

Setter's rotors were growing tired, so she reconfigured into bipedal mode just outside of town.

Like many of the towns in the wastes of the far west, this tiny hiccup of civilization was little more than a strip of buildings standing out against the vast untamed stretches. Huddled together like hobos around a trash fire, most of the structures were one-story shacks cobbled together from trash and various other materials found and stolen from more civilized spots. Setter wasn't encouraged as she approached on foot and saw the local robots not only staring at her, but calling to others to 'come see the stranger'.

At just over 7 meters in height, Setter wasn't the tallest robot by any means. Nor was she the mightiest. Made female in form and identity, she suffered from a handicap of mass as well as general respect. For these two shortcomings, she walked with her right hand resting on the butt of her blaster that hung from her narrow waist.

Right as she reached the very literal edge of town, three robots stepped in her way. They stood in a line, spreading themselves just wide enough to block the entryway into town. In their bipedal form as was customary, they were chipped and eroded from the hard life of living in the wastes. They were thick and brawny, the type one associated with the wide open spaces and the hard labor such living demanded. They also cut right to the chase, also as one would expect from this domain.

"Scram, little darlin'," said the middle one, the biggest of the three. He looked like a transport truck of some kind, with an orange hull and gray undercarriage. "We ain't keen on strangers around here." Setter didn't respond at first. She simply cocked her hip out, making her gun obvious. "No tellin' what diseases you carry." He snickered and his two cronies laughed a little too uproariously.

Setter glanced at the nearest buildings, spotting windows that looked empty but were so dark, she had no way of being sure. She looked at the smattering of other robots who watched the scene without a word of protest or sign of concern. Accepting there was no help to be had, she looked at the central of the three robots. "I'm looking for a 'bot," she told them. Their thick western twang made her lack of an accent sound foreign.

"I bet," said the central robot. He looked her up and down like he was eyeballing spare parts for an upgrade.

Setter smiled, so grossed out by the behavior, she could either laugh or vomit. "Yeah, but you ain't him, little man." Her smile faded. "I want information, or I want to be on my way."

"You can be on your way," he said. He gestured to the open wastes she'd just arrived from. "This town wants nothing to do with the Central Authority."

Setter smiled back at the robot, genuinely now. "What in the world makes you think I'm with the Authority?" The robots' giggles and smiles dimmed. "Parker's been through here, hasn't he?" The smiles were gone, except for hers which was growing. "Or is he still here?"

"Little lady," said the central bot, "I told you once, I ain't telling you again."

"You didn't need to tell me the first time, because I don't listen to garbage-hauling cowards who ambush a stranger coming out of the wastes," Setter said very clearly. She smiled all friendly-like. "Now, you can either get out of my way..."

"Or?" he asked.

Her smile widened. "I think you can imagine, little man."

The central robot sneered at her and looked at his two partners. When he turned, Setter glanced passed his spherical, bulbous right shoulder and she traced his glance to a fourth bot atop one of the buildings. Setter kicked herself for not noticing him until now.

All three worker `bots whipped out their blasters. Like most `bots, they carried large single-handed blasters that were solidly between pistols and full rifles. Setter was no different, but while theirs were standard-make, generic blasters that any bot could get ahold of, hers was a Southern Mastrion exclusive, made specifically for her. It drew quick, fired fast, and was more accurate than other blasters its size could ever hope to be.

She shot the central bot dead-center, right through the chest plates. The blast passed through his central processing pump, sending out a bright shower of sparks. He teetered and fell back, shut down before he hit the ground. Setter dove to the right as his two cronies fired and she returned shots right at them.

Like all amateurs, they stood their ground, turning as she ran laterally. Her movement worked better than she could have hoped as the one that had been on her left shot the one that had been on her right, knocking him out more from shock than damage. The last of the three was so stunned by his own incompetence that he didn't move when Setter shot him in the stomach, blowing out his processing systems.

