



|---[Chapter 4]---|

The Night Shift

by The Wildcat

The light was blinding. For the first time in weeks, the dank concrete hallway was bathed with florescent illumination. Sporadic chips and cracks in the walls spoke of hardship. A testament to reckless gunplay and mindless destruction. An occasional flickering light fixture added to an already eerie ambiance.

Mold accented the stench of the stale air. Aside from a few crickets and an occasional creek or pop, the corridor was soundless. A dozen steel blast doors sealed the hall from the nearest surface access.

A lone scientist abandoned his efforts at an exposed power substation. The only open doorway was that of a humble computer laboratory. The room itself was a rectangular concrete chamber. Older computer equipment lined the walls. A set of newer console panels crossed the center of the room.

The deep, yawning cavern of concrete passage exited the laboratory opposite the hallway entrance. Three scientists waited quietly. Then, the returning scientist was greeted with pleased grins and jubilant congratulations.

“That’s that,” he announced. “This quadrant of sector F has power again.”

“Excellent,” another responded. “The Lambda search team can try to reach the surface if they want. Personally, I’d rather stay down here. I think we all know what’s waiting up there.”

The other scientists gestured with nods of affirmation. It was in that moment of solemn quiet that the world trembled. A rumble coursed down the hallway. Energy discharge pulsed through the crumbling walls. Distinctive crackling identified the particle buildup.

The scientists ducked behind the machinery and claimed the individual weapons they had scavenged. Seconds later, a brilliant flash in the corridor heralded silence. Stillness. Frightening calm.

A soot black figure stood beside the power substation. Featureless, his face scanned the environment, his hot red eyes glaring.

His blue security team uniform was freshly pressed, as he believed it should be. Grey and black body armor, a stolen prototype, protected his torso. A gleaming chrome helmet sat atop his head.

The guard stood perfectly still until he had completely examined his surroundings. Then he took a few slow steps and clinched his fists. "This isn't the one I wanted," he grunted enraged. But his temper cooled rapidly. "No matter. I can still have some fun here and try again later."

His sidearm in hand, the guard approached the laboratory entrance. He could sense the scientists, despite their efforts to hide. He could smell death and fear all around.

It was a younger scientist that dared to peer from behind an ancient computer. Slowly, he eased into the open having recognized a security team uniform. His colleagues followed suit.

Puzzled, one of the men asked, "A security guard?"

"No," another declared with fright, "something else!"

The guard suddenly felt very amused. He thrust his free hand into the air and exclaimed, "Yes! That's right sub-creatures! Your life will be a pain from now on!"

Sparks erupted from the surrounding computers. Dark energy crawled up the walls. The room began to quake fiercely. A swirling black mass formed in the ceiling.

In panic, the scientists dropped their weapons and attempted to flee. The first victim was older. His reaction was too slow. A moment before he could latch onto a console, the gravitational pull yanked him into the dark portal.

With a shriek, the second scientist clutched a crumbling piece of equipment. Moments later, the metal casing buckled and ripped free. The man flailed wildly to no avail.

Another scrambled beneath the central console and strained to hold on. His only remaining comrade thrust a desperate hand in a plea for help but quickly spiraled into the void.

His energy ebbing, the guard released his portal. Given a few minutes, he would be fully able to continue the encounter, but he wished for more.

The sole remaining scientist dropped to the floor with a rough thump. He staggered to his feet and sprinted, screaming with each step, into the open passage.

"Yes! Run... tell the others! You will die shortly and so will your friends."

The guard strolled into the main corridor. New worlds had always seemed strange compared to his border world.

His first encounter with scientists had been boring. They opened a portal and started pilfering his lands. When they finally stumbled into his stronghold, they actually tried to apologize. It was an amusing thought and brought a soft chuckle. He had defeated the scientists with a heavy hand

and entered their world. He had enjoyed the destruction of his rampage.

