

# STAR WARS

## The Preservers

By Brendon J. Wahlberg

For twenty-four millennia, the Whills have recorded the story of the Jedi and the Republic...until the rise of the oppressive Empire brought an end to their mission.

Now the emerging civil war has forced the Whills to side with the newborn Rebel Alliance.

But the vengeful Emperor Palpatine, seeking to extinguish the light of truth, has turned his malevolent attention towards the Journal of the Whills...

From the Journal of the Whills:

120 Life arose on a multitude of worlds and flourished, and life brought forth the Force, an energy radiated by all living things. Even as living

beings died, the Force they generated remained. And so the Force grew to become the living essence of the galaxy itself. Being a

part of the great cycle of life, the Force had two aspects, creation and destruction, each balanced against the other. And the Force came to know itself.

121 The time came when the energies of the Force had grown strong enough to be sensed by living beings. A Holy man named the Skywalker became aware of the Force. After much study, he came to see in a new way, and his aura and his powers grew strong.

The Force spoke to the Skywalker, and he came to know the life-giving

aspect of the Force. And he named it the Ashla.

122 But the life-taking aspect of the Force was quick to respond to the new

thing that the Ashla had done. It, too, spoke to the Skywalker, and he

named it the Bogan. The Bogan desired the Skywalker as an agent to commit evil and increase the energy of death in the galaxy. But the Bogan had not yet learned the way of seduction, and it could only

try to compel the Skywalker to comply. The Skywalker fought the Bogan mightily, and his strength prevailed.

123 The Skywalker realized that if he taught others the way of the Ashla, some with lesser strength would come to know the Bogan and bring great suffering to the galaxy. He entrusted the secret of the Force only

to his twelve children. The family of the Skywalker brought new life to the people of his system, and many blessings came from them. They became known as the Jedi Bendu of the Ashla, servants of the Force. The Skywalker joined with the leaders of many worlds to form the great government of the Republic. The Jedi Bendu became the guardians of peace and justice in the Republic.

124 And when the Skywalker's work was done, and he had grown very old, he gathered his children, and his children's children to him, and he prophesied.

125 The Skywalker said, The Force has been a secret among us, so that no one will use it to bring great pain to others. But one day, our story will be told in full, and the Force will be known to all. The Republic will grow very large, and our family will not be enough to provide Jedi Bendu to safeguard all of it. The many races of the Republic will provide servants of the Force, and the Jedi Bendu will be numerous enough to oppose the servants of the Bogan where they arise.

126 The Skywalker said, Your descendants will go out among the stars and find a race of great wisdom, called the Whills. They will accept their destiny and follow the Jedi Bendu to this system, and dwell in the light of the Ashlan Nebula. On the fourth planet, they will record our story.

127 The Skywalker said, The Whills shall tell the story of the Jedi Bendu and

the Republic, which shall last for over a thousand generations. All the races of the Republic shall share the story. It is their common heritage.

The Whills shall be sustained by their task, but when the shadow of the

Bogan falls upon them, the Ashla will not desert them, and in the time of

greatest despair, there shall come a savior, and he shall be known as the Son of the Suns.

-The Journal of the Whills, Volume One, 3:120-127. Excerpted from the Testimony of the third son of the Skywalker.

"Reb, Reb, Reb," the Whill Master snuffled chidingly at the human student, "you must try harder to see the meaning behind my lessons with your spirit, not merely with your mind."

"I'm not even sure what you want me to see, Master Resh," said Reb Zakai. "I look at the letters on the page, and that's all I find there. The scribe who made them was very good, but..." Reb trailed off.

Resh placed one huge hand parentally on Reb's shoulder, sighing. "The Aurebesh is an ancient alphabet. It has been with us as long as the Journal...its letters have shaped the way we think. In turn, our thoughts have given life to the letters--life, identity, and meaning. They are more than just symbols or sounds. Take the letter Jenth, for example. It gives us the word Jedi, and in turn, it partakes of the mystery and dignity of that name. Its mystical opposite is the letter Senth, which gives us the word Sith."

"The ancient enemy of the Jedi," said Reb, with his usual skepticism evident in his voice.

"Exactly," said Resh, pretending not to hear the doubt. "Even the name of the Aurebesh itself contains a fundamental mystery. The letter Aurek gives us the word Ashla, the good side of the Force as it was once called. But the letter Besh gives us the word Bogan, the evil side. In the word Aurebesh, both Aurek and Besh are combined--good and evil together. And so it is with the Force. There is a dark and a light side, but only one Force."

"What about the letter Resh?" Reb asked. "There's no mystery attached to my name that's connected to the Force."

"I wouldn't jump to conclusions," the Whill said. "The noble letter Resh gives me my name, and forms the beginning of yours. It also gives us the word Rebellion."

"The Rebellion against the Empire?" asked Reb. "What's that got to do with the Force?"

Resh sighed deeply. "If only it did. The Rebellion is small, and seems doomed to failure. It would need the Force on its side in order to have any chance at all. I know that the Jedi would have fought on the side of the Rebels, if they had not been destroyed."

Reb was immediately troubled by the mention of the Emperor's Purge against the Jedi. Resh saw that he was still haunted by the loss of his parents during that conflict. "I'm sorry, Reb. I didn't mean to remind you of your parents." Reb nodded, but seemed to withdraw into himself. "Maybe that's enough instruction for today," said the Whill sympathetically. "You seem like you could use some time to think by

yourself. For next time, though, just understand that what I was getting at, is that no matter what our work in life, it is somehow connected to the living energy of our galaxy--to the Force. And that includes scribes. Especially scribes working on the Journal. Where would we be, if not for the history of the Jedi, and the Force? It has been the meaning of our lives..." Resh trailed off, looking slightly pained. "The meaning of our lives..." Reb was silent, and after a while, the old Whill finished softly, "...but even without it, we still have to go on, to find a reason." Resh suddenly caught the young human's eye. "You understand, don't you, that your future doesn't have to be here? There's an enormous universe out there for you to discover. And it's full of mysteries. The Force still exists, even if the Jedi are gone. What I am saying is, if the end of the Jedi really does mean the waning of the Journal, it could be better for you if--"

"I'm happy where I am," Reb said, disturbed. "I don't have to go somewhere else, do I? I like being a scribe. I like living here at the monastery."

Snout wrinkling slightly, Resh considered the young scribe. Gently, the Whill said, "You will always be welcome here, Reb. This is your home. All I am saying is, someday, you may want to go. It's like that with humans." Suddenly, Resh grimaced with pain. Reb stood up from the library table to give the Whill some room. "Is it another contraction?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, that was a strong one," said Resh. "It's going to be soon, a week at most. The child will tell me when it is ready." A happy rumbling noise came from Resh's chest. "I'm looking forward to teaching the new Orenth to be a scribe. Old Master Orenth was quite a revered figure. This baby has its work cut out for it. I wonder what it will feel like to be a parent?"

"You'll do fine," said Reb, seeming to cheer up a little. "You did a fine job with me."

"So," Resh snuffled, "you think you turned out fine, do you? That remains to be seen."

Desima Derata watched the old Whill and the young human from her hidden vantage point behind one of the tall, deep library shelves. She liked to observe people before introducing herself; she didn't think of it as spying at all. She just liked to study people, that was all. So she watched attentively as the unusual pair conversed.

She was very surprised to find another human at the monastery at all; when the pilgrims to Ashlan Three had dropped her off, the historian of the Jedi had thought she was alone among the Whills. This human seemed to live at the monastery, as he was obviously close to the old Whill, and he even dressed similarly, although in a decidedly smaller brown robe. He was stocky and of medium height. Desima thought he looked about eighteen. His round face topped by an orange-brown bowl haircut made him look young, but his serious demeanor offset that. Critically, she noted that

he was a bit unsophisticated looking in his simple robe and worn satchel. But she liked his face with its blue eyes, small nose, and wide mouth. He looked sincere, like someone you could trust. Best of all, he seemed to be the student of the old Whill, and she respected that. Because she herself had come to Ashlan Four to study the Journal, she approved of anyone else who cared enough to do so in these times.

Next, Desima considered the Whill. The Whills fascinated her--they were so odd looking, yet so serene and dignified. This old Whill was typical in that he resembled a robed hill, two thirds the height of a tall human, with a long pointed snout. No, Desima corrected herself, the Whill was not really a "he." The Whills did not have two different sexes; any one of them could make a baby alone. She supposed the Whill's beard made her think of it as male.

The Whill was gentle and slow moving. Its face, snout, and arms were all that protruded visibly from the tent-like robe. Its skin was blue-gray. The arms were long and thin, ending in oversized hands that were nonetheless graceful and dexterous. The robe covered everything else, but Desima had seen them at their communal bathing area, and she knew they had bodies like pachyderms, with massive rounded rear legs like short pillars, and a stump of a tail in back. They could rear up on those hind legs to be taller than a human, but normally they held themselves horizontally and walked with slow, deliberate steps.

This old Whill's face reminded her of an anteater in a way--it was long and tapered to a small bulb shaped point. Its eyes were a pretty green color, and its mouth was lost somewhere in the scraggly beard framing its snout. Desima had a very good feeling from just watching the Whill, and impulsively, she stepped out from her hiding place and strolled over to introduce herself.

"All right, Master Resh," said Reb, "you should be getting to teach your class right about now anyway."

"Yes, perhaps my last one, before I have to deal with giving birth. And then I'll be busy teaching the young Whill one on one..."

Reb was staring fixedly over Resh's shoulder, the Whill Master noticed. "What is it?" Resh inquired while turning ponderously around. Reb was staring at a young woman emerging from the endless stacks of paper and electronic books and approaching their thick wooden table. She was tall and reedy, dressed in a floor length, form hugging green gown. In her slim hands, she carried a datapad. She was slim-hipped and flat-chested, but also graceful and, Reb thought, mysterious looking as well. Her face was long, divided by a sharp, straight nose. Below that was a small mouth, set in an obscure smile. Her large brown eyes sparkled as she came up to them. She had very long straight black hair. Reb guessed she was a few years older than himself. She certainly carried herself with maturity. She spoke with a Chandrilan accent, which gave her voice a pleasing, slightly exotic tone.

"Hello, my name is Desima Derata," she said. Because Reb couldn't say anything for a moment, Resh spoke up in a gravelly, whistley voice. "You must be the historian studying the Jedi. Welcome. My name is Resh, and this is Reb Zakai, my scribe apprentice."

Reb nodded, still intimidated.

"Pleased to meet you," said Desima. "I haven't been here long, but I plan to study the stories of the Jedi in the Master Copy of the Journal. I hope to find details there which can't be found anywhere else...especially now that the Empire has suppressed knowledge of the Jedi lore."

"What's your interest in the Jedi?" asked Reb, getting his voice back.

"Well, for a while I thought I was going to be one myself, but that turned out to be just a childhood fantasy. My Force sensitivity tested as far too low. Maybe it was for the best, considering what happened to them. I do know one thing--the Jedi were never evil like the Emperor says. The Empire is what's evil. If you don't mind my saying so, the Purge against the Jedi was the greatest crime of the last thousand years. They were a great asset to the galaxy, and a great loss. Through my studies, I plan to try to preserve what we know about their history, before that, too, is lost."

"With views like those, you'll fit in nicely around here," said Reb. But inside, he felt a pang at the day's second mention of the Purge. Because they had stood with the Jedi, his parents had been lost, and most likely killed, with them. Reb believed in the good of what his parents had done, but he was still unable to come to terms with their loss, even after eight years without them.

Reb wondered if Resh had sensed his attraction to the newcomer, because the old Whill suddenly coughed and said, "I'm sorry, but I really must get to my class. My young students will be impatient. The young never want to wait for the aged, you know."

"That's quite all right," said Desima, bowing slightly. "I'm sure we'll speak again soon."

"We will," said Resh, walking away. "I leave you to get acquainted with young Reb, here. He can help you learn your way around the library."

Reb frowned at Resh's departing bulk, then turned to face Desima with a quick smile.

As Resh went through the exit, the Whill was passed by a robed and hooded humanoid figure on its way in.

"Good to see you, Master Resh," said the figure briskly.

"Hello, Quill," acknowledged the Whill warmly without stopping.

Desima turned to face the new arrival. At first glance, she thought there was yet another human at the monastery. Then her ears picked up the tell-tale whir of servomotors and she realized it was a droid. But why was it in disguise? The droid approached their table directly. Stopping in front of Reb Zakai, it pulled its concealing hood from its head.

"Greetings, Reb," the droid said in a male voice with a definitely stuffy, scholarly tone.

Desima was taken aback by the droid's head structure. Instead of a humanoid face, such as was commonly used for third degree droids, he had a tapered snout pointing downwards to his chest. It made him look like a robotic mouse, Desima thought, amused, but then she realized he was made to resemble the Whills. His metal had a shiny gray finish, and his round photoreceptors glowed green.

"Who, may I ask," continued the droid, "is your cultured companion?"

Desima smiled. To her, the droid sounded like an aged, distinguished professor.

"I just met her myself, Quill," said Reb. "Quill, meet Desima Derata, a visiting historian studying the Jedi."

"What sort of droid are you?" asked Desima abruptly.

"I am a Cybot Galactica QLL Scholar's Assistant. My services are yours to command as long as you reside here. That is, unless I am engaged in one of the endless menial tasks with which they never tire of presenting me. Alas, it is just such an errand which brings me to the library today, and not a truly satisfying task such as translating a rare alien language."

"Quill thinks of himself purely as a scholar," put in Reb. "He doesn't like doing the 'dirty work' around here. What awful thing does Master Aurek have you doing today, Quill?"

"Apparently, a bank of illuminators has malfunctioned in the stacks," said Quill disdainfully.

"So they have you changing light bulbs," teased Reb.

"I think I know where the problem is," Desima interjected. She pointed to the shadowy area where she had been hiding. The dimness had helped to conceal her.

"Yes, well, thank you kindly, Mistress Desima," said Quill politely. "You are a true gentlebeing."

"Wait," said Desima, stopping the droid from moving off. "I'm curious. Why are you wearing a robe? That's unusual for a droid. You're not modest, are you?"

Quill made a coughing sound. "Hardly that. It is to avoid troubling the aesthetic sensibilities of the Whills. No doubt you have noticed how they conceal their technology with rustic or primitive decorations whenever possible. Likewise, they do not want to look at an overtly technological being walking around all the time. Therefore, I cover my droid body with a traditional robe. I was the gift of a wealthy contributor to the Journal, who was aware of the Whills' preferences. My cranial structure was designed to please my Whill Masters. Of course, I please them most with my excellent scholarly services. I am skilled in the social sciences of research, teaching, and translation. I assist the Whills who work on the electronic version of the Journal by translating the alien languages of many of the submissions."

"Which is why they have you changing light bulbs," said Reb dryly.

Quill made a sound like a long-suffering sigh. "The being who donated me recognized that the monastery was truly 'beyond the Rim' as they say, and that a 'droid of all trades' would be even more important than a scholar's assistant. So, in addition to my specialized functions, I was modified with a learning module. I can add new skills to a limited storage capacity when I need them. As a result, I am responsible for maintaining all of the monastery's technology."

"And it's not what you prefer to be doing," said Desima sympathetically. "I understand how you feel. There were times when I wanted to be more than just a historian, but we have to make do with what we have, I suppose. As a wise being once said, 'If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser beings than yourself. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.'"

"You are quoting from the proverbs of the Ortolan philosopher Max Erman, from volume 120 of the Journal," said Quill. "I have the entire electronic version of the Journal in my memory. However, do not fear for my happiness, Mistress Desima. Although I may complain, I do value my service to the Whills and the Journal above all else. I have served them for my entire existence, all of which I remember, for there are no facilities for memory wiping here. There is enough pride in my primary role to compensate for the less meaningful moments. Now, the sooner I complete my current trivial task, the sooner I can return to something properly stimulating."

"By all means," said Desima. "Off you go, then." She turned to Reb as Quill walked away. "What an interesting droid," she said.

"Oh yes, Quill's a real trooper. We couldn't manage around here without him."

"And what do you do here, Reb?" she asked, taking a seat across from him.



"I live here, actually. I've lived here since I was ten. Master Resh took me in, and taught me how to be a scribe. I work on copying the older books as they begin to decay. It's satisfying work, in a way, because there's a discipline to it. The letters are made just so, and it takes a lot of skill. Master Resh is always trying to get me to see the spiritual side of it. He believes in the great purpose of the Whills, to tell the story of the Jedi, and all that, and to him, there's mysticism in the scribal arts, too. Resh finds the careful creation of the letters to be like a prayer, or a meditation."

"And you?"

"Well...I guess I tend to look at the world in black and white terms. I like things to be ordered, and comprehensible. There's not much room inside me for the mystical. I just listen to what he says, and go on practicing my discipline."

"Do you work on the Master Copy of the Journal?" asked Desima, frowning slightly.

"Sure, I've helped Master Resh with the current volume, and I've copied some of the commentary of the older volumes."

"Well, don't you appreciate the mystery of the oldest tales of the Jedi in the Journal?"

"You mean, like the legend of the Skywalker and all that? Not really. Those are just stories, you know, myths. The stories about the beginning of the Jedi most of all." Reb paused. "Why, do you believe in them? If so, I didn't mean any offense."

"Oh, I'm not offended," Desima replied, leaning towards him. "I'm just sorry for you. It sounds like you just copy the stories, and you're missing an entire world of meaning that lies behind them."

"You sound a lot like Master Resh."

"I'll take that as a compliment. It's just the way I see history, Reb. It's not just a string of events. In my studies, I try to follow the influence of the mystical throughout history. That means the Jedi and the Force. To answer your question, I do believe in those old stories, and I think they're important. The ancient Jedi were called the 'Jedi Bendu', which meant Jedi servants. They served the Force, and gave great benefit to the Republic. The old stories do the same thing. They serve the Force by telling us something about the nature of it, and they served the Republic by inspiring later generations to become Jedi."

"So...their value is more important than their literal truth?" Reb wondered skeptically. "Frankly, the truth inspires me more than fantasies. As far as I'm concerned, the Jedi were overrated. I don't have much faith in the Force, either. Maybe it exists, and maybe the Jedi served it, but it didn't do anyone much good when the Emperor came along and wiped them out."

Desima saw an undercurrent of bitterness when Reb mentioned the Jedi, and she made a mental note to ask him about it once they were more comfortable with each other. "So the truth inspires you," she said. "But you have to admit, it depends on what you call the truth, doesn't it? Listen," she said earnestly, "there's a poem about the truth which I'd like you to hear. It goes like this...

Truth, said a traveler, is a rock, a mighty fortress;  
Often have I been to it, even to its highest tower,  
from whence the world looks black.  
Truth, said a traveler, is a breath, a wind,  
a shadow, a phantom;  
Long have I pursued it,  
but never have I touched the hem of its garment.  
The question is, which traveler do you believe? You could probably guess that I believe the second traveler, but I don't want you to answer the question for yourself right away. It's not a question to be answered quickly, or taken lightly. Even if you think you already know, life has a way of teaching you differently."

And, I want time to work on you a little bit, she thought. You have a lot to learn, Reb Zakai, a lot to learn.

"All right," said Reb, "I'll think about it for a while. So...how about you? What are you going to be doing here, again?" he asked, eagerly shifting the conversation topic away from himself.

"I'm very much interested in those 'old myths', as you call them. I'm fascinated with the legends of the Skywalker. I'm going to study the written Whill commentaries in the Master Copy of the Journal. When you just read the basic electronic version of the Journal, a lot of the stories are hard to understand. I hope that by reading the interpretive comments of the Whills who lived close to that time, I can gain insights into the more mysterious passages, like the prophecy of the Son of the Suns, for example. I couldn't find the commentaries in any electronic version, or anywhere else, so I came here."

To Desima's annoyance, Reb failed to look impressed. "Well, you can get access to the Master Copy from Master Yirt whenever you want," he said disinterestedly. "It's not going anywhere."

Desima frowned and raised her voice. "What's the matter with you?" she asked. "You have a priceless historical treasure here, and you don't even appreciate it?"

"No, I appreciate it, I just--"

"Do you know what's happening in the world of scholarship under the New Order? It's terrible! You can only study Imperial approved subjects. Living way out here in your monastery, you just don't--"

"You don't know how refreshing it is," said Quill loudly as he came back to the table, "to have a scholarly human like yourself present. Master Reb has his good points, but intellectual devotion is not one of them."

"Don't you have some lights to fix?" asked Reb, sounding miffed.

"That task is completed. I told you it was trivial. In any case," Quill went on, "your discussion of the veracity of the stories in the first volume of the Journal was most interesting."

"You were listening?" Desima asked.

"My hearing is rather better than yours," replied Quill.

"Do you have an opinion?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, I cannot take sides in matters of the Force. As a droid, I am unable to sense it or say if it is real. However, I am certain that young Reb could benefit from a broader perspective, and I can offer a viewpoint which we can all agree on. Whether they are literally true or not, the contents of the Journal are our legacy. Preserving them is what gives meaning to our lives."

"I'll agree to that," said Reb.

"And I will too," said Desima. She noticed that Quill had butted in at just the right moment. She had been starting to feel rather irritated with Reb, and Quill had stopped her from saying the wrong thing. Desima eyed her new intellectual sparring partner, considering him. She would have plenty of opportunity to open his eyes, she decided. No need to rush, and no need to be heavy-handed. The subtle approach would be much better.

"Hey, how about something to eat?" said Reb suddenly. "I'm hungry, are you? I usually eat with the rest of the Whills. How does a nice trough of insects sound to you?"

Desima was taken aback for a moment, until she realized he was kidding. He had said it with such a straight face. She nodded, smiled, and stood up, holding out her hand to her new friend. "I'm going to have to watch it around you, aren't I?" she asked.

"You'll get used to him," Quill told her. "For better or for worse."

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"It has come to my attention, whether it is a result of their modesty, or an oversight of cosmic proportions, that the age-old Journal of the Whills does not contain a description of the noble race of the Whills themselves, nor even a description of their curious monastery where the Journal is produced. In my Royal opinion, the Whills are at least as intriguing as any of the learned articles they select for publication in their books. So that the galaxy at large may know of these unusual beings in greater detail, I have taken it upon myself to write the following introduction to the latest volume of the Journal, which also contains my article, 'Theories on Planetary Governance.'

When I first arrived at the monastery to deliver personally my article for submission, I was struck at once with the sensation that I was stepping back in time to a pre-technological age. The decor was primarily wood and stone, a fitting setting for the tradition steeped keepers of the ancient Journal. But I must reveal that this rustic appearance is a minor deception. The Whills do possess some high technology in the areas of computers and book preservation, yet it is cleverly disguised to preserve an antiquated atmosphere.

The great old home of the Whills is simply called The Mountain. The monastery consists of tunnels and chambers bored deep into the rock. One enters via a towering cliff face riddled with cave openings. Some are reached by ramps that angle up the cliffs, but others are lofty, unreachable niches where solitary Whills meditate on the natural beauty of the mountains.

The Whill population is quite small. Only a few hundred exist, and they all dwell on Ashlan Four. Although it is a rather private subject, I was able to determine the reason for this low number. The Whills tightly control their reproduction in order to focus on their tasks without distractions. They only reproduce when necessary. The Whill life span in the safe world of Ashlan Four is up to three hundred standard years. If there is a natural death or a fatal accident, one Whill is chosen to reproduce and replenish their number. Being hermaphrodites, both male and female, the Whills ingest a special chemical mixture to initiate a two month long pregnancy. Single births are the norm, but twins can be induced if necessary. The parent trains the new Whill to fulfill the function of the one who passed away.

The Whills are wholly devoted to the Journal. They each have a specific task in the overall effort. There are, for example, scribes and copyists, entry judges, translators, book restorers, commentary writers, illustrators, librarians, historians, and computer specialists who create the electronic version. The other necessary tasks of life, such as cooking or nursing, are shared among them so that very few outsiders are ever needed.

The Whill lifestyle may appeal to those readers who enjoy a simple, disciplined life. The private living quarters of the Whills are quite austere. They sleep stretched out on large mats, and they keep few possessions, mainly the tools of their trade. But they spend little time in their rooms. A more appealing location for them is the communal bathing area. In a deep cavern, a hot spring feeds into a large subterranean pool. The heavy Whills come here to float peacefully in this natural stone basin. The sight of these beings drifting serenely like smooth gray islands, is one I shall not soon forget. Most of their time is spent working, but they do find time for reading in their huge library, meditating, teaching and attending classes, and socializing at bath and while eating. I suspect the Whill diet may not appeal to human readers, as it consists largely of insects which they place in a wriggling mass into a long shared trough, snaring the multilegged morsels with their long tongues. They also enjoy exploring their world, hiking around The Mountain or braving the network of caves beneath it. Their

sedate, contemplative lives might seem boring to most humans, but they are quite content.

To my surprise, I found that the Whills have no leaders. The older Whills are considered 'Masters' at their tasks, but these are not positions of authority, and all of the tasks are considered important. I would not want to adopt such a system on Aquilae, but it seems to work on Ashlan Four.

In my tour of the monastery, I saw part of how The Journal of the Whills is created. There were workrooms where judges formally evaluated the entries, where artists created wonderful decorations for the Master Copy, and where scribes painstakingly copied letters by hand. In another area, Whills sat before computers, which was an odd sight; their large robed bodies dwarfed the terminals at which they worked. But they labor diligently to prepare the electronic version for the consumption of our modern Galactic Republic. Because the monastery does not have any communications link to the rest of the galaxy, new Journal entries are encoded onto memory chips and physically taken by starships to the update centers and infosellers, where we can all go to obtain the Journal.

The environment of Ashlan Four also deserves some mention, as it is steeped in mystery and legend. Ashlan Four is at the edge of a nebula, called the Ashlan Star Cloud. This nebula is a beautiful sight in the night skies of the system's two inhabitable planets, Ashlan Three and Four. According to a history that is so old as to have become myth, the Ashlan system was named by the very first Jedi, a man known by the colorful title, 'the Skywalker.' He named it for the Ashla, another word for the mysterious Force that the Jedi use. Ashlan Three is the reputed birthplace of the Skywalker, and while it is now uninhabited, it is still a place of pilgrimage for the Jedi and various religious groups. Ashlan Four has been home to the Whills for twenty-three thousand years, the life span of the Republic itself. The planet is not their world of origin, the name of which has been forgotten, but in deference to the Whills, no other races have settled there. Most of the planet is still a wilderness. The cool, dry mountains are home to the graceful Shri Hawks, high-flying avian predators who feed on the local population of scurriers. The peaks are also roamed by sturdy, six-legged Tor Goats. The most dangerous animals, the voracious yet slow-witted giant Vlids, have long since learned not to approach the monastery; in the past, they were hunted to near extinction by Republic forces sent to safeguard the Whills.