The fourth bot, on the distant rooftop a few buildings away, was another matter. He took a shot and nicked Setter in the shoulder. Firing a

full rifle, the beam or purple force hit with a serious kick and scarred her blue-and-silver frame. Setter shrieked, more in surprise and embarrassment than pain. She returned fire, despite knowing her shots wouldn't hit at this distance.

Rather than dive for cover and get caught in a battle she'd lose almost certainly, Setter reconfigured into her racer form. Her arms folded over her back as her chest rose up. Her legs bent back, her feet coming to her hips. She landed forward on four armored wheels, the reconfiguring complete in the time it took her to fall.

The wheels gripped tight the hard metal and dirt of the street and she roared forward. The reconfiguration stunned the sniper who took several more frantic shots at her, but only struck the ground where she had been. Reaching the edge of the building where the sniper was encamped, Setter reconfigured again. Her arms folded around and then up under her carriage as the slight wings in her bipedal mode spread out, revealing in-laid rotors. The dual spinning blades whirled quickly and she rose up over the building in a flash. The sniper, a tiny bot with a rifle larger than he, was so stunned, he dropped his gun and stumbled away.

Setter reconfigured back to bipedal form as she continued upward, lettering her momentum carry her atop the roof. She reached the zenith and drew from behind her back a nimble sword. She slashed it down at the fearful robot, hitting not him but his rifle, slicing through the central body with a shower of sparks from the energized blade of her sword.

The gun destroyed, Setter leveled her sword at the sniper. He was a tiny bot, his hands thrown up in complete surrender, an act he was clearly used to. His arms were quaking, as were his legs. "Where's Parker?" she demanded. The little bot spasmed in fear and folded in on himself. Reconfiguring into a mine car, the bot went inert.

Setter sighed. She slid the sword away, returning it to the narrow slot between the rotors embedded in her wings. She glanced back down onto the street, seeing the local workers clambering out to the aid of their three fallen comrades. The central bot and the apparent leader would need serious repairs, but the other two would require little more than some time in the body shop.

Setter walked across the ceiling and sat down next to the mine car. She put her arm around the little transport and said, "I don't want to hurt you." She rocked the little car a bit. "I'm not going to hurt you," she told it. "I just need information on Parker. Just tell me if he's still here. If he's not, tell me which direction he went."

"Heavy said not to talk," the mine car whimpered. "Heavy said he'll dismantle me if I talk."

Setter quietly groaned. She was not the empathic type. "I take it Heavy was the blowhard who stopped me?"

"Y-yeah," the mine car whimpered. "Heavy Hauler. H-he runs this town."

Setter snickered. "What's your name?"

"Sippy Mine...I mean, Silver Mine," he told her.

"You forgot your own name?" Setter asked, trying not to laugh at the pathetic bot she was coddling. She had to avert her gaze for a second, to keep her snickering to a minimum. When he turned back, she asked, "Do you have a doc in this town?"

"No," he answered. "One rolls through every few decacycles but he doesn't stay for long."

"Well, that's a while before Heavy gets the work he needs," she advised. "In the meantime, you can get out of here. Move to another town."

"Easy for you to say," the mine car whimpered.

Setter looked out at the sun setting behind the distant mesas of the wastes. "Look, I..." She realized she was still talking to the tiny mine car like she was talking to a piece of luggage. "Would you reconfigure, please?"

The mine car was hesitant at first, but he did as he was told, which seemed like the only thing he knew how to do. The little box car reconfigured into a tiny, squat bot no taller than Setter's leg. He had once had a silver body but it had been scraped away, Setter suspected by Heavy Hauler. His inner frame was a dark ashen gray, almost black.

"I'm going to find Parker," she told the little guy. "When I do, I'll take him to a friend of mine – a transport – who will deliver him to the Central Authority. Tell me where Parker's gone, give me any useful intel, and I'll take you with me." The little bot's eyes shone, but cautiously. "Give me something useful and I'll arrange for you to get to the East cities, no charge." She looked around at the town they stood atop. "Life won't be easy there for a little bot like you, but it sure won't be any harder than it is here."

