**Erzurum**

Unfortunately, it wasn’t enough to avoid detection.

Several hours after first quitting the Mediterranean airspace in the corvette and staring the pass over Africa, a hostile blip appeared on Eirene’s radar.

“Something’s coming in,” she warned. “I might have to evade or engage, so everybody buckle in. This could get rough.” She sighed and took a deep breath. Regardless of what she wanted, she was back in the pilot’s seat with no more room for angst or hesitation, so she needed to shut any thoughts out from her mind for the time being. This wasn’t a new feeling for her.

Alexis wasn’t having any of it, though. “Don’t engage them,” she said. “We can’t afford a fight now, and I don’t want you doing anything you’ll regret. Unless you really think there’s no other choice, just run.”

The pursuing vessel’s IFF identified it as the CSS *Erzurum*, a fast frigate evidently assigned to a guard patrol along the corridor, and it was closing in on their position at an alarming rate. Eirene knew that she could outrun it for a time, but if she flew at combat speed then she didn’t know if her fuel would last all the way to their destination. It would be safer to bet on her chances of outmaneuvering its greater bulk.

As it drew closer, she began to sweat. The *Erzurum* would be no match for her in a dogfight. Its crew were doubtless making a suicidal charge at her more out of a sense of duty than out of any belief that they could possibly win. Perhaps they hoped to buy time for Skywatch interceptors to catch up.

The corvette wavered slightly as Eirene made a decision. It would be so easy to kill them. They weren’t civilians. It would be justified self-defense. She wanted to fight. Gripping her controls, Eirene felt her eyes twitching and her bloodlust rising as she brought the vessel to bear on the incoming frigate, ready to face whatever it might send her way.

What she said to Alexis, however, was the opposite of the violent thoughts she was harboring. “Sunshine,” she whispered, biting the bullet, “I love you. If I run, maybe they shoot us down, maybe they don’t. But I know I can beat them. I won’t let anybody threaten you. I owe you that much.”

Alexis was stunned. She felt like she was using Eirene, taking advantage of her loyalty, her affection, and her sickness to turn her into an attack dog. It was wrong to let her continue to fight a war she didn’t want, but Eirene wasn’t wrong – her skills being what they were, their chances of survival were better if she stood her ground than if she ran and hoped the Commonwealth couldn’t keep up.

The first incoming missile was easily warded off by a cluster of flares, sending the hostile object fizzling harmlessly away. The *Erzurum* hadn’t even bothered to broadcast a warning or even query their identity, but that was also expected. Although Eirene’s own IFF was still squawking the signal of a Skywatch unit, anyone actually working for the Commonwealth’s air force wouldn’t be fooled.

The second missile was radar guided and proceeded undeterred when she launched another round of flares. Fortunately, her airship was far more maneuverable – she quickly brought the corvette to a near-hovering standstill and pulled a pinpoint banking turn, then accelerated to jet straight underneath the incoming threat. It shot past her into the distant cloudbanks.

Now on a course straight for the *Erzurum*, Eirene prepared a response of her own. To save fuel, most of the heavy weapons had been removed, which meant that there was little she could do to destroy the frigate outright. Still, the enemy’s armor was light and Eirene believed that she could do enough damage to the aircraft to force it to land.

One missile shot forward from the corvette and was taken off course by a burst of chaff from the *Erzurum*. Not a surprise. Fortunately, Eirene had other options.

“Alright, everyone,” she said into the vessel’s intercom, “I’m going in for a pass with ground attack cannons, so we’ll probably get some flak from the frigate. Watch yourselves, and, gunners, get ready to fire on their engines on my mark.”

The mood was tense as the distance between the two aircraft became smaller and smaller until the Peregrine ship was nearly on top of the *Erzurum*. Six guns tore into the frigate’s engines. With smoke billowing from the turbines, the crippled ship began to list to the side and lose altitude.

Alexis watched their enemy’s guns fall silent and disappear into the clouds below. The *Erzurum* was not doomed, but it wasn’t about to fly any time soon. Unfortunately, neither was their own corvette – the return fire from the *Erzurum’s* flak had struck one of the corvette’s engines, forcing it into a gradual descent.