When I was ready to leave Ashlan Four, it was with the knowledge that I would miss the place. It is my hope that other citizens of the Republic may visit this remote, yet interesting location, if only to take a rest from the hectic pace of life in a galaxy where we hurtle from star to star as if there were no tomorrow. For the Whills, there will always be a tomorrow; that is the lesson of their long, long yesterdays."

-The Journal of the Whills, Volume Two Hundred Thirty One, From the Introduction by King Kayos of Aquilae.

Master Resh peered at the Whill medic and demanded impatiently, "Well, how long is it going to be? I'm very uncomfortable, and I just want this to be over. Right now, I can't imagine what possessed me to give birth at such an advanced age."

"Stop your griping," said Peth unsympathetically. "You're only two hundred forty. You're not ready for the crypt caves yet. And you did it because we needed a new scribe, and after old Orenth died, you were the best scribe we had. Sure, another Whill could have given birth, and then you could have trained the new Orenth, but there's really nothing like the bond between a parent and a child to enhance the teacher-student relationship. We're sure to get a first rate scribe out of this, and you'll have someone who can carry on your skills, and be a part of you in the truest sense.."

"I come in for a checkup, and I get a lecture. Stop disrespecting your elder, Peth. All I want to know is, how long? I'm four days overdue already, and I'm about ready to explode."

Resh glared around at the contents of the modest Whill medical center. It was a basic needs facility, where the Whills assisted each other in giving birth, which was rare, or with healing the occasional wounds in a Whill-sized Bacta bath. Of course, some wounds could not be healed, Resh reflected. The old scribe Orenth had died by falling from one of the highest meditation niches on the cliff. No amount of Bacta could have saved the poor, nearsighted old Master. A chemical synthesizer, tucked into one corner, was used to make the Silta solution which induced a Whill to give birth. In ancient times, the various active ingredients were found in the local edible plants, but now the precise chemicals were combined into an artificial mixture which tasted terrible. It was a concession to technology made long ago, when it was found that the necessary plants did not grow on Ashlan Four.

Resh was lying on a stone slab, with an impressive rounded belly sticking up in the air. It was the traditional birth platform where generations of Whills had delivered. Resh thought it was damnably uncomfortable.

"You're not going to explode, Master Resh. From what I can tell, the baby will be here very soon. Maybe by tomorrow. But there's nothing to do but wait. You can put your robe back on now. I suggest you get some rest, meditate, sleep if you can. Your wait is almost over. When your body says it's time, just come back here. I'll be ready when you are."

"You'll be ready, eh? And how many babies have you delivered, Peth? I thought you were a student in text illustration."

"Well, I am, but--listen, Master Resh, I went to all the classes Master Krill gave on the subject. There's nothing to it."

Resh didn't reply. Ponderously, the Whill slid off the slab and donned the robe. With one baleful glance at Peth, the Master went out into the tunnels.

Soon, Resh thought, it will be soon. Then this ordeal will be over. It had been the longest two months of Resh's life, and just recently, the overdue little Whill had afflicted Resh with back aches, leg aches, and headaches. Not to mention a contraction every few hours while Resh's body prepared to deliver the baby. But the best was yet to come, the Master thought. After the birth would come the wonderful time of parenthood Resh had dreamed about. It would just be Resh and the baby, connecting on many different levels. Then, when the child began its training, it would be molded in Resh's image. When Resh finally passed away, there would be a living legacy to carry on. Some Whills never did have children, preferring to avoid the distraction from their work. Others chose to have several children to replenish the population, but they didn't teach them. Resh felt that the situation with baby Orenth was ideal. The effort of having the child was rewarded by the one-on-one interaction of mentoring.

Resh reached a meditation niche and stepped into the sunshine filled little cave in the cliff face. The Whill reflected that bringing up Reb Zakai had been a foretaste of parenthood, despite Reb being of a different species. Humans were shorter lived, and slower to mature, but they had some things in common with Whill children. When Reb was stranded at the monastery, Resh had taken pity on the orphan. The Whill helped Reb through the loss, and agreed to give the human a home and an apprenticeship. Reb took to the old Whill and his new scribal lessons, but Resh came to see that Reb was also retreating from life in order to avoid further pain. After allowing Reb a few years for healing, Resh altered the teaching approach. Reb had come to know all there was to know about the scribal skills, but he knew nothing of life's meaning and mystery. Reb needed to know that life was about more than just working, or finding a safe place and staying in it. Resh felt that the difficulty of getting Reb to recognize this was a preview of the frustration Resh would come to know with little Orenth, no matter how good the child was.

Fortunately, Resh now had help with Reb. The Whill wholeheartedly approved of Desima Derata's influence on young Zakai. The human female had only been at the monastery for a week or so, but she had in that time become a good friend to Reb. While he showed her around The Mountain, she patiently attempted to bring him around to her way of thinking about life. Desima was also getting something out of it. It was a measure of her own enjoyment of Reb's company that she had not yet visited the Master Copy chamber which had drawn her to the monastery in the first place. When Resh had quietly pointed this out to her, she had reddened and asserted that she was going to make an appointment right away with Master Yirt to enter the chamber. The old Whill was privately pleased at the relationship. Reb needed someone to draw him out and interest him in the world outside of himself. Likewise, Desima needed a break from her diligent and studious pursuit of historical knowledge. The scholar in her had come here to expand her research on the ancient Jedi, but the young woman in her had seized on Reb as an opportunity to come out into the light for a change. Not that Resh thought she would put aside her research for long. The Journal would beckon, and she would answer its call. But then, Reb would be so caught up in her that he would follow, ostensibly to help her find the information she needed, but really to

keep on learning what she had to teach him. It was the ideal friendship for both of them even if they saw each other as ideological opposites.

The Whill Master smiled and looked out at the mountains. Nestled comfortably against the small cave's wall, Resh placed both hands protectively over the baby inside. Feeling the restless movement within, the Whill trilled with satisfaction. Resh breathed slowly and took in the living world spread out in a panorama beyond the high vantage point. A mated pair of Shri Hawks circled high above, their clear call sending scurriers into their holes by the dozens. The sound lifted Resh's spirits. The hawks were not hunting today, they were simply enjoying the freedom of flight. The air was dry and cool, raising pleasant small bumps on Resh's blue-gray skin. The Master loved this world, and prayed the Whills would never have to leave it. Indeed, where would they go? They no longer knew their planet of origin, having broken completely with the past to come to Ashlan Four and serve the Skywalker's family. Their race had become one with their purpose.

Suddenly, Resh was melancholy again at the thought of how precarious the great purpose was now. For twenty-four thousand years, the Whills had faithfully told the story of the Jedi and the Republic. Relative to that, it had taken a sickeningly brief amount of time for the fall of the Republic, the rise of the Empire, and the tragic murder of the Jedi. For Resh's people, everything had changed. A solemn gathering of all the Whills had been held to consider the matter. After much debate, they had decided that the Journal must try to go on. They felt they were still obligated to tell the story of the galaxy's people, whether they were governed by a Republic or an Emperor. Some Whills wondered if the fall of the Republic was not its destiny. Perhaps it was for the best, considering how corrupt it had become. But nothing could convince them that the Empire was a suitable replacement. The Purge against the Jedi firmly set the Whills against the Empire forever. Some of the Whills had found a new purpose in opposing the Empire. They kept the Journal going, and printed the writings of those who spoke out against the Imperials. Telling the truth about the Empire helped them to feel some sense of justice in the face of their loss. But other Whills fell into a kind of malaise and totally lost their sense of purpose. The Republic and the Jedi were the reason for the Journal--why carry on without them? Some of these became like automatons, moving about only from the sheer force of tradition. Their spirits had given up, but their bodies knew no other life. The worst victims of depression became silent hermits, moving to the deep caves or out into the mountains, waiting to die. As far as Resh knew, they had gotten their wish; none had been seen again.

Resh refused to give in to despair. He knew that the Force still existed, and if once before the Force had chosen servants to wield the light side, it could do so again. Once, there were Jedi...there might be Jedi again, or others to replace them. Twenty-five thousand years ago, the Jedi had begun with one man. Who was to say that could not happen again? The thought of witnessing the rise of a savior like the Skywalker was enough of a reason to carry on. Didn't the Skywalker's prophecy say of the Whills, "...the Ashla will not desert them, and in the time of greatest despair, there shall come a savior, and he shall be known as the



Son of the Suns?" Well, this certainly qualified as a time of despair. Come on, Son of the Suns, Resh thought. Any time you're ready. Don't hold back on our account. And yet, Resh considered, how could despair ever be total as long as there are children to bring fresh hope? Maybe we don't need any savior, so long as we have little Orenth here. What do you think, Orenth? But the unborn child had fallen asleep, soothed by Resh's stroking. That's okay, Resh thought. I'll see you tomorrow, small one.

The Shri Hawks gave a sudden cry and wheeled away, causing Resh to look up into the sky. Sunlight flashed on the metallic surface of a small starship coming in towards The Mountain. That would be the Bantha Tracker, the Duro freight hauler which supplied the monastery with spice wine and took Journal entries back and forth. Resh frowned.. The Duro Captain, Platt Eth, was usually very punctual. The Bantha Tracker was overdue by almost a week. The Whill stifled a sense of foreboding. There was probably nothing wrong. But suddenly the scribe felt the need for first-hand news of the outer galaxy. Resh carefully stood up, and decided to trek to the hidden landing area to meet Platt Eth. The Whill's body responded by having a contraction.

"Calm down, Orenth," Resh grated. "We're just going for a little walk. Old Resh just needs to set some worries to rest. Then we can have a nice, long nap."

\* \* \*

"The Old Republic was the Republic of Legend, greater than distance or time. No need to note where it was or whence it came, only to know that...it was the Republic. Once, under the wise rule of the Senate and the protection of the Jedi Knights, the Republic thrived and grew. But, as often happens when wealth and power pass beyond the admirable and attain the awesome, there appear those evil ones who have greed to match. So it was with the Republic at its height. Like the greatest of trees, able to withstand any external attack, the Republic rotted from within, though the danger was not visible from the outside. Aided and abetted by restless, power-hungry individuals within the government, and the massive organs of commerce, the ambitious senator Palpatine caused himself to be elected President of the Republic. He promised to reunite the disaffected among the people, and to restore the remembered glory of the Republic.

Once secure in office, he declared himself Emperor, shutting himself away from the populace. Soon he was controlled by the very assistants and boot-lickers he had appointed to high office, and the cries of the people for justice did not reach his ears. Having exterminated through treachery and deception the Jedi Knights, guardians of Justice in the galaxy, the Imperial governors and bureaucrats prepared to institute a reign of terror among the disheartened worlds of the galaxy. Many used the Imperial forces and the name of the increasingly isolated Emperor to further their own personal ambitions.

But a small number of systems rebelled at these new outrages. Declaring themselves to be opposed to the new order they began to restore the Old Republic. From the beginning they were vastly outnumbered by the systems held in thrall by the Emperor. In those first dark days it seemed

certain the bright flame of resistance would be extinguished before it could cast the light of new truth across a galaxy of oppressed and beaten peoples..."

-The Journal of the Whills, Volume Two Hundred Forty, Update file #57, Mon Mothma, former Senator from Chandrila.

Master Resh made it to the landing area just as the Bantha Tracker was settling gently on its landing gear. Four other Whills, Isk, Herf, Grek, and Forn, were already there, waiting to help unload the spice wine bottles. Spice wine was a Whill delicacy, and Isk and Herf were smiling in anticipation of the new shipment.

The landing area was a narrow crevasse sliced into The Mountain, with a flat area at the bottom. It was tricky to get in and out of, but the slanting rock walls blocked the area from being scanned from above. The only way out, besides up, was a tunnel leading back into the monastery. The use of a hidden landing area was the choice of the Duro Captain, Platt Eth. He and his crew of four were strictly small time operators, trying to stay clear of the Empire while making supply runs to several worlds including Ashlan Four. Platt Eth was once a smuggler. Years ago, a particularly narrow escape had convinced him to end his days as an outlaw. He said farewell to his old associates, found a new crew of experienced Duro spacers without criminal records, and went straight without fanfare. But he retained old cautious habits such as concealing his ship, and refusing to be caught unawares on any world, no matter how safe it seemed.

The Bantha Tracker was not Platt Eth's old ship; that had been lost in his narrow escape. His current ship was a Lantillian Short Hauler, a sleek twenty-seven meter long craft shaped something like a long straight bird's wing. In front, it had a round bridge with a wide black window. The tapering lines of its gray hull were interrupted by a turbolaser turret on top, and a pair of tall stabilizer fins just before the powerful looking rear engines.

A short ramp lowered from the ship's underside, and one by one, five Duros stepped out. To Master Resh, the Duros all looked basically the same, but no doubt they felt the same way about Whills. They were tall, thin aliens with humanoid bodies. Their skin was gray-green, and they had large orange eyes, slit mouths, and no noses. Their fingers were long and slender, with knobby knuckles. Each one wore a standard orange flight suit with a name patch on the chest. First out was Captain Eth, followed by Hadd Ali, Newco Cha, Brenn Debo, and Kell Sha. Duro faces were not very expressive, but Resh could tell they were all agitated. The Whill's sense of unease intensified.

"We bring you very bad news," Platt Eth said at once in Basic. "But we want to tell all the Whills about it at the same time. Can you call a gathering?"

"Yes, of course," said Herf. Then, hesitantly, "Is there to be no more spice wine?"

"It's much more than that, my friend," said Platt Eth severely. Then he softened for just a moment. "We do have spice wine for you, which is fortunate, because when you hear our news, you're going to need it."

At that moment, Quill bustled in. "Good, you're here," said Resh to the droid. "Captain Eth has some upsetting news he wants to deliver before a full gathering. Help Isk and Herf unload the spice wine, put our empty bottles aboard the ship, and then help get all the Whills together in the central meeting hall." Resh paused. "Do you know where Reb and Desima are?"

"They have gone exploring in the deep caves," Quill replied.

"All right, but let me know when they get back. I have a feeling I know exactly what this bad news is about. That's all for now, Quill. Get moving!" The Whill Master waved Quill on his way, and turned to Captain Eth. "Please follow me to the Central Meeting Hall. We'll begin as soon as everyone is there. This trouble, Platt...does it have something to do with the Empire?"

"You guessed it," said Platt. "But don't everyone's troubles have to do with the Empire?"

Resh's spirits sank at the confirmation. What kind of troubled world was Orenth to be born into? The Empire was infamous for dealing harshly with its enemies. Indeed, would there be a world for Orenth to be born into at all?

Within an hour, all two-hundred-twelve Whills were assembled in the large, circular, torch-lit Central Meeting Hall. From his raised platform, Platt Eth looked out across the rows of tables at the collected population of the monastery. The firelight played on the anxious faces of young and old Whills alike. There was a loud undertone of muttering and snuffling, which quieted as Platt held up his arms. The Duro waited, and for a moment, there was only the sound of crackling torches. His burden felt immense. How could he tell these revered beings that their world was coming to an end? Finally, the Duro said, "The Emperor has decreed...that The Journal of the Whills is the work of traitors to the Empire...and that the Journal is now illegal."

As Platt had expected, the news had a devastating effect. The normally placid Whills reared up and began speaking all at once.

"- how could they -"

"- a worse crime than the Purge against the Jedi -"

"- twenty-four thousand years we were left alone -"

"- will they send ships -"

"- how can they enforce it -"

"- why now -"

After a minute, Quill called for restored order with his amplified voice. The Whills quieted, and Platt continued.

"The Empire has blockaded the main trade route into this sector. We had to take the long way around to get here. I don't know what this means--whether their ships will come or not. But the Journal is already under attack."

"How can they do it?" one Whill demanded. "How can they make knowledge illegal?"

"They have ordered all Imperial citizens to turn in their electronic copies of the Journal," Platt said. "They claim the books are full of the corrupt teachings of the outlawed Jedi, so they fall under the same ban. It's a class one infraction to own a copy, punishable by immediate arrest and up to thirty years in prison."

"They can't confiscate every copy," another Whill said. "Someone will still have them!"

"No, they won't," said Platt, "because it gets worse. The Empire's computer experts have cooked up a nasty virus. It seeks out the text of the Journal, latches on, and erases the whole thing. The virus has already spread to home reader units, portabooks, the infosellers, even the update centers. When people who at first didn't want to turn in their copies went to the centers, they lost the whole Journal. Now the centers are closed completely."

"Force preserve us!" said Master Yirt, an old Whill. "Where will it stop?"

At that point, Master Resh stepped up next to Platt Eth. "In a way, fellow Whills," Resh said, "we should have expected this. And the reason should be clear to you all. In our last gathering, we resolved to print anti-Empire entries in the Journal. We wanted to tell the truth about the Empire. And the voices of people like Mon Mothma deserved to be heard. But how could the pro-Jedi, pro-Republic, and pro-Rebellion content of the Journal ever be compatible with the oppressive doctrines of the New Order? They are as day and night. Of course the Empire finds the Journal intolerable. It contradicts their entire philosophy. They need to try to eliminate it. They only waited until their control was firmly established...until they had the leisure to turn their attention to us.

"We were not wrong to do what we did--do not let the Empire make you think we were wrong. But the Emperor is powerful, and we are not. We must do what we can to prepare for the Emperor's further punishment, if it comes...but perhaps it will be enough for him to have crippled the Journal in the outer galaxy. We do not have to panic. Our history offers us the perspective we need. In the beginning of the Journal, we were

alone, recording the story of the Jedi Bendu. It was centuries before we began to share the Journal with the outer galaxy. Even if the Empire blocks us from sharing it now, we will be able to go on. We are a patient race. Perhaps we can outlast this evil. Above all, do not lose faith in our purpose."

"Our purpose?" shouted Nen, a very distraught young Whill. "Master, our purpose is dead! Those are noble words, but they are woefully inadequate to help us. The Republic is gone! The Jedi are all dead! We died with them, only we were too stubborn to realize it at the time. Now the truth is catching up to us. We have no more purpose. Why create a Journal that no one will ever read but ourselves? The way forward is not back to our roots. There is no way forward, except into oblivion!"

Resh sighed heavily, and sagged. The scribe had no answers to such emotions of fear and despair which would suffice. Each Whill had to make the decision for faith or defeat, and make it alone. The voices of hope and doom had spoken. There was nothing more to say, really, but many more Whills spoke in turn, reiterating either Resh's position or Nen's. The heated, worried discussion went on for a long time, but as Resh predicted, in the end, nothing was decided.

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"If we are to restore the Republic, we must avoid the same mistakes that led to its destruction. Although the many volumes of the Journal can tell the story in much greater detail, I have set out to create a brief overview of the fall of the Republic and the rise of the Empire, so that intelligent beings may quickly come to terms with where their loyalties are to be placed.

The rise of the Republic is a sort of mirror image of its fall. It came out of a collection of mini-Empires ruled by barbaric men like Xim the Despot, and became the first galaxy wide government. It is no coincidence that the Jedi arose at the same time, and most historians believe that the first Jedi helped to give the Republic its form. Correspondingly, when the Republic fell, it disintegrated into separate dominions again, each ruled by men who were, if not as tyrannical as Xim, then just as greedy for power. Likewise, the fall of the Republic went hand in hand with the end of the Jedi order, as if one could not survive without the other.

The Republic consisted of millions of worlds, and thousands of species, in a remarkable partnership. How, then, did this twenty-five thousand year old entity come to an end? The first thing to realize is that when any bureaucracy becomes too large and cumbersome, cracks in the system will appear which can be exploited by the beings who notice them. In the beginning, a number of powerful corporate leaders and greedy Senators managed to amass great personal wealth at the expense of the Republic. These conspicuously corrupt schemes were easily exposed, but the kind of legal changes which could have prevented a reoccurrence did not come. The Senate bears a great shame in this, for many Senators protected personal interests instead of working together for justice. Once the opportunities became obvious, various nobles, governors, and

military leaders decided they too were above the law, and proceeded to create their own dominions. When they came into conflict, the result was a growing disorder that spread fear everywhere.

The greatest betrayal of the Republic by the Senate was the elevation of Senator Palpatine to the Presidency. In the midst of chaos, they needed a strong leader, but could not agree on one. Palpatine situated himself in the political middle ground, to appeal to a divided Senate. He seemed able to deal with the civil unrest, the crime, the secession of worlds, and the social injustice. He was going to restart the government and restore order. He used his power to create an oppressive New Order instead.

Palpatine had decided that the Old Republic was not worth saving. It had to be replaced with an Empire, with himself as an absolute ruler. In the beginning, the Senate could have stopped him, but only a few suspected his motives. Through endless manipulations and feverish effort, Palpatine worked to secure his future. He cultivated a popular image. He obtained the sworn loyalty of the military, using the 'threat' of outside invasion to build up the army and the navy. He won over the giant corporations with promises of profit. Finally, when he was secure enough, he declared himself Emperor. It was too late for the Senate to intervene. With the Senate helpless, and the Jedi Knights gone, Palpatine's other enemies crumbled.

The New Order is only concerned with subjugating planetary governments to the Emperor's will. The first systems to rebel against it were violently repressed, but they became martyrs to inspire others. Although the Rebellion has only just begun, it will grow. Formerly isolated resistance groups are organizing into a new Alliance which cannot be so easily crushed. Time is now the Emperor's enemy. Someday, the Empire will fall.

But for now, we are all in danger of having our rights taken from us. You, the reader of the Journal, cannot afford not to make a choice. Will you support the Empire, knowing that it robs free beings of their rights? Knowing that it is racist and sometimes even genocidal towards non-humans? Knowing that it replaces elected planetary leaders with Imperial ones, then raises taxes and claims land and property? Knowing that it murders and imprisons millions? Knowing that you could be next?

You must all decide...before your choice is gone."

-The Journal of the Whills, Volume Two Hundred Forty, update file #58, published as "anonymous." [Note: Author is Bail Prestor Organa, former Senator, Viceroy and First Chairman of Alderaan]

The Strike Cruiser, Empire's Purity, smoothly entered orbit around Ashlan Four. The Imperial warship was four hundred fifty meters long, rather smaller than a Star Destroyer, but still well armed with turbolasers, ion cannons, tractor beams, and a full squadron of TIE fighters. The Empire's Purity was long and modular in construction, and

its captain valued it for its power and efficiency. Its kind could be quickly mass produced via prefabricated component sections, and those sections could be exchanged for specialized modules depending on the mission needs. The ship could be outfitted for deploying a garrison, or transporting troops. Quite possibly, it was the wave of the future in Imperial ships. Right now, the Empire's Purity was on a mission of calculated genocide as punishment for treason. It was going to be up close and personal killing, the kind where the nonhuman scum saw the cold white helmet of a stormtrooper before dying. For this purpose, the ship carried a company of three hundred forty troops, and a large number of All Terrain Personal Transports, known as AT-PT's. These forces were more than capable of carrying out their mission to massacre every last Whill on the planet.

The door to Captain Vespa's quarters slid upwards, and Lieutenant Wiggins smartly stepped inside. Assuming a rigid military stance, he reported, "We have entered orbit around Ashlan Four, Captain. What are your orders, sir?" As always, Wiggins had to hide his disgust at the display of luxury inside Vespa's quarters, as well as at the lack of personal discipline evident in Vespa's person. Wiggins was a highly self-controlled man. He knew what he wanted, and he knew how to get it. Someday, he planned to be in command of the weaponry of an Imperial Star Destroyer. To reach that future day, he had to work under this sadistic pig of a man. Patience and discipline were all that was needed. If a man like Vespa could reach the rank of Captain, then surely Wiggins would have no trouble doing the same, and claiming one of the titanic, devastating, beautiful Star Destroyers. To Wiggins, the captains of those ships were the mighty outstretched arms of the Emperor, his great fists of power. It was a dream worth waiting for.

"Lieutenant Wiggins," said Vespa, "do come in. What's the hurry? The aliens aren't going anywhere. They don't even have any defenses. I want to savor the anticipation for a little while before the work begins. So, sit down. Would you like a grape?"

Wiggins reluctantly moved to take a seat next to his Captain. The chair was decadent and plush, part of the spoils of a planet Vespa had ravaged. The Captain used his status to claim, or "reroute" the luxury goods of defeated aliens, decorating his quarters with them. The result was like something out of a museum--a hodge podge of statues, hangings, furniture, paintings, and vases from a dozen worlds. It all clashed terribly, but Vespa didn't seem to care.

The Captain was reclining on a small gilded couch upholstered in red velvet. He was eating yellow grapes from a carved stone bowl set on a glass table. Vespa was of medium height, middle aged, and overweight. A paunch was visible beneath his black Imperial uniform, and he had an extra chin beneath his first weak one. He was a trifle jowly, with a bald forehead and a large straight nose. His brownish-blond hair was short and curly around the back of his head. Wiggins thought he was a bit sweaty, or perhaps slimy. His skin was pale and blotchy, and his small brown eyes were jade looking.

Wiggins despised him, especially for the way he would swagger about the ship in his ill-fitting uniform, carrying a stick to point at things and "thwack" them. Oh, Vespa was proud of his position, but Wiggins knew the truth about him--he was not very important to his superiors. Yes, he did rise in the New Order because of several notable missions punishing alien races who defied the Empire. But due to his low intelligence, Vespa wasn't going to rise any further. He would be lucky to hold on to his current rank. The thought pleased Wiggins. Someday, he would step on this slug on his own way up the ladder of command. Vespa was just an elevated bully. He was valued for being good at what he did, but he was adept at little else.

Wiggins smiled broadly and took a single grape. "Why not, sir," he said. "Thank you, sir." Holding the grape in one hand without eating it, he commented, "All is in readiness to attack the monastery, Captain. We await your command, at your convenience."

"Good, good. Thank you, Lieutenant." Noisily, Vespa chewed on another handful of grapes. "Lieutenant," he said presently, "did I ever tell you the story of how I started my career in the military?"

"No, sir," Wiggins said politely, although he had long since pieced together the story from assorted rumors.

"Well, you see, on my homeworld of Calamin, my family was part of a poor, low class human colony--imagine, myself, growing up poor, if you can! Hah!"

"You certainly have come into the lifestyle you deserve, sir," said Wiggins.

"How true, how true. But indeed, I began my life in a poor family. We were poor because the ruling class was an alien race called the Xerpelplex. They hated the humans...they truly did. They lorded it over us, and they only tolerated us because we performed tasks which the Xerps felt were too dirty for them. We were practically slaves there, too poor even to leave. But then...then! The New Order came to Calamin. The Emperor knew that the situation there was intolerable, and he sent his troops to correct the social order. My family worked with the Empire to bring down the native government of the Xerps, and we were justly rewarded. We gained enough material wealth and status for me to begin my service. Now, with every completed mission, I repay the Emperor for his great kindness towards my family."

"A most interesting story," said Wiggins. "There is much in it that is inspiring." Inwardly, he was sneering. Vespa was not truly devoted to the ideals of the New Order. He was too uncultured and closed-minded to fully understand Palpatine's vision. Vespa was devoted to the Empire because it gave him a chance to destroy according to his deep-seated anti-alien prejudice. In the Imperial military, results were what mattered, and so far, Vespa was getting them. He was very efficient when called on to punish rebellious nonhumans, but his superiors knew about his limitations and did not order Vespa to suppress the many disobedient human populations in the galaxy.



