

Allegiance

by Emily Miragliotta

A glimpse of blond hair.

It was the last thing Xeno saw of his daughter.

Everything had started pretty well though. Like every morning he got up, slightly late, and made himself a coffee, mechanically, without thinking too much about what he was doing. He heard his daughter rushing down the stairs, her school bag on her shoulder, and before he could say anything to her, she was leaving, exclaiming

“Have a good day dad, I’m late !”

A glimpse of blond hair.

And the door closed behind Lyanna forever.

He had gathered his things, before crossing the street to go to Buckingham Palace, where he worked. Like always he had tried to ignore the beggars, asking for coins. He had nothing to give them, but couldn't help but feel guilty everytime seeing how many of them they are, especially the children. As much as he wanted to help them, he knew even if he could, it would be pointless.

London was one of the most polluted cities in England, and you had to constantly travel around with an oxygen mask. These people were too poor to buy them, they would die of lung disease before the end of the year, their fate was already sealed.

He arrived at his work, and greeted Mark, his colleague.

"Well if it isnt our favorite army commander" Mark had smirked in return.

"What do we have today ?" Xeno asked, taking a seat.

"Oh a few strangers to the system spotted on camera." Mark replied, typing on his computer. "They are not registered in the database, probably illegal immigrants"

"If theyre already caught by cameras it wont be difficult to find them. I'll send a patrol to get rid of them quickly" Xeno replied. "What else ?"

"Like always, a new butch of families that arent in the standard"

Xeno had grimaced. Getting rid of foreigners in the country was no problem: England was overpopulated, and the borders had been closed for 25 years now. Every resident was registered in the database, and the city's numerous cameras were set up to track infiltrators. We generally got rid of them quite easily. it was impossible for them to stay on English soil.

But when it came to families., the rule was simple: no more than one child per couple. Hospitals were closed to ordinary people anyway, so most pregnancies never came to term. It was done on purpose.

Most people nevertheless managed to have a child, and some decided to have a second, thinking they could hide and get around the rules. It was always the same story, and Xeno was forced to send patrols to take care of the execution of the children. It was the part of his job that repelled him more than anything. All this because of the selfishness of the parents...it's not as if protections and an infertility serum had been developed..

Xeno had therefore spent the rest of his day deploying troops on the ground to take care of these two major problems. It was only in the evening, when he returned home, that the evidence of death found him.

First a woman on the sidewalk opposite him screamed. Xeno initially thought she was being electrocuted for saying too many words. It was common: they all had a device implanted under their skin, called a "beep" which counted the number of words they spoke per day: in order to avoid the implementation of resistance actions by the population (It had already happened) they were prevented from pronouncing more than XX words per day. If this number was exceeded, the beeper would kill them by instantly electrocuting them. It was common to see people getting electrocuted in the street almost every day.

But Xeno quickly realized that it wasn't that: first because the woman had been shouting for too long, then because she had pointed to his steps.

Xeno turned his head. Slowly. very slowly, and when he finally understood why the woman was screaming, his blood ran cold :

His door was covered in blood spatters. The steps leading to the door too.

A bad feeling had invaded and he rushed in front of the door, ignoring the puddle of red and viscous blood in which he stepped, and tapped on the small tablet unlocking the door of his house unlocked mechanically with trembling fingers. There, his heart stopped a second time.

“148 lilyflowers street” had displayed the tablet. “recognized fingerprint: Xeno Survey, sole resident”

Sole resident.

Sole resident.

Sole resident.

The two words had echoed in his head, while his heart was racing. His blood was pounding in his temples, and it was as if the world around him was crumbling.

The tablet never affixed "sole resident" before, it was always his daughter's name next to his. Now Lyanna's name had disappeared from the device, and his door was covered in blood. The connection was not difficult to make.

Xeno's first reaction was not to break down, but to run to his workplace: cameras were installed absolutely everywhere in the streets, and at the entrance to every house. The blood stains on his door were not caused by electrocution, but by assault, and Xeno had to know who had done it: after all there was no body, his daughter was surely still alive, and he could find the attacker in no time with facial recognition from the government database.

He had arrived in the great hall of Buckingham Palace out of breath, his heart beating wildly, but as he was about to go up to his office, the Emperor had called out to him. The Emperor was the name of the man who had been in power in the country for 25 years now. The man Xeno worked for. It was rare to see him in person, so when the Emperor had signaled to him, Xeno had known that it had something to do with his daughter's attack.

"My daughter Lyanna.." Xeno had begun, as they entered an isolated office, protected by at least fifteen guards.

