

STAR WARS

The Liberators

By Brendon J.Wahlberg

As the Civil War rages across the galaxy, the last known surviving Whill hides from the Empire in the secret Rebel refuge of the Journal of the Whills.

Now the Empire has located the long lost homeworld of the Whills and enslaved the entire race.

While the Rebels plan a daring rescue, the sinister dark adept Blackhole uses the Whills as pawns in his quest for the secrets of an ancient Jedi spirit known as The Skywalker...

Prologue One: 24,000 years before the present...

The old Whill scholar sighed, settled more comfortably on the stone floor of the quiet cave, and spread out the blank scroll, pen in hand. There was no point in putting off the task any longer. It had to be done; the others were expecting it to be finished so they could roll their past up in the scroll, store it away, and begin to get on with their new lives. Onith had gotten the job by having a fair talent with prose, but that skill did not make this particular work any easier. How did one explain to the next generation why they had rejected their people and left their entire world behind? How did one justify that kind of extreme measure, that great a step into the unknown? How could Onith answer the troubled questions of children yet to come, who would wonder why they were born on alien soil, never to see their native home? At least Onith was calm enough to write. The emotions of the past several months had faded with exhaustion, and the initial excitement had been dampened by sadness and the strangeness of the new environment.

Onith gripped the pen firmly and pressed it to the scroll. "I address myself to the next generation of Whills," the scholar wrote, "the first to be born on our new homeworld of Ashlan Four. It is my duty to make a record of the events surrounding our journey to this world, so that you will understand where you came from, and why we have decided that there is no going back, not ever. We have broken completely with

the past, to become one with our new purpose. The story of our leaving begins with the Skywalker, a human and a great leader who lived one thousand years ago. This human was the first to understand and use the mystical power of the Ashla, and it gave him the ability to see into the future."

Onith paused at the use of the male gender. It still seemed strange that most of the races of the Republic, including humans, had two different sexes. It was just one more way in which the new and larger world of the Whills was profoundly alien.

"The Skywalker and his children served the Ashla and called themselves the Jedi Bendu. The Skywalker foresaw that one day, the Jedi Bendu would need scribes and scholars to record their ongoing history. He spoke a prophecy which named our people as the ones destined for that task.

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. The Whills shall tell the story of the Jedi Bendu and the Republic, which shall last for over a thousand generations.

"The Skywalker's children wrote that prophecy down, and told it to the next generation. The prophecy was passed down through two more generations, but no one knew when or how it might be fulfilled. No one had yet found any race called Whills in all the centuries of the Republic's existence. Finally, one thousand years after the death of the Skywalker, his great-great-grandchild, now an old man himself, had a vision while travelling through the Ashlan Nebula. The vision revealed how to find the homeworld of the Whills. Our world had remained undiscovered by the Republic for a very good reason. It lies far from established hyperspace pathways, in an area of the galaxy which is exceedingly difficult to navigate. But the Jedi Bendu bravely set off in their ships and trusted the vision. And so the first alien visitors came to our world. It was not to be a happy occasion."

Onith paused again. This was the hardest part to write, the most shameful part of the brief account. The Whill looked to the cave wall for reassurance and guidance. There on the stone was carved the symbol of the pact between the Whills and the Jedi Bendu. When the Whills and the humans first discovered this network of caves under the mountain, the Whills decided it would make a good home. The caves were similar to their dwelling places on their original world. They had been isolated there, living apart from their race, and the new mountain environment felt familiar, at least. Considering the sheer strangeness of everything else, that was important.

Standing together in the cave, the Whills and the Jedi had made a pledge to each other. The Whills agreed to serve by keeping a record of the Jedi history, and the Jedi agreed to protect the Whills in their new home forever. One of the humans had used an energy blade to cut the Skywalker family sigil deep into the rock to seal the pact. Looking at

the carving now, Onith was reminded of the fascinating future of discovery that lay ahead. The sacrifice had been worth it.

The Whill returned to the scroll and continued with determination. The challenge was to be succinct, and not get bogged down in the details of who committed what offense. They had chosen to use one short scroll in order to keep the narrative brief. None of them wanted any more of a record than was necessary to answer the most basic questions of their children.

"Our civilization," Onith wrote, "had long been in a decline before the humans arrived. Most of us had set aside learning in favor of self-gratification, and the ignorant and the decadent ruled over us. Only a few of us kept the pursuit of science and philosophy alive, and for our strange ways, we were outcasts, living like hermits, in contact only with others of our scholars' society. In all the world, we numbered only six hundred. We endeavored to learn more about our world, and we preserved our wisdom in a journal which was only of interest to our group. The arrival of the aliens was a stunning revelation to us. The event opened up the universe to us and gave us new hope. Our entire group gathered to welcome the visitors and to learn what they had to teach. The rest of the Whills, however, reacted quite differently.

"The humans came to us peacefully. Communication was not a problem, for through the power of the Ashla, the Jedi were able to learn our language. At their first opportunity, they told our leaders why they had come. Our people, they said, were to leave their world behind, relocate to another world, and become historians in the service of the aliens. At first, the population reacted with disbelief, and then with scorn. The very idea was ludicrous to them, and they immediately suspected the aliens of having a hidden agenda. In response, the humans demonstrated the power of the Ashla, in order to convince them of the truth. Then our people began to greatly fear the outsiders. They believed that they would be overcome by these terrible powers and forced to leave as slaves of the humans. When these fears became strong enough, the most radical Whills attacked the aliens and tried to kill them or drive them off. Although the attacks could not harm the Jedi, they caused them to turn away from our world in sorrow and prepare to leave.

"Please understand that we could not bear to part with the visitors and what they represented to us--the new knowledge, the philosophical mystery of the Ashla, and the scientific discoveries. But they would not stay, and so our small society of six hundred had to leave with them. We were afraid the humans would reject us for the crimes of the other Whills, but they accepted us, calling it the fulfillment of their prophecy. We did not leave peacefully. The radicals believed that the aliens were leaving only to gather a force large enough to take over our world. Seeing our group accepted by the humans caused our people to brand us traitors conspiring against our own world. The Jedi ships lifted off with our group aboard them, while the radicals made one last futile attack. We were now truly outcast. We were accustomed to being isolated from our people already, so it should have been easy for us to leave, yet we were full of sorrow for the others. We resented their ignorance, and we were angry about how they treated the outsiders, but we

also knew we were taking something from them which they would not be able to replace--ourselves. Losing us, they lost the best minds among them, and I do not say so out of simple pride. I was there, and I saw what our world was coming to. I believe something terrible is going to happen to it, and perhaps those of us who left with the humans could have made a difference if we had stayed. This is not a matter of my own foreboding. The great-great-grandson of the Skywalker confided this to me on the long journey to Ashlan Four: it was not only the prophecy of the future service of the Whills which brought the Jedi Bendu to us. Another prophecy of the Skywalker seemed to suggest that by leaving their world, the Whills would somehow be saving themselves. Our leaders scoffed at that idea, but I wonder, and I worry for those we left behind.

"But that is a burden for our conscience, not yours. You are the new generation, the first to be born into the Great Purpose. Read this scroll to satisfy your curiosity, but do not dream of going back to where we came from. We will not tell you the location, nor even the name of that world. Ashlan Four is your world, and the Republic, the Jedi Bendu, and the recording of their history are your lives. Give this scroll to your own children, so that they may understand the past, but teach them to look always towards the future."

Onith put the pen down, and rolled and tied the scroll. The sounds of the others returning from their explorations drifted in from the tunnels. Perhaps they had located a suitable area for living quarters. Once they were settled, Onith knew they would be eager to get on with their new work. The first project would be sorting through the huge body of mixed documents, diaries, recordings, memoirs, and notes, the product of a millennium of the family history of the Skywalker. After that, the Whills intended to let their academic natures feast on this exciting new star-spanning Republic. They had already decided to continue their Journal of science and philosophy, broadening its scope to encompass the seemingly limitless galaxy and its dazzling variety of life. It was worth it, Onith thought again. The sacrifice was worth it. The Whill couldn't help but wonder, however, in the end, whose sacrifice it truly was...

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Prologue Two: three years before the present...

The Victory-class Star Destroyer floated futilely among the beautiful orange and pink gas clouds of the Ashlan Nebula. On board the Imperial ship, isolated in his private chambers, Blackhole was brooding. Death, thought the dark adept, takes all the enjoyment out of using the dark side of the Force. A man could master that tremendous power and use it to accomplish incredible things, yet there was a steep price to be paid in the personal physical decay which came with heavy use of the power. Nor could one avoid using it more and more heavily; at first

one's strength was easily enhanced, but over time the dark side came less readily to one's aid while demanding a higher price. Blackhole believed the Sith legends which said that the ultimate price was paid in death, when an adept's spirit forever wandered the trackless insanity of a dark side netherworld. It was a fate he would do anything to avoid; he had that in common with his Master, the Emperor Palpatine. For both of them, solving that problem had been a driving obsession. Recently, however, in the aftermath of Palpatine's fiery confrontation with a mysterious Jedi on Coruscant, the Emperor had finally found a way to reverse the physical decay of the dark side. However, he did not share the knowledge with his dark adepts, leaving Blackhole to desperately continue the search on his own.

Blackhole's obsession was what brought him to the Ashlan Nebula yet again, searching relentlessly for the secret of surviving death. Once again, the star cloud seemed empty of answers. Oblivious to the level of his hopes each time he went in, the nebula had nothing but bleak frustration to offer. He could remember a time in his life when he wasn't so burdened by a fear of the end. For most of his adult life, in fact, he had been content to be one of the Emperor's Hands, and a rising dark side adept. He watched the Imperial fleet, looking for signs of treason, and coordinated the movements of the Star Destroyers. He was a cunning and patient strategist, and he loved the shadowy world within which he moved. He had a public identity within the Empire's ranks, and to prevent anyone from realizing he was a dark side adept, he had created the second identity of Blackhole.

Lord Darth Vader was the only truly conspicuous Force user in the Empire these days; the others, including the Emperor, preferred to hide their true nature for now. When Blackhole considered that practically everyone knew about the dark Jedi Sith Lord and what kind of threat he represented to them, he realized that things had to be different for a secret operative like an Emperor's Hand. As Blackhole, he could openly use the dark side to frighten the fleet captains into obedience. No one, aside from the Emperor himself, knew who he really was. As far as the captains knew, he could be anyone, or anywhere. That made him very effective. When he communicated with the fleet via the HoloNet, he used a distorter to change his image into a black, star-filled silhouette. That eerie image, which had inspired the code name of "Blackhole," served to fill the captains with supernatural dread, and ensured their compliance. When he needed to travel, he boarded his Star Destroyer in anonymity and commanded from the bridge as the holoimage of Blackhole. He had been powerful and content in that existence...

...until the events at Ashlan Four changed his life. It had begun nine years ago, when the Emperor sentenced the Whills of Ashlan Four to death for publishing pro-Rebellion literature in their galaxy-wide Journal. A Strike Cruiser was deployed to carry out a thorough massacre of the Whills. Then the Emperor sensed a major disturbance in the Force emanating from the Ashlan Nebula. Blackhole was ordered to investigate in case the cause involved Jedi who had survived the Purge. The Emperor reasoned that if anything would draw out a hidden Jedi, it would be an attack on the Whills, an ancient race long protected by the Jedi order.

Blackhole had contacted the Captain of the Strike Cruiser, a substandard officer named Emet Vespa. Vespa did not know of any Jedi activity in the area, and promised to look into it, but he subsequently failed to report back as scheduled. Blackhole was forced to go to the scene personally, the first of many visits to the Ashlan Nebula. When he arrived a week later, he found only mysteries...

The Strike Cruiser was dead in space, hanging silently in the nebula. It had no power or life support, and the entire crew had died as a result of that environmental failure. One crew member had died in a different manner. Blackhole remembered speaking to him, a Lieutenant Wiggins. Someone had killed him with a blaster. The ship had also suffered a hull breach from the explosion of a thermal detonator in the tractor beam control area. There was no way to tell who had done these things. Vespa had mentioned the capture of a pair of smugglers in his last communication, but when Blackhole arrived, neither the smugglers nor their ship remained. At least the massacre of the Whills had been carried out to completion, but Vespa had failed to destroy the monastery site from orbit as ordered.

A full investigation was begun at once, but little was determined. The chief mystery was how the Strike Cruiser and its accompanying smaller craft were so completely disabled. There was no apparent cause whatsoever. Despite this enigma, the last mission of Captain Vespa had seemed to be basically successful. In truth, however, it had been a failure.

The magnitude of the failure at Ashlan Four did not become known until half a year later, when to Palpatine's fury, the Journal of the Whills reappeared. The first entry in the New Journal was an account entitled "The Preservers" by Maxine Erman, which detailed how the Master Copy of the Journal and one baby Whill were saved. The Journal project was now well hidden with the elusive Rebels. Blackhole was intrigued by "The Preservers" because it claimed that the spirit of the very first Jedi survived within the Ashlan Nebula. Supposedly, this spirit had intervened to save the last of the Whills, neutralizing the Strike Cruiser so the baby could escape. Blackhole wanted the secrets which enabled the Skywalker to thwart death. Palpatine was also interested of course, but when they both traveled to the nebula, they were unable to sense anything. The Emperor then dismissed the existence of the spirit as Rebel nonsense and propaganda. Blackhole however, was unable to let go of the subject. He continued to investigate whenever he could, until even he had to admit it was an obsession. Even so, something critical was at stake in this matter--his own continued survival and the avoidance of the terrible ending of his own life. Terrible...if the legends about the netherworld were true. The Emperor certainly behaved as if they were true, but in searching for, finding, and not sharing a solution to the problem, Palpatine had selfishly abandoned his dark adept followers to their fates. Blackhole had returned over and over to the nebula, trying to make the spirit appear. He had to hide these efforts from the Emperor, but fortunately, Palpatine was too wrapped up in his own quest for immortality to notice.

This current trip to the star cloud was much like the others. While the Star Destroyer moved slowly through the nebula, Blackhole reached out with the Force, calling, summoning, pleading, begging, threatening, and demanding. There was never a response, not the tiniest tremor in the Force, not the faintest whisper in his mind. Blackhole often thought he should abandon the spirit and find another solution, as Palpatine had done. But he refused to give up. Something had destroyed the Strike Cruiser. There was no reason the account in the Journal could not be literally true. The Emperor denied the possibility because he believed his own senses to be the final test of truth. Blackhole was less prideful--he was willing to admit that something could be out there which he could not perceive.

The Emperor's Hand closed his eyes and concentrated. Through the Eyes of the Force, he could see the nebula in all its glory, though he was shut up in a windowless room deep inside the ship. It was an unusually large nebula, containing dense clouds of gas and dust, and a high number of young stars. The Star Cloud stretched on for a vast distance, a breathtaking panorama of luminous pink and orange, visible in all directions. Blackhole could sense the energy currents flowing from star to star, making connections like the neurons of a vast organism's mind, but there was no sense of intelligence there. There was no impression of thought or identity. There was no Jedi spirit in the stars.

Damn you, he thought, show yourself! Are you out there? Do you even exist? Did the Rebels invent you, imagine you, create you as a lie? Or...were you here once, but now...gone? Dead? Lost? I will not accept that. You must be here. Twenty five thousand years of existence, a span beyond the dreams of any mortal. Yet you achieved it. Now I want the same chance as you had. You must share your knowledge with me. I must have it. I can reward you...give you whatever you want. Do you want to return to a physical body? The Emperor knows how it can be done. A return to life...it can happen for you if you will only answer me. Answer me! Do you understand my power? I can give you life, or I can take away what you already have. The Empire has new weapons under development...weapons that can cause a star to supernova. They could be used on this nebula, do you understand that? You cannot ignore me forever. I will have what I need from you, or I'll see your life end before mine...

The sudden sound of a comm signal snapped Blackhole out of his agitated communion with the unresponsive stars. Angrily, he activated the holographic link to the bridge. As the scene came into view, Blackhole could see the ship's Commander standing next to an unshaven, rough featured man in a rumpled flight suit. A pair of black-armored stormtroopers stood to either side of the stranger, guarding him dutifully. Those on the bridge saw Blackhole as a man-sized silhouette because of the distorter. His black image looked like a doorway to open space, and inside it, a crowd of tiny stars crawled chaotically about. The Commander and the troopers were accustomed to it, but the newcomer's expression revealed both his fascination and his intimidation.

"My Lord," said the Commander, "this scout claims to have information which is of interest to you." The Commander seemed unsure of the truth of that assertion, and he regarded the scout with distaste.

"Let him speak," said Blackhole, "but be brief."

The scout smiled nervously, laced his fingers together, and gave a small bow. "Thank you, my Lord," he said, although he seemed unaccustomed to such a display of manners. "I'm sure the information I have will be very useful to you. I'm equally sure you will wish to reward me substantially for it..."

Blackhole said nothing. Swallowing, the scout went on. "In the past year, I have been searching the Deep Galactic Core for valuable ores, such as could be useful to the Imperial military. It is a dangerous area to navigate, my Lord. With a high density of stars and no established hyperspace routes, a scout truly takes his life in his hands exploring it. But on my most recent trip, the risks paid off. I discovered a new planet, rich in minerals, and from orbit, my scanners detected a strong signal from a large deposit of Chanlon."

"That is a matter for the mining guild," said Blackhole, rapidly losing his patience.

"My Lord," said the scout quickly, "I am coming to the point. I also found life on this planet. I believe you have posted a standing reward for any information relating to these creatures..."

"Creatures?" said Blackhole with sudden interest.

The scout held up a hologram cube and pressed a button on the side. The image of an alien appeared atop the cube, slowly rotating for Blackhole's inspection. "Here you are, my Lord. Notice the long snout with the bulb shaped tip? And the thick pillar-like legs? The long thin arms and the big hands? The horizontal posture? It's a very close match to the description you posted."

Blackhole peered intently at the image, and his breath quickened. The alien was a Whill.

"I don't think this is connected to that fugitive," said the scout, "the one who escaped the massacre out here as a baby, as much as I'd like to collect the bounty on that one. But it is the same species, and given that there weren't supposed to be any of them left, I thought-"

"How many are there?" Blackhole interrupted.

"Five or ten thousand, I'd say," replied the scout. "So do I collect the reward or don't I?"

Blackhole didn't answer right away. He was already considering the possibilities of this discovery. The scout must have found the lost homeworld of the Whills! An entire planet full of the creatures. The spirit of the Skywalker had come out of hiding to save the life of one

baby Whill. What would the spirit do to come to the aid of ten thousand Whills? Yes...there were many possibilities here...

"Very well," Blackhole told the scout, "you shall have your reward for both the ore discovery and the creatures. Commander, get the navicomputer coordinates of that planet from him and credit his account with the posted reward for information concerning the Whills, as well as the standard mineral rights compensatory fee. Include a twenty percent bonus for the helpful...what was your name?"

"Gannet," said the scout, bowing again. His eyes were filled with a greedy light. "Thank you, my Lord. Thank you very much."

"And Gannet...if you should decide to sell this information to anyone else, that would be a terrible mistake for you. Do you take my meaning?"

The scout touched his throat nervously. "Yes, my Lord. Yes I do."

Blackhole terminated the communication and stood alone with his thoughts. He cast his mind once more into the silent reaches of the nebula. Can you hear me spirit? Do you know what just happened? I just gained control over you. I don't have to threaten your nebula. All I have to do is threaten the Whills. Then you and your secrets will be mine.

There was no reply from the mute, endless solar winds.

Ignore me all you want for now, Jedi...because that's not going to last...

* * *

The present...

"The Old Republic was the Republic of Legend. The New Republic is the Republic of my dreams. In between the two lies the Empire. Born out of chaos, greed, and deception, the Empire has spread like a cancer across the stars. Under the cruel leadership of the Emperor, the galaxy has been transformed into a New Order of his design. The truth of the New Order is that it is neither new, for evil has always existed, nor orderly, for its goal is only destruction. The ultimate expression of the New Order was the Death Star, a battle station made to destroy entire worlds. In a clear display of its fundamental nature, the Empire used the Death Star to obliterate the peaceful world of Alderaan.

This annihilation of a living planet by that cold metallic world of death would have become the pattern of our future, were it not for the unexpected aid of the Jedi. Our salvation lies in the fact that what the

Empire tries to destroy, it can never destroy fully. Having survived the Purge against the Jedi, General Kenobi returned to strike a telling blow for freedom. Though the General was killed by the Emperor's Sith Lord, Kenobi left a legacy to carry on. His final student, aided by the Force, confronted the Death Star in battle and emerged victorious.

The Death Star has followed Alderaan into oblivion, but neither of these symbols should be forgotten. Alderaan, is not yet one year in its grave, and it still cries out to us that our danger is undiminished. The Death Star has burned to ashes, but the malignant power which constructed it lives on.

The Alliance to Restore the Republic continues its struggle against tyranny. Our victory over the Death Star has caused both our enemies and our allies to respect us as a military power. The fearsome flagship of the Emperor's Dark Lord now hunts us and harries us across the galaxy. But the galaxy is changing. Freedom loving worlds now offer their support, despite the threat of extreme punishment by the Imperial fleet. Palpatine is losing his grip on the outlying systems as the horror of his acts overwhelms apathy and intimidation. Eventually, the truth of his atrocities will penetrate even the propaganda smothered core worlds.

The Empire now focuses openly on eradicating our Alliance, but we cannot abandon hope. What the Empire tries to destroy, it can never destroy fully. Let us take heart in the example of the Jedi Knights and the Death Star. As long as even one warrior fights on for freedom, the dream of a New Republic cannot die."

From the New Journal of the Whills, volume 10, by Mon Mothma, former Senator from Chandrila.

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The Rebel courier walked calmly through the crowd of people thronging the Bazaar Deck of the luxury starliner, Kuari Princess. He paid no attention to the riot of sights and sounds around him. He strode briskly past an overweight Whiphid female trying on an expensive gown at the Arcade. He ignored the flashing display of Corusca gems in the window of an exclusive jewelry shop. He didn't even glance at the salesman inviting him to inspect the latest droid models as he passed through the aroma clouds of a dozen exotic specialty restaurants. The courier headed straight for a particular turbolift and entered it alone.

When the door closed, the Rebel glanced at the lift controls. From the Bazaar deck, the only way for passengers of the liner to go was down, to the Recreation Deck, the Lido Deck, and the cheaper decks below that. Thus there was no "up" button on the panel. The courier, however, did not need to press a button. Instead, he spoke aloud to the otherwise empty lift. "Master-Com, it's me, Dunc." Promptly, the turbolift rose two levels to storage deck two. The door opened, and Duncan stepped out into the secret home of the New Journal of the Whills.

Master-Com greeted him first. "You are just in time, Duncan. The Kuari Princess will soon leave the Adarlon System for the next stop on its cruise. Fortunately, I was able to introduce a minor problem with the hyperdrive, thus delaying our departure sufficiently for you to arrive. It is almost repaired, however. I suggest you make haste."

"Right, M-C," said Duncan. "I'll just pick up the new message packet and I'll be on my way." He patted the tall, broad orange droid affectionately as he went past. Master-Com was a good friend to the Alliance. Linked as he was to the liner's main computer, he was able to completely hide the computers and living quarters of the Journal project. As far as the rest of the ship's systems could tell, the project simply wasn't there.

Duncan walked into the nerve center of the electronic Journal of the Whills. It was a large room, packed with computer terminals and crowded with people. He paused in the doorway, then stepped back to avoid having a silver 3PO protocol unit tread on his feet. "Terribly sorry, sir. Excuse me," said the droid as it bustled past. The computer specialists paid no attention to Duncan's arrival, engrossed by their flickering screens. A couple of intelligence agents stood nearby, chatting with a security guard. Finally, Duncan spotted someone he knew would talk to him. "Hey, Reb!" he called out to the project leader. "I'm here to grab volume ten and then haul jets!"

Reb Zakai promised one of the researchers he would come back in a minute, then wove through the people and terminals towards Duncan. "Volume ten!" he said loudly. "I need volume ten. Where's that message packet?" A hand holding a data chip was stuck up next to him. Reb snagged the packet and hurried over to Duncan.

"Sorry I'm late. I couldn't help it. The Imperials -" Duncan began.

"That's okay. It doesn't matter. Here you go." Reb placed the data chip in the courier's hand.

Duncan smiled as he closed his fist around it. The courier liked the thirty year old director, and wished he could stay and talk, perhaps have a few drinks. "All right, thanks. Hey, listen, has Voren Na'al been around here lately? I've missed him."

"At our last port of call," said Reb. "He dropped off a set of interviews with the Heroes of Yavin. He's gone now, though."

"That's too bad. Maybe next time. Life of a courier, I guess. Is Desima all right, by the way?"

Reb's wife, Desima Derata Zakai, was the co-director of the project, and the object of Duncan's sincere admiration. The courier glanced at the room's back wall, where over two hundred volumes of the ancient Journal of the Whills were proudly displayed. They were not the actual volumes of the Master Copy, rescued from the monastery of the

Whills; they were scanned copies. Desima had stored the originals in a much safer location, far beyond the reach of the Empire. The sight of the Journal always inspired Duncan in any case, as did Desima herself. The lovely scholar was a contributor to the Journal as well, writing articles about the Jedi so that the galaxy would not forget them. Duncan wondered if Reb knew how very lucky he was to be married to her. Well, he probably did at that.

"She's fine," said Reb. "She's with Orenth right now. He hasn't adjusted very well to the new environment."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But I have to get going. Keep the faith, Reb." Duncan and Reb clasped hands, and the courier turned to head back to the turbolift.

"I always do," Reb called after him.

The courier left the Kuari Princess on a small shuttle to the surface of Adarlon. After determining that the luxury liner had made the jump to hyperspace, he proceeded to the local uplink station. He waited in line until he could transmit the message packet to an in-system relay buoy. The Journal of the Whills data was encrypted and hidden inside a large volume of innocuous unrelated NewsNet files.

From the relay, the data went out on a tight beam transmission to an automated courier droid in space. After receiving it, the droid made its programmed jump to hyperspace and set out along the Rimma trade route towards the core. System by system, the droid would emerge from hyperspace long enough to broadcast the data to waiting communications stations. In this way, the Journal of the Whills would be ready to place on the Rebel NewsNets for dissemination to those who most wanted, or most needed to see it.

Duncan could rest easy. For now, his job was done. He admired the new distribution system for the Journal. When the project was stationed on a planetary Rebel base, it had been vulnerable to Imperial discovery and attack. They had learned this lesson the hard way at Briggia. Now the Journal was mobile and better hidden than ever. At each point of call, the luxury starliner could drop off new Journal entries which were distributed in all directions across the galaxy. To the Empire, it must seem that the Journal was coming from everywhere. They would never be able to trace it to its true, unlikely source. Nor could they stop it from spreading. Rebel computer experts had long since devised a countermeasure to the virus which almost wiped out every copy of the Journal twelve years ago. It served the Imperials right, the bastards. They needed to learn that you couldn't keep a good truth down.

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Reb Zakai left the main Journal office to find Desima, or, as she called herself in her written articles, "Maxine Erman". The pen name was a precaution she took to keep the Empire from learning her real name and arresting her parents on Chandrila. She based the name on Max Erman, her favorite philosopher from antiquity whose work appeared in the old Journal. Reb liked to call her Maxine on the occasions when they took a break from the Journal and posed as tourists to go dancing or swimming on the Lido Deck. He loved those times, and he loved her. Their marriage of seven years was a strong one, and they still found a good deal of romance in it.

Reb saw his wife standing in a doorway which led to the vast storage bay of deck two. She was leaning against the door frame, staring at something inside, and she didn't notice his approach. He took a moment to appreciate her beauty, which had only grown in his eyes over the twelve years since they had met each other. She was still taller than Reb, and she hadn't put on much weight, at least not as much as Reb had. She had little in the way of curves, but Reb found her straight form to be graceful and elegant. He loved her long face with its sharp nose, small mouth, and large brown eyes. Desima had kept her hair long, and it hung straight and glistening to the small of her back.

Reb himself was of medium height, and he had a large frame. His face was round, and he had blue eyes above a small nose and a wide mouth. He and Desima made an odd looking pair, and Reb used to wonder why she was attracted to him. He had come to understand that when a person looked at a loved one, they saw the spirit inside, and treasured that in spite of any physical flaws.

"Maxine," he said, and she turned and smiled at him. The smile was brief, however. Reb knew that something was troubling her, and he could easily guess what it was. "Volume Ten is on its way," he said, stepping up and slipping an arm around her slim waist. He looked questioningly up into her eyes. "What is it?" he asked. "Is it Orenth? Where is he?"

Frowning sadly, she nodded, and with a turn of her head, she directed his attention to the echoing, dimly lit storage bay. Reb peered into the shadows, casting his gaze across a mountain range of boxes and other containers, piled to the ceiling with narrow passageways winding between them. He thought he could see Orenth in the distance, sitting on a box in the gloom, not moving.

"He just sits there for hours, brooding," Desima said in her soft, musical Chandrilan accented voice. "Talking to him does no good. He doesn't seem to hear anything I say." They both knew that Orenth was neither male nor female, that the young Whill was actually both sexes combined. Whill physiology was such that they could chemically induce a pregnancy and become a parent without a partner. But Orenth was the last of the Whills, the lone survivor of the massacre at Ashlan Four. The Whill lived among humans and other species now, all of which had at least two sexes. For the convenience of everyone else, Orenth had agreed to be spoken of as belonging to the male gender. "I'm worried about him, Reb. I think he's depressed."

"Are you sure it's not just regular teenage behavior? You know, sometimes they're self-centered, lazy, and rude, other times they're loving and helpful. I know he's only twelve, but remember, Whills mature faster. If he was a human, he'd be in his mid to late teens. He could just be having one of those moods teenagers have. Tomorrow, he could be happy. You know how fast their moods change, or can't you remember back that far?"

"I'm only thirty three," she said, annoyed.

"That's old enough for a teenager to seem like a different species," Reb insisted. "Besides, he is a different species. I have trouble getting along with him too. Just this morning, in fact, I was trying again to teach Orenth the scribal arts Master Resh taught me. I could use his help on the written Journal, you know. I'm falling way behind on it. He got all upset with me for trying to teach him, snuffled, sighed, and walked out on me."

"I think it's more than that," Desima said softly. "I'm his mother. I notice things you might not see. No offense, but it's just the way men are. I think it started when we first came to the Kuari Princess six months ago. Before the Empire attacked us and drove us off of Briggia, he was happy. Now he has these sad moods more often than not. He has trouble sleeping, he's lost interest in helping out with the tasks of the Journal... He tries to hide it from us, but I think this is a serious problem."

"I have noticed some of that," Reb claimed defensively. "I attributed it to the new environment. On Briggia, he had his freedom, but here... You and I can go out in public on the lower decks, even leave the ship, but Orenth can't risk being seen by a bounty hunter. A Whill is kind of hard to miss."

"Not that he hasn't tried," Desima said ruefully. "That time he tried to disguise himself as a Chevin so he could sneak out into the Interworld Marketplace, I nearly had a heart attack. Thankfully you caught him before anyone realized what he was."

