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FALL FROM GRACE

Chris Hartford

Part Ten



The logo for BattleCorps, featuring the word 'BATTLECORPS' in large, gold-colored, block letters. The letters are partially cut off on the left side of the page.

~27~

"A nightmare journey of betrayals within betrayals. That's all I can really say about those last hours."

—Private Journal

**Marik Apartments, Atreus City
Atreus, Marik Commonwealth
Free Worlds League
15 March 2616**

At close range, the impact of the bullet was devastating. It drove through flesh and bone, destroying everything in its path. There was a sickening squelch as the back of the other side of the head exploded, spraying brains, bone and blood across wall and furniture. Carlton spun and shot the second guard with similarly gruesome effect. Neither trooper expected the attack, nor could they avoid it.

Evie and Rhean looked on dumbstruck.

"They weren't going to let you go into exile. Lambert wants you dead, no matter the preferences of the cabal. Your escorts were going to kill you once you were off-world."

"And Selaj let him do this?"

"Regulus ordered it. And not for the first time. Their little group has killed others who got in their way before."

Rhean glared at him. "Albrecht?"

He nodded. "He stumbled onto some of what the 'triumvirate' has done over years."

"The Triumvirate? But there's only two of them. Unless..." She blanched.

"It was originally the lords of Marik, Regulus and Oriente, work-

ing together to subvert Parliament. The Marik post has been empty for two decades.”

“I had Albi investigating aunt Therese’s death. Did Narinder order her death too?”

“He didn’t, but the Triumvirate did.”

“Who did?” Her voice was hot with fury. “Your bastard father?”

“No, *your* great-grandmother.”

Rhean sat down heavily on the parquet floor. The shock was like a physical blow that drove the wind from her. “Grams?” she said incredulously. “It can’t be.”

“Your grandmother and the others of her generation had some very odd views on maintaining the purity of the family line. The Triumvirate didn’t want anyone who could be used against them.”

“And Therese’s husband was a Liao.” Rhean put her head in her hands. “My aunt wasn’t the target, her baby was. They were lucky with Marie dying so young, but didn’t want to risk that the second baby would survive.”

“And your boyfriend is a Davion, and the most important one at that. If they killed Therese for conceiving a child with a low-ranking Liao like William, what do you think they’d do to you?” He didn’t add that the succession crisis in the Capellan Confederation could’ve elevated William to high office. The killing of his wife and child effectively removed him from the race and changed the direction of Liao politics.

“Oh hell.”

“I need to get you out of here before Lambert and Selaj wonder what’s going on. Give me your jacket and your cane.” Rhean looked at him quizzically but did so. He handed them to Evie who put them on. The fit wasn’t perfect—Rhean was still rake-thin—but it would do. Evangeline undid her ponytail and allowed her hair to fall round her face. The cut was almost identical to her own.

“Do I pass muster?” Evie asked, leaning on the cane. It was an uncanny resemblance. Rhean’s mind wandered back a decade and a half. *You should ask your sister, too*, Kevin had asked. God, she was so blind.

“They assigned me to you because we were so similar,” Evie said in response to the unspoken question. “So I could double you if

the situation was ever bad enough. This qualifies." She looked at Rhean. "Of course, if they're to think I'm you we need to make you not look like you. Get that beret and a couple of jumpers." She did. "Now, put them all on."

Examining herself in the mirror, Rhean had to admit she hardly recognized herself. The jumpers bulked her up so that she didn't look in the slightest like the skinny Captain-General, and with her hair tucked up the signature auburn hair of the Mariks was hardly visible.

"It'll do," Carlton said. "Time is of the essence. There's a car waiting for you on the garage level but I won't be able to help you get there. I need to get the guards out of your path." He handed Evie a pistol, an electronic key, and a security pass. "Your access codes have probably been revoked but these should get you through the doors." He handed a second pistol to Rhean. "Don't attract attention to yourself. Evie knows what needs to be done." And with that he was gone, slipping out into the corridor.

"The dogs?" Rhean asked.

"Will have to stay here," Evie replied. "It's too much of a risk to get them. Tomas will take good care of them both."

They waited several minutes, then followed. The corridor was deserted and they crept down the hallway toward the stairwell—there was too much chance of getting caught in the elevator. They crept down, level by level, until they reached the door to the sub-basement of the parking garage.