Even so, a contingent of soldiers and guards had challenged him. They made him expend his energy and then forced him to retreat. He stole weapons and armor from the best of their laboratories, but he failed to use his acquisitions properly. Ultimately, he was forced to return to his world.

That was their biggest mistake. He took several prisoners in the process. Though the scientists managed to seal the gateway to their world, he had been confident. He took information from his victims. He tortured them for training and tutoring.

He had bettered himself in the years that followed. As his victims died under his tyrannical grip, he mastered fighting techniques. His power grew, as did his knowledge of physics and scientific theory.

Having extinguished his supply of prisoners, the guard had initiated efforts to reopen the connection between worlds. However, his efforts had obviously proven unsuccessful. He knew instantly that the base in which he had arrived was not his intended target.

The guard grumbled with frustration. He wanted to devastate the scientists. Yet, he found himself in a base that already bore the marks of conquest. The men in white coats had appeared to be scientists, but they were so insignificant.

He grew impatient. With a swift step, the guard entered the shadows behind a large crate and exited into a laboratory some distance away.

The lab was much darker than the corridor he had abandoned. A single man slept quietly beside a sealed blast door. He was a soldier, or so the guard surmised by the grey and white fatigues he wore and the automatic weapon he clutched. No doubt, the door had cut him off from a larger unit. Or

perhaps he was a guardian that had drifted off during his watch.

Irritated, the guard kicked the slumbering man's boot.

"Wake up! Go for your gun."

Instinctively, the startled soldier drew his automatic rifle into firing position. There was a thunderous, echoing report. And the man slumped down and toppled out of his seat. His blood slowly streamed down the wall against which he had been resting.

The guard passed into a dark corner and emerged in a new corridor. Only emergency lights cast muted radiance into the sterile passage. Crates were littered about, military supplies that had yet to be unpacked. A pair of elevator doors was inset in one wall. Steel blast doors stood both before and behind him, cutting off any possible escape.

More soldiers were hidden among the crates. The guard could feel them. He could sense their fear. And suddenly one of them fired a stream of jacketed slugs. Harmlessly, the bullets struck the walls and crates. Only two found their marks but they were stopped by the guard's advanced body armor.

The guard's counter attack was simple and direct. He thrust a fist into one of the crates and felt around. Satisfied with his findings, he withdrew a small green ball, pulled its primer pin, and hurled it into the midst of his opponents.

"Grenade!"

Two of the soldiers found safety. Their companions, however, were less fortunate. The blast shattered neighboring crates and filled the hall with flame. Shrapnel danced off the ceiling. One of the emergency lights failed with a burst of glass and sparks.

In the smoke and haze, the surviving soldiers faced the blazing red eyes. The first swipe of a fist removed a man's helmet. His body struck the floor as quickly, a bullet hole bored through his temple.

The other soldier fired wildly into the darkness. His hopes of lucky success faded with the click of dry-fire. The guard placed a single square kick into the soldier's body armor. A metallic crack resounded as the marine's corpse bounced off steel. A slight dent remained in the blast door above the fallen soldier while he writhed in agony.

Disappointed, the guard holstered his glock as quickly as he had first drawn it. He was bored with the weaklings he had already dispatched. At least the victims of his original encounter had been fighters. They were more fun to torment and destroy.

Perhaps he could find something more entertaining outside. He backed into a darkened corner and stepped through it. He emerged in the shadow of a rock formation in an expansive desert.

The guard would have been angry at the lack - would have returned to his own world - had he not sensed the life. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of people concentrated in a single location.

They were too distant to identify individually. He could only sense the condensed mass of many at that range. Rejuvenated, the guard passed behind the rock formation and materialized in an open alley.

He gazed at the surrounding buildings with pleasure. Such sturdy structures. So many victims.

"This should be fun."

He had taken not but two steps when the ground shook. Excitedly, he felt the air. He reached out with his senses

and felt the evil passing through the wind. He felt the concentration of great powers in the city.

The city was ripe. Destruction and chaos were in his grasp. With a satisfied sigh, he began a brisk walk toward the first of the great powers.

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