

# STAR WARS

## TALES OF THE JEDI



### V-VI: INDEPENDENCE

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



ELEVEN FAMILIES.  
TWELVE GENERATIONS.  
ONE EVIL.

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THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO A SMALL GROUP OF INTREPID EXPLORERS SURVEYED THE NARTHIS SECTOR AND SOON IT BECAME ANOTHER PART OF THE GALACTIC REPUBLIC. THE DESCENDANTS OF MOST OF THESE EXPLORERS STILL RESIDE IN THE SECTOR, WHERE THEY HAVE BECOME BOTH FAMOUS AND WEALTHY. BUT DID THE ORIGINAL EXPLORERS DIVULGE EVERYTHING THEY DISCOVERED, OR HAVE THEIR FAMILIES BEEN HIDING SOME DARK SECRET EVER SINCE? NOW A JEDI KNIGHT HAS VANISHED WITHOUT TRACE AND THE INVESTIGATION WILL BRING ANOTHER FAMILY TO THE SECTOR. FROM NOW ON NOTHING WILL BE THE SAME...

**INDEPENDENCE**

WITH ERILL CRASSIS RESTORED TO FULL HEALTH, HE OFFERS THE DROID ARMY HIS FAMILY CONTROLS TO THE REST OF THE FOUNDING FAMILIES. NOW POSSESSING A MILITARY CAPABLE OF DEFENDING THE ENTIRE SECTOR THE FAMILIES DECIDE THAT THE TIME HAS COME FOR THE NARTHIS SECTOR TO LEAVE THE REPUBLIC...

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<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.html>

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# 1.

"This is not how things are done." General Josh Drud said. The general was sat in his office in the headquarters of the Crassis Major Defence Forces, the door sealed to ensure that no one would interrupt him. In addition to being the head of the defence force he was also the head of his family, though he usually left the day to day running of the family to his younger brother Heddren. The Drud family was descended from one of the crew of the original survey mission that charted the Narthis Sector. Together with the descendants of the other crew members they were known as the Founding Families and at this moment Josh found himself looking at holograms of the heads of most of the others.

Nissel Fayl was the youngest of the family heads present, having inherited her position when her mother had been suddenly admitted to a mental institution. Beside her was Faye Karn who's business empire made her family the wealthiest of all the Founding Families. But where the Karns had financial power the Narthis family had genuine political power thanks to Trent Narthis having been recently elected as the sector's senator and he sat opposite Faye. The final hologram was of the head of the only non-human Founding Family, Ket Runn. The Runns were nautolans and the aquatic beings lived on the ocean world of Delvad rather than Crassis Major like the others.

There were two other Founding Families, but neither of them was represented in this meeting. The current head of the Torin family was a fourteen year old boy who had become head when his parents were murdered in a battle for control of the family. Given his young age he was not involved in meetings such as this and the family's interests were represented by the Druds thanks to their family law firm being the legal guardians of the boy. The other missing family head was Erill Crassis. Erill was old and infirm but that was not the reason for his absence.

Erill Crassis had recently married the eldest daughter of the Karn family, Gayal, after rescuing her from the same mental institution that Lorna Fayl had been committed to. Gayal had been sent to this when her family discovered that she was romantically involved with the Jedi knight assigned to the sector and they feared that she would expose some of their unlawful activities. But unknown to them Gayal was Force sensitive and that was key to the Founding Families' plans. Three hundred years earlier the original survey team had discovered a storehouse of Sith knowledge beneath the oceans of Delvad but had been unable to gain access to it. Desiring the wealth and power contained within the Founding Families had spent the intervening years attempting to find out how to get inside and the solution appeared to be to use a Force sensitive individual. This meant that the Crassis family suddenly gained an advantage over the others at the expense of the Karns. In response both the Karns and Druds, who had assisted them in having Gayal committed had attempted to abduct her from the Crassis family and this had resulted in the Crassis family severing ties with the others.

There had been members of the survey team that had not remained in the sector and become part of the Founding Families as well. Trent Callan and Koman Delvad had returned to the Core Worlds to exploit their discoveries, the twi'lek Ban Hollinis had been killed during the mission, while Rodge Kenner had simply vanished.

"Natalay called it." Trent Narthis said.

"I know." Josh replied.

The Natalay that Trent referred to was Natalay Shill. The Shill family were soldiers and their private military company, Shill Security, provided protection to all the Founding Families except the Crassis family. The company was run by Natalay's son Han while her daughters Corlay and Erin had infiltrated the Jedi Order's freedom warriors and Republic navy respectively. Natalay herself was a relatively new arrival in the sector and had brought with her a massive mercenary force. But there was a convention to calling meetings of the heads of the Families and the sudden way in which Natalay had done this was not the way it was usually done, with a transmission demanding an immediate gathering.

"Where is Natalay?" Nissel asked, "The nature of her signal suggests that it was urgent."

"It also said it was about the Crassis family." Faye added.

"The old man's dead." Trent said with a smirk, "It's obvious. Our intelligence said he was on his last legs."

"If Erill's dead then he can't protect Gayal any longer." Faye added.

"The stories of my death are greatly exaggerated." Erill Crassis said as his hologram suddenly appeared alongside that of Natalay Shill. But this was not the invalid that the other Founding Families had become used to in recent years. Instead he walked into view unaided and stared at the others as he sat down while they exchanged nervous glances.

"Erill has requested this meeting so that we may heal the split in our group." Natalay announced.

"Our group?" Trent asked, "Since when have you been a part of the Founding Families?"

Natalay scowled.

"I have as much right to be here as any of you." she said, "When your ancestors stayed in this sector to enjoy

riches and fame Rodge Kenner left to live in secret and build an army for you. I am his descendant and the head of my family and I dare any of you to order me to leave. See how well you do without the Shill family's protection."

"You seem awfully sure of yourself." Ket said.

"And you overestimate the strength of your forces." Josh added, "Any of us can hire replacements for the bodyguards you supply."

"That was the way things used to work isn't it?" Nissel asked.

"Yes. We each had our own security force until they were merged into Shill Security." Trent told her.

"And we could do so again." Josh said, "Plus of course between Trent and myself we can call upon the sector's military forces as well."

Natalay smiled.

"Shill Security and my own forces amount to over a hundred and twenty thousand troops." she said, "And Erill commands five thousand mandalorians as well."

Then Erill spoke up again.

"Plus I have more than five million Sith war droids." he added and the heads of the other Founding Families looked at him in amazement.

"Five million droids?" Nissel asked, "Where did you get them?"

"Shadowfall." Faye said, "The Artisan."

"The Artisan?" Nissel repeated.

"One of the Sith who came to the sector a thousand years ago." Natalay replied.

"Exactly." Erill said, "I was able to obtain enough of their command codes to bring them under my control."

"Where from?" Faye asked.

"That is not important. What matters is that I command those droids and more significantly I have Gayal. Only she can get us into the Sith library. Or she will be able to if we pool the material we have and allow her to use it to develop her skills."

"But what about the Republic?" Nissel said, "And what about the Jedi?"

