

Spark of Sabotage

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Blaster fire rained sideways from all directions throughout the halls as the Brotherhood fell back, the Collective moved up, and an invisible figure casually side-stepped along the *Nesolat's* walls to get behind the action. It was only after Eilen hadn't seen flashing lasers for several rooms that she finally dropped her concentration and faded back into full color. The easy part was over; now the hunt could begin.

As Eilen backtracked, the supporting lines of the Collective's forces were beginning to file through. Her synthweave suit wasn't an exact match to the unarmored personnel moving about, but no one seemed to be looking for an infiltrator moving in the same direction as everyone else. With the jetpack and all the gadgets she was hauling around on her belt and in the backpack she'd moved into her arms, she could pass for a Technocratic Guild agent easily enough - at least, as long as no one stopped to stare too closely at the tall lady with the tail. If anything though, her criminal years in the Outer Rim and recent experience with her Bothan mother should have prepared her for a mission like this. *Here's hoping*, she figured.

An officer came into view, and Eilen did her best to dishevel the contents of her bag and make herself look lost. Her remote slicing pad, designed by this very guild, was the one thing she ensured was in hand, its back facing forward to show their emblem. She hurried up to the man, a Falleen who matched a face from her intelligence briefing.

"Um, excuse me?" Eilen announced over the commotion. He glanced her way, and she grinned. She didn't have to fake the nervous twitch in her expression.

He tried to find a rank on her suit, but whatever he was looking for was blocked by the bag in her arms. Conveniently, she had a free moment to mentally note the details of his own synthweave suit. *Nailed it.*

"You lost?"

"I, uhh— I think so." Eilen's whole body tensed as more people with guns stepped past, all moving in a disturbingly identical fashion. Trying not to think of a fatal failure, she cleared her throat, then re-balanced her bag so she could wave her hand. "Sorry, hi! I need you to show me where I can find Gwendolyn."

Beneath her disarming appearance, her words were laced with an inner force of will that made the Falleen's face briefly go blank. He blinked twice without a response. It took all of Eilen's energy to keep her focus on this one command.

"...The, uh, Lord Supreme appointed me to, you know," she started rambling after a moment, "help her log erroneous feedback, and do some troubleshooting, and manage the surface-level maintenance on the AI network, and upkeep the—"

"I... will... show you where to find Gwendolyn," the Falleen stated awkwardly, only partially aware of his own words. "She's set up in hangar bay Besh-27, about to relocate," he said with a hand gesture pointing toward a hexagonal hall. Last chance to take in the details of his suit.

"Okaythankyou!" Eilen hurried off almost before the words were even out. She didn't glance back for fear of giving herself away if he realized what had just happened.

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The Brotherhood ships in the hangar had all been blasted to pieces, all debris either jettisoned out through the atmospheric shield or forced aside by Collective boarding craft. The lack of people drew Eilen's eyes toward the window of the security deck, where sure enough, she could make out the silhouette of a Twi'lek. That had to be her - Gwendolyn, or 'Sparks' as the briefing said she preferred. For someone assisting several groups at once remotely, it was the perfect place to be during the early phases of a station invasion, though with their forces all moved up, she'd surely be joining them soon.

A part of Eilen wondered if it might be easier to just show up with her lightsaber in hand than try a game of deception and sleight of hand, but caution slowed her thoughts. The briefings suggested her target was a solid combatant, which Eilen certainly wasn't, nor was she in any way intimidating in the first place. Besides, if she could pull this off without making too much noise, it would give the Brotherhood a surprise ace up their sleeve. It was the whole reason she was the one here. Still, alternative options were either capture or, worst-case scenario, kill. Anxious doubts aside, she hoped it wouldn't come to that.

With the officer's suit at the forefront of her imagination, Eilen honed her senses in on her target, subtle as she could be, and made her approach. The screens across the security room threatened to steal her curious attention, but her eyes remained locked forward as Sparks noticed her entrance. Still, the mounds of other equipment spread across the room — a table loaded with metal scraps, chemicals, power tools, and paints, as well as stacked explosive materials and charges sitting either side of the doorway — begged a lot of questions about what this woman was planning.

Sparks turned away from a wall of screens and a closely held datapad to see who'd entered. In a concentrated effort, Eilen imprinted every minor difference between what she and the Falleen were wearing on the woman's mind. Whether or not it was working would be the bane of her anxiety until this mission was finished.

"The hell are you supposed to be?" Sparks asked.