Reb chuckled. "It was a pretty poor costume. Anyway, I've been trying to think of some ways to make this environment more interesting for him. Something to keep him occupied."

Desima looked at him thoughtfully.

Reb took a step back. "Wait a minute. Hold on. I know that look."

"What look?" Desima asked innocently.

"The look that says wouldn't it be great if we had a child, a human child of our own. And you're thinking Orenth would enjoy helping to take care of the child. Am I right?"

"Well...what about it?" Desima asked.

"Hey, we've had this discussion before, remember? I wasn't ready then and I'm not ready now." Reb tried unsuccessfully to keep the defensive bitterness out of his voice.

"When are you going to be ready?" she asked. "We don't have that many more years left, or at least I don't."

"Listen, do we have to talk about this right now? I'm not really up to it."

"We have to talk about it sometime," she pressed. "It's something I feel very strongly about, Reb. I haven't had very many dreams in my life. Once, I wanted to become a Jedi, but it turned out I couldn't have that. So I ended up studying about the Jedi instead, and now I just write about them. I feel like I was cheated out of something more meaningful by fate. Well, children are important to me too. On Chandrila, I was raised to believe that children are the greatest blessing two people can share together. So I met you, and I fell in love, and what happens? I get a baby Whill to take care of. Don't get me wrong--I love Orenth dearly, but he isn't truly mine, not like our own child would be. He's Master Resh's child, and if the universe was at all fair, then Resh should have had the chance to raise him.

"I want my own child, too. Even though I can't feel the Force very much, I can touch life deeply another way, through love. I love you, and I want to love our child as well."

Reb frowned and jammed his hands into his pockets. "I understand how you feel, but I don't think this is a good environment for a child. If it isn't good for Orenth, how can it be good for our own child?"

"What environment would be good?"

"Well...any environment that doesn't have a Rebellion going on in it."

"You want me to wait until the war is over?" Desima asked incredulously. "Who knows when that will be!"

"Desima, I'm sorry," Reb said. "Briggia was a really bad experience for me. It brought back memories of losing my parents, and of the destruction of the monastery. Imagine if we had been with a new baby on Briggia, with stormtroopers everywhere, and things blowing up all around us...what if that baby had died, or...what if we had died and left the baby alone? I've mostly come to terms with the death of my parents, especially since I found those records of the way they died...but I don't want my child to go through what I did, or what Orenth did for that matter."

"We're not going to die," Desima said loudly. "We're on a cruise ship! There's a swimming pool, and--and a--a slafcourse downstairs!"

"And there's the Journal of the Whills upstairs," Reb said firmly. "You know what the Emperor wants to do to the Journal. If the Empire found out where we were, they'd blow this ship out of space with everyone on board. I'm sorry. It's just not the right time. I don't know when it will be."

Desima stared at him, her eyes locked onto his, but she said no more. Then they stood apart for a while in silence.

Finally, Reb asked, "What do you think we should do about Orenth?"

"I don't know," Desima answered tiredly. "I've asked Simon to try to talk to him. He said he'd come down later to do it."

"All right," said Reb quietly. "I have some things I should attend to for now...I'll see you later..."

Desima stood with her arms crossed, looking down at the floor. She nodded absently.

Reb hesitantly turned and walked back towards the office. He felt a lot of sympathy for his wife, even if he couldn't agree with her. She always wanted to dive right into things, while Reb tried to wait for the right time. Reb had made them wait a whole five years before they actually got married, so they could establish the Journal again and let Orenth grow up a little. Reb wanted to be sure that neither of those things was the reason they were staying together. He had to be sure it was based on a real, abiding love. Now she was being forced to wait for a child of her own. Reb understood her frustration, but no matter how much he loved her, there were some things he just couldn't give her.

The Whills had a saying, "The strongest legs can only hold up one Whill." It suggested that each person could really only be responsible for himself. Despite this wisdom, it felt as if the weight of the entire Whill species rested on Orenth's young legs. The grief of this burden had caused the last of the Whills to sit alone in the stillness of the storage bay. The dark lifelessness of the dusty room matched the contents of Orenth's thoughts, and it was much easier to bear that environment than the busy, loud, and bright Journal offices.

The only survivor of the Ashlan Four Massacre was still not fully grown. Orenth's usual horizontal posture brought the Whill's back to half of Desima's height. Like other Whills, Orenth had smooth, blue-gray skin and pillar like legs supporting a rounded body, which tapered to a bald head with a long snout. There was a stub of a tail peeking out from beneath Orenth's blue skirt, and long thin arms emerged from the short sleeves of a brown shirt that hung down open in front. The adolescent had Master Resh's green eyes and long agile fingers, but wouldn't have a beard or indeed any kind of hair for many years to come. A Whill could live to be three hundred years old, and Orenth was only twelve...but Orenth was already seeing life as a hopeless failure.

As far as anyone knew, Orenth was the last Whill alive in the entire galaxy. Orenth's parent, Resh, had left a set of instructions behind before dying, and the young Whill had memorized them long ago.

"Carry on our race, and try to discover the next great purpose of the Whills," Resh had said, no doubt failing to understand the magnitude of what was being asked. Perhaps the old scribe could be forgiven for such an irrational demand. Resh had been dying after all. But Orenth could never escape the burden of Resh's final words. It was a seemingly impossible task. Bring back the Whill species from the brink of extinction by having children? How many children would be enough? Would ten remove the Whills from the ranks of the endangered species? Would fifty? There had only been about two hundred Whills on Ashlan Four; perhaps they had been endangered all along. There was also the fact that Orenth's children would have a very limited genetic diversity. Was it even possible to restore a species from a gene pool of one?

And then there was the responsibility of finding the next great purpose of the Whills. The old purpose had been the creation of the Journal, and it had sustained the Whills for 24,000 years, until the Empire killed the Jedi and outlawed the Journal. How could Orenth find anything to equal that? The young Whill was not even sure of its own purpose for living. Perhaps that was normal for a teenager, but Orenth's life was far from normal. The impossible goals set by Resh served only to limit the future. Where a normal teenager would have many life choices to make, Orenth could only see a set path ahead, even if there was no indication of how to follow it, or of where it might lead.

Orenth's greatest fear was that the path could lead nowhere...except to death. Images of death haunted Orenth's thoughts both day and night. Reb and Desima knew nothing of their child's obsession, and Orenth wanted it that way. If they knew about the nightmares and the constant thoughts about death, their worries and concerns would be too much to handle on top of everything else.

Thoughts of dying often crept in uninvited, scuttling into the shadows of Orenth's mind on tiny insect feet. The Whill would be trying to get through a normal day, and suddenly, unstoppably, the poison of those thoughts would spread across everything, paralyzing Orenth's will. You exist now, the thoughts would whisper in a coldly intimate internal voice, but someday you will not. That time will come. You cannot stop it. All that you know, all that you feel, all that you are, all that you think, even these thoughts, all will be gone. There will be no blackness, no silence, no sleep, for there will no longer be any you to perceive such things. You cannot even imagine what such nothingness will be like, because your own imagination will not be a part of it. There will be no memory, no future, no hope, no returning...only absence, the absolute void of death.

Even those terrifying thoughts, however, omitted the worst aspects of the situation. If Orenth died, it would not be just the death of an individual, but the death of a whole species. Resh's last wishes would go unfulfilled forever. Orenth believed there was a good reason to fear such an outcome. The strong possibility of an untimely death became

clear during the evacuation of Briggia base, when the bodies of Rebel soldiers littered the ground. In Orenth's nightmares, these soldiers reached up with shattered bloody hands as Reb and Desima ran carrying Orenth away from the fires and the explosions, away from the hopeless pleas for help of those left behind. So many had died to allow the base command staff and the Journal of the Whills to escape. Orenth could have been one of them. The young Whill could also just as easily have died as a baby on Ashlan Four, when the stormtroopers systematically chased down and executed every Whill known to live there. Only the fact that Orenth had just been born during the attack made them think, upon counting the bodies, that none had been missed. Even then, the ship carrying Reb, Desima, and Orenth to safety had been nearly destroyed by the Imperials inside the Ashlan nebula. Only the intervention of the spirit of the Skywalker had saved Orenth that time.

Why have I survived? Orenth often wondered. Why didn't I die like the rest of my people? What made me so much more worthy than they were? There were no answers. Orenth sometimes felt worthless in comparison to all of the wise, learned Whills who perished. Reb and Desima wouldn't understand that. They loved their child too much for that. No one in Orenth's tiny world was really able to understand. It was easier for Orenth to be alone, hiding on the storage deck among the giant crates in the semi-darkness. The others expected "him" to work on the Journal. "His" presence inspired the others, making their project still a Journal of the Whills. Orenth no longer enjoyed giving them that comfort, and wondered if the Journal needed a Whill at all, or if everyone should just admit that it was now a Rebel human enterprise. It sometimes angered Orenth that Reb had his child's life all planned out. He wanted Orenth to become a scribe, just as Master Resh had wanted when Orenth was born. Orenth didn't need another reminder of a lost parent and a lost world. The Whill was already jealous that Reb had gotten to be raised by Resh when Orenth had not. But there was no point in trying to explain that to Reb. No one was going to understand. Orenth didn't want to try, just to be left alone.

The sound of footsteps suddenly echoed among the crates. Someone was approaching. It seemed as if they weren't going to give Orenth any solitude, either. Orenth turned to see who it was, and felt an odd relief that it was neither Reb nor Desima. The well dressed, gray-haired human walked over to where Orenth was sitting and leaned against a crate, arms crossed over the sunburst pattern on his expensive shirt. He smiled like the old rogue Desima said he was, and stroked his elegant moustache.

"My boy, is this really the smartest place for you to do your thinking?" he commented. "What if someone were to come looking for a spare engine part and discover you sitting here?"

"Hello Simon," said Orenth sullenly. "I'm not worried. Master-Com would tell me if anyone was coming in here."

"Yes, well, I'm sure he would at that. That's good thinking, Orenth. It always helps to have someone watching your back. Master-Com helped me out a few times as well." Simon Greyshade was the secret owner of the Kuari Princess and the patron supporter of the Journal of the

Whills. Orenth had taken a liking to the human, perhaps because both of them were trapped on the starliner, in hiding from the Empire. But the Whill was in no mood for talking at the moment. Simon soon realized that Orenth was not going to say anything else. Seeming to accept that, he settled on a crate and quietly took in the gloomy atmosphere of the chamber.

Without looking at the Whill, Simon began to speak in a confidential tone. "Did I ever get the chance to tell you the whole story of how I ended up here, Orenth?" Simon didn't wait for an answer. "I have no doubt mentioned that I was the Administrator of The Wheel, which was perhaps the greatest gambling space station in the galaxy. The Wheel generated huge profits, and the Empire left it alone in exchange for the truly vast tax revenues, which helped to fund their military. There was a stunning amount of money flowing around that place, Orenth. A man like myself...well, I've been described as corrupt, but I prefer to say practical. It seemed prudent at the time to divert certain excess funds into a private account for safekeeping, in case of an emergency."

"Embezzlement," said Orenth distantly.

"Well, if you must call it that," said Simon. "One thing I did with the money was to secretly purchase controlling interest in this starliner. And you should be glad of that, my boy. I was glad myself, because an emergency situation did indeed come up. A little under a year ago, the Empire became greedy and reconsidered their policy of leaving the Wheel alone. After that little fiasco with their Death Star, they needed the credits for an intensified military buildup. I heard they took over the gambling planet of Vorzyd Five at the same time. On the Wheel, they hatched a scheme to make it look as if the Rebels were stealing Wheel profits. The Empire planned to take over in the name of protecting the place. The problem with the Empire is that they're not smart enough to be subtle. Their plots always fall apart and they have to resort to brute force to win. And this, my boy, was no exception.

"You've heard of Princess Leia Organa, haven't you Orenth?" The Whill mumbled an affirmative. "When I was in the Senate, I developed an attraction to her. I suppose you're wondering how she felt about me. For starters, there was 'cynical', 'arrogant', 'contemptible'...and it goes downhill from there. But the one which actually bothered me was her saying I was never the type to be committed. I would have been committed to her, but I never had the chance. So...who should show up on my station just when the Empire began to play its political games?" Simon paused, but Orenth didn't answer. "Princess Leia, of course. She was a wanted Rebel, so I saw an opportunity to get what I wanted. I made a deal with the Empire to cooperate with their takeover if I could keep the Princess for myself. She hated me for that, of course. You realize, Orenth, how very lucky you are to be exempt from such problems of the heart? Having only one sex is a real advantage for your kind.

"In any case, the arrangement fell to pieces when the Imperials couldn't keep their plans a secret from the Rebels. I suddenly had a difficult choice to make. In the Senate, I had an undeserved reputation for treachery. I prefer to say flexibility. When I saw the way things

were going, I chose to betray the Imperials and leave the station. I could see that there was no future there for me..." Simon stopped talking for a few moments, watching Orenth.

Finally, the Whill reluctantly asked, "And the Princess? What happened to her?"

Simon smiled regretfully. "I realized I could never convince her to love me...I set her and her friends free and elected to depart alone. There was just one obstacle. The Imperial Commander, understandably disappointed by my decision, wanted to cut short my escape--and my life." Simon shook his head. "Orenth, my boy, never attempt hand-to-hand combat using a grenade. That's good advice for you to remember. I survived, obviously, but if Master-Com had not been there to save me, I would not be speaking to you today. It turned out that Master-Com was quite the Rebel sympathizer. After he and I escaped The Wheel, I found myself a wanted criminal, so I came here to hide out. Then, I thought I was being careful, but I let my habits get the best of me. Someone recognized me in the Grand Dining Room; fortunately, he was a Rebel who offered not to turn me in. Back on the Wheel, I had helped the Rebel cause, so evidently they felt they owed me a favor. They did demand something in exchange for keeping my secret, however: a new home for your Journal project. I think it was a fair deal at that. Between Master-Com and the Princess, I must admit I have come to favor your side in this Civil War. If I can't have Leia Organa, then perhaps I can do my part for her cause. Of course, I have my own stake in this as well. Someday, this war will be over, and the Senate may return. I would like to be a Senator again, if I can live that long." Simon sighed and cracked his knuckles. "I hope you enjoyed that story, my boy. It looked to me as if you could use a bit of a distraction. Mostly, though, I want you to know you're not alone. We're both in the same predicament. Neither of us can show our faces in public, and we have to stay cooped up in this luxurious cage for the foreseeable future. But at least we're not facing it alone."

Orenth looked at him. With an unsteady voice, the Whill made an effort to open up a little. "I'm afraid, Simon. The Empire might just arrest you, but they want me dead. Because of me, the massacre of the Whills isn't finished. As long as I'm alive, I'm like a symbol for inspiring more Rebels. I keep expecting a bounty hunter to find me and shoot me on sight, no matter how well I'm hidden here. And I guess I'm lonely too. There's nobody my own age, just the adults, like my parents. I'm the only one of my kind...I don't feel like I fit in at all. Sometimes I wish I could just leave and go far, far away. Simon? Why don't you leave? If you feel trapped, why don't you get on a ship and go somewhere beyond the reach of the Empire, like I wish I could?"

"Let me ask you that same question," said Simon.

Orenth thought for a moment. "I suppose, then I'd be totally alone," the Whill said sadly.

"There you have my answer as well," Simon replied. The human looked uncertainly at the Whill. He seemed like he had something to say, but he was hesitant. "Orenth...what if I told you that there might be a

place where you could fit in? What if I said that you may not be the last of your kind?"

Now Simon had Orenth's attention. "Simon, what are you talking about?"

Greyshade continued to look serious. "I don't want to give you any false hopes, but there is a rumor spreading around the fringe that someone has discovered the long lost homeworld of the Whills. I found out just a little while ago. I have yet to tell the others...I thought you should be the first to know." Orenth's eyes widened. A thrill went through the adolescent like the shock of a sudden awakening.

Simon held up a cautionary hand. "It's just a rumor at this point, but perhaps it bears investigating. I have already made a few inquiries and called in a few favors, and I may have more information soon. But Orenth...before you get too excited, there's something else you have to know. Evidently, the Whill homeworld was found by the Empire. Now, you may get the idea of finding out the location and going there personally, but I'd like you to take my advice as your elder who knows what the Empire is capable of."

"But Simon," Orenth protested.

"This rumor could represent a trap set for you personally," Simon went on, "and even if the rumor is true, it would be a terrible risk to go there. If the planet is in Imperial hands, I guarantee you it won't be a healthy environment for Whill kind."

Orenth's hands were spread helplessly. "But Simon, if what you say is true, I can't ignore it. You can't know what it's like to be the only one of your kind. I would need to go to them. I would have to help them."

Simon heard the pained urgency in Orenth's voice and considered the young Whill. Orenth wondered what the human saw--perhaps someone on the edge of maturity, still very vulnerable, but having the potential for strength. The Whill wanted the former Senator's respect very much at that moment. Simon nodded, and Orenth saw some of that respect in his eyes.

"All right, Orenth. After all you've been through, you deserve to find out the truth at the very least. Beyond that, we'll see. If there are more of your people out there, they're going to need a lot more help than just one troubled teenager. I suggest you consider enlisting the Rebel Alliance to help. I think they already feel guilty for not being there for your people the last time."

Orenth nodded solemnly. The young Whill was feeling a little better. For once, the chill, whispering death thoughts had fallen silent. Suddenly, Orenth could imagine an answer to the problems handed down by Master Resh. There was a pathway out of the darkness, and who cared if it led through more dangers from the Empire? Orenth had survived those before. Perhaps there was a reason for that survival, and

Orenth was going to learn it soon. Then an icy voice slipped into Orenth's thoughts like a knife. And perhaps, it said, this is going to be the time they get you, once and for all...

One week later, Desima came to Orenth at bedtime with some news. The Whill sat up in bed as she walked in, carrying a large book. "I spoke to Simon today," she said, sitting down next to her adopted child. "He seems to think the rumors are true, that the Empire has discovered the Whill homeworld." She placed a comforting hand on Orenth's smooth forehead. "But there is a problem with the information...none of Simon's sources have been able to determine the location of the planet. It seems to be a closely guarded secret. No doubt they wish to avoid any interference from the Alliance. I also spoke to Mon Mothma again. She told me that without the missing information, there is nothing her people can do."

"Doesn't anyone know where the homeworld is?" Orenth demanded worriedly. "Somebody has to know. Isn't there any clue written down in the Journal?"

Desima patted the book in her hands. "I'm sorry to tell you there isn't. This is the third volume of the original Journal. Inside it is a short account copied from an older document called 'The Leavetaking Scroll'. If you were more devoted to your studies, you would already know about it," she scolded gently. She opened the volume to a page she had marked. "This account explains that when the Jedi came to the homeworld of the Whills, only a small number of the Whills agreed to leave with them. The rest treated the Jedi very badly, and your ancestors departed, feeling such disappointment in their people that they purposely forgot their place of origin, so as to reject them forever. I'll leave this here for you to read, and you'll see for yourself that it contains no mention of the name or the location of the homeworld. Several scholars have concluded that it must lie in the unexplored Deep Core, where hyperspace navigation is extremely perilous. The Alliance could spend the lives of hundreds of scouts over many decades, and still not find that planet."

Orenth slumped and sighed. "I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up so high..."

Desima took the Whill's hand in her own. "It's too soon to give up hope, Orenth. Reb and I were talking about this, and we may have come up with a solution. We were looking over a set of interviews which Voren Na'al did with the Heroes of Yavin. In particular, we were interested in the one with Luke Skywalker, the young man who destroyed the Death Star by using the Force. Luke was also the last student of Obi-Wan Kenobi, the Jedi hero of the Clone Wars. It's wonderful to see the Jedi beginning to return, just like the Skywalker foretold. The spirit said that some of the Jedi were in hiding, waiting for the day when their order can rise again. Well, that started us thinking about the Skywalker, and his invitation for us to visit him again someday."

"Is Luke Skywalker related to the Skywalker himself?" Orenth interrupted.

"No, I don't think so," Desima mused. "Just because they share the name doesn't mean they're related. Look at Reb--he really is a descendant of the Skywalker, and his last name is Zakai. No, the Skywalker name has just been used a lot throughout history. The Skywalker was such a famous legendary figure...he was the first of the Jedi, and he helped to found the Republic. A lot of Jedi and non-Jedi families took his name in order to honor his memory, even though there was no blood relationship between them. Luke just has a common name, but it is fitting that it turned out that way. That name deserves to continue to be honored, never to be forgotten. It was one of the greatest moments of my life to meet the first Jedi's spirit. I can still remember what he told you, Orenth, when you were just a newborn. He said to grow up well, and bring back your people. He wanted you to come back and see him, and let him know what you did with your life, the life he saved." Desima ignored Orenth's cynical little snort. She knew her child thought he hadn't made much out of his life, but in her opinion, Orenth could be proud of overcoming such adversity and leading a relatively normal life in spite of it all.

"As Reb and I were talking, we wondered about those words, 'bring back your people.' We have always believed that the spirit meant the same thing that Resh did, that your children would have to replenish your kind. But in the light of Simon's new information, we wondered...Perhaps the spirit knew about the Whills still on the homeworld. Perhaps he foresaw a role for you in bringing them back to all of us. We remembered that it was the Skywalker himself who guided his descendants to seek out the Whills, so he must have known the location of their world. He may be the only one outside of the Empire who has that knowledge. So, you see, Orenth, there is still a reason to hope."

Orenth hugged her and smiled, trilling softly with satisfaction. "We are going to see him, aren't we?"

Desima smiled too. "I think so. It will be just you, me, and Reb. We'll take the Bantha Tracker to the Ashlan Nebula, and hope for the best. For now, you have to get some sleep. I'll leave the Journal on the table for you." She stood up and pulled up Orenth's blankets, like she had when the Whill was little. But she knew her child was maturing fast. The experiences which lay ahead would only speed up the process. That realization only intensified her desire for a human child of her own, and she felt a pang of sadness that Reb was so unyielding.

"No more nightmares, all right?" she said. "Only good dreams tonight."

"I promise," said Orenth. "Goodnight, mother."

Desima left the room and turned off the light for Orenth. She went about her business for a while, then returned to check on her son's sleep. Listening at the door, she heard Orenth snuffling and whistling

in the dark. That meant more nightmares. She sighed helplessly and forced herself to walk away.

* * *

Excerpt from the Thila interview with Luke Skywalker, submitted by Voren Na'al for future inclusion in the Journal of the Whills;

VOREN: So let me see if I have this straight before we go on. You believe that Ben Kenobi was so strong with the Force that he was 'taken' by it into another 'stage' of life...and now he talks to you from there.

LUKE: Well, don't hold me to any of that. I'm not exactly an expert on these things. I just know what I experienced.

VOREN: Maybe I can help you. A good historian has to do his research, so before I came here to meet with you, I did a search in the electronic Journal of the Whills on the 'Jedi afterlife.' Have you read much of the Journal yourself?

LUKE: I don't exactly get much time for reading.

VOREN: Well you should, you know. I can give you my copy, if you want. I have more than one.

LUKE: Sure...I guess...

VOREN: My search turned up a lot of material, but most of it is very mystical and hard to understand. It makes me wonder if the Jedi writers themselves knew what they were talking about. Anyway, it appears that there are many ways for a Jedi to die. Why don't I list some of them, and you tell me if anything helps you to understand what happened to Obi-Wan Kenobi.

LUKE: Sure. It's worth a try.

VOREN: All right. Most Jedi who die are said to merge with the Force. Some non-Jedi philosophers call it 'becoming part of the All.' It is also possible, apparently, to continue to exist as an individual within some kind of structure, anything that can organize the energy of the spirit. There are references to Sith Temples and the like. Next,

there are some who know how to go to some kind of light side netherworld. A few of these Jedi can supposedly speak to the living by remaining attached to a specific person. They call that person a spirit anchor.

LUKE: That last one sounds like it could have happened to Ben, but I don't know for sure. There's too much that I don't know.

VOREN: Maybe you can find another teacher somewhere.

LUKE: I wish I could. But all of the great warriors died at the hands of the Emperor, and Darth Vader. Including my father...

VOREN: I don't want to make you deal with any painful subjects right now. Perhaps we should continue this later.

LUKE: Yes...that sounds like a good idea.

* * *

Desima and Reb piloted the Bantha Tracker into the softly glowing expanse of the Ashlan nebula. The refitted Lantillian Short Hauler was the same ship they had once used to escape from Ashlan Four. Before entering the nebula, they flew over that planet to learn what had happened to the place where Reb had grown up and Orenth was born. Reb was saddened to see that some time in the past, the Empire had bombarded the Monastery from orbit, reducing half of the Mountain to rubble. Orenth's reaction was harder to read. The Whill simply stared at the images of destruction on the monitor as if already used to them. Desima felt sorry that such a historic location had been ruined, and she wondered if any of the passages beneath the Mountain remained intact. The location might make a good Rebel base at this point.

Without landing and risking contact with the predatory Vlids, they left Ashlan Four and flew into the Ashlan Star Cloud. Ahead of them, filling the viewport with delicate colors, the nebula stretched on for many light years. A few dozen young stars burned brightly within the gas and dust cloud, like scattered lamps in a pink and orange fog. Twelve years ago, they had been chased into the nebula by Captain Vespa's Strike Cruiser, then rescued by the powerful spirit of the Skywalker. Now they coasted in, unhurried and without fear. Once a trio of harried refugees, they had become a family, secure in their devotion to one another.

As Desima had suggested to a skeptical Reb, all three of them now mentally called out to the spirit they hoped was there. We have returned as we once promised, and now we need to speak with you...we need your help...answer us...please answer us...

At first, there was no response. Orenth became openly dejected, but Desima cautioned the Whill to be patient. She trusted the spirit to answer them. Meeting the legendary Skywalker had been an incredibly fulfilling moment in her life. It vindicated all of her studies on the Jedi. She had always explored the influence of the mystical throughout history, and seeing the ancient legends come true before her eyes was the greatest reward a scholar could hope for. She now knew the truth behind the mystery.

She shared an understanding of the Force with her husband, and it had great personal meaning for both of them. Once, Reb had resented the Jedi for letting his parents die at their side, but he had since made his peace with them. Now he shared her feeling of hope that they were witnessing the return of the Jedi. Reb had also learned that he was a descendant of the Skywalker himself, though he had no real Force sensitivity. As an extremely distant relative of the first Jedi, Reb had even managed to fulfill an ancient prophecy that the "Son of the Suns" would come to the aid of the Whills in their time of greatest need. The Skywalker, who had spoken the prophecy long ago, had envisioned the savior of the Whills to be a great Jedi. The Emperor's Purge had altered the prophecy, leaving Reb Zakai, a humble scribe, to salvage the last of the Whills and the Master Copy of the Journal. Reb had greatly downplayed his identity as the Son of the Suns, preferring to make very little of it. Few people were even aware of it, because Desima had left it out of her account, "The Preservers." She had left out quite a few things, about which the Empire had no need to know. She had included the Skywalker and his new prophecies about the fall of the Empire, the rise of the Jedi, and the New Republic, because everyone needed to hear about those things. Now, however, with the Skywalker not responding to their mental calls, she suddenly began to worry that something had happened to the spirit as a result of the Empire learning about him. She thought he was capable of defending himself, but still...

Then, to the relief of Desima's whole family, the spirit of the first Jedi began to appear on the ship's small bridge. Just like the first time, it began with a blurry ripple in the air, which coalesced into the ghostly shape of an old man. Aside from a wispy long beard, shadowy long hair, the suggestion of robes, and bright pinpoints of light for eyes, the spirit had no distinct features. He was without substance or clarity, formed from a trick of the air and the light. There was a distant whispering murmur, which passed for a voice.

"Welcome to my domain," said the spirit.

"Well," said Reb, "what do you know. It worked."

The spirit looked at them one by one. "I remember you," he said. "Reb Zakai, my distant son...and Desima Derata...and Orenth." The spirit seemed to stare right into the young Whill. "On the outside, still partly a child, but on the inside...perhaps older than you should be."

Orenth was trembling, and couldn't seem to reply. Desima stepped in to cover for the Whill. "It is so good to see you again, ancient one. Thank you for answering us. It means so much to us."

"I hoped you would come back," said the spirit. "I have been dormant since the last time we spoke. My consciousness, all that remains of me, has been spread across the stars of this nebula. I have slept in the suns, and time has meant nothing to me. But I awoke for you when I sensed all of you within my domain. How long has it been? How much time has passed for you?"

"Twelve years," said Desima.

"But we have used them well," Reb put in. "We did what you wanted. We kept the Journal of the Whills alive. We raised Orenth, and we're working on helping the Whill race to return. In fact, we need your help on that last one. You see, it turns out that Orenth isn't the last Whill after all. There's a planet somewhere, which is the first Whill homeworld. Recently, we found out that the Empire had located it. We don't know what happened to the Whills after that, but knowing how the Empire treated the Ashlan Four Whills, we're all afraid for them. The Rebel Alliance wants to help any way they can, but right now, we don't know how to find their homeworld. Desima and I thought that perhaps you might be able to tell us where in the galaxy it is."

"The Whill homeworld," said the Skywalker, sounding deeply troubled. "Ashla forgive me."

The Ashla was the original name given to the light side of the Force by the Skywalker. Desima was not surprised that he still called it that.

"I have made a terrible assumption," the spirit said. "I believed that the Whills on that world had all died long ago. When I sent my children there, I foresaw that many of the Whills would refuse to leave. I foresaw a great cataclysm striking their world, destroying all of those who stayed. There was nothing I could do for them but mourn their passing and protect those who allowed themselves to be saved. But in the end, I could not even do that. And now I find that my vision was wrong--some of them still remain alive on their world, after all the thousands of years which have passed." The spirit fell silent for a while, seeming to be deep in thought. Or perhaps, Desima guessed, deep in feelings of regret.

Orenth finally found the courage to speak. "So...can you help us? Do you know where the Whills' planet is? Can you tell us how to get there...I'm--I'm sorry," the Whill stammered, "I'm not sure what name to call you."

"The Skywalker was my title," the spirit answered gently, "not my true name. But I have forgotten my name, as well as most of what I looked like. It is the price I have paid for such a long existence in this galaxy." The spirit faced Desima. "Does the Journal of the Whills record my name?"

"No, I'm sorry. It does not."

"Then 'the Skywalker' will have to do," he said sadly. "I have forgotten much, Orenth, but I do remember how to go to the world of the Whills. I will give you that information, on one condition."

"Just name it," Reb said expectantly.

What the spirit said next surprised them all. "I will go with you to that world and do what I can to save the Whills from the Empire. This is my chance for redemption. I was responsible for their long service, but I failed to stop their destruction on Ashlan Four. Trapped within this nebula, I was unable to help them. I have existed here in this place for too long, and it is time for it to come to an end. Now I have a chance to right an ancient wrong, and I must take it."

"But...how is that possible?" asked Desima. "How can you leave here at all?"

