

Sparks in the Void

Gwen had always thought that the detonation of a thermal imploder was the most beautiful thing in the galaxy. It started...oddly quiet. A silent corona of flame, bursting to life around a pure white star-burst of energy. She had studied what came next extensively. Solid fuel sublimated into a fine vapor, and after mixing with atmospheric oxygen, ignited into an initial ball of flame that expanded into a blinding disk of heat. In the next microsecond, that orb of fire collapsed, imploding into a single point, a hovering dot of condensed potential energy. It was blinding, entrancing. Then, only a millisecond later, it exploded into a terrible nova of molten light. Sparks, like a glowing hail of stars, screamed in the void.

She had seen it happen hundreds of times before. Now, with an imploder detonating only feet before her, the details would be even more clear. It was her own fault, of course. Her old mentor would have been positively livid with her, forsaking all the easy chances that had been given to her. Even after years, Gwen had never learned her lesson about playing with her test subjects.

Too late now. Her throw had gone... badly awry when the damned Zabrak shattered her wrist. The imploder had slipped from her grasp, glanced off the glass of the viewport, and rolled right back towards them, beeping the whole way. If she had had the time, Gwendolyn almost would have laughed at the sight.

At least her death would be beautiful... and hadn't she always wanted to go out with a bang?

The fuse ticked its last, and the cylinder burst. She saw the stages play out before her in slow motion. The burst of light. The ball of flame. The collapse, the fluttering star. Then, the nova.

The last thing she felt was the heat of a dozen suns washing over her, searing away her flesh, melting her implants to dross... and the void rushed to meet her.

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10 Minutes Earlier

Sera wished that she could say the battle for the platform was going well. The fact that she *really, really couldn't* was a sign of just how far the whole situation had devolved. By the time Arcona had arrived, the station's defenses had already been half-crippled, its security decimated from the inside. They *still* weren't fully aware of exactly what kind of monsters the Technocrats had brewed up, and their tendency for turning themselves into works of impressionist art splattered across the station's interior helped in no way whatsoever. Not that the Zabrak could make heads or tails out of all of the bionic nonsense that had been shoved into them. The Force told her that they were unnatural, their minds... uniform. Conjoined. More than that, they were bastards in a fight. Arcona had paid with blood for their toe-hold on the station, to ensure the safety of the Dark Councilors aboard. The blood of Sera's friends. Her crew. Her family.

Now, she stalked alone. For the new Technocrats, whatever they were, had fought like beasts to repulse larger groups of fighters. The summit -or more specifically Lucine- had decided that elite one-man teams would work better, punching deep into the Collective's battle-lines on the station. Their objective was still unclear...as was who, exactly, was leading them. The augmented marines, whatever the hell they were, certainly weren't in charge. Someone was pulling the strings, and the Clan needed them dead. Of course, knowing just how lethal their new enemies were, it would very likely be a suicide mission.

So, naturally, Sera had volunteered.

The Zabrak stepped carefully through the ruined corridors of the station, cutting a careful path around swathes of spilled blood and shattered glass, taking care not to breathe too deeply. This deep into the Academy, she had long moved on from familiar classrooms to more... involved research areas. The station's administration sector was devoted to two purposes; technical control, and advanced study. This particular section appeared to have been devoted to Sith alchemy, if the bizarre combination of chemistry equipment and arcane runes was any indication. Whatever the case, study time was over. Dead staff and security carpeted the floor, smoking, many ripped to pieces by explosive force.

That was the print by which the huntress was tracking, quietly humming under her breath as she vaulted over a shattered obsidian obelisk that lay in her path. The alusteel plating of the station's floor didn't exactly leave foot-prints for her to follow, and there was no scent upon the wind for her to monitor. But, whoever the hell was leading the tip of the Collective's spear seemed to have a certain... proclivity for pyrotechnics. It certainly left an easy trail. Craters, wafting plumes of sulfurous smoke, and shrapnel-scarred bodies weren't exactly hard to miss.

They drove the Zabrak forward like little else. She cared nothing for the station, or for the Headmistress' wishes, if she was being totally honest. Arx meant nothing to her. It wasn't her home. But...lost lives, shattered souls...that meant something to her. To her honor.

Most of all, it reminded her of her friends. The people that she was fighting to protect. *They* were her home. If she let the station fall, all of them would die. If she let the Collective find victory on Arx, countless more would as well.

She **would not** let that happen. Whoever this monster was...she wouldn't let them take another life. Not until she'd had her shot, at least.

