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Hawk Assisted Defections

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Security
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TOP SECRET

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Just
Surrender

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* 1 *

Fifteen year-old Levia Brena tugged at the neckline of her flight suit. The bullet proof vest she wore underneath was too big for her slight frame. She felt hot and itchy, and the top edge of it was rubbing the skin of her neck raw, but if the yellow sticky said she needed a bullet-proof vest then she wasn't going to argue over comfort. She wanted to be alive after Hawk got her out of the Agency, not shot to Nuthen and dead.

"OK, Levia, focus," said her flight tutor in a deeply condescending tone of voice. "I'm going to transfer control to you."

Fighting her urge to snarl at his tone, she glanced sideways at him and reached for her stick. He was an ass, but he was an ass who would graduate her to full pilot if she was polite for the next week. And then she'd get her own plane, or perhaps a Dragonfly quad-copter, instead of the ass-heavy small transport Arber she was learning in today.

"We have passengers today, so you need to keep all movements of the plane gentle and flowing. No room for mistakes. You have about thirty minutes to keep the plane on course and then you'll do your first unassisted landing. Now, what's the first thing y--"

A loud bang echoed through her bones and a howling gale followed the noise into the cockpit. Her tutor slumped forward, nudging the stick, and the nose of the airplane dropped.

Crying out, she reached to push him back against his seat. There was a lot of blood. She blinked at the mess, trying to process what might have happened but still not quite able to think.

She forced herself to look away from him. It was imperative that she fight against her terror or they'd all die. Swallowing back the panic, she gripped her joystick and started levelling out the plane.

When the altimeter stabilized at the textbook cruising altitude and the dials showed that the plane was horizontal again, she switched on the autopilot.

The gale continued to howl in from underneath her seat and she glanced down. Through a hole in the metal bigger than her head, Levia stared at the black desert sands below them.

"Hai di'chena!" she swore, clamping her eyes closed. She took a few very deep breaths to try and calm her racing thoughts, and swallowed. "Well, Levvy," her voice shook. "We got passengers who need you to pull it together. So let's get on with it."

She opened her eyes again and started the pre-landing checks she had memorized. The ritual of those checks would give her some sense of the damage to the aircraft systems, and it would help calm and focus her mind on the task at hand.

Just to her left, within an arm's distance, an ever-increasing puddle of blood crawled over her trainer's seat and down into the hole. The thought of it so close to her caused a jolt of panic to rise up in her chest.

Blinking back the fear, Levia reminded herself again that as the only other pilot on the flight she was responsible for keeping their passengers alive, and it didn't matter that she was probably too young for such a responsibility. It was what it was, and the truth was that she had to just deal with it or they would all die.

She sighed and tapped the fuel gauge, but instead of going up to three-quarters full again, the arrow dropped another point towards empty. It meant that whatever had happened must have clipped the fuel line.

She swore, using the delightfully awful Ronan swear words the house boy at the embassy had taught her when she and her father lived in Kamo. Looking out at the black sand desert around her, she searched for a landing strip or something that would do as one.

On the horizon stood a collection of buildings, and leading up to it on the starboard side of the plane was a clear line in the sand, which proved to be a road. It was gravel and probably not really wide enough to make a standard landing, but it would be better than trying to land on sand without skids.

She lifted the intercom to her mouth. ~“Hey, guys,” she said, trying to sound confident.

*** 2 ***

Briya Ree hated flying: she particularly loathed escorting the Desert Valley transport flight. Her orders required her to escort certain ten and eleven year old kinetic kids to the central desert dispatch hub, where they would be transferred to various “training” bases until they were eighteen.

The children were always excited because it was usually their first time flying and first time outside of the Tower building. But she knew that the journey represented the very last hours of their childhood. Once they arrived, they would be subjected to a life not unlike criminals in prison. Every single one would be beaten and yelled at in order to trigger and train their kinetic abilities.

Her jaw muscle tightened. The whole system of “training” these kids made her sick to her stomach.

