

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE JEDI



IV-XII: ELECTION

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...

ELECTION

THE ELECTION FOR SENATOR HAS FINALLY ARRIVED. BUT A NEW ARRIVAL IN THE NARTHIS SECTOR DEMONSTRATES JUST HOW FAR ONE CANDIDATE IS WILLING TO GO TO WIN...

Original characters created and story written by Stephen J. Dutton.
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1 .

Han Shill sat down heavily as he turned on the massive video screen that filled most of the wall in his apartment. Then he scowled as he saw on it the image of a bald man standing in front of a cluster of voting booths while he held up a folding voting slip.

"Can you tell who you voted for Mister Kast?" a reporter asked and the man smiled.

"I think you'll find it's a secret ballot." He replied to mild amusement before the image cut back to a news anchor.

"Elsewhere Trent Narthis was also seen casting his vote." The anchor said and the image changed again. The scene was almost identical to the first except that the man shown voting looked younger than the first one. This time Han smiled but before he could hear what else the news anchor had to say the sound of his communication unit interrupted him.

"What?" he said, aware from the display that it was his office calling him.

"Mister Shill?" A nervous sounding voice said, "Err, there's someone here to see you."

"Tell them to make an appointment." Han said, "In normal hours."

"The reception staff told her that sir. But she said that her name is Natalay-"

"Natalay?" Han exclaimed, interrupting the person at the other end.

"Yes sir. She said that-"

"I'm on my way." Han said, interrupting again, "Don't let her leave." And he shut off both the communicator and the video screen before rushing from his apartment.

Han was still running when he burst into the main control room at the headquarters of Shill Security. From here the operations of every one of the forces under the command of his private military company in the sector could be monitored in real time. In addition there were several stations dedicated to intelligence gathering, monitoring government and commercial communications to try and identify opportunities for the company to get involved in.

"Where is she?" he said as he hurried across the room towards the individual who had called him at home.

"In your office sir."

"Good." Han replied, nodding, "I take it she's been made comfortable?"

"Yes sir. Refreshment has been provided."

"Okay then. See to it that we're not disturbed. This is very important, do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

"Right. Then I suppose there's no delaying this any further." Han said and he headed to his office.

As the door slid shut behind him he sealed it and looked towards his desk where his chair was turned away from him. Then it turned to reveal the woman sat in it. Looking between fifteen and twenty-five years older than Han she had similar coloured hair and skin and she stared at him and smiled.

"Hello Han." She said.

"Hi mom." He replied, "What brings you here?"

Natalay Shill's expression hardened and she leant forwards as Han approached her.

"Are you a total nerf herder?" she asked.

"What?" Han responded and Natalay slammed her hands down on the desk as she leapt to her feet.

"So deaf as well as stupid." She exclaimed, "Han, what have you been doing here for the past twelve years?"

Now Han frowned.

"In case you haven't noticed I've built the largest private military company in the sector." He said, but Natalay just snorted.

"You built nothing." She said, "You already had five thousand of my troops when you came here and you absorbed the individual security forces of the others into that. All you've done is open a pretty office and get your comm address listed in public directories."

"I have strike teams on almost every planet in the sector." Han said, but Natalay remained unimpressed.

"Yes and they're all identifiable as being yours if someone digs deep enough. This is not what you were supposed to do." She told him.

"Really? So what would you have me do? Live in some hovel that I never stay in for more than a couple of weeks at a time so I can't be found? You know, just like you." He responded.

"If that's what it takes." Natalay said, "Han your role here is very important."

"I know and I think I've carried it out rather well." Han said.

"Oh really? Let's go through some of your successes shall we? Perhaps we can invite Hugo Callan, Keelen Delvad and Corva Torin here to back you up." Natalay said, reeling off a list of individuals who had been killed while supposedly under the protection of Shill Security, "Or perhaps I could call up Erill Crassis. Could you get him on the line for me or is his family still not taking your calls?"

"That wasn't my fault." Han said, "I was only doing what Heddren-"

"Oh yes I know that dear. Heddren Drud wanted you to attack the Crassis Family because he was feeling ignored and what happened? The Jedi intervened and your attack failed. You are not supposed to be dealing with squabbles between the Families, you know that. You are supposed to keep them on track and provide them with what they need when more aggressive negotiations are called for in pursuit of the ultimate aim. Nothing else." Natalay said. Then she sighed and sat back down in Han's chair, "Now just tell me what's going on with this Trent Narthis business. What's your plan of action?"

"My plan of action?" Han asked in reply.

"Yes, to make certain he wins this election. You are planning on doing something to overturn the five point lead his opponent has aren't you?"

"An attempt was made to-"

"Was made? That's past tense Han and that means that it didn't work. I want to know how you're arranging the outcome of this election. Trent Narthis will be senator."

"There's nothing I can do." Han replied.

"Of course not." Natalay replied, "Because if even one of your men gets caught then Trent loses. The Republic will come down hard on him because Shill Security is publicly linked to The Narthis family."

"The vote has already started." Han pointed out, "So I'd like to hear how you intend to influence it now."

"But it hasn't started everywhere has it?" Natalay replied, "What about Tepillos? From what I hear the vote there has been delayed. There are just over four and a half billion people in this sector and two billion of them live on Tepillos. Two billion Han. Easily enough to decide the election."

"Decide it for Kast most likely." Han said, "He's ahead there by more than he is most of the sector."

"Which means he especially vulnerable to the vote being manipulated on Tepillos." Natalay replied, "What's more, from what I hear Tepillos is the ideal world to try and manipulate the vote on."

"Tepillos? I've heard it described as a wretched hive of scum and villainy." Han said, "And that's being kind if you ask me." And Natalay smiled.

"Excellent. That's just what I needed to hear." She said as she stood up.

"So you're just going to go to Tepillos and rig the election? Just like that?" Han asked.

"Of course not." Natalay replied, "I'm going to see Trent Narthis first. If I'm going to deliver him an election then I need his approval first. Then I'll head for Tepillos and I expect your twin sister to meet me there. You can get hold of her can't you?"

"What Belle? Of course I can. She's only pretending to be dead."

"Then that's sorted then isn't it? Oh could you also call Trent and let him know I'm on my way? It'll probably make things easier when I arrive."

"Natalay Shill." Trent Narthis said as he approached Natalay from across the hallway, "It's so good to finally meet you in person. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Oh don't worry about that." She responded as they embraced briefly, "I was just admiring your art collection. Especially this piece." And she looked around at a large photograph hung on the wall that showed a group of people standing in front of a starship.

"Ah, my illustrious ancestor and his gallant crew." Trent said as he too looked at the image, "Plus Rodge Kenner's brother of course. Yes, I've made use of this over the last few weeks to try and capture a bit of the spirit of adventure Jayk Narthis embodied when he set out."

Natalay smiled.

"Yes, to portray leadership and a strong work ethic as a family trait that now runs through your veins."