"She has a point." Ket said, "The Republic can send hundreds of warships to attack us and the Jedi will hunt us down without mercy when they discover what we have."

"But the Republic and the Jedi can only intervene if we remain a part of the Republic." Natalay pointed out,

"But if the Narthis Sector was to secede then we would have our own forces plus all those of the planetary governments to protect our sovereignty."

"But the population supports continued Republic membership." Nissel pointed out, "In the election secessionist candidates received very little support."

"Then it is up to us to turn them against both the Republic and the Jedi." Trent said, "Then when they demand that we declare independence I will follow the wishes of my constituents."

When the holograms faded Erill and Natalay were left sitting in a luxurious lounge located in the Crassis mansion. Erill's son Luke and daughter in law Salla, along with Gayal were all sat together where they could watch the virtual meeting while remaining out of it themselves. The head of The Crassis family's mandalorian security force, Kaylor Mott, stood behind them while in the far corner a woman with a slender build was leant up against the wall.

"Well I'd say that went well." Erill said to his family.

"Very well." Salla replied.

"Does this mean I don't need to hide any more?" Gayal asked.

"I think so." Natalay told her, "I can assure you that Shill Security will not take part in any operation to abduct you."

"What about her?" Gayal said, looking at the woman in the corner.

"Oh Belle will do exactly as I tell her." Natalay replied, "Won't you dear?"

"Of course I will mother." Belle replied with a smile.

"Then in that case I suggest you tell her to get to Tepillos as quickly as possible." Luke said, "If we delay too long then one of the other families may start to get cold feet."

"Belle-" Natalay began before her daughter interrupted.

"Don't worry. I know what I'm doing." she said as she began to head for the exit.

## 2.

"This isn't enough." Jedi Master Varn Udra said when he looked up from the computer terminal that had been set up at the side of the room that had once been the lounge of a luxury apartment but had been converted into a training area for Jedi. Varn had only just been sent to the region of space that included the Narthis Sector as replacement for Jedi Master Ben Karas who had been slain in battle with Kyle Jenner, the previous Jedi knight assigned to the sector who had fallen to the Dark Side. Rather than head for the enclave at Moldas, a week's travel outside the Narthis Sector he had gone straight to the sector to check in with the Jedi deployed there so that he could bring himself up to date with the investigation into the activities of the Founding Families. So far the Jedi Order had received reports that they were amassing as much forbidden knowledge about the Sith as they could in order to gain access to a hidden library somewhere on Delvad. But the reports were not accompanied by any physical evidence of any criminal activity that would justify the order moving against the Families directly, "We need more evidence before we can take action."

"Sorry dad, but Lorna Fayl didn't exactly draw us a map when she tried to recruit us." one of the Jedi assigned to the sector replied. This was Lara Udra, padawan learner and younger sister of Cal Udra the sector's Jedi knight. The pair also happened to be Varn's children.

"Lara." another of the Jedi present, Varn's wife and Jedi healer Neari responded "Remember you are addressing a superior." and Lara sighed. Neari and a second female Jedi, Elle Udra, Varn's own sister had also accompanied the Jedi master to the Narthis Sector. Both Elle and Neari watched from the rear of the room.

"Most of the information we've been able to amass was when we were considered renegades." Cal pointed out, "It's just not admissible."

"And aside from that we've been kept pretty busy here on our own." Lara added, "Compared to how many people the Founding Families have on their payroll."

"Part of having abilities as rare as ours is often having to act while heavily outnumbered." another voice said. This came from the only Jedi in the room not a part of the Udra family. Tarris Blake was a Jedi shadow, a Jedi who specialised in hunting down any artefacts, knowledge or servants of the Dark Side. He had first come to the sector hunting Cal and Lara but remained when it became clear that not only were they innocent of having fallen to the Dark Side, but that there was a major conspiracy relating to the Sith at work.

"They can each still only be one place at a time." Elle replied.

"Yes and they don't have the luxury of being able to dedicate themselves to nothing but investigating the Founding Families." Varn added.

"The padawan does make an important point however." Tarris said and both Cal and Lara stared at him, confused.

"I do?" Lara replied.

"She does?" Cal added and Lara turned and scowled at him.

"My investigation has determined that the Founding Families have exploited their wealth and social position to create a vast network of both formal and informal operatives. Some serve them exclusively while others are called upon only as needed. I have also studied particular aspects of their business operations and noticed a pattern whereby they are able to either severely limit or block entirely access to certain places in the sector. Atch for example. The archaeological team there is privately funded by them and before Jedi Udra and his padawan were called upon to assist the team against hostile natives no representative of any Republic agency had set foot on the planet. There is no way of telling exactly how much Sith lore they were able to recover before we stepped in."

"Then this is where I want to start looking." Varn said, "We need to identify agents of the Founding Families and try to get them to talk."

"Ren?" Lara said, looking at Cal who nodded in response.

"He does like us." he said.

"Who's Ren?" Neari asked.

"Ren Distler." Tarris told her, "A smuggler who has run cargoes for the Founding Families."

"And also done us a few favours as well." Cal added.

"Then the five of us need to locate him and question him." Varn replied.

"Five?" Lara asked, "But there are six of us."

"I'm not going." Elle replied.

"No." Varn said, "I brought Elle along for a very specific reason. Your research suggests that the Founding Families require a Force sensitive individual to gain access to the Sith library."

"They've got Gayal." Cal replied.

"Cal's ex-girlfriend." Lara added with a grin and Cal frowned.

"Never mind that." Varn said, "What is important is that just because Gayal Karn-



"Crassis now." Lara interrupted to correct her father, "She dumped Cal to marry Erill Crassis."

Anger.

All of the Jedi in the room sensed the flare of emotion from Cal.

"Be careful of your feelings." Tarris warned him, "There is a reason why attachment goes against the Jedi Code."

At this both Neri and Varn glanced at one another, well aware that the Jedi shadow, like all of his particular order lived his entire life by the letter of the Jedi Code and thus disapproved strongly of relationships such as theirs.

"Just because she is Force sensitive, it does not automatically mean that she will be able to access the library. Especially if your reports of a schism between the Crassis family and the other Founding Families is correct. Therefore, we may safely assume that the Founding Families will still be attempting to locate beings with the ability to manipulate the Force."

"Like Kyle Jenner?" Lara asked.

"Unlikely." Cal said, "Every time we've encountered him he seemed to regard the Founding Families as enemies rather than potential allies."

"Elle's duties have been to locate such beings and determine whether they are suitable to be trained as Jedi."

Varn went on, "Therefore she is ideally suited to locate anyone that the Founding Families may attempt to recruit. She will stay here and study the-" but then he was interrupted by the communication system and the display in front of him changed to show the face of a woman in a Sector Ranger uniform.

"I was looking for Cal." she said.

"Right here." Cal said as he dashed around the desk, "What's wrong Jule?"

"There's trouble on Tepillos." Jule answered. Agent Jule Raser was the most senior agent of the sector rangers, the Republic's interstellar police force in the Narthis Sector and as such she had often worked with Cal and Lara.

"There's always trouble on Tepillos." Lara muttered.