"I will need your help, Desima," replied the spirit. "To leave the nebula, I must join a living host--I must share your body with you. I am able to exist in the nebula because it provides a structure to organize and preserve my essence. Your mind will serve the same purpose for me, just as it does for you. There will be one important drawback, however. Here in the nebula, I am more powerful than I was in life. I have the energies of all my stars at my disposal. It was nothing to be able to stop the Imperial ships that were chasing you. But once I leave here, I will be greatly diminished, perhaps even less powerful than I was in life. But I have no choice. I must do whatever I can for the Whills. Do you agree to help me in this way, Desima?"

Desima hesitated. She needed time to think. This was so unexpected. What would it be like to share her mind? Could it be reversed? What would happen to her during all of this?

Orenth was ready to make the decision for her. "This is much more than I was hoping for. It could be all we need to make the mission work. Please say you'll do it. Please say yes."

"I need some time, Orenth," she said crossly. "Will it be safe for me?" she asked the spirit.

"It will be safe. We will exist side by side, and you will not be harmed. You will merely carry me with you. You are free to say no, of course, but then my need will remain."

"I know." She paused, staring nervously at the hazy apparition. "Can I have one night to think this over?"

The Skywalker bowed to her, then faded slowly from the bridge. His soft voice lingered in the air for a moment after he was gone. "It shall be as you wish..."

Desima lay down alone in one of the spare cabins that night. She needed the solitude to think about the Skywalker's request. But she was

also disturbed by thoughts of her latest argument with Reb. It had happened right after the Jedi spirit left them, and of course it had been about children. Reb hadn't been sure that playing host to the spirit was a good idea, and Orenth had gotten upset at the idea of leaving the spirit behind. The Whill said that their chances of success would be much greater with him along. Desima wasn't at all sure what to do, but she had to agree that the spirit would be a great asset. There was even the potential for him to help the Rebels with the larger Civil War against the Empire. He could train new Jedi Knights, like Luke Skywalker, and hasten the end of the conflict. At that point, Desima has reiterated her desire to start a family, noting that bringing an end to the war should dispense with Reb's objections once and for all. She admitted to herself that she had steered the conversation in that direction in order to provoke him, and it had worked.

His reluctance to have children honestly hurt her. She wished he could realize how wonderful children were and see how irrelevant his reasons against it were. There were hardships no matter when one had a child, but the benefits outweighed the difficulties.

And so they had argued, but nothing new was said. They stopped before they hurt one another too much, and decided to give each other some space for a while. Anyway, Desima had an important decision to make, Reb said, and he was right. As the prospective host for the spirit, she had to decide by herself. She did trust the spirit, and she knew a lot about the man he once was from her studies. Perhaps she even knew more about the man than the spirit was able to remember.

She assumed the spirit was choosing her as a host because of her minor Force sensitivity. She felt honored and excited. Her mind...side by side with the mind of the first Jedi. It would be a unique opportunity to learn more about the life of this legendary figure, straight from the source. In the end, it was her ingrained desire for knowledge that decided her. She concluded that she couldn't pass up the chance. Sitting up on the bunk, she called out with her mind to the spirit.

"I am here," said a faint voice. She thought she could see the suggestion of bright eyes hanging in the air nearby.

"This thing you want me to do," she said. "Can it be reversed?"

"It can, at any time."

"Then I'll do it."

The spirit didn't reply. She could no longer see his eyes in the dimly lit cabin. "Where did you go? When is this going to happen?"

I am here said a voice that came from inside her head. She jumped in surprise. He was already within her. She felt no different, but she knew she hadn't imagined that voice.

That was rather sudden, she thought accusingly.

I am weary of waiting. Now you may truly make your decision.

This is all right, Desima thought after a moment. It doesn't hurt in any way. I think I'm already getting used to it, in fact.

That is well, Desima, for the Whills need our help very much. We must contact your Rebel Alliance and begin to make our plans.

Feeling excited and a bit unsteady, she stood, left the cabin, and entered Reb's room. Apparently, he too was unable to sleep. He looked at her uncertainly.

"I think we're all finished here, Reb," she said. "It's time to be on our way. I made my decision, and the Skywalker is with me."

He frowned in concern. "Are you all right?"

"Don't worry. I'm fine. It's just a voice I can hear in my head, like my own thoughts."

"Well, I suppose we have what we came for. And neither of us is getting any sleep." He pushed the covers aside and stood up resignedly. "Let's go plot our course out of here."

* * *

Reb Zakai was now officially late for the Rebel briefing on the mission to the Whill homeworld. He had been wandering around Kulthis base, lost in thought over the issue of having children. Despite the pressing problem of the Whills, despite the strange presence of the Jedi spirit, he had been able to think of little else. Fortunately for Reb, when the discussions turned into arguments, the spirit thoughtfully went dormant and gave them their privacy. Reb was glad of that. He did not want a man who had once had twelve children to be on the side of his wife.

The situation with Desima as a host still unnerved him. It was just plain eerie when she became silent and mentally conversed with the Skywalker. She had done that a lot on the return trip. Apparently, she was teaching the spirit things which he had forgotten about himself.

Everyone in the small group was distracted, and if the mission planning had been left to Reb, Desima, and the still depressed Orenth, nothing would have been accomplished. Fortunately, the Rebel Alliance had willingly stepped in. After learning the location of the Whill homeworld, the Alliance sent recon starfighters there on a data gathering mission. The intelligence that they brought back was analyzed, and a special rescue team was assigned to get the surviving Whills off planet to safety. Reb knew little about the mission plans, but he had been told a few things about the special team. They were known as "The

Liberators," an Alliance task force devoted to freeing slaves of the Empire.

Apparently, the recon team had found evidence that the Whills were actually enslaved on their own world. The Liberators were very experienced at dealing with slavers; they had saved Wookiees on several occasions. One thing about them seemed odd to Reb: the Liberators were all Chevs, a humanoid race from the planet Vinsoth. Chevs were quite rare in the galaxy because on their homeworld, their race was enslaved by the pachydermoid Chevin species. Free Chevs tended to be extremely introverted, yet here were about two hundred fifty of them gathered together under one leader and devoted to a very public cause. Reb could only hope that such a task force was up to this particular challenge. He had been hoping for a large well-armed fleet of ships, not a small commando group. Reb decided to withhold judgment until after the briefing, admitting that he lacked any real military knowledge. Perhaps then Mon Mothma's choice would make sense.

However, due to his wandering and brooding, he had gotten very lost in the underground tunnels of Kulthis base. Believing himself to be headed for the command center, he had found himself in the main hangar. A female pilot with reddish-purple hair spotted his confusion and pointed him in the right direction. Brie, her name-tag had said. She was cute and helpful, Reb thought, but now he was missing the start of the briefing.

When he finally stumbled into the briefing room, he was greeted by the curious stares of many of the violet and black eyed Chevs. A presentation by two young Rebel pilots was in progress, and the Chevs quickly returned their attention to the central console unit with its holographic projector. Desima gestured for Reb to hurry and take a seat next to her. He brushed past three Chevs, two males and a female. All of them looked rather intimidating to Reb. He looked them over as he sat down, trying to put his finger on what made him so quickly uncomfortable with them. Physically, they were a little shorter than the human average, and they seemed muscular and compact. They all wore a one piece jumpsuit, padded at the torso, elbows, and knees. The clothes were tight fitting, with lots of hooks, rings, and other attachments on them. Each Chev had on tough boots, and kept a blast helmet next to them with a pair of rugged gloves inside.

Their clothes were the least interesting thing about them. Both the males and the females had a wild variety of tattoos, area skin dyes, and hair coloring. Only a few had plain blonde or white short hair. Still, Reb had been around strangely dressed or decorated people before, and he didn't think that was what put him on edge. No, it was something about the Chevs themselves. Reb unobtrusively studied their faces. They had pale skin with very pronounced features. Their foreheads sloped into thick brow ridges which shadowed their dark eyes. They had hollow cheeks and wide strong chins. Like their bodies, their necks were thick and muscular. The women's hips seemed too wide, the men's shoulders too narrow. There was something rather...primitive about them. That's it, Reb thought, immediately feeling guilty. The Chevs reminded him of scientists' drawings of his own primitive human ancestors. Reb reminded

himself that the Chevs weren't human. They were "humanoid." Knowing that didn't dispel his feelings. He still felt nervous sitting with people who looked so uncivilized. Reb glanced at Orenth, who was listening attentively to the presentation. He wondered why it was easier for him to accept a truly alien being, than one who only looked a little different than himself. He decided to wait and see what these people were really like before passing judgment.

Following Orenth's gaze to the center of the room, Reb began to listen to the human pilots. He was surprised by how young they looked. The shorter one looked about seventeen. He had dark eyes, dark hair, and a hawk like nose. The taller one couldn't be much older than twenty-one. She had a serious expression and a disciplined stance. Her hair was brown with a streak of white on one side. Between the pilots was a wide holographic image of part of a planet's surface and the space above it.

"The Victory-class Star Destroyer is in a geocentric orbit above the garrison site," the young woman was saying. That made a direct fly-over impossible, but our recon ships were able to make an approach flying low on repulsors, using the terrain as a shield against their sensors. We gathered our data on foot, coming as close to the garrison as we could, then returned to our ships and left the planet the same way we came in. As far as we know, we weren't detected. The Star Destroyer never budged from its position the entire time."

She tapped a few controls, and the holimage zoomed in on the surface. The simulation was Reb's first glimpse of the Whill homeworld, and it wasn't a terribly inviting place. The surface was covered with broken rocks and boulders, and there were deep cracks in the ground everywhere. The image centered on a vast, deep crater, the remains of a violent asteroid impact from long ago.

"This crater," the woman continued, "is the home of a standard Imperial garrison, located on the east side, about halfway up the four hundred meter slope. There's a death fence all around the crater's rim--that's nearly eight thousand meters of energy fencing and observation towers. They must really want to keep something in. That something is the entire Whill population of the whole planet. That's still not a lot; there are at most five thousand Whills, total, judging by the life readings we took. The Whills are concentrated at two different locations, depending on the time of day. First, here in the northwest area of the crater, there are a lot of small structures. We assume these are crude living quarters for the Whills. Second, there is a deep excavation in the bottom of the crater on the west side. We wanted to determine what the Whills were doing in the second location, and Commander Reen showed us what to look for in our sensor data." The young pilot indicated one of the female Chevs who was sitting up front. Reb wasn't able to get a good look at her yet. "We had recorded a high frequency signal which turns out to be used to broadcast commands from a director unit to a set of slave collars."

"We also routinely collect physical data from the environment, atmospheric content, energy readings, weather conditions--it's all automated. Once we realized the Whills were slave labor, we analyzed our

mineral readings and found a strong Chanlon signature. For those of you who don't know, Chanlon is an uncommon and very dense metal used in a variety of alloys requiring great strength. One of these alloys is Phobium, for coating the cores of large scale power plants, like the ones in planetary shield generators and space stations. Another one is Havod, which is used in spaceship hulls. Chanlon ore is very valuable to the Empire, and we think they have the Whills working in some kind of mine to dig it up." Reb watched as Orenth grimaced at the news. It didn't sound good for the Whills at all.

"All right," the woman said to her companion, "Tank, you want to tell them what they're up against?"

The younger pilot made the hologram zoom in the garrison. It was an imposing building, a towering hexagonal fortress with thick walls, several turbolaser turrets, and a high central tower.

"Welcome to the Empire's little home away from home," said Tank, "the standard Imperial garrison, used to intimidate and oppress the locals on thousands of worlds. If this one is equipped according to specs, and we don't know if it is, then you're going to face quite a welcoming party. First of all, here on top of the wall, they have six laser cannons and three turbolasers. They can hit anything in the crater with those. They'll also have up to forty TIE fighters, ten walkers, ten scout walkers, and forty speeder bikes. Last, but not least, they'll have eight hundred stormtroopers. I'm just glad they didn't know we were spying on them. They would have wiped us out, no question. It is possible that this garrison isn't so well equipped, it being so far from Imperial space. But don't count on it. The Empire firmly believes in overkill no matter where they are." Tank stared doubtfully at the Chev soldiers. "I hope you have a good plan, because you're going to need it. They're not likely to miss you taking all their Whills away."

Tank's companion glared at him. "Commander Reen will now detail her battle plan," she said. She and Tank took their seats. Reb frowned. Obviously, Tank had no tact, but he did have a point. That fleet of ships he was imagining was beginning to look better and better.

Reb got his first good look at Commander Reen, the leader of the Liberators, when she stood to speak. She had black eyes like holes in her face, under a thick brow ridge. Her face seemed weathered, and oddly sculpted. Her white hair was cut short, close to her head. She projected an air of authority and seriousness. Like the other Chevs, her body seemed out of proportion--forehead and chin too pronounced, neck too thick, fingers too long, hips too wide...Reb wondered when he would get used to it.

"We can handle the Empire," said Reen. Her voice was deep and throaty. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her combat jumpsuit and paced back and forth in front of her team, meeting the eyes of one Chev after another. "The Imperials on this world have been guarding helpless slaves for a few years now. They have seen no combat in all that time. They will be bored, lazy, and weak. They will not be prepared for us."

Reen pointed to the hologram. "Our first concern is the Star Destroyer in orbit. Our analysis suggests that its presence would be a waste of Imperial resources unless it is being used to take the Chanlon away from the planet. We expect it to depart periodically, giving us a window of opportunity to attack on the ground. We can approach the crater from the west, using the terrain to hide us. There are broken rocks and boulders, and many cracks in the ground. Our first obstacle will be the death fence. We will bring ranged weapons into position near the fence here on the west side, above the mine pit. Another assault team will approach the crater from the east, taking a position above the garrison. From there, they will prepare to launch grenades into the TIE fighter launch chutes and onto the turbolasers and laser cannons. At the signal, both groups will attack at once.

"On the west side, we will use more grenades to topple a wide section of the fence. Using flechette launchers, we will dispose of the guards on the closest observation towers and catwalks. We will also sever the catwalks at these two points, cutting off the approach of more stormtroopers who could attack us from above. Part way down the crater slope, at the bottoms of these observation towers, we will attach stair ladders and make them ready to be lowered down into the pit. We will use synthrope for our own descent. Once we are in the mine, we will dispatch the guards with sleep inducer pistols specific for humans. That will nullify them and their slaver devices.

"On the east side of the pit, we will send our forces up the existing ramps to the crater floor and set up a line of defense at the edge of the pit. We will assemble our E-Web blasters and aim them at the garrison. The stair ladders will be lowered, and when the Whills are organized, they will be evacuated up the slope. The counter attack from the garrison may involve walkers and speeder bikes coming across the crater floor, with squads of stormtroopers on foot. We will hold our defensive line as long as possible, using the E-Webs, flechettes, blaster rifles, and grenade launchers to fight back. When we must retreat, I will set thermal detonators to demolish the ramps leading down into the pit, and prevent them from following us."

Reb was startled. Reen had just indicated she was going to be on the front line, in the deadliest portion of the battle. He knew of few human commanders who cared to do that. Then again, Reen struck him as a rather battle-hungry individual. It was evident in her aggressive tone and stance. He realized he had begun to feel distinctly uneasy about her.

"The Imperial forces will not be as threatening as they seem at first glance," Reen continued. "They have their weaknesses which we can exploit. Our assault on the garrison from above will neutralize their long range guns and prevent their fighters from taking off. The walkers are restricted to the crater floor, and cannot pursue us beyond that. As always, the stormtroopers are vulnerable to our ranged weapons, and they too must contend with the rough terrain. As we bring the Whills up the stair ladders and lead them into the badlands, the most significant pursuit we can expect is from the speeder bikes. We will have to fight

them off as best we can. But we will not be on foot. As soon as the assault begins, several of us will pilot a string of linked cargo skiffs towards the crater from a hiding place just behind these hills. When the skiffs intercept the Whills, all the slaves will be loaded on and can ride to our ships for escaping off-world."

Reen finished and returned to her seat. None of the Chevs offered any comment or had any questions. Reb looked around unhappily. The implications of the battle plan were becoming quite clear to him. Quite a few of the Chevs were going to die. And so were a lot of the Whills. Reb stood hesitantly. "Commander...I have a question."

Reen looked at him respectfully. "You are Reb Zakai, a hero of Ashlan Four. Ask your question."

"Well, your plan is certainly well thought out, but it seems to me that there are going to be heavy casualties among the slaves we're trying to rescue. Is that acceptable to you?"

Reen crossed her arms on her chest. "To a slave, Reb Zakai, death is one form of freedom. A slave would rather die while striving to be free, than stay a slave. We will save most of the Whills by using this strategy. No more than thirty-five percent should be lost. That is acceptable to me."

Reb sat down without replying. Thirty-five percent? That was almost two thousand dead Whills. Reb was appalled, but at the moment, he didn't know what to say. He knew he didn't have the authority to change the plans, and besides, he was no tactician. Two thousand Whills. He thought Ashlan Four had been bad with two hundred.

At some unspoken signal, the meeting broke up and the Chevs collected their gear and filed out of the briefing room. That left Reb, Desima, and Orenth sitting with the two human pilots. Orenth sat and brooded, lost in thought, paying no attention to the others. Reb leaned forward and addressed the Rebels. "I'm Reb. This is my wife, Desima. You know about Orenth, I imagine."

"My name's Tank," the young man said. His companion opened her mouth, but Tank spoke first. "Everybody calls her 'Slaughter'."

The woman frowned at him. "Call me Shally," she said to Reb and Desima.

"You two seem a bit young to be taking the kind of risks you described on that mission," Reb said.

Desima agreed. "That's right. Don't your parents worry about you?"

"Neither of us has any parents left," Tank said bluntly. "Mine were killed by some local savages called the Sandpeople. Shally's mother died a long time ago, and her father died a year ago in one of the Empire's little military projects."

"You're both orphans?" Reb asked. "I was an orphan too. My parents were Freedom Fighters who died fighting alongside the Jedi Knights in the Emperor's Purge. But I had a very hard time dealing with the loss. How did you two manage to do so well growing up? Because you obviously turned out pretty well."

Tank put his feet up on the chair in front of him. "It wasn't easy. I had to be a street thief to survive. But then I found sort of a father figure who helped me to turn my life around. Shally had it a little easier. She still had her father until recently. Still, we managed to find each other, and we found the Alliance. The Rebellion is full of orphans. Look at Luke Skywalker. Same thing. The Empire kills our parents, but their kids make sure it doesn't go unpunished. You find a way to survive and make your life count for something." Tank stood up. "Listen. I gotta go. It's been nice meeting you, and I hope it's not the last time. This mission you're going on...I mean, I flew against the Death Star, and I still think you're all crazy. That Commander Reen scares me..." Tank edged towards the door. "...she seems almost as dangerous as Shally is." He slipped out of the room before his partner could find something to throw at him.

Shally turned to Desima. "I have to go, too, but tell me, what's it like to be married? Is it really nice? Because I've been thinking about Tank and me...he still has a little growing up to do, but..."

Well, thought Reb, that was a rather forward question. He supposed that few Alliance pilots were shy, in any case. He wondered what his wife would say. Reb looked into Desima's eyes, and saw a hint of the pain that lingered from their arguments.

"Well," Desima said carefully, "it's not always full of happiness, but there is a joy in it which is one of the finest things in life. I think love is a process. It's never finished. If you love each other and can agree to always work on the relationship together, and never give up, then you should consider marriage." She looked at Reb again with a small smile. "I have no regrets about my decision."

Reb felt a familiar warmth as he was reminded that his wife still loved him despite their differences. He gently smiled back at her.

"All right," said Shally. "I have to give it a lot of thought, but it's nice to see that it can work out for the two of you, at least. Good luck on your mission, and may the Force be with you."

Once Shally left the room, Desima looked steadily at Reb. "It certainly appears as if the loss of their parents did not cripple them for life. In fact, I would hope that any child that we had would do so well, even if we were to die unexpectedly."

Lulled by the sweetness of the moment as he was, it took Reb a few seconds to realize that she was renewing her attack on his objections to having children. "Now wait a second, just because those two managed to make it on their own -" he began, but then he realized she wasn't

listening. Her eyes were shut, and he knew from the tilt of her head that she was hearing the voice of the Jedi spirit inside. It still bothered him when she 'went inside' like that. He tried to be patient until she finished, but the silence dragged on. He was about to try to engage the sullen Orenth in conversation when Desima spoke up.

"The Skywalker wants to see the ships that we're going to use to evacuate the Whills. Do you want to come with me?"

Reb paused, frowning, but then he decided it was a blessing to have avoided another argument. "Sure, all right. Orenth? Are you coming too?" The Whill didn't answer.

"Orenth, what's the matter?" asked Desima.

The Whill looked up solemnly. "Maybe it would be better to leave my people where they are, rather than get so many of them killed."

Reb sighed. "I don't know the answer to that, Orenth. I really don't."

* * *

Writings from the Whill homeworld: Part One

A letter from Sool of Sartus to the survivors of the southern cave network in Fanar, concerning the Punishment Doctrine.

GREETINGS in the name of the new world Prophets of Ashla. The discovery of your lost population has been a momentous event which has filled us with excitement. With so few of our people remaining on Baram-U-Whill after the terrible punishment by our God, the addition of a new group, however small, replenishes our hope for the future. I understand that you survived, as many of us did, by escaping the devastation in underground caves. The depths of our world were your womb of safety, but now it is time to be born into the light, into the new Baram-U-Whill which has risen from the wreckage of the old. This new world is one of enlightenment, order, and understanding. I can only imagine the spiritual poverty in which you have lived, not knowing the meaning and purpose of our punishment three hundred years ago. With this letter, and with the help of the prophet who is coming to live among you, you will at last learn the truth and see the shape of our future. The generation of my parent heard the message of the God Ashla concerning our punishment and eventual redemption. My parent and the other Prophets inscribed the message on a sky stone, which we preserve to this day. This holy text is known as the Punishment Doctrine, and though I cannot send you the holy object itself, I can write the words it contains in this very letter so that you may read and understand.

The genesis of Ashla's terrible judgment was the visit to our world of aliens known as the Jedi. These servants of the God brought us a commandment to leave our world and follow them to serve the God in the heavens. But the people were selfish, impure, and unbelieving, even when the Jedi demonstrated the power of the God. Only a few holy ones among us, who became known as 'the Departed Ones', chose to follow the Jedi to the realm of Ashla. The rest of the people refused the commandment. Ashla was an angry and vengeful God, choosing to punish our people by smiting our world with destruction from the sky. A few aged Whills among you may remember the day of Punishment. There was a vast fire in the sky, and the God's fist struck the world. Dust and smoke filled the air, and the sky turned black. A great thunder filled the heavens, and when the ground stopped heaving, the terrible mark of Ashla's fist was left upon the surface, an enormous hole which remains to this day. In the time that followed, many died. The world grew colder, and the plants we grew began to die. The rains failed us, and the sun grew dim. Only those of us who went into the caves survived, eating the insects there during the years of darkness.

But Ashla is also a compassionate God. Ashla desired that we understand the reason for these events--that we understand Ashla's will. And so the Punishment Doctrine quotes the very words of the God:

"The Whills are being punished for their failure to serve me. Those with the most impure hearts, with no chance of redemption, died under my hand of fury. Those whose hearts may yet be purified by suffering and be redeemed, were spared. This is the Time of Punishment. The time will end when the whole population is pure and ready to serve me. Then the Departed Ones will return and bring word of a second chance to leave this world and serve me with holiness in my Realm."

These are the words of Ashla. You must take these words into your hearts and seek purity. We are still living in the Time of Punishment. The Departed Ones have yet to return. This is because some of us are not yet purified. Your own group, which is only now hearing the God's truth, may be one of many yet to be found in the ruined corners of our world. Until all the people have heard and believed the message, the Return cannot come. The discovery of your group brings us all a step closer to redemption. The Prophet who will come to you will teach you the ways of purity, so that you may practice them at all times. This teacher comes on our authority as the rightful leaders of the new world. You will respect the Prophet's instructions in all matters, as if they were our own. Furthermore, you will be given the opportunity to share your food and other resources with the Prophets in return for their holy guidance.

This guidance will save you. It will save us all, for only when every last one among us is ready to be saved, will any of us be saved. The least among you is as important as the greatest of the Prophets in the plan of Ashla. With your help and devotion, we will all be closer to the end of suffering and the return of the Departed Ones. Greet the Prophet in honor for me, and accept my thanks for your coming efforts to be pure. May Ashla forgive us all.

Yours in purity,
Sool of Sartus

* * *

Commander Reen inspected the cargo bays of the huge slave ships alone. There is a grand irony, she thought to herself, in the fact that these old ships once carried my people into bondage on other worlds, and now they will carry the Whills to freedom. What they had were twenty very old Chevin slave cargo ships. During the time of the fall of the Republic, when chaos was claiming many systems, the exporting of Chev slaves by their Chevin overlords was at its peak. They were carried in these cavernous, forbidding box-like vessels. Reen herself had never been on one, but she knew of many who had. None of them had ever returned to Vinsoth.

The ships were simple in form, with a huge engine in the rear, a giant cube shaped cargo area, and a small bridge. The cargo cube could be detached from the framework which connected the engines and the bridge. In the event of a slave revolt inside it, the cube's jettisoning would leave the escapees floating helpless in space.

The interior corridors were Chevin sized, and seemed immense to Reen. The deck of the cargo cube she slowly walked through was an oppressive space filled with row upon row of cells. The Chevs were once packed into these locked stalls for transport. By present standards, the ships were very much outdated, with poor shielding, slow speed, and low powered weapons. All twenty vessels had been rotting on a junk planet ever since they were captured by the forces of the Old Republic. One of the Chevs freed during that raid retained his knowledge of the old retired ships. Years later, when he joined the Liberators, he told Reen about them. She decided that despite their flaws, they would be well suited for carrying the enslaved Whills to freedom.

Staring at the dirty individual cells with all of the chains on the walls, Reen felt the familiar anger that drove her and her team on their missions against slavers. The Liberators had their beginnings in the slave settlements of Vinsoth, where the Chevin Masters harshly treated her people, keeping the entire population in servitude. Before gaining her freedom, Reen had been the governor of one settlement. With her authority as the oldest female, she guided her people and negotiated with the Chevin for small comforts. But in all of her 157 years, she never felt she had any real power at all. She felt helpless, sickened at the cruel laws, torture, and public executions. When rumors reached her about a Rebellion against the Galactic Empire, she decided that she should escape Vinsoth and return with Rebel help.

She stowed away on a ship and escaped at the next spaceport. Once she was free, she was surprised to learn that the other freed Chevs she

could find were doing nothing to help their people. Some of these selfish ones were even successful in business--acting just like the Chevin! Some of them even served the Empire. Disgusted, Reen knew that her people needed to gain the Alliance's sympathy and then their aid. This was not the way to bring that about. She realized that it was up to her.

Eventually, Reen did make contact with the Rebels, and she joined them. Instead of the prompt help she had hoped for, however, she was given reasons why Vinsoth could not be a priority for the Alliance. The Chevin masters had close ties to powerful Imperials, and the planet would be defended by the Empire if the Rebels attacked it. The struggling Alliance did not have the resources to free and to keep control of an Imperial-aligned planet. Disheartened but determined, Reen made a deal with the Rebel command. If her people fought for the Rebel cause, in return, a restored Republic would free the Chevs. Her first task was to find some of her people to fight with. Reen and some other Rebels intercepted several slave ships carrying Chevs to the black market, to Imperial Governors, and to Imperial construction projects. They freed the Chevs on board, and Reen told them that they now owed their freedom to the Alliance. She told them about her deal, and convinced many of them to join a special unit she was creating, known as "The Liberators." She even successfully appealed to some of the already free Chevs to join her. Using the methods of the Alliance Special Forces, she trained her Liberators to be experts at missions to free slaves. They proved their ability by saving large groups of Wookiees on several occasions.

The Chevs were largely accepted in the Alliance, but Reen knew there was a subtle prejudice against them. She had first noticed it when the Alliance leaders told her why they could not yet free Vinsoth. Most of the Rebels were human, and their prejudice boiled down to this: the Chevs were only humanoid. Somehow, it was easier for them to accept an entirely alien ally, like a Mon Calamari, than one who was just little bit different. There was even an offensive attitude in the word, humanoid, implying that the humans were the basis for comparison and the standard. How would they like, she wondered, to be called Chevoids? Reen was aware that her people looked primitive to the humans. Sometimes the humans were condescending and insulting as a result. But anyone who insulted the Liberators with a remark such as "Caveman," paid dearly for it. Her Chevs were strong, muscular, quick, and agile, easily able to take down a human of any size.

Reen supposed that it didn't help matters that her people kept to themselves and were slow to warm to strangers. This was an adaptation to slavery whereby they avoided drawing attention to themselves. While the Chevs were perceived as being introverted and cold, in truth they were a passionate people. Among her own kind, Reen could laugh and relax in comfort. The Liberators were highly devoted to each other and to their cause.

With human sympathy a bit harder to come by, even in the idealistic Rebellion, the Chevs had to work harder to prove themselves in return for the future liberation of Vinsoth. Reen knew, however, that even if all of her people were killed, the Alliance would still keep its promise.

Every one of the Liberators was prepared for death. Reen felt that any slave would rather be free, and death was a form of freedom. Sometimes a slave would rather die than stay a slave. Thus, slaves who died in the missions of the Liberators were still "freed." If her Chevs died, they were simply repaying the Alliance for their freedom. If slaves such as Wookiees or Whills died, they were still better off than they were. The Wookiees had affirmed this, and Reen assumed the Whills would feel the same way. The Empire was a cruel master, in some ways even crueler than the Chevin.

Reen knew that the human, Reb Zakai, objected to her battle plan, but it was the only way. Given the defenses of the Imperials, a loss of life was unavoidable. She believed that the Whills who were going to die would gladly give their lives to save so many of their kind and bring an end to their enslavement. The Chevs, as a people, always looked to the future with hope. Now was the time for the Whills to taste some of that hope. Reen gripped the bars of the cell in front of her and glared at the empty chains. Death had nothing to do with it. This mission was all about life...

* * *

The small fleet of Chevin slave ships moved through hyperspace, penetrating the Deep Core of the galaxy, and following the complicated route specified by the spirit of the Skywalker. It involved a series of jumps that navigated around the profusion of stars in the area. Reb, Desima, and Orenth were traveling on the same ship as Commander Reen and most of the Liberators. A few Chevs piloted the other nineteen ships, which could be slaved to the "flagship" if necessary. It was a decidedly tedious trip for Orenth, who exhausted the possibilities of exploring the slave ship by the second day. As the arbitrary ship's night fell, Orenth crept out of the sleeping corner and began to wander among the empty slave cells. It was easy to get away from Reb and Desima, who were absorbed in an earnest discussion of some kind. The Whill couldn't sleep in any case, being consumed with worry over the fate of the Whill slaves. The cargo area was mostly dark, but Orenth liked it that way. It was a little like the cargo deck of the Kuari Princess. The silence was conducive to thinking, and the darkness concealed the dirt and chains, the sight of which disturbed the Whill. In each cell Orenth passed, slaves had been imprisoned and robbed of all hope. Crowded, standing in their own filth, hungry and despairing, the slaves must have simultaneously feared and anticipated death. Orenth went down two floors, and then began to hear a faint sound of voices. Following the noise, the Whill eventually saw a flickering light. The voices were chanting and singing.

