

“Bylines”

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Disclaimer: *Star Wars* is not mine. Hallis Saper was created by Mr. Aaron Allston. Most other characters here are original.

Entry 1

There it was. As soon as I accessed *Unencrypted*'s HoloNet site, I saw it. Big, bold letters right across the top:

BLOOD TRANSFUSION MAKES PATIENT FORCE-SENSITIVE

Below it, slightly smaller:

On the run from authorities. Uncontrollable Force powers!

And, of course, the best part right underneath that:

by Hallis Saper

My headline.

My story.

Three weeks of my life that had been poured into combing through, um, “public access” medical records, questionable witness reports, dogged interviews with reluctant and (quite frankly) rude people, and finding just the right words for every single sentence had finally crystallized into my first front-page story with *Unencrypted*. And it's about damn time. I've only been here, what, four months? Something like that. I should check when it was that I started. Or maybe not, because it'll probably just irritate me that it's been that long with nothing but “uh huh” and “that's nice” and “maybe we can squeeze it in on page five” over and over again.

Until now. Now I broke through. Page One. Blakeley finally sees that I won't back down when things get a little rough out in the field, and maybe that'll convince Her Almighty Editor-ness at last that I have what it takes to make it and give *Unencrypted* good stories that can sell. This byline is worth something.

So I figured I would start a little journal so I could keep track of my progress. This was my first story on Page One, but it won't be the last.

Not by a long shot.

Entry 2

Well, today could have gone better.

Now that I've got a bit more clout and can pursue better stories, I found out last week that Blakeley's pretty stingy about authorizing expenses, especially for travel. So I had to get creative.

I'm working on my next story, all about how Ewoks are an Imperial genetic experiment gone wrong. It makes sense, right? Everyone knows the Imperials enslaved the Wookiees years

ago for their strength, but it's hard to control slaves who are both much stronger than you and have the physical stature of another half-person added on as well. The combination of those two factors means that if the slaving technology you're using fails and the Wookiee attacks you, you have no chance in hell of surviving, much less winning. But what if your oppressed, furious opponent isn't huge compared to you? What if it's half your size? Still strong, but in a smaller package? Random having-a-bad-day Imperial might find a way to survive that encounter. So the Imperials genetically tinkered with Wookiees with some leftover Clone Wars tech to make some that were much smaller. Miniature Wookiees, essentially. And since every military is lazy with language and loves acronyms and abbreviations, "Miniature Wookiee" goes to "Mini-Wook" which sounds like "minEE-Wook" which shortens more to "E-Wok". Anyway, the Imperials took the first batch to the Forest Moon of Endor as a trial run to make them build the shield generator facility for the second Death Star. But something went wrong (still digging through Imperial records to find out what, but everything is redacted), and the Ewoks escaped and started their own settlement on the moon. Why else would they have helped the Rebel strike force defeat the Imperial garrison there later on? How else would they have known so many structural and functional weaknesses of Imperial war machines?

I'm sure this is something people will want to read about, and I sold Blakeley on the idea too. She didn't say it would be Page One yet, but I'm going to get it there.

And that's why I needed to talk to an Ewok. I needed some extra authenticity and personal history to really make this story pop.

But there are no Ewoks here on Bonadan. I doubt there's even any in the whole Corporate Sector.

I submitted my request for travel to the Endor system and even offered to grab extra footage for any future Death Star II stories while I was there, but Blakeley denied it. Said it was too far and too expensive.

Grr.

So then I had to figure out how to accomplish this interview from here. I dug around a bit and found someone in the New Republic who sometimes goes to the Forest Moon. I contacted her and claimed to be a xenobiologist with a focus on anthropology, and asked if she could find me an Ewok to talk to over a holocomm. After a bit of complaining and wanting to verify my credentials (note to self: next time, make absolutely sure I have fake credentials ready ahead of time. Not having them almost sunk me, and it was a sloppy oversight on my part), I managed to persuade her to do it. Plus, I even distracted her from wanting to see my "credentials".

Score.

The holocomm interview was today. I had our office's 3PO unit, Leaks, with me at my desk, and I'd given him a written copy of my questions ahead of time so he could just translate and the NR rep with the Ewok wouldn't hear me say them in Basic and know this wasn't some super important scientific study and pull the plug.

It was going just fine for the first few questions until the Ewok got confused with one of them. The NR rep decided to try to help clarify things, and unfortunately she had her own 3PO unit, which I probably should have expected. When that 3PO started telling her what the questions actually were, she got mad and disconnected the holocomm.

Damn it.

So I got a little bit of material, and I've had to spend the rest of the evening heavily inferring and paraphrasing things the Ewok said.

It would've been so much easier if Blakeley had just let me go in person so I wouldn't

have been completely reliant on some NR bureaucrat to get what I need. But this was a good learning experience— now I know that I have to do things directly and on my own as much as I can. This isn't a team sport, and relying on someone else can open me up for failure. I'll have to approach things a bit differently in the future to account for that.

For now, I'd better get back to working on "The Truth about Ewoks." I definitely need to come up with a catchier title, too. That one is horrible.

Entry 3

I spent the day spying on a co-worker.

For completely legitimate and non-creepy reasons, I swear.

Let me back up a bit...

My Ewok story didn't turn out great, despite my best efforts. Blakeley was lukewarm about the final product, and it ended up on page three. After riding the high of Page One, that was a huge disappointment. I started really examining what the Ewok story lacked and what I needed to improve for the next one.

I kept coming back to the "remoteness" of it all. The Ewok wasn't interviewed in person, and that contributed to the abysmal lack of authentic material (I'm looking at you, annoying NR rep with your annoying trigger-happy disconnecting button finger-pusher... thing!). It made the whole story too distant. It wasn't relatable. Wasn't personal. And stories need to be.

These stories are entertainment. I hope no one out there thinks I actually believe what I write about. Sludgenews is meant to entertain. Even the "scary" sludgenews stories, like the classic "Emperor Palpatine can mind-control you from beyond the grave!" ones, are like a thrill ride: people get an adrenaline rush, a kick out of scaring themselves. And no one is going to feel entertained if they don't first feel invested in the story. To feel invested, they first need to relate.

My conclusion was that I need to do better about being there myself and experiencing as much of my stories first-hand as I can. That way people can experience the story vicariously through me. If I can immerse myself, I can immerse them.

My second conclusion was that I wasn't aiming high enough. I need bigger stories than ramblings about Ewoks to an audience who's never even seen one. More sensational, less logical.

I have a couple good story ideas brewing, but the part about being there more in-person is a sticking point. By and large, the stories that *Unencrypted* publishes rely on knowing, hearing, and seeing things the general public can't. That usually means certain people may not want some of the information or images getting out, and they've come up with safeguards to prevent that. Very few sludgenews stories worth their bandwidth are a result of nothing but general-public access and information. As the career sludgers say, "You can't happen into your stories— you need to claw your way into them."

I know the basics about how to get into certain places where I shouldn't be. I haven't exactly been sitting around here the last few months doing nothing. But honestly my skill set is elementary. The stories I did before now didn't require anything more. If I'm going to up my game with my stories, though, I'll need to really up my game with my ability to strategically place myself in opportune, if discouraged, locations.

My co-worker Drayvet is a career sludger. He's the undisputed expert in my office when it comes to sneaking into places and getting excellent footage from restricted areas no sentient

being should be setting foot in. Some of my other co-workers think it's some sort of secret Duros ability, but I think he's just been around long enough to have learned a whole lot of tricks of the trade. And if he could learn them, I can learn them.

Drayvet was being a bit cagey today, which we all know means he was getting ready to sneak off somewhere for story footage. I thought about asking if I could come along, but that's not the kind of attitude he respects. Instead I slipped out of the office after him and spent the day trying to inconspicuously follow him and learn what he was doing from a distance.

Yes, I'm aware of the irony of using distance-learning to figure out how to get up-close and personal.

I would have loved to plant a bug on him, but he would have discovered it right away. So I had to content myself with directional microphones, small holocams, macrobinoculars, basic security camera hacking, things like that to watch what he was doing as he made his way into some big company's office area through a means other than the front door.