A loud boom shimmered through the cabin like thunder, and the nose of the plane dipped steeply. Three kinetic kids, four Task Force Operatives and one Admin Coordinator cried out as their stomachs jumped into their throats.

The plane seemed to take an age before it levelled out but when they were flat and stable again, she discovered she'd closed her eyes. Briiya let out a relieved whimper and looked around.

In the seats either side of her, three very frightened little child faces stared back at her. Sensing their terror, she reached her arms out to reassure them.

"It's alright," she said, careful to keep her own emotions hidden in case they were empathes themselves. The children grabbed her hands tightly.

~"Hey, guys," said a very young sounding woman over the PA. ~"There's been a bit of trouble. Going to have to do an emergency landing. Don't panic, I got you sorted but it's gonna be bumpy as all Nuthen, so I'm sorry in advance."

Briiya looked up at the cockpit end of the space, where four Task Force Operatives stood at attention in their black combat fatigues.

"You four, strap in," she barked.

"But--" said one, likely their Team Leader.

"What's your designation, sir?"

"Shogun, ma'am."

"I know that procedure dictates you must be at attention during the flight. However, if we crash and you're still standing, you will be injured. I take responsibility for breaching procedure. Now strap yourselves in!"

He saluted. "Yes, ma'am!"

*** 3 ***

Asha watched from the facility roof as a little plane dropped down out of the sky. Despite the hole the Rebels had blown in the bottom of the cockpit, the plane didn't seem to be otherwise damaged.

The narrow gravel road came up to meet the plane's landing gear. It bumped a couple of times as if the pilot was a little afraid to commit, and then finally gripped the earth. Just as it slowed to a safe speed, a gust of wind seemed to grab one wingtip and spun it around sideways. The plane came to a complete stop with the body perpendicular to the road.

"Hrm," said Asha. "The co-pilot managed well."

Next to her, Nama grunted in agreement. "So, what next?"

She smirked. "Time to play tag."

“Right,” he said and lifted the radio to his lips. ~“Team One and Two, get into position.”

Below them in the concrete yard, two groups of about twenty rag-clothed Psi Rebels headed off in separate directions.

* 4 *

Levia sat in her pilot seat taking many quick, shallow breaths, while her hands were frozen in place around the joystick.

They were on the ground.

They had stopped and they hadn't smashed into anything.

She blinked repeatedly. She'd accidentally lifted one wing a touch and they spun around, but they were alright. She was alright. She blinked a few more times, and finally her thoughts were clear enough to move her body. Forcing her fingers to let go of the joystick, she unclipped the belts across her chest.

Next, she had to figure out how to get out of the cockpit. The hole in the floor was pretty much where she needed to stand to get out, and it was a touch too high off the ground for her to simply jump and use the hole as an escape hatch.

Someone knocked on the wall, there was a thunk as the cockpit door slid into the fuselage, and a woman with long red hair glanced first at their dead pilot and then at her. Very light green eyes absorbed Levia and she blinked at the older woman.

“Are you alright?” she said.

Levia shrugged. “Yeah, think so.”

“What happened?”

Her body decided at that precise moment to start trembling and she couldn't stop it. “I... I'm not sure. Big bang. Hole in the floor. Pilot's dead.”

The woman frowned. “How old are you child?”

“Fifteen, I'm fifteen. But don't worry, I'm a Spatial Talent so flying's natural for me... I... uh... I'm Levia Brena.” She pulled down her flight suit in an attempt to look more mature than she felt. “A4 Undergraduate Pilot.”

The woman smiled in a very kindly way, and some of Levia's nerves eased. She might be a boss of some sort but she wasn't a mean boss.

“Well, Levia, I am Briiya Ree, I'm Admin Coordinator for the Banshii Group.”

A frown developed in Levia's eyebrows. “But doesn't that mean you're the boss of the Banshii?”

Briiya chuckled. “Administrative superior, yes. Now, we have to walk everyone up to the facility on the hill to get help. Do you need a hand out of here?”