Natalay said, "It's funny in a way. I can look at these faces and tell you what I know about the character of these people who are all long dead and how they seem to have influenced their descendents' behaviour to this day. Look, Boltha Drud supposedly manipulated his findings to suit himself just like his family now manipulates the law, Jayk was a true leader like yourself and Corvis Fayl squandered the opportunity handed to him in the same way as poor Lorna did."

Trent smiled.

"Very astute." He said, "But what if I ask you to pick a trait that described our family? What would that be Natalay? Cunning? Strength?"

Natalay smiled back at him.

"Actually I think I'd have to say the thing that runs in my family is twins." She said.

"Of course it is." Trent said, "Your children are a credit to you. All four are—"

"My son is a nerf herder it would seem." Natalay interrupted, "If he wasn't then you'd already have this election in the bag. Now though it's up to me to deal with this it would seem. Assuming that you're in agreement of course."

"Well I'm certainly open to suggestions." Trent said, "But at this late stage I don't see that there's much that can be done."

"That's why you need me. Where others see difficulties and impossibilities I see the chance for a crushing defeat of my enemies." Natalay said. Then she turned around and began to walk towards the front door, "I'll see you again in a week." She said, "And by that time you'll have been named senator, I guarantee it."

2.

Colonel Arion Jeck was the commanding officer of the Republic's peacekeeping force on Tepillos. For years the planet had been torn apart by civil war and economic collapse and his limited force of troops was the only thing preventing the total collapse of society. Keeping order in the face of numerous insurgent groups attacking what remained of the local government, the colonel's men and one another whenever the mood took them was hard enough without his having to also provide security for the election for senator. The polling stations were obvious targets for insurgents and although he found the idea of having each and every one having Republic troops outside it's doors disturbing, there was no other way to protect them. The stumbling block was the sheer number of polling stations to be protected. There were tens of thousands of them around the planet and Colonel Jeck simply did not have enough men to put guards on them all. The only solution that the colonel had been able to come up with was to spread the polling out. On the other worlds of the sector there was only a single day in which to vote, all held on the same day regardless of the planet it took place on. But here on Tepillos the election was to take place over several days, allowing Colonel Jeck to concentrate his men on fewer locations before moving them on to the next set of polling stations the next day. At the end of each day the Republic troops on guard would also be responsible for bringing the ballot papers back to the secure Green Zone so that at the end of voting they could be counted in one go.

This entire operation was laid out on a holographic display in front of Colonel Jeck and he was studying it as two figures wearing similar robes entered the strategic planning room. Looking up he recognised both immediately and smiled.

"Ah, Jedi Udra, Padawan Udra. Good of you to come." He said.

Cal Udra was the jedi knight assigned to the Narthis Sector, while his younger sister Lara was also his padawan learner. Both had been requested to help oversee the election process on Tepillos.

"Sorry for the delay colonel but we were unavoidably detained." Cal replied.

"Yeah," Lara added, "our ship's still stuck on that miserable ball of dirt in the Levik Cluster. What's more we had to spend four days listening to Charity Crassis complaining about the lack of first class accommodation aboard the *Bright Hope* and Tarris Blake's ship."

"I don't think the colonel needs to know every detail Lara." Cal said and he looked at Colonel Jeck, "Go on, please."

"Thank you." The colonel replied and he pointed to the display, "As you can see the planet ha been divided up into half a dozen regions, arranged to match various time zones. From tomorrow and for the next six days voting will take place around the planet."

"I see you've organised your men in a rolling pattern." Cal commented as he took note of the unit identifications, the same ones appearing in each of the zones.

"So where do we go?" Lara asked as she searched the display for an icon that looked like it represented the two jedi, "Are we with that command unit?" she added, pointing to an icon that clearly represented a command and control position.

"No." Colonel Jeck answered, "I don't want to deploy either of you with the troops, they're quite capable of protecting the polling stations by themselves and your presence could be interpreted as an attempt to influence people's votes through psychic manipulation."

Lara frowned.

"As if we would." She said.

"Sometimes its appearances that matter though." Cal told her as he walked around the display, studying it more carefully.

"So where will we be?" Lara asked again, "Without the *Bright Hope* we'd need to borrow a ship from you if you want us ready to react to trouble on the other side of the planet."

"No, that won't be necessary." Colonel Jeck told her, "I want the pair of you to remain here in the Green Zone. As each day's voting is completed my men will bring back all of the voting cards. Then at the end of the week they'll be counted. I want someone to make sure that no one tampers with them."

"So we have to sit around in the Green Zone with nothing more to do than watch a whole load of voting cards?" Lara asked.

"More than a billion of them probably." Cal added.

"Works for me." Lara responded, "I could use an easy job for once."

"Belle, it's so good to see you again." Natalay said when she saw her eldest daughter at the side of the docking bay on Tepillos. The younger woman was dressed in the uniform of a customs agent and she wore her cap so that it partially covered her face and she averted her gaze by appearing to study a datapad. "How did you know it was me?" Belle asked in reply, looking up and removing the cap. "Do you really think that I wouldn't recognise my own daughter?" Natalay replied as they embraced briefly, "I'm so glad you were able to meet me on such short notice. We don't have much time available to us." "Han said you wanted to do something about the vote." Belle said. "That's right." "Then you really do need to move fast. It starts tomorrow morning." "Yes I'm aware of that, but my plan means there isn't much to be done until just before the voting starts anyway. That gives us plenty of time." Natalay said, "Now come on, I'll explain everything in detail when we're somewhere more private." "Before you do I think you ought to be made aware of something mom." Belle said, "The jedi turned up a couple of hours ago. Fortunately they didn't notice me when they got off the transport. They were in too much of a hurry to go and see the colonel. Whatever you've got planned they'll try and stop us." "Try and stop us?" Natalay asked, "Why my dear I'm counting on them to succeed." And she smiled. Belle looked back at her mother. "Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." She said.

The squad leader took one last look around. The room was mainly empty, this being better to allow an interference with its contents to be noticed. Just within the main door were several foldaway tables positioned end to end with computer terminals sat on them. Beside each terminal was a small pad of paper, each sheet marked with a list of the candidates standing for election. Large signs stuck to the walls stated that two of the names were no longer running, they had dropped out after the ballots had been printed and any votes cast in their names would be rejected. Upon entering, individuals would be expected to identify themselves, be given a voting form and then proceed to the row of private booths positioned in the approximate centre of the room to mark their ballot that they would then place in one of the three sealed containers located on one of the tables near the door. There would be no military presence stationed in here, instead the Republic squad would be located outside the polling station to watch for any signs of attack. "Sergeant its time." One of the election officials said.

"Very well." The squad leader, nodding, "Open the doors." And he approached the entrance. Ahead of him another of the election officials moved to open the doors. The squad leader stepped through into the street outside and looked around to check on his men. Then there was a sudden flash and he collapsed as the energy blast burned a hole through his chest.

"Sniper!" a nearby trooper yelled, activating his armour's built in point-to-point communicator so that his warning was instantly spread to the entire squad. The plasma blast had come from an upper floor of a nearby building and the trooper swung his blast rifle towards the window and returned fire. Without a clear target the trooper fired a burst of energy bolts at it, some of them passing through the window while others blew holes through the wall surrounding it.

