



## Unexpected Setbacks

by The Wildcat

For a secret base, the Chamberlain Research Institute was poorly defended. No security guards. No marines. Even the scientists seemed sparsely populated.

Dark Shadow was gradually becoming convinced that he would find no enhancements of any consequence. The guard screeched with anger and summoned a sphere of dark energy. He would level the compound for his own amusement.

But then, unexpectedly, he sensed an evil aura. He stood motionless in the shadow of a small maintenance building for several minutes. He never actually saw the creature. Rather, he felt it passing from shadow to shadow.

The bony, gnarled creature had leveled two large structures in the heart of the city with a single powerful blast. Perhaps the humans had given him such power with their enhancements. It was a teasing thought.

Dark Shadow lost track of the aura as it entered a sub-complex of four warehouses. A crooked grin was lost in the void of his featureless face. He focused on the buildings and discerned the bony creature's presence along with more than a dozen humans.

And something else. Something with power. Something dangerous. He was intrigued. His lust for new might quickly overtook his focus. He lost track of the creature, but it no longer mattered.

He pressed through his covering darkness and into the first warehouse. Crates and lifting equipment littered the

interior. Dim and soundless, the building was apparently empty.

The second warehouse was identical to the first. Only the shapes of the crates had changed.

Frustrated, the guard was about to move on when he noticed the sliver of light. It was barely a crack in the floor. He stomped and the trap door splintered.

He dropped into the low tunnel and found that it descended with a shallow slope. A blast door sealed the end of the passage. And a small metal hatch beside the door seemed to conceal a control room or office for some unknown purpose.

Curious and desirous of quick answers, the guard buckled the hatch with a sharp punch. A second blow dislodged it completely. The crash of metal on concrete echoed through the warehouse.

But the office appeared empty. Computer equipment and a security console lined the room. A cheap desk provided the only cover for the cowering girl. Dark Shadow was dejected. The only guard was a girl, a scientist at that.

“You! Girl! You get one chance,” he demanded. “Where can I get the enhancements that so many freaks squander in this city?”

The girl stood slowly. She was a shy looking blond. A bit gaunt and disheveled, the girl showed no sign of fear. Instead, her face indicated relief. “You’re not one of them,” she finally declared in a course, sickly voice. “Please, help me. We can give you whatever you want.”

“I want enhancements! What’s to stop me from tearing the information out of you!”

“We have new technologies,” the girl pled. “Genetic and bionic tools. We can offer you plenty of enhancements.

Please, help us. You need us to implement the enhancements. If you hurt me, none of my colleagues will help you.” The girl’s tone was unnaturally defiant. She pointed to a security camera over the hatchway and then nodded.

Seething, the guard contemplated whimsical deaths for the girl. However, the possibility of enhancements fed his ego. “Very well. What do you want girl?”

“Something is... something’s down there,” she whispered while pointing at the blast door. “It took control of our experimental droids. They were meant for construction and maintenance in places too dangerous for us... but they weren’t complete. Now... now they’re using their tools to kill. They’re trying to get out.”

“Is that all?” the guard sneered.

“Yes. Help us and we’ll give you all the enhancements you want.” The girl indicated a rack of transceivers and communication headsets. “Take a radio and I can feed you information and track your progress.”

Dark Shadow snatched a headset and radio with considerable resentment. He despised helping the girl, but the benefits were greater than his yearning to slaughter.

“Wait a minute and I’ll open the door,” the girl said as she fell into a chair and began accessing the console.

“Don’t bother,” Dark Shadow grumbled.

He pressed into the shadow behind a computer. The tunnel beyond was pitch black. In the darkness, his red eyes seemed to smolder. He observed the empty passage carefully, adjusting to the blackness.

Scorch marks and welder cuts scared the heavy door. The droids had nearly penetrated. Severed human limbs and splatters of old blood decorated the tunnel walls and floor.

Pleased, the guard began to stroll down the passage. He only gave passing thought to the blast door. He could only guess the reasons for the droids to retreat when so close to breaking free. His best conclusion was that they needed to recharge their collective power supplies, if that was how they worked.

Truthfully, Dark Shadow was indifferent. He wanted to finish his task and claim his prize. He found a sign mounted on the passage wall, but the relevant label had been burned away.

"I love what you've done with the place," he quipped.

