

**SHADOW  
SOLDIER**

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For Amy



**REBELS  
&  
TYRANTS**



# 1

**H**e woke from dreams of rain and fire.

Shadows moved at the edge of his vision, lingering ghosts of the nightmares he had carried since childhood. It was a common experience among orphans of the war, one more cost of surviving catastrophe. The five-year rebellion against the World System claimed many lives, and—as conflicts often do—left countless children alone in destitution. Most succumbed to starvation or exposure and followed their parents in death. Warriors die in glory, and their children are forgotten by the world.

He had been one of the lucky ones. The Capital Orphanage of Alexandria took him in, and though the life they gave him was a cruel one, they provided him with the tools to survive.

The dreams still echoed in his mind as he sat up on his bed. They had always been obscure, almost meaningless aside from the occasional loss of sleep they caused, yet every time they came he couldn't stop thinking about them. Many believed such dreams were fragments of memories trying to reach the surface, but he didn't know how that could be. So

far as he knew, the Capital Orphanage was his beginning. His parents had likely died early in the rebellion. He never knew them.

The clock on the wall read 22:00. Still two hours before he went back on duty. He needed that time to rest and recover, but as sleep never found him after the dreams it was a futile hope. He rose and stretched, pacing his small—but private—quarters. It was only two steps from wall to wall, hardly luxurious, but it was the first private room he had ever called his own.

He was a soldier—a first lieutenant of the Fourteenth Army of Alexandria—and he bore the title with pride. The Fourteenth represented the largest standing force of the Great Army inside the World System's capital city, and it was truly an honor to serve so near the seat of power. Whispers from his superiors suggested that he might find himself in one of those seats one day. The World System was still young and had not yet had a succession, but the members of the hierarchy were getting along in years. It wouldn't be long before a replacement was required.

The lieutenant retrieved a fresh uniform of Great Army greens and got dressed. He would rather make his rounds of the base than sit in a confined space with only his dreams to keep him company. He pulled on his weapons belt and made his way into the cool night, hoping to clear his head.

Despite the time, the Fourteenth Army base buzzed with activity. Squads marched on patrol up and down the narrow roads between barracks, on their way to or from one of the operations buildings in the center. Hundreds of soldiers went



on and off duty throughout the city every couple of hours, which meant the base rarely knew quiet.

He had barely put three yards between himself and his quarters before a gruff voice rang out over the pounding of boots, "Lieutenant!"

Respect for rank and authority had been drilled into them so hard that every lieutenant within earshot snapped to attention, facing the source of the voice. He did the same, though his off-duty status made it unlikely he was the intended target.

When he saw the officer marching down the road, it gave him pause. It was Major General Wilde, one of the highest-ranking members of the division. The lieutenant had never cared much for the man, as he came off as callous and cruel, but the only officer who outranked him in the Fourteenth Army was the general himself. Wilde was his trusted confidant, and that made him a force to be reckoned with.

The lieutenant remained lost in thought, believing that Wilde would pass him to speak with one of the other five or six lieutenants who stood at attention on the road. Much to his shock, the major general stopped in front of him. The others moved on about their duties.

His heart rate sped up slightly. Had he done something wrong? Was Wilde here to see that he was punished?

"Lieutenant..." Wilde began distantly, his voice trailing off. "What's your name again?"

"Well, sir—"

"Nevermind, I don't really care. I presume you're off-duty, since you're just standing around."

“Yes, sir.”

“Walk with me.” Wilde turned and headed back in the direction from which he had come, toward the operations center. The lieutenant followed, keeping pace but remaining a step behind, as was protocol.

“We just received word from Alexandrian Intelligence,” Wilde said. “An execution order has been handed down from Great Army Command. I need you to carry it out.”

The lieutenant felt a pit of dread open up in his stomach. Execution orders were rare, but when they came officers were always glad not to be on duty. Most ended up being grisly affairs.

“With respect, sir, you know that I have never been on execution detail.”

“Do you know how to follow coordinates? Fire that weapon at your side?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. That means I don’t have to execute *you* for being an incompetent fool.”

He grimaced. “Shall I wake my squad, sir?”

“I have a squad. I need an officer.”