"Well this is worse than normal." Jule replied, overhearing the comment, "Colonel Jeck has reported a massive increase in the number of public demonstrations that his men have needed to police. They're being spread very thin and he needs all the help he can get. I'm moving all my available agents there and I said I'd ask you for your help as well."

"Aren't we supposed to be focusing on the Founding Families?" Lara asked.

"But not at the expense of public safety." Varn responded and he looked at the image of Jule, "We'll meet you there." he told her, "If there is anything more to these protests then you can rest assured we'll find out what."

Tepillos had once been a pleasant world to live on, second only in its importance in the sector to the capital world of Crassis Major. But all that had changed when it had descended into civil war and now only a small fortified area under direct Republic control could be termed 'safe' while the rest of the planet was plagued by violent gangs and insurrectionist movements. From this area, known as the Green Zone, the Republic maintained a force of peacekeeping troops under the command of Colonel Arion Jeck. In theory his men were there to hunt down and destroy the insurgent groups, but the continued weakness of local law enforcement meant that they were far more likely to be deployed in such a role themselves and now that demand for policing was increasing beyond his ability to respond to every incident the colonel was calling in all the support that he could.

The most visible example of this when the Jedi arrived at the Green Zone starport was the praetorian-class frigate *Perseverance* that had landed not long before the Jedi did. This vessel carried two hundred Republic marines plus a squadron of starfighters, so it represented a considerable military asset. In comparison the relatively small numbers of Sector Rangers and Jedi looked insignificant, but to Belle Shill who was watching the starport from a nearby hotel room the Jedi were what concerned her most of all.

"Five of them." she said to herself as she lowered her wide scan binocs. This was not the first time that Cal and Lara's parents had visited the sector so she was familiar with both Varn and Neri. But normally she received advanced warning of any additional Jedi arriving here from her younger sister Corlay. But on this occasion the arrival of the extra Jedi had come unannounced and for a brief time Belle considered whether this meant that Corlay's position had been compromised. Then she put such thoughts out of her mind and lifted the binocs back to her eyes just as the Jedi and Jule were being greeted by Colonel Jeck.

"Thanks for coming so quickly." Colonel Jeck said as he shook hands with Cal, "Though I wasn't expecting so many of you." he added, looking at Varn and Neri, "Not that I'm complaining. I need all the help I can get."

"Can you tell us what's going on colonel?" Neri asked, "We've been told that there has been an increase in the number of public demonstrations but not what they're related to."

"That's just the problem." the colonel replied as he led the new arrivals towards his command centre, "There doesn't seem to be any underlying cause at all. One group could be protesting about food supplies, others about medical care or government corruption."

"But they've all been relatively peaceful so far?" Jule asked.

"Relatively yes. There have been a few arrests of course, there always are. But nothing to suggest any insurgent involvement at all." Colonel Jeck answered just as they reached the entrance to the command centre and he stood back to allow his guests in before him.

Inside the command centre large wall mounted displays showed troop deployments in various locations around the planet.

"That's a lot of your men." Lara said when she saw the displays and Colonel Jeck nodded.

"Half of them." he replied, "I'm working a half on, half off system at the moment. It's the only way I can keep up."

"How are you defending the Green Zone?" Varn asked.

"He's got help for that." another voice called out and a man in the uniform of a Republic Navy officer approached them.

"I believe most of you know Lieutenant Commander Austin Veers." Colonel Jeck said.

"I command the *Perseverance*." Austin added, looking at Varn and Neari, "My marines are currently deployed to keep the Green Zone secure, though with only two hundred of them its a bit of a stretch."

"My agents should be able to help with that." Jule said.

"Then I suppose that leaves assisting with policing the demonstrations to us." Cal added.

"We are jedi. Not policemen." Tarris responded, "The Dark Side is strong on this world and I suspect that it lies behind these protests. We should seek out their cause with all haste."

"I agree." Varn said, nodding, "If all we do is wait for protests to occur then we could be here forever. We'll split up, leave the Green Zone and try to find out why people are suddenly protesting so much."

"I can't guarantee that I can have men available to support you if you get into trouble." Colonel Jeck warned the jedi.

"Our ally is the Force." Tarris replied, "That is all the support we need."

"I'd rather have the Force and a gunship than just the Force." Lara commented.

"Don't worry." Austin said, "I'm taking my ship back into orbit. If you need help I can reach pretty much anywhere on the planet in a few minutes. Will that do?" and Lara smiled.

"The Force and a frigate." she said, "I can live with that."

### 3.

There were two men sat in the corner booth of the cantina when Belle entered. By the standards of the Green Zone the establishment was somewhat run down, but that made it all the better for the meeting she had planned. Both men wore Republic uniforms, one that of a soldier in the Republic army and the other of an enlisted engineer in the navy.

"Good afternoon gentlemen." Belle said as she sat down opposite them and placed a fresh drink in front of each. Both men looked down at their drinks and then glanced at one another, "I'm not trying to poison you if that's what you're worried about." Belle reassured them.

"Of course not." the soldier said before picking up the glass and taking a mouthful, "Then that overweight worm wouldn't get his money."

"Uggaro the Hutt has nothing to do with this meeting." Belle replied, "In fact I have excellent news for you both, as of this morning your debts to him have been paid off in full."

"By you?" the engineer asked and Belle smiled.

"By the people I work for." she told him.

"So now we owe the money to you and you're here to explain our repayments?" the soldier asked.

"Not quite." Belle said and from her coat pockets she took two bundles of bank notes, "My employers would be grateful if you were to repay their kindness with a favour, but the money you owed Uggaro was nothing to them. In fact as a gesture of goodwill they have asked me to give you this." and she slid a bundle of notes towards each of the men, both of whom snatched the money off the table before it could be seen and flipped through it.

"This is all real?" the engineer asked.

"If not then it's a kriffing good copy." the soldier replied and then he looked at Belle, "There must be ten thousand here." he said.

"In your case, twelve thousand six hundred and forty." she told him, "The exact amount of your debt to Uggaro. Just in case you find yourself in a similar situation again."

"So what's this 'favour' you want from us that's worth almost fifty thousand credits when you add up what your employers have given us and the worm?" the engineer asked and Belle reached into her coat pocket again and produced a mem-stick.

"I want you to connect this to the fire control computer aboard the *Perseverance*." she said.

"The fire control computer?" the engineer repeated, "But why would you want me to do that? What's on that mem-stick?"

"A computer virus written by the best slicers than money can buy." Belle said, "It will allow my employers to gain control of the frigate's weapon systems."

"You want to shut them down so the ship can't fire, right?" the soldier asked, "So they can slip a ship past without being shot down." and Belle smiled.

"Got it in one. It's self deleting so after my employers' associates have got off world there won't be any sign of it left to incriminate you." she said, believing that allowing the two men to think that was the purpose of infecting the frigate's computer with the virus was better than letting them in on the truth. The problem was going to be in convincing the soldier to do what she needed him to do.

"And what about me?" the soldier asked, "I don't have access to any of the strategic operations computers so I can't upload anything for you."