“It’s not over yet, people,” Eirene said as the corvette’s flight became dangerously erratic.

“This didn’t go as you planned, looks like,” said Hector.

“Yeah. We have to set down now. My crew can fix the engine. Problem is, the *Erzurum’s* going to be down there too, and I don’t think its crew is going to be too happy to see us.”

“Put us down real close to them and have our gunners target their turrets on the way down,” Alexis said. “Once we’re on the ground, have our gunners put some pressure on the enemy while we figure out how to seize control of the *Erzurum*.”

“Or we could, you know, just not land near them,” Hector said snidely.

“We don’t have enough time left in the air to put enough distance between us and them that they won’t find us within the day or two we’ll need to patch up the corvette. Like, Eirene can correct me if I’m wrong, but from what I can tell we’re going to have to move fast and knock ‘em out hard before they can get their act back together.”

“Fine, fine. I just want to get out of here alive, if that’s alright with everybody.”

Carefully keeping the corvette in balance, Eirene followed the trail of black smoke down to the *Erzurum’s* landing site. A single flyby was all she was going to get.

In the few seconds it took for the gunners to do their best in neutralizing the enemy’s defenses, Eirene reflected on the terror that must have gripped the crew down below while their crippled vessel was being bombarded with nary a thing they could do to resist. As much as she sympathized with their plight, she had a job to do – to land the corvette safely and protect those close to her.

No more than three score meters separated the two vessels when they were both finally at rest. Not a single shot had been fired since Eirene’s flyby, and that stood well with her. If the rest of the mission could be accomplished, then all the better, but she knew that there would be at least one more bout of bloodshed before they were through. At the very least, there were no civilians aboard the *Erzurum* that she knew of, and so that was a relief.

Alexis took Fischer, Sokolov, and a few others to prepare for the raid on the battered frigate that stood across a rocky field from them. As they loaded and checked their rifles, packed their explosives, and donned their flak vests and helmets, she peeked out the open hatch at their target.

“How many do you suppose are in there?” she asked no one in particular.

“Probably a few dozen, if they haven’t changed crew complements since my training,” Eirene said.

That seemed like a low estimate. “I expected them to outnumber us at least two-to-one, but we can practically go one-to-one with them if you’re right,” Alexis said.

“We should go soon,” said Fischer. “They’ll have had time to set up defenses if we wait much longer.”

“Agreed. Eirene, can the gunners launch a smokescreen of any kind?” She laughed darkly as she thought about how many times the word “smokescreen” had played a role in her defeat.

“Kind of,” Eirene replied. “The belly guns can launch smoke bombs, but only when I’m hovering. We’ve got RPGs and smoke grenades that I can have people fire from the dorsal turrets that might work. Gonna be good enough?”

“It’ll have to be.”

“I’ll give the order, then you try to get as much distance as you can before it clears. On my mark?”

“On your mark.”

A few seconds passed after Eirene gave the order while the men inside the corvette’s turrets launched a salvo into the no-man’s-land. “Alright, now’s your chance. Go!” Eirene shouted to the raid party as the barrage finished up. On her word, Alexis and her team stormed out of the hatch and across the rocky field towards the *Erzurum*.

Both ships’ weapons were useless when landed, but the Peregrine troops left behind gave cover fire to the small group of attackers, which curiously met no opposition during its advance. Eventually, Alexis’ team closed in on the frigate and, keeping close to the hull, planted explosive charges around a hatch to what Eirene assured them was a storage bay. With little delay, they ran back and detonated the bombs. The *Erzurum* was open to them.

Every light in the bay was dead. The sun was there to take their place, but the corners of the room were untouched by its light, shrouded in an ominous gloom. Surprisingly densely packed were the crates and barrels throughout the hold. Alexis and her team looked around, making their way through the maze of supplies.

“It’s all foodstuffs,” Fischer said after examining a number of different crates’ labels.

“The Commonwealth must be using the regular patrols as more transports to expedite the construction,” Alexis said. “It’s a pretty good haul. We could make good use of this if we can take it all the way back.”