The pit in his stomach deepened. Most officers had their own squad of regulars, which helped create a sense of loyalty and confidence for missions. Ideally, soldiers were trained to give the same respect to officers no matter who was in command, but it never quite worked out that way. Leading another man’s squad on detail brought its own challenges.

“If you don’t mind my asking, sir, what happened to their normal officer?”

“Dead. Deserter—well, *attempted* deserter. I’d put another squad on this, but we’re spread a little thin tonight and I don’t have one to spare.”

“And the target?”

“High profile,” Wilde replied. “One of the leaders of the old rebellion. You might even get another medal out of this one, if you’re lucky. Bring me his head, and I’ll give you his name.”

“Understood, sir.”

They reached the operations center, where the squad stood waiting. He saw several distrustful stares come his way as they approached, which didn’t bode well.

“You’ll be dropped off at the edge of the city and travel the rest of the way on foot.”

The lieutenant’s dread faded away, overtaken by fear, “The edge of the city...sir?”

“Yes. The target is in the Wilderness Sector.”

The lieutenant then knew he would have been better off staying in bed. The Wilderness Sector along the northern border of Alexandria was a breeding ground for murderers and thieves, a gathering place for those who spurned the order of the World System’s cities. In the wake of the wars at the turn of the century, the survivors had all gathered together in the last remaining cities, leaving the rest of the civilized world to decay and be reclaimed by the wild. The lieutenant had been raised to fear the Wilderness and the chaos it symbolized. It was not safe to go near it unless in full force.

But refusing the order was not an option.

Half an hour later he commanded a dead man's squad to march on foot to the northern border. He could sense their trepidation as they drew closer to the outskirts, where deserted buildings that looked ready to collapse rose around them. The melancholy sight of a ruined civilization threatened to overwhelm the lieutenant—a reminder of the temporal state of man and his mark upon the earth.

He tried not to think too much about his own mortality as they turned down a dark alley to begin their final approach. There had been no challenge to the government's supremacy since the fall of the rebellion fifteen years prior, so why should he expect one now?

Using the coordinates provided by intelligence, the lieutenant spied out a doorway halfway down the alley and held up a hand to stop the march. He stepped to the side of the door and allowed the squad to get in position, assault rifles ready. They waited for his command with bated breath, all trace of distrust gone from their eyes. Unknown territory made them fall back on their most basic training.

The lieutenant hesitated only a moment before giving the order, "Secure it."

A loud crack broke through the night as the soldiers knocked down the door and stormed inside, weapons sweeping the room for any sign of the target. The lieutenant waited outside, listening to the shuffling of feet, and drew his sidearm. *A bullet to the head is all it will take. One bullet and this will all be over.*

The voice of a subordinate jarred him from thought, "All clear, sir. There's no one here."

He frowned and pushed past the enlisted man, sidearm up in case the squad was mistaken. They weren't *his* squad, after all. Streaming lights attached to the soldiers' assault rifles gave him limited views of the room, but what he saw gave him pause. Thick layers of dust covered every surface, the stench of decay so potent that he couldn't imagine staying in the room for more than a few minutes, much less taking up residence there. Cracks spread along the walls, evidence that supports for the building above might be near collapse. No one in his right mind would live there.

He slowly lowered his sidearm, no longer seeing the room. He needed to deflect blame for this onto an intelligence mishap, and quickly. To return without the target, with a report of mission failure...soldiers had been executed for far less.

The lieutenant checked that his earpiece was secure, and then used his wristband to connect to the right frequency. A click sounded, letting him know the line was live, "Squad 11 to Fourteenth Army Command, connect me to Major General Wilde."

Nothing but static answered him. "Repeat, Squad 11 to Fourteenth Army Command, do you read?"

"Sir," one of the soldiers whispered. The lieutenant might have ignored it, but the fear in the man's voice grabbed his attention. He followed the soldier's gaze up to the ceiling, where dust streamed down from the rafters in inconsistent patterns. The lieutenant turned his ear and listened, catching faint sounds like footsteps directly above.

"Out, all of you," he ordered.

“Sir?”

A series of low hums came to life overhead, solemn and melodious, while a strange white light shone down through cracks in the ceiling. The lieutenant’s heart dropped, unable to believe what he was seeing—or at least, what he *thought* he saw. It wasn’t possible! He raised his weapon and commanded with greater urgency, “Vacate the premises immediately!”

