

*Flip.*  
*Flip.*  
*Flip.*

“...Stand.”

*Flip.*  
*...Flip.*

“Sith-spit!”

The galley erupted as Dax slammed his fist on the table, scattering the Pazaak cards in frustration. Grot flashed a sinister grin and pulled in his winnings. He had only started shuffling the deck when Dax kicked his chair out from underneath him, glaring daggers.

“Frakking trando, says you din’ play Pazaak!”

“I said I did not play Pazaak often.”

“Frakking hustler! Cheat!” The Kiffar fumed, grabbing the knife on his belt and leaping onto the table, scattering Pazaak cards to the floor. Grot jumped up to his feet, his vibro-blade springing from his gauntlet as he backed away. The two mercenaries stared each other down, only a few short feet separating them as a tense silence filled the galley.

“Come off it, Dax!” A scarred and half-shaven human pushed himself to the front, “We’re under contract, I’m not having ship-sec up my ass about you two scrapping like \*tookas\*.” The pair looked at each other, unwilling for a moment to surrender, before sheathing their weapons.

“That’s good. Now, Grot, how’s about we celebrate your newfound largesse with a round for the men on you!” The company cheered in response, and even Dax cracked a smile as the gang of mercenaries swarmed the dispenser for an extra alcohol ration. Grot’s grin slipped away as he considered the damage to his purse.

“How generous of you to spend my credits for me, Captain Ghent.”

“Credits that you hustled off Dax and his mates,” Ghent sighed and took a seat across from Grot, “a practice I would advise against if you wish to succeed here.” The old veteran locked eyes with Grot and gave him a withering stare.

“Understood, Captain,” Grot hissed, leaning down to gather his Pazaak cards.

“Good man. Good man...” He chuckled, but gave Grot a sideways look. He pulled a pipe from his vest, asking, “Where’d you learn to play Pazaak anyhow?”

*Red hair and green eyes. Jewelry flickered in the candlelight as her soft fingers flipped the Pazaak cards one by one. Sickly sweet poison flowed from her cherry red lips.*

“My old employer.”

“You’ve said that, but never who this ‘employer’ of yours was or what you did for ‘em.”

*It was small. Innocuous really. A simple, grey datacard slid across the Pazaak table. It couldn’t have weighed more than a few grams, but even still, it felt heavy in his claws.*

Captain Ghent frowned as his question was ignored. He leaned back in his chair, looking up to the harsh florescents light and taking a puff of his pipe. The smoke trailed off, lazily floating up towards the ceiling, its short existence quickly snuffed out by an air vent.

“We all got our devils, Grot. Whoever it was, whatever you did, I ain’t about to force it out of ya’.” He looked back down to Grot and leaned in close across the table. “But *\*this\** outfit, what we’re doing here... It means something. This may just be another job to you but you gotta realize, lot o’ these guys, this is their first real chance of having something. Something real. What the Collective’s doing here, I ain’t never seen. We got a chance, a chance to be somebody, a chance to be a part of something great. You don’t care, I respect that, but these men, this company, they believe. They believe that, just this once, we can fight for something other than credits.”

“We can fight for Oligard.” The Captain’s gaze was intense as he spoke. His voice low, and filled with conviction. “And if you want to stay in my employ, you better get with the program.”

“Understood, Captain.”

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Grot examined the datacard closely, holding it delicately between his claws for fear of breaking it. He looked back to the woman across the table quietly sipping wine, and clicked his teeth in confusion.

“And this is?”

“A datacard,” she giggled, her speech ever so slightly slurred. “Just the solution to the Brotherhood's little problem”

“The *Braga*?”

“Did you imagine I was making friendly conversation when I told you about it?” she gave a sly, joking grin and leaned in conspiratorially “I have been watching you closely, Grot, and I think you are just the hunter for this beast.”

The Trandoshan frowned. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong, a nagging suspicion that he was missing something.

"The Brotherhood surely has more experienced agents."

"Exactly the problem. The longer an agent remains in our service, the harder it becomes to maintain secrecy. Leaks happen, covers get blown, and their connections with the Brotherhood become more and more obvious..."

"And I have only just joined."

"Precisely. Moreover, you have a reputation as a mercenary in this area..."

"You intend to insert me into the Collective's military."

"You're quick. Guess you can't always believe what they say about Trandoshans." She gave a smouldering glance to his scars "Though I am certain some... other things are true."

Grot swallowed, feeling distinctly out of his depth. Still, there was that nagging feeling that something was wrong. "What do you expect me to do, kill every crewman on board?"

She laughed, a delicate, musical thing that made him smile to hear, "I have no doubt that you would try! No, nothing so... grotesque. I need you to take and insert this disc into the *Braga's* main reactor console. I trust our splicer's little creation to handle the rest. Our agents will be supporting you every step of the way. We only need you to get close enough to land the killing blow."

Wrong, wrong, wrong! This was wrong. His mouth was dry, he struggled for words but found none. He looked closely at her face, and back down to the datastick...

Her face. Her body heat was irregular, she was too cold. He sniffed the air, taking a deep breath, where before he had been holding it in. The scent of alcohol was too weak. The sways of her body were too rhythmic to be unintentional.

