

If you are reading this you are more clever than most people who skim over this site. I hope you value the observant, the curious, those who look deeper and read between the lines. I think you do, you must, you're here. If you do, we should talk. In the meantime, here is the first work in progress chapter of that science-fiction fantasy I mentioned. Would you do me a huge favor and give me some honest feedback on it?

Chapter I: Syera

By the time the horns pierced the dawn calling the regiment to rise, Syera had already been awake for over an hour. She had laid in bed, wide awake, staring at the bunk above her, trying not wake the others. No reason to share her insomnia if she could help it. Was she nervous? No. She felt relaxed, she had been training for this her entire life. What was it then? Excitement? That wasn't it either, but it was an easier lie to tell herself than nerves, so she went with it and thanked the stars for the horns so she could get up.

She jumped out of the bunk, earning her a half grunt half curse from Keera. It was too early to don her dress plates, so she went with fatigues and flew down to the staging grounds, landing with a thunk and dropping into parade rest. She got to position before the banner was even raised. As the Tri-Star was raised the regiment filled in the yard. In the rear, the largest section, the conscripts. Humans, lesser luyten, elpoep, but not any segam, even a few amphid, among a dozen or more other species. Immediately behind her stood the Draug, their armor shifting in color in the dawn light. Before her, floating in the air, circling the flag, backs to it, ready to defend it, were the Will, the best of the best, the elite of the Draug, their armor gleaming, their capes fluttering like dark mirrors of the flag itself. Immediately around her were her fellow Will candidates. Today was her last day on the ground. Tomorrow she would be in the air for roll call. Tomorrow she wouldn't look up to the flag, she would look out for it. Tomorrow she would be one of the Will of the Emperor.

The horns stopped. The regiment, all five thousand beings stood, or floated in the case of the Will, at parade rest in complete silence. Three minutes of silence. One minute for each of the Three Stars that lit the worlds. The only sound was the wind creaking its way through the trees. The three minutes ended with a single, long, lonely horn blast. The sound grabbed five thousand bodies and snapped them to attention. The other two horns joined in and the long note turned into the Imperial Anthem. Five thousand voices picked up the cadence. "...and may the Emperor reign as long as the Triplets burn bright" the voices finished and the yard fell silent again.

"Reg-i-ment, pre-sent!" roared Commander Wylas, making each syllable its own sentence, his voice booming down on them from where he floated in the circle of the Will, naturally louder than a human could manage with an amplifier. The five thousand right limbs found themselves in five thousand salutes.

"Reg-i-ment, dis-missed!" and the dawn ritual was over. Most began to make their way towards the mess tents. Syera would have joined them if Wylas, who was gliding down to the ground, didn't call her out as loudly as if he was still directing the whole force "Xoi!"

She turned back towards him and went back to attention all in a fraction of a second.

"Commander, sir!" her voice was no match for his in terms of volume.

"My tent, immediately," it was his normal voice. Syera supposed he figured everyone was already watching, if the point was to embarrass her, mission already accomplished.

"Yes, sir."

Wylas flew off, getting to his tent on the other side of the camp in a matter of seconds. Syera considered following him, leaping into the air, feeling the weightlessness, the power. She didn't and instead walked across the camp like a commoner, letting the lesser troops, her fellow candidates, and the few of the Will who were still there watch her.

She arrived at the tent after a few minutes and knocked on the door.

"Candidate Xoi reporting as ordered, sir."

“Come in.”

She stepped into the tent. It wasn't her first time being summoned here for a scolding, but she had hoped these days were behind her. The tent was no bigger than the one that she slept in, but since it was just an office without six bunks dominating it, the place felt comparatively massive. The desk was simple, pre-fab plastic, as were the chairs, standard issue, like the tent itself. Elsewhere the room had more personality. Wylas' books, many of them old and worn, some even with real paper pages, filled shelves that hid three of the walls. Some were comedies, some were tragedies, most were histories. Wylas Casoni was strong even for a Draug. In his day it was said he could slay a rockbeak with his bare hands. Even in his old age he could still hang with the best of them, Syera had seen that firsthand when he chose to personally light up some candidate who thought being gifted made them a god. But having godlike strength was par for the course for the Will. It was brains, not brawn, that had brought Wylas to the rank of Commander, and his eclectic library was an extension of that.