“That’s a pretty big ‘if.’”

“Guys, shut up,” whispered Sokolov. “We don’t want them to hear us.”

“They know we’re here. What does it matter?”

The trio reached one of several doors that led out of the hangar bay, next to which was posted a simple diagram outlining the layout of the ship’s corridors. It was a simple design, quite unlike the labyrinthine plans of larger capital ships. They looked at the map closely, putting in great effort to make out the details in the dark, and decided upon a route to the bridge.

Darkness and claustrophobia defined the corridor that lay ahead of them. Left with little choice, Alexis turned on her flashlight, trading stealth for safety. If someone attacked them, then they could deal with that, but she was far more concerned about tricks and traps left about by the crew, who had by then undoubtedly fled for far-off corners of the ship.

It was then that an explosion rocked the halls of the *Erzurum*, knocking several of the Peregrines off their feet. Soon after, an alarm sounded all around them and sprinklers turned on overhead, drenching them in a cold, unwanted shower.

Eirene’s voice came to them over their headset radios. “You guys alright?” she asked, clearly frightened.

“Yeah, we’re fine,” Alexis responded. “How’s it looking from out there?”

“The *Erzurum* just lit up like you wouldn’t believe. Looks like the fuel tank by one of the turbine nacelles flat out detonated. Can’t see the damage from here, but there’s a heck of a lot of fire portside.”

“Yeah, they just turned on their fire suppression in here. Going to be disorienting.”

It occurred to Alexis that, amidst the chaos, the crew of the *Erzurum* could very well have been unprepared for the siege. Perhaps that had been why the guns had not fired upon them during their advance – the crew were too busy in a desperate effort to prevent disaster from within to notice the threat from without. In any case, her crew needed to press onwards.

They ran into the first resistance a few cabins later. Three Skywatch officers had erected a machine gun nest at a chokepoint and cut down two of Alexis’ party before she even knew what was happening. Faced with a hail of deadly bullets, she ducked behind a bulkhead and took stock of her remaining soldiers. The water gathering beneath her feet was cold and slippery, making it even more difficult to navigate in close quarters.

Fischer took action before she even gave an order, slinging his only grenade into the enemy fortification. Alexis barely heard the yells behind the blaring alarms before another explosion sounded, signaling that it was time for the Peregrines to advance. They moved down the corridor and reached the three officers, who had survived the blast but now lay helplessly on the flooded floor. Fischer and Sokolov prepared to gut them with bayonets, but Alexis stopped them.

“What?” Fischer asked.

“Keep guard over them. We’re not here to kill people we don’t need to kill.”

When the final door was opened, they saw for the second time the faces of their opponents. The sight before them was pathetic. Not a single man of the three there on the bridge carried anything more than a pistol, and each was utterly drenched after several minutes of downpour. Each of them was caught completely off guard by the Peregrines’ arrival.

The captain was a tall man of Turkish descent, much like most of his bridge crew. It was not uncommon for freighters to be crewed by Turks, the Turkish air force having been instrumental in moving refugees into Ravengrad at its inception. Though there were substantial differences between the cargo planes that these early pilots flew and the modern airships of the Commonwealth, their key involvement made them natural candidates for promotion into the new government’s transport and military fleets.

“How many onboard?” Alexis demanded. The remaining troops behind her aimed their weapons at the bridge crew, who raised their hands in surrender.

“Crew of twenty, total,” said the captain.

“Cargo?”

“Food, construction equipment, and the usual ammunition for a frigate like us.”

“Are your men armed?”

“Yes. Barriers, automatic weapons, you name it. They’re going to be converging on this cabin as we speak; you won’t be able to fight them off.”

If the captain was telling the truth, Alexis knew that he was right. The six of them remaining couldn’t hope to best fourteen officers of the Skywatch when they’d had time to coordinate a counter-offensive.

“Fischer, Sokolov, what’s going on back there?” Alexis said over her headset radio.

“Nothing so far,” Sokolov said. “Just a bunch of water coming from the ceiling. Still got three hostages, and they’ve been pretty cooperative. No sign of anyone at all.”