She wasn't drunk. So why was she pretending? Was it a trick? A trap? She was lying... what else could she be lying about? His head swam, his thoughts blurred. He needed time, he needed to think. Some time to think, just some time...

"I—"

"Grot," she grasped his claw, looking him in the eyes, "I understand if you do not want to do this. It is a lot to ask, especially of someone so new and inexperienced—"

Her words echoed like thunder in his head. He felt his blood rise and the call to the hunt sing in his veins.

“I will do it.”

He had won Pazaak that night, quite easily in fact.

So why did she smile as if she had won?

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Lucine had provided him a transport on his way out of Dajorra. Departing from port Q’sal, it had taken him to some backwater trading post where Captain Ghent’s company happened to be hiring. Ghent was a well known to the Brotherhood, a Collective mercenary working under contract for Capital Enterprises.

Shortly after he signed, Ghent had gotten a sudden and unexpected promotion. From running recruitment on backwater worlds, Capital Enterprises had decided to promote him to a ship security position.

And where else but the *Braga*.

He would have condemned it as horribly unlikely, if he didn’t already know how carefully orchestrated it was. Lucine, for all her talk, had never really given him a choice. She had to have had this planned since before the ink dried on his contract.

“ON YOUR FEET SCUM! DUTY CALL!” The Captain’s thunderous command echoed through the barracks, waking Grot from his contemplation. He finished cleaning his rifle and began putting on his blast armor as the Captain began reading the duty assignments for the day. He perked up as his name was called. “Grot! Dax! With me, double time!”

He fell in behind the Captain alongside Dax, eyeing the Kiffar warily as they made their way out of the barracks. The two of them had avoided each other since the incident in the galley, preferring to keep to themselves. Dax met his gaze and growled.

The Captain was unusually quiet as they entered the turbolift. His face was set like granite as he entered the commands into the console. The serious atmosphere was infectious, and both he and Dax stiffened.

“What I’m about to say does not leave this room. Is that understood?”

“Yah, ‘Cap.”

“Understood, Captain.”

“We’ve been selected for a special mission for the Collective. Collective intelligence says that we’ve got a spy on board.”

“A spy?” The Kiffar furrowed his thick brow.

“I hope Skipper’s wrong about this one, but he thinks the Brotherhood might have snuck one of their own on board. They intend to sabotage the *Braga*.”

Grot felt his heart pound in his chest. He fingered his vibro-blade's release, trying to keep his face impassive. He swallowed. In close quarters like these, he couldn’t use his rifle, and Dax...

That knife wasn’t for show.

“We’ve been recommended for special duty safeguarding reactor control. Engineering will be conducting tests on the stealth systems. Skipper’s going ahead with the this test in the hope that it draws them out.”

“A trap? Int dis Techno work?”

“Normally.” Now it was Ghent who furrowed his brow. “From what I understand, the Capital Enterprises rep on board made a stink over it. Insisted that we be given the job.” Ghent frowned for a moment, but lifted his head with renewed conviction. “Make our employers proud, boys. None of those freaks are getting the *Braga* today”

“Ooh-ra!” the Kiffar shouted, smiling wickedly.

Grot couldn’t bring himself to do anymore than nod. It felt wrong to be doing this. The hunter did not pretend to be prey. He found this sort of deception... distasteful.

*Smiling eyes and shining lips. Words like wine and hair aflame.*

Grot felt sick as they marched out of the turbolift. He pushed down his unease and focused on the mission. They still didn't know. He wouldn't get another chance like this.

*“Land the killing blow...”*

“Special duty detail reports as ordered, Sir!” They snapped to attention in front of the Chief Engineer. He was an unnatural thing, a unisex blob more metal than man. He was uncanny and disturbing, his movements a mere mockery of a living being. Grot shivered, his very presence setting his nerves on end.

“You’re late,” he barked. “This way. The test is already being prepared.” His voice was curt and synthesized. Grating and metallic like rusty nails. He could see that it disturbed even the Captain from the glare he gave the Chief as he lead them on into the reactor control.

Technicians scattered like rats before the Chief, moving to their consoles and averting their gaze. Like a strident king, the Chief strolled up to the central console, calling out in unintelligible jargon. Through the far window the reactor glowed with the fury of an imprisoned star. Mechanical limbs responded to the reactor crew's commands, manipulating the delicate systems that would shunt the reactor's fury into the ship's heatsinks. Attendants called out in a chorus of affirmatives as the stealth systems began to activate and a calm sense of satisfaction began to fill the room.

Then the ship began to shake.

“Sensors offline! Hanger bay 14!”

“Damage reported in sections D through F!”

“Security teams report enemy contact!”

“Frak!” the Captain cursed “Skipper was right!”

“Spy!” Dax howled

“Captain Ghent. The Brotherhood cannot be allowed to interfere. Systems tests are still in progress.” The Chief barely moved a muscle from his console as he spoke.

“Understood. Dax, Grot, remain here and guard the Chief. I'll lead a team and track these frakkers down!” Dax stepped forward, opening his mouth the protest. “Stay here! You and Grot are the best men I have. No-one gets in or out, understood?”