I probably was only able to pick up on 5%, maybe 10, of what he did in there, but even that fraction gave me lots of good ideas and tricks. Drayvet picked locks, circumvented security, made non-entrances into entrances, planted bugs, even bribed someone to look the other way when he got cornered and spotted through sheer bad luck and timing. Ah, good old Corporate Sector, credits are your lifeblood. Even the way he moved through the rooms and corridors was purposeful and kept him away from other beings as much as possible.

This guy is amazing.

I followed him for a while after he left the building, partly for the practice and partly to see if he did anything else, but nope.

I just finished transcribing my notes— I want to make sure I don't forget anything I learned today.

Now all I have to do is practice, and I'll be back on Page One in no time.

Entry 4

I've come to the inescapable conclusion that maybe Drayvet does have some secret Duros ability, because there's no other way he could make something so hard look so easy.

That's what I'm telling myself, anyway. It soothes my ego a bit.

I've been reviewing what I learned during my little stalking operation and been practicing whenever I can in fairly low-stakes circumstances. During this time I've also been doing all of the tedious research on my next story. I'm writing about shapeshifters that have been impersonating local people in power (especially some of the big corporations here) and using that power for their own ends. I have to do a bit more digging to see which underground organizations some shapeshifting species could be involved with so I can figure out what they would be trying to do.

But aside from that, I'm at the point where I've pretty much done all the background research I can and need to really get into the meat of the story. That means I need to start getting into places for footage. Once I have that and know which direction the story is going, I can find some anonymous sources to interview. (I'm looking forward to the interviews. The best part is that if there's an interviewee whose story doesn't match what I'm going for, I can claim they're really a shapeshifter trying to throw me off their trail. Really, this story practically writes itself sometimes.)

Though before I begin traipsing through huge corporations with high-tech security, or even medium-sized corporations with adequate security, I figured I'd better give my new skills a test. Make sure I can sneak around somewhere unnoticed.

So I went to the zoo.

And I got &#*%@% *caught*.

Not caught as in arrested, but caught as in spotted, which in a higher-security location can end up being the same thing. A security droid chased me out of the back access hallway of the varactyl enclosure.

I'm so embarrassed.

I almost didn't write this journal entry because I don't want someone else ever finding this and learning about it. But maybe having it here will be a good reminder for me and a good motivation to get better.

I still can't believe the local zoo bested me, a sludger. Looks like I have more to learn about ways to deal with security droids. And it also looks like I have some hard decisions to make tomorrow about how to proceed with my story.

Sithspit.

Entry 5

What was it I wrote here a while ago? Something about how this isn't a team sport?

Yeah. I should've remembered that and stuck to it. Maybe then I wouldn't have this bitter taste in my mouth, especially when I should be ecstatic that my shapeshifter story made Page One. And yes, it's *my* story, even though the blasted byline reads "by Drayvet Ersa, consultation by Hallis Saper". I wrote it. I researched everything. It's mine.

So to make sure I never let this situation happen again, I'm writing it here as a future reminder of an irritating lesson learned.

The zoo was an eye-opening experience for me, and it showed me how far I still have to go with those particular skills. I won't deny that there was a large part of me that wanted to go for broke and try getting my shapeshifter story footage inside a couple companies anyway. Sure, they'd have better security, but the zoo was just a fluke, right? I could totally do this.

But deep down I knew that voice was wrong, and it was just ego talking. Ego is a good driver in a sludger, but I've also seen and heard enough to know that ego doesn't make for a good criminal defense when a sludger gets arrested for trespassing.

That left me with two options: put the shapeshifter story on hold until my skills were up to snuff, or get help with it.

So help me, I'd gotten invested in this story and didn't want to lose all of my momentum on it. Plus I'd have to start all over on another story with essentially nothing to show for the last couple of weeks. I chose Option 2.

And here we are.

I found Drayvet at work. Said I had an amazing opportunity for him if he happened to be interested. You know, the type of sales pitch that the general public gets hooked with. Unfortunately career sludgers practically invented the spiel, so he saw right through it.

When we started negotiating details, he seemed slightly intrigued by the overall story idea but insisted that his price for going into the companies and getting footage would be first billing on the byline. Seeing as how the story was my idea and I'd already done most of the

work, I quashed that notion right away... until Drayvet pointed out that I needed him for this much more than he needed me for anything.

Sithspit.

I couldn't admit to him that he was right, so I said I would ask someone else instead. Except then he called my bluff and started listing off the security systems inside the companies in question and oh-so-very-nonchalantly pointed out that no one else in our office could easily get past them.

Double sithspit.

I really thought about changing the story to make it about different companies instead, ones that were a bit more in the league of some of my other co-workers' abilities, but I couldn't. Things were fitting together so well with the companies I'd originally picked. Changing them would drastically lessen the story, and for what? A few centimeters' worth of text placement under a headline?

Ugh. Normally my throat's not big enough to swallow my pride without choking, but I managed to.

I agreed to his terms on the condition that he also take me along when he went to get footage and teach me more about those particular skills. Drayvet almost backed out then, until I dangled the notion of a nearly complete story in front of him that would involve minimal-to-no writing effort on his part. Turns out I wasn't completely useless to him after all. It's a good thing that he enjoys the excitement of field work much more than the "mind-numbing boring tediousness" (as he's put it before) of putting words on a screen.

At first I wasn't sure how he'd ultimately take the "tagging along" part, but he faithfully held up his end of the deal and taught me a lot of his tricks and methods for sneaking into places. Luckily there was only one time when I almost got us caught. Things make a lot more sense now, and I'll be so much better at the methods I'd been trying to practice on my own at the blasted zoo. Some things I'd actually been doing wrong. I've already corrected my sneaking notes from before and added a whole lot more into them.

The footage Drayvet got was amazing. I do have to say that my story wouldn't be as awesome as it is without that.

...And when we were brainstorming what kind of footage to get, he had some really good ideas of what to explore and how to approach some aspects of the story. I would have never thought about those on my own.

...Grr...

...Okay, so, now that I've vented and can see all this in black and white on the screen, maybe this wasn't such a bad trade-off after all. It still really rubs me the wrong way to lose all that credit for my story, but the story itself turned out great and I learned a hell of a lot from Drayvet. With luck, that means this will be the last time I'll need to rely on him for footage.

He showed me how to do this. He showed me I *can* do this. Now I can get better on my own.

Entry 6

I haven't had a chance to write in this journal lately, but I figured I'd better update things since so much is going on. I've been pretty busy since the shapeshifter story was published.

I've been doing a lot of practicing with what Drayvet taught me. For instance, I often see

how long I can tail some of my co-workers in public before they notice. They should be a bit more aware of their surroundings than the general public, so it's a better challenge. Plus it avoids potential weirdness with legalities and stalking some random person who might feel endangered.

After a week or so, word got around the office about my activities and now there's a whole betting pool set up. No one knows who I'm going to be tailing or when, but if I manage to get back to the office with some sort of footage of them doing or saying something in public before they contact someone here to say they saw me and can give details of where I was or what I was doing, they lose. If they can report any of those details first, I lose. Credits have been flying quite a bit since this started. Rora even has a board set up where he tracks odds for various co-workers' success or failure, and he collects the different bets and manages the money. He's probably the only one in the office everyone trusts to do that, so it's good that he's willing to. This system makes it even better— with credits on the line people are even more eager to spot me following them, which makes it harder for me, so it's great practice. Plus they obviously know how sludgers think and where I might be, so I have to get creative sometimes to avoid being spotted. It's actually been pretty fun. I sometimes catch myself thinking of unusual ways to tail a certain co-worker after I notice something random about them, like where they bought their caf in the morning.

Sometimes a co-worker will bet against another and secretly come to me to persuade me to tail them and give me pointers of how to do it, and in exchange for my cooperation they give me a percentage of their winnings. But there have also been times when they've said all that but fed me false information because they actually bet against me. Other co-workers will have conversations about fake plans or itineraries within earshot of me to throw me off in case I'm planning to tail them. Sifting through the lies and skullduggery has added a whole extra layer to this. Some of the career sludgers are pretty wily, but this is good for me to learn too so I don't complain (at least publicly) when they set me up and I fall for it. I'm getting better at it.