"I know"

The Emperor responded, his icy, hissing voice piercing Xeno's eardrums as he sat down on a shaky chair, white like everything else in the room, with lighting reminiscent of hospital rooms.

"You know who did it?" Xeno had exclaimed. "You know if she's okay? Where is she I need to know" he had added, his voice cracking.

"No she's dead" The emperor simply responded, unmoved. "I was the one who ordered her to be killed. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

the world around Xeno had stopped spinning. If he hadn't sat down, he probably would have fallen backwards and most likely vomited. The beating of his heart had echoed in his ears so loudly that he was unable to catch a word of what The Emperor was saying.

"Why.?" Was all he managed to ask, his voice raspy.

"My wife is pregnant with a second child" the Emperor responded very calmly, with a small smile on his lips, as if Xeno's distress amused him more than anything else.

"That's against the rules" Xeno had replied between gritted teeth. Still struggling to speak or even stay conscientious.

The Emperor kept looking at him with his little smile, not saying anything and Xeno understood alone: the rules didn't apply to the people who created them. the queen would have her second

child. But for that another innocent child had to be killed. So that the number remains constant. And Lyanna had been the easiest prey, right there within reach.

if he had been able to move and the emperor had not been protected by a whole group of guards, Xeno would have killed him

"Anything else to add ?" The Emperor asked, visibly starting to be annoyed.

"You said when I entered at your service that she would be protected" Xeno spat unable to look at him, clenching his fists in rage.

"Oh yeah I said that ?" The Emperor replied, shrugging. "Well that's the thing with people like you who mean everything they say. They think everyone else does too."

Xeno had stared at him without saying a word, hatred burning in his eyes.

"Now that there is nothing else to say.." The Emperor had declared as if it were a trivial matter. "All my condolences. You can leave"

Now here he was, sitting in one of the palace's many corridors, his head in his hands, completely devastated. He already cried, and he couldn't scream so there wasn't much left to do.

When his father, the precedent army officer, died, Xeno didn't intervene. His father had accidentally pronounced too much words, it was against the rule. His death, as terrible as it was, was deserved...at least that's what he thought back then. When his wife died, from a disease caused by the pollution, and that the hospital refused to take her on the pretext that she wasn't rich enough to afford the medication, Xeno tried to intervene, saying that he was doing a job that basically guaranteed the security of the nation, even if he wasn't rich, and that therefore his wife should be handled properly. Of course it has been pointless, they refused to take her anyway, and Xeno ended up thinking that it was normal too : after all, his wife wasn't important for the country, and the hospital couldn't take everyone in charge, otherwise they would be overbooked 24/24. But now that his daughter had been unfairly killed, Xeno started to question everything.

Despite his position, which guaranteed the security of the country, despite his numerous services rendered to the nation and to the emperor, despite the number of individuals representing a threat that he had eliminated over the years, the emperor had not hesitated for a single second to eliminate his daughter, if it could allow him to circumvent the rules that he had himself established.

And it was unfair, horrible and cruel.

Now Xeno had no one...well technically yes, but all the people that he loved and cared for had been killed by the government he was serving everyday.

Xeno couldn't help but think he looked like a fool. And that's probably how the Emperor considered him too. After all a man that keep obeying blindly to the orders of a government that took everything from him could be nothing but a fool, right ?

And he only realized now how stupid he had been all this time.

Angrily wiping the tears streaming down his cheeks with his sleeve, Xeno stood up, determined. He wasn't even sad anymore, just livid. At himself, for having remained blind all this time, and at the system, which he was going to take down at all costs. Lyanna's death wouldn't stay unpunished.

Xeno had a plan. Not a really good one, he was forced to admit, because it was based on pure assumptions, but a plan.

"Wait wait wait" Mark suddenly cutted him. "But how are you going to do that?"

They were in Xeno's house (one of the only houses that was not bugged by the government). Xeno had just told him of his plan to overthrow the system. Yes, he knew it was risky, and that the fewer people knew, the better, but Mark was his friend, and he couldn't just walk away and leave him alone without saying anything. Plus he trusted Mark and knew he wouldn't betray him, no matter how much their opinions differed.

"I don't really have a structured plan" Xeno admitted, sighing. "I just ..want to find the Resistance, for now, and advise later."

"So that's your plan?" Mark repeated, incredulous. "Find the Resistance and join them?"

Xeno nodded.

"Xeno it's been 25 years since the Emperor seized power" Mark sighed. "And 23 years since the Resistance had been created, yet we never found their QG. 23 years. We've been looking for 23 years where they can hide, and where they coordinate their actions, and you think you can find them with the snap of a finger?"

Xeno shrugged.

