

THE SOLDIER WITHIN

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“Now you’re going to meet the most important friend you’ll ever have,” the sergeant said.

We were standing far away from the main training camp. The ground was covered in patches of dry, flat grass, desperately trying to hold onto its green color but fading quickly to brown. Kind of like our uniforms. I rolled my eyes to look at my fellow recruits on either side of me. Right now our most important friend would have been a tall glass of cold water, or an air conditioner.

A sweat bead dropped off my forehead and past the front of my eye. I kept myself from wiping my brow; we were supposed to stand perfectly still while at attention.

“Do you want to know who that friend is?” the sergeant asked.

“Yes, sir!” we shouted. My throat felt hoarse.

The sergeant narrowed his eyes, even though his back was the one to the sun. “That friend is your new weapon. The SM-rifle.”

I blinked. I had never heard of the SM-rifle. From the vibes I was getting off my colleagues, neither had anyone else.

A covered truck had been parked next to the sergeant; the door opened and two soldiers jumped out. One of them moved to the back of the truck and began unloading boxes; the other one set up a folding table.

The sergeant glanced at the soldiers briefly, then turned back to us. “You’re probably wondering what the SM-rifle is. Well, in a few minutes you’ll find out.

“As I call your name, come up here, get your rifle from the corporal, and return to your position. You may examine your rifle, but do not turn it on. Understand?”

“Yes, Sergeant!” we all shouted, despite our confusion. How did one “turn on” a rifle? Why didn’t he warn us to treat the weapon as if it were loaded? He didn’t really want us flagging our weapons, did he?

Having my last name in the middle of the alphabet meant that I got to watch as

others got their rifles—excuse me, their SM-rifles—and brought them back to their positions. I noticed a lot of us straining to get a better look.

Finally, the sergeant called my name. I trotted up to the table where the corporal sat. I recognized her from the mess tent; she worked in the administrative section of the base, so we never interacted. Which was a shame, as she was a cute redhead whose hair flowed out from under her cap, not cut to the regulation buzz like the rest of us. As she opened the box and handed me my rifle and sling, I smiled at her. She flashed a smile at me in the space of a moment and then was back to being all business. I felt eyes on the back of my head and turned around to see the sergeant glaring at me.

As quickly as I could, I ran back to my position with the rifle, and then began to study it. The rifle was a lot heavier and bulkier than the zip guns I'd been used to popping on the streets before I had been drafted. Come to think of it, it was wider than any other rifle I had ever seen before. Its length seemed right, though; I hefted it up and found that the rifle had a sight attached to the top. The stock and barrel were both made of a dark metal, which absorbed the sunlight. And sure enough, it had an on/off switch on the trigger housing, right next to the safety.

Within a few minutes, all the rifles had been distributed and the sergeant shouted, "Tench-hut!" Immediately, we stood at attention, with the rifles balanced in one hand, the butt resting on the ground.

The sergeant smiled, deliberately showing all his teeth. "In the olden days, sergeants used to tell the apes under their command that their weapon was their best friend. Well, for the first time in history, it's actually true.

"Hold your SM-rifle so you're looking at the right side. You'll notice a tiny screen that's camouflaged to look like the rest of the metal. That screen will display all sorts of information once your rifle is activated. You'll probably ignore it most of the time, though, except when your rifle's unable to talk."

Unable to talk? Since when did rifles talk?

"SM stands for Simulated Mind. Remember that medical test where the lab coats put that helmet on your head for an hour?"

I remembered. That helmet had been heavy, and it hurt. I spent the rest of the day massaging the aches out of my neck.

"What you didn't know at the time was that a new technology was recording the patterns of your mind. Your memories, your thoughts, but most importantly, your personalities. Your engrams have been imprinted on your SM-rifles." He paused. "That means that your rifle knows you better than you know yourself."

A lot of us must have given the sergeant an incredulous look, because he said, “I know you’re finding that hard to believe. But after you spend a few hours with your rifle, you’ll come to see it’s the truth

“Your SM-rifle is yours. It knows you and you only, and it is bonded to you. Its sole job is to keep you alive and shooting. You and your SM-rifle are now a team. Which means...”