What else... I bought a couple really cheap security systems and have been tinkering with their innards to learn about them and how to bypass them. I've even been playing around with bugs and different types of listening devices, and some tracking devices too. Trackers are harder though.

I've also been studying the schematics for the weapons detectors that are everywhere around here. Not because I'm going to be carrying a weapon, obviously, but because learning about their detection capabilities helps me learn about their sensor coverage and if there are any "dead zones" where the sensors can't reach due to physical items blocking it or a bad transceiver placement or whatever, and then I can translate that knowledge to sensor coverage of regular security systems. The public weapons detectors are just a lot more accessible and visible for this particular kind of studying, so I don't look suspicious doing it and don't have to figure some of this out inside a private, secured area where I could get in trouble.

The biggest change for me, though, has been in my strategy. Before the shapeshifter story, I was focused only on getting on Page One again as soon as possible; however, that story and what I had to do to get it there made me re-evaluate that goal. Now I'm playing a longer game and focusing on how to get to Page One more easily and more consistently in the future. So I've been doing a lot of smaller stories that are easier and quicker to write, but I've used each one to practice a new skill. For example, for one story I needed to plant a lot of bugs and get audio recordings in order for it to work out. Another relied on tracking something. Others needed footage from discouraged locations (zoo-level or lower at first, and steadily working up). The most expensive one had me practicing a few bribes, but I didn't do a lot of those for obvious

reasons. Things like that. As long as I've kept a story primarily focused on one new skill at a time, I haven't been tempted to throw everything all together and go after one big Page One story again.

But I'm getting there. I'm getting more comfortable and confident in these situations. Pretty soon I'll be able to really put it all together at a much higher level than I could before.

Oh, and speaking of the shapeshifter story, I don't think I mentioned one of the best parts of the aftermath: I got some really good hate mail about it! I even got a sternly-worded message from a lawyer, which was a first for me. I've gotten a few nasty messages from people before about some of my stories, but nothing as substantial as this. Drayvet said he got a fair amount too (since he was first on the byline... grumble...). I showed some of my co-workers, and we had a small, informal party one day.

You know you're starting to make it as a sludger when you get this type of hate mail. It's a badge of honor and something of a rite of passage in our field. For this much hate mail, it means that people are reading the story, and not only that, but they're also getting really invested. The story is evoking so much emotion in them that they actually make the effort to write and send the nasty message. This particular milestone also helps separate the career sludgers from those who aren't really cut out for it. The ones who aren't bothered by the nasty messages (and even joke about them or celebrate them) and aren't fazed by the public's reactions have the right mindset to continue on in the trade. The ones who get really upset by it generally don't last here much longer and move on to other things. Like Brekki did. I wonder what he's up to now.

It was a fun little party. Blakeley even showed up for a bit and congratulated me. I had no idea she liked dew cake that much. Note to self: in the future, claim how many pieces you want before she arrives.

Entry 7

Today was the day.

I decided I was ready to really test myself in the field using as many of my fieldwork skills as would be necessary. I went somewhere that I felt would be a good, solid challenge for me but wasn't completely out of my league.

And I'm not talking about the zoo. I got past the zoo a while ago. I've been in and out of that varactyl access hallway a bunch of times since that first embarrassment just to prove to myself that I could do it.

No, I went to the CSA's Merchant Marine Academy. Enough security to make it hard, but not so much that I'd be shot on sight if I messed up.

I didn't have a specific story idea that I was pursuing, but I had a list of buildings to get into and numerous things to record or do before I could call my excursion a success. I wanted this to be a good, all-around test.

Overall it went pretty well. I was really happy with my general competence and ability to get inside and record the various things I needed. I felt some nerves and adrenaline, but that's normal. It was nothing I couldn't handle and nothing that impeded me— if anything it kept me on my toes. I've made great progress in lots of areas since that first time at the zoo.

Except... one part.

I was stuck for a few hours hiding in a half-pulled-apart vehicle in a maintenance hangar

because of a security droid who came very close and then wouldn't leave.

A stupid security droid. *Again*. Just like at the blasted zoo!

At least this one didn't spot me, but if I'd moved at all, it would have. It was that close to me. Hence the "hiding for several hours" decision. Maybe I should have made a backup set of fake credentials that would have given me a plausible reason to be in that hangar so I could have bluffed past the droid, but I don't know. Fake credentials are hard and time-consuming to do well, and I can't rely on having them for every single place I end up. Sludgers have to be flexible and be able to think on their feet.

Finally the stupid droid went to another area and I could get out of there. Good thing this all happened post-shift and the workers had gone home for the day. Imagine if one of them had come to do more work on the scrap heap I was hiding in and found me? That would be an awkward conversation. And I don't like awkward conversations unless I'm the one initiating them.

It was a very long few hours, and it gave me plenty of time to think.

I— very belatedly— realized that for all of the work I'd put into things like facility security systems and bugs and tailing people, I hadn't done nearly enough to learn about security droids and how to circumvent them or deal with them. And I really should have, given that the whole incident at the zoo was caused by a security droid. I thought my improvements in other areas would allow me to deal with security droids as a byproduct, and in some ways that's true, but the droids are their own separate entity that don't necessarily fall under the umbrella of "sentient organic bodyguards" or "stationary building security sensors" or anything else I've really focused on lately. They don't act or react the same. I need to treat them as an independent element.

So my new short-term focus will be learning more about different types of security droids.

After I came to that conclusion, my mind wandered down that path a while (like I said, I was stuck there a loooong time). So, security droids are used in lots of situations. In many cases they're trusted completely by their owners to keep their assignments safe and secure. These droids are let loose in high-profile areas or with valuable assets, often alone, and it's just taken for granted that they do their job and do it correctly. So if I was someone who wanted something from that droid-guarded area, maybe I should focus on using the droid more than getting past it. Change its programming. Install some hardware or software in it that does what I want while inside that guarded area, maybe without the droid even knowing what's happening. Wouldn't that be the smart thing to do? Do people guard against things like this? We trust security droids, but how secure *are* security droids, really?

And why stop there? Who looks twice at a GONK droid or a protocol droid or any of the myriad of other droids in and around our buildings and cities and vehicles? What if some are being used for nefarious purposes? How do we know we can trust the droids around us?

I had that story halfway written in my head by the time the security droid finally moved and I could leave. I have lots of research to do and more to learn about droids first, but that's probably going to be my next story. And it'll tie in well with my new skill focus of learning how to deal with security droids.

But I'll mess with all this tomorrow. I left the Academy much later than I wanted thanks to my inconvenient little respite, and it was really late when I got home. I'm way too tired to figure out details now.

But anyway, I did it. I passed my test, even in spite of dumb security droids. Look out,

galaxy: you'll be seeing a lot more of my name on Page One pretty soon.

Entry 8

I have a new roommate!

And he's already made a mess and is refusing to pick up after himself.

Though I suppose that's my fault, since I'm the one who disassembled him and scattered the parts everywhere.

I've been working on my "security of droids" story, and I've gotten to the point where I really need to understand if some droids could have software patches or extra items installed in them without their owner's knowledge. Is there room inside the chassis for a recorder? Would a listening device still pick up sound through a droid's metal "skin"? Can new code be uploaded quickly through external access ports? These are things I need to figure out, and the best way to figure them out is to try them myself.

A couple days ago I took some of my winnings from the office bets (I cleaned up one day by betting I could tail Drayvet without him noticing. Victory is sweet) and went to a droid junk shop. I bought a couple random chassis sets and appendages that would be useful for my story, and I also unexpectedly ended up with a filthy but mostly intact 3PO protocol droid. Turns out it's silver under all the tarnish. It doesn't work right, and it's missing some internal parts. I really wasn't looking to buy a complete droid, but it was cheap, and it looked so pathetic sitting there in a tetanus-inducing heap that I didn't have the heart to leave without it. Besides, having an entire protocol droid available will let me really explore some experiments for this story. See, it was a totally practical decision and not at all motivated by pity.

I've been disassembling it ever since I got it home, and I've been looking for internal nooks and crannies and software interface access points that could make the droid vulnerable to being used by someone else. I've learned more about 3PO units in the last couple days than I ever thought I would.