Two more troopers rushed towards the building, their weapons aimed at the front door. But as they neared it there was a roaring sound as a vehicle drove down a side street at high speed. There was the squeal of brakes and the vehicle decelerated sharply. However, it was still moving at a significant speed as it came out of the side street and struck the running troopers, taking both off their feet and sending them tumbling over the top of it.

Four masked and armed men then leapt out of the vehicle and opened fire, spraying bullets at the polling station.

"Get back!" the trooper outside the main door yelled, waving at the staff already cowering just inside and he stepped back inside himself to use the door as cover.

The remaining squad members who had been deployed around the sides and rear of the polling station now began to converge on the front of the building to join in its defence. But their arrival had been anticipated and there was a sudden 'Pop!' as a projectile was launched from another concealed position in a nearby building. The round exploded amongst three of the troopers and produced a fireball that enveloped them all. Their all-enclosing white armoured suits prevented the flames from burning their flesh directly, but the liquid used to fuel the flames adhered to their armour and the heat still began to burn. All three dropped to the ground and attempted to extinguish the flames by rolling.

Meanwhile two of the gunmen from the vehicle turned their fire on the other approaching troopers while the other two charged the entrance to the polling station. Inside the single trooper protecting the doorway fired on them, hitting one before the second put a bullet through his shoulder and as he fell his rifle slipped from

his grasp. One of the polling station staff reached for the drooped weapon, but just as he was about to take hold of it the approaching gunman reached the doorway and delivered a strong blow to the man's head with the butt of his own rifle that knocked him out.

The remaining staff raise their hands as the gunman burst into the polling station.

"Get back!" the gunman shouted and he fired a short burst of fire into the ceiling. Then as the staff backed away he stepped up to the table and snatched a number of the pads of voting forms then stuffed them into a small bag he had slung over his shoulder before rushing back outside. He fired another burst towards the Republic troopers who were now pinned down by his comrades and then ran to where the man who had attempted to storm the polling station now lay and picked him up. He carried the injured man back to their vehicle and then all of the gunmen got back inside it and drove away. As the vehicle disappeared the supporting fire from the other buildings also ceased as the gunmen within them withdrew.

"See to those men!" one of the surviving troopers ordered the others and he pointed to where the three troopers were still burning and then he headed towards the polling station entrance. There he found the injured trooper pressing a field dressing to his shoulder, "What happened?" he asked.

"The guy just grabbed some voting papers and then left." The injured trooper replied.

"He only took a few pads." One of the election officials added, "We can still keep this station open."

"I'm going to send for support." The uninjured trooper announced, "I'll get a proper medic to take a look at that wound and the colonel needs to know what happened here. I've got a very bad feeling about this."

Cal and Lara were inspecting the hangars that would be used to hold the ballot papers prior to being counted as well as the rooms in which numerous droids had already been placed to conduct the count when Colonel Jeck approached them.

"He doesn't look happy." Lara whispered.

Anger.

The Jedi both sensed the colonel's displeasure through the Force before he spoke.

"It's started." He said, "The instant one of the polling stations opened it was attacked. I've got four men in the morgue already. Three more badly injured."

"Any idea which group is responsible?" Cal asked, but the colonel shook his head.

"No and the weird thing is that the insurgents didn't even bother to put the polling station out of commission. They just stole a few ballots and then left." He said.

"So maybe they were just amateurs." Lara suggested, "A bunch of guys that thought they could take the ballots and stop people voting."

"Amateurs with access to some pretty serious firepower." Colonel Jeck said, "They used a plasma rifle and some sort of grenade launcher with incendiary ammunition in addition to the slug throwers that most use."

"This is disturbing." Cal said, "I sense that there's something going on bigger than just the theft of a few ballot papers."

"My thoughts exactly." Colonel Jeck replied, "The problem is I've no idea what that may be. I know I said I wanted you to oversee the storage of the ballots but right now I'd like you to take a look at this."

"Well its not like there's actually anything here for us to protect yet." Lara commented.

3.

"Mission accomplished ma'am." The gunman said, pulling off his mask as he addressed Natalay and he handed her the bag of voting forms. Natalay smiled as she took the bag and removed one of the pads it contained.

"See?" Natalay said, looking around at Belle and smiling as she held up the pad, "I told you that these men have never let me down." And then she looked back at the man in front of her, "Excellent work Krovis." She told him, nodding and the man turned and strode away.

"So now what mom?" Belle asked from behind Natalay and her mother turned to face her again.

"Now we reproduce these." She said, "We're going to need a lot of them. Have we got the printers?"

"Yes, the Karns were as good as their word and they got them here about half an hour ago. They're almost ready to run." Belle replied, "So I suppose we need to get those scanned in and start marking the copies up for Trent then."

Natalay grinned.

"Eventually yes. But to begin with we'll be doing something a bit different." She said.

Cal and Lara leapt down to the ground before the gunship had properly touched down. On the other hand Colonel Jeck waited until the vehicle had landed before he disembarked.

"You're letting people in still?" Lara said as she saw a figure enter the polling station, watched by a pair of Republic soldiers.

"The insurgents didn't do any damage that would prevent voting from taking place so I thought it better to allow it to continue." Colonel Jeck responded, "Makes things look under control."

"So where was the attack made from?" Cal asked, looking around at the surrounding buildings.

"The first shot came from up there." The colonel told him, pointing.

"You mean the window surrounded by scorch marks?" Lara asked as she looked at the window he was pointing at.

"Yes. One of my men returned fire with his blast rifle. As you can see not all his shots went through the window." Colonel Jeck answered.

"And the ground car?" Cal asked, turning his attention to the skid marks on the road where the braking vehicle's tyres had scraped the surface.

"We're still hunting for it." The colonel said.

"I'd like to speak to the election officials." Cal said and he began to head for the polling station entrance.

Along the way he noticed several clusters of bullet holes in the wall of the building. Such damage was not uncommon on Tepillos, where shootings were a daily event, but these had the look of being new, "The slug throwers were automatic?" he noted.

"That's right." Colonel Jeck answered, "Submachine guns."

"All the same type and calibre?" Lara asked.

"Yes, how did you know?" the colonel asked in reply.

"Because so far everything's telling us that this group of insurgents has better access to weaponry than most." Cal responded, "They aren't having to make do with whatever comes to hand. But frankly I'm less worried about their access to small arms than what other sort of hardware they may have at their disposal."

"What do you mean by that?" Lara asked but by this point Cal had reached the entrance to the polling station and went inside. There were only a handful of voters inside the polling station and not all of the staff were occupied. Cal approached the closest of the unoccupied ones.

"My name is Cal Udra." He announced to her, "Jedi knight. I need to speak with you about the incident this morning."

Behind him Colonel Jeck nodded at the election official when the woman glanced in his direction.

"I didn't see much of the battle." She replied, "The insurgents attacked the guards, but we were all inside. I only saw two of the soldiers get hit."

"But you saw what happened when one of the insurgents entered this building?" Cal asked her.

