

[Target Sighted - Severian Principate: The Screeching Osprey]

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It was a concerningly familiar feeling to be walking among the Tenixir Revenants, hiding in plain sight, practically invisible between criminals, mercenaries, and outcasts. The ruggedness of the people, their lack of a proper command structure, and how they maintained their ships felt like a callback to Eilen's years of planet-hopping across the Outer Rim for whatever scraps of work her old captain, Baro, could get for them. They'd screwed over a lot of shady groups on behalf of equally unpleasant people for the credits and resources to get by. Eilen almost felt several years younger to be doing the same thing again, especially with her former mentor in the Force and father figure working alongside her.

Baro didn't have to get involved, but it sure felt nice to have a familiar face doing familiar work in familiar-ish territory. That, and sneaking around invisibly on a starship was a lot easier when she had a grouchy old Kel Dor with a mask that helped him pass for a nameless Revenant to walk through doors with her. No risk of people on higher alert when things kept opening for no one, and the infiltrator on this ship that people could actually see wasn't the one carrying a backpack full of explosives — win-win for her.

As the last gate closed behind them, the two technicians in the room turned from their work stations. One of them had barely opened his mouth to speak, when Baro crossed his hands in a quick sweep. The Revenants flew head-first into each other and crumpled unconscious onto the floor. Eilen let out her breath as her Force cloak finally dropped.

"That...looked pretty bad," she commented.

"Minor concussions at most," Baro said. "They'll be fine."

Eilen removed her backpack. "How long do you think we have before security notices?"

"I played with some of their toys while you were keeping stowed away. We have some time, but don't waste any of it."

Something odd occurred to her. "Maybe keep a lookout? It should take more than two to run a room like this."

"You're expecting pirates to be efficient? Come on." Baro was already shifting his arms to slide the men's bodies someplace safer. "If any more show up, I'll take care of them."

"Uh— Just...don't kill any of them?"

"I'll be gentle."

Eilen grimaced, but now wasn't the time to question his methods. Before them was the carrier's magnetic field generator, the one thing maintaining an atmosphere across the hangar. Without it, the *Screeching Osprey* would forcibly close its gaping launch points behind several layers of airtight durasteel. No field meant no way of deploying starships; no defense against Principate forces coming to capture this wave of reinforcements on their way to Dandoran. It took no shortage of carefully calculated measures to infiltrate this deep, but the Revenants' lackluster organization had given them just enough of a window to make it happen. Now, at the mission's finish line, all Eilen had to do was plant a few explosives.

A pack of Denton charges could obliterate an entire building. Since killing the whole vessel and its crew wasn't the plan, she needed to keep the damage minimal. Based on the structure around her, a few charges at most would do. Eilen took a moment to synchronize the signal of the pre-programmed trigger with her spare detonator, then clipped the latter to her belt and dug out three charges to prime. The rest went back into her bag with the original detonator; it was always a good idea to have another explosion available.

Just as she found a good spot for the first explosive, Eilen felt Baro's gaze on her back. A hint of worry crept over her. "...What is it?"

He sighed. "Eilen, I'm with you here, but I can't help but worry about the consequences of what we're doing."

She stretched to reach the support for a pylon, and the charge's adhesive stuck in place with a satisfying click and beep. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

Eilen turned as she resettled onto her feet. Her ears flattened. "Baro, I'm...I'm not doing this for the Sevarian Principate. I just...I'm trying to help my friends do what they think is best."

"Of course. I've never known you to have any ill will for good people." He rubbed his temple. "But do you know what the Principate will do, if they win this conflict?"

Eilen began skirting around the room to find the next best component to break. "Uh...I mean...I don't, but, like...We're not just supporting the whole Principate, right? Me and my crew are trying to make sure the Harmonists come out on top. You know, the guys trying to do the whole proper-law-and-order thing."

"That's very noble," Baro said with a hint of pride. "...I want to say that the old Jedi Order would have been with you. But you and I lived the life a lot of these Revenants are trying to make for themselves. It's hard to fault them for trying to get away."

"Aren't like...only *half* of the Revenants trying to do that? Seems like the rest just want to freakin' kill everyone. And make slaves, and cart drugs, and—"

“HEY!” an unfamiliar voice shouted.

Baro flexed an arm, and the man who'd stumbled onto them slammed into the doorframe he'd come through. He hit the ground without another word as Baro folded his arms like nothing had happened.

“...You're right. A lot of these Revenants *should* be condemned for their actions. I'm just worried that too many of the ones who don't deserve it might get caught in the crossfire.”

Eilen sprang herself up to grapple another support point on a pylon. “Isn't that...why the Harmonists exist? So that, you know...” She paused to plant and prime the next charge. “...So the actually bad people get what they deserve, and everyone else is free to go when this is all over?”

Baro glanced up at her work as she flipped back to the floor. “Eilen, I have a bad feeling that things won't go that way. Just look at *us*. Think about what would have happened to us if law and order had come to the Outer Rim to track down people doing what *we* were doing for all those years. I don't think for the life of me you'd deserve it, but you'd have been rotting in a cell until your fur was grey.”

He was probably right. That was exactly why she had almost sided with the Expansionists. It honestly sounded nice, getting away from the rest of the galaxy to be a new person, free from constraints and expectations to just live however was best. Eilen stared at the third charge in her hands and sank a bit where she stood. Why did she choose this side?