Rounding the corner, Orenth found a large group of Chevs, gathered in an open space at the center of the deck. A large shallow pot rested on the floor among them. An eerie bright red fire filled the pot, its flames soundlessly rising close to the ceiling. Commander Reen sat on

the floor against the wall with most of the Chevs, but some of them were on their feet dancing around the fire. Everyone was singing a complicated melody, and the words were not in Basic.

Reen saw Orenth right away, and smiled. She gestured to the Whill to come and join them. Orenth hesitated, and almost slunk back into the shadows, but Reen insisted. The Whill picked a careful path among the seated Chevs and nervously sat next to the Commander.

"Welcome, Orenth," she said. "Listen with me and watch our dance of destiny. We act out the story of our past, and our future as a people. It puts our spirits at peace before we go into battle. I know you do not understand our language, but perhaps you will grasp the essentials of the story even so. Let yourself appreciate the beauty of the music and the dance." Reen fell silent and continued to watch the dancers. As far as Orenth could tell, the dance depicted a hunt of some kind. Some of the Chevs were costumed as Chevin hunters, and Orenth noted with embarrassment that even these crude disguises were more convincing than the one the Whill once used to sneak out on the Kuari Princess. The costumes captured the massive, wrinkled, and somewhat ugly bodies of the Chevin. Large boots suggested their thick legs, and special gloves resembled their three fingered hands. Long masks captured the typical Chevin face, with their black eyes and long snouts, which nearly reached the ground.

Other Chevs represented the hunted. The Chevs were fast and clever, but the hunters had the advantage of numbers and sophisticated weapons. As Orenth watched in the glaring red light of the fire, all of the hunted were captured and gathered within a roped off area of the room. The chanting, which had been wild and desperate, now grew mournful and slow. The Chevs were seen to bow down to the hunters, who strutted powerfully about beyond the ropes. Occasionally, a Chev would be removed from the symbolic prison and "beaten" by the Chevin, lying as if dead on the deck. The Chev "slaves" sang a song together that Orenth didn't understand at all. It had a hopeful feel to it, however, and Orenth began to feel oddly uplifted. When the song was over, the "slaves" moved as one group to the ropes and tore through them. The Chevin, seeming full of fear, fell down before the advance of the Chevs. The Chevs spread out into a great circle around the fire, and linking hands, they walked slowly, singing a triumphant sounding song. When the last notes faded away, the Chevs broke up into small groups and spoke quietly amongst themselves. Reen looked expectantly at Orenth.

The Whill stirred, sighed, and wrinkled its snout. "Would you tell me," Orenth asked quietly, "about the enslavement of your people? I want to have some idea of what my people are going through."

Reen nodded. "What would you like to know?"

"How hard it was... how you survived it... I guess I'm wondering what kind of shape my people will be in when we find them."

"The situations will not be the same," said Reen. "The Empire and the Chevin are not the same masters. But perhaps there are elements

common to all slavery, which may help you to understand. And you will need to understand, Orenth. The effects of slavery do not end when physical freedom is obtained. You may have to help your people in ways that you do not imagine. Long enslavement can change a people. For us, generations of slavery caused us to accept it as our fate. We became mostly docile. A few of us were able to hope or try to escape, but on the whole, we complained without action. I suppose I was one of the unusual ones. There was some resistance of course. There always is among slaves. We were able to talk freely when alone in the settlements. We also had a communications network disguised as trade between settlements. We worked in secret to make technological devices, anything that could help us. But our resistance never amounted to much. The punishments of the Chevin were a strong deterrent."

"What did they do to you?" Orenth asked nervously.

"When we broke one of their many laws, they would torture us, then publicly execute us. They were ruthless, and they ruled over us harshly at all times, commanding us according to their whims."

Orenth slowly nodded. "And how did you live with that?"

"We had our families, we had each other to hold on to. As a governor, I was sometimes able to protect my people in small ways. Other times, I was helpless. I suppose our religion helped us as well. Our beliefs tell us that someday we will have our freedom, and more, that we will rise to power and dominate the galaxy."

"Won't that make you just like the Chevin?" Orenth asked.

"I know I won't see it in my lifetime," Reen said reflectively. "I hope we never change that much, but sometimes I wonder. I've seen things already that make me worry..." She was quiet for a long moment.

"And the Whills?" Orenth prompted her. "Do you think the Empire is torturing and killing them?"

"Perhaps," she said, "but if they have broken your people's spirit, they do not need to kill. The Empire cares more about absolute control than murder, and I think they want your people alive to work in their mine. Dead or injured Whills cannot dig up their precious metals. No, Orenth, I do not think they are dying, but they may be dead in other ways, inside. The Empire's slave control devices can crush all hope in a being. Their slave collars and director units, their stun batons, their neuronics whips, their stun cuffs... there is nothing the Whills can do against these things. You need to be prepared to find your people in very bad shape. Digging in mining tunnels is punishing work in and of itself, but under the conditions of enslavement... I fear that the Whills have it worse than we did on Vinsoth. The Chevin used us for some manual labor, but often our tasks were technical, working on droids, transports, and computers. Your people are being forced to work at hard labor in a harsh environment. Even if the Imperials are not killing them, the conditions may be."

Orenth looked sadly at her. "I think I was hoping... maybe to hear something better than that from you."

"You asked, and you need to hear the truth. But think of this. You are bringing hope to your people. You are trying to help them to win their freedom. When I became free, I began to try to do the same for my people, but I found others of my kind who simply did not care. You should be proud of yourself, Orenth. Because of you, no matter how harsh things are for the Whills, they are going to have a real chance for the future. We are alike, you and I. I am glad to be sharing this fight with you. You may not outwardly be a soldier, but your spirit strives for what is right just the same."

Reen placed a hand on Orenth's shoulder in a comradely fashion, then stood and moved away to speak with some of her troops. Orenth stayed sitting, staring into the hypnotic flames. The voices of the Chevs speaking their own language blended together like a murmuring buzz in the background. Orenth was getting sleepy, despite the anxieties that spread their chill inside. A cold, familiar interior voice chose that moment to speak up. The Whills are dying, it whispered sharply. Once you join them, you'll die too. That's the way it's meant to be. Your time is over. All that's left is to finish the killing... finish the dying... finish... finish...

Orenth jerked awake, staring into the fire. Disoriented, the Whill stood up and stumbled away from the red glow into the darkness of the hallways between the slave cages. The empty chains seemed to rattle softly as Orenth passed. The venomous voice followed the Whill into the shadows. You'll die, Orenth...very soon now...you're almost there...almost ready to be nothing...forever...

* * *

After a final set of the hyperspace jumps, the slave ship convoy emerged into the outskirts of the Whill system in the Galactic Deep Core. During their slow approach to the Whill homeworld, their main goal was to avoid detection by the Star Destroyer in orbit. Two factors worked in their favor. First, the Chevin ships had relatively low-tech systems in comparison to the newer Imperial ships. They had little in the way of the modern equipment which Imperial sensors were set to detect. Second, the system was crowded with asteroids. Sometime in the distant past, one of the outer planets was shattered, creating a huge asteroid belt. Many of these meteoroids had orbits that crossed the orbit of the Whill homeworld. This implied periodic impacts, an idea borne out by the giant crater surrounding the Imperial garrison. The approaching Chevin ships were able to take advantage of one of the largest meteoroids to hide themselves. Flying close to the enormous stony iron rock, the Liberators made their approach to the inner planets without being detected. One week into the journey, the Rebels received a lucky break. The Victory-class Star Destroyer left orbit and jumped out of the system.

Subsequently, the small fleet accelerated its approach, arriving at the homeworld on the opposite side of the planet from the garrison.

Once they entered the atmosphere, they made the final approach flying low and slowly for days. The ships were further hidden by ongoing atmospheric disturbances created by periodic lesser meteorite impacts. The surface of the planet told the story of a long series of catastrophes. The homeworld was generally barren, with hard dry ground. Large rocks were imbedded in the surface. There were high concentrations of metals, some unearthed by the impacts. Huge crater fields dotted the surface. There were a few areas with inactive volcanoes. There were no oceans, only scattered small seas. Evidence of the Whill civilization was everywhere, but it suggested a bleak history. There were many ruins of different ages, indicating that the Whills had been forced to rebuild their cities several times following major impacts. The most recent living areas were intact but deserted. No life signs could be detected as they flew over these empty villages. They knew that all of the Whills had been rounded up and enslaved by the Empire, but the emptiness still created a sense of gloom and foreboding as they passed.

The Rebel convoy finally landed and stationed the ships behind some mountains near the garrison, beyond the range of Imperial sensors. The Liberators set up a base camp in that location and began to prepare for the upcoming assault. Reb, Desima, and Orenth set up a tent outside, preferring to sleep in the open rather than endure the grim slave ship interior for another night. They found the climate cool and dry, with the gravity slightly less than standard. The sky was a dusty brown color; that, along with the mournful sounding wind and the barrenness, depressed all of them.

* So this is what has become of the Whills' planet,* said the Skywalker within Desima's mind. * If only they had listened to my children and left this world.*

Desima recognized the tone of guilt in the spirit's thoughts. "They're going to get another chance," she said softly, "thanks to you. This time I think they'll be more willing to listen."

* Perhaps, Desima... perhaps.*

* * *

In the end, the enslaved Whills were rescued from their homeworld and transported back to the Kuari Princess, where they lived with Orenth in hiding from the Empire. The merciless determination of the Emperor, however, ensured that the new place of refuge could not last. Inevitably, the Journal of the Whills was traced back to the luxury liner at last, and the Empire's punishment was swift.

Now the Starliner floated dead in space, broken in half and surrounded by debris. An Imperial Star Destroyer, victorious over the

weaker vessel, loomed nearby in all of its sinister glory. Zero-G stormtroopers were searching the shattered Kuari Princess for surviving Whills or Rebels, and when they found anyone alive, they swiftly executed them.

Orenth was awakened by the terrific rending sounds of the ship breaking in two. Everywhere, people were screaming and dying as either fires or the vacuum of space took them away. Orenth turned and saw a doorway in the small bedroom leading to the familiar refuge of the storage deck with its piles of crates and reassuring dim lighting. Unlike the rest of the ship, this area looked quiet and safe. Orenth hurried inside.

It was darker than the Whill had thought. Orenth stumbled over soft shapes lying on the floor and tried unsuccessfully to make out what they were. There was light and movement ahead, and the metallic tramp of heavy feet. Bright, powerful searchlights were sweeping across the boxes. As they passed, Orenth caught glimpses of what was lying everywhere. The dead.

A shattered droid. Several motionless Whills. Human Rebels. Journal staff. Was that Desima? The light moved away too fast, but Orenth had seen long dark hair on a sprawled corpse. The circles of light revealed the still forms of MasterCom and Simon, lying together in robotic and organic death alike. Then, to Orenth's horror, all of the bodies began to float upwards from the floor. Something was happening to the artificial gravity, but somehow Orenth was unaffected. The corpse of a Whill drifted close to Orenth and brushed against the terrified survivor with gruesome gentleness. Orenth stifled a scream and shoved the body away. It sailed into a pile of crates and knocked one over. The crate crashed to the floor with a loud noise, and suddenly the aggressive footsteps began to come closer. The searchlights danced crazily around the room, finally catching Orenth in their bright embrace. An enormous Zero-G stormtrooper came around the corner into view. The space trooper was surrounded by a bulky armored shell that bristled with weapons. The helmet was shaped like an upside-down bowl and its markings resembled a scowling face.

Orenth heard the trooper's voice over the helmet comlink. "Zero-G 15 to base. I've found him. The last one... and he's the one we've been looking for all these years." A pause. "Copy that. I'll take care of it and return to base. Fifteen out."

Orenth was going to die. Orenth tried to run. Running was impossible. Orenth couldn't move. Orenth was a baby again, lying helpless on the floor, tiny arms and stubby legs gyrating futilely. The infant saw the trooper loom above it, towering like a giant. The infant saw the gun come up, saw the gun pointed directly at it. The trooper took careful aim, unhurried, unmoved, confident. The baby let out a final whistling scream...

... and the scene faded from sight. Orenth was alone in the darkness of a small tent. The Whill felt the urge to cry out, but a

soothing influence quieted the terror. With the calm feeling came a soft voice, the whispering words of the Skywalker.

* You must not awaken the others, Orenth. Do not answer me out loud. Answer me with your thoughts, and I will hear you. *

Orenth almost blurted out a surprised yell, but stopped in time, looking at the sleeping Reb and Desima. Skywalker? What is it? What's going on? I was asleep, and I was... I was having a nightmare-

* I need your help, Orenth. I want you to become my host. *

What? You mean instead of mother? Is that possible?

* You are as suitable a host for me as she is. Desima thinks she was chosen for her sensitivity to the Force, but I can use anyone as a host. I intended to use you from the beginning, but I knew your parents would object. Desima brought me here, but now I need you.*

But why? What's happening?

* You and I are going to save your people, Orenth. I find that I must act, and I need your assistance. This plan of the Liberators is too dangerous. Many will die if they carry it out. I have a better way that will save many lives. To bring it about, I need to get inside the Imperial garrison. Desima cannot go in without being captured, because she is a woman. From my encounter with the Empire's Purity, I learned that women are very seldom found in Imperial outposts. But you, as a Whill, are no different than the thousands of slaves already within the compound. You will be able to pass as one of them.*

Orenth thought about what the spirit had said. The young Whill's first reaction was one of deep anxiety. To go into the garrison could mean capture and death. Or worse, capture, torture, and death. But to take that chance, to go among other Whills for the first time, and to help them directly... could Orenth say no? The Whill had assumed that the assault plan would proceed without its involvement. After all, Orenth was no fighter by any stretch of the imagination. What's the plan? Orenth wondered hesitantly.

* I plan to avoid any battle at all. I am much weaker out of the Ashlan Nebula, but I can still use the power of the Ashla. If you can bring me to the Imperial Commander in charge of the garrison, I can affect this man's mind and arrange for him to let your people go. The pretext will be that the Whill slaves are slowly losing strength from an improper diet, which lacks insects. The insects breed in caves within these mountains. The Commander will believe that the Whills must go out to the wilderness and visit the caves. If he is truly in authority, his orders will not be questioned. Once the Whills are outside the crater, they can be freed with minimal loss of life.*

Orenth was astonished. Could the Force, which the spirit called the Ashla, really get the Whills out safely? It sounded awfully unlikely, but this was the first of all the Jedi they were talking about.

Then the Whill admitted that the decision was already made. They had come this far, and the need of Orenth's race was absolute. Orenth had to do whatever was possible without question. Even if it meant dying for the others. Yes... even if it meant dying for them. Oh, and it will, whispered the chill voice of fear from the darkness behind Orenth's mind. Somehow you know it will. Do you want to die? Are you tired of this life of pain? Then go... go to your own ending little Whill... the only destiny you will ever have... Orenth stared bleakly at the wall of the tent, forcing the horrible, familiar voice back down into silence. There was no choice. Fear of death was not enough of a reason to refuse.

I'll help you, as much as I can ...

* Then become my host. Stand close to Desima and place a hand upon her.*

Taking care not to wake his mother up, Orenth complied. The Whill felt nothing, but the spirit of the first Jedi nevertheless made the transition. * It is done. Come, let us be on our way while the night remains for travel.*

Orenth stepped over Reb and Desima, taking a last lingering look at them. It might be last time the Whill saw them. I'm sorry, Orenth thought to them. I know you're not going to understand, and that you'll say this is the stupidest teenage suicidal risk I could possibly take. I know you'd never let me go, given the choice. But I have no choice. Resh told me to save my race, and I finally have a chance to do something about that. I believe in the Skywalker, too. He'll protect me, if anyone can. I've been thinking that he's the only real chance we have anyway... so I have to help him. Mother... father... I love you... Orenth quietly slipped out of the tent and set off on foot, disappearing into the cold, windy blackness of the mountains.

To Orenth, the journey seemed like the continuation of a dream. They slipped past the Chev sentries silently and invisibly, and melted into the chilly mountain pass. Orenth knew the spirit was using the Force to assist their journey; a Whill's stubby legs simply were not up to the task of a long trek across that cracked jagged landscape. Somehow, their progress was much faster than it should have been. Time, speed, and distance seemed to become fluid, and Orenth felt much lighter. They almost floated from point to point, their footing sure. Even in the dark, they unerringly navigated around boulders and ravines. Whenever it seemed that fatigue must set in, it bled away and was replaced by fresh energy. The shadowy wasteland fell steadily away behind them. No stars were visible in the sky, because of the considerable amount of dust in the atmosphere. The lack of that familiar sight made the journey even more surreal.

Orenth had no idea how much time had passed, when a straight horizontal line of light appeared on the horizon. This eventually resolved itself as the lighted catwalk that ran between the observation towers all around the rim of the giant impact crater. Below the catwalk,

unseen in the darkness, was a high-voltage perimeter fence. They had arrived at the garrison site, Orenth realized with a thrill of apprehension. All along that catwalk, stormtroopers would be patrolling, watching for intruders, ready with their blaster rifles. Any one of them could simply notice and shoot Orenth down at any time.

This is suicide, the Whill thought frantically. We came here just to get killed. That fence... there's no way into this place. No way at all ...

Calm yourself, Orenth. Trust me. We will not be seen by the Imperial soldiers. I can prevent any of them from realizing that they have seen us, by clouding their minds and directing their attention elsewhere. As for the fence, it presents no difficulty. Make your way to the bottom and I will do the rest.

Orenth obeyed, feeling weak with fear. At the base of the ten-meter high death fence, the sharp hum of deadly energy was overwhelming. Orenth dared to come no closer, freezing in the shadows and staring up at the towers rising up behind the fence. How were they going to get past it? Surely any attempt would be detected by their sensors, or caught on camera eyes right away.

* Prepare yourself for a moment of disorientation. I will render us invisible by bending the light around us, and then lift us over their barriers.*

Lift? What are you going to-? Orenth suddenly went blind and simultaneously lost touch with the ground. It was a scary feeling, as for a long moment, the Whill floated in emptiness. Then Orenth's feet touched the rock again. The absolute darkness fell away, to be replaced with the glow of nearby floodlights. They were on the other side, within the Imperial compound.

* We will wait here for the dawn.* said the Skywalker. Orenth huddled, shivering, and didn't argue.

An hour later, the sun came up behind the garrison. For all that time, Orenth had stayed very still, trying very hard to look like a small boulder. The first glow of sunlight in the dull brown sky hit the far western slope of the crater first, then the light began to spill across the vast two and a half kilometer depression. From the Whill's vantage point on the crater floor, few details of the far side could be seen. Orenth could make out a large cluster of block like buildings in the northwest. At the briefing, these had been designated the probable slave quarters. My people are there, Orenth thought. So close, and I don't dare go to them. What good am I to them?

*Keep things in perspective, Orenth. You personally are weaker than the Imperial stormtroopers, but the Ashla is stronger than all of us. With the help of what you call the Force, we will strike at the enemy in the right way, at the right moment. It will be a telling blow I

assure you. For now, your people must wait. Soon, their time will come.*

Orenth nodded, and continued to examine the crater floor. Running north to south from the slave quarters was a line of low structures. Beyond them was a dark, deeper area that the sun had not yet fully illuminated. Orenth knew that was the giant pit like excavation where the slaves mined Chanlon. Closer at hand, roughly situated in the middle of the crater, stood a single isolated building. The entire eastern half of the crater floor, however, was empty of any structures. Just to the north of Orenth, the pale light was climbing a broad ramp that reached all the way up to the garrison. Now Orenth reluctantly gazed at the Imperial fortress itself. At the top of the ramp, the garrison was situated on a wide flat area, then the crater slope rose another hundred meters above it. The garrison walls looked enormously tall and thick. In the center was a giant gate flanked by guard towers. At the top of the wall was a series of laser turrets, and above them loomed gaping launch chutes for fighters. Even higher up were several turbolasers surrounding a tall central tower. The overall impression was no doubt exactly what the Empire intended. Orenth was utterly intimidated.

* Orenth. Come now. It is time to go inside.*

Inside the garrison? Right now? They'll arrest me in a second!

* Calm yourself. I have been scanning the surface thoughts of the Imperials in the garrison. During daylight hours, it is not unusual for a few Whills to enter the building to carry out certain errands. I will ensure that they believe you are on such an errand. There is one small matter to attend to before we go, however. The images I received told me that the slaves do not wear clothes. You must take yours off now.*

Orenth let out a troubled sigh. The Whill already felt naked; now actual nakedness was required? How much worse could this get? But once again Orenth thought of the slaves. If they could live with it every day, then Orenth could for a little while. The blue skirt and brown shirt were stashed behind a boulder. On the way up the ramp, they didn't encounter anyone, which was good, because the Whill was visibly trembling. Orenth had clamped down on the fear by the time they reached the top. Feeling like one of the insects that the Whills prefer to eat, Orenth approached the main gate. The doorway was able to rise high enough to let an Imperial Walker pass through, but now it was only partly opened. A group of five stormtroopers stood guard. Their lack of interest and discipline was evident even to Orenth. Perhaps Reen was right about the quality of personnel assigned to this forsaken outpost. As for getting past them, the spirit was as good as his word... up to a point. At first it seemed easy for the Skywalker to plant the suggestion that Orenth belonged there. The soldiers accepted the idea that this slave was carrying a message to their superiors and should be allowed inside. As soon as they were past the gate, however, the deception began to be strained. They had entered an enormous vehicle bay housing a single AT-AT, four AT-ST's, and a lot of speeder bikes. The chamber was full of technicians, vehicle crew members, and officers, and a great many of them were suspicious of Orenth's presence.

* I may have made an error.* the spirit admitted. * From what I am sensing, Whills are sometimes admitted into the base, but only a certain group of them called the overseers. I do not think you look like an overseer. Keep walking and look straight ahead. Go to that door near the maintenance area. I will get us safely through. It is difficult to redirect so many minds, especially with my diminished power, but I will manage. We must reach the base commander for this to work.*

Orenth did exactly as instructed, and somehow made it to the door unmolested. At the last moment, a frowning officer with an aggressive posture approached them, but he seemed to think of something more important to do and headed off in another direction. Relieved, Orenth slipped through the open blast door and entered a plain hallway, which opened onto a nearby room with six turbolifts. As the Whill stood there waiting for instructions, one of the turbolift doors suddenly opened, and an adult Whill stepped out.

Orenth froze and stared at the first other living Whill the teenager had ever met. Like the Ashlan Four Whills, this one was robed and bearded. The robe was a deep red color with black trim. Was this an overseer? One of Orenth's people... actually here...

The adult spoke into Orenth's stunned silence. "You there! What are you doing here? Why aren't you at the slave quarters? And shouldn't you be starting your shift? You must come with me at once, or they will kill you for trespassing."

The mention of killing jolted Orenth out of that suspended moment. "Wait! You don't understand! I'm not one of the slaves. I'm not from this planet at all. I came with a rescue force to try to free all of you from the Imperials."

Now it was the adult Whill's turn to be shocked into silence. Its eyes widened, it took a step backwards, and, to Orenth's surprise, began to tremble. "Not from this planet?" the red robed Whill asked softly. "Then where did you come from?"

Orenth looked around nervously, but so far, the turbolift room remained empty. Still, wouldn't it be safer to have this conversation elsewhere? "I was born on a planet called Ashlan Four, but that's not where I grew up. What matters, though, is that help has arrived for your people, for my people. I need-"

"The realm of the Ashla," the adult Whill gasped. "The Departed Ones! The Departed Ones have returned in my lifetime! Oh, holy Ashla! Have you judged us to be purified from our suffering at last?"

* I'm not sure what this Whill is talking about, but our situation here is precarious. If this is one of the so-called overseers, ask him if he can take us to the base commander.*

"We're sort of in a hurry here, so can you help us get to whoever is in charge of this garrison?"

"In charge? You mean Governor Malol? I just came from a meeting with him. He only sees the overseers, though. If you had tried to reach him, you would have been captured, and that would have been a disaster. The Imperials have no respect for our religion, and we cannot afford to lose you! In fact, you must come with me right now, back to meet the others! This is an absolutely incredible event, and they must be told at once."

Orenth hesitated, but the Skywalker made the decision for them. This spirit told Orenth exactly what they had to do.

"I'll go with you for now," Orenth told the overseer, "But later on, I'll still need to see the governor. We have a plan to free the Whills without bloodshed. You can get me one of those robes, and accompany me back here, can't you?"

"My name is Faloo, Departed One. It is my holy duty to serve you however I can. This is a great day. The end of the Time of Punishment is at hand. The great god Ashla will reach out a mighty hand to free us from our cruel masters and bring us to serve in the holy realm instead."

* This disturbs me, Orenth. After listening to some of this, I want very much to go with this Whill and understand what has happened here. The governor will have to wait for a while.*

Orenth shrugged, wanting only to leave the garrison at once. "Lead the way, then. Let's get out of here."

The overseer led them back through the vehicle bay. This time, the watching personnel saw a red robed Whill and assumed that the overseer was rounding up a stray slave. Orenth knew that the Imperials regarded the Whills as animals anyway. Their arrogant disdain was not unexpected, but Orenth still squirmed at their cruel facial expressions. Reb and Desima had always protected their adopted child from this kind of dangerous vulnerability. Orenth wished they were here right now. Following Faloo through the main gate, the young Whill breathed heavily in the open air. The two Whills walked slowly down the huge ramp and into the strange new morning.

* * *

Writings from the Whill homeworld: Part Two

Instructions from High Priest Nozen of Alassa to the servants of Ashla in the plains city of Colara.

"To my fellow teachers of purity, I am writing to you in earnest to tell you how you may respond to the arguments of the secular troublemakers who speak in your public squares and corrupt the minds of the people. I will tell you what you must say to repair the damage they are doing in your city. With so many of our population centers in ruins or upheaval, Colara must remain a stable refuge for our faith.

You have told me that the impure rabble rousers are condemning the Punishment Doctrine and our entire religion, condemning a set of holy teachings that has guided us towards purity for 10,000 years. You must fight these Whills, pitting our truth against their lies. Set the record straight for all who will listen. Our future depends on this.

Our secular enemies have said that the impacts from the heavens are merely some form of natural disaster, like a quake or a volcanic eruption. You must respond that these impacts have always been the punishment of the God Ashla. Each one reminds us of how far we have to go to be redeemed as an entire people. Each one has corrected the path of history.

Our enemies have claimed that the proper course for our civilization is to reestablish the technology of old. They have claimed that the holy Departed Ones were actually scholars who would have disapproved of our religion. This is a lie. The Departed Ones were faithful followers of the God, and we can only hope to be as pure as they were. As for the course of civilization, we must accept that it is proceeding as Ashla wills. If the recovery of ancient technology was our intended destiny, then why did another terrible impact devastate the manufacturing centers of Shar and Monacra? Ashla knew we were moving away from purity, and struck at us again to teach us what is important--not lost machines, but the knowledge of Ashla's plan. Why else were the ancient writings rediscovered here in Alassa and given into the hands of the new servants of Ashla? We needed to understand what has happened to our world, and the Punishment Doctrine explains our past, our present, and our future. It tells us why so many have died, why we survived, and what our new purpose is. We are a struggling race, and the writings give us the guidance we require.

You have warned me that our enemies are lying about us as well. They accused us of finding the writings, and claiming power in the chaotic aftermath of the most recent punishment. It was Ashla's plan that the religion should be taken up and followed as of old. We of the servants have reasserted our rightful place and saved the people by putting them back on the correct path. Our religion has carried us through dark ages in the past, and not, as our enemies say, extended them. Our religion can certainly carry us through our present state of disorder until anarchy can be vanquished.

Our enemies wrongly claim that the Punishment Doctrine merely empowers our religious order and holds back the progress of the people. The only true progress is towards Purity and the end of Suffering. You must not give ground to these misguided and impure Whills. Deny their lies with the truths I have given you. Bring purity to your city and the world will follow.

Yours in service, Nozen of Alassa."

* * *

The isolated building in the center of the crater turned out to be the quarters of the five Whill overseers. Faloo took Orenth directly to it. They passed through a wide doorway and entered a large open space. The only furnishings were a multitude of thin military issue blankets on the floor, placed in straight lines all along the room. Faloo explained that this room was used for worship services by the Whills. Coming in groups of about five hundred at a time, the slaves gathered to hear the overseers read the Writings to them. The Imperials felt that it helped to control their slaves, and so they allowed it. Faloo was of the opinion that the people all needed to hear the teachings so that they could be purified at last and deserve redemption. Because purity came through suffering, and the suffering under the Empire was a new extreme, Faloo was convinced that the end of the Time of Punishment must be close. Orenth's arrival was a glorious vindication of that faith.

Orenth paid little attention to Faloo's devout ramblings. The overseer was clearly working with a painfully incorrect world view, and surely the details didn't matter much to Orenth. Instead, the young Whill was interested in a small table on the far side of the room. It contained a large flat stone, black in color and very irregular in shape. On the flat upper side, a brief text had been carved into the stone using tiny letters in an alien script. Whill letters, Orenth realized, feeling a pang of sadness at being unable to read them. "What is this?" Orenth asked.

Faloo had been about to disappear through a doorway, but the overseer paused to answer. "That, Departed One Orenth, is the Punishment Doctrine, carved into a sky stone by the first Prophets of Ashla. That stone is over twenty thousand years old."

"What does it say? I can't read your language. And how is it that you speak Basic anyway?"

"We were taught by the Imperials, of course. Very few of the slaves can speak it, however. But we overseers must interact with the Imperials on a daily basis. As for the Doctrine...are you checking to see if it is recorded correctly after so many years? Very well, Departed One, I shall translate the Doctrine into your language. Then I must bring the others to meet you."

Apparently from memory, the Whill recited the Punishment Doctrine. When Faloo translated the lines concerning the Departed Ones, Orenth was disturbed. "The time will end when the whole population is pure and ready to serve me. Then the Departed Ones will return and bring word of a second chance to leave this world and serve me with holiness in my Realm."

Faloo left the room. Orenth nervously touched the heavy stone. Could it be that this ancient writing had somehow predicted the arrival of Orenth and the Liberators? The Whill shivered, staring at the stone, not quite willing to accept it.

Faloo came back and brought four other Whills, all wearing the same kind of red robes. Orenth still felt naked and embarrassed, but didn't dare ask for a red robe yet. The overseers were introduced to the teenager. They had all been religious and governmental leaders before the Empire arrived, and they were allowed to keep their status as long as the slaves were controlled. The High Priest of Ashla was named Civtor. This Whill walked with a measured, dignified step, and was quite large by Whill standards. The third Whill was named Pamal. This one was small and nervous looking. Orenth could empathize with that. The fourth, Amand, seemed confident and lively, regarding Orenth with excited interest. The fifth was named Meelo, an expressionless Whill who was as still as Amand was animated.