“Right. Eirene, Hector, could you send some more guys over? Like, you’ve got a few left, yeah?”

“We do. Should we launch another smoke barrage to cover your reinforcements?” Eirene asked.

“No need to waste ammo. Trust me on this – we’re in the clear, I’m certain.”

“Do what she says,” Hector interjected. “I think I see where she’s going. The rest of you, get to the *Erzurum* posthaste.”

As much as she didn’t like it, Eirene conceded. As it was, Alexis was right – not a single shot was fired at the Peregrine reinforcements, just like during their first charge.

Meanwhile, on the bridge, Alexis continued to interrogate the crew, hoping that her hypothesis was correct. “What’s the status of the ship? And, more importantly, can we get some lights on in here?”

“The ship is heavily damaged, but will fly if we replace the portside engines. Not possible right now, obviously. Anyhow, I can turn on the lights, yes.”

“Do it.”

The captain did as he was ordered, throwing a few switches that filled the corridors of the *Erzurum* with light once again. Now able to see, Alexis noticed the damage became much more visible. Bullet holes. Broken glass. Loose equipment scattered all over the floor. She imagined that the situation was far worse to the stern of the ship.

“Your reinforcements are getting into the ship now,” Eirene told her over the radio. “It was a big risk, but it seems to have paid off. What are they to do now?”

“My squad’s tied up at the bridge, but we have it under control. The new troops should check out the back end of the ship, especially the chambers near the nacelle that just exploded. Sweep for survivors and report back. We’ll return once I’ve got a grasp on what’s going on.”

Several minutes went by until Eirene saw the entire party disembark from the battered shell of the *Erzurum*. They walked peacefully across no-man’s-land until they were close enough for Alexis to shout for the rest to meet her on the ground. Eirene and Hector headed down to meet her.

“So? What’s the deal?” Hector asked.

“Explosive decompression. These men were just about the only ones still alive by the time the *Erzurum* landed, and the rest were taken out either by the fuel detonation or by our own gunfire.”

“Oh,” Eirene said, crestfallen but keeping up a stoic appearance. The deaths of Skywatch officers did little to faze her, but it was disturbing that, for a promised diplomatic solution, their mission had been forced into a massacre already.

“And what of your hostages?” Hector asked.

“Dead by their own hands. Sealed airtight on the bridge was the only way they survived the decompression, but they couldn’t know what was happening on the rest of the ship. When he found out the entire rest of his crew was dead, he requested permission to take his own life. The other five followed suit.”

“And you *let* him?” Eirene asked, completely bewildered that Alexis had allowed such a plan to go through.

“What was I going to do? If a man wants to die with dignity rather than rot in the brig we’d have to put him in, then who am I to say no?”

“You enabled his delusions of honor, not anything real. There is dignity in *life*, in persistence, in struggle, but not in blowing your own brains out because you lost a single battle!”

“Maybe. But I didn’t feel like it was my place to make that choice for him.”

“…fine.” Eirene didn’t say any more on the subject.

“Well, at least that’s six less people we need to worry about. Eight if you include the ones we lost. I’m sorry that they’re gone, but we have work to do,” Hector said.

“They were our men, Hector!” Eirene protested. “You can’t just…just…shrug off their deaths like that! We need to give them and the Skywatch officers a proper burial, or else how can we even pretend to have any legitimacy?”

“Stupid girl. Would Jacob Lancaster give our troops a burial? Do you think the troops we lost at the Tower were given funerals? We can’t waste time; the Skywatch will muster a response soon, and we need to be gone before that happens.”

Alexis grabbed Hector by the chin and stared deeply into his eyes. “Listen here, clearly Eirene isn’t the stupid one here, because you clearly haven’t noticed that *no one* is going anywhere any time soon, whether we want to or not.” She released his head and pointed back and forth between Eirene’s corvette and the *Erzurum.* “Two crippled airships. We’re going to need to get one into better shape before we can leave at all, so we might as well give the dead a good send-off while we get things fixed up.”

“Fine, you’re right. But how would we do that?” Hector asked. “We don’t have a lot to work with out here to do repairs, and we can’t exactly call for help.”