But it was too late. An explosion ripped through the ceiling, raining wood and ash down upon their heads. Smoke obscured his vision and made it hard to get a sense of his surroundings, but it wasn’t long before he heard the screams. Spikes of white fire fell upon them with minds of their own, piercing into the unwary soldiers before they had the chance to react. Cries rang in the lieutenant’s ears as men died all around him, and though he could see nothing in the dark but the furious white lights, he opened fire. Others tried to do the same, but managed only haphazard bursts before a fiery spike threw them to the ground.

The lieutenant continued firing until a spike struck the weapon from his hand, searing his skin in a flash of pain. He cradled the hand against his side and felt the subtle warmth of blood as it seeped from the wound. Now unarmed, he sank to the floor and prepared to die.

But the white lights did not strike him again. Silence reigned in the room, and the clearing smoke created that same eerie feeling he had experienced time and again at the close of battle. He had only ever participated in Wilderness raids, despite the recent war across the ocean, and those always

ended with a World System victory. He was not accustomed to being on the losing side.

The spikes moved into an arc formation and cut off his path to the door. What were they doing? Taunting him? Was the sting of defeat and the finality of death not enough for them?

“Lights!” The voice startled him, and he realized that he had begun to see the spikes as otherworldly beings, thirsting for the blood of unwary soldiers. *No*, his mind snapped back to reality. *These are just men. Powerful men, perhaps, but nothing more.*

Brightness burst from the room above at the voice’s command, illuminating the wielders of the white blades. One, the lieutenant was glad to see, had been wounded in his brief firing spree—further proof that they were just flesh and blood.

He took in their solid black uniforms, unable to stop his inquisitive mind despite the likelihood he was about to die. Several groups had risen to challenge the World System, most barely strong enough to provide more than a training exercise for the Great Army. Only two serious threats had risen in the past fifteen years, and both had been contained within the cities of their origin.

None had ever dared to rebel in the capital.

So who were these men? A splinter sect of some kind? He wanted to name them brigands from the Wilderness, but brigands wouldn’t fight with those weapons. Starved nomads in the wild didn’t move with that kind of discipline. His only clue was the insignia that they wore on the left side of their chests, a symbol that incorporated the blades they carried. He didn’t recognize it from any of his studies on recent rebellions.

The leader of the group—a commander, by the silver stripes on his shoulders—stood with his arms crossed, eyeing the young lieutenant approvingly. “Well done. I didn’t expect you or your men to get off a single shot.” He glanced at the wounded rebel, “You alright, Corporal?”

“Just a graze,” the corporal smiled. “Nothing a few days’ rest won’t heal.”

“In a few days you’ll be in the ground,” the lieutenant said with spite. “You just slaughtered a detail of soldiers on official business from Central Command. They will be coming for you.”

The commander surveyed the carnage around them with amusement, “If they fare as well as you and your men here, I think we’ll be fine.”

“Traitors and murderers always meet the same end.”

“Harsh words from a man whose profession routinely requires him to kill without question. Tell me, young soldier: how many men have you killed on Wilderness raids? How many women? Children?”

The lieutenant trained his eyes on the floor. He tried not to pay attention during the raids, tried not to see their faces. But there were times it could not be avoided. “I’m a soldier,” he said, speaking as much to himself as to the rebels. “I follow orders.”

“Those who pledge service to tyrants are no less tyrants themselves.”

“Then give me the death I deserve,” the lieutenant said, attempting courage but feeling it fall flat. “Take your victory, short-lived though it will be.”

“So eager to die?”



“You just annihilated my squad,” the lieutenant indicated the corpses around him. “How else can this end?”

The commander walked over to the side of the room where the lieutenant’s weapon lay, retrieved it, and made his way back to the center of the arc. He studied the silver sidearm closely, “Ruling Council Issue. Presented only to the most exceptional officers upon their graduation.” The lieutenant exhaled long and slow. Executed with his own weapon—the very one he had been planning to kill a rebel leader with just moments ago. He supposed it was appropriate.

But the commander ejected the magazine and removed the remaining bullets one-by-one. They hit the concrete floor like metal drops of rain, and one rolled right into the lieutenant’s shadow.