"-What?" the girl asked through the headset.

"I wasn't talking to you girl! Where am I going!"

Ignoring his detest, the girl responded. **"-The main hallway will lead you to a sub-level interchange. A lift. Go there."**

Dark Shadow could see the lift platform in the distance, but he also noticed a gaping doorway and became suspicious.

"What about this room?"

**"-Don't both... ith that. It's just an old biological stor... ab... oth... t... ee..."**

"What? Girl? Are you there?"

Static replied.

Frustrated and doubtful, the guard turned aside to enter the room. As black as the hall, the room was a cluster of crates and cages. Massive glass cylinders stood sparsely placed around the room. Through a murky fluid, Dark Shadow could see the shapes.

Some were distorted and definitively non-human. But others resembled a human fetus. They were ugly, leathery, lifeless creatures long since stored in formaldehyde for future study.

Still, the guard was apathetic. He could see no weapons or droids to destroy. The room was a pointless waste of his time.

Suddenly, light was everywhere. The white flash was blinding. Brilliant illumination followed by pitch black. Then another flickering assault of florescent light. With his eyes still adjusted to the blackness, Dark Shadow felt searing pain with each flare.

He clutched his eyes and backpedaled awkwardly. In his mind, he could feel a voice taunting him. He could not understand the words, but he felt the meaning.

Something struck him in the abdomen. Another blow fell on his head. He teetered for a moment at the doorway and then fell prostrate on the floor.

Dark Shadow lay motionless for a single moment and then pulled himself to his feet. Fuming, he discharged a full barrage of dark energy into the room.

Crates exploded before him. The glass cylinders ruptured with their contents partially liquefied by the attack. Cursing and spitting hatred at the room, the guard left nothing unbroken.

**"-...me? Hello? Can you hear me?"** The girl's voice sounded mildly concerned.

**"What are you trying to pull girl!"**

**"-Nothing,"** she pled. **"I lost contact with you. It was like you just disappeared. What happened?"**

**"A couple of your pet projects tried to attack me!"**

**"-Projects? You mean in that storage laboratory? I was trying to tell you... There's nothing in there but dead specimens."**

**“If this happens again... deal’s off. And I will rip out your lying tongue and shove it in your...”**

**“-Please... I didn’t do anything. It must be the droids. A booby-trap perhaps. Please, the rogue droids are on the lowest sub-level.”**

Without another word, Dark Shadow strolled down the corridor. His fury only repressed slightly, he paused occasionally to bury his fist in the concrete walls.

When he finally stepped onto the lift platform, he found it predictably immobilized. A gaping hole had been cut through the metal floor.

It was a simple matter to drop through the opening and locate the access ladder. Rather than slowly rattle down the metal steps, the guard allowed himself to slide down the support rails.

On the lowest sub-level, the shaft had once been sealed by a thin corrugated gate. The twisted metal wreckage was propped against one wall. Before him, the new corridor yawned blackness.

**“-...osing contact. They’re fl...ing you! So...hing’s wrong. ...e lost y...r signal.”**

**“Girl! I warned you!”**

Dizzying and painful, the flashing florescent lights gouged at Dark Shadow’s eyes. Moments later, he felt the first crushing punch. He crumpled after a sharp jab to his gut.

Blackness returned and the guard sprang to his feet. He began lobbing energy orbs at every fixture. He left no corpse intact. Anything that might conceal his assailant was laid waste.

**“I’M COMING FOR YOU NEXT GIRL!”**

Static replied.

An electrical whine filled the hallway. Bursts of compressed gas and the percussion of steel on concrete steadily filled the guard's ears. Grinding treads crushed the debris.

Dark Shadow summoned a sphere of dark energy and allowed it to roll across his fingertips.

As the machines filled the passage, they formed ranks. A line of skeletal machines with spidery limbs readied their own industrial drill attachments as swords. A second line of tank-like machines spread massive lifting arms tipped with steel tines. The third line was broad, heavy machines sporting fuel tanks and the unmistakable blue glow of welding torches.

Though impressive in their appearance, the machines had made one very critical mistake. The guard's pitch was perfect. The charge quickly passed through the fuel tank of one of the welders.