Still, it could be said for Vespa that he was a fair Captain. He rewarded efficiency and favored those under him who shared his racial bias. But all a crewman had to do was to pay lip service to those ideas, as Wiggins did, in order to have Vespa's approval.

"In fact, sir," said Wiggins, "I can see how this mission against the Whills suits you perfectly, sir."

"Yes, it does indeed! How dare those animals publish outright treason in their filthy books? Did they expect to tell such outrageous lies about the Emperor and not be punished? They're just like the Rebels we've been hearing about. They publish the Rebels' lies, they must be working with the Rebels as well. In fact, I expect to find a whole nest of Rebels hiding out with those animals down there. And every last one of them will die for their crimes." Vespa munched some more grapes, and disappointingly came to the end of the bowl. "I'm honored," he said, swallowing, "to be the one to mete out the Emperor's justice against the Whills."

Wiggins nodded. It wasn't what he had meant about the mission suiting Vespa. No, it suited him because the Whills were an easy target. The one drawback for Vespa was that they reportedly had little or no wealth for Vespa to claim. Wiggins expected the Captain to treat the aliens with extra cruelty to compensate for that.

"In any case," said Vespa, "I suppose it is time to get down to business. Let's review my battle plan, shall we?"

Vespa stood up from the couch and stepped over to a tactical display screen situated next to a large, garish, velvet painting of the Emperor. Why does the Emperor always have his face covered in public, Wiggins wondered to himself. Oh well, in a painting as bad as this one, Palpatine probably didn't dare to show his face, on the off chance that someone he knew might see him there.

Vespa activated the screen, bringing up a diagram of Ashlan Four, complete with orbital bombardment vectors. He promptly switched to a camera eye image of a tall cliff face in the mountains, a flat, steep surface dotted with cave openings and lined with ramps.

"The legendary monastery of the Whills," said Vespa. "This is our target, just a bunch of caves and tunnels, much like the places where animals live. What you are seeing are images from a standard probe droid reconnaissance of the area, taken several months ago. Notice here on the data display...there are no energy shields, no energy weapon emplacements of any kind. But there may be natural defenses. These ramps and cave entrances seem to be the only ways in. Our scanners can't penetrate very far into the rock, but we know there are extensive tunnels inside the mountain. That provides many opportunities for hiding and ambushing. My mission parameters come from the Emperor himself. Every last Whill is to be killed on sight, no exceptions. When we have made sure they are all dead, then we can go home. So, Lieutenant, we have to be thorough in this. That is why we have to forego any bombardment and send in the

troops instead. The first wave will consist of all twenty of our AT-PT's. We will land them beyond this ridge, and they will rapidly move to the target area. The AT-PT's are small enough to climb these ramps and enter the tunnels. Following them will be our stormtroopers, equipped for cave conditions. As a precaution, several TIE fighters will fly over the area after the attack has begun, in case their support is needed. We should be prepared for rebel resistance. This is exactly the sort of place they like to use for bases. Are there any questions, Lieutenant Wiggins?"

"No, sir," said Wiggins snappily. "I will begin the preparations at once, sir."

"Excellent," said Vespa as he set his uniform cap on his balding head and retrieved his pointer stick. To Wiggins' discomfort, Vespa placed a fatherly hand briefly on his shoulder. "I admire your efficiency, Lieutenant. You're a fine officer. I know you'll go far someday."

Wiggins nodded briskly. Yes, he thought, as far as humanly possible from your slimy hide.

\* \* \*

A strange, unknown noise brought the Vlid out of its deep sleep. As always, it woke up hungry. The creature slowly rose out of its hole in the mountainside until it was able to see the cause of the disturbance. Upon finding that it was not a herd of tasty Tor goats, the Vlid growled in disappointment. Then the Vlid's mood changed to one of intimidation. The intruder was unlike anything the Vlid had ever seen. It flew in the sky and made a noise like the violent wind of the highest peaks. It gleamed in the sun as it settled gently to the ground. Then the large shape began to disgorge other creatures from a hole in its side, like a female giving birth to a huge litter. The offspring were very strange looking. Unlike the box-like mother, they seemed to consist of a head with one large eye, and two legs that emerged from either side of the head and ended in three-clawed feet. The creatures made a loud noise as they walked, a chunk-clack, chunk-clack, chunk-clack sound.

The Vlid felt an urge to protect its territory, and it rose from its hole to its full height. The Vlid was a fearsome sight, with its baleful gaze, strong clawed arms, and a gaping mouth dominated by one huge razor-sharp tooth. It roared its challenge to the group of newcomers. The great bloated mother and her brood of two-legged monsters were not going to lay claim to this hunting ground. As the roar echoed through the canyon, one of the offspring lurched over to meet the challenge. As it came closer, the Vlid could see a cluster of tubes protruding from the thing's chin. Without warning, a small object like a stone was shot from one of the tubes. Instinctively, the Vlid opened its maw and lunged forward to eat the projectile.

That's not food at all, the Vlid thought, disappointed and still hungry. Perhaps the whole creature will taste better...

Then the Vlid exploded in a flaming cloud which rained burnt chunks of tough flesh on the AT-PT nearby.

The AT-PT driver smiled in satisfaction until his comlink crackled with the angry voice of his squad leader. "No one said you could indulge in target practice, PT-18. Get back in formation, or you're on report."

The chastised driver swiftly joined the line of vehicles waiting to move on the Whill monastery.

As one unit, the line of AT-PT's came over the ridge of rock that had hidden their approach and sprinted across the wide, flat field in front of the monastery cliff entrance. The one-man walkers were mobile armored fortresses for the soldiers inside. The drivers sat in angular control pods between two multi-jointed legs ending in massive three-toed feet. The front of each pod had a large darkened window. Below that were mounted a blaster cannon and a concussion grenade launcher, both of which had a forward arc of fire. The pods were riding high as the legs took mighty, swift strides. The vehicle could also crouch to enter a low ceilinged area. Behind the walkers came a long line of Imperial Troop Transport hovercraft, each one carrying six white-armored stormtroopers to the battle site. The troopers stepped to the ground and began to form ranks at the far end of the field, lining up inside the dust cloud kicked up by the walkers. By the time the dust settled, the stormtroopers were marching quickly towards the cliff, and the walkers had already begun their ascent. The AT-PT's easily navigated the ramp-like pathways up to the entrances. A few of the machines darted into the lowest cave openings as the rest continued upwards. Soon, all the walkers were inside.

The stormtroopers reached the cliff next. High above them, a frightened Whill leaned out of a meditation niche. One of the troopers took careful aim with his standard issue blaster rifle and shot the Whill in the head. The Whill fell forward and out of the niche, plunging down to land next to the troopers. One of the soldiers prodded the creature with his white boot, but it was already dead. The massacre of the Whills had begun.

Master Zerek, the old Whill librarian, heard the awful noise of whining motors and heavy mechanical steps, and was filled with terror. For a long moment, Zerek and the other Whills in the library froze in indecision. Then the sudden additional sounds of blaster fire shocked them into movement. Zerek knew at once that Imperial soldiers were in the monastery. The awful predictions of the recent Whill gathering were coming true.

"Everyone, hide in the stacks! Imperials are coming!" the librarian shouted. The library visitors hurried into the long corridors between the high book shelves. Zerek waited until they were out of sight, planning to distract or divert the Imperials alone, if possible. Then a frightening mechanical shape filled the entrance to the library, and Zerek knew that resistance would be impossible. It was an Imperial ground vehicle on two

legs, flanked by two stormtroopers. Unable to escape, Zerek somehow found the self control to face the intruders with a measure of dignity.

"Soldiers of the Empire!" the Whill said in a loud voice. "I know you are here to make war on knowledge. But you cannot kill knowledge, even if you kill-"

The librarian got no further. One of the stormtroopers shot and silenced Zerek forever.

The other stormtrooper stared at the rows of bookshelves, which stretched away from him for hundreds of meters in all directions. "There may be more of them in hiding," he commented over his helmet link. "Should we go in and get them?"

"No need," said his superior. "PT-6," he commanded the walker driver, "burn all of this down."

PT-6 unhesitatingly activated his firing controls. A trio of grenades shot out of his pod's launcher and landed among the books. Each grenade erupted in a bright ball of fire, sending flames washing over the shelves. Tall, ancient paper books were reduced to black ashes, and neatly stored electronic books cracked and melted. The stormtroopers and the AT-PT driver waited patiently as the blaze spread. The troopers' helmets and the AT-PT pod were sealed against the dense billowing smoke filling the vast chamber. Every once in a while, a Whill came running out of the fire, brown robe and beard burning, arms and face blistered by the heat. PT-6 was ready for that. The walker's blaster cannon sent a scatter of bright red energy bolts slicing into the fleeing creature, swiftly cutting it down. The sound of screaming, or sobbing, or bleating terror occasionally rose above the crackle of the flames, indicating that the fire was doing the troopers' job for them. Finally, there seemed to be no more survivors to shoot down.

"All right, let's move on," said the stormtrooper officer. "They'll have a scanning crew in here to check for life signs once the fire dies down."

Obediently, the AT-PT driver led the way out of the former library.

Peth was waiting for Master Resh to arrive in the medical center when the Imperial troops came marching down the corridor just outside, firing methodically at anything that moved.

Peth ducked down behind the Whill-sized Bacta tank just as two troopers split off from the group and entered the room. The Whill could hear their voices emerging from their helmets as impersonal, mechanically altered sounds.

"The room looks empty, but check over there to be sure."

Peth swallowed hard. Time had run out, that suddenly. But Peth didn't intend to simply give up. It might be possible to flee, if the soldiers could be distracted. The Whill's gaze fixed on the Bacta tank itself. Moving quickly, Peth braced against the wall and set both thick, strong legs against the tank. The Whill strained desperately, and the tank began to tilt. The stormtroopers noticed the movement as the tank reached a balancing point, and toppled towards them. A thick wave of reddish Bacta healing fluid drenched the soldiers and sent them slipping and sprawling on the floor. Peth chose that moment to try to escape.

The Whill dashed into the outer corridor and came face to face with an advancing walker. Peth had a frozen moment to regret ever taking a hiatus from text illustration. The Whill spun to try to get away, but the AT-PT's blaster cannon fire struck Peth in the back, hard. Mortally wounded, Peth stumbled and fell on the stone floor.

Wesk, the Whill history teacher, ordered the young students to turn over the study tables and hide behind them. Then Wesk pushed another table to the side of the entrance to the classroom, and climbed up on top of it. The teacher did not have long to wait before the Imperial walker showed up. The AT-PT's roof just cleared the top of the entryway. The bulky machine crouched and, with a series of shuffling motions, made it all the way in.

One of the young Whills could not contain its terror. The student scurried out from behind a wooden table and, consumed by panic, made straight for the walker blocking the only way out. With a whine of powerful servomotors, the AT-PT oriented its pod to aim its guns directly at the young Whill.

At that moment, Wesk leaped from the table and landed atop the walker. The AT-PT lurched from the heavy impact. Inside, the driver twisted in the cramped cockpit, and was surprised by the sight of a dangling brown robe outside his side door window. The driver understood there was a Whill on top of his vehicle just as Wesk began to pound violently on the walker with massive hands. The attack, however impotent, enraged the driver. He jerked at the controls, and the walker reared up and turned from side to side. He was unable to shake the Whill free. The driver fumbled to release his restraint belts and grabbed his blaster. Angrily, he thrust his side door open, intending to shoot the offensive creature at point blank range. Instead, the driver received a huge Whill fist in his face.

The Imperial fell back inside the pod, his elbows crashing onto the weapons panel. A concussion grenade shot out of the launcher, bounced off the wall, and rolled back to stop beneath the walker. The resulting blast killed Wesk, the driver, and the young Whill who had run from the cover of the tables. The rest of the students survived, but they remained cowering behind the tables, terrified of the noise and heat.

Panic was spreading throughout the monastery as all of the inhabitants learned of the surprise attack. The sounds of blaster fire

and explosions echoed through the stone corridors, mingled with distant screams. A haze of smoke had spread everywhere, making it hard to breathe. Platt Eth and his Duro crew were running hard, gripping their blasters, and trying to stay clear of the stormtroopers. So far, they hadn't been entirely successful. In a firefight with three troopers, both Hadd Ali and Brenn Debo were wounded. Now they limped along with the others. Platt Eth wanted to find the way to his ship and get the hell off of Ashlan Four. He was stunned at the ruthlessness of the Imperial attack, and part of him wanted to help the Whills, but he also had a responsibility to his crew. Also, they hadn't found a single Whill still alive during their mad run through the monastery. They had seen Whills slumped dead in the halls, blaster wounds all over their mound-like bodies. They had checked into several living quarters as they passed, finding bodies in some, and others empty. The worst sights had been the communal areas for eating and bathing. Platt could not shake the images of Whills sprawled dead in the insect troughs, their blood becoming food for the tiny creatures they had been eating...or the naked Whills floating so still in the red waters of the underground pool. There was nothing he could do for them, but his crew was still living, and his first priority was to save them.

Platt stopped short in surprise as a Whill staggered towards them out of the smoke. It was Herf, the Whill who loved the spice wine so much. Herf was cut and bruised, but he had no blaster wounds.

"Captain Eth!" Herf cried out in relief. "I'm so glad I found you! The stormtroopers are killing all of us! We never imagined they would do such a thing. The library is on fire...the dead are all over. I was in the wine cellar when I heard the shooting. I saw Master Yirt get shot down outside the Master Copy chamber. I ran the other way until I found you by accident. You have weapons--good, but you have wounded! Oh...what are we going to do?"

Suddenly, there was the sound of a violent detonation somewhere nearby. Herf peered anxiously in the direction of the blast. "That was one of the classrooms!" the Whill said. "The young ones! I have to try to help them!"

"Hold on," said Platt. "If we help you, then you can lead us to our ship. We can get the young ones to safety." He looked each of his crew members in the eyes. They all nodded. "All right. Lead the way."

Platt regretted the relatively slow speed of the Whills as he and his crew followed Herf to the classroom. Inside, they found the wreckage of an Imperial ground transport and several bodies, human and Whill. When Herf entered, a group of eight young Whills emerged from behind a wall of overturned tables. Crying and snuffling, they ran to Herf and crowded around the adult, clinging tightly in their fear.

"We have to get out of here, children," Herf told them. "Where is your teacher?"

One of the students pointed to the broken body of a Whill half buried under the twisted shell of the walker.

Herf grimaced, and said, "Listen to me, all of you. Be very quiet and follow these Duros as fast as you can. We're going to try to get to safety."

Platt waved them along and led the way out of the room, blaster ready. The Duros and the Whills formed a long line down the smoky hall. Inevitably, the slower Whills with their stumpy legs held back the swifter Duros. But Platt didn't allow anyone to be left behind. Herf decided on the quickest way to the Bantha Tracker, and for a while, they made good progress. But their luck ran out as they rounded one sharp corner. They had run straight into the path of an oncoming AT-PT.

Platt shouted a curse and dropped to one knee, opening up with his blaster. Hadd and Brenn were with him to one side, leaning against the wall and firing for all they were worth despite their wounds. Newco and Kell stood on Platt's other side, also blasting desperately away. The small storm of blaster bolts pelted the control pod of the AT-PT, but the armored surface had been made too strong for the guns to do much damage. The AT-PT's blaster cannon sent laser fire shrieking back at the Duros. There was no way to escape.

Herf watched in horror as Platt, Eth and the crew of the trader ship died in a shower of red energy bolts. As the Duro bodies hit the floor, there was a chunk-clack chunk-clack sound as some kind of large machine came around the corner into view. It was like a large booth on two tall jointed legs. A cluster of long weapon barrels was mounted underneath.

The young Whills stood frozen behind Herf, as the older Whill tried to shield them bodily. Herf's wide-eyed face was reflected in the large window on the front of the transport. The guns swiveled to take aim at the group.

"Children!" Herf shouted. "Run away as fast as you can!" As the young ones scattered, the Whill stood ground firmly in front of the advancing walker, eyes now shut tight.

The stormtrooper advanced quietly into the seemingly deserted tunnel, checking each side room for Whills. All he had found so far was a series of empty bedchambers, with barren mats lying on the cold floors. But he had orders to be thorough. Captain Vespa's command was to leave no Whill alive.

The trooper stepped suddenly into the next chamber, blaster rifle aimed and ready to fire. Nothing. The room was empty. Move on to the next one.

So far, the trooper thought, it had been a very successful raid. He had heard a few reports of Imperial casualties, and these excited him. It indicated that there might be Rebels present after all. Yet, those casualties were minimal, which was a blessing in the dangerous life of a stormtrooper. In the balance, the stormtroopers and walkers had taken

well over a hundred Whill lives. The only thing wrong was that he himself had seen no action...so far. Not one Whill or Rebel had crossed his path. He supposed it was because the monastery tunnels were so extensive, and the resident population so small, but it was frustrating. There would be nothing to distinguish him to his superiors, and nothing to boast about in the barracks afterwards.

Then a rough whistling voice called out from the far end of the corridor. A very old Whill hobbled out of the last bedchamber.

"You there!" it said. "Soldier! What took you so long? Come down here. I'm ready for you."

The trooper paused in confusion, then advanced slowly, blaster rifle at the ready.

"Come on...finish the job!" the elderly Whill said. "You're the Emperor's weapon, aren't you? His finger has pulled the trigger. Now fire the shot. He has already destroyed what we served. He has killed the Jedi, and the Journal we worked on for twenty four thousand years. Now we have nothing left. It is time for us to die. So, come on! Do the Emperor's work for him. He's done most of it already! He took the best for himself, and left you the dregs. Come and taste how bitter they are!"

Needless to say, the trooper had not pictured his enemy encounter this way. The Whill began to walk slowly towards him. Rearing up, the creature opened its robe in front, baring its chest beneath its beard.

For some reason he didn't fully understand, the trooper found himself hesitating to fire. But the old Whill continued to come at him. Finally, when the creature was very close, a defensive reaction made his finger squeeze the trigger. Shot in the heart at point blank range, the Whill collapsed at his feet and lay very still.

The trooper looked around, but there were no other stormtroopers in sight. Perhaps he could come up with a different version of the encounter for recounting later on in the barracks.

The smoke was everywhere. Master Resh stumbled along the corridor coughing on the stench of death. The Master scribe was dazed and stunned at the ferocity of the attack. Only last evening, in the gathering, they had been debating whether the Empire would come at all. They must have already been on the way.

The Whills had started a new day as usual that morning, because to do otherwise would be to give in to fear. The Duros were going to try to find out more information concerning the Empire's plans. Now, Resh didn't even know if the Duros were still alive. Nor had Reb and Desima showed up at any point. Quill had said before that they were in the deep caves, and that may have saved their lives so far. Resh hoped they would stay there, and never see the devastation of the monastery.



Resh was almost to the medical center, which was good, because Orenth was almost coming out. Giving birth in the midst of an Imperial attack was madness, but there was no choice. Resh needed Peth's help--needed it right now. The hallway ahead was clear of stormtroopers. Perhaps they hadn't found the medical center yet.

Then Resh found the awful evidence that they had already come and gone. Blaster marks were all over the walls, and the still form of Peth was stretched out on the corridor floor. Resh choked back sorrow and wondered what to do without Peth's help. Checking inside the room, Resh found the Bacta tank overturned and the other equipment smashed. No one else was there.

Resh stepped carefully among the scattered instruments, heading for the birthing slab. Then the silence was broken by the sudden sound of approaching footsteps. Resh froze. A humanoid figure appeared in the doorway...but it was not wearing the white armor of a stormtrooper. The figure pulled back its hood. It was Quill.

"Master Resh," said the droid. "Thank the Maker!"

"Quill!" roared Resh. "You scared me half to death! Get in here and help me--I'm about to give birth!"

The droid hurried inside.

"Help me up on this slab," said Resh, groaning. "Peth had no right to die before he could help me...Quill, you're going to have to do it, now."

"Don't worry about a thing, Master Resh," said Quill. "Remember that I am equipped with full medical knowledge concerning your species. There you are. Lie on your back, that's right. Now, give me a moment to find the right drugs in this chaotic mess..." Quill turned to begin sifting through the wreckage.

"No," the Whill said, "there's no time for that. It's going to have to be painful and primitive."

Quill hesitated, then moved to stand next to Resh. "All right, let's take a look at this." The droid pushed Resh's robe aside, exposing the shuddering belly beneath. "You're right," Quill affirmed, "this is the final stage. I will assist you in pushing the baby out."

For five minutes, Resh gasped and strained, while Quill applied pressure at the correct points. All at once, Resh began to scream, and the newborn Whill came out in a rush. Quill was there to collect the newborn in his metal arms. The droid placed the child in Resh's large hands, stripped off his own brown robe, and helped to wrap Orenth in the soft cloth.

Resh looked into Orenth's eyes. The baby seemed to be healthy, Resh saw with relief. But what were they going to do now? Orenth, Resh thought. I am so sorry...so very sorry. You have been born into a world

of dying, at the end of our history. I have nothing to give you but a moment of life. A moment of my love. Resh gazed at Orenth, and the infant looked back with trust and what seemed to be affection. One of the baby's hands reached out and found Resh's large, old snout, gently gripping it.

"Master Resh," said Quill nervously. "I hear a sound...like a heavy tread, coming this way."

Resh reluctantly looked up at Quill, listening. There it was...a rhythmic stomping sound, getting louder by the second. The scribe handed the newborn carefully to Quill, and painfully got down from the slab. "The Empire has one-man walking machines, heavily armed," Resh said. "We don't stand a chance against them. Our only hope is to split up. Maybe it will only get one of us. Quill...you take Orenth." Resh looked longingly at the wrapped infant. "You can protect the baby better than I can. I'm in bad shape, Quill. I can feel it. Giving birth took a lot out of me. I won't make it far, and if I have to die, I don't want Orenth to die too. Quill, find Reb. He can help you keep Orenth safe. And Quill...thank you, for all you've done."

"It has been my honor to serve you and all of the Whills," said Quill as they headed for the exit. "I will do my best to save your child. But do not give up hope of being reunited with Orenth. Once the child is safe, I will do my best to return for you. I promise."

PT-4 drove his walker down the monastery's corridor, carrying out his orders to make a second sweep of the area. Ahead of him, two figures came out of a chamber to the right and began to run away from him. PT-4 checked his targeting scanner as he increased speed to pursue. One of the survivors was a droid. The other was a Whill. The driver smiled. He had flushed out another one of the rebellious creatures. This would bring his count to what...twenty now? The walker gained rapidly on the fleeing pair, and PT-4 fired a round of blaster shots at them. One of the shots hit the Whill, but that didn't stop it from going around a bend with the droid. When PT-4 came around the corner, it was just in time to see the droid and the Whill split up. The corridor branched, and the droid went down one fork, the Whill down the other.

For PT-4, the choice was simple. He had orders to exterminate the Whills, not shoot at droids. He sent the walker stomping after the Whill. But within moments, the driver began to have trouble with the height of the tunnel ceiling. It was significantly lower here, making it necessary for the walker to crouch and take shorter steps. It slowed him down, but PT-4 wasn't worried. His target was slow, too, and wounded now as well.

Then the ceiling became even lower. The topmost leg joints of the walker scraped and jammed into the roof, and the machine shuddered to a halt. PT-4 scowled. He couldn't lose the Whill now, just because of a low ceiling. The driver angrily released his restraint straps and slammed the door open. He grabbed his blaster and dropped to the tunnel floor. Leaving the walker behind, PT-4 chased after the fleeing Whill on foot.

Resh staggered along a tunnel of nightmare visions of smoke and dead friends. The Whill had reached an area adjacent to the insect breeding area, where the monastery's food was grown. Resh recognized the slain ones who had been shot down while fleeing to or from the communal eating area. But there wasn't time to rearrange their limbs into more dignified positions, or to close their staring eyes, not with that Imperial monstrosity chasing close behind. Then Resh realized that the heavy sound of the walker had stopped. Pausing, the Whill listened carefully. Had it given up the pursuit? No--there were the sounds of a human on foot, running.

Resh slipped into the breeding room, and looked for some place to hide. The old scribe was bleeding externally from the painful blaster wound in the back, and perhaps internally as well. It was impossible to run any further. Resh spotted a large cabinet and collapsed behind it.

All too soon, the pursuing soldier came into the room, blaster in hand, moving confidently. Resh risked a look at the human, and saw a man of medium height wearing a gray uniform and a helmet. He didn't look much older than Reb Zakai. Resh wondered what had turned this human into a killer for the Empire. Then the Whill scowled. It didn't matter what the reason was...this human was not going to kill again. Even soldiers for the government had to pay for their crimes. And this soldier had shot at--had actually fired a huge blaster cannon at--Orenth. Orenth could easily have been killed by this man, minutes after birth. He deserved to die. All Resh needed was a weapon.

The Whill looked desperately about the small hiding place, as the soldier began to search methodically among the tall racks of hives. There was very little within reach...only row upon row of insect cages reaching to the high ceiling. Perhaps Resh could slip one of the cages out of the rack and throw it at the soldier. But that would accomplish very little. The cage was too lightweight, and the soldier had a helmet. Then Resh considered the insects within the cages. There were two different kinds of bugs inside, one much larger and less colorful than the other. Only the smaller creatures were considered food. The Whill recalled that these were males and females of the same species. The larger females were very poisonous. But were they poisonous to humans? Quietly, Resh slid one of the cages from the rack. The soldier was coming closer...

Resh triggered the opening latch and cast the cage over the cabinet. It landed at the AT-PT driver's booted feet. The insects were furious. They scurried out of the cage and swarmed up the man's legs. In moments, they had found their way under his clothes. As soon as the aggressive females found warm flesh, they began to bite. The driver slapped frantically at his body, letting out a high-pitched cry. It soon became obvious that the insect toxins were deadly to humans. The Imperial convulsed and fell to the floor, where he continued to twitch. The blaster tumbled from his contorted fingers, and he gasped for breath. Resh stayed put, listening as the violent breaths came fewer and farther between. A minute later, the breathing stopped.

Resh managed to rise up enough to see over the cabinet. The human was dead. Nothing living could hold such a horrible contorted pose. The

Whill sighed with relief. It had been a victory of pure luck, but sadly, it did Resh little good. When the scribe tried to get up, it was impossible. Resh fell back into a spreading pool of blood.

I'm sorry, Orenth, Resh thought. Despite Quill's good intentions, I'm not going to be able to rejoin you. It seems such a cruel fate, to bear you and not get to raise you. I had such hopes for you, Orenth. You were going to be a great scribe in the long tradition of our people...going to take your place in the great purpose of the Whills...but it's ashes, now. I hope Reb finds you and keeps you safe. You'll like Reb. He's a good human. I know...I raised him myself. So, in a way, he'll bring a part of me to the task of raising you. I don't know what kind of future you'll have, Orenth. But let it be a proud one. I wish I could have had more time with you...and I wish I could tell you that I love you, just once.