And as I've been disassembling it and trying to think of how someone could take advantage of a protocol droid, I started wondering... could *I*? If I can get this droid functional again, can I put a recording device in this little chest plate cavity? Can I find a bug that would detect sound through this metal chassis? Can I send him into places for clandestine footage that would be off-limits to a sludger but where a protocol droid's presence wouldn't even register in anyone's mind?

I think I'm going to play around with this idea and see what I can do with it once this story is done. I'll need to buy some parts and learn a bit more about droid mechanics first, but I like where this line of thought is heading and the possibilities it's opening up.

I'm calling him Scrounger.

Entry 9

It's been a great couple of weeks.

It started off when I submitted my finished droid security story to Blakeley. I didn't expect her to come over to my desk afterward with a copy of it, kind of gave me a side-eye, and ask how much of what I wrote was true. Apparently just one read-through was enough to make

her paranoid of her little MSE droid at home.

Emotional investment! Success!

That's when I knew that all my hard work lately was about to pay off with a story on Page One. And the byline would be mine alone this time.

It all came true a couple days later with the latest issue of *Unencrypted*. What a wonderful feeling. Take *that*, you annoying security droids everywhere! You have failed to stop me. Quite the opposite, actually.

With that story, I've started making some ripples at the office. A couple co-workers were like Blakeley but a bit more subtle about it. They had a couple "casual" conversations with me where they seemed to be trying to feel out how much of my story was fiction or how worried they should be about droids in the office or in their homes. I kept my responses ambiguous. They're smart people— they can research things for themselves if they're actually concerned. And if they're not really worried, then I'm not going to give away my writing methods for my stories and what ratio of fact versus fiction I like to use to get readers engaged and keep the story believable enough for continued engagement. That formula's still a work in progress anyway.

But either way, whether I've convinced career sludgers of something dubious with my story or they're digging for writing tidbits, there's been some kind of subtle shift that moved me from one of the "inexperienced" sludgers to "someone who knows what they're doing."

It's not really pervasive yet, and not everyone in the office is thinking that way, but a few are. And that's more than there were before this story was published.

Like I said, ripples.

Oh, and today Rora was grumpy with me. He stomped up to my desk and complained that his old C-5 household protocol droid had an actuator fail last night, but when he combed the repair shop this morning, the wait list for an appointment was a couple weeks long. The shop said there was an influx of people wanting their droids stripped down and checked for non-factory parts and software.

I very innocently told him that other people's actions were completely out of my control and none of that was my fault. Besides, it's good business for the repair shop, isn't it?

I even offered to take a stab at fixing the actuator for him myself, but Rora declined, saying he didn't want his C-5 to end up like my "creepy droid" and went back to his desk.

Poor Scrounger. Such insults are completely uncalled for, especially when it's not his fault. And besides, he's not creepy. He's useful.

I'm still working on getting him functional. I have a couple of parts on order (I hope the shop doesn't reappropriate my order for use with this influx of repairs they have now, though), and hopefully with those parts I'll be able to get Scrounger's body working at a basic level. But I discovered his head works just fine, and it doesn't need to be attached to his body to operate, just to be mobile. I've also found that a 3PO droid's brain is very handy to help with researching stories, recording notes, and bouncing ideas off of, so sometimes I bring Scrounger's head into the office with me and keep it on my desk while I work.

That seems to disturb some of my co-workers. I don't know if it's because it's just Scrounger's head, or if they're still a bit paranoid of droids because of my story. I think it's more the paranoia. I admit I egg it on a bit and warn the people nearby that Scrounger will be guarding my desk when I leave for short times.

I purposefully leave Scrounger's head unattended periodically as a curiosity follow-on to my droid story. Now that I've planted the seeds, I want to see if my co-workers try doing anything to him, whether it's installing something or deleting something or anything in between.

I get to practice finding anything unexpected each night after work. It also gives me more ideas for what someone might do to a droid, and in particular what tricks another sludger would do to it that they feel would be valuable. And now, if some of my co-workers are starting to see me as someone who might have story ideas or writing methods worth knowing about in advance, they might actually try to use Scrounger to find that information.

I've caught a couple things already, including a type of listening device I hadn't known about before but which seems very well-suited to picking up sound through a droid chassis. Thanks for the tip and your hardware donation, unknown co-worker!

Entry 10

During the time I was doing all those smaller skill-building stories, I'd forgotten what a rush it is to have the top story. I remember it now, though. It feels even better knowing that it was solid and well-earned after all that work to improve, and it wasn't due to some fluke story idea I stumbled across that Blakeley happened to like better than the others available at the publishing deadline.

Speaking of Blakeley, she's been talking with me more often and has even offered some compliments. She's been more proactively interested in what I'm working on instead of just waiting to see what I submit to her, and a couple times she's suggested a tweak or two at the outset. Those are the classic signs that I'm becoming one of her "go-to" sludgers— I've seen it happen with some of my co-workers. It means my chances for getting on Page One are increasing.

I was riding high on that realization and the aftereffects of the droid security story when I decided to throw caution to the wind and go for a big one. I didn't want to lose this feeling.

And so my latest story is all about how Leia Organa-Solo is using her husband's underworld contacts to organize some sales rings on the black market. Corruption, popular figures, shady dealings... this has it all. Add in a humanizing, sympathetic factor like how the sales rings were started for things that originally got taken off of Alderaan by illegal means, and it becomes even better. I'm not sure yet if I'm going to say the operation has grown to include less savory things. On one hand, showing something growing a bit out of control that the person didn't intend helps to keep readers invested and sympathetic. On the other hand, if things get too unsavory then readers might get turned off. It's a fine line to walk with public figures. Usually I'd go all-out for the negative reactions and hate-mail-generating emotions, but I've found it's not as easy to do that with famous people. The general public already has their own perceptions of them, and sometimes if things go too far past those preconceived notions, the anger at the story turns into disbelief and disgust at the publication, and they stop reading, possibly for a while with later issues as well. I think it's a trust thing. But Blakeley is pushing for me to go for the unsavory route since she thinks it'll draw in more readers. The unspoken implication is that more potential readers gives the story a much higher chance of getting on Page One, and isn't that what I'm aiming for? I need to make up my mind really soon to make the deadline.

But— wait, how'd I get off on that tangent? Anyway. My story's going to be great no matter which way I go with it. The basic premise is completely believable, and most of the heavy lifting is done right there. There's no way that Han Solo is completely out of the dodgy underworld scene. People don't just go from smuggling to the then-illegal Rebel Alliance and its own questionable ways of operating and come out of it all reformed and squeaky-clean on the

other side. Here's someone who's been engaged in criminal activities for years and now has direct, personal access to political power in a new government that hasn't gotten all of its bureaucratic checks and balances figured out yet. With a background like that, who wouldn't take advantage of such a situation?

And as for Leia? Organa-Solo was a Rebel even longer than her husband was. They're similar enough to have developed a relationship and gotten married. After all that hardship with the Rebellion, wouldn't a politician take advantage of a way to make some extra credits and generate more influence and power? Especially if it starts out with seemingly good intentions? For someone who's essentially been a lifelong Rebel, I imagine lines can get blurred pretty easily.

Obviously there's no way I can get in-person footage of the Solos way over here on Bonadan, so I've been having to research things remotely. I found a couple "anonymous sources" and interviewed them. Otherwise I've been looking at things like financial records, crime syndicate activities that coincide with locations where the Solos are visiting, things like that. Scrounger's been really helpful with doing the tedious parts of the research and looking for patterns. This would've been the perfect story to put all of my droid security knowledge into play and hijack the Solos' 3PO droid and use him to get some good footage and inside information, but it's just too far away. I even tried thinking of ways to paint Scrounger gold and ship him there so he could impersonate (imdroidate?) their 3PO for a while, but nope. Even for a guaranteed awesome story, Blakeley's still too stingy with expenses.

Speaking of Scrounger, working on him has been fun. Those parts came in, and I managed to get him walking. It's not perfect— he has an odd hitch in his gait and can't navigate stairs very well, so there's still some stuff I have to work on. I haven't trusted testing his body's mobility functionality at work yet, so I just detach his head to take him in, which is more often lately because of this story on the Solos.

I'm spending a lot of time on this story. Even when I work on repairing Scrounger's body, I'm dictating notes and ideas to him. Actually, I shouldn't even be writing in this journal right now. It's wasting time that would be better used on writing about the Solos.