"Besides," Mark added, clearly not wanting to stop talking, despite his word limit. "They could be hundreds of miles from here, and you and I know very well that communication is down everywhere. So no means of transportation. It could take you years to find them, and until then, The Emperor's henchmen will have caught up with you. An army officer who abandons his post does not go unnoticed. It's suicide."

Suddenly Mark's bipper emitted a shrill noise: a warning. He only had 5 words left to end the day. It was predictable. He had talked too much.

Mark grimaced. But he was still looking at Xeno, visibly waiting for an answer.

"The transports won't be a problem" Xeno finally replied. He knew he couldn't take the risk to reveal too much, even if he trusted Mark: if the Emperor's henchmen went after him, and Mark knew too much, he could be tortured until he revealed Xeno's plans.

"But how are you going to find them anyway?" Mark asked cautiously. "It's impossible. Our best units, with our best agents using our best technologies have never been able to locate the Resistance"

"I know where they are" Xeno admitted, blurting the words out.

Mark's eyes widened as he shook his head. "No way. You're kidding. If you really knew where they were all this time, you would have said so. Should I remind you that finding resistance and eliminating them has always been one of your main missions as an officer?"

"Maybe they changed location over time" Xeno sighed. "So in fact im not sure of anything but I know where they were established at the beginning, and I really hope they didn't change because otherwise I really have no idea where they are"

"But- but how..?"

At this point Mark was looking at him in disbelief.

"I know their leader" Xeno replied.

"You know their- no, no stop it you cant know their leader !" Mark repliqued, running a hand through his hair, completly atonished and looking at Xeno like he was some sort of extraterrest. It was comprehensible : everyone here was after the Resistance since 2082, and Xeno randomly admitted he knew where they were all this time, when he was the one supposed to take them down.

"You dont know their leader" Mark continued, visibly trying to convince himself more than Xeno. "How would you know their leader hm ? How ?"

Xeno exhaled sharply, offering him a brief smile :

"Its my brother"

●●●

When the rebellion began, 23 years ago, the government had put in place extreme measures to avoid any communication, in order to avoid a coup d'état. These measures included, among other things, of course, the bipper, which limited the number of words that everyone could say, as well as the total ban on paper and pens (quite obvious, so that one could not write and send messages instead of speaking, any communication of important messages relating to the state was entrusted to trusted people, and was done by computer) but also the total ban of circulation outside the defined borders of the cities, whether it was by car or by train, except for a few people, who held important positions, and who could be required to travel outside the city.

Luckily, as an army officer, Xeno was one of these people.

The very essence of his plan consisted in his position : no one expected that he, Xeno Survey, loyal commander of the armies, could commit an act of rebellion and join the resistance. He therefore had a margin of maneuver of approximately 2 days before anyone suspected anything, because exits from the perimeter defined for authorized agents should not exceed 48 hours.

When their father was killed by the government, Warren, Xeno's big brother, who was supposed to succeed him as commander, refused. In fact, he had completely lost his temper and left town,

heading for Cambridge, where their family had a vacation home. When paper was still authorized, Xeno had received some letters from him sent from there, where he said that he was starting a resistance group. The letters stopped when Xeno was named commander of the Emperor's army. This was a few weeks before communications by paper mail became banned.

This is how he found himself, the next day, at 5 a.m., in front of the railway at Atonia station, previously known as Victoria Station.

Train departures were rare and took place directly on official orders, early in the morning. Unaccustomed to seeing people, two officers approached Xeno.

"Commander Xeno Survey" Xeno said in a flat voice before they could say anything, before showing them his wrist beeper so they could scan it.

When they realized that he was telling the truth, the officers saluted him solemnly.

"Where are you going?" asked one of them. "do you have a mission order?"

"Cambridge" Xeno replied, rolling up his sleeve. "No mission orders, the Emperor wants to keep all this confidential, that's why he sent me personally. Can I count on you misters?"

The two officers seemed to have a moment of hesitation, but after all, Xeno was higher ranking than them, and had been serving the Emperor for years. Why would he lie?

"Alright, follow me" the taller officer responded, guiding him to a train ready to depart.

"Train" was actually a big word. In truth, there had been no real train in circulation since 2082, and the trains in question were in fact small metallic-looking shuttles with armored doors, reserved exclusively for emergency travel.

The doors opened on the sides and Xeno sat inside. The decoration was very simple: two white benches that ran the length of the shuttle. And white walls too. No windows. The same hospital light as in the Buckingham offices, but this time more bluish, certainly for reasons of visual comfort, and a sterile smell.

Soon the shuttle started, without an announcement, towards Cambridge. It took about 1h15. Xeno smiled briefly: it had been almost too easy.