The sergeant paused for a moment, and when he spoke again, he spoke softly but strongly.

“Do not pick up another soldier’s rifle. Do not lose your rifle. When you go to the latrine, your rifle goes with you. When you go to the shower, the rifle goes with you. When you’re not in combat, keep your rifle’s battery pack charged. When you go to sleep at night, you’d better be hugging your goddamn rifle like you’re a crybaby and it’s your teddy bear. Understand?”

“Yes, Sergeant!” we all shouted.

“Now, fall out and get to know your weapon.” He smirked.

The flat ground extended as far as the eye could see. Most of the other trainees scattered away from the sergeant and the truck. I decided to do the opposite; if I screwed up, I didn’t care if he knew it. So I walked over to the area behind the truck and studied my SM-rifle.

I flipped the on switch. The SM-rifle hummed for a moment, and the tiny screen glowed blue. Then it spoke.

“Hello, Johnny,” it said. The voice sounded calm, friendly, and gender-neutral.

“Um, hello,” I replied. “You know my name?”

“Indeed I do. I’ve been programmed with everything you know.”

That sounded freaky, but I let it pass. “Well, you know my name. What do I call you?”

“You may choose a name for me.”

“How about Sam? Short for Samantha.”

I swear to God the rifle chuckled. “You know that over seventy percent of soldiers pick Sam as their rifle’s name?”

“No, I didn’t. Does that mean I need to pick another name?”

“No, Sam’s fine. Want to get started trying me out?”

“So, urn, how do I load you?”

“You don’t. I don’t fire projectiles.”

“So what do you fire?”

“Let me show you. Sweep me around, please, until I can spot an appropriate target.”

“There’s nothing around for miles.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

I shrugged, but followed Sam’s request. Aiming it properly, I did a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn. “Well?”

“Hm,” Sam said. “There’s not much to aim at around here.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Still, they wouldn’t bring us out here without a reason. Go ask the sergeant if there are any targets around.”

“I’m sorry, what? You want me to approach the sergeant?”

“Trust me, will you? Let’s go ask him.”

I stared at the rifle for a moment, then hefted it over my shoulder and walked over to the sergeant, who was supervising the return of the boxes to the truck. “Sergeant?”

He turned to me. “Yes, soldier?”

“My weapon suggested I ask you for a target to shoot.”

The sergeant smiled. “Of course. I suspect the others will be coming over soon.” He called to the corporal, who went into the back of the truck and brought out a bundle of wooden poles, each a little less than a meter long.

“Take one of those, stick it in the ground somewhere, and find a rock to put on top of it.”

I goggled. “Seriously, Sergeant?”

“You have a problem with my order, Recruit?”

“With all due respect, Sergeant, we don’t even have an RSO with us.”

The sergeant smiled. “Your SM-rifles are all linked to know where each one is at all times,” he said. “It’ll serve as both the range safety officer and the drill instructor.”

“Yes, Sergeant,” I said. I grabbed the stick with my left hand and wandered off, further from the truck than I had gone before. As I looked for an isolated spot, I noticed a few of the other soldiers heading to the truck.

“You planned this, didn’t you?” I asked my rifle.

Again the rifle chuckled. “Kind of. Let’s move out a long distance. We don’t want to hurt anyone.”

I walked for about five minutes, keeping the rifle in the sling to make it easier to carry. Just when I was about to stop, it said, “Here’s good.”

“I was just—never mind. Can I put you down while I set up the target?”

“Sure. Just keep me within reach.”

I nodded, although there was no one around to see me. I found a promising spot, set the rifle on the ground, planted the pole, balanced a rock on the end, and picked up my rifle again.

“Swing me around, please, so I can see the rock.”

I obliged, and then the rifle said, “Excellent. Let’s back up about five hundred meters.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. I’m not that skilled.”

“Don’t worry. I am.”