Entry 11

What a *rush*.

The hate mail I've gotten for the (Page One!) story on the Solos was *considerably* more than I got for the shapeshifter story. And it's been regular angry hate mail, not the bunch of "I'm never reading *Unencrypted* again!" messages I was worried about. Blakeley even casually mentioned to me that sales of this issue were slightly above average.

I don't know what I was so concerned about. Blakeley was right: going full-on unsavory with public figures sells well, and it doesn't permanently turn readers off. And if I can write stories that sell more issues, then that Page One byline is going to be mine more and more often.

I've been thinking a lot about this new revelation and what it means for me. My conclusion: go full-on unsavory with another famous public figure. One connected to the Solos, even.

Therefore, my current story: Luke Skywalker is a fraud. The Jedi Order is known to be extinct, and his claims of membership are fake. Any "Force powers" he exhibits are tricks and elaborate hoaxes. He's a skilled pilot and a good fighter, but that's really all there is to it. He's a

regular human with no Force powers behind him, just a desire to get attention by being something “unique” and “special.” Being a hero of the Rebellion wasn’t enough for him after a while, so he thought up something else that can’t really be proven. Just a poor kid from Tatooine who wants to feel like he’s someone important. Maybe he got a bit hooked on the attention and fame during his Rebellion days.

I found a couple people who gave me good quotes to use. They claim they served with Skywalker in the Rebellion, but they’re too young to have done so. The quotes fit in well, though, so they’ll just become “anonymous sources.”

This is a story people are really going to be talking about. I can’t wait to get it published.

Entry 12

Okay, um... well.

So I did my Luke Skywalker story. It turned out great. Both Blakeley and I were really happy with it. I should be ecstatic. But instead of flying off to my next story idea, here I am, spending time writing in this journal and trying to sort things out.

A couple days after it was published, I decided to get lunch from Priyitz’s. It was a nice day, so I walked and took the scenic route that takes me past the school. The kids were outside for lunch, and it was the usual chatting and running and laughing. I guess that’s why it stuck out to hear one of them crying.

When I spotted the kid in question, he was holding what I can only imagine was some sort of Luke Skywalker toy or figure. Two older kids were getting in his face and being kind of mean about it. From the snippets I heard, it sounded like the two older ones were saying Skywalker was a fake and it was true because they saw it “in the news,” so the crying kid was an idiot and wrong for liking him. The crying kid was denying it all and defending Skywalker while trying to keep his toy away from the two older kids. One of the adult supervisors was heading over to the group. I kept going on my way.

And that one little exchange I witnessed put a damper on my whole day.

Why? Why does this bother me when hate mail doesn’t? Okay, so this particular reaction wasn’t what I wanted to happen as a result of my story, but so what if it did happen? This is nothing new in the world of sludgenews. Why can I laugh at a scathing note sent to me in response to a story I wrote, but I get rattled by overhearing a random crying kid?

And why is it still nagging at me days later?

This is crazy. No sludger worth the oxygen they breathe gets sidetracked by something like this. Something so insignificant. It makes no sense. Even Scrounger noticed I was acting weird and asked me what was wrong, and I didn’t know how to explain it to him. My poor droid is so flummoxed by me right now, and I don’t blame him.

I need to press on and get my head back in the game. I’ve worked too hard to lose it all over a glitchy little fluke of nonsensical emotion. I know Blakeley really wants another public figure story from me, so that’s what I’m working on. But... I’m doing it on more publicly-accepted “bad guys” this time. There’s always a solid audience for Imperial Remnant stories or former Imperial officers or warlords or something.

Blakeley wasn’t too thrilled with that idea. She said she’d been hoping for another New Republic public figures story, and Imperials are such an easy target that it’s beneath what she’s seen from me lately. That really annoyed me, but even that insane irritation gave me no

motivation for another New Republic story right now so I had to do some mental gymnastics on the spot to come up with a reason to do an Imperial story that she'd buy into. I was so flustered that I don't even remember what I said, which could come back to haunt me if I don't write the story to match what I told her. I think I spouted something about wanting to change things up so New Republic stories don't get stale or overdone for *Unencrypted*. That was a sloppy mistake on my part. I need to keep my cover stories and lies-slash-embellishments straight out in the field, and there's no excuse for me to not remember the one I'd used with Blakeley.

Whatever I told her, I sold it to her well enough that she grudgingly accepted it. So I'm figuring out something dastardly for the IR to be doing. Shouldn't be hard.

Hopefully a good, successful story like that will help me get my head on straight again. Too bad it's not as simple for me as it is with Scrounger.

Entry 13

I'm starting to bring Scrounger with me on little outings here and there. His mobility isn't perfect but it's improving. Each time we go out, we get more information about what needs attention, whether it's a sticky servo, a faulty wire, a software issue, and so on. I fix what I can, and we try to work around what I can't.

I still want to bring him in the field with me at some point. I've got him outfitted with a couple hidden cameras and microphones, and after each outing I take a look at the kind of data we've recorded so I can tweak the recording devices as well. Other times it's a learning experience for me to know what kind of data I can expect to get from those devices in certain conditions.

Scrounger and I did a very low-key test run when I interviewed a couple former Imperials for some quotes to use in my story. They didn't see Scrounger, but I made sure Scrounger was nearby and recording. I went in with all of my regular recording gear as my primary in case Scrounger's recordings didn't turn out.

The interviews went pretty well, all things considered. One of the Imperials got a little pushy and didn't like the amount of credits I was offering him in exchange for his quotes, which are complete fabrications anyway. It was a perfectly reasonable amount so I shut him down pretty quickly when he started jawing at me about it. That did get me thinking, though. I might put some audio recordings in Scrounger's internal data storage in case I need him to broadcast something for me as a distraction. Sirens or blaster fire or something. That might come in handy some day.

Anyway, my "dastardly Imperial" story is admittedly one of the sludgenews classics: Vader is alive and is in charge of the Imperial Remnant. I put my own spin on it using some jumbled holos from the Battle of Endor that "show" his shuttle leaving before the second Death Star exploded, as well as things like "leaked" data from the IR showing a higher than normal casualty rate of Imperial officers in certain pocket locations at certain times. It's no secret that Vader tended to leave bodies of his own allies in his wake. And, of course, some financial nudging helped my anonymous sources to "remember" that they saw Vader in the IR recently, alive and in command. Those interviews are the centerpiece of the story.

Maybe one day I'll do what my co-workers do and just make up my own quotes for anonymous sources. It probably doesn't make much sense for me to pay people to say things I've asked them to say. It's better for me to do it this way for now, though. When I'm quoting what

someone else says, even if they're retelling my own fiction, they still say it in their own way. It comes out more authentic-sounding for the story. If I made up the quotes myself, they would all sound like me. Besides, they usually unconsciously throw in more details that I wouldn't have known to include, and sometimes they really get into it and give me more than I expected. I've had a few stories morph into something else that way. Those are actually pretty fun. It's interesting hearing people talk and developing stories based on what they say or what they've experienced. Even if it's fake.

We'll see how Blakeley likes this when I'm finished with it. I haven't really been able to get the visceral feel of fear in this story I was hoping for when I chose the topic, but it's still a solid piece. I didn't have any qualms writing this like I was a bit nervous about at the start. Hopefully that means that weird nonsense from before is behind me and it's full throttle from here on out.

Entry 14

Unfortunately Blakeley wasn't too impressed with my Imperial story. She said there was nothing technically wrong with it but "Vader is alive" stories have been done to death and my spin didn't spin things enough. Drayvet got Page One for this issue.

I kind of feel like I need to salvage this, so I'm doing something I don't do often: expanding on my "Vader is alive" story with a second part. My last story set things up to show Vader is still a dangerous threat and ruling the Imperial Remnant. In the second part, I'm taking a closer look at Vader himself... namely that Vader is a part played by more than one person who simply puts on the suit and assumes Vader's identity for however long the IR deems fit. If their current incarnation isn't ruthless enough, they can find someone else who is. Basically, the being we outwardly see as Vader cannot die.