“We do not believe in killing when it is not necessary and serves no end. Your death gains us nothing.”

“But theirs did?”

“Yes. They died to send a message.”

The lieutenant couldn’t place it, but he recognized something familiar about the commander’s voice, as though he had heard it in a long-forgotten dream. Up to that point he had only studied their uniforms, and paid very little attention to the men themselves. He raised his eyes to the commander’s face.

At first glance he was not impressed. Before him stood an average man—perhaps in his early fifties—in a uniform tattered with age. On his right sleeve he wore a patch of dirtied red and white stripes set alongside a star-strewn block of blue. At this, the lieutenant’s eyes widened. He didn’t recognize the

insignia, but he *did* know that design. It was the flag of the nation that had once ruled in this region.

The weapon in the rebel's right hand was one that the lieutenant had never actually seen in real life, but he could identify it all the same; they had not been used in battle for fifteen years. The sight of the brilliant white blade presented a stark contrast to the simple uniform, and added back a certain degree of fearsomeness to the commander's presence. Scars decorated the man's arms—burns or cuts, the lieutenant couldn't tell. One long scar, the remnants of a particularly nasty gash, lined the left side of the commander's face.

"You've sent your message, then. What do you want with me?"

"First," the commander looked down at him, no sign of anger or hatred in his eyes. "I'll have your name."

"My name?" the lieutenant asked, caught off-guard by the strange request.

"Yes, your name. What they call you."

"I have no name."

Many times this revelation led others to believe him arrogant or cold, withholding a name he did not wish for them to know. But the rebels merely shifted and gave one another meaningful looks. They did not seem surprised. Dread returned to him, this time much deeper, and he couldn't keep his eyes from the dead soldiers he had led into this mess. Had the rebels done this merely to get to him?

There were stories—rare, and unconfirmed—of officers who went out on assignment and simply vanished. The Great Army claimed they had been executed for desertion, but the

lieutenant had seen the lie in the eyes of those who gave those reports. Was this what happened to them?

“You know who I am, don’t you?” he asked the commander.

After a brief pause the rebel replied, “Designation 301-14-A, raised in the Capital Orphanage of Alexandria; tested into soldier training at ten; achieved active duty at eighteen; selected to train as an officer at nineteen; second lieutenant at twenty and first lieutenant at twenty-one. Quite an impressive resume. We’re ready to see what you will do at twenty-two.”

“You’ve seen my file.”

“Bright too, apparently.”

The lieutenant, whose designation was indeed 301-14-A, couldn’t think for the life of him why a rebel group would single him out for recruitment. He had excelled faster than most, it was true, but there were others whose files looked just as exemplary—until now. This would shatter everything for him. Returning without proof of mission success had been perilous enough, but to lose his entire squad? If the rebels allowed him to live, the general of the Fourteenth Army would not be so kind.

“Make your case, rebel,” 301 said.

“Very well,” the commander nodded. “The MWR doesn’t look kindly on failure...and regardless of where fault *really* lies, blame for this incident will fall squarely on your shoulders. Return to the World System and yes, you will likely be executed.” He paused, watching 301 closely. “But it doesn’t have to be that way. Your knowledge and talents would serve you well enough to survive on your own for a time...and

perhaps later to fight against the regime that has brought so much suffering to our world. I can offer you a place within our ranks, 301. Take it, and you may live.”

301 mulled over the commander’s words for a moment, and then let out a loud stream of laughter, “Don’t even make me waste my breath on an answer. I’d rather die than betray the World System.”

“Death is likely what you choose, young man. This may be your last chance to escape it and the terrible destiny that will follow.”

“I am an officer of the World System,” he spat. “And I gladly choose death over treason.”

The commander shook his head, “The pride of a System machine knows no bounds. If that is indeed the fate of your choosing...I will say no more.” He tucked the gun under his arm and reached in his pocket, “Perhaps, then, you will be kind enough to deliver this to your superiors and instruct them to give it to the MWR.”

301 inspected the object as the commander set it on the floor before him. It was an insignia patch—the very same worn and tattered cloth that each of the rebels wore over their chests. Upon closer examination 301 saw that it was a simplified image of the weapons with two rays of light emanating from the sides of the blade.

