

Horn in a Haystack: Epilogue

That shower Eilen finally let herself take was probably the most desperate cleaning she'd ever needed — well over an hour under cold water after an exhausting day in the desert, scrubbing the sweaty grime and coarse sand from her fur and the marring from her spirit with a quiet sulk on the floor. She could afford to cover the water, at least.

With her fur softly poofed and her hair back in its naturally disastrous state, she pulled the most comfortable clothing she owned from her rack and meandered to the galley, desperate to finally rehydrate. That one water bottle she'd chugged after boarding the ship just wasn't cutting it. She tried not to think of drinking anything else, but at the back of her mind, a bit of alcohol to drown her thoughts was admittedly tempting her.

She'd lost track of how long she'd been staring at her third glass of water when she sensed a shift in her quiet corner of the room. Heavy footsteps drew a flicker in her ears, and Eilen looked up to see Sully, of all people, walking nearby.

"Hey," he said. His mane was still tied back, and although he'd changed out of his armor, his fur was still slick, speckled with sand, and a bit odorous. It didn't make him look any less warm and welcoming. "How are you holding up?"

Eilen pulled aside her hair from under her hood as she realized it was covering most of her face. A part of her almost lied that she was fine, but either her father's influence or some desperate need to talk way down led her mouth elsewhere. Her fur made like a Bothan's and betrayed the thought anyway as it visibly curled downward, ears following suit. "Not really."

Sully looked at the other empty tables nearby, then back to her. Without much further thought, he set his tray of food and multiple drinks down diagonally from her and inched his hefty form into the bench. In spite of his entirely content expression, Eilen could feel the clutching sensation in his chest and the wear in his grinning muscles.

"Well, you can talk about it, if you want," Sully said as he lifted a bottle of something dark. "Would a drink help?"

Maybe, but the thought of old habits still told her no. Eilen shook her head. "...You can talk too, if you need to," she said back.

Sully shrugged and cracked open the other drink. "I'm doing okay, but thanks." He didn't so much as twitch in the little lie.

Eilen didn't have the strength to call it out. She sighed. "...That whole mission was really rough."

“Yeah, it was. But hey, you were pretty amazing.”

A light grin briefly graced her face, then faded. “Thanks. I just... wish it turned out easier.”

“Ah, yeah. It’s never really easy.” Sully took a hefty bite and added something else, but it was unintelligible. Without looking back to him, Eilen could sense that it was meant to be encouraging.

After a long pause, she spoke up again. “I... don’t feel like I was pretty amazing, really.”

She got a less content look from him. “Why’vs what?” he got out before swallowing.

“I mean... Yeah, I helped, but I also, like... screwed up, a few times. Almost real bad, too. And...” She exhaled hard. “I dunno, I just feel like things could have been better, and I just... I feel bad about the things that we did wrong, and... Maybe I’m not the best for this. I dunno.” A deeper thought scratched at her tongue, but Eilen held it back.

She was expecting Sully to try and smile back and tell her something nice, but when all she got was silence, she looked back up toward him. His gaze stared through her, loosening, then shifted away.

“...I’ve been on a lot of missions,” Sully started. “That’s usually how it goes. Something ends up wrong at the end, even if you try your best, do everything right... win. Just happens, and maybe you can fix it, maybe you can’t. Can’t really stop to worry about it if you can’t, though, or...” His face twitched, and he scratched his mangled cheek. “...Well. You just can’t.” He reached for his drink for a sip.

That boy from the settlement got caught in Eilen’s thoughts, and a crushingly ironic pit welled in her gut. The guilt felt worse for the fact that she’d already tried to block it out. It hit far too close to home.

“Do you think we did the wrong thing?” Eilen eventually asked.

Sully’s mangled face wrinkled. “I don’t know if I’m a good person to ask,” he figured, ever deflecting of that weight. “...but I think we did try our best. We always do,” he assured.

Perhaps he was right. Even when it felt like the people she cared about were against her — her mother, Baro — Eilen held firm. She hadn’t given up at any point, this mission, no matter how rough it had gotten. Still, it would have been nice to know that those she loved could keep supporting her. Ruka, Zig, and even Satsi still had her back. Even if Sera had Karran back in her life, she’d still be her friend. But would they really, after times like today? Eilen tried to tell herself it was just her anxiety suggesting otherwise.

Still, the feeling of being in the wrong, some way, somehow, pervaded her thoughts. Sure, she'd gone on this mission to save someone important, and one of Sera's most cherished connections, but she still had a secret little wish about it that brought her a pang of guilt. And a worse thought hung overhead: Her team's actions had ultimately done to that boy what her own mother's enemies had done to her when she was his age. Was it any better that his mother had tried to kill them? Were Eilen's own parents just as at fault when her dad was gunned down?

Eilen's arm unfurled from her chest to reach for that drink Sully had offered. Maybe she'd regret it later, but a bit of relief now seemed like a godsend. She stifled a gag as the first gulp went down, then followed it with another swig. "Gross," she mumbled.

Sully offered her a sheepish grin and scooted a little closer.

The silence lasted a little longer before Eilen asked, "Do— do you think, uh... I'm... worth... being loved?" She immediately huffed at herself and rolled her eyes, leaning her head away on her hand. "Sorry, that's a stupid question."

"...As worth it as anyone," Sully said lightly. "Really."

Eilen side-eyed him. "...Well... I mean, yeah, *everyone* kind of is, but, like... I'm..." She tried to find a safe way to call herself a screw-up afraid of commitment who'd lost ties with family and friends alike from her decisions, ideals, shortcomings, and failures.

As if reading her mind, Sully spoke up. "Hey, no one's perfect. That's why you can't let yourself get down when it looks bad. I think we'll all be okay, sooner or later."

Eilen's entire musculature seemed to lose some tension. She nodded. "...Thanks, Sully."

He smiled brightly. "Maybe if you just talk to people a little more, you'll see it from their eyes, yeah? You can learn a lot, that way."

Yeah, she knew, but...

Her clawed fingertips tapped on the table for a bit before she finally brought herself back to her feet. Her problems were far from resolved, but somehow, she'd found the strength to stand again. Though, as Eilen made to finally leave for her own room again, she could feel the weight still pressing down on Sully's shoulders. That made two of them, she supposed.

"...Hey," Eilen softly spoke back, "I hope you know... We might be the ones with powers, but... you're the one with magic in here." She tapped a finger to her heart. "You're the best, alright? And... you kinda always are."

Sully almost chuckled. "Ahh... Just trying to help."

“...It’s nice to see your face,” Eilen encouraged.

He looked up, having forgotten his mane was tied back. “Oh. Thanks.”

It was Eilen’s turn to smile at him, and she left on that note. Perhaps a lighthearted parting thought could help them both move on a little easier.