

Falling Out of Erebus

By
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Marie knew that she was going to die.

The fact didn't bother her; quite the contrary. Although she had not sought death—such a thing was disrespectful to *Gran Met*, to her thinking—it would not be unwelcome, either. Life had little meaning for her since Adrien and Réunion had passed into the Baron Samedi's keeping. Following them would almost come as a welcome relief, an end to five years of relentless grief.

So long as the Baron does not dig my grave before I send at least some of the Furies to hell, then I will be content.

Her fellow pilots didn't seem to agree, however; she could hear the nervous murmur in their voices while they awaited the captain. Their words echoed off the cold metal walls of the small room, which normally served as the ship's mess. But on the *Siren's Kiss*, there were very few rooms that didn't do double duty. The *Siren* was a warship, not a cruise liner, and every cubic meter that didn't go to some other purpose was another one that could be packed with ordinance, fighters, or shielding.

After five years of war, the ship was starting to show the hard use it had been put to. Rust flecked the gray-green walls, and countless boots had scuffed the decking. The smell of sweat and oil was omnipresent despite the best that the filters could do. Compared to the sleek, spotless ships of the Protectorate, the *Siren* looked like a joke.

But if she was a joke, then the Protectorate would find the punch line bitter indeed.

Captain Arnaud Léon finally entered the room, a harried expression on his face. His waist-length dreads had been pulled back in a ponytail that swung wildly from side to side as he walked. When he reached the front of the room, he turned and surveyed the pilots, all of whom had snapped to attention.

"At ease."

They relaxed only slightly, every eye fixed on his face. Léon surveyed them in silence for a moment, as if taking their measure.

“I don’t have to tell you how bad the odds are,” he said without preamble. “Everyone has seen the aftereffects of the Furies’ strikes. They don’t know pain, or fear, or doubt, and that gives them an edge. But they also don’t know honor, or courage, or friendship—and those are the very things that make us strong.

“The Furies may be fast and heavily armed, but we outnumber them ten to one. The entire Allied armada is in this together. Liberte and Boukman’s Children do not stand alone today—we stand with all of civilized humanity.”

Léon kept talking, but Marie tuned him out after that. Nothing he said was of any importance to her. His pretty words about how the other colonies had fallen in behind Boukman’s Children didn’t change the fact that no one had been there to help when the Protectorate had first come calling.

When he finished his inspirational speech, Léon left, probably on his way to a sleepless night spent conferring with the other captains. Most of the pilots departed on his heels, determined to get some sleep before combat tomorrow. Marie started after them, then slowed when she noticed that a lone man had remained behind.

Jean-Jacques was the youngest pilot aboard the *Siren*. He was a beautiful boy, despite the fact that he kept his hair shaved close to the scalp to better fit into his helmet. Tonight, however, there was fear in his dark eyes, and his hands trembled as he pulled out a rosary.

“You’ve seen a lot of combat, haven’t you, Marie?” he asked eagerly when he saw her. His brown fingers slid over the rosary beads, threading them back and forth, back and forth. “You flew patrol even before the war, right?”

She nodded guardedly, hoping that he wouldn’t ask her what station she had been assigned to. Racine Point had been the first to fall to the Protectorate—the first to feel the wrath of the Furies.

But Jean-Jacques didn’t seem interested in her history. “I don’t understand why we’re doing this,” he said desperately. “Why are we making a stand here, above this darkworld? So what if it is Earth? No one from the colonies has had a damn thing to do with the origin world for a hundred years, if not more.”

Marie shrugged. It didn’t matter to her where they made their stand, so

long as they did it. “Perhaps it was the only location we could all agree on. If it’s true what they say, that we all did originate here, then every colony has a stake in this place no matter our differences otherwise. Whether that’s true or not, this is a darkworld, as you say. They have lost any technology that could possibly have defended them against the Protectorate. Who will save them if we do not?”

Jean-Jacques shook his head miserably. “I don’t want to die for some barbarians on a darkworld, Marie.” “It is not your own death you should fear, Jean-Jacques,” she said. And left him with that.

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Marie lay on her bunk, counting down the hours until combat. She had not faced the Furies in five years, and she longed to give wings to the slow minutes that separated her from the moment when she would stand before them again. Most likely many of her compatriots were wishing for time to slow rather than speed...but perhaps they had something to live for.

Five years. It felt like no time at all. It felt like a millennium.

She had been flying a routine patrol, keeping an eye out on the lanes near Racine Point. Her unit had been looking for pirates, for freighters in trouble, for all of the everyday things station authorities paid them to guard against.