Eilen cleared her throat as she quickly thought up a name. "Uh— tah-ru," she sounded out as confidently as she could fake it. "Er, *Major* Ataru, assigned under—" *What was his name?* "—Commander Dreen." She almost afforded Sparks the moment of silence to speak, then quickly added, "They're wondering why you haven't moved forward yet. If Brotherhood naval forces gain an advantage, they could potentially retake this hangar."

"If that's the case, then they should hurry up and invade this station faster." Sparks looked Eilen up and down with a questioning expression that made the fur on her neck stand. Either the lady knew something was up, or— "You're pretty loaded up on gear for a messenger girl."

Eilen resisted any gesture of relief. Surely, her grenade launcher helped the look, but admittedly, her jetpack may have been a tad excessive. "Well, sometimes you have to do grunt work, right?"

"Obviously." Sparks turned back to the many screens, flipping between them rapidly. A datapad in her hands kept reclaiming her attention, though. "I told those grunts I need them to get me the central security hub to get the most out of this."

"At this rate, that might not take too much longer," Eilen said as a knot built in her throat. She stepped further in and began examining the many volatile materials and devices off to the side, trying to balance making notes and upkeeping her concentration. Thermal detonators, seismic charges, detonite tape, mines, charges - she had it all. The intel suggested Sparks dealt with explosives, sure, but this lady had enough firepower to blow out the entire hangar. If she was mainly here to support the AI-driven Collective soldiers, what was the deal here? "...My turn: you're packing quite the big bang for the girl in the chair."

"Duh," Sparks taunted, never looking away from her datapad for more than a few seconds. "Gotta always have a last contingency plan, like blasting the place into oblivion."

Well, kriff. That was definitely worse than she'd hoped before coming here. "...Aren't there a lot of, uh, valuable artifacts and intelligence on this station?"

"Yeah, but if things go to hell and we can't claim it, no use in letting the damn Sith keep it for themselves. Besides, it's their turn to suffer," Sparks added venomously.

Hmm... Much as Eilen didn't want the lady staring at her too long or too closely, she needed to get to the root of whatever connections she was maintaining, here. She needed a distraction, preferably one that seemed natural - anything to get the woman away from that datapad for just a minute. It was clearly her key focus, and thus Eilen's new focus. That...and Eilen's curiosity may have been creeping in.

"You think destroying everything we could learn about Force-users would be worth it?" She mainly asked to keep conversation going as she reexamined the explosive charges for ideas, but a part of her did want to know how desperate the Collective was.

"Why don't you ask *them*," Sparks spat. "They're the ones who have literally destroyed planets with millions of people, committed innumerable war crimes, and deceived entire systems to keep their tyranny going. So paranoid and desperate, they even destroyed their *own* planet once. Psh, literally the villains of the galaxy."

"...That's... a little more than I knew," Eilen said, trying to be convincing. Admittedly though, a part of her had to legitimately stop and think about her Clan's place in the galaxy for a moment. As she realized her concentration had faltered for a second, she quickly pushed her thoughts down. For all she knew for sure, Collective propaganda could have easily poisoned its people's minds.

"You know, for a Major, you seem a little out of the loop." Sparks whipped her head back toward Eilen. "Hey, don't you have somewhere to be?"

"Uhm—" *Frackin do something!* She was getting too obvious, and hadn't even put a plan into play yet. There had to be something, anything, that could get Sparks to screw off for just a minute.

...Come to think, there were only several explosive charges staring her in the face, and Eilen recognized the makes. A bad idea hit her, but an idea nonetheless. "Yeah, but they still wanted me to bring you—"

As Eilen stood herself back up, she deliberately kneed a mine she knew to be impact-resistant onto the floor, then threw herself back and clamped her head. "Ack!! Nonono—"

Sparks whipped her whole body toward the noise. "The hell'd you do?!"

The Twi'lek flew across the room like her life depended on it, and Eilen quickly backpedaled to where she'd been. *Now or never.*

Fast as her hands could move, Eilen pulled the slicer's datapad off her belt and plucked the code cylinder from it. A hasty glimpse revealed that Sparks' datapad had exactly one slot left for one, and Eilen damn near bent hers trying to get it in before the woman saw her.

"Blasted idiot," Sparks yelled from across the room, "you're lucky you didn't smack an impact grenade or ya could'a killed us all!"

"Uh— yeah, so sorry—" Eilen dropped her handiwork and stepped in front of another set of screens just before the Twi'lek turned back, furious.

