”

“-Do you seriously wish to task me child?”

“Who are you? How do you know my name?”

“-You cannot believe yourself worthy of me.”

“I ASKED YOU A QUESTION! YOU’D BETTER QUIT IGNORING ME!”

“-I have heard your question boy. Do not think yourself my equal. I come for Wildcat alone. You will have your own time.”

Dark Shadow was angry, yet dumbfounded by the machine. He could feel the truth in the droid’s words. He could also sense the sudden increase in the mysterious power. Something had changed.

He focused on the sensation. Then comprehension found him. The power was coming closer.

“Did you hear that boy?” he called to the embattled human. “Something’s coming this way and it wants to kick your ass!”

Content, the guard retreated into darkness to watch. He stepped back into the second story office with certain satisfaction. He was about to meet the real authority in this battle.

He shuddered unexpectedly. Something else. Dark. Evil. Powerful. He diverted his eyes from the hapless man and his

remaining enemies in standoff. It was above. On the rooftops. It was not the mysterious power he had felt. It was...

"I thought they had left," he grumbled. High atop the apartment building opposite Dark Shadow, the spike covered creature and its massive wolf counterpart stood watching. The larger creature seemed to lose interest.

Nevertheless, the smaller beast remained.

Power. The guard could feel focused power. The humanoid creature was channeling energy. Excitement filled the guard as the first arcs shattered the rooftops. A passing news helicopter met with a bolt of energy and burst into flame. It spiraled into an adjacent building and tumbled blazing into the street.

The six-foot creature drifted slowly out over the street, the power apparently keeping it aloft. Searchlights scattered when the news and police choppers fled. Darkness consumed the street save for the radiance of the beast.

Its spikes became as lightning rods. It spread its body wide drawing the energy in. The guard glanced at the street and found the human opposite the line of machines. Grenades were fired, but missed high. The human lunged.

Above, the glowing ball of white-hot energy engulfed the creature. It was ready.

Static tingles coursed over Dark Shadow's body as the energy thumped into the line of machines. Windows shattered and the roar of the blast was overwhelming. The guard felt the blast wave thrust him through the office wall and into a darkened corner.

Thinking quickly, he pushed through the shadow and into the alley he had abandoned earlier. He peered around the corner

and found the massive fireball expanding into the apartment and the office building he had evacuated seconds before.

The human had been thrown clear of the blast, but seemed to radiate his own energy. Sparks and bolts of energy entered him, but then flashed into the ground uselessly.

Two of the fleeing helicopters were clipped by the blast wave. The first made a daring crash landing. The second slammed into the open street and scattered over the pavement.

As the smoke billowed and the flash of pure energy depleted, the remaining face of the office building crumbled. The apartment building was even less fortunate as its entire structure toppled into the street. A feeling of bliss passed through Dark Shadow. So much chaos and destruction. It was beautiful. A work of art.

In the haze of his pleasure, Dark Shadow watched the duo leap from rooftop to rooftop and into the distance. He must follow these creatures. He must have such wonderful power.

On the pile of rubble, the suited man was roaring with anger and lifting chunks of debris away. It was a fact that drew laughter from the guard's lips.

The machines were gone. Destroyed. Their explosive self-destruct used to enhance the energy attack. He could no longer feel the mysterious power that bound them. Possibly the little creature was the power he had felt.

He was about to follow the two beasts when he sensed it once more. It was distant, but still en route. Torn between his options, it was the glint moving down the opposite sidewalk that subdued him.

They were different. Bigger. More powerful. And they preceded the mysterious power.

Delighted, he began to count.

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