



|---[Chapter 8]---|

Fractured Reality

by The Wildcat

The darkened buildings of the Chamberlain Research Institute.

The facility was quiet, but given Kain's rendition of events, the imp was not surprised. However, he did think odd of the sterility of the compound.

The perimeter fence was whole save for a section recently cut by a work crew. A single warehouse appeared to be under demolition, boasting an empty dump truck and an assortment of abandoned machinery. Only two vacant lots appeared to have been recently cleared.

"I thought you said you escaped earlier tonight," Shk'Rha declared with accusation.

"I did," the twelve-foot beast said in an earnestly surprised tone. "When I left, there were fires. I slaughtered dozens of sour humans. I don't understand this."

The duo eased toward the gap in the perimeter wall. Kain sniffed the soil and grunted. "They may be fast, but I can still smell the explosion. I smell ninety... maybe a hundred sour humans here." He whiffed the air more carefully. "And I smell their blood and fear."

"Fine," Shk'Rha snorted. "Let's go."

The imp was losing interest quickly. He knew not how long his stay on earth might last. No matter how limited, he intended to take full advantage of the opportunity. His

agreement with Kain had seemed worthwhile initially, but given time the novelty had faded.

Shk'Rha slouched into a four-point crawl. He could feel something elusive. He could sense a deception, but could not pinpoint the source.

He pressed low to the ground and inched toward the most visible building. Glittering with a glass front, he perceived it to be the primary laboratory complex that Kain had mentioned previously.

The lumbering beast was less discreet. His steps were almost thunderous. He gave no sign of the stealth he had displayed formerly. Perhaps it was a subconscious outburst, but he started growling and huffing.

Irritated, the imp turned to his cohort and glared with each of his glowing orange eyes. But the wolf-like beast sped his pace. He nearly trampled the imp as he rumbled up to the windowed wall. A bellow of pure arrogance cracked the many panes.

Then Shk'Rah sensed the presence. A meager looking old man approached the main entrance. With white hair and a long, speckled brow the human seemed decrepit. Yet the imp could feel the subtle difference in his aura.

A minute squeak echoed across the courtyard when the human opened one of the building's main doors. He sighed quietly and looked first to Shk'Rha. Then to Kain.

"Kain, I'm so glad you've come back home dear boy. I was getting worried. You've been out so late this time."

Obviously aghast, the beast replied in a howling bark. "WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT! WHO THE HELL ARE YOU!"

"Oh dear. That danged amnesia again. I had hoped we had fixed that this time. Kain... I'm your father."

The massive creature recoiled and staggered backward as if struck in the face with such ferocity. "YOU! IMPOSSIBLE!"

"Please, come inside. I will explain."

Shk'Rha would have preferred to rip the man's face off, but he was curious. Most of humanity would have fled at the site of the two beasts. Besides, a chance to explore the CRI facility for possible weapons and prey was a delicious idea.

Kain ducked into the building with surprising care. The imp observed his giant ally with disgust. He knew that the beast had already succumbed to the human's obvious ploy. Taking care to shatter the glass door, Shk'Rha followed.

The human walked quickly to a reception desk and accessed the workstation mounted on the desktop. Without hesitation or even diverting his eyes from the monitor, the man began to speak.

"I am Doctor Alexander Fields. As I said before Kain, I am your father. I won't rush you into the labs below due to your amnesia. The last time we did that, you reacted with certain... distrust."

"Meaning he tore everything apart," Shk'Rha hissed with amusement.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. I can't possibly hope to help you remember everything Kain. But I can explain why you stormed out of here again tonight, and why you persisted in following that merc in the city. I'll keep the explanation short so we can get you into your healing chamber." As if speaking to uneducated children, the old man glanced at Shk'Rha and then said, "That is, we have a special chamber designed specifically to augment your natural healing factor. You'll be right as rain in a few days."

“Screw that, I want some action.” Shk’Rha was within striking distance of the man, but Kain’s paw appeared before him. A firm if not misplaced warning to wait.

“I won’t deny you the chance to hunt,” the old man said reassuringly. “You are not damaged the way my son is.”