The dying scribe coughed raggedly and slumped as a great weariness spread all over. Resh looked at one of the broad hands which had written so many letters during all the long years. The fingers were covered in bright blood. Resh decided there was a way to say good-bye to Orenth after all. The weakened finger would be the stylus, and the blood, the ink. The clean, smooth side of the cabinet would be the Master Scribe's final page.

With great care, Master Resh began to inscribe the most precious document of a long and distinguished career.

\* \* \*

Selections from the "Proverbs of Max Erman":

47. Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence.

52. As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all beings.

55. Speak your truth quietly and clearly, and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story. Avoid loud and aggressive beings. They are vexations to the spirit.

64. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser beings than yourself.

65. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

73. Exercise caution in your dealings with others, for the galaxy is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to the virtue there is; many beings strive for high ideals, and everywhere life is full of heroism.

79. Especially do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment, it is perennial as the grass.

101. Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.

105. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune, but do not stress yourself with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

112. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the galaxy, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here.

113. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the galaxy is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with the Force, whatever you may conceive it to be.

114. And whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul. With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful galaxy.

-The Journal of the Whills, Volume One Hundred Twenty, from the proverbs of Max Erman, the Ortolan Philosopher of Coruscant.

"What's so special about this cave that it's worth walking for an entire day to get there?" Reb asked Desima as they walked carefully down a rock slope deep in the heart of The Mountain. "Come on, you can tell me."

"For the last time, Reb, no, I can't tell you. It's going to be a surprise for me as well." She aimed her helmet spotlight into the solid seeming blackness ahead. "Besides, you'll find out soon enough. I think we're almost there. Master Yirt told me to look for a cluster of red stalagmites, and that must be it right there."

"And Master Yirt didn't say what you were going to find at the end of your trip."

"That's what I said. You just don't believe me."

"What I don't believe is that you would come all this way underground, not knowing what it's for."

"So why did you come with me, Reb?" Desima asked, smiling. "Don't worry. If it was just that you wanted to be with me, that's okay. I like your company too. Look how well we've gotten to know each other on this trip. So, even if the end of the road isn't very remarkable, it hasn't been a waste."

Reb smiled back at her. "All right...you have me there. But don't you know anything about it at all? It is kind of strange to go this deep into a mountain on a whim. And even stranger for me to come with you on a whim. I need to have sense of practicality when I do something. So humor me."

"Okay," Desima relented. "You're wondering why I'm exploring instead of studying the Master Copy. Well, I tried to see the Master Copy. But when I went to make an appointment with Master Yirt, the old Whill told me that before I saw the Master Copy, I had to go to this cave and see what was there. And...Yirt said I should take you."

"I knew you were hiding something," Reb said. "Why did Yirt think I should see it?"

"I have no idea," Desima said. "I don't know why he wanted me to see it."

"Old Yirt is a strange one," Reb said. "He's always claimed to be able to sense the Force. You almost became a Jedi yourself. Maybe Yirt recognized a kindred spirit."

"I didn't almost become a Jedi. Far from it. I told you, I didn't have the potential, so I never tried. Sometimes though, sometimes I wish-

"

"I hear water," said Reb.

Desima listened. "You're right. And there's more. Turn off your helmet light for a moment."

In the sudden darkness, they were able to see a pale glow ahead. "What is it?" wondered Reb. "Could it be sunlight?"

"Only one way to find out," said Desima. "Let's go see."

Together, they pressed on, once again using their artificial lights. The narrow passageway finally opened into a large grotto. The source of the light was obvious--high up at the roof, a hole was open to the sky. A sunbeam streamed cheerfully into the cave.

"I'll be damned," said Reb. "We must be on the other side of The Mountain. We walked all night, and came all the way through."

"It's beautiful, Reb," said Desima wonderingly. She stepped into the cave and switched off her light. Not far away, a stream of water flowed across the cave and tumbled down a wall of rock, forming a lovely cascading waterfall. "It's the kind of place that could make a person believe in mystery, and wonder," she said, glancing at Reb.

"Hey, don't start that again," said Reb defensively. "I think it's beautiful too. I never knew this place existed. But natural beauty isn't mysterious. It's just...natural."

"I don't know," Desima said slowly. "There's something about this place. I feel like..." She fell silent for a moment, then turned to Reb. "Can't you feel it? It's like a vibration inside my mind. It feels good. Very peaceful."

Reb closed his eyes. "No," he said shortly. "I guess not." But he didn't meet her eyes.

Then Desima followed the sunbeam with her gaze to where it met the cave wall. "Reb, look!" she gasped. She hurried over to the illuminated surface, splashing through the shallow stream. On the wall was a worn symbol, carved deeply into the rock. Desima stood before it, a rapt excitement on her face. "Now I know why Master Yirt wanted me to see this! And you, Reb. Do you know what this is?"

Reb sloshed over and peered at the carving. To his surprise, he recognized the symbol immediately. "Letters of the Aurebesh," he said. "Senth, Wesk."

"The sigil of the Skywalker," pronounced Desima. "Do you realize what this means? It's real, physical evidence of the connection between the Skywalker and the Whills. His family was really here--in this cave! This supports the old legends in the first volume of the Journal. Yirt knew I was a believer and wanted to reward my faith. And you, Reb...Yirt wanted you to see the truth, in a way you couldn't deny."

She looked at him, then frowned in concern. Reb looked crestfallen instead of intrigued. "Reb, what is it? What's wrong?"

Reb turned away and sat heavily at the top of the gently rushing waterfall. He stared at the water as it splashed down into the depths and disappeared into a subterranean watercourse. He didn't answer Desima.

"I take it you're not excited about this," she said.

"I don't want anything to do with the Jedi," Reb said disconsolately. "Or their artifacts. I'm glad you're pleased with it, but I'm just not interested."

Desima sat down next to him, and looked at him while he continued to stare at the water. "This is about your parents, isn't it?" she asked gently. "You haven't said much about them. Maybe it's time to tell me what happened to them."

Reb sighed. "They were Freedom Fighters, both of them. It's an old tradition...goes back thousands of years. They were people who would fight in support of the Jedi, whenever they needed it."

"I've heard of them," said Desima.

"My parents were taking me on a trip to Ashlan Three. I was ten years old. For them, it was like one of the Jedi pilgrimages, to see where it all began. That was when they got the news about the Purge against the Jedi. They knew they had to go and fight at their side. It

was their duty as Freedom Fighters. But they wanted me to be safe...so...they left me on Ashlan Four, with the Whills." Reb's voice caught. The words came with some difficulty. "I never saw them again. I waited to hear, and the months went by. Then a whole year. I never even found out what happened to them. The Jedi should have kept them alive, so they could come back to their only child. But they didn't. They couldn't even keep themselves alive. What good were they? What good is feeling the Force? I don't want any of it! It took away my parents and left me all alone. When it mattered most, the Force totally failed me. For that, the Jedi and their old carvings and legends can just stay buried."

"Mercy!" Desima murmured. "Reb, I'm sorry. I didn't realize any of that. I had no idea, or I never would have pushed so hard. I can only imagine what a trauma it was to lose your family. I still have both of my parents, and I love them very much. Can you forgive me?"

"It's not your fault...maybe it's just mine for not being able to forgive the Jedi. I've tried, but it's hard for me. I never want anything like that to happen again."

"I understand that," said Desima. "Still, I don't think you're going to face such a loss while you're safe at the monastery. My favorite philosopher said, 'Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not stress yourself with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.'"

Reb gave her words some thought. "Maybe I have been holding on to the past too much," he said after a while. "Maybe things are getting better for me now. I know I haven't been lonely since you've been here. When you're around, I can almost forget about how much I miss my parents. I've been wondering...if you think we could become closer to one another." Reb looked her in the eyes. "If you're going to stay for a while, that is. How long..." he asked hesitantly, "how long will you be around? What happens when you finish your studies?"

"Let's make that jump when we get to it," said Desima, slightly nervously. "There are all kinds of possibilities. You might want to come with me, and leave Ashlan Four. Don't start worrying about losing me yet. After all, we just met!"

Reb smiled, looking slightly foolish. "Sorry. It feels like a long time already." They were quiet for a while then.

"Well," said Reb finally, "you've seen the carving now. I suppose Master Yirt will let you into the Master Copy Chamber. You probably want to get started as soon as you can. We should start back, I guess."

"I'm in no hurry," said Desima. "I like it right here. The past week or so has been a nice vacation for me. When I go back up there, the work starts all over again. I think it can wait a few more hours. Besides, I've never seen a place like this before. It feels so...so right. Let's break out the food and stay a while. After all, it won't kill you to miss one more lesson with Master Resh, will it?"

\* \* \*



Reb and Desima felt a deep unease during their long trek back, in strong contrast to the peaceful feeling of the waterfall cave. Despite his claims to the contrary, Reb had experienced the sensation described by Desima, at least to a small degree. Uncomfortable with that fact, he had enjoyed the unusual serenity without acknowledging that it might emanate from something supernatural. But once they left the cave behind, their feelings had changed markedly. Desima had felt it first, and much more strongly. She had complained of a sudden weakness, a sense of depression with no obvious cause. Reb thought he felt it too, but it could have been her mood affecting him. After that, a nameless fear followed them every step of the way.

Somewhere under The Mountain, about halfway back to the monastery itself, they encountered Quill. The droid was alone, carrying an odd bundle wrapped in his robe. Both humans intuitively realized that something was wrong at the monastery.

"Master Reb!" Quill cried. "Thank the Maker I've found you! I had begun to think I would be lost forever in these caves. Orenth would have perished, and my last command from Master Resh would have been given in vain. I know bringing the baby down here was a poor choice, but I had no other! If I had stayed, there was a high risk that the Imperials would find me, and then Orenth would surely have been killed-"

"Quill!" Reb interrupted. "Hold on a second. What's going on up there? What Imperials? What happened to Master Resh?"

"Is that Resh's child?" asked Desima at the same time.

"You have both missed a terrible series of events," said Quill sorrowfully. The droid proceeded to tell them of the gathering and the news brought by Platt Eth. He told of the morning assault on the monastery by Imperial troops. Then he described how he had found Master Resh and assisted in the birth of Orenth. He explained Resh's command that he should bring the child to Reb. After Resh and Quill were separated, Quill had hidden with the baby until he was sure no more Imperial pursuit was forthcoming. Quill didn't know the fate of Master Resh, but he made it clear that he wanted to find out if Resh, or any other Whills, had survived. The droid had observed that the first attack was followed by a second sweep by stormtroopers on foot. He learned, by eavesdropping on Imperial communications frequencies, that scanning crews would follow the next day, to make a final, exhaustive search for survivors. Quill had evaded the second sweep and went in search of Reb. Because Reb had mentioned his general destination to Quill before leaving with Desima, the droid had reached his goal...

Reb listened to all of this in shocked silence. When the information finally began to sink in, Reb could not contain his grief. Before Quill finished, he went to his knees and began to cry openly. He wept for his home, now destroyed, and for the only family he had since the loss of his parents, now gone too. The proverbs Desima had quoted back in the waterfall cave echoed in his mind with ghastly hollowness. I

don't think you're going to face such a loss while you're safe at the monastery, she had said. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune, she had said. He had been comforted then. Now, they seemed like empty words. The galaxy wasn't unfolding as it should, not if it saw fit to scourge him with another such terrible loss.

Quill fell silent in the face of Reb's emotion. Desima was crying, too, while she accepted Orenth from Quill. She cradled the infant, keeping it warm.

The sight of the baby Whill made Reb realize that he was not the only one who had lost a parent. Orenth had lost more than that. The baby might be the last Whill alive. Reb tried to imagine the entire population of the ancient monastery, dead in a brutal slaughter. He tried to picture his own Master, Resh, strange old Master Yirt, the reliable Master Aurek, Zerek the librarian, the wine-loving Herf...and some two hundred more...all dead. He found that he couldn't imagine it. Perhaps it was best that way. Perhaps he wouldn't have to see the bodies. Maybe he could remember the Whills the way they were, alive and full of dignity.

Reb grieved, but now it was not for himself. He grieved for the Whills, who had first lost their purpose, and now their very lives, to a vast, impersonal aggressor. He grieved because a story could last twenty four thousand years, and still come to a tragic end. After their long, long service, they deserved so much more. Without meaning to, Reb thought back to the cave where the ancient sigil of the Skywalker was carved. He remembered the feeling which had filled that cave; it was more than just peace, it was hope, too. Hope for the future. Reb gazed at the baby Whill, and saw that hope made physical.

Not everything is lost, Reb told himself. Not everything. I'm still alive, and Desima, and Quill, and Orenth. And maybe something else can be saved, back at the monastery.

Reb stood and looked at his companions. Desima was watching him with both concern and compassion. Quill was standing still, his head bowed in a gesture of sorrow. "We have to go back up there," Reb said to them. As he said it, he felt a new determination which was stronger than his despair. "We have to try to save the Master Copy of the Journal. If the Whills are all dead, except for Orenth, then the Master Copy is all that's left of their legacy."

"Master Reb?" asked Quill. "Are you certain? The Imperials are securing the monastery as we speak. They will be making a careful search for survivors to eliminate, and they will be removing the dead to count them outside and burn them. This much, I learned while I was in hiding there. We would be in great danger if we go back now."

"There's a good reason why we have to go right away," Reb insisted. "They're still securing the monastery, which means they haven't brought in the scanners yet. Now think about it--they probably haven't found the Master Copy chamber yet. The way the entrance is made to look like stone would hide it from them. I mean, we all know where it is. It's not hidden, just sort of disguised, so the Whills could stand to look at it.

But the stormtroopers don't even know there's a room there. We might have a chance, but we have to act quickly. With a scanning crew, they'll find it for sure."

"He's right," said Desima. "We can't allow the Imperials to find the Master Copy. They'll just destroy it. With the Empire outlawing the electronic version of the Journal, the Master Copy is irreplaceable. I say it's worth the risk."

"Humans!" said Quill indignantly. "Just when I thought I had found some safety down here. Don't you realize that being down here saved you from being killed in the massacre? Now you can't wait to go and share in the danger that killed Orenth's people. Honestly! The Whills, I understand...humans, never!"

"Don't you want to save the Journal, Quill?" Reb demanded.

"Of course I do! I have dedicated my existence to serving the Journal. But the Whills come first. I will not put Orenth in any further danger." Quill paused to stare doubtfully at Reb. "I don't suppose you have the slightest inkling of what you will do once you secure the books, do you?"

"Well--I--sure I do! We'll bring them down here...somehow. And wait for the Empire to leave."

"And if the Empire does not leave? What if they set up a garrison here? Survival in these caves will not be possible long term. Orenth will die. Allow me to contribute a better suggestion. After you left, the Duros came in their ship. They set it down in that concealed landing area Captain Eth prefers. There is a good chance the Imperials have not yet discovered it. Provided the Duros have not used it to evacuate themselves, which is unlikely with the Empire still in orbit over The Mountain, we could escape on it ourselves, along with any survivors we find."

Reb considered the idea. "All right, Quill, you take Orenth to the ship. Desima and I will get the Master Copy and bring it there also."

Quill sighed. "It seems I cannot dissuade you from your goal. For the record, I do see how worthy it is. But I have also seen the ruthlessness of the Empire first hand. I do not want you both to become just two more corpses on the heap. Still, I have learned that humans will do as they please, even if it means abandoning all logic. Promise me, though, that you will do your best not to add to the tragedy of this day."

"I promise, Quill," Reb said seriously.

"If your parents were here," Desima said, "I know they would do exactly what we're doing, Reb."

"That's what has me worried," said Reb. "It's how they got themselves killed."

"Introductory Guidelines for Submissions to the Electronic Journal of the Whills. To the Applicant: You are one of the great personalities of your time, and your words may be considered for inclusion in The Journal of the Whills to be read by current and future generations of the Galactic Republic. If your submission gains final acceptance, it will be recorded in two places: the electronic Journal database for galaxywide distribution, and the Master Copy which is inscribed by hand and kept at the monastery. The Master Copy is less well known than the electronic version, but its history is a much longer one, reaching back to the beginning of the Journal. The Journal itself started as a volume of collected writings concerning the Skywalker and his family. This first volume was compiled one thousand years after the Skywalker lived, when the Whills followed his descendants to Ashlan Four and took up the task of recording the Jedi story. The Whills also wrote commentary on those momentous stories, and one hundred years later, those writings were collected into a second volume. This was the origin of the tradition of completing one new volume every one hundred years. The volumes are part of a series which came to be known as the Master Copy. Eventually, scholars of other races began to contribute to the Journal. Over the centuries, the range of topics became as diverse as the Republic itself. As the Republic grew, and became more technologically advanced, an electronic version of the Journal became a necessity. New entries are now included in yearly updates to this version. The Master Copy is also still maintained, and at the end of each century, the hand scribed and illustrated pages are bound into a new volume to be kept at the monastery of the Whills.

The process of judging entries arose out of necessity as well. By selecting only the best entries, the Whills prevent the Journal from expanding beyond a manageable size. As you have inferred, the standards for selection are high. Please read the following guidelines carefully before making your final submission.

1. Your work should be submitted in Basic if possible. Our translators are available to serve you if necessary.
2. Your work should have universal value. It will be judged on whether it can speak to a multitude of species and cultures.
3. Limit the file size of your submission to 1,000 CCU. Many citizens prefer to download only parts of the Journal. Your readership may depend on your brevity. Truly important thoughts can be expressed succinctly.
4. Preference will be given to the writings of the Jedi order. The Journal was created to tell their story, and that mission is ongoing. (see also guideline 17 on The Force and Religion.)
5. We encourage the following topics (without limiting publication to these): universal treatises on philosophy, major scientific paradigms, Republic history, galactic government, sociology and anthropology of Republic races, galactic culture..."

-The Journal of the Whills, Volume Two Hundred Thirty Three, excerpted from " Guidelines for submissions to the Journal."

They reached the outskirts of the monastery after nightfall. At the tunnel to the hidden landing area, Quill left them to go to the Bantha Tracker. The droid planned to place Orenth into the medical bay and to prepare the ship for takeoff. He was to wait one hour for Reb and Desima to join him, then he was to try and find them if possible. But if there were too many Imperials for Quill to avoid capture, they agreed that for Orenth's sake, Reb and Desima would be left to save themselves.

The two humans stealthily entered the monastery just after the second wave of stormtroopers withdrew. Reb's distress at the condition of the place was obvious to Desima, and she resolved to be strong for him. The signs of blaster fire disturbed her, too, but this was Reb's home. The loss would be so much more painful for him. She extended a hand for him to hold, and he gripped it tightly.

They found the first of the bodies in the computer center. Slain Whills lay slumped over the smoking terminals where they had fallen. Reb gave an involuntary cry and half fell on the first Whill he saw. Desima guessed what he must be going through. All during the long walk back, he had had the time to imagine the murdered scholars. But nothing in his sheltered life could have prepared him for the reality. She hugged herself in sorrow as Reb hesitantly touched the blackened wounds, flinching at the dried blood. Then Reb simply lay his head on the broad, still back of the Whill and closed his eyes. Desima didn't disturb him, and finally, he stood up straight.

"I've said my good-byes to all of them," Reb said without looking at her. "This was Thesh. I didn't know Thesh very well, but...this should never have happened, to any of them. I may not get to see the rest...I may not get to see Master Resh. So this is my last good-bye to all of the Whills. I'm ready, Desima. Let's go do what we have to do." Desima slipped a comforting arm around him, and together, they left the room and its silent occupants behind.

Reb was very quiet all the way to the Master Copy chamber. They passed several more bodies, but Reb pointedly avoided looking at them. He obviously did not want to chance upon Master Resh. However, when they reached their destination, they found a Whill whom they both recognized at once. Master Yirt lay dead right in front of the disguised doorway to the chamber.

"We owe our lives to Yirt," said Desima. "Without that trip to the cave of the sigil, we'd be lying there too. It looks like he died trying to protect the Master Copy."

"But it looks like the Imperials didn't realize there was anything here," said Reb. "The door is still closed. Here, help me move...this." Together, they pulled Yirt's body aside. Reb pressed a spot on the stone wall. Smoothly, the wall swung outwards, revealing a sealed pressure door

of gleaming metal. Control systems for the atmosphere and temperature of the room beyond blinked rhythmically next to the door. It looked almost like the airlock of a modern starship. Desima could see why the Whills had disliked it.

"What's all this for?" she asked.

"Book preservation technology," said Reb, punching a few buttons to open the door. The portal slid noiselessly aside. "Some of these books are ten thousand years old. Let's hurry up and get inside and get the outer door closed."

"Who made the outer door, anyway?" asked Desima.

"A people from Sullust called the Bomer-wrights. The most amazing stone crafters there ever were. They felt the same way the Whills did about rustic appearances. They did a lot of work around here many years ago. Here, help me pull this shut."

When they had restored the room's concealment, Reb closed the pressure door as well. Desima looked around the circular chamber. There was no furniture of any kind. The curved wall was lined with shelves, and half of the shelves were full of nearly identical books. "Ten thousand years old," she said with reverence. "But the Journal goes back more than twenty thousand years."

"The earlier volumes are copies now," Reb said. "The original books just couldn't last that long. No book could. The preservation technology just wasn't available. But ten thousand years ago, they invented permavellum, which practically doesn't age. The ink is permanent too."

Desima caressed one of the bindings, then rapped on it with her knuckles. "It's so hard."

"It's a heavy plasteel which is treated to repel dust," explained Reb. Then he paused. "You know," he said hesitantly, "we might have a problem here. Those bindings really are heavy. I'm not sure how we're going to carry them all."

Desima took one of the volumes down and hefted it. She shared Reb's sinking feeling. "Exactly how many of these are there?"

"Two hundred thirty nine. Why didn't I think this through? Quill was right. I'm just being a fool."

Desima didn't reply. She went to the very first volume, took it from the shelf, and opened it so they could both look at it. The contents were every bit as beautiful as she had imagined them. The central portion of each large page was occupied by the main text, hand written in tiny aurebesh script. This text was surrounded by the commentary of the Whills who had lived centuries after the text was written. The four corners of each page were intricately illustrated, depicting the Skywalker as he met with the leaders of other worlds to begin the Republic. She was holding history in her hands. It was everything she had dreamed of when she came

to Ashlan Four. The carved sigil of the Skywalker's family flashed through her mind, and she felt the connection between the people who had brought the Whills to this world, and the words they had spoken, written in the book she held. Her thoughts encompassed twenty four thousand years.

"No matter what it takes, Reb," she vowed, "we'll find a way to save this. We owe it to the Whills. We owe it to ourselves. And, we owe it to the galaxy."

"So we're both fools," he said, "just very noble ones."

She glared at him, annoyed. "We only have a few hours. We need a plan. Let's start thinking of one. The Journal is probably too heavy for us to carry, but what if we wait for Quill's help?"

"Too bulky, even for three," Reb said. "Besides, Quill might not come back for us, remember?"

"Then we need some kind of repulsorlift cart to put the Journal on."

"This is the monastery of the Whills. We don't have anything like that around here."

"A more primitive cart, then. Did the Whills tolerate wagons?"

Reb gave in. "Okay, I'll try to find something with wheels that can help us."

"Good luck, Reb," she said softly. "Come back safe, whether you find anything or not. You're even more important than the books."

Nodding solemnly, Reb went out into the monastery among the dead.

He was gone, seemingly, for a long time, and Desima became engrossed in the first volume of the Journal. Reb's return startled her more than she cared to admit. He barged into the room and closed the door hastily behind him. "There are Imperials still in the monastery," he said anxiously. "Not the scanning crews yet, but some kind of work detail assigned to remove the bodies."

"Did they see you?"

"No, I overheard them talking--that's what saved me from walking right into them. They're here to take the Whills away, but the bodies are too big and heavy to carry, so they brought in hoversleds."

"Did you get one?" Desima asked excitedly.

"I stole one. I watched them pile bodies onto three sleds, but there were only two men. They left to push two of the sleds away. I snuck out and pushed the body off of the third sled. Then I just took the sled."

"They'll wonder what happened to it," Desima said dubiously.

"All right, what would you have done?" Reb demanded. "What, are they going to think that a scribe stole the sled to carry books? I got the sled, that's what's important."

"Maybe those particular men won't be back to that corridor," said Desima, glossing over the matter. "So, where is the hoversled?"

"Right outside. It wouldn't fit in the doorway. Are you ready to load it up?"

"The sooner the better."

They set to work quickly, but soon, another problem arose. "The cart is at its weight limit," said Reb disgustedly. "It's because of these heavy bindings. It looks like we have no choice. The bindings have to go."

"Leave the bindings behind? Can we do that?"

"The pages can be released for when they need repair. But even then, each volume is a few thousand pages. It's going to be close."

Reb showed her how to release the precious pages from the interior binding closures. They made neat stacks of the pages on the hoversled, keeping them in order as much as possible. The pile grew steadily as they worked.

"Reb, I'm worried about these stacks of pages. What if they tip and fall off when we're trying to get away?"

"I'm getting a headache, I really am," said Reb.

"We can tie the pages together, so they won't slip."

"All right, with what?"

"How about strips of cloth?"

"And where will we get those?"

Desima pointed to Master Yirt.

"Oh," said Reb.

The task of cutting strips from the Whill's robe with Reb's razor knife was quickly accomplished. So it was that Master Yirt made one last contribution to the cause, and in return for taking the robe, they dragged the old Whill's body into the Master Copy chamber. If the Imperials failed to find the room, the body might be left in peace. Hurriedly, they worked to tie the pages together. At any moment, they knew, the Imperials might come upon them in the middle of their task.



When the corridor remained clear, Desima was willing to believe that the Force was with them. Diplomatically, she avoided mentioning this to Reb.

As they finished, Reb noticed that the sled was just under its weight limit. They took care to close the concealing door behind them, and gently, they guided the repulsorlift platform into the enemy-held halls.

Quill marked the end of the hour without surprise. Of course the humans had not shown up at the appointed time. They were much too foolish and distractible for that. Then he retracted the uncharitable thought and considered that this meant they were in trouble. Quill knew he had to try to find them before it was too late. Even so, Quill found it to be a difficult decision to leave the ship. So far, at least, Orenth was safe in the Bantha Tracker. Neither the Duros nor the Imperials had come. Quill assumed that the Duros were dead or captured, and that the Imperials didn't realize the ship was there. There was a good chance that the ship would remain hidden, at least until the scanning crews found it in the morning. But there was no way to be sure. Leaving the ship might mean failing in his duty to Master Resh. And, there was no real evidence that Reb and Desima were in jeopardy. They could still safely arrive at any moment. In the end, Quill made his decision based on his promise to try to find Master Resh. The combined promises to Reb and Resh sufficed to balance his duty to guard Orenth. But he resolved to limit his search for Reb, Desima, and Resh to one hour. Morning was three hours away, and the scanning crews would be coming in.