Levia found herself blushing. "Thank you, ma'am. I do."

* 5 *

Levia knew they were walking in a desert so of course it was hot, but she hated it anyway. She refused to think about taking off any layers of clothing because then she'd be embarrassed. And in case there were any telepaths in the group, she also thought to herself in the deepest darkest places behind her artificial mental shield, that if she took off a layer of clothing to ease the heat she'd also have to answer the fatal question of "why".

There was no non-Traitor answer to why a co-pilot was wearing a bulletproof vest on the same day her tutor got shot by a seemingly random high-caliber armor-piercing round that just happened to hit their plane. A question like that always ended with a bullet to the brain pan (squish).

She just had to keep focused, keep thinking thoughts that wouldn't get her killed, and put one foot in front of the other. If she did that she would get out of this alive. Levia wiped a line of sweat off her forehead. She sighed. It was still too hot.

They were about halfway between the plane and a big concrete building when Levia heard a shot and dropped to the ground.

There was a cry of pain and she saw one of the TFOs fall back, grabbing at his leg. "Ah! So'then nuth!" he growled.

Levia glanced around at the rolling sand hills on either side of them. There was no enemy in sight. No heads bobbing behind black dunes, or light reflecting off a 'scope. Behind her, the three children were huddled around Agent Briiya.

Levia remembered that she had a vest on, so she was more protected than those kids. She grunted, feeling angry at her own instinctive fear.

Half-crawling, half-scampering, Levia made her way to where Agent Briiya was standing. She wrapped her arms around the uncovered side of the group, so that between her and Briiya they managed to cover the three kids with their bigger, adult bodies.

One of the remaining TFOs barked some kind of order and the other two moved into position to guard her, Briiya and the children. The TFO giving the orders crouched near his injured team member and seemed to start first aid.

"Agent Briiya Ree!" someone called from above. "We've been sent by Hawk and we intend to take the children. Order the TFOs to surrender their weapons and no one else will be harmed!"

Levia stared at her superior over the heads of the children, hoping selfishly that Briiya would do as the Rebel woman asked.

Briiya stared back. Her light green eyes were wide for a few moments, but then she closed her mouth, swallowed and looked above them at the sand dunes.

“If you know who I am, you know I can’t do that.” Briiya’s voice was calm, almost cold. All of the softness in her from before was gone.

“Suit yourself,” replied the Rebel woman.

A cacophony of flicks and clicks surrounded them on all sides. Many people lifted from the sand dunes and Levia found herself staring down twenty-odd weapon barrels.

She whimpered and put her hands up in the air.

“You TFOs,” said the Rebel woman, who moved into sight above them. “Drop your weapons or you will be shot.”

The two TFOs guarding them glanced at their Team Leader, who sighed. “Do as they say.”

The Rebels wore a mishmash of patchwork clothing with layers of rags barely covering their scrawny bodies. They ranged in age as young as short teens to the willowy heights and white-haired figures of the post-retirement age.

A handful of Rebels stepped off the dunes onto the road to collect the guards’ auto assault rifles.

“Team One, take the kids to the extraction zone,” barked the Rebel who seemed to be the leader. She had dark hair and an icy shard in her cobalt eyes.

Gun barrels were lifted right into Levia’s face and she stepped back from the children. Staring at the nearness of gun barrels, Briiya didn’t move away but lifted her hands to shoulder height. Three Rebels grabbed the children’s hands and lead them away.

“Team Two, escort the prisoners inside!”

*** 6 ***

Even though the warehouse wasn’t much cooler than outside, Levia was relieved to finally be out of that sun. She sat on a warm concrete floor next to the Task Force Operatives.

Six Rebels stood around them in a circle, eyes attentive and gun barrels aimed at their prisoners. Levia wanted very much to declare from the top of her lungs that she had a yellow sticky and to stop pointing those guns at her, but her gut told her that caution was probably the better plan for the moment.