I shrugged, and walked, keeping my pace even so I could measure five hundred meters exactly. Normally, I count my paces under my breath, but I kept quiet because I didn’t want to give the rifle any clues.

It didn’t matter. Once again, just when I was about to stop, it said, “Five hundred meters. Perfect. Drop prone and face the target.”

I sighed and did so. I began reaching for the rear sight aperture but the rifle said, “Don’t worry about adjusting anything. I’ve already taken care of it.”

“You have? That’s . . . great.” I sighted the rock through the scope, aimed the rifle, and reached for the trigger.

“Wait,” it said.

“What?”

“Keep your muscles completely relaxed. You want good bone support. That will keep the sights on target.”

I tried to relax, but having my weapon practically ordering me around—well, it didn’t feel very relaxing. “Is this better?” I finally asked.

“Perfect.”

“So what do I do now?”

“You’ve fired other rifles before, haven’t you? Draw in a full breath, and then let it out halfway. Then aim me and fire.”

I squeezed the trigger. The rifle snapped and sizzled, and kicked back with barely any recoil. A tiny bolt of orange fire emerged from the barrel and flew towards the rock. Within seconds, I heard an explosion coming from the target.

“Come on, let’s go check it out.”

I swallowed hard, stood up, and carried the rifle with me as I walked back to the target. When I got close enough to see it clearly, I stopped short.

The rock was completely blasted away, but the pole stood unharmed.

I lifted the rifle to my face and studied its sheen. “My God. What are you?”

“Your new best friend.”

* * * *

More than anyone else, even the sergeant, Sam taught me how to be a soldier.

My buddies really didn’t know me as well as Sam did. I could talk to her about anything. She always backed me up, and sometimes gave me a new perspective on a training exercise or a combat mission.

That's right. I said combat mission. With these new SM-rifles helping us out, we finished our training in three-quarters time and got sent to the front quicker than any of us expected. I found myself in a squad with seven other soldiers, commanded by a staff sergeant who was one of the first soldiers trained with the new SM-rifles.

Our first mission in the war, in conjunction with another squad in our platoon, was an attack on a munitions shed at the top of a hill. The enemy had dug in and was expecting a fight at some point.

What they weren't expecting was us.

I had heard about units that were coordinated perfectly, having drilled over and over to work not just as a team, but almost as one mind.

With the SM-rifles, this conceit became true.

When the sergeant explained the mission plan to us— our squad would surround the hill and begin shooting, drawing fire to allow the other squad to attack from behind—it seemed clear to me that the plan had been developed with the SM-rifle capabilities in mind. Coordinating our attack would have been possible with radios, but the rifles managed to communicate far more quickly with each other than we would have been able to. We took out that shed easy as anything.

Well... almost.

As we started blasting away, blowing through the walls of the shed with the phased plasma, the enemy soldiers inside began to flee. Not exactly according to our plan, but as the soldiers ran away from my squad, the other squad managed to pick them off.

Except for this one guy, who was braver than his comrades. He snuck out of the shed and dove into the foliage, where he began firing at us. Bullets whizzed by, and the guy to my left got hit in the shoulder. We fired back with everything we had, but it didn't help. Every time we fired into the foliage, it was like the guy had managed to magically teleport himself into another hiding place.

And then Samantha spoke to me, quietly. "Johnny. This isn't going to work. Stop for a second."

I squeezed the trigger again, firing concentrated plasma into the foliage. "You got to be kidding. We can smoke the guy out."

"And then the fires would destroy the shed, and the mission goals won't be achieved."

“If I stop firing, the guy’s going to take me out.”

“Not if you listen to me. I can spot the guy better than you can.”

I sighed. “Fine. What do you want me to do?”

“Move my sight back and forth, slowly.”

“Can I keep shooting while I do that?”

“It won’t help.”

“It’ll keep me from getting killed!”

“Johnny, we’ve worked together for a long time. Trust me on this.”

She was right. Slowly, I swung her sight across our field of vision, giving her a chance to see if she could spot anything. And then the weirdest thing happened.