The droid paused only to check once more that Orenth was safe. The baby was strapped securely to the medical bay patient couch, sedated and fed intravenously. Quill left the room and went out of the ship. Crossing the landing area, he reached the large blast door which protected the tunnels beyond from sublight engine exhaust. He opened the door, revealing a dark, quiet corridor leading into the monastery. The door lowered shut behind him. On his side, the door was disguised to look like stone. Like the Master Copy chamber's door, the blast door had been covered by the sympathetic Bomer-wrights of Sullust. Captain Eth had been very pleased with the door; it made the corridor leading to the ship look like a dead end by several storerooms. Today, it had hidden the Bantha Tracker from the Empire, at least temporarily.

Quill hurried down the corridor, his sensors tuned to maximum sensitivity and his broad band receiver ready to pick up Imperial comlink communications. However, he encountered no one, much to his relief. At a particular fork in the tunnels, Quill recognized the place where he had separated from Master Resh. Feeling the electronic equivalent of hope, he followed the path along which Resh had fled.

In a moment of supreme anxiety, the droid came upon one of the one-man Imperial walkers, but he determined that it was abandoned. Full of apprehension, the droid slipped past the machine and pressed on. It was not long before he found both Resh and the walker driver. Both were dead. The soldier had died of toxins injected by multiple insect bites. Quill saw the broken cage and surmised that Resh had done the deed. The Whill

Master had evidently died of blood loss many hours ago. But not, the droid noticed with surprise, without completing one last scribal task. Quill read Resh's final message, and made a recording of it. Written in blood, yet with careful attention to the formation of the letters, the message was a farewell to Orenth and Reb Zakai.

Orenth, my child, live well without me. I would give anything to live on with you, but I cannot. My gift to you is your life, and that will have to be enough. Forgive me for my failure to prevent this, and remember me. Carry on our race, and try to discover the next great purpose of the Whills. And always remember I love you.

Reb, son of my spirit, I ask you to raise Orenth to adulthood. I have given of myself to you, and you can pass on something of me to Orenth. I trust you, and I am proud of you.

Orenth, my last thoughts are of you, and do not be sad for me, for they are glad ones.

Quill finished the recording, and respectfully bowed to the departed Whill. "Farewell, Master Resh. You were exemplary among scholars. I can give no higher compliment. Your race, and your work, will live on."

The droid arranged Resh's limbs in a dignified position, closed the Whill's eyes, and smeared the message into illegibility. Then he left the room, ignoring the horribly contorted body of the soldier.

"Halt where you are, Rebels!" said the stormtrooper to the two humans. They reacted with satisfying shock and dismay, and stopped where they were. At last he had a lucky find. Aside from that one very old Whill who had practically walked into his gun, the trooper had scored no kills for this mission. In order to make up for it, he had requested a double shift patrolling the monastery halls during the night. The extra hours had just paid off handsomely. Capturing Rebel prisoners could result in a promotion for him.

The Rebels were pushing a hoversled loaded with papers, no doubt a cache of Alliance documents they were trying to rescue. That was an added bonus to make Imperial Intelligence happy. Captain Vespa would be very pleased.

The trooper was just about to call for assistance on his comlink when he heard the approach of an AT-PT. That would be plenty of help, he decided. "Get up against the wall," he commanded the Rebels. "Away from the hoversled."

The badly shaken Rebels obeyed, and the trooper turned to greet the walker. That was when he realized that the vehicle was moving more quickly than it should have been. Caught in a moment of indecision, and

expecting friendly reinforcements, he hesitated too long in the middle of the hallway.

And the AT-PT was upon him, knocking him down and then crushing him beneath its massive feet.

The side door of the AT-PT opened, and Reb saw the driver stick his head out to look at them. It was Quill.

"Quill!" Reb cried in surprise. "You killed him!"

"I know, Master Reb," said the droid. "I did not intend to, but he simply would not get out of the way. Perhaps my Life Preservation Programming has eroded since its original installation. It may not be up to current Imperial standards. Please be assured that I detest violence. But sadly enough, it is sometimes necessary--"

"Never mind that Quill!" interrupted Desima. "The important thing is that we're all right, thanks to you! We have the Journal, too! It's...not in the best condition, but all the pages are here." Quill cast a distressed glance at the pile on the sled.

"Is the ship okay?" asked Reb. "Can we get to it?"

The droid clambered out of the vehicle with awkward effort. "I have secured the ship, Master Reb. We must go back to it at once. Orenth is there all alone."

"All right, just a second." Reb bent to take the trooper's blaster. The man's helmet had fallen off, and as Reb had expected, the trooper was a human male about Reb's same age. The sight filled him with disgust for the kind of system able to warp young lives so efficiently.

"Lead the way, Quill," said Reb, hefting the unfamiliar weapon.

"Should we take this vehicle?" asked Desima, pointing to the walker.

"Not if we wish to make a quiet, unnoticed escape," said Quill. "You heard how much noise they make. I only used it because I had to rescue you humans from whatever trouble you were in. The Imperials will be looking for it anyway. We should abandon it and set out for the ship on foot."

"How did you get it in the first place?" asked Reb as they pushed the hoversled in front of them.

"It was abandoned by the Imperial who was pursuing Master Resh," said Quill. "But I have sad news to tell you. I found Master Resh, dead along with the Imperial driver. As far as I could determine, Resh killed the Imperial before succumbing, and managed to write a final message to you and Orenth. I made a visual recording of that message. Do you wish to see it now?"

Reb shook his head no. "When we get to the ship. There's no time now." But inwardly, Reb's thoughts were full of his old Master. He had not expected to find Resh alive, but the confirmation still hit him hard. What he hadn't expected was that Resh's final actions against the Imperial saved Desima and him. And that had helped to save the Journal itself. Reb thought the old Whill would have been very pleased with that.

For a half hour after seeing the message from Resh, Reb sat quietly on the bridge of the Bantha Tracker, contemplating his Master's final words. He reclined in the chair next to the navigator's console, staring out the wide rectangular forward window at the canyon which concealed the ship. He had a lot to think about. So much had happened, so fast. A week ago, he had told Resh that he didn't want to leave the monastery at all. Now, here he was, leaving with Desima on a strange ship for an unknown destination. Resh had died and left him a baby Whill to care for until it was mature. And, as far as he knew, it was the last of the Whills. Orenth, he thought, you're going to have to have a lot of twins when you grow up. In charging Orenth with bringing the Whill race back from the brink, Resh had given the child a huge responsibility as well. Reb supposed that he and Orenth would take it one day at a time and simply do their best. The 'next great purpose of the Whills' would have to wait a while.

Reb also speculated about what Desima would do. Her plans had also suffered a tremendous upset. The books she had come to Ashlan Four to study were now a heap of pages in the cargo hold, tied together with the ragged strips of a dead scholar's robe. The place she had come to study in was now a tomb in the hands of the Empire. Reb wondered how much their friendship meant to her. Would it be enough to keep her by his side? He certainly needed help in his tasks: the raising of an alien child, the preservation of the Master Copy, and perhaps the resurrection of the Journal, too. He liked Desima very much, and he thought she was a good choice of a partner in all of those things, and more. He supposed he would simply have to tell her how he felt, and let her decide for herself.

Eventually, Quill came back to the bridge and began the pre-flight preparations. Reb looked fondly at the droid. He supposed Quill belonged to him now, but he knew better than to make an issue out of that. Reb had no doubt that Quill would decide on his own to stay by Reb's side and to help raise Orenth.

"What's going on, Quill?"

"We must consider leaving Ashlan Four now," said the droid. "We have done remarkably well so far, in that we are alive, so to speak, we have the Master Copy, and we have a working starship, at the expense, sadly, of the Duros. But we cannot expect this good fortune to hold. It is now dawn. The Empire's forces will discover all sorts of clues relating to our presence, and then their scanning crews will discover this landing area."

"What about the Imperial cruiser in orbit? Or cruisers, for all we know?"

"I may be able to outfly them," said Quill. "This is a fairly fast vessel."

"Wait," said Reb, "you're the pilot? I thought you were just a scholar droid."

"You are forgetting my learning module. As soon as I came aboard, I plugged into the ship's computer and uploaded the necessary piloting skills from the tutorial program. I had to delete many other skills in order to create space, but I shall not need them now that the monastery is gone. The result is that I am now a competent pilot. Besides...did you have another candidate in mind?"

Reb knew that neither he nor Desima would make a better pilot. Neither of them had ever flown before. Like it or not, they had to depend on Quill.

"I just hope you don't fly a ship like you drive a walker," said Reb. "We want to escape from the Imperials, not ram them."

Quill pointedly ignored him and continued to prepare for takeoff.  
\* \* \*

Lieutenant Wiggins could tell by the hastily dressed appearance of his Captain that Vespa had been asleep when Wiggins had called on the comm. Regulations specified that a Captain should be on top of the situation at all times when his troops were in battle. Wiggins added Vespa's failure to a long list of the man's faults.

As quickly as Vespa must have prepared to come to the command deck, he had not forgotten his pointer stick. That accursed item seemed sometimes to be a permanent part of his hand. "Give me your report, Lieutenant," said Vespa irritably.

"Sir, the operation is going well," said Wiggins. "After the second attack wave withdrew, a work detail removed the bodies and counted them. Two hundred and eleven were removed from the monastery and incinerated. Our intelligence states that number is nearly the entire population. At present, we have sent in our scanning crews to check for any hidden survivors."

You should already know all this, Wiggins thought. He was highly annoyed at the Captain taking a sleep period when no one else had. Perhaps there was a way to show Vespa up in front of the crew. "I recommend that we pay close attention to the findings of those scanning crews, sir. If there are any more unexplained problems, they could confirm that there is a Rebel base deeper inside the mountain." There, Vespa thought. Now you'll have to admit you don't know what I'm talking about.

Wiggins watched as the Captain squirmed slightly. Finally, Vespa said, "Yes, I agree Lieutenant. What is your analysis of those mission anomalies?"

That was a neat way out of it, thought Wiggins. No matter, there would be another time for certain. "Well, sir, the body of the AT-PT driver killed in the explosion of his vehicle is being examined right now, as is the wreckage. We're not yet certain what weapons were responsible. A group of five Duros armed with blasters were found by another AT-PT, and all five of the aliens were killed. Three stormtroopers were killed by blaster fire elsewhere in the monastery. We're not sure if the Duros were responsible, or if there were other armed defenders. Another AT-PT was found abandoned where it had apparently crushed the body of another stormtrooper. The driver wasn't near the vehicle, however. He was found far from the scene, dead from multiple bites of a poisonous kind of insect."

Vespa was dumbfounded, and he quickly forgot about appearances. "All that?" he demanded. "Those animals down there did all that?" He pointed his stick at the large viewport image of Ashlan Four and shook the pointer with anger. "How could they? They were supposed to be defenseless. We had overwhelming force to throw at them. What happened?"

Wiggins realized that Vespa hadn't been prepared for significant casualties. Vespa was accustomed to using orbital bombardment to accomplish his goals. But, when troops were on the ground, unexpected things happened. It was that simple. Didn't Vespa understand that? Perhaps Vespa had enjoyed speculating about Rebels, but never actually expected to find them. "Perhaps it was Rebel activity, sir. There could be more to come. Our men searched the entire monastery, but there might be hidden exits which could lead to a Rebel base. The scanners will pick up anything like that, sir."

"Yes, you have my total agreement. Keep me informed of any more 'unexplained problems.'" With that, Vespa left the command deck, perhaps to go and take a belated shower. Wiggins didn't object. It would be much worse if the Captain didn't.

\* \* \*

After Quill revealed Resh's final message, Desima had gone to the medical bay and sat by little Orenth. She was overwhelmed with sympathy for the infant, now an orphan to be raised among a different species. But at least Orenth was unaware of the tragedy. Quill had set the autodoc to keep the baby constantly slumbering. For now, at least, Orenth was safe from trauma...but that only meant all of the pain was yet to come. Perhaps, when the infant finally awakened, it would look in vain for that large, reassuring adult Whill face it had seen only once, so briefly.

The people on Desima's homeworld of Chandrila had such a low birthrate that they greatly valued children. Her own parents had always treasured her. It broke her heart to think of this child without any parents at all. But there was something she could do about it. Firmly,

she resolved to give the baby what care and comfort she could, as a sort of surrogate parent, for as long as it was needed.

She had, of course, never seen a baby Whill before this one. Orenth was about a foot long. The baby's skin was blue and smooth with a faint pebbly texture. There was just a hint of a tail, and the rear legs were very short. Orenth's frail arms moved about involuntarily, even during sleep. The baby's head looked too large for its body; it was hairless and the snout was short and blunt. This Whill certainly had a lot of developing to do. Desima hoped there would be a chance for that. First, they had to escape alive, and that was far from guaranteed.

Reb appeared in the doorway, looking worried, and Desima guessed that they wouldn't be on Ashlan Four much longer. She gave the infant one last compassionate look. Sleep, little one, she thought. I know you're too young to leave the cradle and go out into the world, just as Reb and I are too young to face death like this. Sometimes...there simply isn't any choice.

"Desima, come over to the bridge with me. We have to strap ourselves in. Quill's about to take off. Is Orenth all right?"

"Orenth is fine for now. What's going on?"

"The ship's sensors picked up scanning activity on the other side of the blast door. Quill thinks they've found the landing area. That means our time's up. We have to leave now or we won't get off the ground at all."

"What about the Imperial ships in orbit?" asked Desima as they hurried through the corridor and crossed the common room on the way to the bridge.

"There's not a damn thing we can do about them," said Reb as they entered the small bridge and paused, uncertain of what to do next.

"Will one of you please take the copilot's chair?" Quill said testily from the pilot's position. Reb and Desima looked at each other hesitantly, each unwilling to take the intimidating seat. Quill swiveled to stare at them. "We don't have time for this," snapped the droid. "Reb, copilot's seat, now! Desima, behind me, weapons and shields, quick!" They both hurried to comply. "That's better. Now, I will be in control of most of the ship's functions, but I'll need you both to manipulate some of the controls for me. I have darkened your control panels to make this easier. The necessary controls will light up when you need to operate them. Just follow my instructions, and we should be all right." Then, to himself, Quill lamented, "Why...why did the Duros have to get themselves killed?"

Reb suddenly pointed out the viewport. "Something's happening down there...the blast door is opening! They're coming in--now they've seen us! No stormtroopers yet, but I bet they're calling for them now."

"Please close your seat restraints, Master Reb. This liftoff maneuver is somewhat challenging," Quill warned. The only flight path out

of the area was upwards at a forty-five degree angle between the confining rock walls of a deep crevasse. Platt Eth had been accustomed to coasting carefully into the area using repulsors and braking thrusters, but leaving was another matter. Platt had once told Quill that the best way to get out was to aim straight up the throat of stone and kick in the sublight engines. Quill prepared to do just that.

The Bantha Tracker gracefully lifted up off the floor of the crevasse, sending the scanning crew fleeing back into the tunnel to avoid laser fire or the wash of the engines. The ship rotated to reverse its direction and tilted at an angle to match the narrow pathway to the sky. The sublight engines thundered, and the Bantha Tracker leaped into the gap. For an uncounted, dizzying span of seconds, the stone walls raced past, seeming to come closer and closer together until they would surely crush the ship. Then the Bantha Tracker shot out into the open sky with the rugged mountain peaks spread out below it, and climbed into the upper atmosphere, aiming for the stars.

"Captain Vespa," called a voice from the crew pit. "There's a ship leaving the planet. It's not one of ours, sir."

"A Rebel ship," suggested Wiggins.

"Get me an identification on that ship immediately!" Vespa demanded.

"Yes, sir," said the crewman. "BoSS registry coming up now. The ship's code identifies it as the Bantha Tracker. It's a Lantillian Short Hauler, a common trader vessel in some areas."

"Set for a pursuit course," said Vespa. "I want to intercept it. Prepare a tractor beam and a boarding party. Set weapons for stun. I want them for interrogation." Vespa stared out of the main viewport as the Empire's Purity turned away from Ashlan Four and chased after the trader ship. The Ashlan system was at the edge of a gigantic, diffuse nebula, and as the Imperial ship came about, the viewport was filled with the glowing orange and pink gasses of the star cloud. Beautiful young stars were scattered across the nebula, but Vespa only had eyes for the swift bright speck of the fleeing starship. "I don't want them escaping into hyperspace. Prepare to fire the turbolasers. We have to keep driving it further into the nebula. With all the gravity wells in the area, they won't be able to jump."

"I have a weapons and speed reading, sir," said a crewman. "The ship has only two small laser cannons, not enough against our shields. Their speed nearly matches ours, but we can overtake them."

"Very good," said Vespa. He glared into space at his prey. Who were they? Were they the ones responsible for the casualties among his forces? Could they really be Rebels? Even more importantly, could there be any Whills on board, trying to escape his reach? Vespa couldn't allow that.



The Emperor's orders were very specific. If any Whills escaped, Vespa's career might be at an end.

"Sir," said Wiggins, "we just received a report from the surface. The ship we are chasing was hidden at the Whill monastery, in a concealed landing area. Our scanning crew flushed it out."

Vespa frowned, watching through the viewport as the trader ship attempted evasive maneuvers. Then the Strike Cruiser's powerful turbolasers fired, slicing apart space next to the smaller vessel. In response, the short hauler sharply angled away and ran hard on a new vector. The turbolasers continued to track after the small ship, coming close, but not quite hitting it. It was being driven successfully towards the heart of the nebula. The Strike Cruiser took full advantage of the other ship's course change and further closed the gap.

"Get a tractor beam on that ship, now!" Vespa ordered.

"Attempting a tractor beam lock," called out a crewman. "Sir, we're not quite close enough yet."

"Stay on them. Don't let them change course. I want whoever is on that ship. If they are Rebels, we have a very fine detention cell waiting for them. If there are Whills aboard...well, it is a pity that they came all this way just to die so far from home. At least back on the planet, they would have had the company of the rest of their people, on the funeral pyre..."

"Those barbarians are trying to ensnare us with a tractor beam," said Quill indignantly.

"What about escaping into hyperspace?" asked Desima.

"In avoiding their turbolasers, we have been driven onto a course they no doubt intended for us. Now, with all of the stars ahead of us, a jump to hyperspace simply isn't an option. We would have to turn around and get past the Strike Cruiser, and then get far enough from Ashlan Four's gravity well to make a safe jump. No, Mistress Desima, it seems likely that we will be captured. However, when they board us, there are certain things that they should not find. This vessel has a small concealed hold behind the regular cargo hold. Platt Eth once showed me where it is located."

"Right," said Reb, "we'll have to hide Orenth. But the baby shouldn't be left alone in there. How many of us will the hidden space hold?"

"We will examine it at once," said Quill. "I am placing the ship on autopilot and programming in a series of evasive maneuvers. I am also setting the sublight engines at maximum thrust. That should delay their tractor beam lock for a short while. I predict that we will have approximately ten minutes before we are fully drawn into their landing

bay. Beyond that, it will depend on how quickly they are ready to board the ship."

"It's better than nothing, I guess," said Desima. The three of them hurried to retrieve Orenth from the medical bay. Once awake, the infant was able to sense the fear and agitation of the humans. It let out a series of nervous whistles upon being removed from the patient couch. Desima tried to soothe Orenth as they ran to the starboard cargo hold. "That hidden room had better be sound proofed," she muttered.

The cargo hold consisted of a long rectangular room along the side of the ship. It was full of empty spice wine bottles, Reb saw with a pang. The drink had been a favorite among the Whills, their one true vice. Platt Eth had faithfully brought it to them for years, despite the fact that it was technically a controlled substance. Next to the empty bottles were the stacks of the Journal pages, rescued from the monastery. It was a heartbreaking image for Reb; the empty bottles and the haphazardly piled sheets seemed to symbolize the ignoble end of a long and noble history.

Suddenly, the ship shook. A few Journal pages slipped free from the stack and fell among the bottles. "That is their tractor beam," said Quill. "We must make haste."

At the far end of the hold was a panel which Quill removed to reveal a small closet. Reb eyed the secret hold critically. "Not much room in there."

"I know what we have to do," said Desima. "I've thought it through. At least one of us has to stay outside, because they'll never believe an empty ship. Orenth has to be in there, plus someone else--I suggest Quill. If the Imperials find Quill, with that Whill-shaped head and the entire Journal in his memory banks, they'll destroy him."

"But what about the two of you?" Quill demanded. "I couldn't possibly preserve myself at your expense."

"You're not preserving yourself--you're preserving this Whill," said Desima. "There's no time to argue, and don't make us order you. Reb and I will have to take our chances with the Imperials. We'll come up with some kind of story to tell them...like that we were working for the Duros as crew. Maybe they'll let us go--we're not Whills, and they only came here to attack the Whills. Once they see there are only humans on board..."

"Mistress Desima, your story has holes large enough to lose a Vlid in them, but you are correct--there is no time to argue. Give Orenth to me."

Desima carefully handed Quill the Whill, and the droid stepped into the hidden hold. He filled almost all of the available space. The only other thing in the hold was a small shelf. Quill was surprised to find that it contained a small number of explosive devices, including a

thermal detonator. Quill guessed that the ship's owner had hidden them here in case of an emergency.

Reb gave a low whistle when he saw them. "Hey...maybe this changes our plans."

Quill held up a cautioning hand. "Don't get any foolish ideas, Master Reb. You cannot fight your way out of this situation."

Desima looked at the small collection of weapons. "Quill is right. We can't do much with these anyway. We'd probably just get ourselves killed trying to use them."

"All right," Reb gave in. "But maybe as a last resort for Quill, rather than getting captured..."

"Let's not think about that," said Desima. "Quill, may the Force be with you."

"And with you, Mistress Desima," Quill replied.

Reb and Quill looked at each other for a long moment.

"We gave it a good try, didn't we," Reb asked sadly.

"It was the best anyone could have done, Master Reb," said Quill.

They closed the panel, sealing the droid and the Whill away. Then Reb turned around and found himself staring at the unbound pages of the Master Copy. The realization hit him with a crawling sensation in his stomach. "The Journal! We have to hide it, too! If the Imperials find it, we're Vlid food! They'll never believe that story of yours!"

"Don't panic, Reb! Let's just...we can try to fit them in with Quill--"

"Not enough room!" Reb began to pace frantically.

"All right then...how about the bottles?"

"The bottles?" Reb stopped short.

"The spice wine bottles." Desima picked one up and showed it to him. The specialized container was large and cylindrical. On its side was a ring of miniature cooling equipment--temperature regulators for the interior of the bottle. The lid was a sophisticated pressure seal. There was a hiss as Desima opened it.

Reb glanced inside, and judged that perhaps she was right. The self-cleaning interior seemed to have sufficient volume to fit some of the Journal pages, if they were rolled up. "Let's get to it," he said without further hesitation.

The two of them frantically set to work. They moved rhythmically, opening the bottles, picking up bundles of the Journal pages, bending the bundles to fit the bottles, shoving the lids back on, and reaching for another bottle and more pages. Reb felt awful handling the precious artifacts that way--rolling up ten thousand year old pages and stuffing them into wine bottles without regard for their proper order. At least the permavellum could take the punishment. Eight minutes later, they were done. Reb and Desima sat on the floor and stared at each other. They were both slightly dizzy with anxiety and exertion. Reb wondered how long they had before stormtroopers invaded the small ship.

"Maybe we'd better rehearse that story you mentioned...the one about us working for Platt Eth," he said dazedly. Then he saw Desima look at him with fresh alarm. "What? What is it?"

"Your clothes," she said with dismay. "Mine too. We don't look like spacers at all!"

Reb looked at his dirty brown robe. It marked him as a refugee from the monastery. Desima's clothes were no better--she had on an equally dirty plain green dress. "Clothes," said Reb, trying to force himself to think. "Clothes...we need clothes. The Duros! They must have had spare uniforms in their quarters!"

They raced to the cabins, threw open the clothes closets, and yanked out a pair of orange flight suits. Thankfully, the Duros were human sized, and the suits were likely to fit.

"Should we get changed in different rooms?" Reb asked. Then the ship shuddered briefly as it was deposited in the landing bay of the Imperial Strike Cruiser.

"I don't really think we have time for modesty, do you?" asked Desima pointedly.

Reb had to agree they didn't.

Leaving the bridge under the command of Lieutenant Wiggins, Captain Vespa gathered two dozen stormtroopers and went to the landing bay to meet the captured Rebels. He had decided that the ones fleeing in the short hauler had to be Rebels. He needed them to be Rebels, for the sake of his career. The losses his forces had taken, those "unexplained problems" Wiggins had described, were troubling him a great deal. Vespa knew that his superiors would be troubled by them too. They would consider the nature of Vespa's target, a cave full of defenseless scholars, and condemn him for his ineptitude. In the Empire, success was what mattered, and even the small losses on Ashlan Four could be seen as a failure...unless there was another explanation, like the presence of a Rebel base. The Whills had been supporters of the Rebellion--it made perfect sense that they would risk harboring Rebels in their monastery. If he could unearth and destroy a base, not only would it excuse any perceived incompetence, it would also gain him a promotion. And there was

an appealing thought. If Captain Vespa could put a few nonhuman worlds in their place, then Moff Vespa could purify an entire sector.

Vespa let his troops precede him into the gleaming open space of the docking bay. The newly captured ship rested quietly on the deck. Already, it was surrounded by troops and targeted by the bay's automatic lasers. Vespa smiled with grim pleasure. He and his men were ready for anything. If the Rebels came out shooting, they would be quickly shot down themselves. Vespa preferred to capture them alive for interrogation, so most of the blaster rifles were set for stun. A successful interrogation of the captured Rebels would reveal where their base was, what armament and equipment they had, and how many of them there were. The strike cruiser was already turning back towards Ashlan Four. On the surface, Vespa's men were going deeper into the mountain tunnels, looking for other Rebels. TIE fighters were flying over the mountain, waiting to shoot down any other fleeing ships. If orbital bombardment was called for, the Empire's Purity would be ready.

A loud voice blared over the bay's comm speakers. "Attention, crew of the captured vessel. You are under arrest by the authority of the Empire. You are instructed to come out immediately, unarmed and prepared to surrender. This is your only warning. If you do not comply, you will be considered hostile, and your immediate destruction will result."

The stormtroopers all aimed their weapons at the ship's exit ramp as it began to lower. Vespa stared in nervous anticipation, tapping his stick repeatedly against his uniformed leg. At any moment, hardened soldiers could drop out of the ship and begin firing. Briefly, Vespa reconsidered his decision to be present, but he was, after all, behind several rows of white armored troopers. He could always duck out of the room while his men took care of the Rebels.