If this works out, it can turn the essence of Vader into a much more long-term threat that can outlast any one being's life span. What's more frightening than realizing that outliving a horrible enemy is not necessarily an option anymore, that the hope of "someday they'll be gone" is off the table? That they could go on indefinitely? I'm sure to pull in readers with this approach. This is that visceral feeling I was looking for with the last story but couldn't find. It's going much better so far.

The notion of different beings using the suit has given me some things to chew on that I'm exploring in my research. Exactly how would that work? How do they pass on knowledge from one Vader-actor to another so a later one knows things "Vader" should know? Did the original Vader wear the suit just for show as an intimidation factor, or was it truly needed due to medical reasons?

That, in turn, has led me down some interesting paths with researching bacta and why such a suit would be needed if bacta is such a cure-all. Bacta allergy? It wasn't for lack of access to bacta as one of the leaders of the Empire. What would a suit like that do for a person that bacta couldn't? What medical conditions would make a suit like that necessary, if it was medically necessary at all?

I have to say, this bacta research is really sparking my imagination.

Entry 15

Blakeley liked the immortal Vader story a bit better, but she still wasn't really enamored with it. But that's okay, because I'm deep into my next story about bacta. This one is going to be great. It feels like the more I research bacta, the more questions I get, and the more I can explore on the subject.

Bacta is such a universal topic, too, that lots of readers can already relate to it on some personal level, whether they've had a full-blown bacta dunk or just a little bacta patch on a skinned knee as a child. Growing up, I had my share of it. It's always been touted as a miracle cure.

But how many people really know what's in it? How is the quality controlled? How can a single substance work "miracle cures" for so many different species and so many different medical issues? Doesn't that sound a bit too good to be true?

Whenever the answer to such a question is "yes," it always makes for a great sludgenews story.

This story is going to make up for the last couple lukewarm ones and get me back in favor with Blakeley. One of the hardest parts so far is actually trimming my draft down enough to fit in the issue. My main topics are knock-off "bacta" products that do nothing, the under-reported dangers of bacta addiction, questionable bacta ingredients, and whether the Vratix add anything "extra" into bacta, like mind-control chemicals. Mind-control stuff always gets readers riled up and invested.

I have so much material left over in my notes that I might have enough for a follow-on story too.

Entry 16

I make a point of reading all the messages sent to me from readers. I've written here before about how I love getting hate mail. I have a flimsi print-out of my very first piece of hate mail framed and sitting on a shelf in my living room. It's a great conversation starter, as well as a reminder of the thick skin needed for this line of work. It's got more expletives than non-expletives, and I reread it when I need a pick-me-up or a bit of inspiration.

I've been staring at it in the dark for the last hour or so.

That curse-laden, befouled piece of flimsi always made me want to keep going, keep pushing, keep asking questions, keep getting better. I always did. I always tried to. The vitriol in it never bothered me.

Somehow it's a letter from a reader with no swear words, no threats, no rage, that's made me feel worse than I think I ever have. Someone who wrote me the other day to say that a family member of theirs read my bacta story, got scared, and refused a bacta treatment they needed. No one could convince the person that what they read wasn't true, and the doctors were forced into a less effective treatment plan. They weren't fully equipped or prepared for the alternate plan, either, since bacta was the primary treatment that they always used. It didn't work. The person ended up dying.

I've gotten a few more letters with similar stories, too, though thankfully no one else seems to have died as a result. One had complications that are being managed with an alternative treatment. Another has a much longer recovery time ahead of them. The others didn't give an outcome.

Blast it, don't these people know that these stories are supposed to be *entertainment*?! That they're not supposed to actually take them seriously? That they're supposed to think for themselves with their own brain and not take a sensationalist sludgenews story at face value?!

I've been mulling this over for a long time, and I don't like where my brain has been taking me.

Specifically...

Even if *Unencrypted* is marketed as entertainment, I'm still responsible for writing the story and planting whatever seeds sprouted in those minds. That name in the byline is complicit in contributing to unnecessary suffering and, in one case, death.

I'm sure most of my co-workers, especially the career sludgers like Drayvet, will be sympathetic but will also maintain that those people made their own decisions and it's not my fault that they took a piece of fiction too far. I can't control other people's actions, and I didn't force them to do anything.

And I guess in some ways that's true, but... isn't the point of writing sludgenews to influence people's emotions and thoughts in some way? Isn't that emotional investment and reaction what I'm always going after? If I don't want to guide a reader's thoughts on a path alongside my own, then why even bother to write the story? It becomes nothing without that. True, I'm doing it for entertainment and some sort of escapism, not anything malevolent, but I'm still doing it. And maybe I've been missing that realization this whole time. The problem is that I can't reconcile this new realization with how to go forward after what's happened. Now that I know what can happen.

Ugh. Damn it.

Page One doesn't seem so desirable anymore.

Entry 17

Like I suspected, Drayvet and the others were sorry to hear about what happened, but they don't really understand why I'm taking it so personally. I couldn't really explain it to them either. I took a few days off of work to clear my head, and on my way out of the office after grabbing a few things and talking to Blakeley I caught a couple glances of the sort that I used to give co-workers who I felt were "getting too soft" after some hate mail or a setback. The kind of glance that wonders if they'll manage to pull out of the nosedive or not.

Never thought I'd see the day when I was on the receiving end of it.

I'm not throwing in the towel yet, though. I've worked too blasted hard to get to where I am, and I'm a damn good sludger. I just need to figure this out.

I've spent most of the time off working on Scrounger. It's a good mixture of a goal to focus on and time to let my brain mull things over.

In particular, I've been mulling over the field of sludgenews and looking for what its essence is and if there are any aspects I can redirect myself to for a while.

The good news is that I've gotten a lot fixed with Scrounger, and he's pretty mobile now. I'll be able to take him along on some field assignments.

The bad news is that I haven't had much luck with my mulling. Maybe it's just my mood and the aftermath of my bacta story, but the more I think about it, the more I doubt that sludgenews in general is something that inherently makes the galaxy a better place. And now that I've started seeing things through that lens, I'm not sure how to stop.

I've never wanted to hurt people or make kids cry or do anything that adds more problems to a galaxy that already has enough of its own to deal with. Maybe I can find some stories that add some positivity. I'm not sure where to find those yet, but I can try.

Entry 18

After training myself for so long to think of how I can twist a situation into something gritty or less-than-savory, you know how hard it is to look at something and figure out if there's a good aspect to it that can be highlighted?

It's hard.

And I'm annoyed at myself because I didn't realize how hard it would be or how entrenched I've gotten in that other mindset.

I actually needed some help from Scrounger. We would go walking through town, and I would point things out to him and ask for his interpretation of what he saw or heard. Sometimes it was an overheard snippet of a conversation, sometimes a sign on a business or hover train, sometimes a headline on a broadcasted news report. His more objective droid viewpoint would at least get me to a more neutral place than where my mind started from. From there, it was easier.

It's taking a while but I'm getting there, and I'm proud of myself for managing to submit a couple of these stories to Blakeley so far. One was about a New Republic mercy mission. Another was a more local angle about a CSA merchant ship that outsmarted some pirates and escaped unharmed. The captain was a graduate of the Bonadan academy. Both stories were researched well, and I stuck to facts instead of my blend of facts-plus-generous-interpretations. Without all that interpretation tweaking and massaging, I had those stories written in half the time I usually needed.

Oh, and the best part? I took Scrounger with me to the Bonadan Merchant Marine Academy for some of the research. We still had to find details about the captain's record and the CSA's incident report about the pirate attack, and those aren't exactly publicly accessible. I kind of knew my way around the academy from last time (I avoided that particular maintenance hangar this time around), so I focused on putting Scrounger through his paces and seeing what he could do inside some of the buildings on his own. He was amazing. He got all the info I needed, plus even more that he thought might help. And like I suspected, no one looked twice at a 3PO droid moving through the hallways. All that hard work to get him mobile and functional again is paying off. We're going to make a great team out in the field.

I kind of liked that feeling. Scrounger and I working together, sneaking around for footage and information, but... no one getting hurt as a result. I think we might be on to something here. I want to play around with it and see where it goes.

The factor in all this I'm not sure about is Blakeley. She hasn't said much about these couple stories I've submitted, but that in itself says a lot. Plus there's the side-eye she's given me each time I've submitted them. The New Republic story ended up on page ten, which is the lowest page number I've gotten since I was brand-new to the field. The pirate story was a little better and made it to page six. I suspect because there was some action and shooting involved in it.