The little mine car looked eager to take the offer. He was ready to speak when the trap door to the roof was thrown open. Up from the stairs came storming the town sheriff. A bright tin star on his chest and a pair of

intimidating guns made his role clear, he spotted Setter and ignored Silver Mine. "Missy, you got a—"

"I'm a bounty hunter, sheriff," Setter told him without getting up. "I hunt Rebels. Don't call me 'missy'."

The sheriff didn't back down but he visibly re-evaluated his approach. "No one comes into my town and shoots up my citizenry," he all but threatened.

Setter looked to Silver Mine and with a conversation tone, remarked, "As I hear it, Heavy Hauler runs this town."

The sheriff glared. "Heavy Hauler thinks he runs this town. He's too stupid to know who really runs it."

Setter smiled again, amused, unable to tell and uninterested if the sheriff was really that naive or really that clever. "Doesn't matter. They shot first."

"It's true, sheriff," Silver Mine chimed in. "Heavy made me—"

"Sippy Mine, when I want your opinion, I'll come find you in the refuse pile," the sheriff snapped at him. He looked down at Setter. Just over her shoulder, the sun disappeared over the horizon. Night was settling fast and the stars overhead were multiplying quickly on the deepening purple backdrop. "Ma'am, perhaps you and I should discuss this in my office."

"Love to," Setter told him with a smile of disgust. She rose and followed him down the trapdoor off the roof. She stopped halfway down the steps, though, and glanced to Silver Mine. The little bot looked at her fearfully, like he would never see her again as she descended.

The sheriff's office was a shack of cobbled-together materials from a variety of technological ages. Setter decided it fit the sheriff, who looked like a skeleton with two guns and a wide-brimmed hat. He put away his guns at his desk while she walked into the metal square with a desk and an energized cage opposite it. He removed the hat, revealing a cranial unit that was badly scarred from blaster fire. "Little lady, you ain't been here half an hour and you've already stirred up quite the trouble."

"Little man, I didn't start it; I just finished it," Setter told him as he sat behind the desk.

The older robot slowed as he sat, taken aback by her brazenness. He relaxed into the seat that groaned and squeaked from his weight. "So you're still insisting Heavy Hauler opened fire on you first, without

provocation." Setter didn't even bother with responding. "What do you want here?"

"Information," she told him. "Maybe a place to rest for the night but given how hospitable your quaint little town is in the daylight, I bet I'd find myself up on blocks with my hoses cut come the dawn."

The sheriff decided to let the insult go. He interlaced his long fingers and seemed to think for a moment. Studying him, Setter realized he might not be as old as she first thought. She decided it must be stress more than age that made him look so run-down. His paint was faded and his joints and shocks looked worn. He wasn't old, he was just aged.

"What information?" he finally asked after a moment's thought.

Setter smirked, pleased she was finally getting somewhere. "I'm looking for a rebel named Parker." She produced from a slot in her back the official warrant for Parker's arrest and capture. She handed over the flexible screen display.

"Rebel, huh?" said the sheriff, taking the screen. It showed a readout of Parker's crimes as well as a physical description. On the right corner, a rotating picture showed a dangerous and bottom-heavy robot standing tall. When the rotating completed one revolution, it changed to show his alternate form, that of a ten-unit missile placement. The sheriff handed the page back to Setter. "You're Authority, then."

"No, just a bounty hunter," Setter told him as she returned the screen. "I got little love for the Rebels or the Central Authority."

"The Eastern politics doesn't really get to us out here," the sheriff told her as he turned in his chair, thinking. In the dim light of the office, his intelligent eyes darted about like candle flames. "But we gravitate more towards the Rebels' way of thinking. 'All 'bots created equal' has little appeal when you're living in the wastes. 'Bots like Heavy Hauler keep this place alive."

