**Metallic Treason**

Chaos filled the halls of Taldryan as its members scrambled to recover from Sphinxian Satellite Technologies’ unprecedented attack. As directed by his battleteam leader, Seyda, Ringer strode briskly to help clean up the hangar, along with his fellow battleteam members, Aiden Lee and Retden.

 “Any word on what they were even trying to accomplish?” Aiden asked his companions. Retden shook his head.

*All I’ve heard is that they broke into the kitchens, of all places, before we were able to organize enough troops to drive them off,* Ringer projected his thoughts to the other two, the Wookiee unable to speak them coherently aloud.

“The kitchens? What could they possibly have been looking for there?” Ringer shrugged in reply. *Maybe they just got lost,* was his only idea. He was just as confused as anyone else. No one had expected another attack from Sphinxian Satellite Technologies, let alone a physical attack. The covert organization had been visibly all but dormant in the months since Taldryan had successfully fended off their cyberattack campaign.

Unbeknownst to the two humans, their Wookiee companion had another assignment to fulfill. Shortly after receiving his cleanup instructions from Seyda, he had received another message on his secured datapad. “Traitor suspected in ranks. Investigation necessary. If possible, apprehend, but do not kill. Bring any information directly to me. You may enlist help from your House, but do not reveal the details of the investigation to anyone.” Ringer was shocked to see that the transmission had come directly from the the Clan’s Consul, Prophet Keirdagh. Keirdagh seemed to him to be more of the kind of person that would entrust such a mission to no one besides himself, let alone to a lowly Padawan. The Wookiee puzzled over why he had been trusted enough to be given the assignment. Perhaps they had already suspected a traitor in the Clan long before he had returned from his stint among the Rogues, and his absence disqualified him from suspicion.

Ringer reflected on the situation as the three Wardens continued to jog toward the hangar. The invading troops had taken advantage of sheer surprise and targeted the hangar bay before any sort of response could be mustered, taking out a number of Taldryan ships and unloading several transports worth of troops. The biggest mystery was how the troops had even been able to enter Taldryan space without being detected as outsiders. The security clearance codes were newly generated daily and without one of the codes, the entering troops would have had less than a minute to either declare their intent and land with a military escort or try to make the landing themselves - after their ships had been completely disabled by the planetary defense system. This traitor he was supposed to investigate must have somehow communicated the security codes to Sphinxian Satellite Technologies. Even that, though, was a puzzle. Outgoing communications were monitored for everyone except for the Consul himself, and Ringer was certain that the Clan’s leader was no traitor.

When they saw the state of the hangar, Aiden let out a low whistle. “That’s quite a bit of damage. Where did they suddenly come up with all of the firepower? As far as I was aware, they were just a computer technology company on the brink of bankruptcy. Isn’t that why they tried to hack our systems to begin with? To siphon credits away?” Ringer simply shrugged again. The normally cheerful Wookiee had a strange feeling about the whole situation. What was even the point of the attack? Yes, they had done a good amount of damage here in the hangar, but beyond that, it seemed like the enemy troops hadn’t accomplished much. And why did they head to the kitchens? He didn’t even believe his earlier comment about them getting lost. From what Ringer had heard of the company, he couldn’t imagine Sphinxian Satellite Technologies coming so unprepared as to not even have a map or blueprints of the Hall.

After their shift had ended, the three battleteam mates headed to the cantina to grab a bite to eat. The meal was even less remarkable than normal; apparently the kitchens had been rendered completely unusable after the forced entry by the enemy troops. The entrance to the kitchens had been barred as they had walked by on the way to the cantina.

After picking through the various bits of meat in the earthy protein sludge for a couple minutes, Aiden slid his tray away and stretched. “Well, I’m off to bed. See you in the morning.”

Retden shoved his tray to the side as well. “Hopefully they actually have the kitchens up and running by breakfast,” he remarked

Ringer nodded in reply with a personable growl and let out a stretch and groan of his own. He had certainly been giving a Wookiee’s share of heavy lifting in the hangar. Then he was reminded of the other task he had been entrusted with. He had been warned not to trust anyone, but he could use some help in the investigation. He would just have to conceal his actual motivations from the two humans.

*Want to check out the kitchens?* the Wookiee projected with a sly grin. Aiden and Retden, who had already begun to head toward the tray return, stopped and turned around.

Returning to the table, Retden asked softly, so as to avoid being overheard by others nearby, “How are we supposed to do that? The entry is blockaded, and none of us have even close to the security clearance to override the blockade.” Rising from his seat, Ringer grabbed his tray and gestured for the two to follow him to the tray return alcove. Glancing at each other, somewhat perplexed, Aiden and Retden followed.

Once inside, Ringer set his tray on the conveyor belt that would take it to be sanitized and then, glancing out the door to make sure no one was watching, hopped up onto the belt himself with a grin at his two companions. It was a tight squeeze for the well-built Wookiee, but he managed to press through the narrow opening that led straight into the kitchens. Wordlessly, the two humans followed.