The machines were decimated in seconds as a wave of fire spread and triggered a chain reaction. The corridor filled with light stunning the guard and drawing curses of his own shortsightedness. He rubbed his eyes and started toward the crumbling section of corridor that remained.

Drill bits speared through the walls flanking him. The concrete crumbled to reveal twin waves of droids. Dark Shadow parried a first attack thrusting two droids through each other.

A slicing jab ripped the hem of his uniform. He spun with rage ripping an arm from its joint and whipping two other droids with crippling precision.

With speed and accuracy befitting the finest marksmen, he began pounding the machines with fire from his sidearm.

Still, a blazing blue streak slit his body armor from shoulder to shoulder.

Whirling into a slicing kick, he decapitated the machine and summoned a ball of dark energy. As he dove clear of the ensuing blast, he felt the tug of a dying drill bit in his lower back.

He rolled away as the first slab of concrete fell. Scrambling to his feet, he sidestepped a massive boulder and sprinted for the end of the corridor. The crashing rumble pursued, but soon began to fade.

As silence returned, he howled with rage. "DAMN IT GIRL! WHERE AM I NOW!"

He heard no reply. Not even static. He attempted to check his radio and found only the frayed tips of his headset's cable.

New and disgusting, the sound was a burp of sludge. Its source was a meaty fungus spread over the hallway. Dark Shadow stared at the growth. He could feel the power within it.

Raw muscle and pulsing arteries stretched up the walls. Oozing fluids seeped down the outer surface of the meat. Stringy tentacles swayed to and fro across the passage opening.

It was more orifice than hallway.

The stench of rot and disease filled the air.

Dark Shadow never saw the snake-like appendage that dropped behind him. The stinging bite seemed to dig at his skin. He ripped the strand of meat away with a grunt.

The other tentacles became ridged as to deny him entrance. Screaming with wrath he began slinging globes of dark energy



at the meat. Each step splattered in the flesh as he barreled toward the orifice.

\*\*\*

Shk'rha had scoured the four warehouses but found nothing. Nothing, save for a cowering young man that had not sense enough to flee. Feeling freshly energized as he stood over the smoldering body, he had started to feed. He was tired of looking for non-existent droids.

The old man had lied. He would be the last to go. He would watch the others slaughtered. And even the beast Kain. The lurching oaf was a fool and far too gullible. Then the old man would face...

A hollow rumble passed under the demon's feet. He scurried to the shadow of a warehouse. Even as he focused energy on his shadow-meld, he heard the thunderous crash of steel and glass.

Cautiously, he crawled up the side of the building and peered over the rooftop. He could see the dust and smoke billowing from the neighboring building. Satisfied with the potential, he scurried over the rooftop and studied the rubble.

Half of one warehouse had completely collapsed. A sinkhole had formed directly beneath one corner and the stench of flames and death wafted on the night breeze.

No longer concerned, the imp relaxed his shadow-meld and leapt to the ground. Disappointed, he soon realized that no signs of life remained in the debris.

Then he heard the voice. Human. Female.

He followed the sound to a broken trapdoor, to an open hatchway. "Yes. I'm certain it was Target Delta. Just keep looking. Even his dead body would be useful to us."

**“-What about another collapse,”** a man’s voice crackled from a radio.

“From what I saw here, there were two explosions down there. If he’s still alive, he won’t be pulling the roof down on you anytime soon.”

**“Very reassuring,”** came a snide reply.

“Hold on... Tracker One watch your back. I see more droids.”

The human waited for a response, but none came.

She sighed and started to turn around. Her scream was chilling and luscious to Shk’rha. He clutched her chest and lifted her from her seat.

Writhing, the human swatted at his head in a futile attempt at self-defense. Her defiance was unexpected. She spat and clawed at his arms.

He twisted her from side to side examining her closely. She was strangely different from the other humans. Not only did she fight with much ferocity despite her weak and tiny body, but the imp could sense something in her.

His grip relaxed allowing the human to tumble back into her seat. He leaned close to her face and placed his gnarled claws on her belly. Then he felt it.

He ignored the spit and scratches she raked over his leathery face. After a few moments, the human seemed to realize that the creature’s intentions had changed. She allowed her body to go limp and stared at the demon’s many orange eyes.

“You are with child.”

“No. I can’t be,” the human protested.

“Fortune is with you this day. I cannot destroy this body. For your son will sire the lineage.”