"Yes I did." The woman answered, "But I didn't see his face. He wore a mask."

"Just tell me what he did." Cal told her.

"Well he came in and fired into the ceiling. Then he told us to get back while he took the pads of ballots from the tables." The woman explained.

"You still seem to have plenty left." Cal commented, looking at the pads now on the table.

"He didn't go near the case of spares." The woman replied.

"Is it possible he didn't know about them?" Lara suggested.

"I don't see how." The woman answered, "They were in plain view."

"They weren't interested in preventing voting from taking place." Cal said and then he pulled his sister and the colonel aside, "I think that this is part of a plot to influence the vote." He said to them both, keeping his voice low enough that no one else could overhear his suspicions.

"But surely a campaign of intimidation would require hitting more than just one polling station." Lara said.

"It would also require a large number of insurgents." Cal replied, "Enough to confront the Republic's peacekeeping force head on."

"There are no groups that large." Colonel Jeck said, "Intelligence suggests that the largest of them is about a thousand strong. They may join forces with one another every now and again, but they just don't have the command and control structure to operate like a conventional army, let alone the firepower to attack us openly."

"Precisely. Which means that they must be planning of doing something with the actual votes themselves." Cal said.

"So what do we do about it?" Lara asked.

"We do what the colonel originally asked us to do." Cal replied, "We go back to the Green Zone and protect the ballots when they come in."

"And we check them right?" Lara said, "See if any of them have been tampered with."

"The ballot boxes are not to be opened before the count begins." Colonel Jeck said, "Republic law prohibits it."

"Yes, unfortunately tampering with ballots isn't the sort of thing that the Jedi Order goes in for so we'll just have to wait until counting starts at the end of the election." Cal added.

"So we just sit and wait?" Lara asked.

"No, we'll keep an eye on any other incidents like what happened here, along with any other irregularities." Cal replied, "But the real work's going to begin when we get to open those ballot boxes."

"Two hundred and eighty million mother, that's a lot of votes." Belle said as she looked at the datapad. Every single polling station had been monitored by one means or another so that the correct number of replacement ballots could be produced. Natalay and Belle knew that the Republic would have an exact figure for the number of votes cast and that they had to be able to duplicate this number for it look right.

"Oh we don't need to switch every ballot box my dear," Natalay replied, "just enough that we can overturn Kast's advantage. Now have you prepared the infiltration teams?"

Belle nodded.

"They're ready to go." She said, "From what I can tell they're damn good."

"Of course they are Belle." Natalay said, "I trained them didn't I?"

"Just like me." Belle replied.

"Well, perhaps not quite that good." Natalay said, smiling and placing a hand against the side of her daughter's face, "You always were my star pupil."

Belle glanced at the wall mounted chronometer.

"I need to get going." She said, "The Republic will be starting to move soon. We need to be ready."

"Of course, go along now and make me proud." Natalay replied before Belle turned around and walked away, picking up a Republic-issue blast helmet as she went.

In the hangar the gunship pilot ran the final pre-flight checks on his vehicle before take off. His orders were simple, he would fly from the airbase in the Green Zone to the first polling station on his list where he would collect the list of voters who had turned up to vote and also the ballot boxes containing the votes themselves. Then he would return here to drop them off before heading back out to the next polling station on his list. Over all it would have been quicker to visit as many polling stations as it took to fill the gunship rather than just carrying a handful of ballot boxes at a time, but this way if any of the gunships were shot down or suffered malfunctions only a handful of ballots would be lost and arrangements could be made to cope with the loss of the gunship. In total more than a hundred gunships would be making these runs in order to be able to collect every last ballot box before morning when the second day of voting would begin elsewhere on the planet.

As he neared the end of the pre-flight checks the pilot heard the sound of someone rushing aboard and he looked around to see a figure wearing the same type of all enclosing white armour he did.

"Where the hell have you been?" the pilot demanded.

"Call of nature." The second armoured figure replied and it was obvious even with the distortion caused by the armour's communication system that it was a woman underneath.

"Well get strapped in because we're leaving now." The pilot announced and as the woman sat down on one of the benches in the gunship's rear compartment it rose up into the sky. The gunship and many more like it then flew away from the Green Zone, splitting up to each head for their assigned polling stations. Some time later the gunship's first destination came into view and the pilot looked over his shoulder. "Touching down in two minutes." He called out and the woman in the back gave him a thumbs up as she unstrapped herself and moved to the nearest hatchway. As the gunship descended another pair of troopers rushed towards it and the female trooper jumped out to meet them. "The ballot boxes are both inside." One of the troopers on guard at the polling station announced, "Shall we bring them out for you?" "No." the female trooper replied, "I'm under orders to fetch them myself." And escorted by the two guards she ran towards the polling station. The guards waited outside as she entered the building and as soon as the door shut behind her she looked around. Seeing that she was alone Belle then removed her helmet, "I'm in." she said into a PTP link that she slipped from a pouch on her belt and then she darted towards the ballot boxes that lay on the tables in front of her and picked one up in each hand. However, rather than head back outside with the ballot boxes Belle headed for a storeroom at the rear of the building. In here there was a sealed access hatch in the floor that led to the utility tunnels that criss-crossed the city. Belle set down the ballot boxes and unsealed the hatch before lifting it open and peering down into the tunnel below where she saw a group of four masked men pointing silenced slug throwers back up at her. "Put those away, it's me." Belle told them, "Now you take these and give me those others." And she passed the ballot boxes down into the tunnel. Less than a minute later she came walking out of the polling station once again wearing her helmet and with a pair of ballot boxes in her hands that she calmly carried to the gunship and placed aboard it. "Why so slow?" the pilot asked. "Maybe you can run with two of those but I'm not so strong." Belle replied and the pilot shook his head. "I've got a feeling that this is going to be a long night." He said as the gunship took off and steered back towards the Green Zone.

"Well everything looks to have gone to plan." Lara said as she stared at the hangar filled with ballot boxes. "Maybe." Cal replied with looking around at her, "But I've still got a bad feeling about this. I just wish we could take a look at some of these ballots right now." "What's that you're always telling me about patience big brother?" Lara asked. "That mine with you is rapidly running out?" Cal said and she pulled her tongue out at him, "I know what you're doing young lady. You never got away with that with dad and you're not getting away with it with me either." He added and Lara pulled her tongue back in and frowned. "Oh let's just go get some sleep." She said, "We've been up all night and these boxes aren't going anywhere."

"Well everything looks to have gone to plan." Natalay said as Belle returned to their temporary headquarters, no longer disguised as a Republic soldier. "So we managed to infiltrate all of the gunships then?" Belle asked in response. "Every one." Natalay replied, "The slice worked perfectly. None of the soldiers supposed to be collecting the ballot boxes received the order and our men were on every single gunship. The Jedi that Colonel Jeck fellow were so busy trying to stop the voting being interfered with that they neglected to keep an eye on their own personnel." "And what about the boxes themselves?" "So far it looks like we got eighty to eighty-five percent of them. Not all of the polling stations had alternate entrances we could use." Natalay answered. "Eighty percent should be good enough though." Belle said. "Oh easily." Natalay replied, "I can hardly wait for them to be opened." "Well you'll just have to won't you?" Belle said, "Plus we don't know how the next four nights are going to go do we?" "With you in charge I'm sure they're going to go just fine." Natalay replied.