The three companions had expected to see signs of the enemies’ entry to the kitchen, but they were unprepared for the havoc that faced them. Tables were overturned, shards of glass littered the floor, and blaster marks stood out on the steel cabinet doors that lined the walls. “Well, it’s obvious why the door is sealed,” Retden offered, voicing what had been on everyone’s minds.

Careful not to step on any glass, the three began to look around the kitchen, but it seemed that the soldiers’ only goal had been wanton destruction. As Ringer righted one of the overturned tables, he heard Aiden comment, almost to himself, “That’s strange.” As Ringer and Retden joined the Knight, they made the same observation he had. Curiously, although the pantry door was open, the only indication that anyone had been in there was a sack of grain that had spilled on the floor.

Their curiosity again getting the better of them, the humans and Wookiee entered the pantry. Lined wall to wall with shelves of non-perishable or freeze-dried supplies, the dimly lit room featured a gigantic walk-in fridge and freezer on the back wall. The three spread out to see if they could find anything out of the ordinary.

Retden and Ringer spun as they suddenly heard a crunch behind them. Aiden froze, his hand already back in the bag of Cracknel Crisps that he had pulled off the shelves. Shrugging, he smiled and brushed the crumbs away from his mouth. “I figured if we’re here anyway, I would get something at least remotely decent to eat. Want some?” he asked, tilting the bag toward the other two. Shaking his head, Ringer turned back to the shelves and was about to keep exploring when they heard a beep coming from the main entrance.

*Someone’s coming in,* Ringer warned the other two. Quickly, the three crawled into the shelving, Ringer trying not to groan as he compressed his bulk into the tight space. The Wookiee watched, intrigued, as a humanoid shape entered the pantry. *Isn’t that the Consul’s new security droid?* he asked the others.

“I think so,” whispered Retden, who was packed into the shelf next to him. At that faint sound, the droid suddenly swiveled its head in their direction. Everyone froze, even using the Force to calm themselves and slow their breathing. After a few seconds, the droid turned away again, stepping over to the spilled bag of grain, the only noise the slight grating of hinges and metallic tapping of his feet hitting the ground. Standing in front of the bag, it took three steps to the left, then counted two shelves up, as if following preset directions. After a quick glance to either side, a surprisingly sentient-like gesture, the droid reached to the back of the shelf and drew out a datapad that had been hidden behind a small bag of rolls.

After tapping on the datapad’s screen a few times, the droid turned and headed briskly for the exit. After waiting a few minutes to be certain, the group climbed awkwardly out of the shelving. Ringer groaned in disgust as his exit toppled a bag of flour. The bag burst on impact with the floor, sending up a cloud of flour that coated the Wookiee’s shaggy fur. *At least I was due for a shower, anyway,* he thought and growled at his companions as they stifled laughter.

After the two humans had composed themselves, the Jedi discussed what their course of action should be.

“We should probably tell someone what we saw,” Aiden suggested immediately.

“The problem is, we aren’t even supposed to be in here, so we can’t tell anyone about it without getting in trouble. And to be honest, we don’t even know what was going on here; the Consul could have sent the droid to investigate,” Retden argued. Ringer didn’t mention that he had had a reason for entering the kitchen that would keep him from being punished. Instead, he kept silent, remembering his instructions from the Consul. After a brief discussion, the three decided that they would wait a week before revealing the experience to anyone, although Aiden wasn’t happy with the decision.

*If anything else happens that is out of the ordinary, we can go sooner,* offered Ringer. Aiden shrugged and nodded his assent.

Getting out of the kitchen against the flow of the conveyor belt was a little trickier than getting in, but the three managed it without too much difficulty. The toughest part was waiting for a lull in activity when they could get out without being noticed. Luckily, they were between standard meals so the cantina was fairly empty. With a simple farewell nod, Ringer, Aiden, and Retden headed to their rooms.

At least, the two humans headed to their rooms. As soon as the others were out of sight, Ringer turned into a side corridor and made his way to the Consul’s office as swiftly as he could without drawing more attention than the Wookiee usually drew. Before he knocked, he steeled himself for the encounter. Ringer was still fairly intimidated by the Sith Prophet and knew that he would not want to be bothered without a good reason. Would he consider Ringer’s information about the security droid to be sufficient for interrupting him in his work?

Cutting off his hesitation with a will, Ringer raised his fist, but before he had even knocked on the Consul’s door, it swung inward, revealing Keirdagh sitting at his desk, typing vigorously. His normally impeccably groomed hair and beard were now disheveled, indicating that the Clan’s leader likely hadn’t slept since the attack. As Ringer stepped inside, Keirdagh shut the door behind him with a wave of his hand and looked up. Not wasting a moment, he asked Ringer, “And? What have you found?”