“I can’t have a son. It’s impossible. They purified me and sterilized me. I underwent the genetic alterations.”

“Hear me woman, for my words are true! You are with child. Your son will sire the lineage. It is because of the alterations of which you speak that you were so easily claimed.

“The son of your son’s son will be the one. Flee this place. Have your child and hide him from the people of this world.”

With that, Shk’rha released the woman and scuttled back to the surface. He absentmindedly strolled into the open court between the four warehouses and then realized his mistake.

The skeletal machines attacked first. He deflected the first with a wave of his hand and sliced the second with his claws. Leaping back to safety, he focused his energy and summoned a blazing orb of flame.

Heat seemed to splatter from the droid as Shk’rha’s attack found its mark. He summoned another ball, but saw the lifting time too late. His severed arm fell atop the droid and the fireball burst.

Clutching his stump and glaring at the swarm of machines he felt his energy waning. Four skeletal droids stood before him. One tank-like droid stood to his right. And three droids with welding torches stood in a semi-circle to his left. His fiery attack had barely left a few blackened marks on the machines.

Then he felt her. He turned to see the human watching with fear. Only seconds passed, but the woman seemed frozen. At the moment Shk’rha opened his mouth to bellow a warning, the woman turned and ran toward the main laboratory.

Three droids gave chase while the others mounted a final offensive against the imp. He watched the human and batted droids away with his remaining hand.

Desperation filled him. In that final moment, he summoned his strength and drew all of his energy into focus. He roared with vehemence and a pulse of energy pitched the droids away. The three pursuers immediately turned back to assail the imp.

Shk'rha had never felt such strength. He could feel the muscles stretching and tightening. Arcs of energy flowed into him from the buildings and ground. His spikes were enveloped in flesh. The sudden burst of pain forced him to his knees.

Then the air thinned and he stood. Towering above the little machines, Shk'rha felt a surge of energy. He was ready.

He wrapped his claws around one of the skeletal droids and began pounding the other machines.

The lifter plowed forward to gore him, but he sensed the attack. He slammed his makeshift club over the aggressor.

Summoning his blazing attack, the green ball of plasma sizzled through one of the welder droids, detonating its fuel.

Growling with rage, he pitched one droid helplessly aside and hurled a second plasma ball. His welder target ruptured and bathed two other droids in flaming shrapnel.

The last of the skeletal droids fled unexpectedly. The hell-knight thundered after his prey. He closed the gap quickly and snapped the machine into the perimeter wall with a flick of his wrist.

He stood over his victory for a single fleeting moment. Then a doubt filled his mind and he recounted his opponents'

number. His reaction came too late as the sizzling torch began cutting into his back.

He struggled to reach the machine, but it was too small. It had clasped firmly to his back and was barely out of reach. As the cracking and burning sensation spread, he saw the torch burst through his breast.

He collapsed to the soil of the courtyard and lamented his defeat. Even as a mighty hell-knight, he had been conquered by a little man-made appliance. He felt the ignition and burning of his flesh as he was pulled back toward his border world for reconstruction.

But there was something else. He could feel the very energy of his death being channeled by something... powerful. Perhaps, even in his defeat, he would have some revenge.

\*\*\*

In the star filled New Mexican sky, the black aircraft were but shadows. The thumping of their rotors was lost in the vast distances of the open desert. High above, a team of personnel monitored radar screens and reported their findings. Working as one, all of the units progressed toward their objective.

Aboard one of three black Osprey transports, the team of operatives sat in silence. Their orders given, they waited patiently for the command to land.

Outside, their Apache escorts buzzed impatiently, ever mindful of the night sky and desert sands. Drifting almost silently beyond, a small team of black Comanche ghosts guarded the mission with such lethal intensity.