They both nodded, and the blast doors shut behind him as he left.

An eerie silence fell over the control center, punctuated only by the nervous reports of the crew. Grot's skin itched and crawled as he waited.

He realized he didn't want to do this.

He had lived with these men, slept with them, worked beside, and trained with them. He looked over to Dax. They had their differences but...

Could he really just...

“Grot! Ow bout yah post up-” Dax began, but was cut short in an instant as Grot's vibro-blade slipped between his ribs, the ceramic blade cutting through his armor like tissue paper.

“Ghurk!” Dax let out a wet croak as the knife slid into his lungs, his eyes bulging out from their sockets. “Grot... you...”

Grot twisted the knife into the wound, clutching Dax close as the Kiffar began to go limp. The control crew looked on in silent, terrified horror as it finally dawned on them what was happening.

“Tr... traitor!” With a final act of heroic will, Dax thrust his knife into Grot’s shoulder, blood and foam flying from his mouth as he mustered the effort. Grot grunted as he felt the razor sharp blade pierce his armor and dig deep into his flesh.

“Only business... Dax.” Grot laid the Kiffar back down on the ground, taking a last look at his former brother-in-arms. “And you were right, I did cheat at Pazaak.”

He turned to the reactor crew, and began to work.

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“Grot! Dax! Reactor control! Frak, anybody, come in!” Captain Ghent ran down the hallway, a score of his men beside him as he desperately keyed the comlink. They’d caught the Brotherhood agents, but not before they managed to do crippling damage to the ship’s sensors. To add insult to injury, they had committed suicide before they could be interrogated. To add further disaster, reactor control wasn’t responding. They rounded the corner into the control room to find the blast door wide open, blood trailing out from it.

Inside was a vision from hell.

Technicians lay dead at their stations, shot dead where they stood. The Chief lay beside his command console, throat slit and arms ripped to pieces in what must have been a titanic struggle. Outside the far window the reactor pulsed with blood-red light, its fury unrestrained.

And directly in front of him was Dax, sprawled out the floor.

He rushed to his side as the men spread out into the room, checking the corpses one by one. One of them had the presence of mind to check the consoles, and paled as he realized what was happening

“Sith-spit! The reactor's overloading!”

“What?!”

“Someone's shut down the cooling systems, it’s all automated,” he fumbled with the controls, inexpert hands desperately punching in commands. “I can’t stop it! Something's locking me out!”

The Captain howled with rage. “Frak! Frak! Frak! Get the Skipper on the line! Full evacuation now!” He picked Dax’s corpse up in his arms, taking one last look around the room. “Grot... Where is Grot?”

The Trandoshan was gone.

He looked back towards the entrance, and the blood trailing out of the room, down the hall. He leapt to his feet, fire burning in his eyes as he brought up his blaster.

“Get to the escape pods! Now!”

“What about you?”

“I’m going to fix my mistake.”

He raced down the hall, leaving his men behind. The ship shook as the reactor's more delicate systems began to fail, and the emergency klaxons wailed like death itself. He ignored them all. He had only one thing on his mind.

He caught up to Grot by one of the auxiliary escape pod bays. The Trandoshan limped along, clutching his shoulder and clearly weakened from the battle in the reactor. He fired off a burst with his rifle, most of the bolts slamming into the far wall. One hit Grot in the shoulder, sending him spinning to the ground. He scrambled into an alcove before the next burst could finish him off, and returned fire with his pistol, the slugs whizzing past and pinging off the walls.

“Grot!” the Captain cried. “I’m not letting you get out of here alive!” They traded fire as the ship began to collapse around them, the superstructure wailing as more and more of the reactor's systems failed on its approach to total collapse.

“Why’d you do it? Why’d you kill Dax?” He was crying as he fired. “We had a shot! It’s gone, gone because of you! Traitorous scum!”

“Just business, Captain,” Grot’s throat was dry, and wracked with pain as he spoke.

“Business! Working for those Brotherhood freaks! They’re using you, Grot, they don’t care about you, they don’t care about any of us! The Jedi, the Sith, they want power, that's all they ever want, they don't care how many lives they have to ruin to get it!”

The firing stopped.

“Dax had a family, you know, just like every other person that you slaughtered in that room. They were waiting for him, in Axio city. He’d even carved a little toy horse with that knife of his...” The Captain gripped his rifle tight. “I should have left you back on that frakking backwater, Grot!”



“Aye, Captain, you should have.”

A sonic grenade rolled out from under Grot’s cover, and the world exploded into sound.

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Grot watched the burning wreck of the *Braga* as his escape pod slowly drifted away into the void. He collapsed into the seat, clutching his wounds and staring dumbly at the ceiling. This was not glorious. There were no points to be earned in this. Not in such indiscriminate slaughter. Men, women, children, culled like beasts in the field without even a chance to defend themselves.

He activated his Brotherhood transponder, and fell into blissful unconsciousness, waiting for them to pick him up. Perhaps they wouldn’t, and he would be left out here. Perhaps that would be better.

Darkness took him.

And green eyes were there to greet him when he awoke.