Suddenly it was like I wasn’t just inside my body anymore. Samantha was no longer just my weapon; she was part of me, and I was a part of her. Our thoughts started to come together. I was both the soldier aiming the weapon and the weapon itself. I felt scared for a moment, as if she was taking over my body, but it was more like she was in the back of my mind, and I was in the back of hers.

There he is, she said in my mind.

Where? I asked, and then it was like I could see the soldier through Samantha’s “eyes.” The world changed suddenly from all the colors of the rainbow to just two—a red outline showing me exactly where the soldier was crouched, and black everywhere else.

Is that him?

It is! Come on, Johnny! You can do this! Just aim and fire! I did. And I smacked that soldier right between the eyes.

* * * *

The next day, the lieutenant spoke to the whole platoon, congratulating us on a mission well done. After we broke for mess, my sergeant took me aside.

“The lieutenant wants to see you,” he said. “Now.”

Puzzled and hungry, I headed over to the lieutenant’s office. When I arrived, he looked up and said, “Ah, Johnny. Good to see you’ve got your SM with you.”

“We were told always to keep her at the ready, sir.”

“Good, good. Is it on?”

“Yes, sir. But so is the safety.”

“Good. Always keep your weapon turned on, and charged.” He paused. “That was excellent shooting the other day.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Please sit down. I have a question for you.”

As soon as I had sat down, the lieutenant surprised me with his question. “Did you notice anything unusual yesterday with your SM-rifle?”

I tried my best to look nonchalant. “Unusual, sir?”

He nodded. “Like I said, that was excellent shooting. Do you know how far away from you the enemy soldier was when you hit him?”

“Um, no, sir.”

“Fifteen hundred meters.”

I cleared my throat. “Really? That’s good, isn’t it?”

“A head shot at fifteen hundred meters—that got me wondering. Some soldiers have reported having a, shall we say, closer relationship with their SM-rifles than they originally expected.” He looked me directly in the eyes. “Have you had an experience of that sort?”

I heard Samantha’s voice in my head again. *It’s okay. We can trust him.*

“Well, honestly, sir, yes.”

He nodded, and I relaxed.

“Johnny, let me explain something about the SM-rifles. Although they are far better weapons than conventional rifles, we haven’t been handing them out to our soldiers simply because of the artificial intelligence. Haven’t you wondered why your rifle was specifically imprinted with your own personality engrams?”

“I really hadn’t given it much thought, sir,” I said. “I supposed it had to do with increasing our compatibility, making it easier for us to work together.”

The lieutenant laughed. “Most people would find it difficult if not impossible to work well with someone exactly like them.” He paused. “What I’m about to tell you is not exactly classified, but it’s also not for public consumption, if you know what I mean. I’m ordering you not to discuss it with anyone.”

“Yes, sir.”

The fact is that I couldn’t really understand much of what the lieutenant told me then, let alone discuss it with others. Apparently, Samantha and I were among the lucky few, whose identical memory engrams achieved what the lieutenant called “quantum resonance.” That allowed us to get into each other’s minds—a sort of telepathy. *That* word I could understand, but I was surprised to discover that it now existed for real.

Personally, I don’t think the lieutenant understood much of what he was telling me either. But I nodded politely and tried to look thoughtful.

“That means you can become one with your weapon, Johnny. The two of you together are much more proficient than any other soldier with a conventional weapon.”

I nodded, but didn’t say anything, which the lieutenant seemed to interpret as modesty. “It’s something to be proud of, son. You’re special.”

“I—thank you, sir.”

“Which is why I called you in to see me. I think you can be more than the ordinary soldier.” He leaned forward. “We need volunteers for special training. People who are willing to work alone. People who can get a particular job done.” He paused. “You ever hear of Carlos Hathcock?”

“No, sir,” I replied, puzzled.

“Look him up in the camp database. He’s what I’d like you to become. Let me know your decision within twenty-four hours. Dismissed.”