Eirene noted that he had still not apologized to her, but she took his concession as the best she was going to get for the time being. “We have two airships,” she said. “The crew can strip parts from the *Erzurum* and repair our corvette. The damage to my engines was comparatively light, so we should make good time.”

“Fine, then, do what you must. Just make it quick. In the meantime, why not have our people can move the supplies from the frigate to the corvette? What do we have? Food, fuel, uniforms, and some weapons? We can make good use of all this.”

Once the repairs were finished, the corvette took off and Eirene flew Alexis and her team south. As night fell upon them, Eirene prepared to set down in the South African plains where she, her crew, and her passengers would be able to rest. They would finish their journey the next day.

The aircraft rested on the plateaus of the Highveld, just outside the ruins of the city. The metal hulk stood out against the aged grass, which was yellow and scruffy where it even grew at all. A few mid-sized rocks and shrubs also dotted the landscape, darkly silhouetted against the evening sunset, a beautiful painted array of dark reds and yellows in the sky. Here the rebels would make camp. Had their conveyance been a larger vessel, they might have had bunks indoors, but the corvette was too small for beds, and so most of the team would have to sleep on bags outside.

The dirt was hard beneath their boots, and the air was bitter cold. A few lights could be seen in the distance, lit up against the darkening sky. Commonwealth transports, they figured. Nothing to be worried about.

“What a thing,” Alexis said. “A month ago, we were locked up in the Panopticon with no chance of escape, and now look at us. Wandering the plains of Africa, as free to wander as the herds of wildebeests.”

“If there are any of those anymore,” said Hector.

“You really think they’re all gone?”

“No reason not to.”

“Hmm, that’s a bit depressing.” She shivered. “Damn, it’s cold.”

Their only light was a dim glow from a portable lantern that Hector had brought. They didn’t dare start a fire. It would be all too easy for a spark to set the dead, dry grass alight and consume the whole field in an inferno. If they weren’t killed by then, the Commonwealth would be on them in an instant. They all kept close to conserve heat, with Eirene a little bit closer to Alexis, but this did little to keep out the cold.

Hector was the first to fall asleep. He slowly but steadily nodded off, slumping over until he collapsed on the grassy soil. A few Peregrine soldiers joined him in slumber, and Alexis realized that she too would soon succumb to the same.

“We need a guard,” said Wilson, who had volunteered to be attached to the company, along with Fischer. “Someone to keep watch. If the Commonwealth catch us in our sleep, they’ll surely gut us without a second thought. Such are the magnitudes of our sins.”

“That’s a bit morbid, but he’s right,” said Alexis, yawning. “Someone has to look out for us. We can take shifts.”

“I’ll do it,” Eirene said without hesitation. “You guys rest.”

Alexis looked worriedly at her. “Are you sure?”

She laughed halfheartedly without smiling. “No rest for the wicked. Go. I’ll be fine.”

Alexis looked sorrowfully at the ground for a second, then agreed. “Alright. Eirene’ll cover us for as long as she can.” She paused, then whispered to Eirene. “Just…just make sure to wake me up when you get tired, okay? I can take over. We don’t want you getting too sleepy tomorrow.”

“As I said, I’ll be fine. Seriously, you just rest.”

“Alright. If you say so.” Several of the soldiers had already broken out their sleeping bags and had dozed off. Alexis nodded farewell to Eirene, shut her eyes, and then joined them.

Alone, Eirene leaned inwards and switched off the lamp. Darkness enveloped the group, and she was free to consort with her thoughts.

She opened her right hand and looked at it forlornly. In her mind, each finger became a person or group of people that she had killed. She folded the pinky finger down. That was for the *Erzurum*. Then came the ring finger – the *Sierra*. Middle was the *Cerberus*, followed by the *Verdun* and the super dreadnought *Freyja,* which had been her ‘proudest’ kill and had put the blood of almost a thousand souls on her hands. These she did not regret, and even gave her some amount of satisfaction. They were the traitors whose acts the Commonwealth had pinned on her and her crew, and they had deserved their deaths.