Evie pressed her ear to the door and listened. "There are a couple of people there. She opened the door a fraction and peeked out. "Four guards by the main gate. I'll need to distract them—a gunfight is too risky."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I'll head to the lift and get their attention. You wait under the stairs there." She pointed to the cavity under the rough ferrocement steps. "Until they've headed up, then you make for the car." She tossed the key to Rhean.

"How will I know they've all followed you? They might leave guards here."

Evie shrugged. "We're a little short on options. Now, get ready." Rhean shuffled under the stairs, Evie observing to make sure the

hiding place was sufficient. She nodded, then moved back to the door. "I'll catch up with you, either before you boost for orbit or on Terra." She smiled. "It's been an honor." And with that she slipped out into the garage. For a minute or two there was silence, then a male yell and the sound of gunfire. She heard bullets impacting on the ferrocrete and causing chunks to spall off.

"She's in the lift, she's in the lift." A voice cried, then there was a crash as the garage door was kicked open. Booted feet thundered through. One pair, a second, then a third. What about the fourth man? Was he waiting? Rhean crept from her hiding place. There was no figure looming over her. Carefully, so as not to make a sound, she crept over to the door that remained half-ajar. She peered through. Nothing. She slipped out into the cavernous space and edged toward the parking space Carlton had indicated. A substantial RV that awaited her.

She looked round the bulky machine. There was no one there. Perhaps the other trooper had used the lift, or perhaps she'd miscounted the footsteps. There was no time to worry about that. Rhean waved the key over the security sensor and opened the driver's side door as soon as it flashed acceptance of the code. She dropped into the seat. And glanced at the controls. Not a model she'd driven before—not that she'd driven many in recent years—but it was close enough. She thumbed the ignition, half expecting a security trooper to leap out at her. The engine purred to life, but nothing else happened.

Dropping the vehicle into gear, she released the handbrake and pressed down on the accelerator. The vehicle rolled out of its bay smoothly. A few quick maneuvers and she approached the exit ramp. A massive gate blocked her path—and Evie had the security pass. She examined the gate. Did it need the pass? It was designed to stop people getting into the complex, not from exiting. She rolled the car a little further forward, and as if by magic the massive doors began to swing open. Thirty seconds later, the way was clear and she accelerated up the ramp toward the streets.

"Crap." She swore to herself as he approached the exit. A barrier blocked her path, a uniformed figure looking down on it from a booth. There'd be no debate. No chance of negotiation. Rhean gunned the engine and the car leapt forward. *No chance of stealth either!*

The barrier shattered as the RV hit it. A smaller vehicle might've been stopped, but Carlton had chosen well. Sparks flew into the darkening sky as she hit the street, tires protesting as she swung

the vehicle around. She raced away from the palace, then cut into the maze of Atreus City's side streets. She slowed, not wishing to attract more attention than was necessary, knowing full well they'd be hunting for her now. They probably didn't know who had broken through the barrier—if Evie's disguise had held at least—but they knew *someone* had.

After twenty minutes she began to relax. Night had fallen and she slowly cruised out of the city through industrial units and open fields. Another five kilometers to the rendezvous point, then she'd wait for Evie. There was a two-hour window there, then whoever was at the point was to make for the DropShip. Her eyes scanned for the landmarks Evie had mentioned. As she slowed, approaching what she thought was her destination, Rhean caught a glint of movement in the corner of her eye. An AgroMech? She turned for a better look.

A shot tore into the back of the RV and span it around. Fragments of bodywork flew across the road and the vehicle bucked. Rhean fought to maintain control as the vehicle slewed under the impact. As the car whipped around, she saw a *Griffin*, its rifle-arm raised. The humanoid machine took a step forward then staggered slightly as machine gun fire ricocheted off its shoulders—a bird-like *Locust* charged in at high speed, firing wildly as it came—but the heavier machine ignored its small opponent. There were flashes at the 'Mech's shoulder as its missile rack loosed, then the tell-tale nimbus of the PPC charging to fire again. Rhean swerved the damaged car, but knew it was too late.

The universe exploded in a blinding flash.

* * *

"Yes!" Lambert exulted, pumping his left arm up and down. His right held a com unit to his ear.

Selaj looked on dispassionately. "They've confirmed it?"

"DNA analysis from the wreckage." Lambert grinned. "Though there wasn't an awful lot left to work with."

"And the 'Mech that interfered?"

"A loyalist security officer who chose to meet an ignominious end. She never stood a chance."