Two pairs of legs came down the ramp into view. A pair of young humans, a male and a female, stepped out in front of the stormtroopers, empty hands held high. Several troopers stepped quickly around them and filed briskly into the ship. Vespa's first reaction to the alleged Rebels was one of disappointment. They were practically children, in their late teens or early twenties. Both of them looked soft and vulnerable, not at all like experienced fighters. They were more than weaponless. Neither looked as if they had ever fired a weapon. Dressed in rumpled common orange spacer gear, they stood close by each other, looking extremely intimidated by the stormtroopers.

Vespa frowned deeply, suddenly doubting himself. Were these Rebels. or were they not? The boy looked more like an office clerk, and the girl, like one of the thin fashion models popular in the core worlds. No, he scowled. Appearances could be deceiving. Angrily, he reminded himself of the facts. Six soldiers killed. A walker destroyed. There had to be Rebels on Ashlan Four. If these two hadn't been in the fighting, they knew who had. A torture droid would have them begging to reveal that information.

The troopers who had gone into the ship came back out two minutes later, and reported that it was empty. The two humans were the only

passengers, and the small ship was secured. Vespa stepped to the front of the ranks and faced the captives, crossing his arms atop his stomach. The stormtroopers remained holding their guns trained on the pair. "Do you know why your ship was hauled in by our tractor beam?" Vespa asked patronizingly. The prisoners glanced at each other uncertainly.

The boy swallowed and spoke. "Actually, no sir, we don't."

"Oh, I see...Well, allow me to explain it to you. Your ship made an illegal takeoff from an Imperial attack and containment zone. The monastery of the Whills was being punished for treason against the Emperor. Because you were in the same location, you could be charged with treason as well."

"We can explain our presence," said the girl hastily.

"Oh, you can, can you? I would be most interested to hear your explanation. I can make no promises to believe it, however. You may start with your names."

The girl looked at the boy again, and he shrugged. "My name is Desima Derata," she said, "and this is Reb Zakai. We're part of the crew of this ship, the Bantha Tracker. We haul goods between the local systems. The owner is...was a Duro named Platt Eth. He hired us on just a few weeks ago. He had a delivery to make to this system, but he had no idea this planet was going to be under attack. I swear to you, Captain, we had nothing to do with the local inhabitants. Our Captain had us stay on the ship while he and the rest of the Duros made their delivery. That was when the place came under attack. We got a message from Captain Eth, telling us that stormtroopers were shooting everyone. We waited for our crew to come back, but they never did. When our ship was discovered, we just panicked and took off. Can you tell us anything about our crewmates? Did they survive?"

Vespa took all this in, his face expressionless. Finally, he put on a sad face and replied, "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you...but your employer was killed. So was the rest of your crew. They were foolish enough to fire at my troops. If they had not done so, perhaps they might still be alive. But Duros are not as smart as humans, are they? I hope you two will be smart, and not resist me."

"What is it that you want with us?" asked the boy, Zakai. The question was asked respectfully enough, but it still annoyed Vespa.

"That should be obvious. You are suspected of conspiring with traitors to the Empire. Your ship will be searched, and you will be held for questioning."

"Sir," said one of the stormtroopers emerging from the Bantha Tracker. "The ship is ready for your inspection."

"Very good," said Vespa. "Follow me, both of you," he said to Derata and Zakai. "And, I hope, for your sakes, that you do not have anything incriminating in your cargo hold." He enjoyed the dismayed looks

on their faces. This promised to be interesting. Perhaps there would be something there to connect them with the Rebels; weapons, or other equipment they were trying to escape with. He led the way into the small craft, and the prisoners were prodded into following.

The cargo hold was just off of the common room at the top of the ramp. Vespa entered it eagerly, but stopped short upon seeing the contents. Aside from a pair of stormtroopers, all the room contained was a large number of liquid containers. Vespa was suddenly angry. This was not going as he had expected it to...as he had needed it to. Instead of Rebels and weapons, he had found only two young people who claimed to be minor hirelings of a common trader, and a cargo of...of...what were those containers, anyway?

Zakai and Derata entered the cargo hold, and Vespa turned on them. "What is in these containers? What was your Duro Captain bringing to the Whills?" he asked sharply.

"Just...just wine, I think," stammered Zakai. "Our Captain didn't tell us much about the cargo or the destination. He wasn't the trusting type."

"Neither am I," snapped Vespa as he stooped to pick up one of the containers. Hefting the heavy bottle, he quickly looked it over. It was an odd shape for a wine bottle, he noted, and what were all the refrigeration units affixed to the side for? The sight jogged his memory. A lot of luxury goods had passed through his hands in the last few years. That included various kinds of wine. But the only kind of wine that needed constant refrigeration was...of course, spice wine. These were spice wine bottles. That did not make Vespa happy at all. To all appearances, he had just captured not Rebels, but a pair of minor smugglers.

Clutching the bottle tightly, he glared at the prisoners. "Are you aware that the transportation of restricted spice is a class three violation, which can result in two years in prison, impoundment of your ship, and a fine of 5,000 credits?"

"Spice? We don't know about any spice," stammered the girl. "Our Captain told us nothing about the cargo. I assure you, we're not smugglers. We-"

"Don't act stupid with me," Vespa said disgustedly. "These bottles are specifically designed to hold and preserve spice wine. See these refrigeration units? I'm sure we both know that continual cooling is necessary to preserve the potency of Aura spice in the wine. Of course you're smugglers. The evidence is right here."

"But those bottles don't have any spice wine in them," said Zakai.

Vespa looked at the bottle in his hand again. The power unit was deactivated, and the contents readout was at zero.

"You can't arrest us for carrying empty bottles," said Zakai.

Vespa's rage boiled up inside him. He hurled the bottle against the wall with all his strength. "Don't tell me what I can't do, boy!" he shouted, as the bottle loudly shattered. The prisoners winced, and stared anxiously at the fragments. A loose collection of papers had unrolled and scattered amidst the broken pieces of the container. Vespa stepped over and picked up one of the sheets.

"What's this?" he demanded. It appeared to be an old piece of paper with dense pen scribblings and little pictures all over it.

"That's nothing," said Zakai. "Just some old papers the Whills were throwing away. They gave them to our Captain, and he told us to pack them into the empty wine bottles. The insides are very delicate, you see, and they have to be cushioned during transport. Those old scraps serve the purpose very well--"

"Shut up, boy!" Vespa yelled. "I wasn't asking you." He took one more glance at the page, then crumpled it up, irritated. He cast the paper trash aside and aimed his pointer stick at the prisoners. "You two listen to me. It looks like you're smugglers, but that could just be a cover. It's also possible that you're both Rebels. I intend to find out the truth, one way or another."

The prisoners were shocked into silence. "Take these two to the detention center and prepare for a full interrogation." He bent to pick up a piece of the bottle's interior, and handed it to an officer. "Have this analyzed for spice residue. Even if these two aren't Rebels, we don't take kindly to spice smugglers in our Empire."

The prisoners were marched out of the hold, and Vespa watched them go with a sense of frustration. A good interrogation would make him feel better, he decided. There were ways of eliciting any kind of confession which was desired. Perhaps if there was no real evidence of Rebel activity, some could be manufactured. There was a lot at stake--in the Empire, a man's performance record could follow him for a long time. He hated the thought that his superiors might hold him responsible for a few anomalies during an otherwise successful massacre of a treasonous race, but that was just the way they would be. It was best to shield himself against that possibility. Someone would pay for what had happened. It didn't matter who, as long as it was not himself.

Captain Vespa was on his way to droid storage to obtain an interrogation unit when he encountered Lieutenant Wiggins in the corridor.

"Sir, I'm glad I found you!" said Wiggins quickly. "While you were away from the bridge, we received a report that another Whill body was located. You asked me to keep you informed of any more strange happenings, sir. This body was found dead from blaster wounds inside a sealed and hidden chamber. Nothing else was in the room, and none of our forces put the body in there. I think this is more evidence of Rebel activity. There must be people down there we just haven't found yet."



"I'm not sure any more," said Vespa. "It could have been those smugglers we just captured. I was just on my way to interrogate them. So as you can see, I am rather busy. Was there anything else urgent that you needed to tell me?"

"Yes, sir," said Wiggins, seeming to miss the sarcasm, "the THX alert is buzzing on the bridge. I thought you should know, so I came looking for you. You need to go to the holochamber to answer it as soon as possible."

Vespa frowned, and scratched his chin. He had no idea what a THX alert was, and he wondered if Wiggins was playing some sort of game with him. Vespa sometimes wondered about Wiggins' loyalty. The Lieutenant sometimes failed to show him the proper respect; only just that morning, Wiggins had tried to make an issue of his minuscule bending of the regulations. Sometimes it was more important that a Captain be well rested than always on top of everything. That was what lower ranking officers were for, to do the rest of the work. And now here was Wiggins, trying to catch him in his ignorance yet again. Was Wiggins out to get him? Did he want Vespa out of the picture so he could ask for Captaincy of the Empire's Purity? It was possible. Perhaps Wiggins was even now questing for a way to show that Vespa was incompetent. He would have to watch Wiggins closely from now on. For now, he was going to call the man's bluff in the current matter.

"Lead the way, Lieutenant," Vespa said gruffly. "We'll both go at once."

"But, sir--"

"Hurry up, Lieutenant. We do not wish to keep the THX alert waiting any longer, do we?"

"No, sir," said Wiggins. "We most definitely do not." Swallowing nervously, Wiggins turned and began to lead Vespa along the corridors.

Soon, they arrived at a small, empty room where the walls were covered in computer controls and displays. It was the first time Vespa had seen this room. He noticed that Wiggins was uncomfortable there...eager to leave for some reason. "Well?" asked Vespa impatiently.

"Sir," Wiggins said hesitantly, "this is a holocommunication for the Captain's eyes only. I should leave you now. Just...stand in the middle of the room to activate the transmission."

Vespa glared at him, prolonging the tension, then he sighed and waved the Lieutenant away. "All right, you may go."

Wiggins' relief was palpable. By now, Vespa was intensely curious as to what had shaken the younger man so. Wiggins offered no explanation as he hastily exited. The door closed behind him. Vespa was left alone in the small cubic room.

Well, there was only one way to find out what was going on. He stepped onto the holographic activation ring in the middle of the floor. The ring immediately lit up, and the walls emitted a low hum. His image was now being sent to someone. A moment later, the image of the person who desired contact appeared in front of him, projected by lenses in the walls. It did not appear like a normal hologram, wavering into view with a burst of static. Instead, it began like smoke, and slowly coalesced into a dark shape, like a cloaked and hooded man. But it was only a silhouette, totally black and filled with... stars! It was like looking into the starscape of deep space through a man-shaped hole in the air. There was no face inside the broad hood, just empty darkness and stars.

Then the eerie shape spoke, and Vespa experienced an inexplicable dread. The voice...he hesitated to use the word, but it seemed to him to be evil. Vespa didn't think he had encountered true evil before. He had been called evil by some of the misguided lower races he had helped to punish, but he knew that this being was malevolent on an entirely different level. It sounded sinister and authoritative. From the first words it said, Vespa felt somehow threatened, even though no threats were being made.

"It's about time, Captain Vespa," it said. "You must have been busy with something very important to keep me waiting."

"I'm sorry...I had no idea. I wasn't informed. How shall I address you?"

"You may call me Blackhole."

Blackhole? Vespa thought that was a rather melodramatic title, but that in no way lessened the intimidation he was feeling.

"I am a servant of the Emperor Palpatine," said Blackhole, "and he requires a full report on the destruction of the Whills. Was your mission successful?"

Vespa noticed that the stars inside of Blackhole were actually moving. The effect was disorienting, and for a moment, he forgot to reply. "The...the Whills? Yes, we destroyed them all."

"All of them?" demanded Blackhole in a warning tone. "The Emperor wishes to be certain that every Whill has been accounted for. What was the final body count after your attack?"

"Two--two hundred eleven. No! Two hundred twelve," said Vespa nervously as he recalled what Wiggins had told him.

"Good. My intelligence indicates that is the correct total. Tell me, Captain, have there been any unusual occurrences during your attack?"

Vespa hesitated to answer, but he felt compelled to do so by the specter. "Yes...my forces did encounter some small resistance. There were a few casualties, some equipment destroyed..." Hastily, Vespa added, "But

we suspect the presence of a Rebel base inside the mountain. My men are searching for it even now."

"That is a waste of time. There are no Rebels on Ashlan Four," said Blackhole in a cold voice. "We determined that before you were given any orders."

"But--the casualties we took--"

"They do not concern me, Captain. Perhaps your men were simply incautious, or they fell prey to their own incompetence. That was not what I was asking about. I want to know if there were any signs of the presence of Jedi."

"Jedi?" asked Vespa, confused. "Aren't they all gone?"

Blackhole waited for an answer.

"No," said Vespa, "there was nothing like that at the monastery." The Captain was feeling more and more out of his depth. Who...or what was this being?

Blackhole watched the pathetic image of the sweating Captain Vespa from the other end of the HoloNet link. He felt a great deal of disdain for how flustered the man seemed. Was this the sort of man Palpatine allowed to command in his fleet now? Blackhole couldn't imagine why...but he didn't expect the Master to enlighten him about everything, either. The Emperor had his reasons for all that he did, and most of them were well hidden.

Blackhole was privy to many of Palpatine's secrets, because he was a dark side adept, and one of the Emperor's Hands. As the Emperor's emissary, he watched over the Imperial fleet, making sure that its goals and actions were according to the Master's wishes. On most large Imperial ships, a small holochamber existed which Blackhole used to speak to the ships' officers when necessary. Many commanders didn't even know the purpose of these rooms...until it was time for the Emperor to tighten their leash. Blackhole transmitted his image over the HoloNet, but he kept his true identity hidden. Via a machine called a distorter, his holoimage was converted to a black, star filled silhouette. In fact, his true identity was known only to the Emperor himself.

As a dark side adept, Blackhole was very much concerned with matters of the Force. There were currently powerful disturbances in the Force which originated from the Ashlan system. Palpatine had sensed them, and commanded Blackhole to find out if there was any Jedi activity in the area. Some surviving Jedi might be responding to the massacre of the Whills. The Whills and the Jedi were ancient allies. If anything could draw out the last of the Jedi, if any existed, it would be the attack on the Whills.

Captain Vespa was claiming that there was no evidence of any Jedi to be found. Still, the man seemed very ill at ease. Was he telling the complete truth? Was he hiding anything important?

"You say there were no Jedi on the surface of Ashlan Four," pressed Blackhole, "but were there any ships in the area which could have contained Jedi?"

"Ships?" asked Vespa stupidly. "Containing Jedi? No, nothing like that. There was a smuggler vessel, however--"

"There was a ship in the area?" demanded Blackhole. His instincts in the Force were quite reliable. Now they told him there was something significant about that ship. Something connected to the disturbances in the Force.

"Yes, as I said, just a smuggler ship. Apparently, they were bringing spice wine to the Whills, and--"

"They?"

"A- a pair of young humans, not even the owners of the ship. The other crew, a group of Duros, were killed on Ashlan Four. We captured the ship, and arrested the two on board. We have them in a cell right now. I had suspected they might be Rebels, actually--"

"Did you search their ship thoroughly?" Blackhole asked. The dark side adept wanted information, but he wasn't sure what he was looking for yet. But there was something important there, something significant, if only he could get Vespa to reveal it.

"Yes, of course," said Vespa. "We found their cargo of spice wine bottles, but the containers were empty except for old papers used to stuff the insides during transport."

"Papers?" Blackhole seized on that detail. It might be part of the puzzle, or it might not, but he had to know. "What kind of papers? What was on them?"

"I'm not sure," Vespa swallowed nervously. The man held a pointer stick, but it hung limply at his side. "Writing, small pictures, perhaps. Was it important? The smugglers said they were discarded by the Whills."

"It may be significant," said Blackhole thoughtfully. "It may be connected to The Journal of the Whills in some way. If it is, the Emperor's orders are clear. Nothing of the Whills is to survive. Not the Whills themselves, and not their work."

"But isn't that Journal of theirs some kind of electronic book?" Vespa asked.

Blackhole ignored Vespa's ignorant question. "Here are your orders. You are to recall your forces from the surface of Ashlan Four immediately. Then you are to proceed with an orbital bombardment of the

monastery and the surrounding area. Level that mountain if possible. As for the captured ship, scan every part of it. Determine the nature of those papers, and interrogate those prisoners. I will give you one standard day to accomplish this. Then you will make a full report to me in this room. I will expect you in twenty-four hours. And be prompt. I do not enjoy waiting."

Blackhole reached to terminate the link, and the image of Vespa faded away. The dark side adept was left feeling unsatisfied. Something had produced a profound disturbance in the Force, out there where Captain Vespa was the unfortunate sole representative of the Empire. Blackhole didn't trust such a man to handle a situation involving the Force competently. He wanted to go there himself and find out what was happening. Vespa hadn't described anything that could explain those far-reaching Force tremors. The adept sensed that a major event was on its way, but there was no indication of what it might be. He decided to wait one day before acting. He would hear what Vespa had to say, then consult with the Emperor. Then, if it was necessary, he would travel to Ashlan Four as the Emperor's Hand and solve this disturbing mystery.

Vespa saw the image of Blackhole disperse like plumes of smoke. The overpowering sense of malice dissipated at the same time, and he sagged with relief. He had never encountered someone like that before, someone who made him so afraid, who left him feeling so insignificant. Why would the Emperor even employ such a person? Was Blackhole even human? Or was he some kind of terrifying alien who needed to hide his shocking visage? No wonder Wiggins was so nervous earlier, he thought. And the thought gave him pause. Why had Wiggins been so afraid? Had he spoken to this Blackhole before? If so, what had he told the mysterious agent of the Emperor? Things about his Captain, perhaps? Things which might damage him? Vespa scowled, letting his fear become anger. He was the Captain of this ship. He was Wiggins' superior officer. How dare the Lieutenant plot and scheme behind his back like a coward and a traitor? Vespa wasn't going to tolerate it any more. Once he did all the things Blackhole wanted, he was going to tend to certain matters of discipline. It looked like the Whills were not the only ones who needed to be taught a lesson about respect for authority.

\* \* \*

'My Master, the great Mace Windu, who was also my Uncle and the head of our Jedi family, liked to take me out to the center of the Lake of Shaalo, during my days as a Padawaan Learner. Now that I am a Jedi Bendu myself, and my life is heavy with responsibility and grave burdens, I miss those far-off days of my youth when I learned from the revered Master of Opuchi. Of course, when I was young, I did not appreciate what I had. My Uncle Windu was often cryptic and infuriatingly obscure. He made me work my hardest for every tiny insight into the Ashla. He would summon me to come into his little, leaky wooden boat, then he would row us out to the middle of the lake, and cast away the oars. Sitting and smiling serenely, he would expect me to bring us back to shore using only the power of the Ashla. It was a long, long time before I was able to do

so. In those early days, I would sit in the slowly sinking boat, becoming more and more frustrated.

"Why will the Ashla not answer my commands?" I finally demanded one day, as the water began to cover my feet.

"Perhaps it does not want to," said Master Windu.

"You make it sound as if the Ashla is alive. It's not, is it? It's just an energy field which all the Jedi Bendu use. Except for me, anyway," I said sarcastically.

My Master was never bothered by the water, even if we had to swim to shore. He always retrieved his boat and paddles when I wasn't looking, later on. "Are you certain the Ashla is not a living thing?" he asked me. "Is it not created by life? Does it not grow?"

"Well," I replied, growing even more impatient, "just because the Ashla has a few things in common with living things, that doesn't mean it's alive and sentient."

"How did the Skywalker come to know the Force?" he asked.

"I read the stories, Uncle. We're told that it spoke to him. But what does that really mean? The Ashla never speaks to me."

"Perhaps you need to learn to hear it. Then you would know what it wants from you."

"What it wants from me?! How about what I want from it? Like the power to push this boat to shore before I have to swim again. Isn't the Ashla a tool for me to use? What am I doing wrong?"

It was a typical exchange between us, but my Uncle never gave me an easy way out of anything. "Is the Ashla your tool, or are you the tool of the Ashla?" he asked patiently.

I knew better than to answer impulsively by this point. Despite the sinking of the boat, I gave my reply some thought. Finally, I ventured, "Both?"

"Well, Usby," he said, "you are getting both wetter and smarter at the same time."

I forced myself to reason it out. "If I am sometimes the tool of the Ashla, and sometimes the Ashla is my tool...no, that's not it, either." Then I realized he had given me a hint. "Wait, I know. Both are true at the same time. The Ashla and I must work together in order to succeed."

"Better and better," said Mace Windu. "And are you prepared to share the effort, or do you expect your partner to do all the work?"

Chagrined, I said, "Share. But to work with the Ashla, I have to know what it wants, and I have to tell it what I want."

"And that is what we call speaking to each other," said my Master simply.

Then I thought about the long hours during which my Master had made me learn meditation and communion with nature. Communion and communication. They were the same thing, where the Ashla was concerned.

"I'm not in the right mood to listen, am I?" I asked. "I'm just shouting out my commands mentally, and getting frustrated. Maybe the Ashla needs to tell me something before it can work for me. Maybe it needs to tell me why it won't work, and that I should stop trying."

Master Windu didn't reply. He kept his silence, and I added mine to it. The minutes slipped by, and the boat sank away beneath us. I paid that no mind. I was treading water by then, but I let my mind relax into my environment. I was surrounded by water, and the water was full of life, including myself. The energy of the Ashla was all around me, I realized, created by all that life. I myself helped to create the Ashla, I thought. The Ashla and I were a part of each other, not separate. I realized then that I had been treating the boat and the water as two separate things, trying to make them work against each other. I needed them to work together in order to lift the boat. The Ashla and I were one. We had only to see this in order to cooperate. Our desire was the same. We made the same effort.

"The boat will rise," I whispered, "because it will." And the small craft was lifted by the water until it lifted my Master and myself into the air. The water poured out of the tilted boat, then the boat settled on the lake. A small wave brought the oars back to me, and I picked them up and placed them inside the boat. A larger wave pushed the boat to shore. When we reached the land, the great Jedi Bendu Master gave me a smile that I have treasured more than all wealth to this day.'

-The Journal of the Whills, Volume Nine, from the "Memoirs of Usby C.J. Thape."

Desima and Reb had been placed together in a stark and empty cell in the detention center of the Empire's Purity. Reb was slumped in the corner on the floor, and Desima was sitting on the small metal platform that was supposed to be a bed. Reb's depressed mood and almost total withdrawal added to Desima's profound state of anxiety. He hadn't spoken since they were left in the cell. She understood his feelings, but she was fighting similar ones inside herself, while he was giving in. But she couldn't allow him to despair--she needed him too much for that. Desima knew she had to try to bring him out of it any way she could. This was the darkest hour of her life, and she didn't want to face it alone.

"Reb?" she asked softly. "Reb? I want to talk. I want to talk about us...you and I."

He stirred, but didn't look up.

"Reb...the other day...in the cave, you asked me if I thought we could become closer to each other. I didn't really give you an answer."

"You said, how could you know, we just met," Reb mumbled.

Desima smiled a little. At least she had gotten him to say something. "Well, I thought about it some more. I thought about my whole future, really. The kind of thinking you do when you realize there may not be a future at all any more. I've been really, really scared...and now the worst has happened, and...what I want to say is, I've never loved anyone, Reb. I never tried to find anyone, or to make room for it in my life. Other things were always more important. First, I hoped I could become a Jedi, and when I failed, I threw myself doubly hard into scholarship to make up for it. If I couldn't be a Jedi, then I had to learn all I could about them. My studies were everything, until I came to Ashlan Four. Reb, maybe you don't realize what an effect you've had on me. You didn't know me before. I never would have chosen to spend time getting to know someone when I could have been studying something like the Master Copy. I don't know what it is...we just go together well. Our different strengths complement each other. I know it looks really bad for us right now, but think of what we accomplished. We could never have done it if we didn't make a good team." Desima saw the interest in Reb's eyes, and she went on, encouraged. "Look, I think it makes sense for us to stay together. We've committed to the same future, we get along so well, and-"

Reb sighed heavily. "That's a nice dream, Desima, it really is. But we have to face the fact that we're not going to get out of this. We gave it our best, but it wasn't enough. They got us. Now we're in a cell on an Imperial cruiser, and they think we're Rebels, or smugglers. And you know what? They're right. Not the way they think, but still, we're smuggling the Journal and Orenth, and we were friends of the Whills, so we're traitors just like them. And all of that is going to come out when they interrogate us. They'll use drugs, and we won't be able to stop ourselves from telling them. And then what do you think they'll do to us? Kill us, that's what I think."

"That's exactly what I'm trying not to think about!" said Desima angrily. "We have to hold on to hope, and we have to do it together! I don't feel strong enough on my own. I need you! Haven't you been listening to me? I've been trying to tell you, I'm starting to love you, even though we just met. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Reb looked ashamed. "I'm sorry," he said. "I just...I'm just really scared too, and it's making me want to just give up. How can I even think about love? I mean, yes, of course I want to be with you, but life sure picked a terrible time to send you my way."

"You can't think that way, Reb, you just can't. We have each other right now. Whether that lasts a little while, or a lifetime, it's still a gift. Now get off the floor and sit next to me, so we can hold each other."



Reb did as he was told.

"We're going to get out of this," said Desima. "We're going to save Orenth and Quill, and the Master Copy. We're going to bring back the Journal of the Whills, too. We're going to do all of that together. Neither of us could do it alone...raising a baby Whill...publishing the Journal..."

Desima trailed off and simply rested in Reb's arms. He felt very good to her, and despite the threatening surroundings, a curious sense of security enveloped her. She began to feel very peaceful, as they gently caressed one another and stroked each other's hair. This is life, she thought, sweet life in the midst of death. It was wonderful, noble, defiant, bittersweet. And...something more. Another feeling, one of deep connection to her surroundings, was growing. Desima felt a thrill of recognition--the Force was flowing through her! She had felt it before, but only weakly, when she was a child, hoping to become a Jedi. Crushed by the disappointment of testing with too low a sensitivity, she had stopped trying to sense the Force. Perhaps she had even blocked it out. Recently, she had sensed it again, in the waterfall cave. But now...now it was very different from those other times. She could hear whispering...whispers without words, yet she understood them. They told her to open herself to the Force, to allow it to work through her.

"Reb," she said, trembling, "can you hear that? The whispers?"

Reb stirred from her shoulder. "I don't think so," he said. "What do you mean?"

She didn't answer him right away. The whispers required an answer first. Happily, she surrendered to them, as a willing servant. Paradoxically, her submission empowered her. Strength filled her in a decisive rush.

"I can feel the Force, Reb," she said wonderingly. "The power of the Force...it's mine. But it's so strong! I've never felt it this strongly before! This is incredible..."

"You're able to use the Force?" Reb demanded, standing up and facing her. "Since when?"

"Since just now! It just came to me. I think it wants me to use it. I think it wants to help us. I've never heard of anything like this--"

"Can you use it to make the cell door open?" Reb asked excitedly.