When the train finally stopped after an hour and 15 minutes of travel, Xeno opened his eyes slowly. He had spent most of the journey mourning the death of his daughter, before finally succumbing to fatigue.

The doors opened again and he got out of the train. The station was deserted, that was to be expected. The sound of his footsteps on the floor echoed throughout the building as he walked out. Now he had to find his brother. If he was still here of course. He hadn't heard from him for 20 years.

Their family's old vacation home was about an hour's walk from the station. Xeno took advantage of this time to think about what he was going to say. He and his brother didn't exactly have the best of relationships, and that went back before one was at the head of a revolutionary movement and the

other at the head of the army meant to enforce justice, or in other words, government dictatorship. In the end it might be better for him to improvise. Their reunion wasn't going to start well, anyway.

After an hour of walking, he arrived in front of the house. Surprisingly she hadn't changed. It was an old stone building, several stories high, away from the town.

Xeno hesitated. But before he could ring the bell, an arrow grazed his hand. It came from above. He looked up. A woman with a bow stood in the doorway, her gaze piercing. Xeno couldn't help but judge his methods (a serious bow?) but he raised his hands in surrender.

"There's a man outside!" the woman inside shouted, when suddenly another head appeared in the doorway...the brown hair, the blue eyes, the posture.. Xeno immediately recognized his brother.

"Oh you can leave this one to me" Warren replied to the woman, loud enough for Xeno to hear.

And within 5 second, Warren was outside, facing Xeno. Although he was 3 years older, Warren looked younger than Xeno. Maybe it was his long hair. Or the fact that he looked less tired.

"What are you doing here ?" Warren spat, pointing a dagger at him. "Its your dear Emperor who send you ? To spy on us ?"

"Well, hello, nice to see you aswell" Xeno replied, sarcastic.

"Im not pleased to see cowards" Warren replied, his tone sharp. "Answer me"

"Its not the Emperor who sent me" Xeno replied. "Actually, I escaped but it's still too early for them to realize it. I am here of my own free will."

Warren scoffed.

"And you expect me to believe that ? You, the loyal patriotic soldier, proud to serve the dictature, escaping ? To come here ? Come on you could have found a better lie"

"Im not lying" Xeno replied. "Warren please, you have to believe me"

"And why would I do that ?" Warren replied, raising an eyebrow, stepping closer. "You're so loyal to your sick system that even when they killed our father, you took his place to serve them" he spat, looking at Xeno up and down with disgust. "Why would make you change your mind now, when the death of your own father wasnt enough ?"

Xeno was going to respond, but he noticed Warren's right hand. The one holding the dagger. It wasnt his hand, it was..a metal prosthesis, that looked like a hand. Now that he was thinking about it, the woman with the arc earlier had the same thing. But he decided to not focus on that now :

"They killed my daughter" he finally said, the words catching in his throat.

Warren froze, understanding from Xeno's state that he was telling the truth. He put away his dagger.

"Im sorry" Warren said. "Knowing them Im sure ..it was an awful death. May this angel rest in peace where she is"

Xeno smiled briefly.

"But that dont mean I trust you" Warren warned. "What do you want ?"

"To join you." Xeno replied firmly. "Like I should have down years ago. To take the Emperor and his system down"

Warren jaudged him cautiously.

"I dont know what else to say" Xeno admitted. "I dont even know how im supposed to act now that I left London. I did all the way here almost robotically, without thinking, and now that I should think about what to do or say, im lost. I dont know who I am when im not the Commander Xeno Survey. I dont know who I am anymore"

And it was true. He had absolutely no idea how to act when he didnt do what was excepted of him. Giving orders was easy. Receiving orders too. He was used to it. But behaving normally ?

"I understand" Warren replied, finally letting his guard down. "It took me many years of vomitting up all the filth I'd been taught about myself, and half believed before I was able to walk on this earth as though I had a right to be here. To exist..as myself. Just me. You will get there too. Coming here was the most difficult step"

Xeno looked at him, relief washing over him. That meant Warren accepted him here ?

"When I left London a while ago and came here, I was alone" Warren continued. "I guess thats the price. To be free is often to be lonely. But years after years I found people like me, and you. People who wanted to make a change. That were tired"

"How many people are there here ?" Xeno asked curiously. "The Resistance is kind of quiet lately. The capital havent heard from you since months"

"Around 60" Warren replied, gesturing at the house. "We try to be forgotten for a while. You know when I started this movement, I thought about what dad often said : 'To avoid trouble, say nothing, do nothing, be nothing' and i decided to do exactly the opposite. Looking back I realize it was a mistake. We can only loose too much lives with this. So I decided to take a pause in the actions, to come back with a new plan. However, here waiting without doing nothing..there's no corpses, yet we rot"

Xeno nodded quietly, understanding the complexcity of the situation.