“What makes you think this piece of trash will ever make it into the presence of the MWR?” he asked.

“That is the message your men died to send,” the commander replied. “We had planned to just leave it here if you agreed to

join us, but since you're determined to walk into the jaws of death you might as well take this with you."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you return to your base empty-handed. You waltzed right into our trap and now all your men are dead. Perhaps with this you'll have something to show for it." The rebel commander placed the emptied sidearm back on the ground in front of the insignia patch, "I'll leave it up to you." He turned to his men. "Move out. Disperse and regroup at the rendezvous point." The rebels did as ordered, leaving 301 in the room alone with the commander.

"Who shall I tell the MWR the message is from?"

He smirked, "He will know." The commander turned to leave. Seeing his chance, 301 reached out for the gun and with his unwounded hand took careful aim at his foe. He pulled the trigger, propelling the final bullet from the nose of the weapon.

In one graceful motion the rebel commander turned and raised his glowing white blade into the trajectory of the bullet. It disintegrated on impact. "The chamber," the commander mused. "I always forget about that one." He turned back around and disappeared into the night.

301 slumped back down on the floor, defeated. That had been his last hope for survival.

# 2

**F**reshly shined black military boots pounded hurriedly on the red velvet carpet. Guards and soldiers moved out of the way as though dodging a freight train, for standing in the path of this man was just as dangerous. Clad in robes of royalty, his floor-length cape rose behind as though carried by the wind as he rushed toward the elevator at the end of the hall.

In his haste he took a small pea-sized device from his pocket and placed it in his ear. “Central Command,” he spoke harshly. There was a brief pause before he continued, “This is Chief Advisor Scott Sullivan, Premier of the Ruling Council—authorization seven-six-nine-eight-four. I am issuing an order for the emergency assembly of the Ruling Council. I want them all here within the next seven hours—you may pass along my apathy at any inconvenience this may cause. Failure to appear will be considered an act of treason.” Sullivan removed the device from his ear and stepped into the elevator, turning to face the hallway as the sterling doors closed.

“Specify floor,” an automated voice commanded.

“Crown 121.”

“Authorization—”

“Scott Sullivan, Chief Advisor of War.”

“Access approved.”

The Premier tapped his foot impatiently as the elevator began to rise. His mind raced with theories and propositions of how to combat this threat—new and yet old at the same time. One solution stood out above the rest, but the MWR would almost certainly never allow it.

The elevator doors parted and Sullivan stepped out into the hallway. He headed to the right and continued on until two large golden doors loomed in front of him. Four soldiers stood guard outside, weapons ready.

“Premier Sullivan,” one of them spoke warily. “We have been told that the MWR is not to be disturbed at this time.”

The Premier didn’t lose a step, “We have an urgent matter of world security, Sergeant. I suggest you stand down, unless you and your family wish to appear before the Ruling Council for judgment.”

Sullivan brushed past the sergeant and thrust open the doors to the office and quarters of Napoleon Alexander, the supreme ruler of the world.

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“You know how these things go, soldier...losing your squad to a group of rebels is unforgivable.”

301 nodded. He had thought of nothing else during the long and lonely walk back to base the previous night. Doubtless

he would end up facing the firing squad, but Major General Wilde wanted to wait until all the fine points were observed. “So,” 301 said, “I am reporting for execution, then.”

“That was the plan, originally,” the major general replied. “But we’ve just received new orders. You are to be stripped of your rank and your class status, effective immediately. After surrendering your rank pin and weapons, a helicopter will take you to the palace where you have been called to testify.”

A brief hesitation followed this announcement, as 301 wasn’t sure he had heard correctly. “The palace, sir?”

“From this point on you will be referred to by your numeric designation,” Wilde went on. “The Ruling Council will decide your fate.”

Breathtaken, 301 could only whisper, “The Ruling Council?”

“Yes,” the major general answered. “These orders come straight from Premier Sullivan. You will testify to what you have seen at an emergency assembly of the Ruling Council at noon. Pending their assessment of the situation, you will be tried and judged. They tell me that the MWR himself will also be in attendance at this meeting.”