"He's a bully and a killer," Setter told him.

"He's also a hard worker and the only reason we've had enough energy to make it through the cold months," the sheriff countered. "The biggest and the strongest contribute too. They balance out what the weaker bots can't."

"Now you sound like the Central Authority," Setter smirked. "You may not like 'all 'bots created equal', but a meritocracy isn't the paradise the Rebels make it out to be. Some bots are simply made bigger and stronger

and faster. A robot's fate shouldn't be decided before they even first come online."

The sheriff elected not to argue, saying nothing more than "Perhaps not." He took from a drawer in his desk a stack of cards and began to shuffle them reflexively. "What's the bounty on Parker?"

"Not just Parker; all five of his team," she told the sheriff. "Parker's simply who I'm going after first."

"Why go after them at all?" he asked. "They've fled this far into the wastes, they can't be too much of a threat."

"They're an abomination," she told the sheriff.

The older 'bot stiffened at that. He seemed to reconsider his stance on matters as he looked to some random corner of the room, thinking. "And what's the bounty?"

Setter chuckled and shook her head. "I ain't sharing."

"No, I'm just curious," the sheriff waved off. "What's the going rate for...things like that?"

Setter saw no real reason to refute him. "60,000 for the team."

The sheriff's jaw dropped open. "Sixty-thousand?!" He whistled in amazement. "Shoo-wee." He gawked again. "Sixty?!" Setter simply nodded. The sheriff shook his head, astonished. With a sigh, he seemed to surrender to his conscience. "Parker was here. Left yesterday afternoon."

Setter's eagerness got the better of her. "Where did he go?"

The sheriff tossed a finger behind her. "West, of course. Nowhere else to go. Not if you hope to survive, and even then... He headed into the canyons." The sheriff kept talking before Setter could even make it three steps to the door. "You go tonight and you'll get splintered." She stopped at the door and turned back to him. "The canyons are an absolute maze. Twists, turns, caves, and dead ends. You're liable to crash in the dark even at an idle. He's been there a day, he'll have a leg up on you." Setter seemed unconvinced. "Spend the night," the sheriff told her. "Get some rest." He chortled. "Drop some coin; the people here need it. Go out tomorrow and do some proper reconnaissance." The sheriff settled into his seat. "He ain't going nowhere."

"And you know this how?" she asked.

"Because he told me," the sheriff shared without hesitation. "He told me he was going to hold up in there for at least a week."

"And then what? And why that long?" she asked. The sheriff just shook his head, clueless. "Is he meeting somebody?"

Again, the sheriff simply shrugged. "Don't know, little la—ma'am. Maybe? Or maybe he's meeting somebody somewhere else and he's ahead of schedule. You said you're after his team. We ain't seen anybody but him, but that don't mean they won't be coming through too." That thought excited and unsettled Setter. She nodded slowly and departed without another word.

She stood on the steps into the sheriff's office, looking out at the single street that was the town. Bales of dust went blowing by as the night wind blustered through the town, moaning between the buildings. Paranoia that had served her well crept inside her as she eyed every window. Each one might hold a sniper. Every 'bot she saw might be an assassin.

Unsure what to do, she stepped off the sheriff's step and began to walk towards the west. She wasn't sure if she was going after Parker yet or not. She didn't have a clue what to do and couldn't make up her mind. Her eyes glanced this way and that, even as she walked with the façade of confidence.

She found herself approaching one of the few two-story buildings in the tiny town. A porch atop mimicked the porch beneath, giving the diamond-shaped building the impression of being two distinct buildings stacked atop one another. Setter entered through a pair of swinging half-doors to find a dimly lit saloon with only a handful of other robots. A player unit, a rare sight in towns like this, doled out music from the corner, set atop the bar.