I left the tent, and almost immediately Samantha said, “Forget the database. I know who Hathcock was.” And she told me all about him.

I whistled when she was done. “The lieutenant wants me to do that? I can’t.”

“Sure you can. Let’s volunteer for the training.”

“I don’t want to work alone.”

She laughed. “You won’t be alone,” she replied. “You’ll have me along.”

That’s how I became a sniper.

* * * *

Becoming a sniper required more training. Despite Samantha’s assurances, it took a lot more than my just being able to aim my SM accurately. I had to learn about camouflage and concealment, so the enemy wouldn’t spot me when I was sent on missions. It took a lot of studying.

But I wasn’t alone. A handful of other soldiers and their SM-rifles had also been moved to sniper training, so we studied together. In a way, Samantha was wrong about it just being her and me.

But Samantha was right about one thing—our ability to shoot. Part of sniper training is learning how to shoot one’s rifle under various conditions. But with Samantha and me together, we aced all the preliminary tests, because we really could get into each others minds.

In fact, we did it so much better than any of the other soldier-rifle pairs that we were the first ones sent back to the front. We reported back to the lieutenant, who assigned us to a whole variety of interesting missions.

One time, we were working with my unit, but positioned far away, at a location perpendicular to their advance. Our job was to pick off the enemy soldiers at random, sowing confusion and fear while my unit engaged in a frontal assault. The tactic worked, and we took another hill.

Another time, we were sent on our own to one of the enemy’s cities. Our spy network had intercepted reports that one of the enemy’s generals was going to be doing an inspection of the city. We managed to keep ourselves hidden for two days until we got a clear shot, right into the general’s chest.

I was promoted to corporal and given a medal. I was pleased about that, but something nagged me in the back of my mind.

And I started having bad dreams. When I closed my eyes, I would see my targets explode in front of me. Sometimes I dreamt that I was my rifle. I felt the plasma flow through my body and then burst out at my targets, burning holes in their chests and heads. I woke up a few times in a cold sweat, unable to get back to sleep for an hour or two.

But our new role didn’t affect Samantha any. She seemed almost gleeful about our success. For her, killing became more than just a job. It became fun.

And that scared me to death.

* * * *

So here's how it all came to an end. Our last mission.

As always, my orders came from the lieutenant. He called us into his office as usual, but this time he had a much more sober look on his face.

"This is a different sort of mission, Johnny. A very sensitive one. We've located an enemy training facility for new soldiers. We want a sniper to go in there and pick off some of their new recruits, to strike fear into their hearts. Are you willing to do it?"

I remember feeling unsure, but Samantha's voice in the back of my head told me to go ahead. So I accepted.

The next day, we were dropped off a few kilometers away from the facility and we headed towards it. We never had to worry about getting lost, as Samantha always knew where she was going. When we got close enough, I took a look at the building. It was a red brick converted school building, with an outside playground transformed into a shooting range. I found a good copse of trees in which to conceal ourselves, and we waited.

Finally, after about twenty minutes, the front door opened, and my jaw dropped.

Two enemy soldiers led out a parade of children, none of them older than ten years at the most. They lined them up at the shooting range, gave them pistols, and began to instruct them on the use of their weapons.

I froze. I could feel myself sweating, and a lump formed in my throat.

Sam's voice appeared in the back of my mind. *Johnny, are you ready? Come on, aim me. We can take out at least five of the students before they'd get back into the building for safety.*

I closed my eyes and shook my head. *Sam, did you see the targets?* I asked her.

Sure I did. They're enemy soldiers-in-training, just like the lieutenant said.

They're not soldiers-in-training! They're kids. Children.

We knew the enemy was turning its young citizens to fight back. We just didn't realize how young. But it doesn't matter. They're still the enemy.

I whispered aloud. "I can't kill children."

"Sure you can," Sam replied in the same quiet tones.

"How can you say that?"

She sighed, something she hadn't done in a while. Then she cursed at me. "Damn it, Johnny, they've already been indoctrinated to hate you. There's not one of them that wouldn't just as soon kill you as look at you, and you know it."