"And you don't need to." Belle answered, "But what I need from you is more delicate." then she looked around to see if anyone was close enough to overhear before whispering, "I need you to shoot someone."

"Are you insane?" the soldier hissed.

"No, I am quite serious." Belle replied, "The next time you are called to police a demonstration I want you to use your weapon to fire on the crowd and at least one person needs to be hit."

"Have you considered what will happen to me afterwards?" the soldier asked.

"You will most probably be arrested." Belle said, "But I can assure you that my employers will not let you be tried for any crime. If you do this then you are guaranteed a position in their organisation."

"And what do you get out of this? Or your employers or whoever is really behind it all?" the engineer asked.

"Let's just say that what we want you to do will cause problems for certain people. People my employers want to see inconvenienced as much as possible."

"And if we just take the money and go?" the soldier asked.

"Then we go our separate ways. But I ought to warn you that this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. If you turn this down then whatever happens afterwards my employers will not be there to help you."

The engineer held up the mem-stick and stared at it.

"Why should I care if a ship gets past us?" he said before looking at Belle and adding, "Count me in."

"Thank you." she replied and she then looked at the soldier.



"I'm with you too." he said, "Those losers do nothing but shout and scream about how hard done by they all are deserve a bit of a scare and if a few of them die then there'll just be fewer of them to need food and whatever else they think they deserve more of."

"Then we have a deal." Belle said as she got up, "Now finish your drinks and return to your base. We won't meet again."

Leaving the cantina, Belle headed back to the starport and to the unmarked cargo ship that had brought her and the rest of her team to Tepillos. Officially the ship was an aid transport, bringing emergency relief supplies to be distributed by one of the charitable groups operating beyond the Green Zone. But inside the hold now empty of supplies there were still a handful of cargo containers. If anyone tried opening the container using the obvious door then they would find nothing but heavy machine parts stacked to the roof. Picking out a specific one of these Belle walked up to it and presented a magnetic key card to one of the letters marked on it. Then there was a hiss as the hermetic seal on the hidden hatchway released and it opened to allow Belle access to the real interior of the container. Stepping through this hatchway Belle stepped into a compact control centre that was a miniature version of Colonel Jeck's facility with display indicating troop deployments, but in addition to this there was a single control console that had been taken from a gunnery station aboard a warship that for the moment at least was unmanned.

"How did it go?" one of the technicians inside the false container asked. Like the others this man was an employee of Shill Security but he wore nothing to indicate this. Even if someone was able to locate the covert field command post and gain entry to it, there was nothing inside that could be used to link it to either Shill Security or the Founding Families.

"Like a dream." Belle replied, "Both of them accepted the deal I offered them."

"Did you need to offer them much?" the chief technician asked her.

"A job." Belle told him and he snorted.

"So they really think that they're going to live through this then?" he said.

"Oh yes, I was very convincing."

The Jedi split into three groups to conduct their investigation and each focused on the issue from a different perspective. Varn and Neri went to the locations of previous demonstrations to question those who had been in the area when they took place. Operating alone as he usually did, Tarris decided to investigate how much was known about the demonstrations in the underworld, reasoning that anyone manipulating the public on such a scale would come to the attention of criminals sooner or later. Meanwhile Cal and Lara focused on the crowds present at these protests and headed to see someone that they thought could tell them about the concerns of the locals.

Before Tepillos had been engulfed by civil war the building that Cal and Lara approached had been a luxury hotel where only the wealthy could afford to stay. But when the violence started wealthy guests stayed away and the hotel soon went out of business and was abandoned. The structure remained somewhat run down but it was sound and its size and location made it ideal for use as a base of operations by the charity run by Jondo Veltros and his on again off again girlfriend Lynn Kerr. Between them the pair worked to deliver emergency aid to the many inhabitants of Tepillos that got overlooked by both the Republic and their own government. The charity workers had been amongst the first people in the sector that Cal and Lara had met and the Jedi appreciated that the pair were often a party to useful information.

"Anyone home?" Cal called out as he and Lara entered the hotel lobby. They had seen the repulsorlift truck that Jondo used to move supplies parked in the secured parking lot beside the hotel so it was reasonable to assume that he was around, but Cal preferred to announce his and Lara's presence anyway. "Hang on! Coming!" a woman's voice responded and moments later Lynn came rushing out of an office, "Cal, Lara. What can I do for you?" she asked with a smile. Then her face fell, "Oh, it's about all the protests isn't it?"

"What else?" Lara responded.

"Colonel Jeck is calling in reinforcements from all over the sector." Cal added, "But we thought that trying to find out what's behind all the trouble was a better way of getting the situation under control."

*Anger.*

Lynn's reaction to what Cal said surprised both him and Lara. But the Jedi did not have to wait long for her to explain.

"Trouble?" Lynn said, placing her hands on her hips and scowling, "There's nothing but trouble here and the Republic hasn't cared at all until people start threatening to riot. The Founding Families have trillions of credits sat in accounts all over the sector but won't lift a finger to help here because it doesn't suit their plans to have a stable society on Tepillos. The planet was poised to overtake Crassis Major as the primary world in the sector before the war you know."

Though both Cal and Lara knew that the Founding Families were prone to manipulate entire societies when it suited them they also knew that Lynn's accusations were false. Unfortunately the woman, though well intentioned, had become obsessed with the idea that every evil act committed in the sector was as a result of

the Founding Families. What she did not know but the Jedi did however, was that a large part of the funding for her charity came from the Founding Families. Jondo had gone to university with a member of the Torin family and had exploited that link to gain access to the Founding Families.

"The Republic's reports indicated that conditions here were improving." Lara said, "So why would people suddenly start protesting now?"

"There look to be too many to be coincidental." Cal said, "Have you heard anything?"  
Lynn sighed.

"No, but then I don't ask." she replied, "And I wouldn't believe what the Republic has to say. Remember, the sector's senator comes from one of the Founding Families. So did his predecessor. They've got the Republic dancing to their tune."

"Is Jondo around?" Lara said, "Doesn't he go out to deliver supplies?"

"He's out back. Go on through." Lynn said, "I've got work to do."

"Thank you." Cal replied with a smile and as Lynn returned to her office the two Jedi headed for the loading dock beside the parking lot.

"She doesn't get any easier to deal with does she?" Lara said quietly when Lynn was out of earshot.

"There's a lot of anger in her." Cal replied.

"In her? She seems to let enough out that there shouldn't be any left."

"Never mind that. Maybe Jondo will be able to help us."

"Help you with what?" Jondo said as he emerged from around a stack of crates.

"We're here about the disturbances." Cal told him.

"So this isn't a personal visit then?" Jondo responded in jest.

"Is it ever?" Lara said, "This may have been a hotel once, but it's hardly a prime holiday destination now."

"Let me guess, you think that the protests aren't as spontaneous as some people say they are and you think that there is some common thread behind it all. Am I right?" Jondo asked.

"Spot on." Cal answered.

"Well you may be right." Jondo answered, "I can't prove anything mind you."

"Go on." Cal said, "We'll sort out what's genuine later. For now we just need leads."