“Just get to the point,” Shk’Rha snapped.

“My apologies,” the old human said with a pause. “I once wed a beautiful woman. A colleague named Allison Millar. She was an incredible woman. And she pioneered much of the robotic sciences of this modern era. Even the experimental maintenance droids in our warehouse sector are based on her older work.

“Allison was your mother.”

Shk’Rha began to focus his mind. Something had weakened. The old man’s guard was down. He began to sense something distant. Amusing.

“Unfortunately,” the elderly scientist continued, “her efforts led her to work for a defense contractor. It was the only way to fully fund her research. The laboratory was on a privately held island off the coast of California. Purely man-made. Just far enough out to be considered international waters.

“But that’s where the contractor began cutting corners. And eventually Alison had to establish the Elite Robotic Combat Units as her only defense against that greedy merc and his warlord employers. His name is Wildcat. Or The Wildcat. Or something.

“He destroyed the island’s facilities and stole valuable technology. He also killed my beloved Alison. Kain... Wildcat butchered your mother.”

Kain started to growl softly. Shk'Rha eyed his partner, but maintained his focus on the old man. Something dangerous was in the atmosphere.

"After her death, I was distraught. I began grieving uncontrollably. I don't know who is controlling the ERC Units now, but they are still active. It's probably the defense contractor or the warlords. Too bad I don't know who.

"Too bad you didn't know either. You, our only son, were desperate for a revenge you couldn't have. But I... was another story. I began work for CRI. Work on a cybernetic organism. A machine with human intelligence. Animal senses and agility. Augmented by bionic upgrades.

"Regrettably... my creation was imperfect. And the cost of your rage and my carelessness left me alone in this world.

"I couldn't bare another loss. Not you too. So, I used my creature's design and... some advanced technology... from a classified source... to give you this new body.

"Had I known that you would suffer such amnesia, I might have been more careful. But that no longer matters. Every night since your accident, you have been desperate to find The Wildcat, and believe me... I'll not stand in your way."

Shk'Rha considered his words carefully. Something felt wrong or missing. He considered possible questions, but he could tell that Kain was satisfied. The old man - Dr Fields per his id badge - held a vast amount of convenient knowledge. It was quick and easy answers.

"When Wildcat started prowling the local streets, Kain had just suffered from an amnesia black-out. When he came to, he was driven only by the want of revenge against that merc. The local staff wanted to study him further and... unfortunately, they tried to stop him.

“No harm done though. He only injured a few people and made a bit of a mess. But that didn’t actually happen tonight. Heaven’s no. He fled almost two weeks ago. He has since returned to come and go as he pleased on a nightly basis.”

Shk’Rha honed his focus on the man. Kain was apparently awestruck and growing steadily more useless. He had not spoken since the old man began his sob-story.

The imp simply snatched the little golden statue from Kain’s grasp. The unwieldy oaf was completely void of activity. His body was present, but his eyes were distant. The beast was only a hallow shell of his previous viciousness.

“Tell me pops, what do you know about this?”

Suddenly, the old man looked astonished. “It looks like Cthulhu. I thought I’d lost that. It’s an... it’s a piece of technology that came from the same classified source I mentioned before.”

Fields reached for the statuette and produced a red gem that gleamed in the florescent light of the reception foyer. He quickly fit the gem into a mold in the base of the figurine and set it atop the desk.

The old scientist cleared his throat. Shk’Rha could feel the sudden focus in his speech. “When combined with this power crystal, the commands are spoken. Then, once charged, some form of portal is opened.”

The old man froze and stared at the red crystal. Minutes passed in silence.

Shk’Rha groaned an unearthly curse and looked at the human. “He can stay here if he wants, but I’m sick of this!” As the imp lunged toward the nearest wall, he glanced back at Fields. “I give you notice now human! I spare you only for the alliance I made with that one. Heal him if you can, but

fear my return for I go to hunt. None shall be safe in this facility.”