**“-This is it, so listen up!”** the commanding officer’s voice blurted into each operative’s headset. **“I know this is not S-O-P, but too much has happened to play this by the book. I want voice logs of this one. Video too.”**

**“-Operation Cumulus is a go. Cloud Team, watch the sky for any unauthorized aircraft. Breeze Team, the Comanche program was officially canceled for budget cuts. You don’t exist. Keep it that way. No witnesses. Sprinkle Team, get down and up fast.**

**“-Your job is purely recon. You are not a combat unit. Repeat, this is recon only.**

**“-Red Sky, take over.”**

**“-Copy that,” a new static shrouded voice acknowledged. “LZ is clean. Satellite imagery indicates... uh... Sir, the crater has seen definite heat since the last image. Recommend a Predator low-level pass.”**

**“-Negative Red Sky. We’re seeing the same images. The LZ is confirmed clean. Two low-level and three high-level passes have already been conducted. Proceed.”**

**“-Copy that.”**

A mild updraft shook the transport, but none of the operatives moved. Their training demanded perfection. Silently, one of the operatives gestured with his free hand. Immediately, the entire squad checked their weapons one last time.

**“-Sprinkle One,” Red Sky ordered, “Lima Zulu One-One-Two-Six. Sprinkle Two, stand by.”**

The Osprey slowed and began to shudder as it prepared for vertical descent. The Apache escorts formed an aerial perimeter. A firm jolt shook the transport as it sank.

The squad leader stood and held himself steady beside the cockpit hatch. On his signal, the other operatives stood and stormed out of the aircraft.

**“-Sprinkle Two, proceed.”**

He slipped behind a large concrete slab at the edge of the crater. He motioned for a subordinate to take point. As he watched the squad advance, he monitored the approach of the second Osprey.

**“-OHMYGOD!”**

**“-Red Sky? Do you copy?”**

**“-Rain Maker this is Cloud One! I have a definite fire ball in my two o’clock position. High Altitude.”**

**“-Copy that Cloud One. We’ve lost Red Sky. Sprinkle Team get those birds in the air now!”**

As a javelin of light, the missile passed through the Osprey’s cockpit. The explosion was tremendous, tossing the bodies of the second squad aside.

**“-Cloud One watch your six!”**

The fighter was a black streak. Its delta shaped wings and dorsal fins blotted out the stars for an instant and then vanished into the night sky.

**“-Shit! Breeze Three he saw you! Move!”**

A burst of flames in the distance silhouetted another of the stealth attackers.

The squad leader gestured for his team to take cover. Moments later an Apache flared with life, his missiles targeting an unseen attacker.

Flaming into an arch of debris, the attacker shattered into the sand beyond the crater.

**“-Good shot Cloud Four! Now move!”**

The roar of a jet engine swept overhead.

**“-Move kid!”**

A second Apache ignited a barrage of missiles. The attacker burst into flames but remained in the air.

**“-Oh my God! Sprinkle Three, get out’a there!”**

The warning fell short. The flaming jet plunged into the fully loaded Osprey and bathed the desert with fire.

**“-Breeze Two! Coming up on your five o’clock!”**

**“-Sir, Cloud One. I’ve never seen a jet move like that! Who...”**

The spiraling ball of flames dropped onto the ruined frame of an old surface building.

**“-Watch it Breeze Two!”**

Brilliant light filled the sky. The explosion flashed overhead and radiated scorching heat over the squad.

Then the point man signaled. He had found something. Observing cover and moving quickly, the squad leader slipped up to his subordinate’s side.

It was a grizzly find. Not much was left, but it confirmed the reports.

Rubble shifted at the crater’s edge. The squad leader focused on the debris. Heavy steel girders and chunks of concrete toppled aside as the silhouette moved along the rim.

The sound of grinding from the opposite side of the blast crater revealed a second massive shadow moving through a pile of toppling debris.

**“-Cloud six, I’ve got one on my...”**



As the flash of fire and light faded, the squad leader knew. "Rain Maker, this is Sprinkle One Alpha. We have found remains of what we believe to have been a man. He was wearing a Black Mesa clean suit. Looks like he was cut apart by high-caliber rounds. There's not much left."

**"-Sprinkle One, copy that. Can you withdraw?"**

"Negative sir. We're cut off. It's ERCU. I don't know how they managed to fool the satellite imagery. There are two of them. The big ones."

The squad leader readied his automatic rifle and signaled. As one, the squad opened fire on the closest machine. At over two stories in height, the machine's main pod pivoted to face the attack. Grenades pelted its legs as it lurched forward.

Twin missiles flared into the crater from its shoulder-span launchers. The twin gun batteries, mounted on what could best be called arms, drilled holes in the debris field finding targets with precision.

Then the undercarriage mounted mini-gun began to spin-up. λ