And then a hole had opened in space, right above her, so close she had made visual contact. A handful of sleek fighters glided out, so black they swallowed even starlight, so shielded that her scanners never made a single beep to indicate they were there. The fighters had shot past, headed straight for the station, and Marie and the other pilots had tried to send out an alarm...but there had been no time.

Heavy fighters had come out after the first batch, and these turned their attack instantly on the patrol, no doubt having been forewarned by the incredibly fast ships that had preceded them. It had been a slaughter. Outnumbered and vastly outgunned, the surviving patrol ships turned and ran for the station, signaling all the way, hoping to raise the alarm before the first batch of fighters closed.

But the fighters—Shard class, they had later been dubbed—had jammed the patrol’s first cries for help, and had outrun their second warning. Even as Marie nursed every ounce of speed from her battered craft, the station’s own alarms had raced out to meet her. Helpless to act, she’d had to listen to the desperate pleas and reports pouring out of Racine. Part of the station had been blown—there hadn’t even been a demand to surrender

first. The Furies simply swept in and demonstrated their power, their ruthlessness, so that there would be no questions. No time for their enemies to muster a defense under the cover of negotiation.

It was only when she came within scanner range of the station that Marie realized the choice of which section to expose to vacuum hadn't been random. The Furies had gone out of their way to make perfectly clear the means they were willing to use to achieve their end.

The section they had blown had contained the school. The cloud of debris streaming out of the gaping hole in the station's skin was mostly comprised of the frozen bodies of children. There had been no survivors.

She had screamed and begged, had invoked every Iwa who might help her. *Please don't let Adrien and Réunion be dead. Don't dig their graves yet, Baron.* Perhaps there had been some miracle, some incredible circumstance by which her children had been spared....

But of course there had been no such thing.

She was picked up twelve hours later by one of the carriers sent from Liberte, the homeworld of Boukman's Children, site of their original Colony. Just another pilot lucky enough to escape the first salvo of the Protectorate's war. Once medical had cleared her, she was shuffled into the ranks of Liberte's hasty defense, sent here and there, always longing for a second chance to face the Furies, always praying for another glimpse of the sleek Shard fighters falling out of hyperspace. But always she had been denied.

Until now. Until this stand of the Allied Worlds in the space above a backwater, a darkworld lost to the vagaries of history, but which might be the place where all humanity had originated. Certainly that would explain the Protectorate's interest in this planet, when there was no other reason for it that she could see. If they wanted to cleanse all of space of lesser humans, surely they would think it shameful to allow the origin world to remain infested.

Someone in one of the other bunks was crying, and Marie wondered idly if it was Jean-Jacques. If so, she could not find it in her heart to pity him.

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Marie's helmet was filled with screams. Static crackled through the nexus as pilots dropped out, either through death or equipment failure. A dozen conversations went on at once, overlaid with a map of the battle, the bright blue dots that marked the Allied armada growing fewer and fewer. Marie tuned them out, focused only on the red points of light that wove a dance of death around her fellows. The taste of metal was in her mouth,

and the smell of sweat filled her facemask.

A Shard fighter appeared beneath her, briefly silhouetted against the dayside of the planet below, black shadow against blue seas and dust-colored continents. She fell on it, guns blazing even as the Shard tried to evade another fusillade. Surrounded on all sides by enemies, there was nowhere for it to go, and Marie watched as the slender fighter came apart. Fire bloomed in the atmosphere below as the Shard's remains slid down the gravity well.

Yes. Elation filled her, and she could hear herself laughing wildly even as the report went out over the nex. *Die, bitch. I hope you screamed all the way down.*

Drunk on revenge, she wove her fighter through the battle, everything coming together perfectly. Each shot found its mark, as if she could not miss. Marie could hear the others cheering over the nex; some fool even sent images of victory her way, but she trashed them without bothering to look. There could be no distractions from her mission; she would not allow it.

The Furies took down five fighters for every one of their own that they lost, but not even they could overcome the odds set against them. Flame streaked the atmosphere below, while blackened husks assumed a higher orbit. It was beautiful. * * *

The level of celebration aboard the *Siren's Kiss* reached a pitch Marie had never witnessed before. People were dancing and singing, pouring offerings of thanks to whatever Iwa they felt had protected them. Tomorrow the dead would be mourned, but tonight the survivors could grasp only that they had pulled off an impossible victory.

Even through the barracks walls, Marie could hear the sounds of jubilation. She lay on her back, trying not to look at the bunks that would not be filled tonight even after the celebration died down. Jean-Jacques, who had so wanted to live, had met his end tumbling out of control into the atmosphere below. She, who had secretly longed for death, remained.