Before, I would have been crushed at the notion of anything past page two, but I'm okay with this right now until I figure things out better. I know these aren't the usual fare for *Unencrypted*, and it's still getting my stories out there. If what I write is going to reach a reader,

even one, then I think I like the notion of this type of story being the thing that reaches them and not some of what I was writing before.

Entry 19

Well, that didn't last long.

Blakeley called me into her office today. She was not happy. She said she'd humored me with the first couple "poofy" stories as she called them since she knew I was shaken by those letters, but she wasn't going to accept any more of "that ilk" from me. Her vocabulary gets strange when she's really irritated. And no, she was not going to even bother publishing the latest story I'd submitted to her, which was actually a very good story about some unusually amazing cures some people had experienced from bacta. It was in the notes I had left over from that other bacta story, and I thought it was an interesting topic to explore.

Blakeley didn't.

We argued for over fifteen minutes. I told her why it was a good story. She told me why it was a terrible sludgenews story. She told me to change it. I told her I wouldn't. Ultimately, she said I've been getting too soft with these "feel-goods" and I'm losing my edge, and there's no place on the sludger staff at *Unencrypted* for people who only submit "doilies" and not actual sludgenews. I either have to step up or get out of the way.

I admit it, that rattled me. I thought I had a bit more credit banked here, but then again, this isn't exactly a field known for its lenient and forgiving nature.

I don't know if it was the surprise or the argument's adrenaline or what, but I blurted out that my next story would be Page One material. She said it had better be.

I felt confident at the time I said it, but now I've got some niggling doubts starting to creep in. That in and of itself scares me. A sludger can't doubt themselves, not when they need utter self-confidence to bluff their way into secure areas and handle tricky situations while getting inaccessible footage. Self-doubt is dangerous. It's that crack in the armor that lets security guards see right through you.

And the doubts aren't about my skills. I trust my skills. They're about the prospect of what I said I'd do and what it means. As seen by her reaction to my "feel-goods," Blakeley's made it clear that she'll only approve of my next story if it's sensationalist like my old stuff. But ever since I took those days off to mull things over, I haven't been able to come up with a story that's full-on sludgenews that Blakeley will like and also doesn't run a risk of people getting hurt through misinterpretations or of needlessly tarnishing someone's reputation— it's called "sludgenews" for a reason. My choices are pretty much one or the other. Hence the doubts about my Page One statement.

My first concern: what if I can't do it?

My second concern: what if I can?

Entry 20

It's taken me a while to write this entry because I don't even know where to begin.

Well, I guess I do. Strictly speaking, I should begin where the last entry ended— I'd told Blakeley I would give her a Page-One-worthy story to keep my job. Despite those doubts that

were creeping in, that's what I set out to do. It was my livelihood on the line, after all.

A couple weeks ago, a storm hit a Lant Mining Corporation's refinery here not far from Spaceport Northeast I and damaged a lot of their equipment, as if LMC needs any more problems to deal with. It put the refinery out of operation for a while.

When I was brainstorming Page One ideas with Scrounger, we found a news snippet about a legal dispute between LMC and TaggeCo that was playing out in a completely different sector. What drew my attention was that the legal dispute was getting pretty dirty between the two companies. LMC is struggling financially and desperate, and TaggeCo used to be untouchable but they've had a rough time since the Empire fell so they're getting hit hard from lots of companies who wouldn't have stood a chance against them before, and they're crumbling and defensive. It's two wounded animals fighting each other.

It was ugly, but it wasn't sludgenews. At least, not until I remembered that TaggeCo owns Bonadan Heavy Industries, and per law, Bonadan Heavy Industries is one of the primary financiers of the northern weather-control station that generates the sweeper storms to clear out the mining pollution here.

From there, it was easy to come up with the theory that, through bribes or extortion or clandestine station access or any number of methods, BHI somehow caused or generated the strong storm in that area specifically to target the LMC facility as retribution on behalf of TaggeCo. The damage would hurt LMC, but in this far away, random system, who would ever connect the two events and suspect TaggeCo of wrongdoing? Especially if the storm was considered a natural event and dismissed in everyone's minds?

I ran my proposed story idea by Blakeley. She was thrilled and said she'd known I still had it in me.

But I wasn't so sure. Those doubts got worse the more I researched the story. Sweeper storms are normal here on Bonadan, but I was about to plant the seed in people's minds that they could be purposefully used for unethical things and even used as a sort of weapon, and there was nothing the target could do about it. And what if you're not the target but end up as collateral damage? Storms aren't exactly precise.

I was envisioning all the ways readers could get *too* invested in this story and what they might do as a result of this newly-realized powerlessness against a world and a galaxy much bigger than them. I wasn't sleeping well, and my deadline was looming. I wasn't passionate about the story, and my heart wasn't really in it.

And... I'm pretty sure that's why I was distracted and not on my toes. That's why I slipped up. And that's why Scrounger is in several broken pieces in my living room, and why I (ironically) have a bacta wrap on my ankle right now.

I feel horrible, and it's not because of my ankle.

I couldn't do the story without some in-depth research. I'd planned to go to the closest BHI offices first, and then once I had some of that data I'd know what to look for up at the weather-control station.

So I took Scrounger with me to the BHI office after hours when fewer employees would be around. They have some pretty hefty security there. It was nothing I couldn't get past, but I didn't have that adventurous feeling that I did with Scrounger at the Merchant Marine Academy. That was a good, thrilling sort of rush. This just felt... wrong.

Even now I'm not 100% certain what happened. Did I miss bypassing something in the security system? Did I not spot something that I should have? Did I accidentally trip a sensor? Did someone see us?

Scrounger was going down a nearby corridor and I was inside a back room in the building when everything hit at once: alarms started blaring, lights started flashing, and I lost contact with Scrounger.

One thing that Drayvet drilled into me early on was to remain calm during situations like this and not draw attention to myself by running away. Normally I could do that, but I'd already been anxious so it was a lot harder and I almost lost control. Though I didn't really start to panic until I heard the blaster fire and a crash.

Yeah, weapons are outlawed here on Bonadan, but that doesn't mean that security systems don't have other ways of stopping or incapacitating intruders. Repulsor traps, shock nets, grav traps, force fields, the list goes on. Places that are really serious about their security also play a little fast and loose with the definition of a "weapon." They might not have blasters or vibroblades, but something like stun batons or other blunt-force items might be incorporated in the system and classified as a "lever" or "strut" or something to skirt around the law.

And sometimes, if a company is big enough and powerful enough like TaggeCo is and can grease the right palms, their security droids might have actual blasters that are defined as "power packs" or "batteries." And oh dear, it sure was unexpected that the droid's battery happened to explode in a very focused way and injure that intruder. It must have been faulty. We'll look into that right away so it doesn't happen again.

Though I hadn't expected quite this level of security and danger, I'd known BHI's security was strong so I'd come at least somewhat prepared. Once I unfroze myself from the panic, I found the tiniest hiding place I could fit into in the room where I was— always a challenge since I'm not exactly small— and pulled out my blocker sheet, draped it over myself, and crammed myself into the hiding spot. I was still trying to adjust it properly without tearing the thin, metallic material when I heard a security droid entering the room. I froze, on purpose this time.

Luckily the sheet was positioned well enough to block my body heat from the droid's IR sensors. I held my breath while the droid scanned the room. I'm surprised it didn't hear my heart pounding, though maybe all the alarms drowned it out. Finally the droid left.

I stayed hidden for another few minutes before slowly coming out and breathing again. I tried to tap into the security comm frequencies but they'd obviously switched to something more secure once a threat was detected. I still couldn't contact Scrounger.

It was hard to hear anything over the alarms, but I couldn't detect any major activity nearby. So I went for the tried-and-true ventilation duct up above the ceiling of the room. Again, not very easy for me to fit into. But I did, and I headed in the ceiling vents toward the last place where I'd known Scrounger was.

I never would have found him through the maze of ducts if I hadn't had the BHI office map and the small tracker I'd installed on Scrounger, though that tracking beacon was glitching out and basically impossible to get a read on. At least the alarms were more muffled in the vents.