301 felt lightheaded, and in the back of his mind he heard a small voice urging him to flee. Let them shoot him in the back—it had to be better than what was coming! A summons to the Council was a worse fate than death. If his testimony angered the Premier or the MWR, they could subject him to pains he had never imagined. He struggled to correct his breathing, which he noticed had become irregular.



“Your rank pin and weapons, citizen,” Wilde said, bringing 301 back to his senses.

With great care he pulled the silver rank pin from his collar and placed it in the major general’s palm, relinquishing the symbol of his position in shame. He surrendered his weapons, including the Council-issued firearm, which Wilde took greedily. 301 suspected that the major general had already made plans to sell the sidearm to the highest bidder.

And just like that, his exemplary career in the Great Army was over.

Without another word to the major general, 301 proceeded in the direction of the landing zones, downcast with the knowledge that he would never return. He looked back briefly as Wilde called after him with ill-humored contempt, “Savor the sunrise, 301. I fear it will be the last one you ever see.”

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Sullivan stood still, hands held respectfully behind his back, as the golden doors snapped shut behind him. The MWR sat behind his desk, chair turned toward his wide window and the panoramic view of Alexandria visible beyond the glass. Sullivan lifted his eyes briefly to the skyline. Truly, the capital and heart of the World System was a wonder to behold: a vast urban domain, a city-state in the true meaning of the term, larger than many countries in the Old World.

“By all means, Premier, come in,” the MWR said sarcastically as he swiveled his chair to face Sullivan. “I hope this is not about the rumors coming in from the Wilderness Sector. I’ve heard quite enough as it is.”

“Sir,” Sullivan began. “The situation is—”

“Hardly dire enough to wake me in the middle of the night,” the MWR interrupted. “My days are busy enough as it is without you and General Brooks interrupting my nights as well. You would think we didn’t have procedures in place to deal with these issues.”

“I apologize for interrupting your rest,” Sullivan said with a trace of impatience. “But information has come to light that paints the incident in a more...*threatening* light.”

“This had better be good.”

Sullivan took a deep breath and began, “Last night at approximately twenty-two hundred, the Fourteenth Army command tower dispatched an execution squad led by Lieutenant 301-14-A to the Wilderness Sector, based on intelligence that General E. C. Crenshaw had been sighted along the border of the city. Upon arrival the team realized too late that they had been lured into a trap. Only the lieutenant survived—”

“A detail that I’m sure has been rectified.”

“I took the liberty of delaying that action until the situation can be reviewed,” Sullivan said. “To execute our only witness before gaining adequate knowledge of this event would be—”

“Foolish?” the MWR stood, his voice deepening into a tone of challenge.

But Sullivan would not be cowed into silence. He dropped his attentive stance and looked the MWR in the eye, “With respect, sir, if you allow me to finish I am certain you will agree.”

“Out with it then, old man!” the MWR ordered. “And spare me the fine points.”

“Very well,” Sullivan stepped forward and reached into his pocket. The MWR flinched as though the Premier meant to draw a weapon, but relaxed when Sullivan pulled out a small piece of cloth and tossed it onto the desk.

As he took in the familiar shape of the insignia patch between them, the MWR’s smug expression faded and gave way to a grim anger. Deciding he should hit the MWR with all the information at once rather than let it build, Sullivan went on, “The attackers were carrying weapons that the lieutenant had never actually seen before, but recognized from his studies. He described them as swords on fire with white light.”

“The Spectral Gladius.”

Sullivan nodded, “It would appear so. That would explain why none of the rebels were killed. For the past decade our defensive training techniques have not included countermeasures against the Gladius. Those soldiers didn’t have a chance.”

The MWR turned back toward the window to mask his mounting emotion. Sullivan thought it wise to remain silent until the MWR spoke again. “I know what you’re thinking, Premier...but you’re mistaken. It’s not possible.”

“We cannot afford to be wrong about this, sir,” Sullivan insisted. “At least allow the Ruling Council to review the situation. If it is found that—”

The MWR faced him again and raised a hand for silence, “Given the situation, perhaps a meeting of the Council would do us service. Do what you will in this matter, but when you are done with the lieutenant—our laws are clear—he must be executed.”

“Understood, sir,” Sullivan replied.