Civtor spoke first, in a booming, rough voice. "What is this nonsense you have disturbed us with, Faloo? I see no holy Departed One here. This is just a child, one of the slaves who was caught trespassing in the garrison and made up a colorful story so that you would help, that's all."

"What were you doing in the garrison, child?" demanded Pamal. Faloo had evidently told them that Orenth spoke some Basic.

"You were lucky they didn't kill you," said Meelo flatly.

"I hope you do not think this is a game," said Civtor darkly. "There are strict rules to follow, for all of us. No one must make any trouble, or we will all suffer. I am held responsible for making certain that the people remain compliant and safe from Imperial reprisals. No, child, you were lucky that Governor Malol did not hear of this. There will be no next time. Faloo will escort you to the slave quarters, and we will hear no more of your wild tales."

Faloo looked embarrassed, and snuffled uncertainly. "But Civtor, why would a slave make up such a story?"

"Do you really believe this is one of the Departed Ones?" Civtor demanded impatiently. "We can't even be sure that they were real historical figures, and now you think one of them has walked through our door."

"Just--just wait a moment," Faloo implored. "Orenth claimed to be from a planet called Ashlan Four. Ashlan Four, not the 'Realm of Ashla'. Clearly, they are the same thing, but the different name...it is not from the Writings. A slave could not have taken it from the worship services. And Orenth speaks such fluent Basic."

Civtor grunted doubtfully.

"Don't I get to say anything?" Orenth asked.

"Take this child back to the slave quarters, Faloo. We have work to do." The high priest turned to leave.

"Enough!" cried a commanding voice. It was not the voice of any of the Whills. Orenth stared in surprise at the glowing, floating image of the Skywalker which had just appeared in front of the overseers. Once again, he manifested as an aged human with a silvery beard and a long robe. The spirit's eyes seemed bright with anger.

The overseers were understandably surprised and dismayed. Pamal cowered, Meelo took several steps backward, and the high priest raised both large hands to ward off the apparition. Amand and Faloo merely stared in awe.

Faloo spoke first. "Ashla? Is it you? Have to come to speak to us?" The young Whill tensed, wondering what the spirit was going to do now.

"Are you really the god Ashla?" Amand asked boldly. "If so, what do you want from us?"

The Skywalker's voice crackled with restrained ire. "I want you to listen to me very carefully. I am not a God. There is no God Ashla. The Ashla is the name of a powerful energy, which my descendants came to call the light side of the Force. This energy comes from all living things... It is wondrous, but it is not a god either. Long ago, my children came to visit your world, calling themselves the Jedi Bendu of the Ashla. Somehow, your people have made a terrible mistake, and misinterpreted the stories of that time. If you have developed a religion based upon this mistake, then it has no validity. I must reveal the truth to you, if there is to be any hope of saving your people."

The Skywalker paused, and Orenth cringed. The reaction of the overseers was as bad as the young Whill expected. All five of them began to shout at once.

"What did it say-"

"What are you-"

"What can it mean, a terrible mistake-"

"What do you want from us-"

"What are you saying-"

"No god Ashla-"

The confused and angry outburst lasted for a few loud moments, then the sheer strangeness of the shimmering specter reduced them to shocked silence.

"The truth," Amand said hesitantly. "You said you would tell us the truth..."

"If you will listen, I will tell you," replied the spirit.

"The Departed ones... Are they real? If the stories of Ashla are just... stories," Amand looked nervously at the other overseers, "then who is this young Whill? Who are you, for that matter?"

"I was once a human, but I lived along time ago," said the spirit slowly. "I have yet to fully die, and in this form, my life span has been greatly extended. The human Jedi Bendu who came to your world were my descendants. They came to ask your race to migrate to another world and take up the task of recording the Jedi story. Most of the Whills refused. A small number of scholars accepted, and left with my children before disaster struck your world. If I understand you correctly, you remember these scholars as the Departed Ones. They went to live on Ashlan Four, where they stayed until recently, writing the history they called the Journal of the Whills. This young Whill, Orenth ..." The spirit hesitated. "Orenth is a child of the Ashlan Four Whills... The last child. The rest of them are all dead, murdered by the Empire. "

"All dead?" said Faloo, incredulous. "There are no other Departed Ones? This child is all there is? Then who is going to take us from this world to the holy realm?" Faloo thought about that for a moment. "I'm sorry. This is all too much for me to take in. All my life, I have believed... How can I suddenly stop?"

"Oh, come now, Faloo," said Amand gently. "I've been saying these things for years. The Writings themselves reveal that Whills had doubts about this religion a long time ago. So what if some of the details are revealed to be false? What is important is the moral guidance it has given us, not whether there are any supernatural Departed Ones coming to save us."

"That's easy for you to say," reported Faloo. "You've never been a true believer. But if you haven't noticed, our race is in desperate need of a miracle. We're dying out, Amand! No new births since our enslavement. As long as it continues, there will be no more children. We can't make the Silta we need to reproduce if we can never get out of this forsaken hole in the ground. This is the last generation, the end of the road for us. So yes, I do need to believe in the Writings, now more than ever."

"And believe them you shall," said Civtor firmly. "We have no reason to believe this human is telling us the truth. It could be an Imperial trick, or even an impure spirit sent by Ashla to test us."

"That is possible," said Meelo grimly. "Perhaps we should listen no more."

"Do you think it means to do us harm?" wondered Pamal.

"I can see that this is going to be difficult," said the Skywalker, "but I have no choice. I must have your cooperation to reach the governor. I suppose then that I must convince you. Heed my words. I am the Skywalker, the first Jedi, and the power of the Force is with me. For twenty-five millennia, I have been a part of the Force, and it answers my needs as easily and as quickly as thought. Now see for yourselves the reality of this power, the same power which my children wielded when they came to this world to save a precious few of you. Your recorded history is full of errors, but in a sense, it does hint at the truth. There is no vengeful God Ashla, but I have brought the power of the Force to save you and take you safely from this world. For you, the end will be the same. Behold!"

The astonished overseers rose slowly from the floor and floated in midair. Then, one by one, they began to fly helplessly around the large room in all directions. Faster and faster, the Whills soared, whistling as they flew. The heavy meteorite containing the Punishment Doctrine rose up from its table, suddenly accelerated, and joined the overseers in their helpless flight. Eventually, the spirit decided that they had had enough. The five frightened Whills settled gasping to the floor, unharmed. The meteorite returned to its resting place and gently touched down.

Now the spirit had their full attention. "I am ashamed of you," the Skywalker told them, "for holding to this Punishment Doctrine of yours. It was not the hand of some imagined deity that created craters like this one and devastated your world; it was a natural event, an asteroid impact. A planet in your system fragmented, and some of the pieces have struck your planet. The ones who died as a result were not impure, nor were the survivors especially worthy. It is true that your ancestors rejected the help of my children and drove them away. But this does not mean that they deserved any kind of punishment. Their suffering during the asteroid impacts was a tragedy, not justice of some kind. And it is beyond reason than any punishment could last for generation after generation like that."

"Oh, ancient Jedi," Faloo said reverently, sounding rather shaken, "How then can we explain our history? How can so much suffering be visited upon a people, and it not have a purpose? The Doctrine and the Writings have helped us to comprehend what has happened to us at the hands of the Empire. Our enslavement was the greatest trial of all, and we have thought it must be the final one before our redemption."

"Some things have no explanation," said the spirit. "For some things, there is no purpose we can discern. Yet I understand the need of you and your ancestors to find a purpose in what happened. But you and your ancestors were wrong. There is no shame in that, but there comes a time to put aside your mistakes and face the truth with open eyes. The Doctrine you hold to may explain what the Imperials have done, from a certain point of view, but nothing can ever justify their deeds. The Empire is controlled by the Bogan, the dark side of the Force. It is a thing of evil. Your people are only a small example of their vast multitude of victims." The Skywalker paused in thought for a moment, then continued. "My purpose here is not to dispute your religious beliefs,

even though I know them to be wrong. I have come out of a sense of personal responsibility for your people. Long ago, it was my own prophecy that caused my children to take some of the Whills away from this place. Even after my physical death, I watched over those Whills, hoping to keep them safe as they served my children and the Republic. In the end, however, I failed them. When the Empire came to murder them, I could do nothing. I could save only one Whill, a child, and that was Orenth. I knew of this world, but I had also foreseen the disasters which would befall it. I assumed that all of you had perished. When I learned otherwise, I resolved to come to your aid and repay the debt I owed to your race. I have come to free you from slavery and take you to live in safety elsewhere in the galaxy."

"How are you going to do that?" asked Meelo skeptically. "It looks like you brought very little help with you." The overseer pointed rudely at Orenth.

"You may be able to spin us around the room," Civtor added, trying to regain a bit of dignity, "but what can you do against the Imperial forces here? You must realize how powerful they are."

"I have come with a small, well armed group of fighters from an organized Rebellion against the Empire. All over the galaxy, beings of all races, including the humans, are trying to overthrow the Imperial government. Those waging this Civil War have cared about the welfare of the Whills for a long time, thanks to the Journal keepers of Ashlan Four. They care about you as well, just as I do, all the more so because they could not save the others. The Rebels are already on this planet, and they have planned an assault against the garrison in order to free you. The violence of their plan, however, goes against my nature. If it is carried out, many will be saved, but also many will die. I have come here now to prevent that outcome. I am going to meet the governor, and with the Force, I will convince Malol to let the Whills leave the crater for one day. Once your people are in the wilderness, they can be taken by the Rebels to the waiting ships."

"And you need one of our red robes to clothe your naked companion," said Faloo. "Orenth will pretend to be an overseer, is that the idea? We help Orenth get inside, and then when the governor is scheduled to meet with one of us, Orenth goes instead, and brings you."

"There's a problem with that idea," Pamal said nervously. "What if you fail, and get arrested? Orenth is a lot younger than any of us. Maybe the stormtroopers won't notice, but the governor knows the five of us very well. Are you sure you can control him? If you cannot, then surely that red robe will reveal that we helped you. Our arrests will follow very shortly after yours. We will lose our positions at the very least. I fear we would be enslaved or even killed as punishment. What guarantees can you offer that this will not happen?"

"I cannot," said the Skywalker. "But I must try. The rebels will begin their assault soon, in any case. No matter what I do, no matter what you do to help, change is coming. If we do our best then that change may be salvation, rather than disaster."

"What gives you and your Rebels the right to march in here and decide our fate?" demanded Civtor. "Perhaps the current situation is best for us, if, as you say, many of us will die attempting to reach freedom. What if we decided we simply want to be left alone?"

"You just like the status quo because you're in charge," accused Amand. "What do you think the slaves would want to decide?" the Whill asked pointedly.

"The slaves are not here, and we are their leaders," retorted Civtor. "It is up to us to decide for them." Civtor faced the spirit. "I know you are powerful. But you still need our help. We can get you into the garrison, that is true, but there is much at stake here." The high priest paused.

Orenth chose that moment to speak up. "We could use your help in other ways too. The Liberators need your knowledge of the layout of this whole place. You live here, so you know details they don't. Like that the Imperials have only one Walker. If one of you could get to the Rebels and help them with their plans, it could save more lives. They don't even know where I am right now. I left without telling anyone. If you could tell them where I am and what the Skywalker is doing, it would help a lot."

Well said, Orenth, commented the spirit.

When I can't get a word in edgewise, Orenth thought, I have lots of time to think things through.

"We will take a vote," announced Civtor, "on whether to aid you in reaching the governor, and whether to try to reach your Rebel group and offer our knowledge to them. Give us a few moments to confer alone."

The five overseers moved to a far corner of the room and argued in low voices for several minutes. Orenth watched them, looking for a clue as to their intentions. The outcome looked very uncertain.

Did you really have to fly them around the room like that? Orenth wondered.

* There were many things I could have done, but nothing I would have enjoyed as much as that. *

When the overseers finished, they came back to the front of the room and stood formally in a line. "I will hear your votes and your reasons," said Civtor loudly.

Faloo spoke first. "Today, a great many surprises have occurred. I am no longer so certain what I should believe. Perhaps this Jedi is correct, and our religion is false. Perhaps our beliefs still hold some truth, and unbeknownst even to him, this Jedi serves the purpose of our God. Whenever the truth may be, I do know that Orenth and the Skywalker

are here to help us. They truly have good intentions. I vote to help them and the Rebels."

Pamal spoke next. "I think that would be a mistake. The Imperials are too powerful. Our lives mean very little to them. I see a very high chance that these Rebels will fail. The consequences for our people could be total extermination. The risk is too great. I vote not to help."

"I agree with Pamal," said Meelo. "These rebels will surely lose, and I do not wish to be destroyed with them."

"You disgust me, Meelo," Amand interrupted. "All you respect is power. I have heard that you helped the Imperials when they were rounding up our people. Don't you have any morals at all? All your talk about purity and who is impure! Why don't you take a look at yourself for a change."

"Enough, Amand," said Civtor. "Do not speak out of turn."

Meelo continued, apparently unmoved. "I vote not to help the Rebels. It would be pointless."

"Well, my vote is to help them," said Amand. "I don't understand how any of you could choose otherwise. Are we not religious leaders? Even if some of our beliefs turn out to be false, the moral basis of our faith remains. This human Jedi has presented us with a clear choice between good and evil. It should be obvious what we must do."

Civtor had the final vote. "Things are rarely as simple as you want them to be, Amand. So it seems that we have two votes for, and two against. Mine is the deciding vote." Civtor stepped closer to the spirit. "I am not sure whether this young Whill is really a Departed One...but I respect your power. I believe you can control the governor. It is worth the risk to have a chance to free our people. However, Amand is correct. I do value my authority. My people need leadership, and I consider myself a good leader. Without me, perhaps, their burden during this enslavement would be even greater. I have done my best to ease their suffering, though the governor is a very difficult human to work with. Whatever the outcome, I wish to remain the leader of my people. If your Rebels will not interfere with that, then I will cast my vote in your favor."

"You want to stay in charge?" Orenth said. "That's no problem. The Rebel Alliance will let the Whills manage their own affairs."

"Very well, then. It is decided. We will get you to Governor Malol. After that, it is up to you. We will make an attempt to get one of us out of the compound to meet with the Rebels. The success of that cannot be guaranteed, for Imperial security is very tight. Of course, you somehow managed to get in. Perhaps a single Whill can also get out."

Orenth was relieved. Now they had help, improving their chances considerably. The young Whill gazed at the inscribed meteorite. Perhaps

there is something to those beliefs, Orenth thought. It felt strange and exciting to be thought of as a Departed One, a savior of the Whills. Savior? Orenth's internal voice spoke up, right on cue. What a load of nonsense. So you gained the help of these fools. All you have really managed to do here is to provide a more certain death for yourself. Now you can go straight to the Imperial in charge, get captured right away, and be executed as a Rebel spy quickly and efficiently. The governor will have full authority to do so, and he won't hesitate. You will die, and then these fools will die, and then all of the slaves too. You won't see that happen, but as you go into the final eternal void, your last thoughts will be of how you took your entire race with you...

* * *

A subdued Faloo took Orenth back across the cracked, boulder strewn crater floor the next morning. Once again, Orenth had to walk past the towering legs of the Imperial Walker inside the garrison's vehicle bay. This time, the young Whill was wearing one of the red robes of the overseers, and the Imperials seemed to take no notice of them. They rode the turbolift to level six, and walked down a short hallway to a reception area. A bored looking controller sitting behind a console frowned at them as they approached.

"We're just here to see Governor Malol as scheduled," Faloo said cheerfully.

"There should be only one of you," protested the controller. "The governor is quite strict about-"

"Oh, yes," interrupted Faloo. "Of course. Only one of us is going in. I'll be turning back right here. Yes, we know the rules. We wouldn't want to cause the governor any trouble."

"Just so you don't forget it," said the controller crossly.

"All right," Faloo said quietly to Orenth. "Good luck... May Ashla guide you. Well... you know what I mean."

Faloo pointed Orenth down the correct hallway, then turned back to the turbolifts. Orenth felt horribly alone until the spirit mentally spoke up. *Go ahead. Keep moving. Do exactly as we agreed. Act like you belong here. Don't be afraid.*

Orenth walked past several doors leading to offices and officers' quarters, finally reaching the suite of the base commander. The Whill was greeted by another receptionist, and ushered into a large conference room. Inside was a heavy polished table engraved with the Imperial symbol. Seated at the table was Governor Malol. He was a middle-aged human, like most of the Imperial leadership. He was wearing a standard gray-green uniform which fit him well. In Orenth's opinion, the governor's face was not unusual in any way. He had a mild expression,

average features, a few wrinkles, and a slightly receding hairline. Just another Imperial bureaucrat assigned to a dull post in the middle of nowhere.

* This is what we came for, Orenth. Are you ready? Just say what I told you to say, and as you speak, I will create in his mind a belief in what you tell him. *

Malol looked expectantly at the Whill. "You are not Faloo," he said. Orenth was startled by Malol's voice. Everything else about the man was rather nondescript, but his voice held a sense of power. It effortlessly rang with authority, and Orenth felt suddenly intimidated. "I don't know you," said Malol, managing to sound threatening, not in his words, but in his tone alone. "The overseer Faloo was to report to me concerning the recent decline in Chanlon production."

"I am Faloo's student," said Orenth nervously, following their prepared answers. "I'm going to be coming here in Faloo's place."

"I didn't authorize that. What is your name?" Malol leaned towards Orenth, and the Whill felt unmistakably menaced. Who was this man? How did he have such an effect? Orenth ignored the question and launched into the prepared statement that the Skywalker had dictated.

"Governor Malol, I have come here to bring an important matter to your attention. The Whill slaves are suffering from a deficiency in their diet. When they were free, they ate certain insects which are found in the mountains. Without that source of nourishment, they are slowly weakening. Eventually they will all sicken and die. You will lose a valuable work force. But this can easily be prevented. If the slaves can be allowed to make periodic trips to the insect caves, fully supervised of course, they can feed there and regain their health. If you, in your wisdom, will let my people go out to the wilderness for this purpose--"

"What are you doing to me?!" Malol suddenly interrupted. What are you trying to--" The governor stood up, his face full of angry surprise. "A force assault?" Malol said incredulously. "From a Whill? You would try to take control of my mind?"

*Something is terribly wrong, Orenth. * The spirit was as surprised and upset as Malol. * He is resisting me! How is that possible?*

"Who are you?" demanded Malol, his expression darkening. "If you will not tell me, I will take it from your mind. What is your name?"

Only now did it occur to Orenth to try to escape. But of course, there was nowhere to go.

"Orenth," said Malol, "your name is Orenth! Ah! Now I know who you are. You are the last survivor of the massacre at Ashlan Four. What could you have come here for? Surely not to turn yourself in after all these years. Oh, don't worry about escaping. You're not going

anywhere." A pair of stormtroopers stepped up behind Orenth and trained their weapons on the Whill. Instead of the usual white armor, they were colored a gleaming black. "Tell me Orenth, how is it that you know how to use the Force? That surprises me. Nothing about that was included in your files. And you are assaulting my mind with considerable power. It is not more than I can handle, but again, it does surprise me. I was not aware that your race could have such strength in the Force." Malol came around the table and stared closely at Orenth, who was paralyzed with fear. "But it isn't you who is doing it...is it?" Malol said slowly. He peered into Orenth's terrified green eyes. "I wonder..." he said quietly. "Could it be? After all this time, have my efforts finally paid off?" He walked back to his chair and stood behind it. "Orenth, have you brought someone with you? Someone very old, perhaps?"

The young Whill collapsed, unable to stand any longer, and cowered on the office floor. Malol closed his eyes for a few moments and concentrated. Then his eyes widened. "I can't believe it has actually happened," he exclaimed. "My trap actually worked! But I never expected this! I thought he would arrive in a great storm, or that I would have to fight for my life before I could learn his secrets. Instead, the Skywalker simply walks through my office door one morning, ending twelve long years of desperate searching. Incredible! Where is your great power, ancient Jedi? You are not the terrible force of nature that they claimed you were in the Journal of the Whills. My garrison is still standing, and I am able to withstand you easily. My power in the dark side is a match for your strength. And so you are mine! Mine at last. And very soon now, your secrets of immortality will belong to me as well."

Apparently, Malol couldn't help himself. He laughed out loud in astonished relief.

Governor Malol, who was also known as Blackhole, the dark side adept and former Emperor's Hand, was incredibly pleased with himself. He had never given up on flushing out the spirit of the first Jedi, even when the Emperor had denied the very existence of the Skywalker. And now his efforts had paid off, finally. Malol's reasoning had been correct. Although the spirit would not respond to him in the Ashlan Nebula, putting the lives of the Whills at stake was enough to force the spirit out of hiding. Malol had risked much, and sacrificed much, for this opportunity. For too long, it had appeared there would be nothing to show for all of it. His present station in life, in charge of a little outpost on a forgotten world in the Deep Core, far from any center of Imperial life, represented a complete failure to fulfill the promise of his noble birth.

Malol had been born to a wealthy family in the Tapani Sector. He was a child of House Melantha, a noble house loyal to the Emperor. Melantha had produced Moff's, governors, and even a few dark adepts to serve Palpatine. Malol's own potential for the dark side was noticed by one of the Melantha dark adepts, and he was taken away at a young age to be trained. Eventually, Malol was incorporated into Palpatine's master plan to one day create a Dark Empire. For the present, Malol was to act

merely as an Imperial governor, but when the time came, he would openly participate in a galaxy-wide dark side government.

Malol was made governor of a minor world in the Hana Sector. It was a job with very few demands, so that he could fill a more important duty--being one of the Emperor's Hands. Using the disguise of Blackhole to hide his true identity, Malol was very successful as Palpatine's agent, watching over the fleet and its captains. Then came that terrible awareness of death, and then a consuming fear of death, and finally, the obsession with cheating death. After Ashlan Four and the discovery of the Skywalker, nothing could be the same anymore.

Malol looked back in anger at the years spent trying to get the Jedi spirit to manifest in the nebula. He remembered the day when the Whill homeworld was located, and his feeling that he had finally found the key to controlling the Skywalker. The planet was found in an unexplored area of the Deep Core, a region not belonging to any Moff's Sector. The closest system, as it happened, was the one Malol governed, giving him the authority to set up a garrison and claim the planet and its valuable metals for the Empire. He had even offered to take care of this personally for the Emperor, adding that he planned a fitting punishment for the Whills-- enslavement. The Emperor, furious with the continuing Journal of the Whills, readily agreed.

The Whills were not the only nonhuman slaves of the Empire. Slavery effectively increased the level of fear and suffering in the galaxy according to Palpatine's design, and thus it was instituted wherever the Empire could get away with it. The Wookiees, the Mon Calamari, the Kluuzot, the Elomin, the Mrissi, and the Yagai were only a few of the races serving the Empire in this way. The enslavement procedures and protocols were already available for Malol to follow. A garrison was deployed, and Imperial troops rounded up the scattered Whill population. The Whills were enslaved and set to work mining Chanlon. To Malol's disappointment, there was no response from the Skywalker. In truth, Malol was unsure of what kind of response to expect. Would the spirit come in power, ready to kill everyone in the garrison, as he had killed the crew of the Empire's Purity? Would Malol be able to do anything against him, or would he go down fighting an ancient being far too powerful to be stopped? Perhaps even that would have been preferable to no response at all.

Fighting off doubts about the spirit's existence, Malol stayed close to the slaves and the trap he had baited. He continued to act as Blackhole, communicating with the fleet from the Whill homeworld. With increasing frequency, however, the Emperor assigned him duties that forced him to leave the planet for long periods of time. As the Emperor's Hand, he could not refuse, but what if the spirit was to arrive in his absence? To solve this problem, Malol decided to arrange a demotion for himself. The surest way to do that was to fail the Emperor.

The first opportunity came when the Emperor and Lord Vader assigned him to stop a Rebel operation on Vorzyd Five, the "Gamblers World." The planetary President was planning to divert some of the enormous profits to the Rebel Alliance. Malol, as Blackhole, was instructed to prevent

the transaction without drawing attention to the Empire. Blackhole proceeded to fail on purpose. He allowed the wanted Rebels Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa to escape, taking a great deal of money with them. He didn't go to Vorzyd Five in person, but commanded his black-armored troopers via his holoimage. He carefully ensured that the orders he gave them would allow the Rebels to succeed with only minor difficulties. After the Rebels escaped off-world, the President was arrested and the matter was concluded.

As expected, the Emperor was most displeased. But Malol knew something important about his malevolent Master, something that Lord Vader had once told him. It was possible, sometimes, to choose one's own punishment when one failed the Emperor. Palpatine cared only that a sufficient price was paid. Malol expressed his deep regret at his failure and suggested that he should step down as Emperor's Hand. He further suggested that he should be assigned to the garrison on the Whill homeworld. That way, he could supervise their enslavement, and his penance would serve a useful purpose. Palpatine still believed that Malol would be useful in the future Dark Empire, and so he agreed to both suggestions.

Malol returned to the garrison to take up permanent residence. He was disappointed to learn that the trap had not yet been sprung, and he wondered if the whole idea had been a colossal mistake. Stubbornly, he looked for another explanation. Evidently, the anguish of the Whills was not, in itself, enough to summon the spirit. Perhaps someone needed to alert the Skywalker in some way, but who? The spirit had never responded to Malol. But perhaps the Rebels could be of assistance. To that end, the news of the discovery of the Whill homeworld was then leaked... but the location of that world was not revealed. Malol reasoned that only the Skywalker would know that information, and he gambled that the Rebels would involve the spirit in whatever rescue efforts they designed.

And now... now Malol had the Skywalker in his grasp, neatly imprisoned in a holding cell and awaiting interrogation. After all of the effort that came before, the resolution seemed far too easy. But perhaps he had simply earned it by working so hard.

He did wonder whether a significant Rebel fighting force had accompanied the young Whill, Orenth. A Rebel attack had been expected ever since the base's sensors detected the Rebel intelligence mission several weeks ago. That team had been allowed to leave so that the real Rebel force could arrive. Now the question was, how many were there and where were they? Malol was not overly concerned about the Rebels, for he knew that they tended to be poorly equipped and few in number compared to the Imperial forces. If they were here along with the Skywalker, Malol had not detected their arrival. No matter, the garrison was fully able to handle any assault they might attempt. Malol could learn about the Rebels when he interrogated the new prisoner. His main goal now was to learn all that could be learned about the Jedi spirit, how it survived, and what secrets of the Force it knew. That was what he had waited twelve years to do. Next to that, the Rebels were unimportant. He would put the base on alert, and then let the Rebels come to die when they were ready.

* * *

It was early afternoon on the day after Desima had awakened to find Orenth missing. For her and her husband, it had been a traumatic day and a half. They had searched the camp site, and discovered that their adopted child had completely vanished. One of the Chevs found the Whill's tracks heading into a nearby mountain pass, and two men had been sent to follow them. Desima knew that Orenth couldn't move very quickly, and she hoped that he would be overtaken and returned before anything terrible happened. The scouts, however, reported back with bad news. Somehow, Orenth had managed to make it all the way to the garrison crater, and there the trail ended. It was possible that the Whill has been captured and taken inside at that point.

Commander Reen was pessimistic. She knew that if Orenth was taken prisoner, he could be interrogated and reveal their entire plan of attack. On the other hand, the Whill could have been killed before divulging any information. There was no way to know. Reen was considering calling off the attack. If the Imperials knew all about them, then she had no desire to lose her entire team on a suicide mission. It was one thing for her Chevs to die saving the Whill slaves. It was quite another to waste their lives and accomplish nothing. A forewarned garrison could negate the Liberators' whole strategy. The element of surprise was critical to their success.

Desima and Reb both felt terrible and extremely worried. Reb expressed his fear by cursing Orenth for having done the most "foolish, teenaged, idiotic, cliché, reckless, insane thing possible." Desima was quieter about it. She sank into a mire of guilt over not having paid much attention to Orenth lately, because of her fixation with having a human baby. Neither of them could stand not knowing if Orenth was dead or alive. They had barely slept the previous night, and now Desima could only sit and wait while Reen and her officers studied the situation.

When the quiet, distant sounding voice of the Skywalker intruded on her thoughts, it took her completely by surprise.

Desima...can you hear me?

Skywalker? Desima hadn't heard from the spirit in two days. She had wanted his help looking for Orenth, but he wouldn't answer her. She had been worried about that, too.

"Yes, I can hear you," she said out loud. "You sound different, like you're very far away." She hugged herself anxiously. "Something terrible has happened. Orenth went off on his own, and we think he was taken into the garrison. We've lost him, and we don't even know if he's still alive."

He is alive. I know this for a fact, because I am with him.

"What?! I thought you were with me! I didn't even realize you were gone--where is Orenth? What happened to him?"

It was my fault. I will try to explain it to you. Right now, we are in the detention center of the garrison. I do not believe that Orenth is in mortal danger yet, but the Imperials are going to interrogate him very soon.

"The detention center? How did you get there? Is there any way we can get you out? What was Orenth thinking?!"

* Let me tell you everything first. I came to Orenth with the idea of getting inside the garrison. He did not think of this on his own. Understand that Orenth was not being foolhardy. He was being extremely brave. It took enormous courage for him to take me inside the Imperial stronghold. I have shared his mind now, and I have learned something about him that you should know. He has a terrible fear of death. At times, it nearly overwhelms him. But he helped me anyhow. I told him that the plan of the Liberators would result in too many deaths. I had conceived of my own plan to go to the Imperial Governor in command of the base, and use the Force to control his mind. By the power of the Ashla, I would convince him to allow the slaves to leave the crater for a trip to the mountains. There, they would be able to feed on the insects in the caves. This would restore the workers to full health and strength, and avoid a wasting illness among the slaves. It is not the truth, but that is unimportant. Once the Whills were out of this well defended area, the Chevs could take them with little effort and loss of life.

"I needed Orenth's help to reach the governor. As a human female, you would have been unsuitable for this purpose. We cannot be sure if any women are posted to the garrison at all. But Orenth, who looks the same as any of the slaves, could be present in the compound without drawing instant attention. We gained the help of a group of five Whills who act as overseers to the slaves. They are also religious leaders who believe that the Force is some kind of God who punishes them with asteroid impacts... I know that will seem unclear to you, but an explanation must wait for another time. These overseers helped Orenth and I to see the governor, and that is when my plan fell to pieces. *

"What happened? It sounds like it should have worked. I remember that time in the Ashlan nebula when your power convinced the guard to let Reb and I out of our cell and take us to our ship."

* It would have worked, but the governor was not what he appeared to be. He is a dark side adept, a servant of the Emperor and the Bogan. I failed to control him, and now Orenth and I are prisoners. But matters are still worse than that, Desima. This adept, Malol, knows who I am. He is here on this planet because of me. He engineered the plight of the Whills solely to bring me here, and now he has me. *

Desima was now even more worried than before. She would not have thought it possible a few minutes earlier. "What does he want with you?"