She didn’t know what they were going to do with them. The Rebels could have simply tied them up and run off with the kids, but they hadn’t done that. Instead they were holding prisoners and questioning them. She didn’t know what that meant, and figured that if she was going to survive she probably needed to wait and see what was happening.

The roof was at least two stories above her head and massive columns of plastic-wrapped boxes towered around them on all sides. It seemed as if they and the Rebels guarding them were in the only clear space of the building in amongst those massive storage boxes.

Footsteps brought her eyes back to ground level and Levia saw that Agent Briiya was being escorted back to the group. Either side of the older woman stood two tall, skinny men wielding the newly acquired auto rifles. Briiya looked pale and stared into the mid-distance.

Levia tried to get eye contact with the older woman but Briiya either didn't notice or didn't want to look at her.

One of her escorts indicated with a flicker of fingers that he wanted someone else to stand.

"Pilot girl, you're next."

Levia swallowed and got to her feet. She was led across the concrete floor to one corner where there was an office. The escorts did not follow her inside, merely closed the door behind her.

The room was very spartan with a simple dark-wood desk standing between her and the Rebel leader. The woman leaned on the desk and stared up at Levia, and this time there was no ice in that cobalt blue.

"Hello, Levia, I'm Asha. I take it you were the pilot that got the plane down?"

She nodded.

"You're wearing a BP vest?"

Levia unconsciously pulled at her neckline where the vest was rubbing. "Yes, ma'am."

Asha smirked. "Good, just keep your arms down," she pointed at her.

Levia looked down to discover that her flight suit shirt was ripped, revealing long slivers of metal embedded in the black of the bullet proof vest underneath.

"So'then!" she squeaked, pulling at the shredded cloth to try and hide it. Had the others seen it? Were they going to kill her for being a Traitor?

Asha's smile was gentle. "Stay with Agent Briiya, and you'll be just fine."

Levia frowned. "What do you mean?"

The door opened behind her and one of the escorts grabbed her arm, pulling her out of the office and away from any answer to her question.

Back where she'd been sitting, the uninjured TFOs faced outward in a protective half-circle around their injured fourth man, and Briiya sat a little away from them staring at her hands.

When Levia's escort let go of her elbow, she headed towards Briiya and sat down.

The last person to be called up was the injured TFO and Levia watched as Shogun crouched, and wrapped his arm under his friend's shoulder. When they both had a good grip of each other, they stood.

Shogun murmured something that she couldn't hear, but the other two TFOs shot to their feet, knocking over the nearest Rebels and grabbing their guns.

Those Rebels still with weapons stepped forward but, impossibly, their weapons were wrenched from their fingers by an invisible force, and flew into the air above their heads. Realizing they were in trouble, the disarmed jailers dove for cover.

Staring up at the flying weapons, Shogun barked. "You two get up! Follow the others!"

Levia instinctively understood that he was talking to her and Briiya, and got to her feet.

* 7 *

"Just surrender," it said.

Briiya held the yellow sticky so tightly that she wouldn't have been surprised to find her long fingernails had drawn blood when she opened her fist.

There were gunshots around them and activity as the Rebels tried to re-acquire their prisoners and the TFOs tried to evade them. Briiya ran when they said to run and found cover when she was told, but her reality bent around that sticky note in her hand.

Hawk had sent his second in command to give her that sticky, and to offer her a chance to escape the Agency.

"Get inside!" barked Shogun.

She stepped into a little box room. It might have been another office, but considering how small it was, it might have also once been a cupboard.

The young woman who had landed the plane followed her inside, and one of the TFOs dropped their injured Team member on the floor beside them. The man was starting to look gray in the face and his lips were almost white. He needed some attention, and she needed a different focus. Briiya scrunched up the yellow sticky and put it into her jacket pocket.

She leaned over the wounded man and tightened the tourniquet below his knee. The bullet wound through his calf had looked relatively tidy. It was obvious that whoever pulled the trigger hadn't wanted to kill him. The man's temporary bandaging was almost entirely soaked through with blood and she wished she had some kind of first aid kit to re-dress his wounds.