"I can try," she said. Desima tried to channel the Force with her mind to push the heavy blast door up, just as she had tried to raise pebbles as a child.

"No, I can't," she said after a minute. "There's probably some kind of mechanism keeping it shut, and I have no idea what it is." Reb looked crestfallen.

"But wait," said Desima, "I can sense things, see things, even outside the cell. There's a single guard out there in the cell block. I can touch his mind if I want to."

"Do it," said Reb. "If by some miracle, you can use that legendary Jedi mind control, we can get out of here! The guard will open the door for us!"

"All right, let me see what I can do. Give me a little quiet, here..."

Desima extended her senses and made contact with the guard's mind. She had never done anything like it before, but the power seemed to know what to do. All at once, she could hear the man's thoughts. He was bored, of course, because his duty was so uneventful. He was thinking about his Captain Vespa and how they both shared a real understanding of how inferior nonhuman species were. The mission against the Whills had been very satisfying for him, and Desima shuddered in disgust at his attitudes. The man was also wondering what the two humans in the cell block were imprisoned for. Desima decided to use all of these feelings.

Gently, she sent a thought drifting into his consciousness. The two humans in cell 30 need attention. They have been unfairly imprisoned. In fact, they are innocent of any dealings with the aliens. They were simply trying to get out of the way when the Empire came to administer a just punishment. Vespa had made an honest mistake in arresting them. There was evidence on their ship, down in the docking bay, which would clear up the whole misunderstanding. All the two humans needed was a little help getting to it. The guard could help them so easily. If he would just open their cell, and escort them to their ship, they could get that proof to show to Captain Vespa. It was a small favor to do for fellow humans. Humans had to stick together in a galaxy so full of disgusting creatures as this.

Desima felt that it would only take a little more to convince the guard...

Not only would it help his fellow humans, she suggested, his Captain would reward him, too. Vespa did not like imprisoning humans, and he would be grateful for a good reason to let them go.

Desima felt the guard leave his post and walk towards their cell. Delicately, she disengaged her thoughts from his and returned her awareness to her cell. "That's it. I think I did it. He's on his way. Reb? How do you feel about this? I mean, my using the Force to rescue us? I know how you feel about the Jedi, but I'm not really a Jedi. I have no idea how I'm doing this. You're not going to dislike me now, are you?"

Reb hugged her in answer. "If this gets us out of here, I'll reconsider everything I ever said about the Jedi."

The cell door slid upwards, revealing the guard. "I'm going to escort you back to your ship," he told them. "But it will have to be

quick, before anyone notices you're gone. You two can get your evidence and I'll bring it to the Captain. You'll have to wear these binders, though. Until the Captain clears you, you're still technically prisoners, and my responsibility."

Reb looked at Desima with unabashed admiration. Then he held his hands out to the guard to accept the binders. "Whenever you're ready," Reb said to the Imperial.

\* \* \*

Quill and Orenth continued to hide in the cramped secret hold of the Bantha Tracker. The small space had no light, and no room to move around, but neither aspect was troubling to a droid. Quill had positioned his arms to create a cradle for the Whill, and set his joints rocking rhythmically back and forth, slowly and tirelessly. The motion and the soft repetitive whir of his servomotors had fortunately put Orenth to sleep, but sooner or later, the Whill was going to awaken from hunger. In all the confusion, no one had obtained a nutrient pack with which to feed the baby. Quill was not yet willing to risk going out for one.

So far, they had remained hidden, but Quill knew several reasons why the situation could not last. Besides Orenth getting hungry, there was Quill's own need for a recharge. Also, the Imperial tech crews would bring in a scanner and discover their hidden compartment. The droid reviewed his options. Provided the Bantha Tracker was empty, he could exit the hold, go to the bridge, and attempt to fly the ship away. Of course, the cruiser would soon have a tractor beam locked onto them again, unless they decided to destroy the short hauler outright. Perhaps, before either event happened, Quill could escape with Orenth in the emergency pod. And yet, if the pod was detected, they could once again be captured or destroyed. And there was another problem: although Quill could not think of any way to rescue them, he did not want to leave Reb and Desima behind. Most droids did not experience anything like emotions, but some scholars thought that the most sophisticated ones did. When droids had no memory wipes for a long time, they could develop true personalities and feelings. While these attributes were not the same as those of sentient organics, they did serve the same purpose. Quill felt afraid for Reb and Desima, and he missed them and longed to know that they were still alive. They had been his companions, his fellow warriors, and his friends. Together, they had fought their way to the edge of freedom, only to be dragged back. But the outcome did not make the attempt less meaningful. The heroic things they had done echoed the exploits of the great figures of the Journal. Quill was proud to be a hero. Few droids ever had the chance to do that.

Quill heard the sound of muffled voices and footsteps coming aboard the ship, very faintly through the thick panel which concealed the hiding place. Apprehensively, Quill stopped rocking the baby. The voices seemed to be coming closer, as if they were moving directly into the main cargo hold. Quill decided that they were indeed in the hold, just on the other side of the secret panel. He braced himself for discovery.

Quill had a moment to wonder why the Imperials would come directly to the hidden hold when previously, they had seemed to miss it entirely, and then the panel was lifted away. Light spilled in on Quill and Orenth. It was an Imperial naval trooper.

"All right," said the trooper, "is this what you were looking for? This droid?"

"Quill!" called out the voice of Reb Zakai from somewhere behind the trooper. "Come on out of there, but put Orenth down first."

Quill hesitated. Was Reb still a prisoner? Had he been interrogated and forced to reveal the hiding place? For a moment, the droid considered arming one of the explosives on the shelf and using it to bargain for freedom. But once again, he came back to the problem of the tractor beam. Once in space, the ship could be recaptured easily.

Quill set Orenth on the shelf and stepped out into the main hold. To his surprise, the only ones present were the trooper, Reb, and Desima.

"Quill," Reb commanded, "immobilize this man." Quill didn't hesitate now. Using his considerable droid strength, he took hold of the trooper's arms, backed him against the wall, and held him there. The man was curiously nonresistant, though he did seem very confused.

"What is this droid doing?" he asked. "Let go of me! I thought we were looking for your proof--make this droid let go!"

"He's resisting me," said Desima worriedly. "Hurry up, Reb, I can't hold him much longer."

Quill found Desima's statement to be odd, considering that he was the one doing the holding. Reb, meanwhile, had picked up a spice wine bottle with both hands. He then proceeded to tip the trooper's helmet off and to smash the bottle against the back of the trooper's head. He was not immediately successful. It took two more clumsy hits to render the Imperial unconscious.

Desima sagged with weariness. "That was hard work," she breathed.

Reb dropped the bottle and leaned against the wall. "Quill..." he said. "Good to see you again. Is Orenth okay?"

"The baby is well, Master Reb. But I never expected to see you return like this. How did you manage it?"

"We didn't expect it either! Desima used the Force to convince this guard to bring us here. Now we just have to get these binders off somehow..."

"I was unaware, Mistress Desima, that your abilities in the Force were so advanced."

"They're not," said Desima. "I'm not sure where it came from."

"I'll go find some cutters," said Reb. "Be right back."

"Do I dare to hope," asked Quill as Reb left the hold, "that you have some kind of plan as to your next actions?"

"We're kind of improvising here, Quill," Desima said. "Isn't it enough of a miracle that we got back to the ship at all?"

"Impressive as your feat may be, it is insufficient," said Quill. "If we take off now, they will certainly recapture us." Then Quill had a sudden realization. The added presence of Reb and Desima changed the whole equation. Now he saw a possible plan of action. In a second, he had analyzed it and accepted both the plan and its consequences. "This is what we can do," he said firmly. "The tractor beam is our most significant obstacle. Therefore, it must be destroyed. If that can be done, you stand a chance of outrunning this cruiser."

Quill went to the hidden hold, picked up the Whill, and handed it to Desima. She accepted the baby clumsily with her bound hands. "I place Orenth in your care," he said solemnly. Then he stepped back to the hiding place and reached back inside to the weapons shelf. Delicately, he removed the most powerful explosive, the thermal detonator. "I will use this device to destroy the tractor beam controls. You and Reb will fly free in this ship with Orenth and the Master Copy. I presume you still have it--"

"Oh," said Desima, "we hid it in the wine bottles to keep it from the Imperials...but hold on a moment. Aren't you coming with us?"

Quill didn't answer.

"Oh, Quill, no, you can't mean it! You can't just destroy yourself like that."

There was a loud clatter from the doorway, as Reb dropped the laser cutter he had found. "Quill, what do you mean, destroy yourself?"

"If you blow yourself up with that tractor beam," said Desima, "we'd just be saving ourselves at the expense of your life!"

Quill looked at her. "You're not preserving yourself, you're preserving this Whill. Your own words, Mistress Desima. Before, I allowed you to place yourselves into danger instead of myself. I agreed because your argument was logical. But now it is my argument which carries the weight of logic, while your reactions are merely human emotions. The tractor beam must be destroyed. This detonator will accomplish that, but to be certain, I must stay with it until it explodes."

"What if they catch you before you make it there?" Reb protested.

"That is unlikely. Humans tend to ignore droids, as long as we mind our own business and look busy. You would be far more likely to be stopped than I."

"But we need you, Quill," said Reb. "How are we going to pilot the ship without you?"

"I will remove my learning module and patch it into the ship's computer. It contains my piloting skills and a rudimentary version of my basic intelligence. You will be able to give it verbal commands and ask it for basic information. With the help of the module, you will be able to control the Bantha Tracker yourselves."

"But Quill, you're needed for the future of the Journal...for Orenth's future. We were all supposed to get out together. We can't just leave you behind." Reb was beginning to sound desperate, but Quill couldn't allow that to deter him.

"Master Reb, you say The Journal of the Whills needs me. In that you are correct. The Journal is now experiencing its ultimate need. I can serve it better with my sacrifice now than I can with years of mundane service in the future. I am quite old, and I have had a long and useful period of functional service. What more can a droid ask for? And besides," Quill's voice softened, "your lives are more valuable to me than my own continued existence. Cruel circumstances prevented me from saving Master Resh, but Resh wanted you to live, Reb. To care for Orenth. At least I can fulfill Resh's last wishes."

"But I need you, Quill," Reb said quietly in a defeated voice.

"I know you will do just fine without me. You have matured into a responsible adult, at least by human standards. And you have Desima to help you. I assume you will be staying together?"

"Yes, Quill," said Desima. "We've become close."

"I appreciate knowing that. I wish you all the happiness that organics may find. And I trust you with the legacy of the Whills. In committing to the future of the Journal, you have committed to something larger than yourselves. If Resh were here, I am sure the old scribe would think Orenth was in good hands. Now...I must go soon--your escape will be noticed, and I still have to install my learning module. I will also upload my copy of the electronic version of the Journal into the ship's computer. I do not wish it to be destroyed with me. It has been a part of me, and I wish it to go free even if I cannot."

Quill sighed. The way forward was so clear for once. Why did it have to be so hard as well?

When Quill was ready, he left the ship quietly, managing not to be seen on the ramp by any of the docking bay personnel. He quickly found a computer outlet, plugged in with an interface jack in his finger, and made a simple inquiry as to the layout of the ship and the location of the tractor beam power generator. It turned out to be not far from the docking bay, and on the same level. It made Quill's job easier that the Empire's Purity was not a huge ship like a Star Destroyer.

As he had predicted, no one stopped him on his way to the tractor beam control area. He was, after all, only a droid, a menial mechanical. No one seemed to notice his unusual head shape either. He supposed it was because the Empire used such a large variety of droids in the fleet. He reached his goal without incident. It was a small room full of computer terminals staffed by six technicians. In the back of the room, the broad surface of the main generator was visible. The low hum of that power source filled the air.

Quill marched right in.

"Hey, you there!" called out the lead tech. "What are you doing in here? What's your business? Are you lost?"

"Oh, no sir, I assure you I am in the correct location," said Quill confidently.

"Well, we weren't expecting you," said the tech.

"No, you couldn't have expected my arrival, which is why I am going to offer you a chance to evacuate. After all, just because the Empire as a whole has committed atrocities, that does not mean every citizen is equally guilty. I assume you are merely skilled technicians who needed this employment, and that none of you participated in the attack on the Whills."

The technicians were all staring at Quill. Frowning, the lead tech began to advance on him. "What are you babbling about, droid?" he demanded.

Quill opened a storage chamber in his chest and took out the thermal detonator. "Come no closer," he warned. "This is an armed thermal detonator, set to explode when my finger leaves this switch. I am giving you a chance to leave, as I said, and it would be a shame if you were to jostle me in any way as you exit. I advise that you keep your distance, and move in an orderly fashion."

All the techs froze where they were. No one made a move. All eyes were fixed on the detonator.

"It is my intention to destroy the tractor beam," Quill went on, "but before I do so, I wish to speak my last words. You are not required to stay and listen, educational as it might be for you, as listening to my speech in full would be detrimental to your health. I am a model QLL scholar's assistant. My entire period of service has consisted of four hundred twenty six years with the Whills on Ashlan Four. The Whills themselves served the pursuit of knowledge for twenty five millennia. A particularly brutal galactic government, which itself arose fewer than twenty years ago, in a display of vicious racism and hatred for the truth, served to put an end to that noble endeavor known as the Journal of the Whills. Not satisfied with the malevolent destruction of the Jedi Knights, and the cynical replacement of a corrupt government with an even more detestable one, the Emperor found it necessary to murder a race of

defenseless scholars whose only crime was to print the free speech of those who opposed him. This destruction was accomplished using only the smallest part of the Emperor's terrible space fleet. But even the least powerful, sufficiently motivated, can cause great evil."

The technicians had, by now, moved around Quill, stepping slowly and keeping their distance. As soon as they were past him, they desperately ran from the room without a word.

"As a being of little power myself," said Quill, "I will now show that the weakest among us can also accomplish great good. I have been given this chance to serve the good at the cost of my own existence. I consider it a small price to pay."

Somewhere nearby, alarms began to sound.

"Droids cannot touch the Force, yet I believe it exists. I ask that it guide and protect those I leave behind, that my sacrifice shall not be in vain."

With a clatter of booted feet, a group of stormtroopers showed up at the entrance to the room. "Freeze!" shouted one of them as he leveled his blaster rifle.

Quill was startled into dropping the detonator. He looked at it philosophically as it bounced twice, rolled a bit, and lay still. The droid faced the stormtroopers.

"How clumsy of me," he said. "Now I'm afraid you'll have to share my fate. However, speaking from experience with your kind, I am certain that you fully deserve it."

The thermal detonator exploded, annihilating the tractor beam control room and much of the surrounding area.

Reb and Desima felt the blast as well as heard it. The docking bay and the Bantha Tracker shook. Alarms sounded everywhere, and the crewmen hurried to evacuate the area. The explosion had caused an enormous hull breach nearby, and an entire section of the modular ship had to be sealed off. This allowed Reb and Desima to work undisturbed.

"Damn it Quill...why did you have to be a martyr?" muttered Reb as the chaos erupted.

"Come on," said Desima. "Let's use the time he bought us. Help me get this guard, will you?"

Together, they hauled the still unconscious detention block guard to the top of the exit ramp, and unceremoniously dumped him out of the ship. They closed the ramp and hurried to the bridge.

In the center of the pilot's station, a gray module had been installed on top of the existing controls. It was all that was left of



Quill now. Reb sat down beside it, and Desima took the copilot's chair. The piloting program was already running.

"Activate the repulsorlifts," Reb said to the module. "Exit the docking bay and activate the sublight engines. Plot a course on the opposite vector of the Strike Cruiser and execute it with engines at full thrust. Set shields for maximum strength in the rear quarter."

Quill had coached Reb on how to talk to the module. The instructions worked fine, and the Bantha Tracker lifted off and rotated to aim at the sparkling rectangle of space beyond the magnetic field. The sublight engines came on and thrust the ship out and away from the Empire's Purity. The ship made a tight turn and rushed alongside the Strike Cruiser, heading for the rear of the Imperial ship. In a moment, it was clear of the larger vessel and running hard for freedom.

"The majority of these facts are not in dispute by my fellow Whill Masters--that the Skywalker lived, that he came from Ashlan Three eleven centuries ago, that he and his twelve children were the first of the Jedi, and that he helped to found the Republic. However, during the millennium since he lived, a great many historically questionable things have been said about this already legendary figure. We agree that the tales told by his children are largely accurate; these are contained in the first volume of the Journal. But long before the Whills began to tell the story of the Jedi Bendu and the Republic, the Skywalker and his children had passed away. The Whills were called to serve by the Skywalker's great-great grandchildren. In such situations where a collection of stories reaches far into the past, the historical truth may be blended with myths, legends, propaganda, inaccuracies, mistakes, omissions, additions, and interpretations. I believe it is an important part of our task to separate fact from fiction in these early accounts.

The goal of these commentaries is to put the stories in the first volume of the Journal in perspective. That endeavor had divided us into two camps and sparked a lively debate. While I side with the rational camp, I respect the mystical camp as well. Neither side has an easy task. A few examples given here will illustrate just how difficult it is to find the truth where the Skywalker is concerned.

One example of this problem is the role of the Skywalker as a prophet. The rational camp must question whether he did indeed have the power to foresee the distant future, as is claimed in his legend. Prophecy can be vague and easily applied to all manner of subsequent events. It is true that the Jedi Bendu are able to see possible futures, but these visions are hard to interpret, and often they do not come to pass. The Skywalker seems to have had a very different power. His visions reach hundreds, thousands, and perhaps tens of thousands of years into the future. For example, he predicts that the Republic will last for over a thousand generations. Even if we use the shorter human value of twenty five years for a generation, the Republic will then last an astonishing twenty five thousand years! Did the prophet really see so far? We cannot know the answer, but we can get some idea by examining the past one thousand years. Did the prophecies for the past millennium come true?

In the "Testimony of the Third Son," the Skywalker correctly predicted the growth of the Jedi order and the Republic. 'The Republic will grow very large, and our family will not be enough to provide Jedi Bendu to safeguard all of it. The many races of the Republic will provide servants of the Force, and the Jedi Bendu will be numerous enough to oppose the servants of the Bogan where they arise.' But perhaps both of these outcomes were merely inevitable, given the trends already in motion by the end of the prophet's life. The Skywalker also predicted the coming of the Whills to Ashlan Four. 'The Skywalker said, Your descendants will go out among the stars and find a race of great wisdom, called the Whills. They will accept their destiny and follow the Jedi Bendu to this system, and dwell in the light of the Ashlan Nebula. On the fourth planet, they will record our story.' My parent's generation answered the call of this prophecy and severed all ties to the past. They even caused the knowledge of their world of origin to be purposely forgotten, so as to embrace entirely their new great purpose. As a result, the prophecy is difficult to evaluate. On the surface, it seems like a true prediction. But perhaps the Skywalker was in contact with my race during his life, and made an arrangement with them. Perhaps his words were merely a set of instructions to his children to go and fulfill a bargain which had already been made? Because of the scarcity of information about our past, no real answers can be found.

Another difficult kind of prophecy is the apocalyptic prediction. The Skywalker is said to have made one in which a terrible calamity will one day befall us. 'The Whills shall be sustained by their task, but when the shadow of the Bogan falls upon them, the Ashla will not desert them, and in the time of greatest despair, there shall come a savior, and he shall be known as the Son of the Suns.' The prophecy uses colorful imagery such as the shadow of the Bogan, and a savior known only as the son of the suns. No time frame is given for these events--who can say when they may occur? The Skywalker even provided hauntingly ambiguous predictions of doom for his own Jedi order when he foresaw conflicts with another order called the 'Sith.' This kind of prediction, by its very ambiguity, can lend itself to fearful speculation in generation after generation. The making of such predictions is a safe thing for a prophet to do, for how can they ever be proven incorrect by the passage of time?

In our search for the truth within the legend, we find that not even the Skywalker's death can be agreed upon. The mystical camp firmly believes that the Skywalker never died at all, while the rational camp recognizes that this is purely myth-making in progress..."

-The Journal of the Whills, Volume Two, excerpted from the Commentaries of Master Cresh.

"Captain Vespa!" called out a crewman. "There's been an explosion in the tractor beam control room!"

Vespa whirled towards the man. "What was the cause?!"

"The report is just coming in now, sir--just a moment..." The man listened to his comm headset, then said, "A droid brought a thermal detonator into the area."

"A droid? What droid?"

"Sir, we have a hull breach from the explosion. That section of the ship is being evacuated," reported another crewman.

"Captain! Just after the explosion, the captured short hauler escaped. It cleared our docking bay a minute ago."

Vespa couldn't believe what he was hearing. "The prisoners," he grated, "were they aboard?"

"Unknown, sir."

"Contact the detention block and find out if we still have our prisoners," Vespa ordered. "Set a course to pursue that ship immediately. Is our tractor beam functional or not?"

"No, sir. We lost our tractor beam due to the explosion."

"Then launch all of our TIE fighters," Vespa said. "I want that ship, disabled and intact if possible, but destroyed if necessary." He did not look forward to reporting any of this to the Emperor's servant. Vespa had followed Blackhole's orders and recalled his forces from the surface. The troop carrier and the AT-PT transport were on their way even now. But Blackhole had also wanted the captured ship searched and the prisoners interrogated. Vespa had been ready to do all of that, he really had, but now everything had suddenly gone wrong. The short hauler had escaped somehow, and now Vespa simply wanted to see the tiny, infuriating vessel blasted into flaming particles.

"Sir, the detention block commander reports a missing guard as well as the disappearance of the prisoners. There was no sign of a forced escape. He claims not to know how it happened..." the crewman trailed off, fearing Vespa's reaction.

"I will deal with the detention block commander later," was all Vespa said. So, the prisoners were free. Somehow, they had simply left their cell, walked to their ship, created a diversion and crippled the tractor beam, and sailed out of the docking bay. Vespa thought back to Blackhole's odd questions about Jedi activity, and a sudden suspicion flared up in him. Had the prisoners been Jedi? They hadn't seemed like it, but what if that was just part of the deception? Vespa's mind reeled. He didn't want to deal with Jedi, or Blackhole, or the Emperor. It was all too much for him. Feeling slightly dazed, he verified that his order to launch TIE fighters was being carried out. The swift fighters could overtake the fleeing freighter long before it was in position for a hyperspace jump. And then...the situation would be under control again. Vespa felt as if someone was staring at him, and he turned to catch Lieutenant Wiggins looking his way. He frowned, giving Wiggins a sour

look in return. Try not to enjoy this too much, Lieutenant, he thought. Just like those escaped prisoners, your time is coming...

"Can we make the jump to hyperspace?" Desima asked anxiously.

"Negative," said the module in a flat voice devoid of personality.

"Our current position makes a hyperspace transition impossible."

"What?" Desima nearly shouted. "What's our current position?"

"The Bantha Tracker has passed the limits of the Ashlan Nebula, but our current course places us within Ashlan Four's gravity well. The presence of any large gravity well prohibits a hyperspace transition."

"Well, can we change our course?" Reb asked.

"State the parameters of the desired course change."

"We--we need a course that will get us into hyperspace the fastest!" said Reb.

"Computing that course," said the module blandly. "Computed. Implementing new course." The ship turned suddenly, causing the planet of the Whills to seem to slide swiftly out of the viewport. Reb and Desima leaned in their chairs, then recovered.

"How long until we can make the jump to hyperspace now?" Reb demanded.

"In approximately nine minutes," stated the module. "However," it continued, "a new variable must be taken into account. The Bantha Tracker is now being pursued by the Imperial Strike Cruiser. The cruiser has launched a squadron of TIE starfighters. The superior speed of the fighters indicates that they will overtake the Bantha Tracker before a hyperspace transition can be made."

"TIE fighters?" exclaimed Desima. "Can they destroy our ship?"

"That is the probable outcome."

Reb hung his head. "I really thought we'd made it that time. To come so far, and then just not make it...but there's nothing we can do. We've used up all of our tricks."

Desima didn't contradict him. She, too, seemed to be out of ideas. The mood in the small bridge was one of helplessness and sudden defeat. They continued to hurtle along at maximum sublight velocity, but it had become a high-speed journey to nowhere. They imagined a tight formation of the Empire's deadliest starfighters quickly catching up behind them. Even if one of them knew how to operate the ship's laser cannons, it wouldn't be enough to defend against so many TIE's. Reb and Desima began to imagine their deaths in the fiery explosion of the Bantha Tracker.

They looked fearfully into each other's eyes. Reaching across the console between them, they tightly clasped hands.

"I guess Quill forgot about the TIE fighters," said Desima softly. "We all did. But...I don't regret anything we did...or said. If we have to die, I'm glad we're together, and not all alone. I'm glad we tried to save the Journal, and the Whills. It was worth trying...worth dying for. But I do regret losing the time we were going to have..."

"So do I," Reb said, looking steadily into her eyes." He glanced towards the rest of the ship. "You know, we have each other, but Orenth is all alone."

"I'll go get the baby," said Desima. "The last Whill shouldn't die alone." She unstrapped herself, and left the bridge. When she returned, she was cradling Orenth. The Whill was whistling in alarm. "It knows we're afraid," she said, trying to soothe the baby. "I'm sorry, little Orenth. I can't do much about that..."

Desima came close to Reb and settled herself against him as best she could. He put his arms around her as she held the Whill. Then the little group rode on in silence, resolved to share their comforting warmth until the end.

Vespa's gaze was fixed on a tactical display screen. Colored symbols represented his ship, his fighters, and the fleeing short hauler which possibly contained Jedi. Although the Empire's Purity was too far behind, the TIE's would overtake their target in just a few minutes. The pilots had orders to destroy the engines and stop the ship if possible. If they encountered any resistance, they were to destroy the ship without hesitation. The laser cannons of an entire squadron would make short work of the little freighter. If they did not surrender, they would die.

"Captain Vespa," said a crewman next to him, "our sensors are reading very high solar radiation levels from the younger stars of the nebula. The levels are getting higher by the minute."

Vespa didn't want to be distracted. "Is there any danger to us, with our shields in place?"

"Not yet, sir, but at this rate..." The crewman paused uncertainly. "Sir...I think you should see this display."

"All right, what is it?" Vespa took a step towards the crewman's station, then halted. "No, those display screens of yours are too tiny. Give it to me on the main screen." Vespa's pleasing tactical display was replaced with a real time holographic image of the star positions in the Ashlan nebula. When he saw it, his annoyance gave way to concern. Many of the young stars were beginning to blaze much more brightly than the others. Perhaps there was a danger to his ship after all. And there was more...Vespa stared at the image, not willing to admit what he saw. His imagination was creating a pattern in the stars, like a constellation

seen from the surface of a planet. The brightest stars were forming a huge outline of...no, that was impossible.

But Lieutenant Wiggins saw it too. He was the first one to say the obvious, impossible thing. "By the Emperor's Throne! The stars! They're a face! An enormous face!"