*Well…it’s your droid, sir*, Ringer communicated hesitantly, realizing uneasily that implicating the Consul’s property in wrongdoing could easily pull the owner in as well.

“What about my droid? Quit hesitating and talk,” Keirdagh replied brusquely.

Ringer quickly related the details of his investigation to the Consul, who nodded impassively. Without further discussion, he summoned the droid with a press of a button on his desk. Ringer tensed as he waited for the security droid to enter, wondering if he had made too many assumptions in his eagerness to find the traitor in the ranks. He wasn’t even sure anymore if it had really been Keirdagh’s droid. *Too late to worry about that now*, he thought to himself.

They didn’t have to wait long. Within a minute, the telltale beeping of entrance being authorized sounded from the office door. As the doors slid open, Ringer’s doubts were removed. This was definitely the same droid. He remembered seeing the unique scorch mark on the droid’s left shoulder when he had spied on it in the pantry.

“What were you doing in the kitchens this evening?” the Consul asked.

“Sir. I was investigating after the forced entry by enemy troops,” the droid replied in its metallic voice after a moment’s pause.

“And who gave you authorization to investigate?”

The droid paused again, obviously searching for a suitable answer in its memory banks. Without warning, it suddenly whipped its blaster off its back. Ringer reflexively growled in warning and drew his lightsaber, but his warning proved to be unnecessary. Before the droid had even fired off his shot, the Consul’s golden lightsaber sprang to life with a hum. As the shot flashed, it was deflected easily by the Sith and struck the droid’s own hand, causing it to drop its weapon. Before it could attack further, Keirdagh skillfully initiated the droid’s shutdown sequence with a refined direction of Force energy. The droids head slumped and Ringer let out the breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding. Deactivating his lightsaber, the Wookiee turned to face Keirdagh, who didn’t even display the slightest sign of irritation at having been attacked by his own droid.

“Thoughts, Ringer,” the Consul asked, preferring to let the Padawan come to his own conclusions.

The Wookiee thought for a moment before answering, *I can come up with two explanations: First, Sphinxian Satellite Technologies managed to subvert the droid before it was purchased. I would suggest an interrogation of the merchant who sold you the droid. Look for connections to Sphinxian Satellite Technologies and find out if he gave them any opportunities to tamper with his droids.*

“And the second explanation?”

*Well, we know that they hacked us before. It wouldn’t be too much of a stretch to think that they could have hacked us again, reprogramming your droid and then breaking the connection to avoid leaving a trace. Then they left the datapad in the kitchen to provide him with further instructions without attempting another hack. That still doesn’t explain how they managed to muster so many troops so quickly, though, to attack in such a manner.*

“Very good,” the Consul complimented the Padawan simply, not wanting to stoke Ringer’s pride but still impressed with the investigation. “Now that we have captured the droid, we can turn him into a double agent. Those who hacked us likely don’t know that their inside man…or droid… is now compromised. You, and the others who helped you, will be rewarded for your efforts. Now head back to your room and rest.” Keirdagh turned back to his computer and the conversation was ended.

Ringer walked back to his room and turned out the light. Not bad for a day’s work. Letting out a gigantic Wookiee yawn, he settled back in his bed, falling asleep almost before his head hit the pillow.

The next morning, Ringer awoke early to a flashing symbol of an envelope on his datapad indicating that he had a message waiting again from the Consul’s office. Tapping the indicator, a small hologram of Keirdagh projected above the datapad.

“I thought you might like to know what you prevented with your actions yesterday. We found the datapad you had seen my droid grab out of the pantry. After spending all night to break into it, we found a malicious little program that would have disabled every last defense system on the planet, then corrupted our systems to act as if everything were normal. We wouldn’t have even known there was a problem until the next attack came. Then we would have definitely had a problem. Since I am the only one with the security clearance to make changes to the entire planetary defense, the datapad would have had to be connected to my personal computer, which explains why Sphinxian Satellite Technologies targeted my personal security droid. We were lucky that I had been at my desk all day, otherwise the droid may well have completed its mission before being discovered.

“I will be speaking with your House leadership about a suitable reward for your efforts and ask them about their plans for your promotion to Knight. You demonstrated successful leadership skills, as well as commitment to the Clan, obedience to orders, and appropriate discretion. For a Padawan to exhibit such qualities warrants a further look at your rank. Again, well done.”

As the hologram deactivated, Ringer felt a grin spread across his face. Although his time among the Rogues had definitely been valuable to him, it was gratifying to be a part of Taldryan again and work for goals above his own immediate needs. And now he had gained the notice of the Clan’s highest leadership.

A growl from his stomach reminded him that last night’s dinner had been somewhat less than filling, let alone satisfying. The Wookiee made his way toward the cantina, thinking with a grumble, *Maybe we should have cleaned up a little more in the kitchens before we left. The chances of getting something decent to eat this morning would certainly be higher.*