Even as the imp crashed through a cracked window pain and clawed up the side of a building, he heard the old man calling behind him. “I will treat his wounds with stasis. Please, don’t be cross with us. If it is a challenge you seek. Then go to the warehouse section. Our maintenance droids are out of control and something is using them as weapons against the staff.”

The white van sped away as quickly as it had screeched into the intersection. According to the markings on its side, that impotent human had been carried off by scientists. Given thought, it made sense that the scientists would make a new base.

Perhaps Dark Shadow would have a chance to destroy his scientist opponents after all. Maybe he would even find some new enhancements and weapons.

The guard started to press into a superficial shadow behind a dumpster. He stopped only when he felt the power. It was very close.

He turned back and peered around the corner of concrete that had been his cover. The security team was well armed, and each man was clad in advanced body armor. Their transport was a heavy APC with mounted weaponry. It was a tantalizing target.

Deafening, the mechanical roar was surprisingly visceral. High atop the corner of an eight-story building, the figure was dark and hard. But even at the distance of more than a city block, the guard could sense the fire within it.

A black flame-retardant cape caught the wind and gave the seven-foot figure a bat-like silhouette. Sharp angles traced

the outline of heavy metal armor. A weighty automatic rifle, drastically customized, lowered to the figure's side.

When he finally spoke with the synthetic voice of the droids, his tone was emotive and outraged. *"-YOU STOLE MY TROPHY! YOU LOWLY INSECTS!"*

To the guard's surprise, the machine pitched his rifle aside. The security team scattered as the gun snapped across the pavement. Their mini-gun turret roared to life. Other automatic weapons joined the ruckus quickly.

Scarcely a dozen shots found their mark. The machine had leapt from his perch with unparalleled speed and crashed to the sidewalk below. As concrete dust cleared, he found his first victim.

Wailing, the man was crippled by a bloody impact to the groin and helplessly pitched into the streaks of tracer bullets.

As a flash of darkness, the machine hurtled to the top of the APC. Steel met steel in a grinding hiss. The spinning barrels jammed and screamed with each second that passed. Smoke began to swell from the crippled weapons and cloaked their intended target.

A second man chirped only mild protest as the machine dropped behind him and snapped his neck. His lifeless body was whipped into a careless woman that attempted to offer aid. She had only a second to comprehend the metal fist before it plunged through her night vision goggles and subsequently her face.

A leaping kick shattered the next victim's ribcage. The other humans took cover seconds before a grenade twirled into the carnage. The overshot fireball illuminated the machine as he retaliated.

The gunman was quickly slapped to the ground. His body then cart-wheeled into the side of the APC. Effortlessly, the machine ripped the arms from the next man and left him for dead.

Over the incessant rattle of weapons fire, the machine bellowed with inhuman rage. The nearest opponent was plunged through a plate-glass storefront and then impaled with her own gun.

With misguided intentions, two men stepped into the open and attempted to distract the machine. Despite several obvious direct hits, he plunged into the gunfire and shattered the two skulls into each other.

Caught off guard, the planned flank man careened off a roundhouse kick and buckled a powerless streetlight.

Left alone outside the APC, the last of the security team lowered his weapon and barked a hasty report into his radio headset. Seconds later the machine gripped the man's face and mashed. The lifeless corps was hurtled into the slowly lowering rear hatch of the APC. Moments later, it was crushed.

Smoke billowed out of the frame. A lone man, bloody from the sparks and fire of the crippled mini-gun, stumbled into the open and brought an assault shotgun to bear.

The blast struck the machine squarely in the chest, but he stood unwavering. Gingerly, he confiscated the weapon. He then jammed the 12-gauge's barrel down the man's throat and allowed the body to collapse.

Dark Shadow was stunned. Such a grizzly slaughter stood before him. It was glorious. More so than before, he lusted after the mysterious power that gave the machine its strength and tenacity.

He stepped into the open and on approach, overheard the mechanical voice. *“Demolition Unit number zero zero four... clear these coordinates and then join zero zero three at the Black Mesa perimeter. Let nothing in or out.”*

Could Black Mesa still hold untold secrets? Possibly, but Dark Shadow still longed for the opportunities at the new research institute.

