

MACHINES DO IT BETTER



By Aura Ta'var

35 ABY

The hot Nancora sun glared down on the smoking escape pod, its black smoke twisting its way upwards like a smoke signal. Small dunes surrounded it, artificially made by the landing's impact. Unfortunately, this didn't stop the swirling sands that pelted the blackened pockmarks on its exterior, remnants from close encounters on the way down. It would soon blend in perfectly with the wrecked ships around it.

Aura Ta'var grumbled as she salvaged what she could from the pod, its cramped interior making things difficult. Her spy droid, 9D9, floating off her left didn't help matters. A bead of sweat went down her brow as she quickly grabbed a canteen of water, a pack of ration bars, and a flare gun with a single round. She chucked aside the datapad, preferring her own. She popped open the canopy and stepped out, scanning the landscape. *It was definitely the Badlands*, she thought with a sigh.

The Zeltron had been here on missions before but the desert was large and the wreckage played tricks on one's eyes. She took an inventory of her own possessions and felt at least a little relieved as her hand patted her Inquisitorius scanner. At least she would know when the guests finally arrived. She stared at what looked like a decent clump of half-buried ships and nodded toward her droid floating nearby.

"9D9, scout out ahead in that direction. Report back if you see anything."

It gave an affirmative beep and zoomed off, leaving Aura to slog through the sand in its wake. The Zeltron frowned as she walked, the dry, coarse earth sprayed around her. Not only did it get everywhere but it completely clashed with her dark blue Jedi robes, forcing her to keep her brown cloak on lest she was easily spotted. She spoke into the comlink on her wrist and hoped for the best.

"Dancer to Solari, I have crash landed in the Badlands. Request immediate extraction. Incoming enemy forces likely."

"Dancer, this is Solari. We are cut off from your position. You will have to wait. Seek cover for now. We will inform you once we send someone out," replied a rushed technician, the sounds of a multitude of alerts going off in the background.

"But—"

Silence. Aura swore and pulled out her scanner. Nothing on the thermals or the lifeform detectors. *That was something at least*, she thought as she tried to ignore how hot she was becoming already. She took off her cloak and dragged it behind her, hoping that it would help mask her footsteps. The wind blowing her hair across her face was also appreciated. It would shift the sand below her feet nicely. She quickly walked quickly to the nearest wreckage and stepped inside for a moment. Not wasting any time, she quickly accessed the video feed of her spy droid, playing it back as she looked for shelter.

Nothing stood out beside a craft that looked oddly familiar, even with it being mostly buried under the ground. Its organic-based design reminded her of the Solari. She wondered if this was an earlier version of an MC80 and if it had the same layout. It was worth a shot.

“9D9, initiate a search pattern around point 0-7. Should be an old MC80. Search for any potential hostiles and then find a nice place to hide nearby.”

She heard the droid’s affirmative and mapped the data point on her datapad. Plan secured, she stepped back under the scorching heat of the Badlands and set off for the marked wreck. It would have to do until she could be rescued. She hoped it wouldn’t take that long.

She put one foot in front of the other, doing her best to ignore how far away the marker was and whether or not she would have enough water. She reached out to the Force but felt nothing. Her only companions were the sweat on her brow, the blazing sun overhead, and the swish of her cloak as it dragged behind her. Time passed as she passed ship after ship. As Aura stepped into the shade of nearby craft to take a well-earned sip of water, she gazed out into the endless wasteland around her and noticed other half-hidden footprints.

The Zeltron’s hand went to her saber as she reached out to the Force, searching for anyone nearby. Finding nothing, she checked her scanner but it again showed zero life signs. She capped her canteen and strode out to the nearest set of prints, resting her hand on one of its depressions and focused. Images and sounds washed over her consciousness. The heels of staggering figure driving into the ground, brown cloth brushing against sand, and the sound of a woman’s labored breathing. She froze as the obvious finally hit her. She looked back at the small freighter and realized she had seen it before.

“Kark it,” she rasped under her breath, “I’ve been walking in circles. Focus, Aura. Focus.”

She ignored her headache, feeling as if small needles were stabbing her temples. She shook her canteen from side to side. It felt lighter than it should be. She gulped as she looked at her comlink. I’ve been out here this long! She checked the marker again, thankful it wasn’t that far away. She cursed herself under her breath and strode back to the ship. Igniting her saber, she carefully marked the interior of the freighter with the tip of her saber. Quickly shutting it off, she sat down and pulled the energy around her into her body, using it to replenish her energy reserves. Her breathing slowed as she used some of her newfound strength to clear her mind and relieve her headache, for the time being.

“I’m one with the Force. The Force is with me.”

Slowly Aura got back to her feet, draped her cloak over her shoulder, and sprinted back out into dunes. Her run was straight and true as she relied on the Force to drive her forward. Disregarding the other wreckage around her, she ran for her life, fearing that she might fall prey

to her own weaknesses again. Beads of sweat trickled down her face as she crossed each dune. As she felt her energy start to wane again she sighed in relief as the familiar profile of the mostly buried MC80 came into view.