"Okay, well I've been making my usual deliveries to clinics and food banks so I encounter a lot of the people who use them and they've been a lot more vocal of late about how angry they are that the government are all safe in the Green Zone while they're stuck out here."

"Have conditions worsened?" Lara asked and Jondo shook his head.

"No. They haven't got any better, that's just the local government trying to make itself look good with the Republic. But things are no worse than they have been for at least four or five years."

"So why are they complaining now?" Cal asked.

"There are rumours going around about secret stockpiles of food, medical supplies and various luxury goods." Jondo said, "There's not much new about that of course, there are always people who think that the government is holding back. But this time things are different."

"How so?" Lara asked.

"People are actually claiming to have seen the stockpiles." Jondo replied, "Plus they have items that they've taken from them, things not normally available here on Tepillos. Then there are the aid crates turning up that have manifests inside them that don't match the official one and show the shipment was far larger than what was delivered."

"Have any of your shipments been affected in this way?" Lara said.

"No thankfully." Jondo said, "I'd be in trouble if they were. All of the affected shipments are official Republic ones handed over to the local government for distribution. People are going to where they're told the stockpiles are being maintained and demanding access to them or demanding that those responsible for diverting the supplies are held accountable. So far it's only the local government that is being blamed by the protesters, but people are starting to say that the Republic knows all about the stockpiles and is turning a blind eye."

"So if we can't put a stop to this then the Republic could become a target." Cal said.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Lara added.

## 4.

The call had come in about a protest outside a local government building and three gunships filled with troops had been despatched to deal with it. In one of these the soldier who had met Belle in the cantina stared out of the open side hatch, repeatedly flicking the safety catch of his blast rifle from on to off and then back again.

"Hey Flint," one of his fellow troopers said to him while looking down at his hand, "How about you not do that in here? I don't want to get shot just because we hit some turbulence?"

"Sorry." Flint replied and he move his hand away from the safety catch.

"Two minutes!" the pilot suddenly called out, "Jedi are already on the scene."

"Jedi?" Flint exclaimed, "What the kriff are they doing here?"

"What didn't anybody tell you?" the soldier who had warned Flint about fiddling with his safety catch responded, "The colonel brought in jedi reinforcements while you were off drinking. Five of them turned up."

"Oh that's just kriffing wonderful." Flint muttered as he realised that the task he had committed himself to had just got a lot harder.

The protest came into view below the gunship and Flint looked out to see that the crowd consisted of several hundred people. As usual there appeared to be no signs of weapons amongst the protesters and the lack of banners with anti-government slogans on suggested that the protest had not been long in the planning. Flint also noticed that he had been here before. This was not the first time that there had been a protest at this particular building, a structure used by various government bodies set up with the intention of making life better for the population.

The three gunships descended over the government building and Flint saw that there were two figures standing just in front of the building's main entrance confronting the crowd, both of them clad in the robes favoured by jedi knights. The gunships touched down a short distance away and the Republic soldiers leapt out and rushed towards the jedi.

"Get back! Get back!" one of the squad leaders began to yell as he shoved protesters out of the way until he reached the jedi, "Sergeant Jullen." he identified himself as to the older of the two jedi.

"Jedi Master Varn Udra." Varn responded, "It appears our presence here has stirred up some trouble."

"We're here for the food!" a nearby protester yelled, "We know the jedi have come to take it and we want it!"

"Food! Food! Give us the food!" other protesters yelled.

"Not this again." Sergeant Jullen said.

"I was trying to explain that we are just here to look into the reasons behind the previous demonstration but they don't seem very interested in hearing that." Neari added.

"I'll see what I can do." Jullen replied and he reached to the control for the point to point link built into his armour. The device was connected to a speaker mounted on the side of his helmet and when he next spoke his words were amplified, "You are causing an obstruction that presents a risk to public safety. Disperse immediately."

"Give us the food!" someone yelled.

"There are no food supplies here. Go back to your homes." Jullen ordered. Then both Varn and Neari felt a tremor through the Force and reached for their lightsabers as they searched the crowd for the source.

*Shoot them.*

"What's wrong?" Jullen asked.

"Sergeant, there may be someone in the crowd who is armed." Varn said and nearby Flint glanced at him, realising that the jedi had picked up on his thoughts. However, he realised that he had also been presented with an opportunity and he raised his blast rifle, lining up the optical sight on the crowd in front of him.

"Trooper!" Jullen yelled when he saw this, "Stand down! Nobody fires unless you see a weapon."

Flint began to lower his weapon but then he gave a sudden yell that was carried to all of the other soldiers by his armour's PTP link.

"Gun!"

"Try not to lose this one." Colonel Jeck had said to Cal when he supplied the jedi with an airspeeder so that he and Lara could move quickly around the city. The comment was a reminder of how on their first assignment in the sector the two young jedi had been leant a landspeeder that had then been stolen. Lara had insisted on piloting the speeder and as they raced towards the location of the latest demonstration Cal was glad that she had.

*Danger.*

Cal sensed trouble through the Force that went beyond just an angry mob venting their feelings, someone down there was prepared to kill. Air rushed past as Cal opened the door beside him and he glanced at Lara.

"Get me over the crowd." he told her and she nodded before steering towards the protesters. Then as soon

as the vehicle flew over them Cal leapt out.

Using the Force to slow and guide his descent, Cal drew his lightsaber and ignited it. The 'snap-hiss' sound was drowned out by the passing air but the glow of its blade was clearly visible. Just before he landed, Cal heard Flint yell out his warning about a weapon and Cal landed right in front of the trooper just as he was about to fire. With a swing of his lightsaber Cal deflected the energy bolt fired upwards where it could do no harm and then before Flint could fire again he swung his lightsaber back and sliced through the blast rifle's barrel.

#### *Fear.*

Behind Cal there were screams of panic as the crowd realised that they had been fired on

"Stang!" Flint exclaimed as he stared in disbelief at the ruined weapon.

"Flint! What the hell are you playing at?" Jullen demanded as he rushed towards Cal and Flint.

Meanwhile Varn and Neri tried to calm the crowd.

"There is no need to panic." Varn called out, "These men are not here to harm you."

But the damage was already done and despite Flint's shot not having hit anyone the crowd was no longer peaceful. Some tried fleeing, pushing anyone who got in their way aside, whereas others picked up whatever small objects they could find and began hurling them towards the force of soldiers. Fortunately the armour the soldiers wore was designed to withstand far more than a few thrown rocks, but they were not going to take being assaulted lightly.

"Stand to!" a squad leader ordered and the soldiers all raised their weapons.

"No!" Neri shouted as with a wave of her hand she deflected a rock thrown towards the soldiers.

"Stand down." Varn ordered, but the soldiers took no notice until he rushed up to the closest and physically pushed his rifle downwards, "I ordered you to stand down!" he snapped.

"You're not in charge here." one of the squad leaders told Varn and the Jedi master glared at him.

"Yes I am." he said, using the Force to push the suggestion deep into the soldier's mind, "The colonel himself said so."

"You're in charge in here sir." the squad leader replied, "The colonel himself told me."

