

A Curious Experiment

Cinching the straps of her pack tighter around her waist and against her back, Zana Suntel quickened her pace as the first embers of the night flit into the air to light her way back to camp. It had been six months, now, and the pirates finally had the planet's fickle storms down to a science. They had at least three hours before the rain put an end to their nightly festivities. Most had returned from looting abandoned mines and cutting through jungle in the full light of day, but it would take more than ghost stories and aggressive droids to quench her sense of adventure.

Orphaned at a young age by a rival band of pirates on her homeworld of Duro, Zana was taken in by the sometimes-merry, always-deadly band that gathered at the camp ahead. Her innate sense of adventure coupled with her noseless nose for space travel had brought her crew equal measure of profit and peril. Thus far, this planet promised a mixture of both – though it was yielding enough that she hadn't yet disclosed that their arrival was the result of a gravity well and not her brilliant instincts.

They met little resistance when they first arrived and discovered the apparently abandoned mining operations halted by war. Droids and droid parts littered the landscape, but none appeared active. After several weeks, almost in proportion to their plunder, her crew began to report sightings of a single droid here and there. Eventually, their expeditions deeper into the planet brought them face-to-face with larger and larger groups of droids. The fact that the droid presence was greater and more active at night and during the planet's storms created the superstition that kept her comrades in their tents. For Zana, the mystery drove her to know more.

In her pack, she carried the parts she hoped would complete a droid of her own creation. Perhaps, if she could build or re-build one of the fallen battle droids, it would provide some protection and, more importantly, some clues to the strange activity on the planet. Her rather covert experiment was one of the reasons her long, lanky legs carried her at a brisker pace than usual. With luck, she would return to her tent before anyone else's curiosity led them to discover what was already a nearly complete droid.

A drop of rain sliding down the expansive length of her bald head brought her attention back to that task. It was too early for the storms to start, but she had noticed some erratic weather patterns and even strange behavior from the droids over the past twenty-four hours – ever since rumors of foreign ships landing on the planet began to circulate among the crew.

Large, red eyes roamed the horizon. There, on the opposite hill overlooking her camp, Zana spotted a handful of armed sentients.

One of them laughed.

A piercing shriek and the sound of blaster fire erupted from the camp.

Her heart stopped.

Those sounds hadn't come from the strangers – but from her tent.