Finally I caught sight of him through a ventilation grate in the ceiling. His eye lights were out, and he was lying in a room that had a bunch of power banks and generators running. The power room was right off of the corridor he'd been in when I'd last heard from him— he must have ducked inside when the alarms started. Unfortunately he'd chosen a room with a higher security threshold than the corridor had had, and it instantly made him a higher threat even though he wasn't doing anything to the building's power systems. But it was probably the closest door to where he'd been in the corridor, and while his mobility is okay, he was limited by my repair skills and so he's still not very quick. He probably didn't have any other options if he felt

he had to get out of the corridor right away.

I'd been expecting bad news, but the sight hit me harder than I expected. Scrounger had been shot in the torso and the arm with a couple decently-powered blaster bolts from the look of things. That arm was detached and lying near him. He'd also fallen back against a power bank, and the power bank had numerous craters from blaster shots in it as well. Both Scrounger and the power bank were smoking slightly. Even from up in the ductwork I could smell the ozone and fried wiring.

I checked the office map to verify the quickest way out of the building from that room, and then I made extra sure there weren't any people or security droids in the room below that I could see through the grate. When it looked clear, I took a deep breath and activated my contingency plan. One transmitted command over a secure comm frequency activated a little decoy recording and broadcast it over a small speaker I'd planted earlier outside the north end of the building. It was a little closer to my current position than I would have liked, but originally I thought I'd be in a different room if things went sideways. With any luck, the BHI security forces would hear some unintelligible shouting and a couple landspeeders whirring to life from that direction and they would focus their attention that way.

I gave it another agonizingly long thirty seconds to give them time to hear it, report it, and start wondering about it before I cut the grate fasteners with my small laser cutter and dropped into the power room. The drop was farther than I expected, and I hurt my ankle on landing. I had to limp, but luckily the adrenaline took the worst of the edge off long enough for me to grab Scrounger's blown-off arm, haul the rest of him over my back, and go as fast as I could toward the exit.

I had to dodge a security patrol on the way, but somehow I did make it out. Several blocks away I laid low long enough to catch my breath, get my bearings, and check over Scrounger. Then I carried him to where I'd parked my speeder and took a very long, circuitous route home, just in case.

Scrounger's body is ruined. The blaster damage is too much for me to fix, and I think a lot of his electronics got fried and melted by the shot-up power bank he fell on. The electronics in his head were a bit more shielded because of the specialized listening and recording equipment I installed there. They didn't come through unscathed, though. His programming is messed up and I have to replace the more sensitive items. Once again, I'm back to just having Scrounger's head as the only semi-functional piece of him.

That was not at all like that night was supposed to go.

Scrounger's ruined, and it's my fault. My story is dead after I caused such a big security breach; there's no way *Unencrypted* will publish it and open themselves up for legal charges and liability when BHI knows they had a break-in and is likely actively looking for the culprit. Plus, you know, I don't want to be arrested. Blakeley was furious with me when I told her what happened.

But the weird thing? If I'm being brutally honest with myself, I'm not really sorry that Blakeley's mad or that I couldn't publish this story. I do feel horrible and guilty about what happened to Scrounger, though. I'm also a little bit terrified when my thoughts wander to Scrounger's condition and I realize that could have been me with a blaster bolt in my gut. And for what? Something I didn't even really want to write about in the first place? I'd always known sludging could be dangerous, but it never really sank in until now. I'll never be that fearless again. Is this what it feels like when a sludger truly knows they've lost their edge?

And the other thing I'm scared of? What all this means for me. Is my sludging career

really over? What will I do? Who am I if I'm no longer a sludger?

I don't know the answer to that.

Entry 21

I still don't really know the answers, but I decided I have to start looking for them.

In light of... well, everything... I told Blakeley I was quitting. I wanted to do it before she asked for my resignation. Blakeley didn't say if she'd been planning on asking for it, but she didn't seem particularly surprised that I quit and she certainly didn't try to talk me out of it. I gave Blakeley my final paperwork, said goodbye to my co-workers, cleaned out my desk, and left. Some of them watched me go with the same pitying look I'd given past co-workers who couldn't cut it. A couple of the newer ones who'd joined the sludger staff when I was at the top of my game seemed a little nervous when I headed out. I wonder what they were thinking. Right now I'm flattering myself by imagining that they were afraid of what it meant that someone like me, who had done so well for so long at *Unencrypted*, had washed out and what that implied for their futures. Maybe it would galvanize them into buckling down and going all-out with sludgenews to make sure that never happened to them. Maybe it would make them think twice about the sludgenews field. Who knows.

After I left, I walked around town for a long time, trying to think about what to do next. It was one of those days when I couldn't help but notice all the pollution hanging in the air; usually I can ignore it. But on a more positive note, the activity reminded me of when Scrounger and I had gone out walking to try to find some feel-good story ideas. I missed having him with me. I passed a couple of the places where he gave me some of his neutral, objective droid viewpoints, and I remembered how easy those fact-based stories had been to write. No spinning, no re-interpreting, just showing the facts.

But just spewing facts sounded boring. That's a regular news report, and it's too dry for me. Where's the excitement? Where's the investment? Where's the *story*? Besides, no legitimate news center is going to hire a former sludger for their staff.

That still sounds weird. *Former* sludger.

Eventually I ended up walking past the place where I interviewed the former (there's that word again) Imperials for my Vader story. Even when I gave the people a script, I'd always liked doing interviews for anonymous and fake quotes because I liked hearing the details and the nuances that the interviewees provided. Sometimes the most fun stories were ones that took an underlying nuance or info snippet from an expanded quote and pulled me in a direction I hadn't expected to go.

I wondered if there was a way to combine those types of interviews and personal accounts with fact-based stories that wouldn't become a straight news report.

The closest thing I could come up with was some sort of documentary. I'm intrigued by that idea. I'm looking into it pretty closely now.

One area of concern for me, though, is that documentaries need credibility to stand on, and I wonder how hard it'll be for me to leave behind the reputation of being a sludger. Will other publishing and media groups even give me a chance with this so prominently in my background? I imagine it'll take me a while to build that kind of personal credibility, and I'm not sure if I'll have to do something else in the meantime to pay the bills. Maybe I should try to track down Brekki and ask him how he navigated things professionally after leaving *Unencrypted*.

Hopefully in a few days I'll be at the point where Scrounger can help me research things again, if the parts I ordered come in on time. Or, actually, I should start getting used to using his new name, Whitecap. His head's the only main thing I can salvage, and I don't think I'll ever get the programming quite right again for a 3PO after so much got damaged. He'll never be the way he was. But even though his memory is also fried it didn't feel right to just throw him away after all we've been through, so I scavenged what useful parts I could out of his ruined body. Then I took what was left of his headless body back to the droid junk shop where I got it and used the bit of credits I got for it to pay for the first parts to repair things in his head. If I go into the documentary field I'll need all the help I can get with research. It can be kind of like old times—me at my desk with his disembodied head sitting there helping scour the Holonet for the facts and connections we need while simultaneously creeping out my co-workers. But the name “Scrounger” reminded me too much of what I'd done in the sludgenews field and what had happened, so I decided that a new name, a new byline in a manner of speaking, was appropriate for a fresh start. So his new name is Whitecap.

If anyone ever asks me why he's called that, I can say something profound like how the name is symbolic of a powerful wave reaching its limit and going in a new direction. But the truth is I've always just liked that name, and Scrounger needed a new one.

While I'm waiting for Whitecap's repair parts to come in, I'm going to keep researching the documentary field and finding out what it takes to get my foot in that door. I've got some documentaries on holo vid that I'm going to watch and take notes on— technique, approach, editing, topic, sources, you name it. I've got a lot to learn about it, but I know I can do it, just like I did in my sludgenews career.

Speaking of which, I'd started this journal to chronicle my progress of getting onto Page One as much as possible at *Unencrypted*. Since that particular event won't be happening again, I think this journal has reached its end as well. This will be the last entry, and I'm going to wrap it up here because I've got a lot to do and even more to figure out going forward.

From now on, this byline will be published on better things.

Look out, galaxy. Hallis Saper isn't finished with you yet.

The End

Revision A

1-12-21