She looked into his face and gave him a kindly smile. "You'll be fine," she said. "Just try and stay conscious."

The man's dark eyes were not able to focus on her, but he nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Hawk had promised if she defected that he'd do his best to get her children out. But she had to convince the others to stay as well, and she had to do it soon.

"Clear!" yelled Shogun as he stepped in through the door. "We gotta run again, ma'am."

He had very dark eyes, but somehow the darkness was incredibly kind. She could sense his absolute loyalty to his Team and to her as the ranking Agent. But she couldn't sense if he would be just as happy to be free of the Agency. But, if she asked him directly and he was loyal to the Agency, he was legally required to execute her, higher rank or not.

"I'm worried for your man, Shogun," she said carefully.

"He'll be fine, we just need to get clear of the combat zone. Please, ma'am, we have to move."

He leaned down and putting an arm under his friend's shoulder, lifted him to his feet.

Briiya nodded once and strode back out through the door. Her mind dropped back to the yellow sticky in her pocket.

Did she want out? Compared to other Agents, she had it pretty good. She also had three children and an ex-husband who she'd have to leave behind if she escaped.

The TFO in front of her jogged around a huge box of something covered in plastic cling-wrap and she increased her pace to keep up with him.

Her jaw tightened. She knew that if anyone could get her children out, or at least give them the opportunity to choose for themselves, Hawk could. And her ex could jump out of the window of his twentieth floor office for all she cared.

An automatic weapon fired somewhere behind them and a shaft of fear shot through her body. She covered her ears with her hands and kept running. The TFO in front stopped, turned around, and motioned with one hand for her to get behind another large storage box. She moved past him back under cover and put her back to the plastic.

She thought they might be closer to the exit now, because she could see a broad swathe of sunlight at a distance to them. She'd have to make the decision soon. Her mouth tightened and she absently put her thumb to her lips.

"What am I frightened of exactly?" she thought. "Well, for one thing, I might be shot for suggesting it. Another problem is my family has been in the Agency for four generations. I don't know any other life."

Shogun was carrying his friend over one shoulder. Unable to hold up his own weight, the injured man seemed close to unconsciousness. She moved out of the way as Shogun gently placed his friend against the storage container.

Levia moved in behind her, and the two remaining TFOs stood with hands on their stolen weapons, facing out.

She lifted her thumb from her lips and the question tumbled out. “Did the Rebel leader offer all of you an escape?”

Shogun turned to look at her, his face was somber but calm. “Yes, ma’am.”

The three standing TFO’s each pulled out a small yellow scrap of paper from their vests and showed it to her. The girl just nodded and yanked at her neckline like she was expecting to be shot any minute.

Briya’s bottom lip lifted, and she took her sticky out of its pocket. “Do you want to take the offer?”

“Ma’am--” started Shogun.

“No, don’t tell me what you think I want to hear, tell me the truth. I promise that no matter what happens here, it will not get you executed.”

Shogun stared at her for several breaths. There were no gunshots in the warehouse around them or sounds of motion. It was as if the Rebels knew what they were discussing and waited for their decision.

“I don’t want to be an Agent.” The girl’s voice was tiny and afraid, and Briya smiled at her desperate honesty.

Shogun glanced at his Team and then back at her. “Neither do we, but we’ll stand by you, ma’am. That’s our job.”

Briya bit her lip. She had to make the decision now. Choose to either to try and escape, or surrender and become Rebels.

“*And be free,*” she thought.

Now that it was an option, she realized how very much she wanted it. Even if she didn’t know what it might mean to be free, she didn’t want to be an Agent either. She didn’t want to live in constant fear because of her position and the dangerous groups in the Agency who worked against the Banshii. She wanted out, and if Hawk could give her children a chance of escaping then she had no reason to stay.

“Ok.” Her voice was breathy in her fear. “Let’s surrender.”