“Sit,” Wylas poured himself a drink. He did not offer her one and she knew better than to ask.

“Do you know why you are here?”

“Flying without authorization, sir.”

Wylas sighed. “If you already know, why do I keep having to tell you?”

“I forgot, sir.”

“Oh don't give me that. You're the best of the candidates, better, in the yard at least, than some of the Will and everyone knows it. Including you.”

“Thank you for thinking so, sir.”

“For thinking you're arrogant and insolent?”

“Yes sir.” Syera had learned in the past thirteen years of disciplinarians that the simplest thing was to just agree with everything.

“Today is the ceremony. Tomorrow you will be one of the Will. The Will do not fly where they want. They do not want. They do not think for themselves. They are nothing but the Will of the Emperor. They do what the Emperor wants. They fly where the Emperor wants. If the Emperor wants you to fly straight into the Blue Star and turn yourself to vapor, you will do so with pleasure because you are the Will. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir.”

“So in other words, I better not ever have to talk to you about this after the ceremony. The Will is not rogue. The Will follows orders. The Will are the orders.”

“Yes sir.”

Wylas swallowed the rest of his drink. “Dismissed.”

She returned to her tent. Keera was not there, probably getting breakfast. Syera wasn't hungry. She was annoyed. It was a stupid rule, forbidding flying around the camp. She could fly. It was part of her, as easy as walking. She just had to jump up and she was off. Forbidding that was like forbidding a normal person from walking. Wylas was right though, that the Will didn't choose anything for themselves. They were extensions of the Emperor. She'd never met the Emperor. Never seen him in person. Did she want to submit to him? Forfeit her freedom to fly where she wanted, to eat when she wanted, to serve a master she'd probably never see? Syera shook the thoughts from her head. She was born to serve her Emperor. A Draug born to normal luyten parents was extraordinarily rare, a gift from the Triplets. Her parents had offered her to their Emperor as thanks for her gifts as soon as she could walk. As soon as she could fly. The Draug were the elite, any Draug born to lesser luyten, by the grace of being born Draug, were raised to nobility. Syera's children would be Draug, their father, whoever he was, would be a Draug. Her grandchildren would be of House Xoi, her great-grandchildren would be born in a castle. That was why she had been given to the Emperor. That was why she would be one of the Will.

She needed to clear her mind. To relax. The best place to that was the training dome. The candidates trained in all kinds of environments. The woods around camp, the plains, underwater, in

space. But most training happened in the dome. It was a huge empty dome, not unlike the stadiums that hosted sports events, concerts, and executions all over the Empire. Unlike those stadiums, there were no bleachers, tunnels, locker rooms, or other facilities inside the training dome. It was a vast empty space. In any environment, the terrain, the weather, countless other factors could give one fighter an advantage over another. In the dome, there was nowhere to hide. No wind, no rain, no uneven terrain. There was nothing but your opponent. The best would win.

Syera entered the dome alone. It was mostly dark, only the security lights were on and the sun wasn't nearly high enough to light the interior yet. She didn't need light to see. Since she had no sparring partner, she was just going to do some laps, some solo moves, just to break a sweat. But as soon as she was out on the dome floor she saw that she was not alone.

Fitz was a human who had risen high enough to give orders to Draug, not the other way around. He had been the only human instructor ever since she arrived on the base as a toddler. Other humans, lesser humans, came and went. Fitz remained. In the 13 years she'd known him, Syera swore he hadn't aged a day. Tall, for a human, wiry limbs with muscles like steel cables, a bushy beard that was certainly not permitted by regulation but nobody ever seemed to be brave enough to tell him to shave. He was wearing his exoskeleton, save for his helmet, which he held in his hands. A massive, cumbersome suit of pneumatic hinges, steel bars, hoses, lights, boxes. The only way a human could hope to match a Draug at strength and even then the suit severely restricted movement and couldn't fly. And the human inside it still didn't have the speed, reflexes, or senses of a Draug. A normal human in an exoskeleton would last a few seconds longer in a fight with a Draug than a human with no suit. Fitz had beaten members of the Will in his, in the dome. In actual battle, he had slain Draug who forgot that they answered to the Emperor.