4.

The following four nights went just as Natalay predicted. With the duty schedules sabotaged by the computer slicer she had brought with her Natalay ensured that none of the Republic's soldiers thought that they were assigned to collect the ballot boxes, leaving Natalay's troops to take their place while the genuine pilots transported them. At each polling station the trooper responsible for picking up the ballot boxes would instead locate a suitable access point to either a neighbouring building or utility or sewer tunnel where they could meet up with a team carrying replacement boxes. These were then flown back to the Green Zone where the Republic military and the Udras protected them.

Then at the end of the fifth day of voting it was finally time to count the ballots.

On most of the other worlds in the sector votes were cast and counted electronically, allowing for the results to be calculated very rapidly. Of course these had not been released yet, until every ballot was counted the counts had to remain a secret to avoid allegations that making them public had influenced the votes yet to take place. On the other hand here on Tepillos the manually marked votes would be distributed to hundreds of droids that would first sort them into groups according to who the vote was cast in favour of and then begin the task of counting them. All of this was to take place under the watchful eyes of not only Cal and Lara but also representatives from each of the candidates and a select few reporters.

For now though most of the media was gathering in the Green Zone, eager to be able to announce the winner while the candidates had gathered their supporters around them. Within a day one of them would be making a victory speech while the others would be forced to admit defeat. For now the media were concentrating on just two of the candidates, Hyronimus Kast and Trent Narthis. The third remaining candidate, the Tepillos nationalist Gogor Tok was so far behind in the polls that the possibility of him winning was being discounted entirely. Added to which he was not based in the Republic-protected Green Zone on Tepillos and there were few journalists willing to leave it for somewhere that the Republic military was not present.

Boredom.

"One billion, six hundred and forty-two million, seven hundred and seven thousand two hundred and thirty one." Cal said to his sister when he sensed her lack of interest in the count going on around them.

"Huh?" Lara responded.

"The total number of ballot papers to be processed." Cal said and he held up a datapad, "I've got the exact figure here from the polling station records. Of course some will be invalid, I've already seen two that had the name 'Hugh Janus' written in by hand." And Lara smirked.

"Yeah, but I bet some people spotted Trent Narthis' name was already on the ballot." She commented, prompting a smile from her brother.

"I never thought of it that way." He said.

Then one of the droids used for sorting and counting the votes approached the Jedi with several ballot papers in its hand.

"Irregularity detected." The machine announced as it held out the ballot papers and Cal took them.

"Let me see." Lara said, leaning in for a closer look, "What's wrong with these?" she asked.

"Incorrect spelling of candidate name." The droid answered, "Specifically Jaysica Priest."

"Jaysica Priest?" Lara repeated, "But she had to drop out when she got arrested. By us."

"Yes, but the ballots had already been printed by then." Cal pointed out as he read the candidates listed on the ballot paper on top of those he now held and he saw that the 'letters 'c' and 'i' in Jaysica's name had been swapped.

"That vote's for Trent Narthis." Lara said, scowling, "He must be trying to rig the election."

"Not necessarily." Cal replied as he began to sift through the ballot papers in his hand, "Here's one for Hyron as well. But the rest of these look to be for Gogor Tok."

"But what chance does he have?" Lara asked, "He didn't even leave the planet during the campaign."

"Tepillos is one of the most heavily populated planets in the sector remember?" Cal reminded Lara, "Only Crassis Major has more people on it. If Gogor Tok won by a big enough margin here while Hyron and Trent split the vote elsewhere then he could still win. We need to take a look at some more of these ballots."

The droid led Cal and Lara to where ballots were being sorted. The other droids were still separating the individual votes out into stacks for counting despite the apparent flaw with some of them. As far as the droids were concerned they were to continue to sort the ballots until instructed otherwise. The two Jedi made their way to the stacks of unsorted ballots that were still in the process of being removed from the boxes as they were unsealed.

"These are spelt wrong as well." Lara said, "Cal is it possible that there was just an innocent mistake that no one spotted?"

"No." Cal replied, shaking his head before he held up another ballot paper, "Look, this one is correct."

"So since they were all supposed to have been created from a single template some of them have to be fakes." Lara commented and Cal nodded.

"Exactly." He said, "But the question is how many are real and how many are fake?"

"Is there a problem here?" a female voice asked from behind Cal and Lara and they turned around to see one of the election monitors, a female twi'lek wearing a badge that suggested she was a supporter of Trent Narthis. Lara looked at Cal, unsure of how to respond.

"We're just making sure that everything is as it should be." Cal told the twi'lek woman, "Now if you don't mind we'd like to continue."

"Of course, don't let me keep you." The woman replied and she walked away, studying the droids as they carried on sorting ballots.

"Just making sure everything's as it should be?" Lara hissed, "Cal, what the kriff is this poodoo? Someone's trying to rig the election."

"Yes, I know that." Cal responded quietly, "But I'd rather that people didn't know that we knew. At least not yet. Not until we know some more."

"Then what do we do?" Lara asked.

"First I want to see if there are any ballot boxes that haven't been opened." Cal said and he looked around until he saw a stack of several hundred ballot boxes that still looked to be sealed and he beckoned Lara to follow him. As they approached a pair of droids arrived to open more of them and the two Jedi took up positions close by where they could see what happened. The droids opened the box and tipped the ballots out onto the table in front of them and it was then that Cal stepped in.

"Halt." He commanded and the droids stood back from the table and looked at him while he walked up and picked up a ballot paper, "Spelt incorrectly." He told Lara before returning the ballot to the pile and instead picking up the now empty box.

"What's that for?" she asked.

"It's what people put their votes in after they've cast them. But that's not important right now." Cal replied.

"Oh ha-ha big brother, always the comedian. What do you want it for?" Lara asked and Cal held out the box so that the label on the side was visible.

"This identifies which polling station the box came from." He said, "Now I want to see if another comes through with the ballots all spelt correctly and we'll take a look at where that came from."

Colonel Jeck looked up from his desk as Cal and Lara entered his office.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." He said when he saw that Cal was carrying a pair of empty ballot boxes, "What's wrong?"

"Take a look at these images colonel." Lara said, handing him a datapad that had a picture of two ballot papers on its display.

"What am I looking for?" he asked, "These just look like two ballot papers."

"Check the spelling of Jaysica Priest's name on them both." Cal said and Colonel Jeck's eyes widened.

"How can this be?" he exclaimed, "How many of the votes have been affected?"

"From the looks of things a lot." Cal told him, "The majority of the votes Lara and I saw had Priest's name spelt incorrectly."

"I take it that the ballot boxes are significant." The colonel said, looking at the boxes in Cal's hands.

"Yes." Cal replied and he held one up, "This contained ballot papers with the name spelt correctly while the other had them spelled incorrectly. I want to visit both the polling stations that these came from."