"You know what, just go! Tell whoever I'll be there *after* he finishes his damn part!" She exhaled hard, returning to her position. "I've got enough to manage here to have his lessers stumbling around me."

"Yeah, sure. Will do." *Flawless execution*, Eilen critiqued to herself as she made for the exit. It worked, though. As long as Sparks didn't catch an extra code cylinder tucked all the way into her datapad, Eilen would just need to stay within range for her slicing tool to start digging through and screwing with any important files and applications. Perfect plan, from here on out.

Or, it felt perfect, until she almost walked face-first into a probe droid floating in the doorway. Her heart skipped a beat - no illusion would work on a droid. Wait, how long had she dropped her focus? *Frack!*

The droid beeped menacingly and hovered away at high speed. [*Intruder, intruder,*] it barked repeatedly.

With no back-up plan yet and an unnerving alert in the senses she'd had to ignore up to now, Eilen made a bolt for it, but the moment she stepped out, the exterior side of the door frame exploded.

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Eilen's senses jolted to wake her with a ragged gasp. The floor hugged her close, and existence itself was pain. The ache of just breathing made her want to scream.

She reached for her, well, *anything*, but couldn't spread her arms, nor kick her legs, flick her tail, or even open her mouth. Her eyes finally focused; atop burnt fur and synthweave, she was bound, and not by rope or wire. All pain was briefly forgotten at the heartstopping realization that several segments of her body were haphazardly wrapped in detonite tape.

"You know," came the voice of Sparks from the blurry distance, "I thought you'd wake up sooner. Aren't you supposed to have supernatural healing and perfect reflexes, or something unfairly powerful like that? Didn't even draw your lightsaber on me. Speaking of - thanks for the new toys. You might not know the difference between a Major's badge and a Commander's, but at least you've got good taste in gear."

Fracking, son of a... It took all her will to try and focus on the situation instead of reeling in pain and shouting obscenities at her own miscalculated effort.

As Eilen's vision cleared further, the weightless feeling on her back became obvious. With a quick glance, she spotted her bag, grenade launcher, and lightsaber all resting in a heap nearby... nearby, where it suddenly became clear she'd been dragged out into the hangar, near the atmosphere shield.

Okay... Don't panic... She breathed deep, trying to hone in on the heaviest points of trauma to her body and usher them into better condition. Despite the effort, her body trembled. *Don't... panic...* Why was it so hard not to panic in the face of death?

A heavy, sarcastic sigh from Sparks reclaimed Eilen's attention. "A part of me thought when you walked in that there was *no way* you could have super-senses and not notice the trap. Guess you were trying too hard to pull off the look to catch it, though. But hey, it's a good thing detonite tape doesn't cause *too big* an explosion, or you'd already be dead, and what good is that?"

The Twi'lek scooped up her datapad from atop the pile of gear and strode confidently toward her, lowering herself with clearly too much enjoyment in just looking down to see a face. Up close, Eilen realized she was wearing her jetpack like a shiny new prize. The probe droid from before hovered behind her.

"Nah, it's gonna be a *lot* more fun to see how much it can mess up a person with direct contact," Sparks continued, "especially one so... long and spindly, heh. That should make for some nice, long ribbons."

Through her fear and banging chest, Eilen couldn't help but glare at that disturbingly gory thought. This woman wasn't just making a show of things, she was freaking insane! Perhaps Eilen couldn't speak aloud, but her mind wasn't bound shut. "*You sure like to gloat,*" she slowly spoke through thought.

A moment of alien confusion crossed Sparks' face at the voice in her head, but her confident grin returned. "And you're still making too much noise, so why don't we hurry this along?" She held the screen of her datapad up for Eilen to see, then held her finger near a button.

You gotta be karking me. There had to be something, anything, that could give Eilen an advantage. Could she use her claws? Her fingers could still flex, but she'd need a distraction.

"If you can't give me the clearance codes for this station's central security office, not only will we eventually break through anyway, but you'll have literally nothing worth your life to stop me from tossing you out of the atmo shield and turning you into fireworks. You've got some kinda telepathy? Make use of it."

That...actually gave her a bad idea. A terrible idea, really, but between that and assured death, what did Eilen have to lose? Through gritted teeth and pain in all directions, she slowly shut her eyes to try and focus.