Allowing herself a tired smile to cross her chapped lips, she looked around the ship and found a visible access port in the shade behind a sand dune. Wrenching it open, she pulled herself inside and locked the hatch behind her. Darkness descended again. Aura used the light from her datapad to see as she leaned against the warm bulkhead for a moment, catching her breath. Her muscles ached and her headache was starting to come back again. *At least I'm safe for now*, she thought.

"There better be water in this rust bucket or I'm toast," she sighed in exhaustion.

The Zeltron followed corridor after corridor as she headed to the nearest escape pods, hoping they would still have water rations. She focused on an image of her daughter as she took the next step, using the Force to keep the dizziness at bay. As she descended the hallways, their slight tilt brought her deeper under the sand until she was sure was fully beneath it, with it a much-welcomed coolness. Her hopes were further spurred by the familiar looking room off to her left.

Escape pods!

Aura rushed inside each one until it yielded water. She gratefully grabbed an old water canteen and downed it, reveling in its relative coolness as it went down her parched throat. Driven by thirst, she ransacked the rest of the escape pods, grabbing every bit of water she could find. The Zeltron looked down at her stash, comprised of 7 canteens and 12 ration packs, and immediately drank 5 of the canteens. She could already feel the dizziness go away a bit.

I need more of this.

Aura gathered what she could carry, prioritizing the water, and visited the rest of the escape pods on the starboard side of the ship. Empty canteens were haphazardly thrown behind her in her quest to regain her strength. The Collective was coming and she wasn't going to be able to outrun them in the desert. She bit her lip. The Zeltron would have to make her stand here and hope the Solari came through. Aura forced herself to eat a ration bar and looked up at a ventilation shaft above her.

Maybe it will be cold like the rest of the ship.

The Zeltron popped the grate off an end and jumped up, swearing as she hit her head on the way up. Her water canteens clinked against each other as she laid on her stomach. She reached out to the grate below with the Force but it barely budged. She settled for throwing it as far down the

hall as she could. The fear of dying was starting to come back again. The Force was everything to her. If it wasn't working...

Aura crawled away from her current junction, down what she hoped was several corridors towards the center of the ship. Finally, she collapsed, the cold metal pressing against her face and body a gift from the Force itself. Her eyes started to close as an overwhelming tiredness threatened to consume her. The Zeltron activated her comlink.

"T-tired. F-found water. Need S-sleep. A-alert if C-compan—" Aura said to 9D9 before she passed out.

The frantic chirping of 9D9 finally woke her up, the Zeltron's eyes drowsy after her nap. The Odanite was having a wonderful dream about vacationing on Mon Calamari until reality interfered. The dusty cold metal ducts of a dead ship removed the smile from her face quickly, already wondering how long she had slept. As she contemplated how to best get up, she heard voices traveling through the ducts, danger spiking her adrenaline levels. Now fully awake, Aura reached out to the Force around her. She could feel others off to her left some distance away, perhaps even a corridor or two away from her.

The Zeltron shuffled back out the duct, landing on the balls of her feet and briefly looking around her. Nothing. She set off at a run, relying on the Force to warn her if anyone snuck up on her.

"Over there, get her!" one of Kendra's associates yelled.

Aura ignored her and ignited her saber, waiting for the inevitable blaster fire. She could hear the sound of bolts whizz by as she turned a corner, weaving her way throughout the ship. She pulled the Force into her legs, running in a reckless abandon. She opened a canteen on the run and downed it, chucking the empty canister aside as she felt herself getting dizzy again. The sound of a whip wasn't far off, driving her feet forward.

"Come here, Jedi! I'm not done playing with you," taunted Kendra.

"You know, I think my boyfriend might be jealous of my day so far. Chased across a desert by a Chiss lady threatening to whip me. Please go on," replied Aura sarcastically, an angry edge in her voice.

The Zeltron skidded to a stop as she turned the last corner, a nasty trip mine stood in her path. She took a hurried breath, sweat beading on her face.

Rations!

The Odanite chucked her rations bars at its laser and ducked around the corner, the loud explosions rocking the ship and shifting the sands around the blown up opening letting in the sun. Aura ignited her saber as blaster bolts zipped by, batting them aside as she ran towards the light. The hot intensity of the sun blinded her momentarily, but she kept moving forward, unsure of how long she would last.

“Dancer. This is Solari. A transport is nearing your rough location. Please signal a closer landing zone.”

Thank the Force, thought the Zeltron as she shot her flare gun, a cloud of red expanding high in the sky above her. “9D9, converge on my location immediately.”

Aura ran into a wide open patch, frantically looking for her droid. As it whizzed around the corner she ran towards it, the whirl of engines above bringing her hope. Blaster bolts behind her failed to get her attention, that is until one of them hit her leg. The Zeltron cried out in pain as she fell to the ground, raising her lightsaber defensively as she deflected the follow-up shots. Her vision swam as soldiers tapped her shoulder.

“Turn off your saber! You have cover!”

Odanite troopers let loose a wall of blaster fire, forcing Kendra and her goons behind corrugated duracrete. The Chiss scowled as she chucked a thermal detonator towards them.

“Take that, you scum!”

Aura grimaced determinedly as she focused one last time, the detonator coming back into focus as she used the Force to push it back towards its sender. A pair of strong hands pulled her back towards the ship as an explosion safely went off out of range. She turned off her saber as her world spun again, thankful they had come to save her.