"Candidate Xoi," Fitz called as she walked across the empty field towards him.

"Instructor Fitz, sir! What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question, candidate."

"I just wanted to stretch a little."

"In the air, where the Commander can't see?"

Syera felt herself scowl and then redden when the human laughed at her.

"I'm always in here on the day of the Ascension to the Will," he said. "Never really set well with me, me not being able to be one of the Will."

"But you're human, how could you be one of the Will?"

"Just like a Draug, to think that the physical is the only trait that matters."

Syera wasn't sure what policy would have her say. On the one hand, a human being one of the Will was sacrilege at best, heresy at worst. On the other hand, he was technically her superior.

"I don't come here to mope on Ascension Day. I come here to remind myself that the Will is a title and that it doesn't make anyone a better fighter than me. The Emperor thanks the Triplets that I fight for him."

"How dare you say such things--"

"How dare you address a superior officer!" Fitz smiled. "Enough." He donned his helmet, looking patently ridiculous with his scrawny arms and legs visible under the straps and pistons and the bottom of his beard sticking out from under the helmet. "Why don't we do little stretching together, candidate?"

Syera had expected it to come to this. It was common knowledge that Fitz was always ready to spar. She started to circle him. He spun on his back foot, keeping her in front of him, his hydraulics whirring at the effort. Suddenly she feigned left, spun, and came in from the right. She moved fast compared to what they'd been doing before, but slow for her, and he knew it. Fitz caught her punch in his hand, spinning so as to pin her arm behind her. In the same movement, he brought his free arm into a choke-hold, the cold steel of his armor pressed against her throat.

“Don’t you dare go easy on me, girl,” Fitz hissed into her ear. He let her go. Syera went to spin back towards him, but he kicked her in the back of the knee and sent her to the ground. Before she could stand he kicked her between the shoulder blades, sending her face into the rubber substrate. She was on her feet in an instant with a little help from her flight, bringing a swinging kick onto him. Fitz was tossed to the ground himself. She went to kick him while he was down, but the human grabbed her foot and dragged her down with him. They rolled on the ground for a moment, his armor whirring and wheezing and getting rubber pellets caught in it.

She stood, she flew, she picked him up, lifted him high into the air, and dropped him. Fitz landed as perfectly as if he had jumped. Syera remained where she was, high above him. She flew to the far side of the dome and began circling from afar, the ground a blur beneath her.

“A coward fights from a distance. The Will fights up close!” He shouted at her, drawing his sword. It was just a training sword, no blade on it, but she didn’t like it and closed in seconds, using herself as a missile to knock it from his hands. She looped back around to grab the sword off the ground, but he shot a grapple at her and pulled her from the air into the ground, sending rubber bits flying. They were both on the sword, twisting, rolling. He had her now, she was tangled in the grapple. She couldn’t fly away and he wouldn’t let her have the space to use her speed. He had the sword now.

“Yield!” Fitz shouted as he stood over her, sword pointed.

“The Will yields to no one.” She kicked up and took off. He pulled the rope taut, but she had the loop mapped out. This piece over her shoulder, step through that one, there! She was free and flew off to the top of the dome.

“Are we going to spar or are you going to keep flying away like a frightened bat?” Syera came back and kicked the sword out of his hand. This time she didn’t go for the blade but instead kicked him away from it and ran—didn’t fly—at him.

“That’s more like it,” Fitz cried and the dance continued. She was faster and stronger, but he wasn’t as careless with his strikes. Back and forth they went, she’d swing and miss, he’d land a hit that did nothing, she’d swing and he’d roll back faster than she would have thought he could. Suddenly Fitz came alive with a new fervor and sent her backing towards a wall. Swipe, kick, punch, jab, swing. He didn’t let her get her balance, she kept backing up, backing up. Realizing she was running out of horizontal space, she took to the air again, retreating vertically. Fitz grappled her again, this time wrapping the cord around her torso and cinching it tight before she could figure out how to untangle from it. He dragged her down till he had her held over his head, then he threw her clear across the dome. Syera stood, her arms still tied to her sides, and took a deep breath. She was livid. The human said she couldn’t fly, yet he kept using weapons beyond just his body. She exhaled at him.