The stars of the Ashlan Nebula now formed the outline of a cosmic portrait. The bright young suns delineated the vast features of a wizened old man. Two radiant suns formed the penetrating eyes. Long lines of stars suggested the flowing hair and beard. The majestic countenance spanned the height and width of the star cloud. Regally, the visage gazed upon the tiny ships. Then the twin suns of the piercing eyes blazed with furious intensity. Spheres of pure white light burst from every star. Like expanding bubbles, they grew outwards until they touched, merged, and became a great advancing curved wall of light that swept towards the Imperial ships. In an instant, the light surged over and through the Imperial Strike Cruiser and the returning troop transports. It washed over the TIE fighters like a wave of fire. But when the blinding energy of the suns reached the edge of the gas cloud, the light gently dissolved and faded into the void.

The bridge of the Empire's Purity went dark the moment the stellar light wave passed by the ship. Vespa's bridge crew was in a state of primal dread at what they had seen on the main viewscreen. The reports on ship's status began to come in.

"Sir, we've lost all power to the engines. We're slowing to a dead stop."

"Captain, all life support has shut down!"

"Our sensors are inactive, sir."

"The computers are off line..."

"Backups are nonoperational..."

"Weapons systems are nonfunctional..."

"We do have some communications systems--our fighter pilots are calling in--they're stranded in space..."

"Shields are down."

"The troop carrier and the AT-PT lander are stranded too..."

Then the incredulous chatter died out as the main viewscreen came back to life. It still displayed the fearsome face in the stars, but the suns had ceased to flare as brightly as before. The stern gaze of the figure burned steadily at them across the colorful cloudscape of the nebula. Soon, there was silence on the bridge.

The remaining comm systems came to life, and the crew of the Empire's Purity, including the TIE pilots and those on the lander, all heard a booming voice. Behind the words was an unmistakable sense of tightly controlled power. Each word was spoken with such grim potency that many of the men fell to their knees, overwhelmed.

"I AM THE SPIRIT OF THE SKYWALKER. YOU ARE NOW IN MY DOMAIN, AND SUBJECT TO MY POWER. YOU ARE DESTROYERS, THE UNASHAMED MURDERERS OF THE WHILLS. THE RACE WHICH MY CHILDREN ONCE CALLED TO SERVICE NOW LIES IN ASHES. YOU HAVE DARED TO THREATEN THE LIFE OF MY SON AS HE STROVE TO SAVE THE LAST OF THE WHILLS AND THEIR WRITTEN LEGACY. YOUR CRIMES COULD HAVE BEEN PREVENTED BY THE JEDI ORDER, BUT THEY TOO HAVE BEEN MURDERED. JUSTICE FALLS NOW TO ME. HEAR NOW THE JUDGMENT OF THE SKYWALKER. I HAVE DISABLED YOUR VESSELS AND STRIPPED YOU OF THE POWER TO DO FURTHER HARM. UNLESS YOU ARE ABLE TO SUMMON HELP, YOUR DEATHS ARE ASSURED. YOU HAVE SERVED THE MASTER OF THE BOGAN. NOW ACCEPT THE BITTER REWARD."

With that pronouncement, the voice ceased. The viewscreen once again went dark, leaving the bridge awash in dim emergency lighting. The last of the bridge comm systems sparked violently and died. Vespa was on his knees, still hearing the words of the Skywalker in his mind. To Vespa, it had been like encountering an angry God--he had been judged and punished with terrible swiftness. Unashamed murderer...was that what he was? He had never seen it that way. He had only been doing his job. He had only served the law of the Empire, meting out its justice. What was that fearsome being, that it had the authority to hold him accountable for that? Did he deserve to die for following orders? It was grossly unfair. And yet...his ship was dead already. Soon, the cold and the thinning air would come to claim all of them for oblivion. It was useless to deny it. Righteous or not, just or not, the face in the stars had sealed their fate.

Or had it? Wasn't it too soon to give up? Might there be a way out of this? He remembered the words of the apparition--unless you are able to summon help...Shaking his head, the Captain wobbled to his feet. His voice was unsteady as he laid his hands on the nearest crewman. "Do we have any communications systems left? Any at all?"

The crewman looked at him in the reddish light, his face ghostly. "I think the emergency subspace transceiver should still be working, sir. We can send a distress signal, but the range is limited, so..."

He didn't complete the statement, but Vespa knew what was implied. They were located far out on the Outer Rim. If the signal was picked up, it might take days for a rescue to arrive. Long days without life support. It could get very...very bad.

"Captain," said another crewman, "there's another problem. Because of that hull breach near the docking bay, we had to evacuate and seal off the central section of the ship. That places even more demands on the life support resources we have left. Captain...what are we going to do?"

Vespa stared at the crewman without answering. He had no answers. They had all been stricken from his mind. He looked around the bridge. Everyone was starting to talk at once, trying to make sense out of their sudden peril. Help...he needed help. Maybe Lieutenant Wiggins would have some ideas. But Wiggins was gone--he had left the bridge.

"Where is Lieutenant Wiggins?" Vespa demanded loudly. For a moment, it seemed as if no one knew. Then someone spoke up to answer.

"He said he was going to operate the HoloNet transceiver on deck two."

"The HoloNet?" Vespa wondered. "Do we still have enough power to use it?"

"Lieutenant Wiggins said we have a transceiver with an independent power source. If he was right, then perhaps we can be rescued. Do you think there's a chance, sir?"

Deck two, thought Vespa...what was on deck two? Of course, he realized. The THX HoloNet chamber. The special one for communicating with Blackhole.

All the noisy confusion of the bridge seemed to recede into the background for Vespa. The loudest sound was his own thudding heartbeat. Blackhole. Wiggins had gone to get Blackhole's help. Such an action might save the ship, but it would destroy Vespa. Blackhole would learn everything about Vespa's failure...how the prisoners had been allowed to escape with some surviving Whills and their books...how Vespa had totally failed to stop it, despite the explicit orders of the Emperor. His career would be over. But it wasn't his fault. He had been about to accomplish everything the Emperor had wanted, when that...that thing had appeared in the stars. Vespa had no understanding of what it was that had spoken to him, or what it was that had crippled his ship. It was beyond the limits of his experience and his imagination. But he understood this much: whatever that enormous face in the stars was, he had been powerless against it. No one could have done anything to stop it, if they had been in his place. No one.

But he knew full well that Wiggins would not tell it that way to Blackhole. No, Wiggins would use this opportunity to put Vespa down for good. Wiggins would blame the whole disaster on him. Blackhole would report that to the Emperor... From what he had heard about the Emperor's punishments, it could be worse than dying here in this nebula. Vespa had made up his mind. It was better that they all die out here rather than suffer the consequences of failure. He turned his back on his anxious, bewildered crew, and marched determinedly towards his quarters. The Lieutenant might not be able to reach Blackhole right away. If Vespa hurried, he would be in time to prevent the communication and administer some discipline to Wiggins. He just needed to go and fetch his blaster first...

\* \* \*



The TIE fighter attack never came. The Bantha Tracker flew on, undisturbed.

Desima looked up from Reb's shoulder, her eyes widening. "Reb," she said softly, "the voice is back. The voice of the Force. It's whispering to me...telling me we're safe. Can it be true?"

Reb turned to the piloting module. "Are the Imperials still after us?"

"Negative," said the flat, synthesized voice. "The Strike Cruiser and the TIE fighters are all adrift without power. No further pursuit is indicated."

"I guess it's true," said Reb wonderingly. "What could have happened to them?"

"Something in the nebula stopped them," said Desima.

"Something that's extremely strong with the Force. It's calling to me now. It wants us to go back into the star cloud to meet it."

Reb paused to take that in. "Do you think it's safe?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Desima, closing her eyes. "It's the light side I feel. We won't be in any danger."

"All right," said Reb simply. "I trust you."

The Bantha Tracker made a graceful, sweeping turn and headed back to the nebula. Once they were within the gas cloud, Desima told the module to stop the ship. "All right," she said to no one in particular, "we're here."

The first thing they saw was a hazy shimmer in the air near the center of the little bridge. As they waited expectantly, a ghostly shape began to form. It looked like a human male, very old, with long hair and a long silver beard. There were no clear details on the figure--it seemed insubstantial and out of focus.

"Welcome to my domain," said the figure in a soft, very distant sounding male voice. "Forgive my appearance...I have largely forgotten what I once looked like."

Desima stared at the figure in astonishment. "You're the spirit of the Skywalker, aren't you? That's the only thing that makes any sense. Was it you who helped us escape from our cell? Did you disable the Imperial ships that were chasing us?"

"Yes, I did all of that. I could not stand by and let you fail. Your struggle was too important. But my domain does not reach beyond the Ashlan star cloud. When you came within the nebula itself, I was finally able to help you."

Reb was still grappling with the spirit's identity. "You're the Skywalker? The one from the legends? The first of the Jedi? For real?"

"None other. Is it so difficult for you to believe, my son?"

"Son?" asked Desima. "Why are you calling Reb your son?"

"Because he is," said the spirit. "I call all of my descendants my children. Reb is my very distant son, but he is still my child. You have done well, my son," he said to Reb. "Despite the tragic loss which could not be prevented, you have saved at least one Whill and preserved its written heritage. Despite everything, you managed to fulfill my prophecy."

"Prophecy?" Reb asked, confused.

Desima saw it at once. "The prophecy of the son of the suns," she said, astonished. "Reb...you're the son of the suns?! That's incredible!"

"I'm the son of the suns?" Reb sputtered. "What does that mean?"

"It simply means you are my descendant," said the spirit. "When I died, I decided to remain on this plane, to watch over the Ashlan system. I placed my energy within this nebula. I exist in and among these stars, these suns. Thus, the son of the suns."

"So, you actually foresaw what would happen to the Whills, and you knew Reb's role in it?" asked Desima.

"No, I did not," the spirit admitted. "I did not foresee all of that which has come to pass. In my vision, my descendant was to be a powerful Jedi Bendu who would save the Whills from disaster. But I did not foresee the near total destruction of the Jedi Bendu of the Ashla. And so there were no Jedi to intervene. Reb's ancestors were once Jedi. But eventually, his line followed another path. They became warriors who fought alongside the Jedi, and their sensitivity to the Ashla faded away, generation by generation. Reb himself is barely able to sense the Ashla at all. No, Desima Derata, I did not foresee these events...but to my surprise, the prophecy took on a new shape. My descendant joined forces with another who could sense the Ashla--you, Desima. Your small sensitivity to the Ashla allowed me to work through you in order to help. The fact that you were not Jedi, that you did what you did without the powers of the Ashla, speaks highly of your courage and abilities. I owe you both a great debt."

"You saved our lives," said Reb. "You don't owe us anything."

"I owe you a debt for that which you have yet to do," said the spirit. "I want you to begin The Journal of the Whills again, somewhere else, somewhere far from this place of tragedy. The galaxy is in darkness now, and it needs the light of truth which the Journal can provide. That which the Bogan wants to destroy, we must preserve. For you must not believe that the ascendancy of the Bogan is forever. Someday, it will

turn upon itself, as evil must, and the galaxy will be free again. All of the Jedi are not gone. Some are in hiding, waiting for the day when their order can rise again. The Journal must be there to record their story once again, and to record the story of the new Republic which may yet arise. I also ask you to help the race of the Whills to return. I have an abiding love for them, having watched them for so long. I grieve for them, and could not bear to see them vanish forever. Will you do these things?"

Reb and Desima looked at each other and clasped hands. "We will," said Reb. "We had already chosen to do all of that, actually...or...were we destined to do that?"

"You understand destiny as well as I, my son. Sometimes prophecy and destiny are only what we make them." The spirit reached out a foggy hand and touched Orenth. "Grow well, little Whill. And bring back your people. Return here someday and show me what you have made with your life. I will always be here if you should need me." The spirit regarded Reb and Desima. "We must say farewell now. You must complete your journey to safety, and I must return to my long sleep. Live well, and may the Ashla be with you."

"I don't know what to say..." Reb faltered. "Besides thank you. Will I ever see you again?"

"My time of watching over this system is done, but I am not yet finished with this existence. You may return to me someday with Orenth. This is not good-bye, but only farewell."

"Then...farewell," said Reb.

"Farewell," echoed Desima wistfully.

The spirit faded away and was gone.

Desima sat silently for a long moment. Then she suddenly let out a whoop of joy. "We're free! We're alive! We made it!" She stood up and danced around the bridge with Orenth. It was her way of expressing her relief. Reb simply sat in the pilot's chair and breathed easy for the first time in days.

"Wasn't that amazing?" Desima exclaimed. "Can you believe it? The Skywalker himself spoke to us! He even saved us from the Empire! And he told us the Jedi might come back! And Reb, he said you were his descendant! I never would have thought! You're the son of the suns! My friend is in a prophecy! I still don't know how to feel about that. Are we still equals? Does this exalt you or something?"

"I don't know," said Reb, amused by her excited display. "I don't feel exalted. I suppose we can still be equals. Especially if you were to become the daughter-in-law-of-the-suns."

"You're right," she said without thinking. "I could do that." Then she finally paused. "Let me think about that. It's a possibility..." She smiled at him mischievously. "First, I have to ask you something. Which traveler do you believe now?"

Reb had to think for a moment to realize what she was referring to. Then he cleared his throat. "And I believed the second traveler," said Reb, "for truth was to me a breath, a wind, a shadow, a phantom, and never have I touched the hem of its garment...until now. I don't know how to feel about what I learned today," he told her solemnly. "It's going to take some time for me to get used to the idea. I was angry at the Jedi for a long time for not saving my parents. But now I know I came from the Jedi, and the very first Jedi saved me and you. The truth is...I still have a lot to learn. And I want you to help me learn it."

Desima gently set Orenth down in the copilot's chair and proceeded to give Reb a very sincere kiss.

\* \* \*

Reb and Desima left the Ashlan system without a final destination in mind. The Skywalker had charged them with restarting the Journal somewhere else, but where? After thinking it over, they decided that the only safe haven they were likely to find was among the Rebels who fought against the Empire. They hoped that the enemy of their enemy would be their friend. The Journal had supported the Rebels before, so as representatives of the Journal, they could reasonably hope for some desperately needed help in return.

Finding the Rebels, however, would be a challenge. The Rebels only survived by staying well hidden. Reb and Desima might have as difficult a time as the Empire in locating a Rebel base. It was Desima who found the solution they needed, within the Bantha Tracker itself. Besides bringing spice wine to the monastery, Platt Eth had also ferried new Journal submissions in the last few years of the Journal. Because many of those submissions came from Rebels or Rebel sympathizers, it followed that Platt Eth must have been in contact with someone connected to the Rebellion. Using her computer searching skills from her student years, Desima took the dates of pro-Rebellion submissions and correlated them with Platt Eth's travel logs. When she identified which runs had involved such submissions, she traced the path of the Bantha Tracker to specific update centers where the submissions had most likely been made. The update center which came up most frequently was located on the planet Alderaan, or at least it was, before the Empire had closed all of the centers. The ship's computer even held the name of the person who had been in charge of the center. Desima decided that it was worth the risk to contact that person, in the hope of being pointed to the hidden Rebellion.

They made their way to Alderaan and took a cheap public docking bay. Desima quietly checked to see if their names were on the Empire's wanted lists. They had after all given their real names to Captain Vespa. She was relieved to find that they were not. It made her wonder what had happened to the crew of the Empire's Purity, and she hoped they had

gotten what they deserved. She decided it was safe to contact her parents on Chandrila to tell them the basics of what had happened. They were overjoyed to hear from her, and happy to transfer some much needed credits electronically to her. She was vague to them about her future plans. Her parents were relieved enough that she had escaped from an area under attack by the Empire, that they did not press her for details. Desima decided it was best not to tell them about saving the Journal or any of the strange things that had happened. They were only agrifarmers, after all. Such things were simply beyond their purview. It had been hard enough for them when she had developed strange interests in the Jedi, or when she had left the farm to go to the University. If they knew she was looking to join the Rebellion...she decided not to give them too much to worry about.

While Reb stayed with the ship and looked after Orenth, Desima ventured into the capital city of Aldera. After living for so long in the isolated mountain monastery, Reb was simply too intimidated by the city to go in. Desima found the home of the former update center manager, Vesser Nor, without much trouble. He was a human male, and at first he seemed very suspicious that Desima might be a threatening Imperial agent of some kind. As a Rebel agent himself, he had a good reason to be suspicious. Ever since the closing of the update center, he had been without work. He often suspected he was being watched, and although he had not been arrested, he wondered if that would be next. But when Desima told him about what had happened to the Whills on Ashlan Four, Vesser relented and welcomed her into his home. She showed him a holo of the baby Whill and a page of the Master Copy as proof of her story. That gained her his full cooperation. When she told him she was seeking a contact within the Rebellion, he told her to wait while he contacted a man named "Prestor." Within a day, she was told to go to a certain open air cafe at a certain time, and to sit at a certain table. There she met with Prestor, a dignified middle aged man who interviewed her extensively. Apparently satisfied, the man gave her an unmarked data disk and left her with his best wishes.

The disk turned out to contain navicomputer coordinates, but the destination was not named. Reb and Desima decided to trust the information. When they entered the coordinates, the ship took them on a series of hyperspace jumps, until they arrived at last at a lonely rim world called Briggia. As soon as they arrived, they were approached by a Corellian Corvette. Once they were identified, they were instructed to follow a specific flight path to land on the planet. They followed the instructions, intimidated as they were by the Corvette's size and firepower. They understood the need for security in protecting the location of a Rebel base, but they worried about the reception that was waiting for them. Would they be interrogated? What would the Rebels be like? Was any of the propaganda about them true? In any case, the weary refugees had committed to their course. They would soon find out the answers...

The Bantha Tracker soared over one of the small wooded islands of Briggia's southern hemisphere. Quill's module had instructions to bring them in for a landing in a clearing that the Rebels had selected. As the

thrusters and repulsors automatically brought them down and settled them on the ground, Reb and Desima prepared to greet their new allies. During the long journey, they had carefully reorganized the pages of the Master Copy. Reb gathered the first volume together in a neat stack, and Desima held the baby Whill.

"Well," said Reb, "I hope we did the right thing in coming here. Do you think they'll let us stay?"

"I don't know," said Desima, moving to the top of the exit ramp.

"I've heard the Rebels are a strict military group. There may ultimately be no place for civilians like us. But they let us come this far. Let's see what they have to say."

Reb nodded, and together, they walked down the ramp into the Briggian forest clearing. They were stunned to see the entire clearing thronged with people, humans and nonhumans of all descriptions, ages, shapes, and sizes. At the moment Reb, Desima, and Orenth came into view, the huge crowd erupted into cheers and applause. The noise of welcome washed over them like a warm wave. They stared, open-mouthed, as the sound went on and on.

Finally, a proud looking woman with short brown hair and white robes approached them. Desima recognized her at once, for they both were from the same homeworld. "Senator Mothma!" she shouted.

Mon Mothma held up her arms for quiet. Eventually, it was achieved. "Members of the Alliance to Restore the Republic!" she cried. "I give you Reb Zakai and Desima Derata, the heroes of Ashlan Four! Let us welcome them to their new home among us." There was another round of hearty applause. "The galaxy has suffered a grievous loss, and the Empire has once again shown its true capacity for evil. In brutally exterminating the Whills, they have demonstrated their genocidal capabilities. There can be no clearer example of what we are fighting against. And, in these two young humans, there can be no clearer example of the strength and courage we need in order to fight. These people did more than just survive the Empire's attack. They won a real victory for all of us by defeating Palpatine's plans. The Emperor wanted the Whills extinct, and The Journal of the Whills silenced forever. Thanks to Reb and Desima, one of the Whills survives, and the Master Copy of the Journal itself, a priceless treasure of the Old Republic, has been saved. We welcome them as survivors, as heroes, as victors, and as fellow members of the Rebel Alliance!"

Reb and Desima walked into the celebrating crowd to meet Mon Mothma.

"Madame Senator," said Desima, respectfully taking her hand, "I see that our story precedes us."

"You made a strong impression during your brief visit to Alderaan," Mon Mothma said. "The man you spoke to was a contributor to the Journal himself. He communicated your whole story to me while you were in

transit. I hope our celebration isn't inappropriate. We all grieve for your loss, because the loss is ours as well. Yet, in this civil war, we must enjoy what few victories we have. There are...so many defeats."

"Don't apologize," said Reb, "it feels good. We want to think about the future now. Later on, we need to talk about finding a new home for the Journal in the Rebellion. We want it to continue, and we hoped...we counted on this being the best place for that."

Mon Mothma gave him a wide, approving smile. "I was hoping for that. The voice of truth needs to be heard, now more than ever before. I'm sure we can arrange something."

"There's something I want to do first," said Desima. "If you would take the baby, Senator?"

Mon Mothma awkwardly accepted Orenth. Then Desima threw her arms around Reb, and held him as if she meant never to let go. "Welcome home, Reb," she said softly in his ear. "Wherever we are together from now on...that's our home."

Reb smiled and buried his face in her long hair. It was exactly what he had needed to hear. Although he had largely overcome his fear of loss and change, he had done it by finding someone to face it with. He thought of the proverb she had quoted to him, and he reflected that it was clear to him at last that the galaxy was unfolding as it should. He was at peace with the Force, too, for Desima's faith in it had served them well. She had been right after all with all of her theories about the influence of the mystical throughout history. It had certainly helped her to find her path in life. She had gone from being a person who merely studied history to one who made history herself. He was proud of her, and grateful for all that she had shown him. Despite all of its broken dreams, it was still a beautiful galaxy after all.

"Many aspects of the story I have told will be questioned by the more skeptical readers of the new Journal. In our disillusioned and strife-filled times, there seems to be little room for events of mystery and wonder, such as I have described. But I encourage you to believe as much of it as you can, for it is in times like these that we most need a message of hope.

The new prophecy of the Skywalker is an important message of hope for all of us. The spirit of the first Jedi has foretold that the Jedi will rise again, and that the Empire will give way to a New Republic. His vision gives us something to hold on to in the dark times ahead, a reason to continue to strive for the goals of the Alliance.

It is fitting that the first volume of the new Journal should contain a story of the Skywalker, just as the first volume of the old one gave us the story of his life at the dawn of the Republic. The participation of the spirit of the first Jedi in the preservation of the Journal is an auspicious beginning for the new chronicle. The Journal has found a new home among the idealists of the Alliance. A gratifying number of beings have stepped forward to offer their services in producing the

Journal, which shall still be called 'The Journal of the Whills' in honor of its martyred keepers. The new mission of the Journal shall be to chronicle the struggle against the Empire, to tell the story of the brave freedom fighters of the Alliance. And some day, if the Force is with us, the Journal will record the story of a New Republic and a restored Jedi order.

The chronicle of the past is equally important, however. The Emperor has tried to erase our knowledge of the honor and integrity of the history we all share. The many volumes of the Journal which tell us of the Jedi and the Republic were saved from destruction at the Empire's hands, so that they might stand as a voice of truth in opposition to the lies and propaganda which poison the galaxy. Although the text of the Journal has been outlawed, we will find ways to bring it to the beings and places which need it most--those who are enveloped in the darkness of the Empire's New Order. The truth cannot be killed, and while the Journal lives on, the spirits of the Whills who died live on as well.

We must give our thoughts to the beings whose story you have read, who struggled to save that which meant more than life itself to them, and who died tragically in that struggle. They are the true heroes of this story, and we must remember them with honor and gratitude. We will never forget the martyred Whills of Ashlan Four, who died serving the ideals of our Rebellion. One Whill's sacrifice was of particular importance--that of Master Resh. At the cost of this scholar's life, the Whill species was saved from the brink of extinction. Resh's child is the future of the Whills. We must also remember the sacrifice of a brave crew of Duros who battled the forces of the Empire in the midst of the massacre. They gave their lives resisting the cruel aggression of an overwhelming force, and their last stand will not be forgotten. Among these martyrs was a mechanical being who deserves to stand with the fallen organic sentients as one who made the ultimate sacrifice for what he believed in. Without Quill, there would be no Journal today. Finally, we must give thanks to the spirit of the Skywalker. He too, is not among the living, yet he continued in his duty as a protector of those he cared for, far beyond the span of his own life. His was a burden and a commitment we can never fully understand. All of these beings who gave us the gift of a better future are our true heroes, our true saviors. They are the Preservers, and we owe it to them to treasure and share that which they have saved for us.

Long live the Journal of the Whills."

-The New Journal of the Whills, Volume One, excerpted from "The Preservers," by Desima Derata.

#### AFTERWORD

This story was inspired by George Lucas' early drafts of the first Star Wars film, wherein references to The Skywalker, the Ashla and the Bogan, the Jedi Bendu, and Padawaan Learners may be found. I have taken



some names from these drafts as well, such as King Kayos. Readers are encouraged to hunt for them. The names, Mace Windu and Usby C.J. Thape are from an early version of the Star Wars story outline written by Lucas. Part of the prophecy of the Skywalker is taken from script draft two of the first Star Wars film ("...in the time of greatest despair, there shall come a savior, and he shall be known as the Son of the Suns."). The letters of the Aurebesh are from the Star Wars Roleplaying game. Blackhole is adapted from a character from Russ Manning's Star Wars newspaper strips.

George Lucas was once asked in Starlog what The Journal of the Whills is, but he declined to define it. This story is my attempt to use creatively the hints which have been given on the subject, in order to tell one possible version of the Journal saga. I have used a quotation from The Journal of the Whills which may be found in the Star Wars novelization by George Lucas and Alan Dean Foster. This version of the Whills and their Journal is otherwise my own creation.

The poem, "'Truth,' said a traveller," is by Stephen Crane, and it may be found in the book "Poems of Stephen Crane," page 4, Copyright 1964 by Gerald McDonald, Thomas Y Cromwell Co. NY.

The proverbs of Max Erman are adapted from "Desiderata," by Max Ehrmann, Copyright 1927. Desima Derata thanks Mr. Ehrmann for her name.

This story was inspired by a tale from Jewish history. During the siege of Jerusalem by Vespasian and his Roman Legions, the Sanhedrin decided to preserve the teaching of the Jewish Law no matter what happened to the Jewish state. Despite the fact that the Zealot party had forbidden anyone to leave the city, Rabbi Johanan Ben Zakkai was smuggled out in a coffin. "Reb" Zakkai met with Vespasian, and won permission to peacefully set up an academy for teaching the Law in the town of Yavneh. Other scholars joined him, and in Yavneh, the Rabbis eventually determined the canonical order of the books of the Bible. In "The Preservers," Rabbi Zakkai's namesake strives to preserve a book which holds the importance of the Bible, from the depredations of the Star Wars galaxy's Imperial Legions. If the reader were to notice similarities between the Rabbis and the Whills, and the Talmud and the Journal, these are also no accident.

Finally, the following people are commemorated by the brave Duro crew: Web page designer Ethan Platten, Fan fic authors Charlene Newcomb and Alice Hadden, and the keepers of the Star Wars Fan Fiction Library, Deborah Brennan and Susan Gator.

-Brendon Wahlberg