"...Not even gonna put up a fight?" Sparks shook her head with a chuckle. "Figured you wouldn't talk anyway, damn zealots." Her head turned to face the droid. "Giver her a shov—"

The probe droid slammed into Sparks and threatened to push her all the way to the atmosphere shield before her small frame shifted to hit the floor. Her datapad slid aside as the droid frantically shifted its repulsorlifts to regain control of itself.

Perfect.

With a deep breath, Eilen twisted her fingers and forced her claws through bits of the detonite tape, making enough progress to freely, painfully, flex her wrists and cut her opposing forearms free. Her hands frantically tore off the bit stuck to her face, ripping out some fur with it. The threat of its explosive power still loomed over the rest of her body, very much affixed to her burnt suit and exposed fur, but she didn't have time to completely rip it off or undress.

Sparks finally rolled back onto her feet and made a dive for her datapad. Fast as she could move, Eilen whipped both hands to call the device into her grasp, leaving the Twi'lek to hit the floor empty-handed. The fury of an all-too-prideful opponent was obvious even at a distance when Sparks turned to glare back at her.

The half-Bothan's senses didn't fail as her shorter adversary scrambled up and drew a weapon. Blaster bolts that could've taken out Eilen's arms one at a time were stopped just short of their marks by the barrier she immediately summoned. Already struggling to keep it up, Eilen's eyes went wide when she saw Sparks quickly swap her pistol for a micro-grenade launcher. The explosive impact blew her barrier away like it was nothing, leaving her to drop onto her back as the datapad slipped from her weakened grasp.

"Well, you sure decided to make this more interesting *now*," Sparks called over as she reloaded her weapon. "Though, I'm starting to think you'd make a better display right here in the hangar, instead of out in space! More permanent fixture, that way."

Before Eilen could figure out a plan of action, Sparks engaged the jetpack and soared low to the ground right toward her. The half-Bothan called her lightsaber to her hand where she lay, but no attack came. Her foe blew past her out of reach, instead swiping the datapad off the floor as she went.

Oh, not good. Eilen's injuries and bindings certainly weren't doing her any favors as she frantically struggled to stand, trip, and pull her way to her heap of equipment. Hands tore through her bag like her life depended on it; which it frankly did. She held her breath as she dug out her slicer's pad and mashed the key to initiate its remote link.

Her ears twitched as the boom of the jetpack came to a stop atop a landing craft nearby. Sparks let out a mad, victorious laugh and made a proud display of her datapad and the big red button on its screen. "Let's try this one more time, huh?!" the lady called down.

Eilen's hand shook as her slicing tool searched for its code cylinder, and she gasped to see it was still plugged into the Twi'lek's datapad. Her fingers raced for dear life to overtake it.

"Thanks again for the toys, and say hi to Daggo Mouk for me!"

Sparks went for the button. Eilen's heart froze as her whole body tensed.

Nothing happened. According to Eilen's tool, the datapad's input was now locked. She exhaled hard, then reached for her grenade launcher.

The sound of angry tapping practically bled Sparks' frustration. "The hell—?!"

"Tell him yourself," Eilen breathed as she took aim and fired.

The grenade blasted open the jetpack's plating, setting off its fuel and blowing both engines. Every tool on Sparks' belt ignited at once, lighting up the hangar in a combined explosion that shook the floor. The ship where she had stood had a fresh scorch across its hull. Burnt and dented debris that Eilen could only assume were the remains of the jetpack and whatever gadgets the Twi'lek had on her person scattered across the hangar floor.

This hadn't been the intention, and now Eilen felt sick on top of her pains, but she was alive. Given the woman's disturbing desire for gore, she told herself this was okay, and swallowed the guilt that threatened to build up.

With about a minute of work, Eilen managed to cut the rest of her body free. Legs shaking, she pulled herself to her feet and stumbled around toward the different bits of debris that had fallen until she finally found what was left of the datapad. It was little more than garbage at this point, but once she'd removed the back plate, she was glad to see some components weren't completely destroyed. She plucked its memory drive and held it close as she limped back to her things. Whatever direct connection Sparks had to her AI soldiers might not have been salvageable, but with luck, the data could still provide the Brotherhood an advantage against the technologically hive-minded freaks.

With what energy she had left, Eilen ripped the remaining cuts of detonite tape off her suit one chunk at a time, then finally flopped onto her back, where she slowly focused on her training in healing. It was going to be a pain in the tail to get back in a timely fashion.

She didn't quite catch the probe droid that had hovered out in a hurry.