Because Ruka and Sera did. So did Zig, her new captain. Even Sully, who never knew what to think, felt it was the right choice. Because Eiro wasn't sure that an independent colony of ex-pirates could survive long without becoming an anarchal disaster. Because her friends and newfound family were putting their lives on the line to see this through. All of that had to be worth something. Did that make it right?

“I... Well...” *Damn it.* Eilen's knuckles whitened, but she stepped up to the field generator to place the last charge at the center of its mass. “...This ship is on its way to try and *kill* my friends and the rest of my crew. I just... Whatever is gonna happen, I can't just let it get to them.”

“I know.” Baro's voice took on a more solemn tone as he continued, “Normally, I would agree with you. This galaxy isn't worth living in without people you care about... but understand, Eilen: This is the start of a war. It's larger than any of us. Trust me, I lived through one of the largest... We have to consider more than just our friends.”

Eilen looked to Baro, uncertain. “...What do you want me to do? Abandon this?” She gestured to the room and the faint beeps sounding over the hum of the field generator.

Baro breathed deep. “No. Hell no...I just want you to be absolutely certain that you’re not going to lose another ten years of sleep for the decisions you’re making now. There are going to be consequences, no matter what side you’re on. I hope you’re prepared to face them.”

Eilen looked back at the last charge and finally stepped away. “Yeah...Okay.” She took a deep breath of her own, then lifted the detonator from her belt. She hesitated briefly, then swallowed and nodded. “I...I want to finish what we started here. I— I have a feeling it’s going to be for the best.”

“...Then let’s get it done.”

She opened her mouth to speak again, but her ears flickered, and both their heads whipped toward the hissing sound of a door. Once again, Baro made for a telekinetic knock-out, but as the Revenant was yanked off his feet, the blaster in his hands fired off.

“Kriff,” Baro muttered. “They’re ready to blow?”

“Uh— Y-yeah!”

“Time to go.” He was already moving toward the furthest door from the gunfire. “The escape pods on this thing aren’t far.”

They heard the other doorway open just as their exit closed behind them. Both burst into a full sprint before the ship could begin alerting its full crew, but it wasn’t even a minute before an alarm echoed after them. They rounded a final corner to face an armed guard, who raised his radio just before he was flung face-first into the ceiling. Baro grabbed the radio off his limp hand as Eilen rushed toward the pods and popped one open.

“Come on,” she called back with an urgent gesture, when the fur on her neck suddenly trembled. Something very wrong was prickling at her senses.

There was only a moment’s hesitation before the detonator was yanked through the air toward Baro. Before Eilen could react, he pushed the space in front of her, and an invisible grasp yanked her into the escape pod alone. The door closed and locked as she tried to stand.

*No no no—* What was happening?

Eilen pressed close to the tiny viewport. Baro’s face on the other side, even behind the mask that hid his eyes and mouth, bore a begrudging expression. Eilen’s heartbeat nearly choked her.

*He’s not— He can’t—*

Baro powered down the detonator, dropped it by his feet, and hit the pod's exterior launch button. The thrusters lit up beyond the viewport as machinery clanked and shifted.

"NO—" Eilen was thrown about as the pod burst out into space. It didn't compare to the pain in her gut. She scrambled back to the viewport, watching in complete disbelief as the tiny point of light where she'd just been grew smaller. Her frantic shouting would never reach him.

*I'm sorry, Eilen, Baro's voice came through in her mind, somber but firm. I knew I couldn't stop you from going on this mission. I had to make sure you got out of this safely. You're doing what you think is right, and I'm proud of you. But the remains of the Empire are rising back to a terrifying state. What their leaders are planning — For all our sakes, I can't allow them to gain any ground. Fly to safety; I won't let them follow you. I'll get myself out of this later. Please forgive me.*

It was like an icicle in her spine. Her senses faded out as she gaped out the window, stupefied beyond belief. She could have been falling, and it wouldn't have registered. Like a safety net ripped out or a hug with a hidden knife, one of the strongest braces Eilen had in this galaxy was broken.

Baro betrayed her.

Baro. Betrayed. Her.

Her eyes welled as her breath came back to her. He'd been her father. He'd been her teacher. He'd been her friend. *How could he...?*

He'd played her out of this mission. Now Eilen was gone, her explosives were just sitting idly, and he had the detonator to decide whether or not they'd ever go off. He'd won.

*...No. He hadn't.*

Eilen swallowed hard and threw off her backpack. The other detonator was still in there. The red light told her it was still synchronized, waiting for the button. There was no way it would stay in range for very long.

She stared at the trigger. This was going to help her friends. They would tell her pushing it was the right thing to do. It was also a risk that a lot of good people could get their freedom ripped away. Worse yet, it pushed up the chance for tyranny to take over, should things go bad. Baro was giving up everything to stop that from happening. Even through her anger and breaking heart, she knew how this whole thing weighed on him. So many fates, literally in her hands.

If she pulled the trigger, she'd be picked up by the Principate before long. If not, she had a jammer to keep the *Screeching Osprey's* fighters from finding her. Her own safety was likely secure. For everyone else...

Her knuckles whitened around the detonator, thumb twitching as it hovered over the trigger. The signal would be out of range within a minute. *Now or never.* Eilen closed her wet eyes and made her choice.