She was right. I knew she was right. But damn it—"This wasn't what I signed up for."

"Yes, it is," she said. "You volunteered. *We* volunteered."

"I—I can't."

Her voice reappeared in my head. *Here. Let me help you get into a proper frame of mind.*

And then images appeared in my mind—images of the dead children lying bloodied at my feet, with me grinning like a maniac ...

I dropped Samantha as if she had turned red-hot. "What are you putting in my mind?"

"Johnny, quiet! The enemy will hear you."

"I don't care! Stop putting things into my mind."

She chuckled. "I can't put anything into your mind that wasn't already there."

I recoiled. "*That* image was never in my mind. That came from *you*."

"But where did *I* come from?" she asked. "Remember that I'm a reflection of you. A perfect reflection. Everything inside me comes from you." She paused. "I have those dreams too, but I enjoy them. I can help you to enjoy them as well."

I shook my head. "No! I refuse to accept that."

"It's true, Johnny," she said. "I wouldn't be the perfect weapon I am if it weren't for you."

And I knew she was right. The army hadn't just turned me into a killer; they had found something within me already, something that Samantha had nurtured until

it grew, and turned me into the monster I had become.

But no more.

I turned the SM-rifle off and walked away from the mission. When I got back, I handed the weapon to my CO and said that I didn't want to see it anymore. And that's why I'm here now, although I don't know why you needed me to dictate this whole story yet another time. I don't care if you plan to court-martial me for insubordination or lock me away without trial.

I'm not the same as that thing. I won't kill again. It can't make me.

* * * *

The recording had come to an end. The scientist removed the helmet and found himself back in the general's office. The general was leaning back in his chair, his arms crossed, his chin resting on his fist.

"It's not working, Doctor."

He blinked and cleared his throat. "I see what you mean."

"It's not just that one soldier." The general handed an electronic pad over. "Take a look at these records. Almost twenty-five percent of the soldiers given SM-rifles either go AWOL, turn objector, or kill themselves."

The scientist took the pad and glanced at the report. "That last one is regrettable."

The general sighed. "They're *all* regrettable."

"Right. Sorry."

"The SM-rifles were supposed to help bring out the soldier in those boys. Instead it's doing the opposite."

The scientist thumbed the scroll button and read through the introduction to the report. When he finished, he looked up. "Twenty-five percent, general. But what about the other seventy-five percent?"

"The other seventy-five percent are doing just fine. I'll admit that the SM-rifles even allow for greater accuracy in combat for those soldiers. But that twenty-five percent—those are almost all the soldiers who report 'bonding' with their weapons, which is what we were hoping for. But in every single case—well, I've already told you."

“Still,” the scientist said, “that seventy-five percent that are doing fine—”

“Compared with the ninety-five percent success rate we had in turning boys into soldiers before the SM-rifles ...”

“I understand.” The scientist stood up. “Let me go discuss this with my colleagues. We’ll see if we can figure out what the problem is.”

The scientist left the general’s office, and returned to the weapons development laboratory, where his assistant director was waiting for him.

“Well?” she asked once he had shut the door behind him.

The scientist took a seat and smiled. “It’s working. As soon as the soldiers discover the hidden aggression in their R-complex, they reject it.” He handed over the pad, and she studied it briefly.

Finally, she looked up. “Not all of them, though.”

“No, not all. But enough.”

“Enough so that we’ve been noticed.”

He nodded. “Well, yeah. There was no way to avoid that.”

“Then we can’t keep this up forever.”

“We don’t have to. We just need to keep it up until the government gives up on this useless war. In the meantime, let’s get back to work.”

He stood up to return to his office, but the assistant director held up her hand. “I can’t help but wonder if we’re doing the right thing. What if the day comes when the tables are turned, and we’re the ones being invaded?”

He smiled. “We’ve already got plenty of foreign contracts for the SM-rifles. If they do the same job overseas that they’ve been doing for us I don’t think it’ll be a problem.”

“I hope you’re right.”