In her time serving as air support for the Peregrines, Eirene had earned three tank kills as well, putting her at her left hand’s pointer finger. Eirene hesitated there, staring at the digit. Maybe it represented a casualty, and maybe it didn’t. There was no way to know. Instead of folding it down, she opened her tense right hand – already curled into a fist – and pulled out of her pocket a pure white ring topped with a beautiful azure gemstone. She slipped the piece of jewelry onto that finger, an unusual decision, to be sure, and that was that. The rest of the night was spent thinking about other things.

The next morning, Wilson was the first to awaken. Immediately, he noticed that no one had been standing guard – but for how long? A quick glance revealed that they were all still alive. Or, at least, no one’s throat had been visibly slashed. He turned to the side and jostled Hector awake. A few other Peregrines began to emerge from their slumber as well.

There was enough for each man and woman to have a single cup of coffee and a cut of bread with jam each morning for three days. If they made good time, that wouldn’t be necessary, but they refused to indulge further, just in case. When everybody was awake, Alexis put on the coffee in a portable maker and distributed the bread, which the soldiers greedily took. It was still slightly cold, and the grass was laden with dew, but the fog would make good cover for as long as it lasted, which was good.

Eirene was still fast asleep, and she stayed that way until Hector knelt down next to her and woke her up with a light slap on the side of her head.

“Did you not *think* to wake someone up to take over for you when you fell asleep?” he asked. “How long have we been vulnerable? When did you pass out?”

“I…don’t know. Four in the morning, maybe.”

“Four in the – Jesus Christ, what possessed you to stay up so late you fell asleep without even thinking about it?”

“I was distracted. Sorry.”

Hector’s face twisted into a brief scowl, before relaxing into a look that was merely stern. “You idiot,” he said, “Without any guards, we were exposed. And now you – our *pilot* – you’re still deprived of sleep. What if you crash on the way to Johannesburg?”

Eirene was, of course, exhausted, but she heard Hector’s words, and did not reply. Instead, she simply curled up into a little ball, resting her head on her knees and staring at the dirt beneath her feet.

“Look at her,” Hector continued, “She won’t make it. And, since I doubt you’re going to let us just leave her here and walk the way there, we’re going to have to just wait for her to get some rest.”

Alexis looked briefly at Eirene, but couldn’t tell whether or not she was awake. “Listen,” she said to Hector, “You don’t have to talk like that. She doesn’t deserve that.”

“Look at you, always defending your little girlfriend. Why are you so adamant about it? She can do no wrong, is that it? We could have died!”

“No, she made a mistake. I won’t deny that. But we lived, didn’t we? She’s done a lot for us, so you don’t need to yell at her like that. I’ll see to it that she doesn’t make that mistake again, alright? We can take a break while she recovers.”

“No, we fucking can’t. I’m not going to see us miss Jackson by even a few hours just because we took the time to let your sweetheart get a little more shuteye.”

“A few hours won’t make a difference. Don’t be an ass.”

“You don’t know that. We have an autopilot, don’t we? It’s not ideal, but we can finish the trip in good time as long as we don’t need her to fight another airship. Christ, can she even walk into the ship herself?”

“I can carry her,” Fischer said. “She’s small.”

“Fine, fine. Let’s just get going.”

Alexis turned to Fischer and nodded to give him the go-ahead, and he stooped down to pick Eirene up, holding her as one might a small child. As they all prepared to depart, Alexis walked up to Eirene and smiled at her, though she knew that her sleeping friend couldn’t see the gesture. “It’s alright. Get some rest,” she whispered into the girl’s ear, receiving only a soft mumble in response. Alexis held her hand up and took a second to thread a finger through Eirene’s hair, feeling the silky strands against her skin before letting Fischer carry on.

The sun was halfway along its path across the sky by the time the corvette began its approach to Johannesburg. Eirene had woken up, too drowsy to dogfight but rested enough to land when the time came.

“I suppose that if we get attacked this close to the city, we’re dead anyway,” Wilson mused as he observed Eirene’s repose.

“We’re flying low enough that they shouldn’t pick us up. Land a few kilometers out from the ruins and we should be in the clear.”