"If you want to stay here you'll have to cut your hand" Warren finally said. "the bipper is carried in the chair, you can't remove it, I tried. And you're putting us in danger by keeping it because they have access to your location."

"My..my hand ??" Xeno repeated in disbelief, his eyes widening in horror. Now he understood why everyone here was having a prosthesis. "No ! There must be another way I cant..I cant cut my hand like that. Im sorry, but there's no way"

"Grejer will make you one out of metal." Warren replied. "He's a specialist. Trust me it will be like before, but better"

Xeno shook his head. "I keep my hand"

Warren looked at him up and down. "Its too dangerous. Im sorry, but if you want to stay here, you cant. you can stay here for the night, as long as they're not looking for you. but tomorrow you will have to make a choice."

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. Xeno met the members of the group, who all welcomed him warmly (of course he neglected to mention that he was a leader of the armies on the run). The woman from earlier apologized for shooting him. Her name was Amanda and she was from Edinburgh. Grejer, the robotics specialist, was a small bald man with glasses, very friendly, who showed him everything you could do with a metal hand (among others things, cutting appelés without having to use a knife)

Yet in the evening in his bed, Xeno wondered if it was really a good idea. Okay, life as a rebel required sacrifices but he wasn't ready to have his hand removed, even if it could take away the pager and therefore the radar location and the word limit that was ruining his life.

But what would he do if he wanted to keep her? he would be forced to return to London, and he would have done it all for nothing.

After tossing and turning in his bed, unable to fall asleep, Xeno decided to go get some fresh air. It was almost midnight, but he went out onto the large open roof of the house to look at the stars, hoping to find a solution to his problem there. What was his surprise when he realized that he was not alone.

A woman was already there. Blonde, very pretty. The same age as him, or maybe a little younger..45 years old. She also had a prosthesis in place of her right hand.

"Xeno, thats it ?" She asked, her voice soft. "Dont worry if you're to tired to speak, you can sit next to me. I, too, am fluent in silence"

She smiled. It was a warming smile. Xeno sat next to her.

"Whats your name ?" He asked. "I know Warren presented me to everyone but I must admitt I forgot most people's name here"

"Im Allifair" the woman replied, handing him her left hand. "Nice to meet you. Warren told us for your daughter, im sorry"

Xeno shook her hand.

"Me aswell. Thank you, its Alright, she's probably better where she is"

There was a silence. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, but still a silence that needed to be filled. Xeno looked at his bipper. He had 4 words left. Allifair noticed this too and smiled sadly.

"Tell me about you" he finally said, clearing his throat, using his last words of the day. Allifair had no bipper anymore, she was free to speak as much as she wanted. And he wanted to know more about her.

Allifair nodded.

"I grew up in Exeter, in the north east" she began. "When the dictatorship started, it was the city where there was the most rebellion."

Xeno nodded. He knew that. He had to send patrols to Exetet regulary.

"To quell the resistance, they gave us a word limit much lower than normal. 20 words per day" Allifair continued. "Of course it solved a lot of problems, but it mostly made things worse. Everyday that we didn't speak felt like declaring war in a battle I didn't want to fight. I was a kid back then, so I found d I looked at everyone invented their lives, tried to guess their jobs and what was there family like. Later I wondered where they came from, and who they missed, and what they were sorry for."

She paused.

" Years later, when they finally raised our word limit to 100, despite the fact that I was almost an adult, I had forgotten how to communicate and hold a conversation. Analyzing every sentence and how wrong it might've sounded, convinced I was making others uncomfortable with my discomfort, and performing autopsies on conversation I had in the day, trying to find why it didnt sounded well with me like it did with others. Then I realized the problem wasnt me, and it never had been. It was the system. So I left. And I joined your brother, because I wanted to change things. I dont regret my decision. Im sure we're going to win this war. And when its finished I want to write a novel about silence. The things people dont say. I think its important"

She finished her sentence and lighted up a cigarette. Xeno had never hated the beep in his wrist as much as he did at this very moment. He would have liked to answer Allifair a multitude of things, so that she could answer him in turn, and talk to him again. If Grejer had shown up there, right now, and offered to replace his hand with a prosthetic, he wouldn't have hesitated for a single second.

The very next day, he had his hand cut off.

He was going to fight.

For Lyanna.

For his father. for his wife.

For all the people who should have survived.

And he won't stop until he succeeds.