However, he would first demand the great energy that drove the machine before him. “You there. I’ll give you one chance. Be my ally and I’ll get that weakling human’s body for you.”

The machine stood ridged as a statue. His voice was deep and synthetic, but the ominous undertones were ever-present. *“Be not a fool you impudent whelp. Your time has not yet come to serve my purposes.”*

The guard was angry, but still he was pleased at the possibility of a fight. It was a chance to claim all of the machine’s strange charge for himself.

“Who do you think you are droid? I’ll have your secrets one way or the other.”

“Secrets? Dare not challenge me little one. Your dark energy will belong to me soon enough.”

Dark Shadow was fuming. He turned his back to the machine and outstretched his arms. He focused his energy and readied to unleash a barrage of energy orbs. “YOU ASKED FOR IT! I’LL GIVE YOU ONE SHOT! TAKE IT AND FACE ME!”

He waited for the inevitable strike. It would probably hurt, but defeat was impossible. Dark Shadow rolled the orbs around on the palms of his hands impatiently. He expected a searing strike at any moment. The wait seemed an eternity.

At last, impatient and livid, the guard spun to face his opponent and demand single combat.

He was gone. The seven-foot clunking metal heap had disappeared. Infuriated, Dark Shadow screeched at the top of his lungs and lobbed his twin energy orbs at the APC. Both blasts burned holes in the heavy armor and then dissipated.

He tried to focus on the mysterious power, but it was gone. In a blind rage, he dropped to one knee and pounded the street repeatedly.

In the distance a bass rumble caught his attention. He could feel human fear. Something big had just revealed itself to the city's inhabitants.

It was a luscious temptation. But the guard thought again about the scientists. And that human's enhancements were more desirable at that moment.

He resolved to seek out the Chamberlain Research Institute and the upgrades that he knew awaited.

The pompous young scientist was confident. Despite the disastrous events two weeks prior, the portals had stopped. The few marines left in the facility were trapped in more distant locals. Power had been restored. And the survivors were making progress towards their own endurance in the long term.

It was true that he and the other survivors were trapped. The nuclear disaster on the surface must surely have seen to that. Nevertheless, the bunker lab was secure.

Life, at last, could resume. To the scientist, those that hoped to reach the surface were foolish. The military had attempted to silence the facility. Various creatures still roamed the outlying corridors and laboratories. Even the odd

nuclear missile still stood active within the underground maintenance compound.

Another, deeper blast might collapse the core complex and indirectly the entire facility infrastructure. No. It was unwise to effort to attain the surface.

Endeavors to claim specimens previously taken for chip implantation were futile. The fact that the scientist's less intelligent colleagues believed they had recruited xenofauna for assistance was ludicrous.

Xenofauna could never be trusted if simply for their own atavistic nature. They as much as any other factor would guarantee the failure of the surface expedition.

The scientist approached an old security check point sealed by a steel door. He sighed as he touched the orange emblem dyed permanently in the concrete wall beside the frame. The stenciled character was as a welcome mat on his doorstep.

No guard remained in the designated booth. There simply was no need. The security team had swept that very corridor during the previous week. Only scientists and security guards remained in the labs beyond. The guards were needed to secure the main access routes.

The scientist reached through the guard-booth's shattered window and entered an access code. A hiss and whir accompanied the door's motion as it retracted. Once inside, the scientist re-sealed the entrance and continued at a leisurely pace.

She was waiting for him. He longed to see her again. He had hesitated to leave her, but he needed to claim his lunch rations in the commissary, two checkpoints distant.

He had promised her that he would return promptly. As he rounded a hard corner and entered the infinitesimal lab, he

stroked his hand across her hard drive cover panel. All his research resided inside.

As he sat down at her console, he felt at peace once again. For a moment he even considered the possibility that his wife, whom he also cared for deeply, might have survived the disaster and could even find her way to the bunker.

The motion was subtle. It was a shadow within the shapeless dark of a storage cabinet. The unseen figure barely moved. It was a puff of wind and a flicker of light.

Ever oblivious, the scientist toppled to the floor and lay still in the pool of his own blood. λ