The door to the barracks opened with a squeal of gears. In the dim light, she made out Captain Léon's dreadlocked shadow. Despite the permission he had given his crew to celebrate, the captain himself was still in uniform.

"Someone told me you hadn't joined the party," he said without preamble.

Marie shrugged. "I don't feel like it."

“We had a great victory today. Tomorrow we’ll grieve for those we lost, but—”

“I thought I would be done with grieving,” she interrupted. For a moment she bit her lip, staring blindly at the bottom of the bunk above her. “I faced the Furies and had my revenge. So why am I still so sad?”

He sighed and leaned his tall frame against the wall, hands in his pockets. “Because no amount of revenge can bring back the dead, Marie. You already knew that.”

“Is there something you wanted?”

She thought he might have smiled, although in the bad light it was hard to tell. “Straight to business, then. I’m setting a round-the-clock guard on our prisoner, and I need you for a shift. She’s in a bad way, but I’m not taking chances.”

Marie sat up so fast she almost slammed her forehead into the top bunk. “Prisoner?”

“Indeed.”

Her heart pounded so hard that it was difficult to hear anything else. “Not one of the Furies.”

“It is, yes. We were very fortunate. Several were captured, but have been sent to separate ships. They seem to have a private nex, but we think we have it blocked—”

“Kill her! Kill her now!” Marie was on her feet, although she didn’t remember standing up. The decking felt cold through her thin socks.

“Marie....”

“No!” She made a savage motion with her hand, cutting him off. “What is this bullshit about taking prisoners? Did *they* ever take prisoners?”

“We aren’t them.”

“You have to kill her.”

Léon drew himself up. “I am still the captain of this ship,” he said quietly. “We had good reason for capturing those we could. We’ve learned a great deal about them already. Did you know that all of them were hooked up to chemical drips meant to regulate hormone levels? Some medics from the *Damascus Blade* have begun analysis, but from preliminary results they’re guessing that the Furies weren’t *permitted* to feel such things as fear or doubt. They were thoroughly, completely controlled. I’m told it’s an amazing feat of bioengineering.”

Marie shook her head, unable to believe what she was hearing. “Who gives a damn? Dissect them when they’re dead, then, but kill them!”

“Stand down, soldier,” Léon said sharply. “The orders have come down, and I happen to agree with them.” He started back out the door, then stopped. “Take some time and think things over, Marie. And don’t go near the prisoner without my authorization. I’ll throw you in the brig if I even think you’re contemplating it.”

The door shut behind him with a groan. Numb, Marie sat back down on her bunk, her hands shaking.

Not fair. Her children died, slaughtered by the Furies...but the monsters themselves were allowed to live. *It isn’t right. It isn’t just. Why should she go on drawing breath when Adrien and Réunion cannot?*

For a long time, she sat in the dark, staring at nothing while resolve slowly hardened in her heart. If Léon and the other captains lacked the balls to do what was right, then she would have to do it herself. And then, when the Fury on board was dead, the grief would finally go away, and her children would rest in peace.

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Marie kept her nex on, so that she would know if any alarms were triggered. They would be eventually, of course—nothing could prevent that—but if she had her way it would not be until after her mission was complete. Then, when the Fury was dead, it would not matter.

She would face a court-martial for what she was about to do; most likely she would find herself in the brig for a good long while. That, too, did not matter. Better to be at peace in prison than continue a hollow life free.

Various crewmembers were chatting on the nex; off-duty socializing interspersed with reports from those on shift. Marie accessed the feed from the sec cams in the corridor outside the tiny brig and saw Domingue standing off to one side, looking relaxed. What little information Marie had been able to glean suggested that the prisoner had been cooperative, even passive, and Dom apparently thought that a human guard was a mere formality. She found him on the nex, arguing with the other heavy gunners about which team would win the Colony Cup this year.

Marie stayed silent, both on the nex and in reality. She wore only socks on her feet, and they made no more than the faintest whisper of sound against the battered decking. The floor felt icy through the thin fabric, and here and there an irregularity pricked her toes; a melted patch made by

gunfire, a bolt pulled loose by the stresses of the ship. Like a shadow she slid up behind Dom, waiting patiently until he had finished his conversation with the other gunners and had dropped momentarily off the nex.

He jerked when he felt the metal prongs of her stunner touch the back of his neck, but it was far too late. A moment later, he collapsed to the decking, his gun clanging loudly off the floor. Swearing softly, Marie pulled her own weapon from its holster and broke into a run for the brig, even as queries broke out all over the ship's nex.

She had spent hours bypassing the ancient security patch sealing the brig, and it saved her precious seconds now. The door recognized her and slid open, and she dashed inside, closing it again in the vague hope that it would at least slow the others down.