Stepping carefully past shattered chemistry sets and the smoking outlines of ruined rituals, Sera continued on her way through the Alchemical sector. Just ahead, the station schematics outlined a secondary control center, acting as a sort of backup for the *Nesolat's* bridge. The technical jargon meant absolutely nothing to Sera, but it had been outlined by the Summit as a likely target. Take it, as they already had, slice it, and the Collective could seize partial control

over the station, giving them a clear shot to assault the remaining Brotherhood forces. From the look of it, the blast-door that led into the station had been partially melted, smoke and sparks pouring out of it's half-open maw. But, as she opened her mind to the Force, reaching out for any nearby minds... she felt nothing within.

She *did*, however, feel a group approaching from directly ahead of her. Cursing under her breath, the Zabrak ducked near a burning desk, smoke enveloping her form. Sera forced herself to calm, concentrating on the Force to hold the breath within her lungs, and to provide her with sight, even as the smoke blinded her. Down the hall, she felt unfamiliar lifeforms drawing closer, three separate entities...or was it two? She felt a peculiar blur between a pair of the minds, as if they were conjoined... and prodding deeper brought her nothing good. A field of stars, an immense network of eyes and thoughts and feelings, woven into a tapestry of intelligence and information. It wasn't organic. But it was alive.

Shuddering from within the smoke, Sera swiveled her attention away, deciding to touch upon the *other* mind. It was comfortingly natural, yet still twisted. Burning with a passion, a febrility that bordered upon simple madness. It was a woman. An immensely intelligent, and intensely cruel one. Sera felt her step on by where she had hidden herself, before she seemed to stop, the sound of footsteps ceasing. A bead of sweat dripped down the Zabrak's brow.

The woman gave a slight *harrumph*, and an odd sense of knowing filled her mind as she marched onward. Sera gave the trio a few seconds head start, her hearts settling within her chest. Then, still within her deep, huntress' crouch, she followed on behind them. Unfortunately, she didn't notice the probe droid, following silently in her tracks.

At the door to the control center she turned to the side, silently sidling through the half-blasted durasteel, stepping quietly out onto the staircase beyond.

A click sounded beneath her, and the Force *screamed* within her mind.

Jump! Away!

Reflexively obeying the impulse, Sera channeled a burst of unnatural strength into her musculature and leaped for all that she was worth, just as something exploded directly beneath her. The sheet of flame that it threw after her set the hem of her snowy white cloak ablaze, and the blast-wave ended up throwing her much higher than she had intended. She wasn't given even a second to take in her surroundings as she flew, end over end, landing *hard* on her back, the air expelled from her lungs with a strangled gasp.

The sound of clapping greeted her ears as the dull ringing faded, accompanied by a coarse, biting laughter. Looking up, past her feet, Sera saw a Twi'lek approaching her, accompanied on two sides by two of the hulking marines that she had already been fighting for half the day. The Twi'lek's frame was slight, even shorter and slimmer than Sera's, a battered grenade launcher

held in the crook of her arm while she applauded herself. A probe droid moved to hover right above her shoulder, somehow looking very, very smug. “Y’know, I’m almost *glad* you managed to flail your way out of that. It’s so much more satisfying, getting to play with my subjects a little bit...but I’m afraid I don’t have the time,” she laughed cruelly, signalling the two marines forward with a flick of her wrist. They advanced wordlessly, their armored plating gleaming like polished shadow under the control center’s lights. As one, they raised their blasters.

Sera thrust one hand forward before they got a shot off, slamming them backward with a wave of telekinetic energy. They caught themselves quickly, their movements seeming to mirror one another as they fell back, regaining their balance. Anchored by the weight of their armor, in conjunction with their augmented strength, it only took them a second to snap back to attention, rifles rising simultaneously.

That second was all that Sera needed. Tensing her core, she curled her body into a ball before tipping up to her feet, her saber and Zabradi dagger flying into her palms. She charged as the golden blade ignited, the gleam reflecting against the bronze sheen of her armor. Streams of crimson plasma hissed through the air, slamming against her shining blade with a distinctive crackle. Deflecting their shots away, the Zabrad charged directly into their midst.

There was a blur of yellow light, and their carbines were sheared away in an instant, smoking barrels falling to the floor. Immediately, the two soldiers responded as a single entity, one pushing into Sera’s side to try and throw her into the other’s rifle butt, both reaching for vibrodaggers with their free hands. The Zabrad ducked underneath the blow instead, using her momentum to roll in between them, her smoking cloak flaring out behind her. On the ground behind them, she pivoted on her dagger-bearing hand, driving her heel into the side of one soldier’s knee, the weight of his armor bearing down on him as the leg collapsed with a sickening crunch. He didn’t cry out as he fell, nor as her saber cut through his wrist, his vibrodagger clattering to the floor with a metallic buzz. Silently, she thanked her ancestors for the mobility that her brand new set of plate had given her. Without it, she *never* would have been able to pull that maneuver off.