* I am not yet certain. The interrogation will reveal his intentions to me. But I was the father of the Jedi. I am sure that he seeks something of my ancient knowledge of the Force. That could have terrible consequences, Desima. It could aid the Emperor in crushing this galaxy forever. I prophesied that the Empire would fall, and that the Jedi would rise again, but all of that may be in doubt now. I must stop Malol from learning anything of true importance. This is a larger issue then whether the Whills are freed. *

"Well, what can you do? Can you fight this Malol?"

* My powers are greatly diminished, now that I reside in Orenth. I sense that Malol and I are evenly matched in strength. Much will depend on Orenth. Because I reside in him, I can use his mind and his will as a shield. Malol must get past Orenth before he gets to me. He cannot kill Orenth, for then I will cease to exist, and he will lose me forever. He must break Orenth to reach my mind. I am afraid, Desima. Afraid that Orenth's fear of death will be a weakness that Malol can exploit to win. I will give Orenth all of my strength to defend him, but the outcome is in doubt. *

"What should we do? Commander Reen is thinking about calling off the attack. Does the governor know about the Chevs?"

* Not yet. But chances are, he will learn of them from Orenth. Attacking now would be even more disastrous then it would have been before. I do not know how to advise you. Perhaps the Whills can help. The overseers agreed to try to reach you and share their knowledge of the Imperial defenses. It still may not be enough. You must assume that Orenth will be forced to tell all that he knows. Wait... Someone is approaching. Malol is coming. I must concentrate on Orenth now. Do not lose hope. Neither this battle against the Bogan, nor the battle to save the Whills has been decided yet. *

Then Desima felt the Skywalker lose contact. He was gone. She slumped onto a boulder in despair. Not lose hope? What hope was there left? A wave of helplessness washed over her.

Then she thought of Orenth, and in a moment, her fierce maternal instincts rallied within her. She clamped down on the despair and crushed it out. Orenth was still alive. She would not, could not give up hope. Sudden angry tears burned her eyes. This fight wasn't over. It was only beginning!

Desima knew from experience that there was always hope. Twelve years ago, it had seemed hopeless when Captain Vespa was moments away from destroying the Bantha Tracker, but the Skywalker had saved them. The spirit wasn't free to help now, but perhaps... perhaps they could save the Skywalker this time. They still had the Liberators and all of their weapons and equipment. There must be something they could do. So they had lost the element of surprise... Maybe there was a way to get it back. If they made a new plan now, the Imperials would have no way to learn about it. They needed something new, something besides the Chev soldiers, some other weapon the Imperials wouldn't expect...

Desima experienced a flash of insight. Perhaps it was triggered by the spirit mentioning the insect caves. Perhaps it was a gift from the Force. She remembered the story of Orenth's parent, Master Resh, which she had written in "The Preservers." Resh had been fleeing for dear life through the corridors of the monastery of the Whills, pursued by an Imperial soldier. The old scribe had been trapped in the insect breeding room by the trooper. Resh had been dying from severe blaster wounds, but the Whill managed to kill the Imperial before succumbing. Resh had tossed a cage full of insects at the man, and one very poisonous variety of insect had bitten and swiftly killed him. The toxins had been very deadly to humans. The Imperials in the garrison were all humans, too. She knew that was the kind of weapon they needed. The Ashlan Four Whills had come from this planet originally. Had they taken those insects from this world as a food supply when they left? If so, then there might be some of the same species right here in the mountains.

Desima felt strongly about her new idea. It felt right to her, and she wondered if it did have something to do with her minor Force sensitivity. The idea needed a lot of work, but it was a start. She stood up decisively and walked determinedly towards Commander Reen's tent. There was a lot of new information she had to share with the Liberators. It wasn't over yet, not by a long shot. We're coming for you, Governor Malol, she thought fiercely. And if you've hurt my son, I'll see you dead, you dark side bastard!

* * *

The first round of interrogation had not gone well for Blackhole/Malol. In a traditional sense, perhaps, it had; the prisoner had revealed useful information concerning a nearby Rebel force and their plan of attack. Apparently, a group of two hundred fifty humanoid alien ground troops were going to make an overland approach and assault the compound from two directions. They were going to use ranged weapons to prevent the garrison from using its TIE fighters and turbolasers, then go down into the mines and bring out the Whills. It would be easy to foil such an attack. There were more than enough stormtroopers to wait outside the perimeter fence and slaughter the Rebel troops as they approached. The order had already been given, although Malol wondered if the Rebels would still come. By now they might suspect that Orenth had been captured and questioned, and call off the attack. Malol was unconcerned. If they chose not to come, he could always send out his forces to destroy them at his leisure.

Yes, he admitted that the first interrogation had yielded information of some small use, but to his considerable frustration, the true prize remained out of reach. Malol had been unable to reach the spirit of the Skywalker at all. He was sure the spirit was there, using the Whill as some kind of host. Orenth's thoughts revealed that the Jedi spirit had left the nebula, joined with a human to travel to this planet, and then joined with the Whill to enter the garrison. The Skywalker was

hiding somehow, using the Whill's mind as a sort of shield. Malol was only able to detect the Skywalker indirectly, through the effect the spirit had on the Whill's defenses. It was impossible that Orenth's mind could be that strong on its own; the Skywalker was helping him, that was certain.

Malol used a powerful combination of interrogation techniques. Along with the usual drugs, he employed projective telepathy through the Force, creating convincing illusions to manipulate the prisoner. Under the influence of these visions, the subject was soon ready to divulge the necessary information. Malol extracted it fully, using receptive telepathy.

It was easiest to coerce the subject when his greatest mental and emotional weaknesses were known. Using the prisoner's worst fears, very potent and effective visions could be designed. Malol already knew that Orenth suffered from a profound fear of death. That could be used against him, to break his will and expose the Skywalker to a direct attack. The dark adept suspected that the spirit must be too weak to beat him in a direct confrontation, or else he would not be hiding like that. Once the protection of the Whill's mind was demolished, the spirit's secrets would belong to Malol.

Poor little Whill, thought Malol. He could even empathize with Orenth for having such fears. He had them himself sometimes. And Orenth and his people were merely tools, pawns in a larger game. Theirs was a necessary sacrifice, however, which Malol made without regret. Orenth was about to face the second round of interrogation. This time, Malol had quite a vision prepared for him, a tapestry of pain woven from the Whill's deepest fears. The dark adept opened the cell door and stepped inside with Orenth, who was huddled in one corner. Time to get to work.

* * *

In the end, the Liberators attacked the garrison as planned. There wasn't going to be another chance like the present; Commander Reen decided to take the risk. The information that Orenth had given up proved to be their undoing. When the Chevs came across the wasteland towards the crater, they were ambushed by a well armed group of stormtroopers. The troopers outnumbered the Chevs by three to one. None of the Liberators even made it past the death fence, although many of them died burning upon it.

After the brutally short battle, Governor Malol ordered the execution of all the Whill slaves. With the spirit in his grasp, Malol no longer needed the Whills alive. The overseers were herded together with the slaves into a large group at the edge of the mine pit. Helpless and afraid, all five thousand of them milled about in confusion. High above them, across the vast crater, the turbolasers and laser cannons of the garrison turned smoothly to aim at the giant crowd of slaves. Then the fearsome guns opened fire, blasting out gouts of green fire

continuously at the Whills. The result was a hideous slaughter. The slaves were butchered and dismembered, seared and exploded. What was left of five thousand bodies tumbled into the huge pit. The guns roared on and on, not stopping until every Whill was dead. Even when they fell silent, the echoes continued to roll around the crater like the lingering ghost of extreme violence.

The last Whill to survive was still inside the garrison. Once again, it was Orenth, just like in the aftermath of the massacre at Ashlan Four. Orenth had just watched the slaughter of the slaves from a high window in the Imperial fortress. Turning away only when it was finished, the anguished Whill stumbled down the empty corridor, directionless, guilt-ridden, and now hopeless. The gleaming halls of the garrison seemed to be empty of Imperial personnel. No...not quite empty. There was a single figure waiting at the end of the long passage. It did not look like a man, but instead, like the shadow of a man. An upright shadow, solid black and glinting with tiny lights like a night sky. The shadow was waiting for Orenth.

A sinister voice emerged from the dark thing then, and it was the compelling voice of Governor Malol. "Welcome to the end of your life, Orenth," it said. "You may call me Blackhole. Today I am your death."

Orenth froze. There was no point in running. You couldn't run from death. And maybe it was something Orenth deserved. The Chevs and the Whill slaves were all dead, victims of the foolish decision to go inside the garrison, a decision Orenth had made without asking any of the others. They would have chosen differently, chosen to have a chance for life. Orenth's horrible mistake had taken that chance away forever.

"Death, Orenth," said Blackhole. "The final, icy draining away into oblivion. That's what you've feared all along, isn't it? You've always known how close death came to claiming you, several times. First at Ashlan Four, then again at Briggia base. So many others died all around you in those places, others much more worthy of life than you were. Why were they taken, and not you? You knew why not, didn't you? It wasn't just some oversight, some mistake on death's part. No, death has always had something special planned for you. You had to live until this moment, the moment of your destined end. Now you can finally die, Orenth, now that you have helped to complete the destruction of your people, the entire Whill race. That has always been your destiny. And as soon as I reach you, as soon as I touch you, you will die."

Blackhole drifted closer and closer, but Orenth stood stock still. It was all true, everything that Blackhole said was true. The shadow paused. "There is one final chance for you Orenth. One way you can save yourself. Tell me, do you want to live? Think carefully about your answer. Your people are all dead, your family is gone. You are more alone now than you have ever been. Do you want to live, even now?"

Orenth's answer was a swift sob. "Yes."

Blackhole laughed. "Yes, of course you do. Everyone wants to live. No one wants to die. The survival of the individual is all that

matters in the end. All of your people are dead, but does that really matter? You have already spent most of your life thinking you were the last of your kind. Did you choose to die then? No, you chose to live. And you want to go on living, even now, any way you can. We understand each other, Orenth, and I can help you, on one condition." Blackhole's voice turned hard. "You must help me first. You have something I want. Give me the Skywalker. He knows the secret of living beyond death. I will have that knowledge for myself. If you help me, Orenth, I will even share the secret with you. You too can live forever. You need never fear death again."

Orenth did not, could not answer.

"You do not have time to think about this," warned Blackhole. The shadow moved closer again. Orenth knew that touching it would mean dying in an instant. Still, the Whill could not move. "You will answer me now. Give up the Skywalker, and live, or refuse, and die. Choose!"

The shadow came forward, looming like a window into deep space, ready to engulf everything.

"How can I give you the Skywalker?" Orenth said desperately.

"Merely stand aside and let me pass," said Blackhole. "Turn and see. He is behind you."

Orenth looked back. The spirit of the Skywalker stood there, shimmering with a beautiful light.

* Orenth!* The spirit urgently held up his ghostly hands. * Do not give in to him. Listen to me. I know that you fear death, but for the sake of your people, you must overcome your fear. Malol is lying to you. The Whills are still alive, and so are the Chevs. This is just a vision of what might be, if you fail now. I must teach you about death, so that you may face it without terror. Because of what I know, I do not fear death. After such a long existence, I even desire it. *

"You want to die?" Orenth said, astonished.

* I am seeking to die. Malol thinks he wants my knowledge. He thinks he wants to live as long as I have. He does not understand at all. Death is not something to be feared. It is a natural transition to a profoundly beautiful state. The Ashla has shown me that when we die, we merge with the living energy of the galaxy. We become one with the Force. I have delayed that for too long. It is my time to give up the burden of individuality and become a part of all that there is. Orenth, this true knowledge of the Force brings a peace which neither love of life, nor fear of death can shatter. You must let go of your fear and take that peace into yourself in its place. Malol wants you to step aside out of fear. This, you must not do. Trust me, Orenth. Trust life. Face your fear and we will prevail. *

Orenth turned back to the advancing shadow. "Stand aside or die," Blackhole ordered. Orenth stood rooted to the spot, thinking hard. Was

the spirit correct? Was death not the end, not something to be feared? Something natural... even beautiful in the end? Orenth's internal voice insisted on the opposite, but what was the truth? Perhaps, Orenth thought, the real question was not about the next life, but this one. What was Orenth's life really worth? Should it be preserved at any cost? If the Skywalker was lost here and now, what would become of the whole mission? Orenth thought of all the Whills who were still alive. They were worth fighting for. Even if it meant dying for them. The choice was simple. Malol could not be allowed to reach the Skywalker. Orenth ran at the shadow. And ran into it. And fell into the stars. And blackness swallowed everything.

Malol stood in the cell glaring hatefully at the unconscious Whill. He was able to sense the presence of the spirit at last, but he had been blocked from reaching it. He had failed to break Orenth's will. The accursed spirit had been too strong in supporting his host. A much stronger telepathic assault might overcome the Whill, but it might also drive Orenth insane. That might destroy the Skywalker as well, and Malol would have defeated himself at the same time, losing the spirit's knowledge forever. Insanity would be a mercy for the Whill, Malol reflected. Then at least he would no longer fear death. But Malol still would. It wasn't over yet. Malol hadn't exhausted all of his options. If he could not break the Whill mentally, he would break him physically first. The mind would follow easily after that. He decided to put Orenth into the deepest, most difficult part of the Chanlon mines. Back breaking labor and the despair of being enslaved would have the necessary effect. It was only a matter of time now...

Orenth drifted in dreams, and the Skywalker was there, speaking softly. * Well done, Orenth. I am very proud of you. *

I'm not dead, Orenth thought.

* Malol could not kill you. He needs you alive until he can get to me. If you died, I would lose the physical structure which houses my essence, and I too would go into death, taking my knowledge with me. By facing your fear, you won this battle against him. As long as your will holds, he cannot reach me. *

I understand... But how long can we really last?

* As long as we must. Do not give up hope. We still have allies who may yet be able to help us...*

* * *

Roughly five hundred Whill slaves sat listlessly on blankets, listening to Meelo read to them from the Writings. The overseer knew that this could very well be the final sermon given in this room. Orenth

had gone into the garrison nine hours ago, wearing the red robe that would implicate the overseers. Even as Meelo spoke to the congregation, the high priest Civtor was in the back room, listening anxiously to Imperial frequencies on the comlink they had stolen long ago. At the first sign that Orenth had failed, they would put their emergency plan into effect.

Meelo was sure that Orenth had failed. There had been no chance for success in the first place, in Meelo's opinion. The Empire was too powerful. The only thing more powerful was the god Ashla, and the Skywalker, whatever it really was, admitted it was not the God. Meelo expected Orenth to fail, then the orders to arrest the overseers would go out. The slaves would be deprived of their spiritual guidance, which could extend the Time of Punishment even more. If only they had refused to help Orenth... The young Whill could have simply gone away and left well enough alone. But Meelo had been outvoted.

If this was to be the last sermon, then Meelo wanted it to be memorable. But it was hard to make a strong impression on the slaves anymore. Their spirits had been broken long ago. They moved mechanically, almost never complaining, and worked until they were exhausted. At the religious services, they merely sat and listened without a spark of real interest in their eyes. Afterwards, they shuffled back to their standard prefabricated Imperial shelters, where the only thing to do was sleep from exhaustion. Meelo wondered if the Writings meant anything to them now. They had to mean something. The people had to understand them. They were impure, and they had to seek purity. Unless they understood the plan of Ashla, their suffering would be wasted.

"It was written by Sool of Sartus," said Meelo loudly, "that our suffering is deserved. So too, will we deserve our salvation when it comes at last. We will deserve it because we accepted what was done to us, and did not seek to escape it. We have suffered the toil of the mines and the abuses of our guards. To those who do not understand, we appear to be victims of human oppression. But we know the truth. The humans are merely tools of the God. Ashla uses them as the instruments of our purification. When we are pure, and Ashla is done with the humans, they will be cast aside and destroyed, even as we are taken into the holy realm."

Meelo held the heavy stone containing the Punishment Doctrine high, and shouted out the basic tenets of their faith. "Almighty Ashla is our God!" The congregation was supposed to repeat each statement, responding with conviction and enthusiasm, but it hadn't been that way for a long time, now.

"Ashla is our God," most of the Whills murmured.

"Ashla will deliver us from our suffering, when the Time of Punishment is done!" As the slaves mumbled responsively, Meelo was distracted by Pamal, gesturing frantically from the doorway to the back room. Putting down the sky stone, Meelo faced the congregation. "We

will have a moment of silent prayer." Then the overseer hurried to the back room to hear the bad news.

Civtor, holding the comlink, looked resigned. "We're out of time. I just heard a communication ordering a transfer of the Whill prisoner from the detention center to the mines. That prisoner can only be Orenth; there are no others." Civtor frowned at Faloo. "Your 'Departed One' has been captured, it seems. I should have listened to you, Meelo. Now it is too late. They will be coming to arrest us, and from what I have picked up on this device, they are going to execute us. We must carry out our emergency plan, and go blend in among the slaves. It is our only chance to avoid immediate arrest. Amand, if you can, get to the Rebels as we discussed. Bring back their help, or there is no point in your coming back at all."

"I won't let you down," said Amand, bowing once to the high priest. "May Ashla keep you safe."

"And you," said Civtor. Amand went to speak to the congregation and tell them it was time to disperse. The four remaining overseers stripped out of their red robes. Naked, they resembled any of the slaves. "Remember not to speak the Imperial Basic language," Civtor warned them. "It will give you away immediately. Use only our native tongue. And try to act like a slave. Watch the others, and copy their body language." Civtor opened a box and took out four slave collars, which had been obtained from a guard earlier. The high priest distributed them with distaste.

"Must we wear these?" complained Meelo, already knowing the answer. Civtor ignored the question. They fastened the collars around their necks. When a slave wearing a collar misbehaved, any guard with a director unit could command the collar to deliver a painful high-voltage shock. There was a lethal setting as well. The adjustable circlets snapped neatly together. Now they could not be removed without the proper tools.

Amand was already gone when they went out to mingle with the slaves. The slow-moving group of five hundred filed from the worship hall on their way back to the slave quarters. The overseers fell into step with them, leaving their power, their position, and their comfort behind them.

* * *

Trying very hard to stay calm, Amand walked steadily into the cavernous vehicle bay of the garrison. None of the Imperials moved to arrest the Whill. That meant the order hadn't gone out yet, but as for how much time was left, there was no way to tell. Brandishing a clipboard, Amand approached the speeder bike deck with determination. A single speeder bike technician stood among the forty neatly arranged

vehicles, looking bored. Amand smiled. This was going to be simple. Humans were so easy to manipulate.

Amand called out to the technician, using an apologetic tone. "Sorry to bother you, but it's the Governor's orders."

"What orders?" frowned the technician. The human seemed uncertain as to how much respect to give the Whill. Mentioning the governor was a wise move, Amand guessed.

"Speeder bike inspection," said Amand, waving the clipboard. "I have to pick one of the bikes at random and make sure it is in proper working order."

"Inspection..." The technician was openly annoyed. "That's nonsense. Of course the bikes are all working properly. I inspect them all myself every day."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure that is true," said Amand. "You are the expert, of course. Nothing I could do to improve on your work. I agree, this is completely unnecessary. But," Amand said confidentially, "You see... it's Governor Malol. He ordered me to do it. I couldn't exactly argue with him. You know how he is."

The technician nodded guardedly.

"I'm sure it's not a reflection on your expertise," Amand continued. "The governor probably wasn't thinking of you at all. I'm afraid this particular duty is designed to keep me busy with trivial matters and remind me of my place. Perhaps I offended him somehow. One can never be sure. Ah, well." Amand sighed. "He did say something about there being Rebels nearby, and that he wanted to be sure the vehicles were ready, but..."

The technician's eyes widened. "Rebels? Really?"

"I don't know anything about that," said Amand. "I just have to complete this inspection checklist on one of the bikes. This one will do fine, I suppose."

"Well, if it's Rebels we're talking about, these machines are more than enough to handle them. I want you to tell the governor that my speeder bikes are ready for action. What's on your list?"

Amand frowned at the clipboard. "You'll have to help me out here... okay, where are the maneuvering controls?"

"Right here in the hand grips." The technician gave a brief demonstration, moving the steering vanes, as Amand nodded and wrote something down.

"Altitude controls?"

"Down here in the foot pedals. The acceleration controls are right here too. Press here, and here, like this, to go higher and faster. This model will reach the maximum speed of five hundred kilometers per hour and a height of twenty-five meters."

Amand kept on writing. "Very good. I'll be sure to tell the governor about you personally, and let him know what good work you do here. Now... how about the power cell?"

"It's fully charged. The repulsorlift engine was just tuned this morning." The technician flipped several switches on the control panel. "Comlink, sensors, targeting system... all in good shape." The bike began to whine and hum with power.

"And that ...ah... blaster cannon. Is it also fully charged?"

"Of course," said the technician.

Clumsily, Amand started to climb into the seat. The Whill had just noticed an officer pointing in their direction and giving orders to two stormtroopers. The troopers held their rifles ready and marched towards the speeder bike deck. That's it, Amand decided, they've given the orders to arrest us.

"Hey, you don't want to get on there-" protested the technician.

"Oh, I'm afraid the governor insisted that I check the hovering balance," Amand mumbled.

"The what?" The technician noticed the troopers and turned to them, distracted.

Amand shoved one huge foot against the accelerator and pulled back hard on the hand grip controls. With a piercing whine, the speeder bike shot forward with the overseer clinging desperately onto it. In a moment, Amand was through the enormous front gate and hurtling down the great ramp towards the crater floor. Amand's red robe whipped about furiously as the Whill coaxed as much acceleration out of the bike as it could give. The exhilarated overseer aimed straight for the side of the crater, laughing while imagining the shocked expression of the technician at that moment. The human was probably noticing by now that the "Maintenance checklist" was merely a page from the writings of Sool of Sartus. Giant boulders and huge cracks in the ground blurred past as the crater wall loomed large.

"Altitude controls... Altitude controls..." Amand thought frantically. "Oh yes, in the foot pedals. The Whill's stumpy foot was awkward on the pedal, but Amand got it right just in time. The front of the bike pulled up sharply, and Amand was suddenly flying up the slope towards the perimeter fence and guard towers. Amand prayed fervently to Ashla while maxing out both acceleration and lift. As the troopers on the catwalk watched in amazement, the Whill on the speeder bike soared high into the air, clearing the top of the death fence by a comfortable margin. No one thought to fire a shot.

Now outside the crater for the first time in three years, Amand dove down again, close to the ground, and leveled off. Still demanding the highest possible speed from the stolen machine, Amand blinked tears of astonishment at having won freedom. It was time to find the Rebels, Amand knew. They were located beyond the nearby mountains, but Amand was unsure exactly where they were. It might take some time to get to them, but when Amand did show up, they were going to be very surprised to have a visitor!

* * *

When Commander Nella reported the Whill overseer's escape to Malol, the governor took it rather well.

"Don't bother going after him," said Malol. "There's only one place he can go where there is anyone still alive on this planet, and that is to find the Rebels. And I want him to do that. Ever since we captured the Rebel Whill, I have been concerned that the other Rebels would change their plans. It would be best if they came here to us. Then we could deal with them on our terms, with all of our weapons and equipment available to us, rather than hunt them down in the mountains where they would have the advantage. I'm hoping that the runaway overseer will tip the scales in favor of an attack here."

"A little extra intelligence information to make them feel confident, right sir?" Commander Nella smiled.

"Exactly."

"And the other four overseers, sir? What about the report that they vanished also?"

"They are still inside the crater," said Malol confidently. "I believe they simply blended in with the rest of the slaves. Again, let them think they are clever. In reality, they have only chosen their own form of punishment, perhaps a more fitting one than the one I would have chosen. In any case, carry on, Commander. Maintain the alert status and continue to deploy the ground troops outside the perimeter."

"Yes, sir," said Commander Nella briskly.

* * *

Reb stood by nervously as the two Chev scouts monitored the progress of the approaching Imperial speeder bike. News of its arrival had interrupted Commander Reen's strategy meeting, but Reb had been grateful for that. The session had been one big nonproductive argument,

in which Desima tried again and again to convince the Chev leader that her plan involving insects had some merit.

Reen had been alarmed about the bike at first, thinking that the Imperials had located the Liberators. Then she reasoned that if they had, they wouldn't be sending a single biker scout, but an army of stormtroopers inside Walkers instead. Sick of the meeting as he was, Reb had volunteered to go with the Chevs to track the speeder bike. If it was an Imperial, they were to prevent him from finding the Chevs' camp and reporting back to base.

Peering into his electrobinoculars, the first Chev soldier frowned deeply. "Something's not right about that biker," he said quietly. "The size is all wrong for a human. "

"Let me take a look," Reb asked impulsively. The Chev passed him the binocs. Reb found the distant bike, focused on it, and zoomed in. The scout was right. The rider was big, round, and bulky, and wearing red instead of stormtrooper white. There was even something familiar about the shape of the rider... Suddenly the bike turned and Reb saw it from the side. His heart leaped. The rider was unmistakably a Whill!

"There's a Whill--a Whill--on that bike!" Reb stuttered as he shoved the electrobinoculars back at the Chev. For a wild moment, Reb was filled with hope. Could it be that Orenth had managed to escape and come back to them? It was more than he dared to imagine. Reb had been feeling terrible since Orenth had disappeared. There truly was no fear like that of a parent whose child was in danger. He had been wracked with worry that Orenth's brave, foolhardy, heroic, insane stunt would mean his death. Orenth was supposed to have been safe. He wasn't meant to go anywhere near the garrison at any time, especially during the fighting. It had been risky even to bring the Whill to this planet, but Reb knew Orenth had the right to come, after what he had already been through. Having given up the binoculars, Reb stared anxiously at the approaching speck.

"That could be Orenth," he said. "We should go down to intercept him. He may need our help." Both of the scouts agreed.

When the three of them stepped out into the open on the plain, the Whill on the speeder bike immediately steered in their direction. The whine of the bike grew louder as it approached. Reb judged that it was going a bit too fast to stop in time. Sure enough, it shot right past them and continued along the cracked landscape at high speed. Reb caught a brief glimpse of a red robed Whill whose big feet were struggling with the tiny foot pedals. They ran after the bike, which eventually stopped. Dismounting, the Whill almost fell off of the bike, and began to adjust its robes and beat off the dust while regaining its balance on firm ground. Reb's hopes were dashed when he saw that it wasn't Orenth, but a bearded adult instead.

The Whill waved at them. "Hello! My name is Amand! I certainly hope you are the Rebels Orenth spoke about. I'd hate to run into the

Imperials so soon after escaping from them. Horrible people! Absolutely horrible!"

The two Chev scouts just stared at each other.

* * *

"Yes, that is correct," Amand was telling Commander Reen, "This line of buildings along the edge of the mine pit are all guard stations. Most of the guards go down into the pit during work periods. At any given time, there will be about fifty guards on duty. But that is more than enough because of the slave collars and their director units. They connect the collars with power cables so they can control or punish dozens of slaves at once."

"I am familiar with their methods," said Reen. "What other weapons do they have?"

"The guards have their neuronc whips and stun batons," said Amand. "Most of them carry blasters. Those items are rarely used these days. Any spirit of resistance went out of the slaves long ago."

"Very well," Reen said. "Thank you for the information. You may wait outside while I finish the planning."

"Are we going through with the old plan then?" asked Desima.

"I see no better alternative. We cannot know what the Imperials have learned from Orenth. I personally believe that if they knew about our presence and location, they would have attacked by now. They have the forces to do so, and no reason to hold back. Perhaps Orenth has not yet been broken; you say he has the help of the Jedi spirit. We may still have the advantage of surprise. But perhaps not indefinitely."

"If you would consider my plan," Desima argued, "we could be sure of surprising them."

"What plan?" Reen asked tiredly. "You have only a half-formed idea. Those insects of yours--"

"Insects?" Amand interrupted. "Do you have some? I haven't had any in three years. You have no idea how much I've missed them."

Desima turned to the Whill. "Maybe you can help me. I'm thinking about a kind of flying insect which the Whills of Ashlan Four ate for food. The males are small and colorful with bright red and orange markings, and the females are several times larger and very plain, all gray in color. The question is, did they come from around here and can we still find them?"

"Right," said Amand, "You're talking about Nommi bugs. The males are delicious, but the females will make you very sick if you eat them."

"Exactly," said Desima, getting excited. "The females have a bite which is poisonous and very deadly to humans."

"I never knew that," said Amand.

"Where can we find some?" she asked.

"In the insect breeding caves, further into the mountains. I know where to find one, not very far from here. The place must be really overrun by now. No one has tended to it in years. No one to control their reproduction. They could be swarming by now." Amand seemed hungry at the thought.

"So you have these insects," Reen said doubtfully. "What can you do with them, besides feed the overseer here?"

Desima didn't answer. Reen looked annoyed. "You don't have an answer to my question, do you? I think you should stop wasting my time with this and let me finish planning the real battle." Desima still didn't reply. "Did you hear me?" Reen demanded. "I said--"

"No, wait," Reb interrupted. "She gets like that when she's talking to the Skywalker. He must be sending her another message."

"Is that right?" Reen frowned. "And how long does that take?"

"Just a minute or two usually," Reb said apologetically. "Let's be patient. It could be something very important."

Desima's awareness eventually returned, and when she looked up at Reb, she was smiling. "The Skywalker says Orenth is okay. He got through the interrogation, and he was strong enough to keep the spirit safe from the governor!"

"I'm impressed," Reb said, eyes wide.

"They put him in the mines with the slaves," she continued, "just like Amand said. The spirit vouches for Amand and says we can trust him."

Reen nodded. She had harbored certain justified suspicions that the overseer could be some kind of Imperial agent.

"Orenth did give up most of our battle plan," said Desima, "Just as we suspected. But there is hope. I told the Skywalker about my idea of using the insects, and he told me how it can work. The problem is simply how to get the insects to the garrison. They are a flying species, so all we have to do is direct them. That can be done through the Force. The Skywalker wants to use me as a conduit for his power, like he did years ago. He thinks he can create a swarm and direct it to attack the Imperials. This plan can save the lives of our soldiers by letting the

swarm make the first assault. And, like I said before, we regain the element of surprise."

"But the Nommi bugs will bite the Whills too," said Amand. "They aren't deadly to us, but the poison will incapacitate the slaves. Then they won't be going anywhere."

"I've thought of that," said Desima. "The Skywalker thinks there's a way to make the swarm pass over the Whills in the mine and attack only the humans."

"Very well," said Commander Reen. "Now, you have a plan. We will incorporate the swarm into our strategy."

Desima looked at her, surprised. "That's it? You agree to try this?"

"I am not unreasonable," said Reen. "I simply have very exacting standards. I am responsible for many lives, your son among them. I take that responsibility very seriously."

The two women looked into each other's eyes, and an understanding passed between them. They were both on the same side in this battle after all.

"Amand?" Desima asked. "Can you take me to the insect caves? We need to get started right away."

"Certainly," said Amand. "I still remember the way. We can leave at once. If we squeeze on, we should both fit onto that stolen speeder bike for the journey."