There were three cells, each fronted with a transparent wall of plastic designed to be almost impenetrable. Two were in darkness, but bright light flooded out from the center cell. Like the main door, this one opened obediently for Marie, and she stepped through and leveled her rifle.

The huddled figure on the bed looked up, and Marie realized that there had to have been some sort of mistake. The girl looked hardly more than a child, younger than poor Jean-Jacques. Even against the white sheets and white walls, her ivory skin looked pale. Her buzz-cut hair was nearly colorless, as was the washed-out blue of her eyes.

Those eyes were red-rimmed, and the puffiness around them said that she had been crying for some time. She had her knees drawn up to her chin, her arms wrapped around them, and she rocked relentlessly back and forth on her cot. The body under the rough coveralls was stocky but so short that both sleeves and pants had to be rolled up. She looked like a little girl playing dress-up in her parents' clothing.

"Who are you?" Marie asked.

The girl made no reply, only stared at her, lost and scared. A low, keening sound came from her, the voice of some broken thing.

Marie lowered her rifle slowly. She had come down here expecting to confront a swaggering, proud warrior. The Fury of her imagination would have scowled and glared, expressed no remorse over the atrocities she had committed. Only when she realized that death had come for her would she give Marie the satisfaction of begging to be spared. And then Marie would have laughed and killed her.

But reality was not cooperating with her imagination, it seemed.

“Why have you lowered your rifle, Marie Guignard?”

Marie started; she hadn’t heard Captain Léon’s approach. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed half the crew packed into the hall outside, all of them armed and nervous. Léon had come in alone, however, and his gun remained in its holster.

She met his dark eyes; they were calm and flat, and gave her nothing.

“There’s been a mistake. You lied to me,” she said.

“No. I haven’t. This is our prisoner, our captured Fury. They say this one shot down Jean-Jacques before she was taken, although in the confusion of battle it is hard to be sure.”

Marie glanced back at the prisoner, half-expecting her to have undergone some amazing transformation. But there was only the frightened girl.

“What...what’s wrong with her?”

“She is alone for the first time in her life,” Léon said. His eyes remained on Marie, however. “She doesn’t access the nex through a harness—the medics say she has receivers and transmitters grown into her nervous system. There doesn’t seem to be a way to turn them off, so we have to jam her signals for the moment. At a guess, she and the rest of the Furies have been linked since they were months old at most. Imagine always having someone to talk to. Imagine not being able to escape a conversation even if you wanted.”

“Is that why she’s...like this?”

“Part of it. I already told you about the chemical drips. She is feeling fear for the first time. And other things as well, no doubt.” He gestured, his hand looking even darker against the stark white of the cell, of the girl. “This is the great secret of the Protectorate, Marie. Their most terrible warriors are merely parts of a machine. Strip away their nex, remove the chemicals from their shunts, cut them off from orders and allow them to think for themselves for the first time...and they are nothing but children afraid of the shadows.”

Marie hesitated, not certain what to think. “But...she killed Jean-Jacques.”

“Yes. Many others as well. And I’m not certain she would understand what she did even if you explained it to her. Perhaps in time, but at the moment she lacks all context. She has never had to make a decision, so morality has no meaning for her yet.” He sighed and flipped his dreads back over his shoulder. “I am going to let you make a choice, Marie. You

may kill her if you wish.”

Marie cast him a sharp look, but he did nothing. Very slowly, she lifted the rifle and sighted.

This creature killed Jean-Jacques, she told herself, calling to mind the young man’s face as she had last seen it. Worse—this is a Fury. She would have been part of the attack on Racine Point. She killed my children. She did not show them any mercy—she does not deserve any either.

The girl flinched back from the rifle, but otherwise her only movement came from the tears streaming down her cheeks.

She is nothing. A thing. Léon said it himself—she is as close as a human being can come to a machine. There is nothing to her save what her masters put there. I’m doing nothing more than turning off a dangerous machine.

But somehow, looking into those scared blue eyes, she couldn’t make herself believe it.

“I don’t have anything else,” Marie said. Her hands tightened imperceptibly on the rifle, as if drawing strength from it. “After my children died, all I had left was revenge. If I don’t kill her...then what else is there?”

“I don’t know,” Léon replied. “Nobody does. Maybe there is nothing else for you. That’s the real bitch about it, Marie—you can’t know until after you’ve already made the choice.”

Marie watched the girl a moment longer through the crosshairs. Then, with a soft oath, she lowered the rifle, turned, and walked out. Léon followed her, leaving the Fury sitting alone in a white room.

THE END