It didn’t do much to pad against the kick that slammed into her ribs, however, as the standing Marine moved to avenge his fellow’s wound. Lashing outward with another straight kick he knocked her saber from her hand. The soldier’s free hand took Sera by the collar of her cloak, yanking her up as he tried to slam his dagger into her gut. Hissing, she desperately knocked the stab aside with her left vambrace, the blade jarring against the metal. Then, flipping her own dagger around in her other hand, she drove the short, Zabradi-forged blade up into his armpit, underneath the armored plate. Flesh parted like butter, and warm blood poured out over her hand.

She knew what came next. Luckily...the time it took for a man to bleed out provided a pretty good fuse for the explosion that would follow his death. Baring her teeth in a snarl, she ripped free of his weakening grip, and kicked the body on top of his prostrated comrade. Sunken pits

dotted the control center, computer stations for technicians to work within while their superiors looked on. Sighting one of these just behind her, Sera dove in...just before two detonations sounded off directly behind her, one after the other, accompanied by a terrible wet *splatter*.

Silence followed, yet, Sera sensed that she wasn't alone. At the start of the fight, the Twi'lek had just...scampered off, bolting while Sera fought. Taking a deep breath, the Zabrak peered out over the lip of her pit, finally able to take the room in. There were three other pits like her's, spaced in the control center's four corners, with central walkways converging into a large conflux of shattered computers and communication equipment along the far wall. That same wall was mostly composed of transparisteel, providing a clear view of Arx, the energy shield over it, and the massive battlefield that was consuming the void beyond it.

A few feet away, where the walkways converged, a patch of gore, viscera, and pulverized bone steamed under the station's synthetic lighting, a bloody helmet sitting atop one of the broken consoles. The largest remaining piece of the marines, what looked to be most of a lower torso, slid wetly into one of the pits as Sera watched, utility belt clattering to the ground. She heard a series of clicks, like a belt being unlatched. Then, nothing.

The quiet returned for a few moments more. Then, a voice cut through the air, emanating from a pit directly across from Sera's, into which the body had fallen. "Well...I would call clean-up to Control Center Besh, but I think we killed all the cleaning crews already. Oh well," the Twi'lek joked, her laughter cutting the air once again. "It certainly was a nice *bang*. I've gotta say, I'm impressed, Zabby. You certainly put on a better show than any of the poor Pada-whatevers did...buuuut, they were good target practice, I guess."

Sera growled in response, anger rising in her hearts. "You're...a frakking monster," she responded, slowly climbing out from her cover, approaching with her Zabraki dagger held outstretched. Her saber was still discarded behind her, waiting.

There was silence for a few moments more...then another chuckle. "Maybe... maybe not. 'Least I don't try hiding it, like you filthy Force-user types. I swear, you're all the same. So predictable. Let me tell you, I've *never* bought into all of Rath's crap about the Force, but you still make it *painfully* believable. Black cloaks, blood rites, electrocution...at least what I do is *quick*... and there's a science to it. I don't expect you to understand, of course...you're just another *subject*."

A metallic click sounded from the pit directly across from Sera, followed immediately by a high pitched *beep* as something flew out, sailing in a tight-arc directly towards her. Screaming out a curse in Zabraki, she tried to dodge out of the way as the Force shouted warnings into her mind, but there just wasn't enough time. The grenade burst in mid-air, just above her, its fuse timed to detonate perfectly. But, it didn't rain fire and shrapnel, as it might have. Instead, it burst into a rain of bright-blue adhesive, throwing a net over Sera's form. It didn't pull her down. Instead, it dried around her, forming a hardened blue shell that stung against her skin, choked the breath from her lungs. The suffocating prison didn't budge even an inch as she struggled,

her attempts getting her nowhere. Then, once again, laughter cut through the shattered control station.

“Well, taking *that* from one of those damned lugs was a bright idea. At least they did me some frakkin’ good. But, I didn’t make ‘em for the brawn. More...more for the mind...” the Twi’lek chuckled, vaulting smoothly from her pit. There was a manic light in her eyes as she approached Sera’s frozen form, a roll of black *tape* unrolling in her hand. It would have been... so ridiculously easy for her to simply kill the Zabrak. So simple. Sera was... helpless. And she hated it.