Frowning, Colonel Jeck leant forwards and activated the intercom on his desk.

"This is Colonel Jeck," he announced, "I want an assault shuttle with full troop complement on the pad in ten minutes. Jedi Udra will assume command." Then he shut off the intercom without waiting for a response and looked up at Cal, "Will that do you?" he asked.

"Yes colonel. Thank you." Cal replied.

From a room that overlooked the Republic military airbase in the Green Zone Belle watched through a set of wide scan binocs as Cal and Lara boarded an assault shuttle along with a platoon of infantry in their distinctive white armoured suits. Then she took out her PTP link and activated it.

"Mom, the Jedi are on the move." She transmitted, "I suggest you get everyone ready."

By assigning a shuttle instead of a gunship Colonel Jeck dramatically reduced the amount of time it took for the Jedi to reach the first polling station. Rather than a flight that would have lasted several hours, a sub-orbital hop took under ten minutes. The polling station they were visiting first had been used on the third day of voting and it had stood empty since then.

"Cal would you mind telling me exactly what we're supposed to be looking for?" Lara asked as the shuttle touched down and the platoon of Republic soldiers it carried spread out to form a cordon around both it and the polling station building, a squat single storey structure with boarded up windows.

"I want to figure out how the ballot boxes got swapped." He replied, "My guess is that there's something about the buildings themselves that allowed someone to gain access to them." And then he skidded to a halt as he reached the door of the building and he and Lara waited while one of the troopers rushed up to them with an access key.

Both Cal and Lara produced small flashlights as they entered the darkened building and they shone them around the room that still held the tables and voting booths used for the election.

"I don't get it." Lara said, "This ballot boxes would have been in plain sight the whole time."

"Only while voting was actually taking place." Cal replied, "As soon as the polls closed the building was cleared and then sealed."

"So you suspect a break in?" Lara asked and Cal nodded.

"I do." He said, "But the question is where did they get in? Let's split up and take a look around. Search for any alternate ways in and out again. Remember that they have to be big enough to carry a ballot box through as well, so most ventilation ducts are out."

Lara nodded in response and the two Jedi split up, searching the other rooms. The windows were of particular interest to them both as potential entry points, but in each case it was evident that they had been boarded up for some time and were undisturbed. Cal was just studying one of these windows when he heard an odd sound as he took a step. So far his footsteps had all sounded as if he was walking over a solid surface, but this time there was a hollow echo instead and he looked down at his feet. There he saw a hatchway set into the floor that was sealed with an electronic lock.

"Lara get in here!" he yelled as he crouched down to examine the hatch more closely and after just a few moments Lara burst into the room.

"Cal what's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing." Cal replied, "But take a look at this."

"What is it?" Lara asked, crouching down beside her brother.

"A hatchway." Cal answered, "Though I'm not sure where it leads."

"It's sealed." Lara commented as she inspected the seals.

"Yes, but these sorts of seals can be released." Cal replied and then he frowned, "but only from the inside." And he took out his lightsaber.

"Cal wait. Are you sure you should be doing this?" Lara asked.

"Well there isn't anything left here to be interfered with is there?" Cal asked in response and there was a 'snap-hiss' as he activated his lightsaber and then swung it at the hatch, slicing it in half.

The two halves of the hatch clattered down into the darkness below and Cal and Lara lent over the hole and pointed their flashlights into it.

"It's a tunnel." Cal said, shutting off his lightsaber and returning it to his belt and he began to climb down into the hole, making use of the handholds that ran down one side. Standing in the tunnel he then looked in both directions and instantly saw the pipes and cable bundles that lined the tunnel walls, "It's a utility tunnel." He said as Lara followed him down into the tunnel.

"And I'd say that someone's been this way recently." Lara added, pointing to a set of tracks in the grime covering the floor that went down the tunnel. Then when she checked in the opposite direction she saw that there were no tracks heading off that way as well, "In fact they only came here." She added.

"And they had something heavy with them." Cal said and he shone his light to a point on the floor where something had been set down and made a mark in the grime as well, "Does that shape look familiar to you?"

"You mean the one that's exactly the same size and shape as the bottom of a ballot box?" Lara replied.

"Exactly." Cal said and then he looked back up to the hatchway into the polling station, "But there's no sign that the hatch was forced." He added.

"You mean before you cut it in half?"

"Yes, before that. So unless the hatch happened to have been left open—"

"Someone had to open it for whoever was waiting down here." Lara interrupted, "One of the election officials perhaps?"

"No." Cal replied, "That hatch was sealed again after it was used. That means that there had to have been someone in the polling station while the ballot boxes were being swapped."

"But who Cal? The polling stations were cleared when voting was done and the only person allowed in after that was the Republic trooper who picked them up."

"Who was in here alone the whole time." Cal pointed out, "Lara I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"What, you mean because the only people who could have done this are supposed to all be on our side?"

Lara responded.

"Exactly. We better get back to the Green Zone. Colonel Jeck needs to hear about this as soon as possible."

5.

When the shuttle returned to the Green Zone an un-armoured junior officer met it on the landing pad.

"Jedi Udra!" he called out over the sound of the shuttle's repulsorlift engines, "I need you to come with me to see the colonel immediately."

"We were just on our way to see him anyway." Cal replied.

"What's wrong?" Lara asked.

"One of the election monitors for Hyronymous Kast noticed an error on the ballot papers." The officer replied, "The entire count has been halted."

Cal and Lara looked at one another.

"Well it had to happen sooner or later." Cal commented.

"Ah here they are now." Colonel Jeck told his audience when Cal and Lara entered his office.

The colonel was actually the only living being in his office when the Jedi entered it, Hyronymous Kast, Trent Narthis and Agent Jule Raser of the sector rangers were all present in holographic form, while Gogor Tok appeared only as a two dimensional image on a wall mounted screen.

"Colonel." Cal said, nodding, "You wished to see us?"

"Yes, I was just explaining why the count has had to be stopped." The colonel replied.

"And assuring us that you were investigating." The hologram of Hyronymous added.

"As I understand it, the fraudulent votes are mainly for one particular candidate." Trent's image said and it looked towards the screen showing Gogor's face and the massive Herglic frowned.

"If you have an accusation make it directly." His deep voice responded.

"Mister Tok you have my assurance that we are making progress in our search for those responsible." Cal said, "Whoever they may be."

Gogor snorted.

"The assurances of the Republic and their Jedi puppets mean nothing to me." He stated.

"Perhaps we should continue this more privately." Cal said, looking at the colonel.

"I agree." Jule's image said, "The investigation cannot make further progress while we are discussing it in this manner."

"I expect to be kept up to date though." Hyronymous replied, "This is a serious issue and the media are already swarming all over it."

"Yes, it's a pity one of your staff went to them." Trent commented, his hologram looking at Hyronymous'. But then the hologram looked back towards Cal, Lara and the colonel, "I shall await your findings." He said and then his hologram vanished as he broke the link from his end. Hyronymous just nodded before his hologram vanished as well, while Gogor simply snorted again before the display went black.