"Good, now order your men to stand down." Varn said and the squad leader nodded and began to give his men the order to lower their weapons. Meanwhile Varn and Neri looked towards Cal and saw him and Jullen apparently arguing with Flint. The soldier's destroyed weapon had been taken from him and was now in the possession of Jullen.

"What's going on?" Varn demanded as he marched up to Flint while Neri continued trying to calm down the crowd.

"I saw a man with a gun." Flint replied.

#### *Deception.*

Cal and his father exchanged glances, both sensing the lie but unable to tell what the soldier was hiding. It was possible that he was just panicked and made an error that he was now trying to cover up. But it was also possible that there was more going on than a soldier under more pressure than normal over reacting.

"Sergeant Jullen." Varn said, "Take this man into custody and send him back to the Green Zone. Tell Colonel Jeck that I will want to oversee the questioning myself."

"Yes sir." Jullen replied and he activated his PTP link to summon one of the circling gunships to carry him and Flint back to the Green Zone. But the approach of the heavily armed aircraft was misinterpreted by what remained of the crowd as a prelude to an attack from above and the remaining protesters turned to flee.

Once again there were those who found themselves in the way of others and they were pushed aside and trampled.

"Quickly!" Neri shouted as she saw the injured on the ground and she rushed to help, "Get them aboard the gunships. We have to get them to a medical facility."

## 5.

"Track back." Belle said to the technician as she watched the feed from the aerial probe droid that had been monitoring the protest and transmitting everything it saw back to the hidden command centre, "There, stop!" she then snapped when the footage reached the moment that Cal landed in front of Flint, "Okay, now go forwards slowly."

In slow motion the footage showed Cal take a step forwards as he brought his lightsaber into position to deflect the blaster bolt and then cut the barrel from the soldier's blast rifle.

"Can you give me just those two seconds?" Belle asked.

"Of course." the technician replied, "Do you want them on a disc or a mem-stick?"

"Neither." Belle told him, "Access our anonymous messaging server. I want those two seconds of footage sent to every media outlet in the sector."

There were sector rangers waiting to take Flint into custody when the Jedi returned to the Green Zone with the army platoon and Cal saw Jule leading them.

"Do you have any idea what's going on?" she asked as Cal and Lara got out of their airspeeder and approached her.

"Apart from some nerf herder going mental with a blast rifle?" Lara asked.

"No. Look." Jule replied and she pointed to the power fence that surrounded the military sector of the starport. Just beyond the barrier Cal and Lara saw a cluster of people, many of who were holding recording devices that they were pointing towards them.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Cal said.

"And well you might." Jule said, "Someone's leaked footage to the press that shows you stepping out of a crowd of protesters to attack a soldier."

"But that's not what happened." Lara protested, "Cal stopped that man from firing into the crowd."

"Yes, so your master's report said. But the problem is that the only thing released to the press has been a carefully selected two seconds of footage and they smell a story." Jule explained, "The colonel is not happy."

"So I can see." Cal said, looking past Jule to where Colonel Jeck had appeared and was walking towards them.

"Jedi Udra what happened out there?" he called out.

"I only got involved half way through colonel." Cal replied, "You'll have to ask my parents about what happened before I arrived."

"Well according to that lot," Colonel Jeck said, pointing towards the gathered reporters at the fence, "you were hiding amongst the crowd and when one of my men saw your sidearm he prepared to defend himself and you assaulted him."

"Oh that's poodoo!" Lara exclaimed, "Besides, all this happened less than a quarter of an hour ago. How could this have blown up so quickly?"

"It goes with having several hundred reporters camped less than five minutes from my headquarters."

Colonel Jeck responded, "Most of them don't dare leave the Green Zone so they have to find their stories where they can."

"If you think having those guys hanging around at the fence is bad enough," Jule added, "just think about what the press in the rest of the sector will be making of it."

"Senator! Did you authorise the deployment of Jedi agents to Tepillos?" a reporter yelled when Trent Narthis entered the room and walked up to the podium. He ignored the question though, instead setting a datapad down on the podium and facing the gathered crowd of reporters.

"I have a statement to make regarding the news coming in from Tepillos." he announced and he glanced down as if reading from hastily prepared notes when in fact the majority of his speech had been written the day before, with only minor changes made to account for Cal's unplanned for intervention, "So far we have received only preliminary reports from Tepillos regarding the actions of Republic troops. As you know these troops are deployed there for the protection of the local population and I promise you that I shall endeavour to make sure that they act only in accordance with strict rules of engagement. The Jedi Order deploys its personnel according to its own wishes and self administered code of practice and operates without senate oversight. However, that will not stop me from demanding answers from them regarding the reports of Jedi infiltrating crowds of unarmed protesters. Thank you."

"So you'd didn't know that the Jedi were present?" a different reporter called out as soon as Trent finished speaking.

"No I did not." he answered.

"Senator, is it true that the Republic has been complicit in the withholding of aid from the people of Tepillos by

members of its own authorities?" another reporter called out.

"I couldn't possibly comment on that without more information." Trent replied, "Now if you'll excuse me I must be going. I have a scheduled communication with Republic officials on Tepillos. But I promise you that I will share with you everything I learn. There will be no cover up while I am senator." and then he walked off the stage, ignoring the questions still being shouted at him by the reporters, "So how was I?" he asked his wife Calleen who had been waiting for him backstage.

"Perfect." she replied, "I loved the part where you suggested that the Jedi operate as some sort of rogue agency." then she sighed, "Though I suppose that when all of this is over and done with we won't be getting a grace and favour apartment at the heart of Coruscant after all."

"Don't worry about that my dear." Trent reassured her, "Just think of the presidential palace you'll have right here when we're done."

Calleen smiled.

"Trent my darling," she said, "you always know exactly what to say."

The *Perseverance* was in an orbit that kept it close to the Green Zone for as much time as possible and from this vantage point Austin had his crew watching for any signs of unusual activity on the surface.

Unsurprisingly to him the news that activity that could only be described as unusual came when he was asleep.

"What?" he asked as the intercom woke him.

"Captain I think you need to get to the bridge." his first officer told him, "We've spotted something odd on the surface."

"I'll be right there." Austin replied, climbing out of his bunk and reached for a uniform.

Dressing as quickly as he could, Austin was on the bridge in just a few minutes and when he entered his first officer approached him.

"Comscan's picked up significant movement outside the Green Zone sir." he said and Austin frowned.

"Define significant." he said.

"Eight groups of between five hundred and two thousand individuals." the first officer said, "They started off as a larger number of small groups but they're gathering together as they get closer to the edge of the Green Zone."

"Show me." Austin said and his first officer led him to the comscan station. There Austin saw a false colour image of the capital city taken from above that showed the presence of heat sources and just as he had been told there were hotspots that represented large numbers of warm bloodied beings all heading towards the Green Zone from all sides, "I've got a very bad feeling about this." he said, "The locals don't tend to go out after dark, it's too dangerous even with Republic peacekeepers around."

"Yes sir. That's why I thought you ought to know. What are your orders?"

"Contact Colonel Jeck. Let him know he's got trouble heading his way."

Cal was also on the verge of falling asleep in the quarters assigned to him in the Republic's military base when the communicator beside his bed sounded.