"Good," said Commander Reen. "Stay in contact with us, and we'll coordinate the timing of our operations." She stood up, and the meeting was concluded.

A short while later, Reb stood with Amand and Desima to see them off. The Chevs hurried back and forth all around them, preparing their gear for the mission.

"I was thinking," Reb said to the Whill, "about those religious writings you mentioned during the meeting. I was going over the rescue plan in my mind, and it seems to me that there isn't going to be chance to get to the overseers' quarters and collect them."

Amand snuffled uncomfortably. "No, it doesn't seem prudent to advance that close to the garrison. The main point of the assault is to remove the slaves from the opposite side of the crater."

"But..." Reb hesitated. "How are we going to save your writings, your histories, your culture? Someone has to preserve them. Shouldn't we organize a team to go after them?"

"The writings are located where the fighting may be heaviest," Amand said evasively. "I am not sure that retrieving them would be worth losing so many lives."

Desima knew Reb was thinking about the Journal of the Whills, and all they had done to save it. She wondered why Amand seemed unwilling to discuss the issue.

"We should be on our way," said Amand. "Our time is limited and we do not know what we will find at the caves."

"All right," said Reb, letting the matter drop for the time being. He looked Desima in the eyes. "I want you to be careful," he said seriously. "Those insects can kill you just as easily as the Imperials."

"I will," she said. "And what will you be doing? Are you going with the Liberators?"

"I am, but don't worry. I'll keep to the rear. I know I'm not a soldier. I can't just sit here and wait, though. Our son is in there, and I want to be there to make sure he gets out safely."

"I know what you mean," Desima said softly. "I want to be there too. Once we get the swarm on its way, we'll try to join up with you as soon as we can. I'm no soldier either, but this is our fight too, now." She smiled bravely at him. "Reb... I love you very much. I'm sorry that lately we've been--"

"No," he interrupted. "There'll be time for that later. For now, just know that I love you too." He kissed his wife tenderly and ran his fingers through her long hair. "We're going to be all right," he said. "The Force is with us." Reb stood back as Amand activated the repulsors. Desima waved to him, trying to look cheerful. Then the bike took off and sped away. In moments, the Chev camp and Desima's husband were left far behind.

* * *

Hanging on behind Amand for dear life as she was, Desima was unable to converse with the Whill until they stopped next to a yawning mountain cave opening. When the noise of the bike's engine died down, she asked the question which had been on her mind the whole way.

"If I'm not mistaken," she said, "You don't want to rescue your religious writings. Why?"

Amand looked away, snout wrinkling. The overseer sighed. "I won't deny it. But you should hold your criticism until you understand the whole situation. The Skywalker has cast considerable doubt on the truth of our beliefs... and I confess I have had my doubts all along. Strange viewpoint for a supposed religious leader to have, is it not?" Amand wore

a sad little smile. "I did always believe that the writings encouraged a highly moral life style, and in that, their value was above and beyond the question of their historical truth. Even so, there have always been aspects of the writings which tended to oppress and victimize our people. And so I have begun to think about the future of my race. If we should be rescued, and if we leave this world and become part of your galactic society... it may be for the best if we were to make a fresh start... if we abandoned the idea that we must perpetually suffer for the sake of our salvation. Perhaps, instead... we should simply... live."

Desima had little to say in response to that. "I'm sorry, Amand. I wasn't really thinking, and neither was Reb. We're used to trying to preserve the past. It's very important to us. But your history is your concern. Only you can decide what to do with it."

"I have no idea what the others will think," said Amand. "I imagine my fellow overseers would disagree with me. But perhaps in the chaos of the fighting, there will simply be no chance to save the Writings..."

"We'll see," said Desima, "but for now we have work to do right here."

Amand pointed to the cave. "The Nommi breeding area is in there. You'd better put on your gloves and face shield. Do you feel safe enough to go in?"

Desima donned her protective gear, fully aware that she could be bitten through her clothing in certain spots. "I don't have much choice. Let's go."

Inside the cave, they found the remains of an old Whill insect breeding facility. There were some signs that the sudden arrival of the Empire had caused it to be abandoned. A few tattered record books were scattered about, and several long pole like tools were carelessly left lying on the floor. Amand picked up a stiff net covering and handed it to Desima. "Cover yourself with this. It should provide you with additional protection." The Whill looked around as Desima complied. Finding another netting cloak, Amand put it on as well. The cave was very large, and the back wall held a great many small openings. A constant low buzzing emerged from the holes.

"The Nommi bugs are all in there," said Amand. "There are lots of tunnels and caves all through here where they breed. They used to cover these poles with chemical attractants and stick them into the holes. When they pulled them out, they were covered with insects."

"They live back inside there? What do they eat?"

"There's an abundant, fast-growing lichen that they feed on, and their waste fertilizes the plants, as I understand it. But without the regular removal of some of the insects for our food, the population in these caves has probably gotten quite out of hand. There should be plenty of Nommi bugs for your swarm."

Desima did not like insects as a rule. Even in a galaxy as diverse as this one, she found them to be much too... alien looking. Seen up close, the anatomical details of insects always made her feel disgusted. She found a number of dead ones littering the floor and eyed them with distaste. The colorful males were about two centimeters long, and the gray females were between six and ten centimeters. Their bodies had three parts, and they had four wings and six segmented legs. Their heads had long antennae, and the females had very large and sharp mandibles for biting. Desima poked the dead bugs with her foot and grimaced. These insects and the Imperials were made for each other. Now she had to make sure they got together.

She reached out with her mind to call the Skywalker, and he answered promptly.

I am ready, Desima. Clear your mind and prepare to receive my energies. It will be just like that time in the Ashlan nebula when I freed you from your prison cell. You will feel the Ashla flow through you and begin to do its work. You must remain calm and passive. Allow the energy to do what it will.

Desima went to the side wall of the cave and made herself comfortable. Amand stood quietly nearby. She began to settle into a meditative state, as she had once been taught as a child Jedi hopeful. After an uncertain amount of time, her quiet, peaceful feelings began to change. A sense of strength grew inside her, and she felt much more alive. She smiled broadly with her eyes closed, and a tear ran down one cheek. This was what it felt like to be a powerful Jedi, and to touch the Force deeply. If only she could have had that all her life.

Desima's senses expanded, and suddenly she could see and feel the profusion of insect life beyond the rock. The Nommi bugs were there in great numbers, and the dark tunnels and caves were crawling with them. She was aware of them flying through the blackness in droning clouds. She felt them eating the cave plants with their inner jaws, feeling about for the food with their antennae. She knew they were laying eggs in the cool cracks in the stone, and she saw them shedding their exoskeletons as they grew. She was aware of them mating and exchanging pheromone messages. Strangely, they no longer seemed so disgusting to her. Instead, they seemed just like another part of the living world.

The key to manipulating them, the Skywalker had told her, was to use pheromone like messages to trick them into doing what the Rebels needed. The Force was being used to communicate the same kind of instructions to the insects. First, they would convince the female Nommi bugs that a great many highly desirable males were concentrated outside the caves and ready to mate. This illusory sex-pheromone message would bring the poisonous females out and lure them across the plain to the garrison crater. Another pheromone like message would be used to designate an enemy to be attacked. In this case, human male pheromones would be the identifier that led the Nommi to attack the Imperials, and not the Chevs or the Whills.

Desima felt the Force course through her, like electricity through a wire. Her mind began to make contact with the alien consciousness of the insects. She experienced their simple urges to eat, fly, mate, and fight. Her thoughts began to take on a stark, brutal, frenzied quality. Then the Skywalker began to send the deceptive information into the insect nervous systems and sensory organs. Primal, irresistible urges dictated the instinctive response of the females. Thousands upon thousands of female Nommi bugs rose up in search of the mating-ready males. Things happened rather quickly after that.

Blackly dense streams of insects burst forth from the holes in the cave wall and poured out like water from a pipe. For a terrifying minute, they filled the whole cave. Desima and Amand cowered under their netting as the fierce rush of insects blanketed them. The swarm blocked out the light as Desima struggled to stay calm and continue to let the Force flow through her. Eventually the swarm boiled out of the cave and took to the open sky where it gathered like a rain-heavy storm cloud.

Gingerly, Desima lifted the edge of her netting and looked around. The cave was empty of insects. None of them had gotten through to bite her. Fortunately, the mating drive did not involve biting attacks. Amand and Desima hurried out of the cave and got back on the speeder bike. They looked up in awe at the roiling mass of insects in the sky. The swarm was like a giant organism, a biological weapon ready to be used. Desima continued to channel the spirit's energy, and the swarm responded by taking off into the east, still chasing the attractive signals created by the Skywalker. Amand hit the accelerator and the bike shot off after the swarm.

Speeding along with a Whill on the back of a stolen bike, chasing an enormous cloud of alien insects on the way to attack an Imperial garrison, Desima was struck by the wonder of what she was doing. And usually I lead such a normal life, she thought. The situations I get into for the sake of the Whills...

She laughed at the craziness of it all, feeling wild and free as the wind whipped her long hair. It was wonderful to be finally doing something against the Empire. They had been responsible for so much of the unhappiness in her life. Now she had a chance to strike back, and strike back hard. In the name of the Whills and the Jedi, the Empire was going to pay for what it had done. We're coming, Orenth, she thought. Just hang on. Help is on the way!

* * *

Writings from the Whill homeworld: Part Three

From the personal Journal of Meelo:

I have been questioning the state of my own purity recently. I know this is a shameful state of affairs for a servant of Ashla, but it is a truth I must admit to myself, if to no one else. I have done questionable things. When the Empire came to our world, I was among those who welcomed them at first. Perhaps I should forgive myself for that. The humans were clearly the same species as that of the Jedi who visited before the Time of Punishment. I can be excused for thinking that perhaps the Jedi had at long last returned. How was I to know, after all, that these new humans were so very different? Even so, I can only be excused for some of what I have done. As for the rest of it... I am unsure if I will ever feel pure again. I do not consider my actions to have been justified by what the Imperials did. It is true that they totally destroyed one of our cities just to show us their power. It is true that they executed hundreds of us simply to ensure the cooperation of the rest. Still I wonder if we should have resisted them somehow. I know we could never have won, but... would it have been better to die than to submit to slavery? I cannot answer that question, for I am among the few who do not suffer the direct burden of enslavement. Because I cooperated with the Imperials, because I told them where our settlements were, because I went with them to help them round up all of our people, because of these deeds they have made me an overseer.

I know that our enslavement is a part of the Time of Punishment. It would seem that this is the greatest suffering we have ever undergone. That must mean that when this trial is complete, our redemption will be at hand. I know that this is all for a purpose, and part of the design of Ashla. I know all of that, yet I still feel impure for having helped bring it about. The Imperial humans are too powerful for us to overcome, so we cannot change our fate. Ashla may not want us to. I can do nothing to alter what I have done. The God's plan will unfold, and the Departed Ones will come back at last. And I wonder... what will the Departed Ones think of me? Will they see my impurity immediately? Will they destroy me for it? Will I even be allowed to go to the realm of Ashla?

I suppose it will depend on what the Departed Ones are really like. So many legends have been created about them that it is hard to know the truth anymore. In our religion, they are the most popular figures in the imagination of the slaves. The more the people suffer, the more they want to believe in our saviors. And unlike the Jedi and the god Ashla, the Departed Ones are Whills like us. That makes them seem more accessible to us. I personally believe that the Departed Ones will not have the many supernatural powers which have been ascribed to them. Perhaps I simply hope so, for my own sake, so that they will not be able to see into my soul and judge me in fire. If the Departed Ones are merely mortal Whills, then I stand a chance in their eyes. For if they are mortal, then surely they too have made mistakes, and done impure things that they now regret.

But those are not the Departed Ones that the slaves want to hear about in the sermons. They crave the tales of the mighty saviors who will come in power and bring an end to punishment, who will slay the Imperials, and who will lead them out of slavery and into the realm of Ashla. Only time will tell what kind of saviors, if any, will come to us

in my lifetime. For now, I must seek to restore my own purity if I can. I would not be the last impure Whill to delay our salvation until my death. Ashla grant me a better end than that...

* * *

Blackhole had put Orenth in the hardest part of the Chanlon mine to break the Whill physically. It was working. Orenth had never faced this kind of punishment before. How long it could be endured was an open question. The guards had placed a slave collar around Orenth's neck. They had used it several times already to deliver excruciating shocks, even though Orenth was working as obediently as possible. The Whill also wore stun cuffs, a set of wrist binders that were able to deliver a paralyzing jolt whenever Orenth struggled. The cuffs were set for the most sensitive level, and Orenth had already set them off by reaching too fast for a digging tool.

Not wanting to take any chances with the powers of the Skywalker inside Orenth, Governor Malol had assigned ten guards to watch the Whill. All of them carried stun batons and neuronics whips. All of them were instructed to periodically abuse Orenth physically, and they had used their weapons liberally. The Skywalker was able to heal some, but not all of the damage. Hunger, thirst, and exhaustion were also taking their toll.

The spirit spoke to Orenth very infrequently. He seemed to be concentrating on an important task, and all he would tell Orenth was that help was on the way. He did not explain further, perhaps because he feared more interrogations by Malol.

The Chanlon mine itself was the result of the ancient asteroid impact that created the crater. The metal existed as compact globules encased in the rock. These ball like lumps were too dense to be cut by common digging tools such as power drills, vibro-shovels, and compression hammers. The task was to dig around the raw Chanlon chunks, bring them up out of the rock, clean them off by chipping most of the stone away, and load them onto tread carts which brought the metal up to the garrison. When enough accumulated for a shipment, it was taken away on the Star Destroyer. Orenth was surprised by how little metal the mine produced. Perhaps a little went a long way... or perhaps efficient production had never been the main point of the mine. Orenth somehow understood that although the Empire wanted that metal, it was probably getting enough. Malol, on the other hand, was concerned with the suffering of the Whills.

The pit was the result of several years of digging in the crater floor. A lot of rock had to be removed to find the relatively small Chanlon globules. Most of that digging had been done with simple picks and shovels, not modern tools. Using items such as the vibro-shovels was a rare reward for the slaves. Orenth, of course, had a crude pick.

The young Whill was toiling in a cramped tunnel, one of several dug into the western wall of the pit. There were several other Whills working there also, but none of them tried to communicate with Orenth or each other at any time. As far as Orenth could tell, the slaves had almost no social interaction. They would offer a very basic support to one another, helping each other up if they stumbled. But there seemed to be no bonds of friendship or family. Perhaps they were lonely by choice, to avoid the pain of further loss. Death was not uncommon among them, and their numbers had dwindled over their years of slavery. At least the Chev slaves had each other, Orenth thought. Commander Reen had been right when she gave her warning about the probable condition of the slaves. Orenth was dismayed by their shattered spirits and their listless behavior. There was no sense that resistance was even possible. The slaves were helpless. Orenth knew the reason. It was a combination of the influence of the Punishment Doctrine and fear of Imperial power and weapons. Orenth had long been familiar with the violence of the Empire, but this Punishment Doctrine was something new. Orenth was disgusted by it. If one bought into its essential message, that all this suffering was deserved, then one had absolutely no control over the end of that suffering. That led to despair, a despair Orenth could feel all around.

The day wore on, and Orenth struggled to hold the pick in trembling, blistered hands. Several times, the bite of the neuronc whip brought tears to the Whill's eyes, and blows from the stun baton brought near unconsciousness. The Skywalker was totally silent; it felt as if he wasn't there at all. Orenth suffered alone. Therefore, the voice which spoke up very quietly next to Orenth was completely unexpected.

"Just think of how much more pure this will make you."

Orenth turned to look at the other Whill in surprise. Not only had the slave spoken, but the words had been in Basic. Orenth's eyes widened. It was Meelo.

The overseers had been among the slaves for a day, and they were already deeply affected by the experience. It was their first real exposure to the conditions the slaves worked under every day. Accustomed as they were to the easy conditions of the overseers' quarters, they were almost unable to handle the physical demands of laboring in the mine. They were hungry, thirsty, exhausted, and in pain all over their bodies. Faced with the necessity of blending in, the reluctant religious leaders had no choice but to tough it out. The overcrowded, cramped sleeping quarters were uncomfortable and unsanitary. There was very little food and less water. The available protective clothing, coat-like coverings and gloves, was in short supply and in poor condition. The mining tools were plentiful but shabby. The slaves worked until they were totally exhausted. The human guards were mean-spirited and surly. The work itself, which consisted of little but endlessly chipping away at the stone, was grueling.

The overseers had been aware of most of these conditions, but it was different for them to experience them in person. They had avoided

thinking too hard about the problem, rationalizing their passivity with their understanding that they had no real power with the Imperials. There was nothing they could do to change anything. They had always known that. But now they felt like cowards for not trying. They had used the writings to help the slaves make sense of their fate. Now that they were sharing it, they found themselves unable to make sense of it themselves. They had held a privileged position without truly deserving it. The Whill religious leadership had lost a lot of power over the people in the years before the Empire came. Taking the positions of overseers had felt like a return to the religious dominance of old. But it wasn't real. They were still under the complete control of the Imperials. Their personal power was an illusion, and now the truth was clear. Every last Whill in the galaxy was now a slave.

The most depressing aspect of working in the mines was seeing how the slaves had so little will of their own. They were mistreated by the guards without protesting. They were made to work until they collapsed, but they did not complain. They offered no resistance. The overseers were disturbed to see up close how the Punishment Doctrine had debased their people. Perhaps the Skywalker was right. Perhaps they had been using the Writings in the wrong way. Perhaps there was no way to justify this kind of suffering, not even in the name of purity.

Civtor and the others could only place their hopes in Amand and the Rebels. There was still a chance that Orenth's friends might make a brave assault on the garrison. Once they began to think about the practical realities of a rescue attempt, however, they worried that the condition of the slaves might be a very real obstacle to overcome. Orenth's plan involved the slaves evacuating the mine and fleeing to the wilderness, but they were so passive, so helpless, so uncaring... it was impossible to imagine them leaving, or moving fast enough if they did.

It was Meelo who came up with a possible way to enliven them. The solution was in their midst, and it was Orenth. The young Whill wasn't very impressive, it was true, but Orenth was an actual Departed One, a legend come to life. The slaves strongly believed in the Departed Ones. There could be a way to use that belief to galvanize them in time for the hoped-for Rebel rescue.

Spreading out among the slaves, Civtor, Meelo, Pamal, and Faloo quietly told the slaves about Orenth. They encouraged the workers to spread the news as widely as possible without attracting the attention of the guards. As the hours passed, the slaves cooperated. A subtle change came over the population as more and more Whills were told. The slaves seemed to find a little energy inside themselves, a spark of life where none was apparent before. They seemed more alert, and an air of expectation was upon them. This all passed beneath the notice of the guards, but the overseers observed it and were pleased. Finally, they decided to send Meelo into the tunnel to get close to Orenth and communicate their plan if possible.

Orenth could hardly believe it when Meelo whispered a comment; the overseer had taken advantage of a lapse in the guards' attention to get close enough to talk.

"What are you doing here?" Orenth whispered incredulously without stopping the work.

"That's thanks to you," Meelo replied sarcastically. "You had to foul up your little mission to see the governor, didn't you. We had to come down here to avoid getting arrested too. Not that this is much better than prison. It is better than execution though. Listen to me, Orenth. There's still a chance for all of us. We sent Amand to bring your Rebel friends to help us. If they do show up, we're going to need your help. The slaves have to be inspired to save themselves and get out of here. The way to do that is to have them rally around you and follow your lead."

"Follow me?" Orenth whispered. "What are you talking about?"

"You're a Departed One, aren't you?" Meelo smiled grimly. "They believe in you. We've been telling them that you are here."

"But the Departed Ones in your legends are supposed to be these powerful figures. Faloo told me. They're supposed to have the power to save the people from the Empire. I couldn't even save myself."

"We embellished the truth somewhat. We told them that you were concealing your power until the right moment. We said you were suffering among them, along with them so you could achieve a final state of purity. Look, the important thing is that they'll follow you where you lead them. Saving lives is what counts, right?"

Orenth was clearly uncomfortable with the idea. "That's crazy. I don't have any--"

"Just do it," Meelo interrupted harshly. "If you care about us at all, just do what I say."

The guards came closer to Orenth again, and Meelo had to stop whispering. The overseer moved away unobtrusively as the humans stepped up to administer some more punishment to the young Whill. The guards activated their neuronics whips.

* * *

stormtrooper 62997 was the first to notice the strange dark cloud on the horizon. He was among a group of four hundred troops stationed to the west of the energy fence, waiting to ambush the Rebels when they approached. Another group of four hundred was waiting on the opposite side of the crater, to defend the garrison from Rebel saboteurs planning to attack the TIE launch chutes and the turbolaser emplacements. The interrogation of a captured Rebel had revealed their plans, and now 62997 was ready to stop them. They were told to expect a force of about two hundred fifty humanoid Rebels on foot. If the Rebels attacked from two

directions, they would have to divide their numbers in some way, further increasing the extent to which the stormtroopers outnumbered them at each location. The troopers were armed with heavy blaster rifles which could instantly kill any humanoid, and they had the advantage of choosing protected spots in the rocky terrain. The Rebels weren't going to have a chance to reach the perimeter fence, let alone get past it and into the crater.

Trooper 62997 focused his macrobinoculars on the unknown cloud. It didn't look like any normal kind of weather pattern. He checked the readouts and saw that the cloud was getting closer. The stormtrooper immediately reported this to his superior officer, who then notified the garrison. They were instructed to determine the nature of the threat, if any, and report back.

62997 paced back and forth next to a huge boulder, intermittently peering at the cloud with the binoculars. It definitely did not look like a storm cloud. What did that leave? Animals, perhaps? A flock of birds? 62997 snickered to himself. Birds could be very dangerous. They had better report the birds at once. As the moving mass came closer, 62997 decided that it was not a flock of birds. Whatever they were, they were too small to be birds. In fact, they seemed like they could be some kind of insects. Yes, that was what it looked like. A swarm of insects...

62997 lowered the macrobinoculars and swallowed dryly. Even without the magnification, the swarm looked enormous. And it was headed directly towards his position.

The swarm of Nommi bugs had come this far looking for ready males, but now they were receiving different, yet still highly potent pheromone messages. The area below them contained enemies--food-stealing, young-killing enemies. It was the job of the females to defend the group against those enemies, to bite and kill them until the males and the young were safe. The enraged Nommi bugs beat their wings furiously and flexed their mandibles. Their poison sacs were full. They were ready to attack, and something was telling them exactly where to go.

The vast swarm divided into two smaller swarms, and each of those descended upon a group of enemies just outside the great crater. The enemies were strange, very large, hard-shelled white creatures that were like much bigger insects. But the Nommi's smaller size worked to their advantage. The insects were numerous enough to cover each of the enemies, and some of the Nommi found openings in the white shells, openings that they could easily crawl into. The warm black skin-like surface under the shell was an easy target for biting, and some of the Nommi discovered that they could bite right through it. There were even openings in this layer that led to a softer, paler skin underneath. The females bit hard where they could, and the poison flowed.

The enemies tried to fight back in various ways. Some of them crushed a few Nommi bugs, or burned a few with a startlingly loud hot fire. Some of them tried to run. None of these tactics counted for much in the face of the enormous size of the swarm. Each enemy that was

covered with Nommi bugs fought back futilely for a brief time, then succumbed to the poisonous bites and collapsed. The enemies convulsed and writhed, then froze in the stillness of death. In just a few short minutes, none of the enemies were left alive.

But there were more of these enemies inside the crater, they knew. Something told them that the job wasn't finished at all. There were enemies all along the rim of the crater, standing on high platforms, and furthermore, the main nest of enemies was down inside the crater on its east wall. In that place, the chief threat to the Nommi nest resided. It had to be cleaned out before the Nommi young could be safe.

The swarm rose into the sky and swept across the high walkways all around the crater. Many of the insects stopped to attack the white-shelled enemies they found there. The rest of the swarm descended on the main nest. The swarm was large enough to blanket the entire structure. Nommi bugs crawled over the building like a living carpet, seeking any kind of entryway they could find. A furious droning buzz filled the crater, mingling with the death cries of those up on the catwalk. The swarm seemed unstoppable.

The great front gate of the garrison rose up to reveal the cavernous surface vehicle bay. Immediately, a group of four speeder bikes shot out of the opening. Behind them, a towering Imperial AT-AT Walker was framed in the doorway, manned and ready to go into battle.

The four biker scouts were instantly plastered with Nommi bugs. The insects began to bite through the fabric of their uniforms between the armor plates. The speeder bike riders flailed at the insects biting them and blocking their vision. As the poison took effect, one of the scouts died right away. He and his bike dove into the boulder-strewn floor of the crater at high speed, impacting in a brief consuming fireball. The other scouts lost control of their bikes and died in similar fashion before the poison could kill them.

As soon as the front gate was open, part of the swarm poured inside and flew into the vehicle bay. The AT-AT Commander saw a huge number of insects come in and spread everywhere at once. Even the front window of the Walker was covered with them, giving the Commander and his drivers a chance to see the alien intruders up close. Although the Commander could see little else, he knew the way forward and down the ramp was clear. He ordered his drivers to set the lumbering machine in motion.

As the deck shook with the Walker's steps, Imperial personnel were being attacked by the Nommi bugs inside the vehicle bay. Most of these humans had no armor, just cloth uniforms which offered no defense against the biting cloud of insects. One of the deck officers was able to overcome his terror and think rationally for long enough to realize where bugs were coming from. The main gate had to be closed. Even as a dozen insects landed on his head, back, and arms, the officer reached for and activated the door controls. The main gate came down quickly and heavily, crushing many of the insects beneath it and stopping any more from coming in. But the AT-AT, already in motion, was unable to stop.

The Walker crashed against the closed gate and violently shook to a shuddering halt. The head of the AT-AT was bent to one side, leaving the occupants stunned inside it. Unfortunately for the Imperials, the giant door itself was buckled by the impact and frozen in place.

Time to make another payment towards the liberation of Vinsoth, thought Commander Reen as she gave the signal to send the Liberators into action. The battle before them was simpler than it had first appeared, and it promised fewer lost lives. Reen had just thanked Desima for that, and now she joined her Chev troops in the front line, leaving Desima with Reb and Amand in relative safety behind. Still, a battle was a battle, and Reen always found herself eager and excited to be involved. She lusted for the sound of explosions, the sight of slavers dying, and the fierce burning sense of justice that always filled her.

She stepped over the body of one of the stormtroopers who had been waiting in ambush for her Chevs, and waved the demolition team forward. "Units one, two, and three, go!"

Across the crater on the opposite side, a small group of Chevs moved into the undefended area that had been cleared by the insects. The death fence was in front of them, and behind the fence, the high catwalks and observation towers were empty of living troopers. A few Chevs kept their blaster rifles trained on these platforms just in case. An efficient team swiftly set up five grenade mortars on the stony ground. The targets were already programmed into the long-range launchers. The Liberators' long thin fingers danced over the firing controls, and compact grenades began to shoot up and over the fence at a rate of one per second. The grenades sailed through the air in graceful preplanned arcs and struck the garrison in a variety of key locations. Each grenade magnetically attached to the building upon impact. After five seconds, they exploded. Smaller fireballs bloomed all over the garrison, ripping apart the barrels of all three turbolasers and all six laser cannons, and dislocating each revolving turret. A trio of grenades had landed inside each of the three TIE fighter launch chutes. The triple bursts cracked and collapsed the chutes, raining debris onto the interior flight deck below. The insect swarm suffered some losses in the destruction, but there were still more than enough left to take their place.

At the same time, Commander Reen's demolition experts placed a long line of charges at the base of the death fence on her side of the crater. While those Chevs worked, others assembled their tripod E-Web repeating blasters. Two Chevs handled each box like power generator while a third aimed the huge guns at the high catwalks to either side. Reen reveled in the righteous eruptions that followed. The E-Web blasters sent bolts of armor-vaporizing energy to sever the catwalks in bursts of molten metal and shrapnel. The demolition charges blasted stone, dirt, and sections of the death fence into the air with a roar. When the debris finished pelting the ground, Reen assessed the results with a satisfied smile. The way forward was clear. Reinforcements hoping to come along the catwalks and fire down on the Liberators would be blocked by the new gaping holes in the walkways. That was assuming anyone could get out of the garrison at all now, she reminded herself. The death fence had been

thrown down the crater slope in large sparking pieces, leaving a wide opening above the pit. Reen went to the rim of the crater and looked down five hundred meters to the bottom of the mine. The slaves and their guards were down there. Taking care of people like those guards was what Reen and her team did best. Those were the men who had direct contact with the slaves and who were their chief tormentors. The ones who held the whips in their hands. Reen looked forward to meeting them.

One hundred Chevs, including Commander Reen, secured their coils of synthrope and began the descent. They rappelled quickly down the crater slope, and here Reen expected to take a few casualties as the alert guards below fired up at them. But the shots didn't come. The Liberators didn't question their luck. They simply continued to drop as fast as they could. Above them, at the bases of the observation towers, other Chevs were attaching several rolled up stair ladders for the Whills to climb.

The guards below were actually distracted by what was happening to the garrison. Most of them were up at the top of the ramps leading out of the mine, staring at the explosions and the insect swarm covering the distant building. The rest of the guards were dealing with the sudden widespread agitation among the formerly docile Whills, hitting them with their neuronc whips and stun batons when they would not stand still. As a result, the guards were thoroughly surprised to have a hundred Rebel commandos drop down into their midst.

The Liberators each had two weapons to choose from, depending on the target. If they had a shot at a guard standing alone, they took it with their blasters. If the guard was surrounded by Whills, the Chevs used their sleep-inducer pistols. These weapons shut down specific parts of the human central nervous system, leaving Chevs and Whills unaffected. They were soundless and fast acting. As the Chevs spread out and fired the pistols, the human guards immediately fell into a sleep-like state and collapsed among the unharmed slaves. The slaves stared in astonishment as the guards fell right next to them, director units and stun batons tumbling impotently from their limp hands. The Chevs immediately set about freeing the slaves from their restraint devices.

The guards on top of the ramps were another matter. There was no reason whatsoever to spare their lives. Reen led a charge up the wide stone slope. Her Liberators followed, their blasters blazing. The firefight was short and brutal, and was decided by the fact that the Chevs were highly trained marksmen while the guards were out of practice after three years of undemanding duty. Reen dodged their blaster fire and shot four guards on her way to the top. The ease of defeating them filled her with disgust. In minutes, all of the guards were dead, with only a few wounded among her own people. Reen prodded one of the corpses with her booted foot. Such is your reward, slave keeper, she thought. Someday the Chevin will die this easily, and my people will be free.

Standing at the top of the ramp while her wounded Chevs were taken care of, Reen looked across the crater floor in wonder at the garrison on the other side. It was black with insects, completely covered by them. The gates were closed, and no reinforcements were coming out. Just in

case, she ordered a defensive line of E-Web blasters set up along the edge of the pit. Then she turned and marched purposefully back down into the mine.