"So what do you have?" Colonel Jeck asked, turning towards the Jedi now that all of the senatorial candidates had severed their communication links.

"Colonel we need to know which troopers you assigned to collect the ballot boxes." Cal said.

"Of course. But why?" Colonel Jeck asked as he leaned towards the computer terminal on his desk.

"Because they're the only ones who could have swapped them." Lara replied and the colonel stopped his search of the computer system.

"Are you saying that my men are corrupt?" he asked, "You better have good evidence for that."

"Lara and I are not saying anything against anyone specific just yet." Cal said.

"But you are saying that Republic military personnel had to have been involved." Jule pointed out.

"Possibly." Lara said.

"This isn't possible." Colonel Jeck said, staring at his computer screen.

"Unfortunately it is." Lara replied, "The polling station Cal and I—"

"No." The colonel interrupted, "I mean this." And he pointed at his computer display, "According to the duty roster there was no one detailed to collect the ballots. No one at all."

"Let me see." Cal said as he and Lara rushed to the colonel's side and looked at the display for themselves.

"He's right Cal." Lara said, "If this duty schedule is anything to go by then nobody picked up the ballot boxes."

"So they were impostors? All of them?" Jule asked.

"That's how it looks." Cal said, "Colonel, I think your system has been sliced."

"Frankly I'm happier with that." Colonel Jeck replied, "It's better than not being able to trust my own men."

"This may make our job easier." Cal said.

"How?" Lara asked.

"Think about it." Cal replied, "We found tracks at the polling station that we could have followed, but they wouldn't have told us how the other stations were subverted. On the other hand all of the fake troopers likely came from the same place here in the Green Zone. That means we're just hunting for one location instead of potentially hundreds across the planet." Then he looked at the colonel again, "Colonel we're going to have to speak to your pilots."

The pilots of the gunships and shuttles used to ferry the ballot boxes back to the Green Zone were all summoned together in a single room for Cal and Lara to question them en masse.

"How many of you knew the troopers assigned to collect the ballot boxes?" Cal asked and in return there was only silence, "And how many went into the polling stations with them?" Cal added, but yet again none of the pilots responded.

Cal glanced at Lara and Colonel Jeck.

"Big co-incidence huh?" Lara commented and Cal smiled briefly.

"Now how many of you saw where they came from or went to when you weren't carrying out your orders?" he asked the pilots.

This time a handful of the pilots raised their hands.

"Where did you see them?" Cal asked, pointing to one of the pilots that had raised his hand.

"He came from the old defence line at the edge of the airfield." The pilot said.

"And you didn't think that odd flight sergeant?" Colonel Jeck asked.

"Not really, no sir. I just figured that he'd crept off for a quick smoke before we left." The pilot answered.

"Same here." Another of the pilots added, "I saw the trooper assigned to my ship come from the same place."

"Colonel I'd like to see this defence line if you don't mind." Cal said.

"Of course. I'll take you there myself." The colonel replied. Then he looked at the pilots, "None of you are to discuss any of this with anyone." He ordered them, "This is part of an ongoing investigation."

6.

The defence line was a row of overgrown ferrocrete bunkers that the Republic forces had used in the early days of their peacekeeping mission on Tepillos to defend their base against what were then regular attacks against it. However, when the Green Zone had been properly secured the defence perimeter had been pushed outwards and only a fence left to separate the Republic military base from the surrounding civilian area.

"Well someone's obviously been here recently." Lara said as she looked at the tracks leading to and from the bunkers.

"I don't sense anyone inside now though." Cal responded as he peered inside the closest bunker and he shone his flashlight inside, "Ah. This doesn't look good." He added and he looked at Colonel Jeck, "Colonel, I take it that this isn't part of the intended design." And when the colonel looked inside the bunker as well Cal pointed to a gaping hole in the wall below ground level.

"A tunnel!" the colonel exclaimed as he straightened up, "A tunnel running right into my own kriffing base! I'll get a security team here right away to-"

"Yes that'll be very useful." Cal interrupted him, "But for now I think Lara and I should investigate on our own. Your men can follow us later but for now I think that we should avoid any delay."

"Oh great." Lara said, "Another hole in the ground." And she unclipped her lightsaber from her belt.

The tunnel sloped downwards from the bunker until it reached another ferrocrete barrier that had been broken through.

"This must be the security barrier around the base." Cal said softly, "It goes down for about ten metres."

"So it was easier to dig through than go under?" Lara asked and Cal nodded.

"It looks that way." He said, "But I'd say that someone melted through this, probably with a compact barradium charge."

"Barradium? Cal, that stuff is lethal." Lara said.

"I know. Better that whoever's got it is using it up on a wall than using it to make a bomb." Cal replied in agreement, "Let's just hope that they've used it all up."

"Oh, I had a bad feeling you were about to say that." Lara said before Cal continued on his way along the tunnel.

The tunnel came to a sudden halt at a dead end. However there was a ladder set into the wall at the end that led upwards and cautiously Cal climbed up this until he found his way blocked by a blank sheet of metal. Pushing against this he found that it would not move and he looked down to where his sister was following him up the ladder.

"I'm going to have to use my lightsaber." He said softly and Lara nodded as Cal put his flashlight away and instead drew his lightsaber, igniting it so that its pulsing blue light illuminated the tunnel around them.

Carefully Cal pressed the tip of the lightsaber blade up against the metal sheet, attempting to cut through it without revealing his presence to anyone that was lurking above him.

"Almost done." He whispered, "Can you catch this?"

"Sure, I'm ready." Lara replied and Cal finished the cut.

Instantly the sheet of metal dropped towards him and Cal let out a brief blast of telekinetic energy that knocked it aside before it could strike him. Meanwhile Lara watched the sheet closely as it fell, concentrating on it as she focused her mind and let the Force flow through her. Like Cal had just done she reached out through the Force for the sheet, but unlike her brother she focused on grabbing hold of it rather than just deflecting its fall and the sheet came to a sudden halt, floating in midair. Then Lara gently lowered it down the vertical tunnel shaft until she felt it touch the floor below and she released it.

"Okay I'm done." She whispered and Cal nodded before he clambered up out of the hole he had just created above his head.

Danger.

Before he could look around to take in his surroundings Cal felt a tremor in the Force and he rolled aside just as there was the rattle of automatic slug thrower fire and a cluster of bullets passed through where he had just been.

"It's a trap!" he snapped as he searched for his assailant.

Cal was pressed up against a stack of unmarked boxes that felt as if they were packed full of something, but what that was would have to wait for now. Looking in the direction that the gunfire had come from Cal saw that the boxes in fact formed two walls either side of him and it was obvious that he was in some form of warehouse. At the end of the rows of boxes he saw a raised walkway set high up against the far wall and

standing on this was a man armed with a short-barrelled slug thrower that rattled as he fired again. But this burst was not aimed at Cal; instead its target was Lara as she followed her brother out of the tunnel.

"Lara look out!" Cal yelled as she squealed and dived out of the path of the bullets. Fortunately the weapon being used seemed to lack accuracy and there was a sudden respite as the gunman found himself out of ammunition and struggled to reload his weapon as quickly as he could.