"What do you want?" he asked, expecting the call to be from Lara.

"Cal?" Jondo's voice responded.

"Yes it's me." Cal said, sitting upright and suddenly paying more attention.

"At last. You wouldn't believe how many operators I've been bounced between trying to get hold of you."

Jondo said, "Look, I think there's something big in the works."

"Why? What's happened?" Cal asked.

"We had a group of people in today looking for medical help. They were injured in the panic at the demonstration that's all over the news and they were saying that as soon as they were clear they were being approached about taking part in a march on the Green Zone to demand justice. I did some asking around and it seems that they weren't the only ones invited. Cal, there could be thousands of people involved in this."

"And they're all coming here?" Cal replied, "Thanks Jondo, I've got to go." and he shut off the communicator.

Grabbing his robes he ran for the command centre where he found Colonel Jeck studying display screens showing crowds gathering in the streets.

"Ah Jedi Udra." the colonel said, "It seems that we have another protest on our hands, one much larger than any of the others we've faced. Lieutenant Commander Veers just warned us about large groups heading towards us."

"Jondo Veltros just contacted me about the same thing." Cal replied, "Colonel this is an organised protest, whoever has been instigating the smaller ones was building up to this."

"Well I don't see what they intend to achieve." Colonel Jeck said, "I've ordered the blast gates sealed. There's no way in or out of the Green Zone other than by aircraft and those are in short supply here on Tepillos."



"Colonel whoever organised this must have been aware that you'd do just that. So whatever they're planning must rely on it happening."

"Are you suggesting I leave the Green Zone wide open?" Colonel Jeck asked.

"No." Cal answered, shaking his head, "But I've got a very bad feeling about this. I think we should wake my father."

"This is hardly something worth disturbing a Jedi master for."

"I think it's exactly the sort of thing we should alert him to." Cal said, "And I think that maybe we ought to ask Flint what he knows about this."

"Flint?" Colonel Jeck exclaimed, "The trooper sat in the brig after you cut his weapon in half?"

"Exactly." Cal said, nodding his head, "Colonel the people leaving the protest today were met by others asking them to join in whatever's going on now. That means they probably knew that something was going to happen and I think that maybe Flint can tell us how."

Colonel Jeck paused to think.

"Okay then." he said, "I'll contact your master and you go speak with the prisoner." and he waved one of the command centre's guards closer, "Escort Jedi Udra to the detention section. He needs to question Trooper Flint."

The guard nodded and stepped back to allow Cal past him. Cal needed no guiding to the detention section, having been there before. The escort was merely a formality so that Cal could be shown to be in the detention section on official Republic business.

"I need to speak with Flint." Cal told the military police officer in charge of the detention section when he got there. Looking around Cal noticed that some of the stations were currently manned by sector rangers that Jule had brought with her to free up military personnel for other duties.

"Detention cell AA thirty eight." the officer replied and he pointed to a row of cells, "He's asleep though."

"Well I need to wake him up. It's urgent." Cal replied.

Sighing the officer got to his feet and led Cal to the cell before unsealing the door.

"On your feet Flint. You've got a visitor. A Jedi." he called out from the door as he and Cal stared at Flint as he lay on the bunk at the far end of the cell facing away from them. But when he did not respond the officer called out again, only this time louder, "I said you've got a visitor. Now on your feet trooper!" but still there was no response.

"Something's wrong here." Cal said, slipping past the officer and rushing to the bunk where he rolled Flint over to reveal his lifeless eyes staring up at him.

"I can't be sure without doing proper tests but I'd say he was poisoned." Neri said as she examined the body now lay out on the floor of the cell where Cal and the military police had attempted to resuscitate him.

"But no one's been in here since he arrived." the officer in charge of the detention section replied, "We've got surveillance footage to-

"Then it was probably a slow acting toxin." Neri interrupted, "Combined with a sedative so that he'd feel sleepy and go to bed. Whoever gave him the poison probably hoped that we wouldn't find out for several more hours yet."

From behind her Lara leant closer.

"Could the poison be why he opened fire at the protest?" she asked, but Neri shook her head.

"I doubt it honey." she replied, "A toxin that would make someone behave in that way would likely be a stimulant of some kind to build anxiety. Exactly the opposite of what we're seeing here."

Just then Neri's PTP link sounded.

"Go ahead." she said as she activated the device.

"Neri it's me." Varn's voice said, "We've just heard from the *Perseverance*. It seems that one of their engineering staff has been found dead and their medical officer suspects poison."

"Well isn't that a coincidence?" Neri said, looking up at Cal and Lara.

"I'm sorry I didn't get that." Varn said.

"Sorry Varn." Neri responded, "The body of that trooper also bears the hallmarks of poison."

"Have Flint's belonging been searched yet?" Cal asked, looking around at the military police officer.

"No sir. We didn't have any reason to." the man replied.

"Then I think Lara and I ought to do just that." Cal said to Neri.

"Varn," she said into her PTP link, "Cal wants to check out Flint's belongings. Perhaps the crew of the *Perseverance* should do the same with their engineer."

"Good idea." Varn said, "But tell Cal and Lara to hurry. I don't like the look of this crowd. They can't get into the Green Zone and that seems to be making them angry."

## 6.

Flint's bunk was located in a barracks that he shared with five other soldiers, all of whom were on duty when Cal and Lara arrived so the Jedi were able to search his locker in private. However, their findings were not encouraging. All that was contained in the locker were spare uniforms, personal cleaning utensils and a few personal items. None of which connected him to anywhere that he may have been when he was poisoned.

"Oh this is useless." Lara exclaimed, "I don't even know what we're looking for."

"Anything out of the ordinary." Cal replied.

"And can you tell me what that is?" Lara asked before throwing herself onto Flint's bunk. But as she landed there was a sudden 'Thunk!' and she felt herself drop further as part of it collapsed beneath her. Startled, she and Cal looked at one another.

"That sounded out of the ordinary." Cal said as he helped his sister back to her feet.

"Oh I agree." she replied and then together they pulled back the blankets and mattress to reveal the base of the bunk. Here they saw that the base had been cut into sections and that one of them had collapsed when Lara landed suddenly on top of it, probably due to being misaligned. Removing this loose plate exposed a hollow space beneath the bunk in which was a roll of bank notes.

"There's a lot of money to be just left lying around here." Cal commented as he held up the notes.

"Particularly when there's a far more secure locker available." Lara replied.

"Though of course lockers can get searched during spot inspections." Cal pointed out.

"Whereas a secret hiding hole under a bunk is likely to escape such searches." Lara added with a smile.

Just then there were voices from outside the room and the door opened to allow its other occupants to enter.

"What's going on here?" the first trooper through the door asked when he saw the two Jedi.

"Flint's dead." Cal told the soldiers.

"It looks like he was poisoned." Lara added, "And there was another victim, an engineer aboard the *Perseverance*. I don't suppose any of you would know anything about how those two could be connected would you?"

"Do any of you know where Flint went while off duty?" Cal asked.

"He went to some cantina with a guy in a navy uniform." one of the soldiers replied, "I think he said it was on Fifth Street."