Desima had told her that Orenth could be found in one of the tunnels at the back of the mine. She strode briskly across the floor of the excavation, darting around confused, milling Whills, and Chevs dragging the unconscious guards to where they could pile them in undignified heaps. She quickly found the tunnel and notified her second that she was going in alone to get Orenth. The other Chev did not protest. Reen's competence and authority were not questioned. Her team knew well her desire to be in the thick of the danger. Her second merely handed her a fresh blaster rifle.

The dark tunnel mouth beckoned, and Reen stepped inside, her rifle ready. A red blaster bolt flared out of the tunnel depths, just missing her. Reen hugged the side wall and crept forward.

"Don't come any closer," said the voice of a guard. "There are ten of us in here, all armed, and we have your precious Rebel Whill. If you try to get in here, he dies."

"What is this?" Reen laughed. "You're negotiating? The Liberators don't negotiate with slavers. If he dies, he dies. If I die too, so be it. I'd rather die than concede anything to scum like you." She continued to move carefully down the tunnel. "One thing you can be sure of," she called to the guards, "You're not getting out of here alive unless you surrender unconditionally. I have a hundred commandos with me to make certain of that."

The guards didn't answer. Reen didn't hesitate. She crouched to make herself a smaller target and ran the remaining distance to where she had heard the voice. She held her rifle aimed high so that when she swept her repeating fire across the guards, it would miss the much shorter Whill. Unless one of them got off a lucky shot, she could mow them down in moments. The leader of the Liberators burst in among the guards, ready to fire. A strange and unexpected sight met her eyes. All ten of the guards stood stock still, their arms hanging limply by their sides, blasters dangling. They stared blankly straight ahead, not speaking. Orenth was lying crumpled on the tunnel floor, unconscious or dead. Above the Whill stood the softly glowing form of the spirit of the Skywalker.

"Orenth is all right," said the spirit. "He was clubbed by one of the guards, but I am healing him now. I have taken care of these as well." The Skywalker indicated the frozen guards. "Come now, help Orenth to his feet. There is an evacuation to attend to. The Whills need to see that Orenth is unharmed."

Reen was able to overcome her surprise, and she knelt by Orenth. As the Whill began to stir, she used the special tools she carried to sever Orenth's stun cuffs and slave collar. She let the pieces clatter to the ground as she lifted Orenth up.

Orenth wobbled and moaned unhappily. "Am I dead?"

"Not yet," said Reen. "Come on. We've got to get you out of here." The spirit faded out of view as she helped Orenth limp out of the mine tunnel. The guards helplessly watched them go.

* * *

Malol despised moments like this, when everything seemed to go wrong at once, despite his careful planning. The sudden appearance of the swarm was responsible of course. The insects had killed his ground troops, allowing the Rebels to carry out their assault as planned. Now he was unable to launch his fighters, send out his scout walkers, or even blast the Rebels with his laser cannons. For the moment, the garrison's might was neutralized.

Malol had to regain control and superior firepower as soon as possible, that was all. There was still time. The Rebels had to get five thousand slaves to their ships, and get them on board, and get off-planet. That was going to take them a while. In the meantime, Malol had already recalled his Star Destroyer to the Whill homeworld. It should arrive within the day, giving him the weapons he needed to easily defeat the Rebels. The insects were a simple problem to resolve as well. They had shown their ability to slip inside regular stormtrooper armor, but there were several Zero-G Spacetrooper outfits at the base. All they had to do was send men out in those. The Zero-G assault armor had magnetic couplers for climbing all over the building. Equipped with flame-throwers, the troopers could clear away all of the insects, making it safe to deploy all of the garrison's forces as desired. The Rebels had only gained a temporary advantage, and in the end, it would not help them. Malol vowed to see the Whill slaves dead, and Orenth and the Skywalker back in his hands. It galled him that the spirit was able to escape even for a while. An appalling amount of time and work had gone into luring him here in the first place, and now the simple error of placing Orenth in the mine had allowed him to slip away. Malol had to get him back, at any cost. His very life, plainly speaking, was at stake if he did not.

Malol throttled his own raging agitation and gave the orders to begin counteracting the Rebel strategy. Outside, across the impact crater, the Whills were escaping. He could feel it. And oh, how he hated them for it...

Orenth came out of the tunnel and stood blinking in the sun. A small group of Whills, barely recognizable as Civtor and the other overseers, hurried over to Reen and Orenth.

"You're alive," said the high priest with relief. "Thank Ashla."

"I did have a little help in that department," Orenth said weakly. Looking around, Orenth could see that the mine pit was full of confused, fearful slaves. They huddled on the ground, snuffling and whistling in alarm. On the western wall of the pit, the stair ladders had already been lowered. These had wide, sturdy steps that even a Whill could climb, and they reached up five hundred meters to the rim of the crater. Orenth noticed with confusion that none of the slaves were on the ladders.

"What's going on? Why aren't they getting out of here?" Orenth pointed at the empty ladders.

"They're too frightened to move," said Meelo disgustedly. "We've tried to tell them what they have to do, but they won't budge. They won't respond to the Rebels either. For all they know, the Rebels could be more Imperials come to kill them. All of these human types look the same."

"I'm not sure they even know who we are without our red robes on," added Pamal.

"We think they'll listen to you, Orenth," said Civtor urgently. "They already know about you. We've been spreading the rumor that it was your power that defeated the guards, that made them fall asleep. You have to help us get their attention and get them organized. You must lead the way as a Departed One who has returned."

Civtor is correct, Orenth said the Skywalker. * Go to the ladder and speak to the slaves. They must be made to leave the mine immediately.*

"But I don't even speak their language," protested Orenth, unmindful of the fact that no one else could hear the spirit.

* I will help you in that regard. It will be just like the first visit of the Jedi to this world. All of them will hear and understand you.*

"All right," said Orenth wearily, and began walking to the central ladder. Commander Reen followed close behind.

"Whatever else happens," said Reen sternly, "I'm making sure that you get back to your parents in one piece." Suddenly, getting back to Reb and Desima seemed awfully appealing to Orenth.

Orenth climbed high enough to be seen by all the Whills. Only a few of the five thousand slaves noticed the teenager. Reen aimed her repeating blaster rifle into the air and fired a loud series of energy bolts that seemed to go on and on. By the time her power pack ran down, she had their complete attention. Orenth nervously spoke into the temporary silence. The young Whill's words were carried to each and every slave, and translated for them in their thoughts. As the host for the Jedi spirit, Orenth could hear the words echoing in the Whill language along with Imperial Basic.

"Listen to me, my people..."

"Hamthas anto manas, Whills..."

Orenth had to decide quickly what to say. It seemed that the overseers had claimed Orenth was a supernatural figure of some kind, in keeping with their religion. Of course there was no truth to that at all, and Orenth didn't want to lie to them so outrageously when sooner or later they would all learn the truth. On the other hand, if it got them moving towards safety, the ends would justify the means. Orenth felt a pang of sympathy for the overseers and the ambiguous moral choices they had been forced to make over the years. This time, it seemed that they might be right, as uncomfortable as it made Orenth.

But it wasn't necessary to do everything their way, Orenth realized. There were possibilities for doing some good with this unwanted power.

"I am one of the Departed Ones," Orenth said, "who has come back to take you to safety. You have seen my power and now you must trust me. The way to freedom is up these ladders. All of you must follow me to the top, and there you must board the vehicles which will take you away from here. You can trust the aliens among you. They are here to help you. They serve the Departed Ones too."

Commander Reen rolled her eyes.

"The Time of Punishment is over," Orenth added for good measure. When they heard that, the overseers looked rather upset, but Orenth ignored them. "You aren't slaves anymore, and you're not impure anymore either. I declare you all to be pure. Now follow me!"

There, Orenth thought with satisfaction. The overseers wanted a speech, they got a speech. Let them try to talk their way out of this one.

The Whills were astonished, and as close to elated as possible for an exhausted and beaten people. They forced themselves into motion and the crowd slowly flowed towards the ladders. One after another, they began the long climb up the steep slope, clinging to the stair ladders and not daring to look down. Orenth climbed ahead of them, leading them across the boundary from one life into another.

Commander Reen watched the Whills climb, her agitation difficult to control. They were even slower than she had imagined them to be. It was a good thing that the garrison wasn't able to counterattack, or they would have lost much more than the thirty-five percent she had predicted. So far, though, her Chevs at the top of the ramps reported no activity from the Imperials. It was a temporary reprieve, but she was intensely grateful for it nonetheless.

The next time, she vowed, they would liberate a more physically capable species. The Whills, with their large cylindrical legs, nearly drove Reen mad with their slow pace of climbing. One fourth of the slaves were still milling about on the bottom, while many more streamed up the ladders. At the top, the slaves were being loaded onto waiting repulsorlift cargo skiffs which her Chevs had driven onto the scene a short time ago. Reen's commando team still held a defensive position on the stone ramps, watching the garrison intently.

It was time to do something to relieve her anxiety, Reen decided. The battle plan had always called for the destruction of the ramps, to prevent the Imperials from marching down into the mine while the last of the slaves retreated. She climbed back up to the crater floor and gave the order to demolish the ramps anyway, just in case. As her Chevs set their thermal detonators and packed up their E-Web tripod blasters, one of the Liberators reported a change in the garrison status. Reen took the macrobinoculars and scanned the building. In the viewer, she could make out armored figures emitting bursts of flame on the walls and roof tops. They were burning away Desima Derata's insects.

"That's not good," Reen commented to no one in particular. "All right, people," she called out to her team. "Let's get those explosives in place. The chrono is counting! Move it!" Reen looked back down at the slaves. The last of them were just starting up the ladders. "Come on...come on..." she urged them under her breath.

Up on the surface, Orenth was running into the arms of Reb and Desima. Amand watched as the three of them embraced. It seemed strange to the overseer that the humans actually regarded themselves as the Whill's parents, but they were clearly acting as if they were. It seemed that they had prepared some stern words for their child, to be delivered once the happy emotion of their reunion quieted down. But such were the ways of parents all across the galaxy, Amand suspected. After their relief that Orenth was okay, there was the inevitable anger at the adolescent for running away into such danger in the first place.

As Desima continued to lecture her 'son', Reb approached Amand with a concerned look on his face. Amand knew what the human was thinking, and sure enough, Reb wasted no time getting to the point. "Amand, we were talking earlier about retrieving the writings of your religious history. Well, now is the chance to do it. Apparently, the garrison is staying closed up because of the insect swarm. We could send a team to the middle of the crater where your quarters were, in relative safety, if we hurry."

Amand hesitated, then saw Civtor and the others approaching them. "Oh, look," said Amand, hoping to change the subject. "I should see what they want."

"Is that your high priest?" Asked Reb. "Good, I can ask him my question instead."

Amand sighed. Civtor was smiling. "Good work, Amand!" boomed the high priest. "You really did come through! I wasn't convinced you could do it, but you did. You really surprised me."

Reb addressed Civtor without preamble. "There's still a chance to go back for your holy writings. Can you describe where they're kept, so the Chevs can go get them?"

"The Writings?" asked Civtor. "What is this about, Amand?"

Amand frowned deeply. "I would have preferred to discuss this in private, but it seems there is no time for that. Civtor, I have been giving this a lot of thought, and I have come to the conclusion that it would be best for the freed slaves if we actually left the Punishment Doctrine behind. I know this may offend all of you, but we are going into a new world, and it could be better to make a fresh start. You must admit, the Punishment Doctrine is only of particular relevance to our existence as a race on this planet. Now that we are being forced to leave--"

Amand was cut off by the simultaneous explosions of five thermal detonators. Below them in the crater, the stone ramps giving access to the mine disintegrated in a shower of rock. When the dust clouds cleared, the ramps were gone, leaving only rubble. Amand viewed the spectacle with a curious sense of relief.

"I believe that settles the issue in any case," said Amand. Now there was no way to return to the overseers' quarters.

Surprisingly, the high priest took this development philosophically. "Actually, Amand," said Civtor, "we were doing some thinking of our own while we were slaves in the mine. Perhaps this is for the best. I don't know. But what's done is done. It cannot be changed now."

Reb had nothing to say to that. "Don't worry, Reb Zakai," Amand said gently. "It really is okay. Orenth did something important for us, bringing us a second chance to do what our ancestors should have done in the first place--join the larger galaxy out there and take our place in it. Preserving the past isn't always a good thing. Sometimes the record needs to be wiped clean and started anew."

Reb took one last look at the crater, then reluctantly nodded to Amand. "It's up to you, I suppose."

The Liberators urged them to board the skiffs, and they jogged over to get on. The old cargo skiffs were linked in a long line, and the Whills were being packed onto them as tightly as possible. Reb took a position next to Desima and Orenth, and together they waited for the last of the slaves and Commander Reen's forces to come up the ladders and get on board themselves.

At last the loading was complete. The Chev pilots set the cargo skiffs in motion and they gathered speed above the cracked, barren

ground. The newly freed Whills were carried steadily away from the site of their torment, heading towards the distant mountains where the Chevin slave transports were hidden.

* * *

The shadowy figure of Blackhole commanded from the bridge of the Victory-class Star Destroyer, high above the Whill homeworld. Malol was on board the ship, using the distorter-generated image as his accustomed substitute for interacting with the crew. The Governor had boarded a shuttle as soon as the insects were cleared away, and had flown directly to the Star Destroyer as it entered the system. As far as the crew knew, Blackhole had been on board, in command, for the whole voyage. The HoloNet allowed Malol to create that illusion from a distance, but now he felt he had to be present personally to regain control of the situation.

Blackhole knew that the Rebels had brought some kind of transports to evacuate the Whills. Presumably, they had gone directly to the mountains to find them and load the slaves onto them. It was only a matter of time before they had to take off and try to make it off world. When they did, Blackhole would have them at his mercy. The Star Destroyer's scanners were trained on the planet below. There was no way the Rebels could escape undetected this time. The Skywalker would soon be back in his hands.

Minutes later, one of the bridge crew picked up the aged Rebel transports on his scanners. The twenty ships rose out of the mountains at a laughably slow speed. They appeared to be cargo ships of Chevin manufacture according to the computer. They had very low shield ratings and ineffective weapons. They could not outrun the Star Destroyer, nor could they fight back. Blackhole assumed they were hyperspace capable, but this close to the planet's gravity well, not even that escape was possible. Furthermore, in the dense, star filled Deep Galactic Core, hyperspace escape vectors were very limited. Until the Rebel ships could calculate one and get into position, Blackhole had them right where he wanted them. The Star Destroyer moved to intercept the Chevin ships. This was going to be too easy.

Orenth stood on the bridge of one of the Chevin ships, along with the five overseers and a Chev pilot. The cargo module was loaded with former slaves, with Whills packed tightly into the cells where once Chev slaves were chained. This was a flight to freedom, however, and the cell doors were unlocked, the Whills holding onto the chains for support as the big ship climbed out of the atmosphere.

The Chev pilot suddenly pointed out the approaching Star Destroyer, and Orenth's short-lived feeling of victory came crashing down. An Imperial warning was broadcast loudly over the comm system, and Orenth shivered, recognizing the voice of Governor Malol. It looked like escape wasn't going to be possible after all.

"This is Blackhole, of the Star Destroyer Event Horizon, acting on behalf of the Emperor. You are members of the outlaw Rebel Alliance, and you have destroyed Imperial property and taken Imperial lives. As Rebel terrorists, your lives are forfeit at once, and I am authorized to destroy all of your ships immediately. My weapons systems are activated and your ships have been targeted. There is no escape, I assure you. But I am willing to offer you a token of the Emperor's mercy. You have something I want. Give me the Whill Orenth and the Jedi spirit. The Rebel soldiers will be taken into custody for imprisonment and trial. The Whill slaves will be returned to the Chanlon mine to resume their work without further punishment. I understand that they were manipulated into leaving without understanding the consequences of their actions. This is my only offer, and it is not negotiable. If you do not cooperate, I will begin to destroy your transports one by one until all twenty are nothing but space debris. You have one minute to decide."

Blackhole received an answer before the minute was up. "This is Commander Reen of the Liberators. We came here prepared to die in the name of freedom. By becoming a slaver, you forfeited any right to be considered a civilized being. Therefore you are unworthy of any respect or consideration. We will not make any deals with you, even to save our lives. You may be able to destroy our ships, but you cannot take away our freedom. The Whills no longer belong to you. They are now free beings, and if they die, it will be as free beings. No matter what else happens, they will not go back into slavery. Reen out."

Blackhole had expected such defiance. No matter, they would change their minds when enough of them had died. The dark adept examined the Chevin fleet. He was able to sense the presence of the Skywalker, but the Jedi spirit was hard to pinpoint. It seemed to Blackhole that the spirit was on one of the ships in the rear of the formation. It was safe to destroy any of the ships in front.

"Fire at the closest Rebel transport ship," Blackhole ordered his gunners. The Star Destroyer's turbolasers lanced out across space at one of the defenseless box-like cargo ships. The transport blew up at once, the explosion of sparkling particles billowing into the void. The other transports began to make slow turns in several directions. It looked like the Rebels might try to scatter so that some might escape, but the Chevin ships were too ungainly to maneuver fast enough for that. They would all remain within range of the Star Destroyer's weapons long enough to be destroyed. Blackhole designated another transport and ordered his gunners to fire their proton torpedoes this time, just for the sake of variety.

Orenth looked on in horror as a second transport exploded. With two ships lost, that meant that five hundred Whills had died in less than one minute. The Empire had already surpassed the massacre at Ashlan Four, and they were only getting started. The Chev pilot was struggling to turn the ship and coax more power out of the engines, while the

antiquated computer labored to calculate coordinates for a safe jump to hyperspace in the Deep Core.

"I know a way to destroy that ship," said the soft voice of the Skywalker. Orenth turned in surprise. The spirit had become visible on the bridge among the overseers.

"How can we do that?" demanded Civtor.

"Twenty five thousand years ago, in my lifetime," said the spirit, "hyperspace travel was not so safe as it is today. There was a common accident which claimed the lives of many space travelers. During the jump to hyperspace, a ship accelerates nearly to the speed of light. If an object is in the ship's path, there is a terrible collision, instantly annihilating both objects. We must aim this ship directly at the Star Destroyer and make the jump to hyperspace. This will not require lengthy calculations. However..." The spirit paused. "It will require the sacrifice of at least one of us. The cargo cube can be detached from the framework which holds the bridge and the engines, so that the Whills on board do not have to die as well. But someone must be here on the bridge to control the ship during the final jump. This sacrifice must be made if the remaining Whills are to be saved. You must choose quickly. Malol will not hesitate to destroy the last of your people to get to me."

"It has to be me, then," said Orenth, immediately getting everyone's attention. "Everything has been leading up to this, hasn't it? I've escaped death so many times, but I knew it had to catch up with me sooner or later. I only wanted there to be a purpose to it, so I wouldn't die a complete failure... so it would have some meaning. But if I die saving my people, then I'll finally accomplish what Master Resh wanted me to do... to bring back my race. And I think I've found the next great purpose of the Whills too, like Resh wanted. Now they can join the great mix of the galaxy and find their place in it. They don't have to live in isolation anymore, not from being on a lost world, and not from keeping to themselves like on Ashlan Four. I know I never appreciated being alone among the other races, but these Whills won't be alone. They'll still have each other in addition to being able to learn from all the aliens. I know they can make a contribution to the Alliance and the New Republic, and I don't just mean the Journal. There's so much more they can do. Giving them that chance is all the meaning I need for myself. I'll stay and pilot the ship. I'm not afraid anymore." And Orenth realized it was true. For once, the voice of death was silent, perhaps forever more. Orenth felt free.

The overseers were whispering among themselves. When they finished, Amand stepped over to the Chev pilot. The Chev was concentrating on piloting, and growled to the Whill to stay away. Visible through the viewport, a third cargo ship was caught by the Star Destroyer's weapons and obliterated. Amand watched the expanding fireball and shuddered. Seven hundred fifty Whills dead now. "I have been wanting a chance to see one of these up close," said Amand, snatching the pilot's blaster. "This has a stun setting, doesn't it?"

The pilot turned on Amand. "Be careful with that! Look, this is the stun setting, right here."

Amand adjusted the weapon. "Ah, yes, thank you." The Whill aimed and stunned the pilot into unconsciousness. Then Amand pointed the gun at Orenth.

"What are you doing?" Orenth demanded.

"We've decided that you are not going to sacrifice yourself," said Amand.

"Wait a second-" Orenth protested.

"It's not up to you," said Amand. The blue stun burst hit Orenth and darkness fell over everything.

Now only the overseers and the Skywalker stood on the small bridge. The spirit watched the Whills expectantly.

"Let's get Orenth and the pilot into an escape pod," said Amand.

"And we must jettison the cargo module," said Civtor, heading for the control panel. "Jedi, I'll need your guidance for moment... Show me how to aim the ship in the right direction and how to start the leap to hyperspace, or whatever you called it."

"Are all of you going to remain on the ship?" asked the spirit.

The overseers looked at one another. One by one, they nodded, all except Meelo. "We die together," said Civtor firmly.

"No," said Meelo, "That's a waste of life. We only need one to operate the controls. The rest should go."

"But who should that be?" asked Faloo. "At least this way, we all-

"

"I will stay," Meelo interrupted Faloo. "Don't argue with me. Our people are dying out there as we speak. And don't be a fool. Don't tell me you don't want to live."

Some of the overseers looked like they wanted to protest, but the high priest understood the necessity of deciding immediately. "All right," Civtor said. "There is no time to debate this. Meelo, thank you. We owe you our lives. Now let's get moving."

They pulled Orenth and the Chev into the escape pod. It was built for Chevin, so there was plenty of room inside it. Meanwhile, the Skywalker stood by Meelo at the control panel.

"Here is the release lever for the cargo hold," instructed the spirit. Meelo pulled it and the entire ship shuddered as the huge cube

was jettisoned. The metal box carrying two hundred fifty lives tumbled away from the rest of the ship. What remained was a long framework connecting the bridge to the engines.

"This light indicates when we are out of the planet's gravity well," said the spirit. "We're almost there. The navicomputer still doesn't have any escape coordinates, but as I said, we don't need them. Turn the ship, like this. Good, well done. Now stay on this heading."

"I think the Imperial ship is following us," said Meelo. "It's getting a lot closer."

"Malol knows I am here," said the spirit. "We can sense each other now. That's all right, though. At least he is not destroying more ships at the moment." The light on the control panel started flashing. "That's it," said the spirit, turning to the other overseers. "You must leave at once."

Civtor, Amand, Faloo, and Pamal stood in the door of the large escape pod. "May you go into the embrace of Ashla," said Faloo solemnly.

"Live, and be pure," replied Meelo. The pod door slammed shut. Moments later, the explosive bolts fired, sending the escape pod falling away from the skeletal ship.

Meelo saw it spinning away through the viewport. The looming Star Destroyer was also quite visible, and growing ever larger. Meelo turned to the spirit. "Why didn't you go with Orenth? I thought you were attached in some way."

"Orenth was my host, but I have released myself from him. That means my own end is upon me, at long last. Without a structure of any kind to hold me, I am fading away for the last time. Finally, I will merge with the All. I have waited a long time to die."

Meelo continued to turn the ship until the Star Destroyer was centered in the viewport like a wedge-shaped knife stabbing directly at them.

"I understand you, Meelo," the spirit said gently. "We are alike, you and I. We both want the same thing... atonement for what we have done to the Whills."

Tears began to roll down Meelo's snout. "I have done things that... I'm not sure I can ever... I just want to feel pure again, before I die."

"Be at peace, Meelo," said the Skywalker. "In the universe, there is forgiveness, and in the Force, there is life." With a ghostly hand, the spirit indicated the hyperspace lever. Meelo nodded in acceptance. The Whill's tears fell gently upon the ship's control panel. "Goodbye, Reb Zakai...my son," whispered the Skywalker.

"Ready the tractor beam," commanded Blackhole. The Rebel ship had stopped running. They had futilely tried to protect the slaves by ejecting their compartment, then evidently realized they still could not escape. They had given up, and the spirit of the Skywalker was still on board and his for the taking.

Suddenly, one of the crew called out an observation. "I'm getting an energy reading--they're going to jump to hyperspace!"

"Impossible," said Blackhole. "They're pointing straight at us."

The Chevin slave ship seemed to blur into a long streak of light. In an instant, its hyperdrive engines accelerated it to close to the speed of light. On the bridge of the Star Destroyer, in that frozen moment of time, Blackhole recoiled. In the distorter room, Governor Malol gasped in horror. The two ships collided with profound violence. Those viewing the event from a distance saw the slave ship vanish as the Star Destroyer was blasted apart in all directions. The great Imperial ship was vaporized in a blinding flash of light that turned into a spreading cloud of millions of tiny glinting particles.

Desima felt the passing of the spirit of the first Jedi like the sudden pain of deep personal loss. Staring wide-eyed at the explosion, she suddenly burst into tears. "He's gone," she sobbed. "The Skywalker is gone. He did it to save all of us. But... that means Orenth is gone too."

Desima and Reb were stunned with grief until Reen managed to get their attention. "We just got a message from an escape pod," she told them. "Orenth is on it. He's alive."

Reb and Desima hugged each other fiercely, tears of joy and relief flowing freely down their cheeks.

Commander Reen moved discreetly away, leaving them to the privacy of their own emotions. There was an escape pod to retrieve, and a cargo cube full of Whills to transfer to the other ships. And there was a long journey home from the Deep Galactic Core. But the leader of the Liberators was content. This time, they had won. There had been a significant cost in lives, but justice always seemed to demand a price. The Whills could now taste the freedom that all sentient beings deserved. And someday... someday her own people would have it too. That was her promise, and her vow.

* * *

Epilogue: one month later

Orenth found Reb and Desima in their bedroom on the Kuari Princess. The Whill's adopted parents were ready with a warm embrace.

"It's good to have you back," said Reb. "How did the mission go?"

"My people are getting settled on the new safe world the Alliance set up for them. All things considered, they're doing pretty well. It will take them some time to get used to their new situation. New world, new races to meet, new ideas... It's a lot to take in."

"Of course," said Reb.

"I have something to tell you," Orenth continued. "You know how I kind of told them that the Punishment Doctrine was all over? When I was their great Departed One? Well... they sort of believed me. So now Civtor and Faloo and the rest don't have any real authority left. My people don't have any leaders. But the thing is, they say they want me. Me, for their leader. I told them I don't really have those powers, but they still want me." Orenth looked solemnly at them. "Mother, Father, I've given this a lot of thought, and I think it makes a lot of sense. They do need help, and I'm the only Whill who can teach them about the galaxy, the only one knows what they need to learn." Orenth smiled. "So I'm going to the safe world to be with them. I know I'll miss you, but I want to be with my own kind. I wasn't happy here with the Journal. It just wasn't for me. But I think some of the other Whills are going to want to work on it. If Faloo isn't here in a month, I'll be surprised."

"We're very proud of you, Orenth," said Desima. This does sound like the right thing to do. We will miss you, of course, but you're growing up. This is what children do. They don't stay with their parents forever."

"And that's a good thing," said Reb, smiling.

"I'll be back to talk more later," said Orenth. "I want to tell Simon about this right away."

"All right," said Reb. "Go ahead. He's in his quarters."

After Orenth left, Reb turned to his wife. "So, the nest is going to be empty now..." He noticed her sad look and put an arm around her. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that. I've been doing some thinking as well. I guess it started when we almost lost Orenth. I mean, here I was worried Orenth would lose us, and then we nearly..." Reb swallowed and Desima returned his embrace. Stroking her long hair, he continued. "Lately I've realized that I just wasn't ready for my own child, and I was looking for excuses to delay having one. Sure, the Rebellion is dangerous, but I suppose life shouldn't just stop for it. And children will survive, with or without their parents. They find a way. Orenth did, and those two pilots, Tank and Shally did, and even I did. So my excuses don't really hold up, and I have to decide, simply, if I feel ready or not."

Desima looked directly into his eyes. "And do you?"

"Yes," he said simply. "Yes I do."

Her kiss of gratitude let Reb know that for the present, at least, all was right with the universe.

* * *

"And so I conclude my account of the liberation of the Whills which took place exactly one hundred years ago. Besides the obvious influence of these events on the course of my own life, I have often wondered whether they had any greater meaning to history. Certainly, they did not have a great impact on the outcome of the galactic civil war. The freed Whills did not contribute in any way to the war effort, and the New Republic and the restored Jedi order would have arisen with or without them. Some have speculated about the differences in history that would exist if the Skywalker had participated in the war against the Empire, but we cannot judge him for choosing not to do so. I imagine that he foresaw that we would prevail without him, and that he could go to his well deserved rest without fear for the future. Some of the freed Whills came to work devotedly for the Journal of the Whills, changing what had become a human enterprise to a cooperative effort between the species. But it would be difficult to measure the contribution of their writings to the downfall of the Empire or the rise of the New Republic. Although their words won no battles, perhaps they inspired those who did. But the Journal was hardly the only endeavor undertaken by the freed Whills, once the war ended and they were able to emerge into galactic society. Besides the Journal of the Whills, there has been an Unknown Regions Exploration Company of the Whills, a Coruscant-based University of the Whills, a Galactic Food Conglomerate of the Whills, and even a well respected Whill Orchestra. One well-known Whill has even become a respected Jedi Knight. With these institutions, the Whills have contributed to our society at many levels. There is even the example of my own honorable service in the Senate, alongside my late colleague, New Republic Senator Simon Greyshade, and President Eson Zakai. The lives that were saved have enriched us all in ways that are impossible to measure. This, then, is how we may understand the value of the effort to bring the Whills from their homeworld. Whatever meaning it may have had for history, it had a profound effect on many individual lives.

Finally, we may ask, was the mission worth the cost in lives? As the late Commander Reen of Vinsoth might have said, freedom is a basic need that is worth dying for. Reen believed that her efforts to save the Whills contributed to the eventual liberation of her own people, which took place eighty-two years ago. I believe that she was correct when she said that the Whills who died while striving to be free, knew that freedom was worth any price. Those who were lost will always be remembered by my people.

I know I will always remember the Skywalker. He sought and found personal atonement for mistakes only he remembered. He also found an ending to his long existence, which he saw as a final reward. As the Skywalker taught me, death is not an enemy to be feared, but a natural passage from this life to a more luminous existence. I thank the Skywalker for liberating me from my fear and personal isolation into a truly meaningful life. May he rest in peace within the Force for all time."

-From "The Return of the Whills," in The New Journal of the Whills, volume 116, by Senator Orenth of the New Republic.

THE END

Dedication:

This story is fondly dedicated to the three women who liberated me from despair and made it possible for this story to be completed; Amanda Ellsworth, Maureen Smith, and my sister-in-Star-Wars, Michelle Slaughter. I am forever grateful to all of you.

Author's note:

- The character of Blackhole was originally created by Russ Manning for the Star Wars newspaper strip.
- Simon Greyshade originally appeared in Marvel Star Wars comics.
- The race of Chevs appears in West End Games Galaxy Guide 12.
- The character of the Skywalker was inspired by the second script draft of A New Hope, written by George Lucas.

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