One finger twitched, cracking the glue around it. The Twi’lek didn’t notice, almost seeming to talk to herself. “Now, won’t you be fun to... to burn... wish I had more time...”

Mumbling to herself, she wrapped the wad of tape around Sera’s neck like a noose. Another finger twitched on her right hand, and Sera felt her will clenching within herself, a deafening cry of outrage and anger rising to a fever pitch. She had said that she wouldn’t let this woman take one more life. Not one of her friends, not one of her allies. Not her. Another few fingers flexed, and the glue began to crack.

The Twi’lek raised a detonator before her, a manic, addicted look crossing her eyes. She was sick. Insane. A monster... and a fool. She should never have underestimated Sera.

The Zabrak balled her right hand into a tight, coiled fist, sending a predetermined signal coursing through her armor’s systems, directly into her vambraces. With a dull *phoomp*, the repulsor within her right vambrace activated, shattering the glue that had locked her arm in place. A half second-later, that same balled fist slammed directly into the Twi’lek’s larynx, her laughter cutting off as her throat was forced shut.

The woman staggered backwards, choking. Sera just hissed through clenched teeth, once again channeling the Force into her musculature. The drying adhesive around her left arm broke apart as she flexed, her fist swinging in a short arc to slap the detonator from her opponent’s hand. From there, the glue’s chemical strength deteriorated rapidly, cracking and falling away in stringy blue flakes as Sera pressed forward. Driving onto her right foot, she leaned *hard* into a toe-up kick directly between the Collective agent’s legs. As she buckled at the waist, gasping at the sharp shock of pain, Sera took her by the lekku with her free hand and slammed her knee directly’s into the woman’s face, sending her stumbling backward.

The Twi’lek scrambled backwards desperately, fumbling as she brought her grenade launcher around, but Sera didn’t give her even half a moment to aim. She jerked the barrel aside just in time, the grenade exploding cacophonously in the pit to their left. Both of them were showered with shrapnel, a stream of hot blood cutting through the sweat and dried blue goop that coated Sera’s face. The Twi’lek just grunted, releasing one hand from around the launcher to jab at the

Zabrak's face, only for her to pull away, yanking the launcher from the Agent's grip and tossing it away.

"Karkin' frackhat!" the Twi'lek spat, still backpedalling. Unfortunately for her, she was very rapidly running out of space. She had had control over the situation, an easy victory had been within her grasp, and she'd thrown it away. Sera could feel the sudden fear in her, the terror that she'd given in to helpless addiction to destruction, to cruelty. It was the feeling of a cornered animal...and one that remained incredibly intelligent...and very, very dangerous.

"What's the matter? Losing control of your...lab environment?" Sera suggested, a toothy grin spreading over her face.

"No... shut *up*, **shut up!** I'll...I'll see you **burn!**" the Twi'lek screamed in response. In a flash, she whipped a blaster from the holster on her hip, bringing her other hand up to point directly at Sera. She fired in a flash, without even aiming, and the Zabrak just barely managed to turn in time, flinging her cloak out before her. It absorbed a portion of the opening volley, the sterling cloth smoking as it burned anew, allowing her armor to absorb the rest. Still, one shot got through, singeing painfully into Sera's shoulder, the scent of burning flesh joining that of cloth and plastic...but, by then, she was already charging forward, a shield of energy emerging from her left vambrace to absorb further fire. As she sprinted on, she pulled her saber to her hand from across the room, the blade igniting into a golden blur mid-swing.

The Twi'lek ducked underneath, death passing her by mere inches. Now pressed against the control station's central terminal, computers and transparisteel barring her retreat, she pivoted, barely dodging another blow as Sera's blade cut a smoking arc right through a navigational computer. She tried to pivot on her feet, rapidly shifting her direction to escape, to make space. The Zabrak had other plans. Continuing a rapid chain of attacks, she slashed right, and then left, heading the Twi'lek off in each direction, before planting a straight-kick directly into her chest, knocking the other woman back against the smoking central console.

The Twi'lek didn't stay down for long, pressing right into Sera's guard. One hand locked around Sera's left wrist, desperately holding the saber back. The other squeezed down on her blaster's trigger, trying to charge a shot to plant right in her opponent's gut while they were grappling. But, eyes on the saber, she didn't see the dagger flashing around before it was too late, the keen blade nearly severing her right thumb. Her half-charged shot went wild, burning across Sera's side with a hiss and the noxious odor of burning flesh. It pushed the Zabrak back a step, giving her opponent precious time to breathe, to think.