She hadn’t really meant to spit fire at him but sometimes when she was angry she forgot to control it. Her breath became a fireball as it left her throat, a wind of flame that engulfed Fitz.

“CANDIDATE XO!” there was no mistaking Commander Wylas’ voice.

Syera rushed to help Fitz, tearing the rope off herself as she went. His armor was burning in a few places. He dropped and rolled. She patted the flames out. She helped him to his feet, he took his helmet off and laughed, his beard still smoking.

“CANDIDATE XO!” Wylas boomed again. Seeing that Fitz was unharmed save for his whiskers, Syera turned to face the Commander.

“Under no circumstances are you ever to use fire in a sparring match,” the Commander growled.

“Yes sir. It was--”

“SILENCE! If you weren’t who you are I’d kill you for insolence. I may kill you anyway for being stupid. Captain!”

“Yes, sir!” Fitz stood at attention, his armor scorched and beeping warning alarms.

“You of all people I expect to follow sparring protocol to the letter,” Wylas spat, “Never spar without a third person present for safety.”

“Yes, sir. We were just having a little tussle and it got out of hand. Won’t happen again.”

“No,” Wylas shook his head. “It won’t. Now both of you get dressed. The ceremony is soon enough.”

Wylas and Fitz left, heading towards the officers’ quarters. Syera just stood alone in the dome, dumbfounded. How could she have been so stupid as to use fire? It was the mistake of a child, not of one of the Will. She was glad Fitz was okay, as much as he annoyed her by being able to do what humans should not, he was one of the better instructors. But what had the Commander meant, if she wasn’t who she was? She wasn’t anybody. She was the daughter of farmers who paid rent to an amphid. She was about as much a nobody as a luyten could be.

That would have to wait. She went to the candidates’ showers, washed herself, pulled rubber pellets out of her hair. Back to the tent. Tunic, leather and bronze kilt, boots, breastplate, gauntlets, and her cape. She cleaned up pretty good, her dress plates gleaming. Syera went to her place in the staging area with the other candidates. It occurred to her that she hadn’t eaten all day and suddenly she was famished. But she couldn’t eat in dress plates and even if she could she wouldn’t have been able to leave her assigned position in the staging area.

They stood there for over an hour and soon on top of being hungry she had to pee. This was not how the day she became one of the Will was supposed to go. She had looked forward to this event for years and now she wanted it to be over. Keera stood next to her and wondered how Syera could almost kill an instructor and still be allowed to fly in the ceremony. Syera wondered that herself, but she said nothing and concentrated on the wall beside her.

Finally the horns started blowing. The ceremony was beginning. First came the procession in. The instructors, followed by the candidates. Thanks to her last name, Syera was one of the last in. She stood with the rest of them, in the back. The candidates didn’t get to sit. Wylas gave a speech that lasted far to long. Talked about the Triplets, the Emperor, the Will, other things. Syera didn’t really hear him. She was too busy not making it obvious that she was crossing her legs.

Finally came the Ascension. One by one the candidates flew up to where Wylas floated waiting for them. Each one hovered before him and recited the Way of the Will. Then he asked “Will you carry out the Will of the Emperor, from now until your death, may the Three Suns help you?” and the candidate replied “I will” and moved to float behind him. So on and so on until finally Syera took the air, felt weightless again, and flew up to the Commander.

“I am the Will of the Emperor. His will is me. What he commands I do. What he wills I do. The Will will serve. This is the Way of the Will,” Syera breathed, certain that she hadn’t screwed up the Way of the Will.

“Will you carry out the Will of the Emperor, from now until your death, may the Three Suns help you?” Wylas asked.

“I will.”

“Then take your place as one of the Will.”

She ascended up to the growing ranks floating behind the Commander. Below her, the rest of the camp, the regular Draug, the luyten, the humans and the rest were all watching. She spied Fitz, smiling up at her as if they were the best of friends, his beard trimmed a little to make the length even with the parts that had been singed.

Finally the ceremony was over. She flew, didn’t walk, flew, from the staging area straight to a bathroom. This was it. Thirteen years. She was one of the Will. She just hoped she didn’t get herself in any more trouble.