A faint grin crept onto the Duke of Regulus' face. "Neither does the boy."

* * *

The following is issued by the Press Secretary to the Marik Family.

It is with great sadness that the following announcement is made:

At 11:47pm Atrean Standard Time, Captain-General Rhean Marik passed away peacefully in her sleep as a result of complications from her long battle against cancer. Her nephew Tomas was at her bedside. Other members of the Marik family are being informed.

The office of the Captain-General will stand vacant until Parliament confirms the succession. Tomas, son of Quentin Marik and the former Captain-General's designated heir, is expected to succeed to the office per the provisions of the 2310 Act.

* * *

"You wanted to see me, *Captain-General*?" Selaj's voice was oily and his expression...amused. His gaze wandered round the glass and stone Atrium. His pose suggested respect. His actions didn't.

Tomas stood behind his desk, leaning forward with his knuckles resting on the wooden surface. "What happened to my aunt? She was supposed to go into exile."

The duke regarded him levelly, the smile fading from his face. "She and her associates killed several of my men and fled their protective custody. They were killed trying to escape."

"You overstepped your authority," Tomas spat.

The older man's eyes glinted, though whether with amusement or indignation wasn't clear. "I'm the day-to-day commander of the FWLM, *sir*. I make lots of decisions on a routine basis without bothering the Captain-General with minutiae. Your predecessors never micro-managed. I can make sure all the pay claims and supply requisitions cross your desk if you'd like, *Captain-General*. If you want to approve every decision."

The youth bristled. "Get out of my sight, Narinder." Tomas turned his back on the duke and looked out over the city. He watched Selaj's reflection, seeing him turn and walk toward the door. The Regulan stopped just short of the wood-framed portal.

"If I might make one observation, sir." He didn't wait for permission. "Unlike the Dukes, the Free Worlds has not always needed a Captain-General."

"I'm still the Duke of Atreus, despite your threats, Selaj."

"That you are sir. I'm glad you remembered." And with that he left.



Epilogue

I'm dead, buried on Atreus in the family plot alongside my father. Officially, I died of complications arising from my illness, something that lead to a vast upsurge of sympathy for the ruling family that my nephew Tomas and his advisors exploited in their early months in power. A small cadre at the pinnacle of the Free Worlds understands this to be a lie, however, believing it was their coup that unseated me and planted me in the ground. It must stick in their craws that the "dignity and strength" shown by the Captain-General during her five-year illness has become a source of national pride, particularly as they believe they killed me in a fiery motor wreck on the spaceport road. The truth is, of course, more complicated and known to an even smaller group in the Free Worlds League and very few beyond. Tomas knows now, as does Nicholas Cameron—it's his territory I'm hiding in after all—but I balked at letting other lords know.

Zane took the news particularly badly, and renewed the legal offensive against the Free Worlds he'd held in abeyance at my request. Last I heard he was well on the way to seizing Marik assets in the Federated Suns and Terran Hegemony as "reparations."

One part of me understands what they did; my child was a risk to the balance of power and the sovereignty of the Free Worlds League and removing me was a form of misconstrued patriotism. That doesn't mean I forgive them for it though, nor the murders of my aunt Therese and brother Albrecht. Were Carlton's claims about the responsibility for Therese true? Who knows? My great-grandmother could be a hard woman who would do what was needed for the League, but I doubt that would extend to killing her own grandchildren. It wouldn't be the first time, however.

All those years Evangeline was my shadow come into stark relief now. I don't know who it was instigated the plan, nor whether the events that spring were what they had in mind, but without my pseudo-sister I probably would be dead and buried. It was Kevin's comments in the Star Chamber back in those long-lost days that first made me consider the issue, though back then I didn't realize the significance. I should've wondered why she always came back to me, ever-loyal, despite her other commitments.

I'm glad of Annelise too. It was her intervention on that dark road that saved my bacon, holding off the Griffin long enough for me to get out of the vehicle before it was incinerated. The conspirators hushed up claims of a 'Mech battle on the outskirts of the city but were satisfied that the burned-out car was my final resting place. I should be glad that there isn't enough of a person left after repeated PPC and missile strikes for them to have run any significant genetic testing on the wreckage. Evie arrived and threw a vial of blood into inferno to fool the DNA sniffers—I presume they were satisfied, as no assassins have come.