Cal and Lara looked at one another.

"Fifth Street." Cal said, "Let's go."

"After you big brother." Lara replied.

Belle watched the feed from the probe droids scattered around the perimeter of the Green Zone monitoring the increasingly agitated crowd.

"There." she said, pointing to a group that was hurling debris at one of the heavily armoured blast gates,

"Access the *Perseverance's* weapons systems and begin the targeting sequence."

Aboard the *Perseverance*, Austin continued to monitor developments on the surface and relay all the information he gathered to Colonel Jeck and Varn. However, the last thing he expected was to be told that the frigate's turbolasers were charging up.

"Captain, power is being diverted to weapons." the ship's gunnery officer reported, "Turbolaser turret besh is coming on line and our sensors are putting out targeting sweeps."

"What?" Austin exclaimed as he turned around, "I gave no such order. Who's doing that?"

"No one sir." the gunnery officer replied, "The turbolaser emplacements are unmanned and my override is inactive."

"Get someone down there to that turret and disable it." Austin ordered. Then another thought occurred to him, "Where are the targeting sweeps being focused?" he asked.

"Just outside of the Green Zone sir."

"Oh kriff no." Austin said in disbelief, "It's going to fire on the protesters."

The cantina was almost empty when Cal and Lara arrived and most of the beings inside at the time averted their gaze, unwilling to make eye contact with the two Jedi. Unconcerned at this for now they headed directly for the bar where the barman eyed them both suspiciously.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

"This man was in here." Cal replied, placing his datapad on the bar with an image of Flint on the display.

"I haven't seen him." the man said and Cal looked at Lara.

"Did you hear that?" he asked, "He hasn't seen him."

"Interesting given that he didn't even look at the image." Lara replied and then both Jedi glared at the barman.

"Look at the image." Cal said sternly, "And bear in mind that he was poisoned. If we suspect it was as a result of something you served him then we may just decide to have your licence pulled while a full health and safety audit is carried out."

"Plus we're Jedi. We'll know if you're lying to us." Lara added and the barman scowled.

*Anger.*

*Hatred.*

"He was here earlier today." he said reluctantly.

"Alone?" Lara asked.

"No. He was with another man. Some guy in a navy uniform."

"And did they meet with anyone else?" Cal asked.

"They spoke to some woman." the barman replied, "I think she was coming on to them because she bought them drinks."

"Describe her." Cal said.

"Blonde like her." the barman told him, looking at Lara, "But perhaps five or ten centimetres shorter."

Cal frowned and tapped at his datapad.

"Take a look at this." he said and he held the datapad out again.

"Yeah, that was her." the barman said and Cal held up the datapad for Lara to see.

"Oh you've got to be kidding me." she said, "Belle? But she's supposed to be dead."

"Yes, conveniently shot by her twin brother before we could arrest her." Cal said, "I wonder how-" and then he suddenly stopped talking as both he and Lara felt a massive tremor in the Force and had to steady themselves. At the same time there was a sound like distant thunder from outside the cantina, "Outside! Quick!" Cal snapped and the two Jedi rushed outside where they saw the unmistakable trails of turbolaser fire lighting up the night sky.

Even given the drop off in power and refraction caused by hundreds of kilometres of atmosphere each turbolaser blast was strong enough to demolish an entire city block and the *Perseverance's* turret was firing repeatedly. The turret turned slightly between each blast, spreading the destruction further but keeping it just outside the Green Zone. The first impact instantly killed the hundreds of people directly beneath the path of the shot as well as all those near enough to be vaporised by the intense heat that turned the ground to glass. Following this first impact the gathered crowds turned to flee, but the turbolaser fire followed them and many of those not consumed by the turbolaser blasts themselves were instead roasted by the fireballs that expanded out from the point of impact. All of the destruction was directed away from the Green Zone. None of the turbolaser strikes came down within the perimeter wall and the flames could not damage the sturdy barrier.

"Can you get the shield up?" Varn asked.

"What shield?" the colonel responded, "Tepillos' planetary shield hasn't functioned for decades and the theatre shield we've got only covers the Green Zone. Nothing beyond."

"Sir I have Lieutenant Commander Veers for you." one of the command centre staff said suddenly.

"Veers, what the hell is going on up there?" Colonel Jeck demanded loudly.

"One of our turrets is malfunctioning." Austin told him.

"Malfunctioning?" Colonel Jeck repeated, "Veers there are people dying down here."

"Captain, do you have engine power?" Varn asked, "Can you get your ship out of weapon range?"

"No sir. All controls are frozen. I've sent an engineering crew down to try and cut the power to the turret."

Varn looked at Colonel Jeck.

"Colonel, ready your men for deployment." he said, "All we can do is wait until it's safe to try and assess how many are still alive for us to help."

Cal and Lara then burst into the command centre.

"Dad!" Lara called out, "It's Belle."

"What?" Varn replied.

"Belle Shill is alive." Cal told his father, "She met with Flint and an engineer from the *Perseverance* earlier today. I'm betting she got them to cause all this and poisoned them to keep them quiet."

Varn sighed.

"Unfortunately that doesn't do us much good right now." he said, "First we need to wait for the barrage to cease and then we need to help the wounded. After that we'll go after Belle."

"Assuming that she hasn't already got away by then." Lara commented.

The barrage ended after around ten minutes, by which time thousands of inhabitants of the city were dead and the area all around the Green Zone had been reduced to nothing more than rubble. A relative few beings in the area affected managed to survive, sheltered by buildings that collapsed around them or caught right on the edge of the destruction. But this number still required a massive search and rescue operation from the Republic forces with rubble needing to be removed carefully to prevent the structures that had protected

survivors from collapsing and crushing those trapped beneath.

All of this happened under the watchful eyes of the media, some of who even ventured outside the Green Zone in person to record images of the Republic troops assisted by the Jedi in rescuing as many as they could. These images were then broadcast across the sector as well as being relayed to other news outlets further afield. In the Narthis Sector the broadcasts were interrupted suddenly when it was announced that Senator Trent Narthis had a statement to make and the images switched to one of the same podium where he had made his speech appealing for people to wait for more information on the events at the protest where Flint had attempted to open fire.

“Fellow citizens of the Narthis Sector,” Trent began, “we are all appalled by what we have seen of the recent events on Tepillos. The deployment of Republic troops was supposed to bring peace to a world torn apart by civil war. But what we have seen recently is a far cry from the stabilising influence they are supposed to be. We have witnessed a Jedi knight infiltrating a peaceful protest and provoking an attack that resulted in dozens of innocents being injured. Worse yet when the citizens of the city marched on the Green Zone to express their opposition to such actions they were struck down by a mindless orbital bombardment that they had no defence against while the Republic's commanders, including a master of the Jedi Order sat in their fortress and watched.

“Following these events I have been in contact with the governments of the worlds of this sector and we have determined that we can no longer allow the future of our worlds to be determined by a remote central government that displays no control over its armed forces and allows trained killers to act without oversight. I must therefore inform you that as of eleven this morning the Narthis Sector is withdrawing from the Republic.”