Their eyes met. Bright blue clashed against beady, oily black. Then, the crimson-skinned woman hissed, and pointed her right hand directly at the ground between them.

"Burn."

Jump back!

There was a hiss as the wrist-rocket roared to life, the Force once again warning Sera just in time to save her life... but not enough to avoid the blast completely. She felt the shockwave throw her backward, rolling across the gore and glue spattered flooring. Her entire front was singed, her flesh tingling with burns, her frontal horns throbbing, cracked. Twin trickles of blood ran out of both of her ears. Pulling at the Force, she compelled her body to ignore her pain, pushing the agony away for at least a few moments.

She looked up just in time to sight a thermal detonator, flying directly at her. It seemed to be wrapped in flaming detonite tape, sparking like an infernal shooting star. Sera just barely managed to duck it, tucking into a roll and continuing her run forward. She heard it impact against the wall behind her, another deafening detonation filling the room. She couldn't even see her opponent through the thick smoke that clogged the air, running based on the trajectory of the detonator, and the vague presence that she sensed through the Force.

Sera found her enemy staggering on her feet. The Twi'lek's slight body, armored only with a synthweave jumpsuit, was pockmarked with shrapnel, bleeding from dozens of wounds. Her bionic eye was twitching in her skull, sparking, and one lekku was badly shredded at the tip. Again, their eyes met.

There was silence for a long moment, interrupted only by the popping of burst circuits as fire spread through the room. Sera felt her opponent's desperation, coloring the Force around her like the glow from a bonfire. There was fear there, rage... and a growing mania, widening cracks within the subconscious. It filled her with pity... and anger, darkness growing where before there had only been light.

"Why... why are you here? Why are you killing for these monsters?" Sera questioned, her voice piercing incredulous. She simply didn't understand. Her patience wasn't helped when the Twi'lek laughed in response, her giggles cutting off into a wet, racking cough.

"Same...same reason as you. Same reason as anyone. The Collective...gives me what I need," she choked out, her gaze boring into Sera's face.

"What...what do you mean?" the Zabrak asked in turn, provoking another snort of laughter.

"Don't...don't play games with me. We all have something. Money. Power...."

"No. I'm fighting for my friends. For my-..."

"Banthashit," the Twi'lek interjected, spitting a bloody wad before her. "I've... seen you kill. I know your type. You think I'm a monster? Sure...sure. The Collective wanted me for what I can create...those little toy soldiers...but all I want...all I want to do is destroy.," she murmured, her

voice lowering into a wet, mocking croak. Then, her gaze flitted back up to meet Sera's, the damaged cybernetic eye narrowing. "I see that in you. You... you just want to kill me...just like I want to see you burn."

The two women stared at each other for another half-second. Then, they moved in unison. The Twi'lek reached to her belt and drew a thick, silver cylinder, pressing a button on the surface. When she moved to throw it, however, it was already too late, Sera had sprinted forward, before pivoting on her back foot and twisting her torso to drive her left foot into a blazingly hard roundhouse kick. It connected with the Twi'lek's outstretched wrist and didn't even pause in its track, bending flesh and shattering bone with a wet *snap*, blood spraying. The cylinder went flying, bouncing against the hyperglass window before rolling right to their feet.

The fuse ticked down. Sera still grappled with the half-crippled Twi'lek, desperately trying to force her away. Roaring, the Zabrak slammed a headbutt into her opponent's face, blood spraying into the air as her needlelike horns dug deep into flesh and bone. Kicking her opponent's legs out from under her, she turned and ran.

She didn't see the silent fireball, the beauty of the hovering halo. She did, however, feel the shockwave slam into her, throwing her across the room. She did feel the shrapnel, slicing through her armor like paper, the heat burning her cloak to ash. She did hear the blast, like the thunder of her ancestors cracking in her skull, totally deafening her.

She landed in a motionless heap...and lay there for a few moments. Breathing. Trying to recover what remained of her scattered thoughts. Then, groaning deeply, Sera pushed herself onto her elbows, surveying the wreckage of what had once been her opponent. There...wasn't much left to speak of. What concerned her more was the web of cracks spreading out through the transparisteel window behind her, the surface finally beginning to buckle. Cursing under her breath, the Zabrak scrambled to her feet, sprinting for the ruined door.

She made it out just in time. Behind her, the control station's viewport shattered, the fires within extinguishing instantly as the room's atmosphere was vented. The last few scraps of Sera's opponent were condemned to the void.

And good riddance, the Zabrak thought to herself, grinning.