“Good.” The MWR sighed and set an angry glare on the insignia patch. “Where is the soldier now?”

“On his way here, sir.”

“You summoned him to the palace without my permission?”

The corners of the Premier’s mouth turned slightly upward in a barely noticeable smile, “I had a feeling you would want him here.”

“Have you taken any other actions I should know about, Premier?”

“I have ordered an emergency assembly of the Ruling Council to convene in the Hall of Advisors at noon,” he answered. “They will begin arriving at the palace within the hour. We will address this issue and decide what must be done in response.”

“If indeed there is an issue,” the MWR said darkly. “You have taken several liberties today without my consent, Premier Sullivan. I hope you have not forgotten your place in the World System.”

“I am the head of the Ruling Council, sir.”

“A position we both know to be more symbolic than substantive.” The MWR moved slowly around his desk to stand directly in front of the Premier. “Your power, broad as it may seem, exists only as I delegate it. So, we will let this

incident slide for now, as no harm has been done.” He leaned in closely and whispered in Sullivan’s ear, “But if you overstep your position in the system of command again, there will be *severe* consequences.”

Sullivan’s eyes flashed with anger, but he merely nodded.

The MWR walked back around his desk and sat down. “What time will the soldier arrive?”

“Sunrise.”

“Excellent. Go up to the landing pad and wait for him. Then bring him here.”

“Here?” Sullivan asked.

“Yes, here. I will interview him before the rest of the Council arrives, just to make sure I am not caught off-guard by anything in his report. Inform the others that I most certainly *will* be in attendance for this meeting. Dismissed, Premier.”

Premier Sullivan bowed his head reluctantly and left the room. Looking out a window toward the east, he saw that the first traces of light had already crept onto the horizon. Soon the day would be set in motion, and hopefully his plans along with it.

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The palace of the MWR grew dark and ominous in the distance. As light from the sun began to dominate the eastern sky, shadows of the night gave way to morning. Yet the palace seemed to retain its aura of darkness, as though some unseen entity cast a shadow upon it.

Napoleon Alexander took great pride in the royal structure. Once seen it could never be forgotten, for it was a wonder of architecture such as had never been seen in the world before. From above it looked like a slightly deformed letter X, after which the insignia of the World System had been modeled.

A blend of modern and ancient forms, the palace incorporated five very different buildings into a single structure, spanning a distance of over half a mile from end to end. To the west, a massive gothic-style cathedral; to the north, a golden-domed mosque; to the east, a Buddhist temple painted in alternating colors of black and brilliant red; and to the south, a gleaming tower of gold and silver that shone like a beacon in the growing light of the morning.

In the very center of those buildings rose a column of stone taller than them all, plainly meant to overshadow them in symbolic fashion, and it was there that Napoleon Alexander himself resided. Large black spikes curved downward from the flat top of the pillar in a cruel mockery of a flower, completing the intended effect to strike fear into all who beheld it. Truly it was an unsettling sight, but for 301 the apprehension was even deeper.

He knew from his training as an officer that each 'arm' of the palace housed an armory, within which an arsenal of weapons unlike anything else on the planet was kept. Any army trying to attack by land or air would literally be cut to shreds before coming within a hundred yards of the palace. Not the most comforting thought, as their path took them right by the western armory.

To top off the palace's security, a defense ring of twenty guard posts ran around the main structure. Each post contained its own powerful weapons, though the real threat of the defense ring was the soldiers. Hundreds of them patrolled the entire area daily, making the palace of the MWR the most heavily guarded building in the history of the world.

The helicopter touched down on top of the stone pillar, and 301 took a deep breath. This was it. After all the narrow escapes, after all the training and striving and peril, death had finally caught up with him. Here at the hands of the Ruling Council, he would meet his end.

A rush of wind hit his face as the helicopter door opened and he stepped out onto the landing pad. An older man dressed in royal black robes waited by the entrance, his cape flapping furiously in the air behind him. Rows of soldiers flanked him on both sides, all of whom grew tense as 301 approached—he was not to be received as a guest, it appeared.

301 stood at attention as the man yelled over the whirring blades, "I am Premier Scott Sullivan, the Chief Advisor of War! Is your designation 301-14-A?"

He nodded.

"Good! You *must* follow me, now!"