"Now!" Cal snapped and he leapt to his feet and charged towards the walkway, holding his lightsaber up in front of him so that he would hopefully be able to block any further bullets that came his way.

When Cal reached the end of the stacks of boxes he found that there was no way up to the walkway to hand, but he did sense the presence of someone lurking just around the corner and as another man appeared with a weapon in his hand Cal was ready. Before the man could fire his pistol Cal swung his lightsaber upwards in a diagonal line, slicing the man's torso from hip to shoulder. He let out a brief scream and fell backwards, landing in a heap at Cal's feet.

Cal pressed himself up against the wall below the walkway and Lara joined him just as there was another burst of gunfire from above. However, the gunman was now unable to draw a clear line of sight to either of the Jedi and the bullets just embedded themselves in the floor and the stacks of boxes nearby.

"Over there Cal." Lara said, pointing along the wall to where a flight of stairs led up to the walkway above them.

"Good. Let's go." Cal replied and they ran towards the stairs.

However the gunman was able to guess what they were doing and as Cal led the way up the stairs he was met by another burst of gunfire.

"Down!" he exclaimed and both he and Lara ducked down out of sight.

"Now what?" Lara asked.

"I'm not sure." Cal replied.

"I wish we'd brought our blasters with us." Lara commented, "At least then we could return fire. How much ammunition do you think he's got?"

"He only needs two bullets that we don't block or dodge." Cal said, looking around for anything that may come in useful. Then he looked down and smiled, "I've got an idea." He said, "Get back down the stairs."

"Down? But I thought we wanted to get to the top of them?"

"Yes but there's a bad man with a gun up there." Cal said as he slipped past Lara and descended the stairs.

"So what are you planning to do about that?" Lara asked, following him back down to the floor below, "Wait for him to come down to us?"

"Not quite. I'm going to bring him down a bit quicker." Cal said and he swung his lightsaber so that it cut right through one of the walkway's supports.

"I get it." Lara said and she ran to the next of the supports and cut through that one with her own lightsaber. The Jedi went along the wall and cut through each of the supports in turn. Only when the walkway under his feet lurched suddenly did the gunman realise what was happening and by that time it was too late as the walkway collapsed under its own and his weight, falling away from the wall and into the stacks of boxes that filled the warehouse. The impact triggered a chain reaction as one stack of boxes after another toppled over into the next.

By the time this ended all of the stacks had collapsed and the warehouse was now filled with boxes randomly piled on top of one another. Of the gunman there was no sign. Neither Cal nor Lara could see him or sense him through the Force and the only thing that they could assume was that he was dead, buried under the piles of boxes that had landed on top of him.

"So what do you suppose he was protecting Cal?" Lara asked as she looked up at where the walkway had been, "These boxes or something up there?" and she pointed to a doorway set into the wall now far above the floor that could not be easily accessed.

"Let's go take a look shall we?" Cal asked, putting away his lightsaber and unreeling a syntherope line instead.

Cal pulled Lara up into the room after him and they both looked around at what it held.

"Cal are these what I think they are?" Lara asked as she approached one of the machines that was in the room.

"If you think that they're industrial printers then I think that you're right." Cal said.

"Ballots." Lara said as she looked at the display of the nearest machine, "Cal these are set to print out ballot papers."

"And Jaysica Priest's name is spelt incorrectly." Cal said as he looked at the display as well and saw an image of what the printer was programmed to produce.

"So all those boxes out there are probably full of them." Lara commented.

"Yes, they're-" Cal began and then he stopped, "No. There's no need." He said and he returned to the doorway and looked out into the warehouse. From this elevated position he could make out pieces of paper about the size of ballots that had spilled out of the boxes when they had split open and reaching out through the Force he grabbed hold of some and pulled them through the air towards him, "Jaysica Priest is spelt correctly." He said as he looked at them, "Lara these are the genuine ballots."

"But why gather them all together here instead of destroying them Cal?" Lara asked as she came to look at them herself.

"I don't know. Perhaps as proof of what had been done. Or maybe for blackmail purposes."

"Blackmail?" Lara asked.

"Yes. The fraudulent votes we've seen were overwhelmingly for Gogor Tok. If he was declared senator illegally then whoever organised all of this would have leverage over him." Cal explained.

"So Gogor isn't responsible for any of this then?" Lara said and Cal shrugged.

"Frankly that's for Jule Raser's sector rangers to figure out now. We just need to make sure that these ballots get properly counted." He told her, "Then we find out who the new senator is."

"For a while I had a bad feeling about all this." Trent Narthis told the cheering crowd, "But the verdict of the people of the Narthis Sector is clear and I would like to thank them for their vote of confidence in me." Then he paused and smiled, "And I would also like to publicly pay tribute to the actions of Cal and Lara Udra, the brave jedi assigned to this sector. During the campaign they saved my life from an assassin and now they have saved the election itself. I can't say whether or not they would have supported me if they were eligible to vote for themselves, but without them I would not be here now to accept my new office. And now I'd like to take my leave of you, it's been a long couple of days and I'd like to get some rest."

The crowd continued to cheer, some of them chanting his name as he took his wife's hand and they made their way off the stage. They headed directly for a luxury landspeeder with blacked out windows and got into the back where Natalay Shill waited for them with a smile on her face and a drink in her hand.

"I take it that you're satisfied with my work?" she asked.

"Well I am senator now, so I suppose I am." Trent replied, "But what happened to the actual ballots?"

"You mean the ones that look to have handed the election to Hyronymous Kast by a wide margin?" Natalay asked, "Oh they burned quite nicely."

"You took a big chance." Trent's wife commented, "What if you'd been caught? Rigging an election is treason and Trent could have hanged for it."

"Calm down Calleen." Trent told his wife, "Just think of everything we have to gain from this." And Calleen smiled.

"Yes I suppose that senatorial expense account could come in handy." She said. Then she looked at Natalay, "But you still put my husband at risk." She added.

"There was never any risk." Natalay replied, "None of the personnel I used could be linked to your family. Belle is the only one who didn't arrive in the sector with me and she's believed to be dead anyway. Added to that if the deception had been discovered prematurely then it would have looked like Gogor Tok was behind it."

"And supposing it was never discovered?" Calleen asked, "Then we'd have him as senator ready to kick the Republic off Tepillos before we're ready for that."

"Actually if we assume that everyone involved in the counting of the votes was a total nerf herder then we'd have a senator who owed his position to us." Natalay replied, "After all we still had all those ballots in your husband's name. Tok would have done exactly what we told him to or Colonel Jeck would have received an anonymous tip about where the supposedly legitimate ballots all were and how to identify the fakes. Tok would be impeached for electoral fraud and the jedi who oversaw the election would have been totally discredited."

"Why you make that sound almost preferable to my winning and having to say nice things about Cal and Lara." Trent said and all three of them smiled.

"But I take it that I have your confidence now?" Natalay asked.

"Oh yes." Trent replied, "But then you always have been one of us haven't you?"