I don't know what they did with Anna's body—her Locust never stood a chance against the Griffin—and Tomas wasn't able to dig up any details. I hope she was buried with respect. If I ever get back to Atreus—if Allison and Selaj are dealt with—I hope to find out. As it stands, she'll live on in my heart forever, honored for her loyalty and sacrifice.

As for Evie, I never did hear the full story of what happened after we split up on the palace. It was a cat-and-mouse game I gather, some moments in her 'Rhean' guise and others as herself. One moment she was bait for the hunters, the next she was one of them. I don't want to know how many people she killed in the escape—they were all innocent victims, puppets of the dukes—but I'm glad she survived. I may not have made it off-world without her, and her contacts in the Hegemony eased my integration into Terran society. Officially Evie retired, after all she's been with the service for over a third of a century, and moved to Terra to be with her husband. Unofficially, she works for her old friend Frieda Moran.

Yes, I know it's a cliché to use that name, but it suits me. Lambert may know it, but he'd hardly have reason to link the Swiss resident of that name to his nemesis at Princefield a quarter-century earlier."

- Private Journal

Troistorrents, Valais Canton Switzerland, Terra Terran Hegemony 9 April 2617

There was a knock at the door and Briseis, Andromache's newest daughter and a present from Madeleine, growled from her basket. Rhean set down the pen and looked up from the journal. Evie appeared at the door of the study, pistol already in hand and motioned Rhean toward the back room of the house. She slipped in quietly, looking down at the sleeping form in the crib, lifting him onto her shoulder in case they needed to flee.

"Stay there." The older woman whispered. Evie edged to the front door and peered out the spyhole. She relaxed slightly, tucked the pistol in the waistband of her trousers, then pulled the tail of her blouse over the weapon as she unlatched the door and opened it.

"Are you Miss Moran?" The speaker was a young girl, perhaps thirteen or fourteen years old. She was familiar.

"I'm not," Evie said. "But I can get a message to her."

The girl frowned, and sought to peer round the security agent. Evie blocked her easily. Pusing her lips, the girl took a step back and produced a document from her pocket. "Daddy said to give this to her." She handed the paper to Evie.

"I'll make sure she gets it."

"Thank you." The girl looked sullen and turned away. Evie closed the door, then handed the document to the waiting Rhean. Baby still clutched to her shoulder, the former Captain-General flicked open the sheet with a swift wrist movement. She skimmed the documents. A property transfer accord.

"Shit." She pushed the child into Evie's surprised arms and squeezed past her. She yanked the door open and dashed out into the late spring air. "Zane?!"

He stood at the car, one arm around Sarah's shoulder. Their eyes met and Rhean dashed forward, her footsteps crunching in the slushy snow. Zane met her halfway, wrapping her in an embrace. They clung to each other for what seemed like an eternity.

"I thought I'd lost you," he whispered into her hair. "They said you'd died."

"I'm not that easy to kill. You know that. Remember Robinson?"

He broke the embrace then stepped back to regard her. "You look...great."

Rhean saw Evie watching them from the doorway. "Fresh mountain air. And no stress of leading an interstellar nation."

"Tomas told me what happened on Atreus. Why you disappeared."

Rhean walked back to the door and returned with the small, swaddling-wrapped bundle.

"My son?" Zane whispered.

Rhean nodded and she lowered her arm so that Zane could look at his seven-month old son. "His name is Albert. Albert Alexander Marik."

"Albert Alexander Marik-Davion," Zane corrected her. "Sarah, come here."

"What do I care about you and her?" The girl sniffed. "You made me come." Zane looked at Rhean and raised an eyebrow.

Rhean turned to regard the girl more closely. Perhaps it was the movement or the cold air, but Albert began to cry. The noise seemed to fascinate Sarah. "Your baby?" She asked Rhean.

Rhean nodded. "Your brother," she said softly.

Sarah was transfixed. She already had two full brothers, but this was the first time she'd been old enough to appreciate the biological imperative of children. She reached out and touched the baby's forehead. Albert stopped crying and attempted to grab his sister's fingers. Sarah smiled. "Can I hold him?"

Rhean handed her son across to his half-sister, watching them both until she was sure the girl understood how to hold the baby.

"Miracles will never cease," Zane observed, watching his uncharacteristically silent daughter.

Rhean leaned forward and kissed him, slipping her arm round Zane's waist and drawing Sarah and Albert to her with the other.

The child had cost her everything, her life's work, but she was content.