Setter felt like she was glowing the way the flickering candlelight shimmered on her well-maintained frame. The eyes on her didn't help her paranoia but she approached the bar where a giant bot with stubby, replacement legs was soldering a circuit. He glanced up as she neared, but only a glance. "Yeah?"

"I want a room," she told the robot. She glanced at the stairs up to the second floor and decided, "Make that two."

The big robot was nonplussed. He fished out two keys and placed them on the bar. "Three and four."

"I want rooms on opposite ends of the building," she told the 'bot.

"No you don't," he told her, going back to the soldering. Setter grew angry and was about to shout. "These two are across the hall from each other," he explained over the sizzling circuit. "Somebody comes for you at one door, you can see through to the other side thanks to the peep hole.

Plus, the doorways are narrow, so even if they storm your room at the same time, they'll be easy to stall." Setter hedged a bit. She looked down at the keys and reconsidered. As she did, he stopped soldering and looked right at her. Setter returned the look and her expression softened with gratitude. She nodded appreciatively, took the keys, and went for the stairs. "You didn't pay," he said after her, like a reminder, not a demand.

"I'll pay half-again in the morning," she said, starting up the stairs.

The big man on short legs watched her go, then nodded. "Okay," he accepted, going back to his work.

At a tiny shack on the edge of town, Heavy Hauler awoke. He stammered incoherently for a moment and looked around before he recognized his tiny little shack of a home. He began to rise when he noticed the wires and tubes running into his body, metal plates pulled back to expose his insides. He grabbed up a handful of wires and traced them to the processing machine by his bedside. "What the hell..." he asked.

"They're keeping you alive, Hauler," said the sheriff. He was sitting on the opposite side of the room, looking irritated.

Hauler laid back down and rubbed his face. Rust and grime came off with his fingers. "What happened? I remember that fembot arrived and..."

"And she shot you through the chest," the sheriff told him. "Blew out your processing pump." He nodded to the machine. "This'll work for a bit, but you'll need to install a replacement." The sheriff asked rhetorically, "You ain't got one of those lying around, by any chance?"

To the sheriff's horror, Hauler answered, "I can get one." The sheriff averted his eyes, hating to even be sharing the same space as Heavy Hauler. The big robot sat up and rolled his thick shoulders. The joints groaned from inactivity and he fumed for a moment. "Where is she?"

"At the inn," the sheriff said. "She's after that Rebel that came through."

"Like I care," Hauler scoffed. "The Rebels are idiots."

"Yeah, but the Rebels'll leave us alone," said the sheriff, rising angrily. "The Central Authority will come for us eventually." Hauler looked away, indifferent what the future held so long as it didn't affect today. "We can't let the Authority think it can handle us out here."

"So then what?" asked Hauler. "You want us to side with the Rebels?"

"No, not side," the sheriff asserted. "Simply...simply help when it suits us."

"And it suits us now?" Hauler asked him.

The sheriff smirked. "And you're telling me you don't want another crack at her?"

Hauler's irritation turned into a cruel smile.

The big robot behind the bar in the empty saloon looked up when the sheriff and Heavy Hauler entered. A few hours before dawn, the two were carrying big, bulky rapid-fire blasters. They were weapons of war, meant to suppress approaching enemies or fill an entire room with blaster fire. He looked at the two and their weapons and swished his lips in disapproval. He returned to the glass cutter he was repairing.

The sheriff approached the bar and asked, "Which room's the stranger in?"

"Don't know," the bartender told him without looking up from his work. "She ordered two rooms. Not sure which one she's staying in."

The sheriff looked mad. He checked with Heavy Hauler at the entrance. "Which two rooms?"

"Two and five," he said. "She may have already left, though."

The sheriff didn't waste any time. He and Hauler quietly rushed to the stairs. They ascended the steps, Hauler casting a glance down at the bartender. The big bot returned the glance with challenging indifference. Hauler sneered at the robot but followed the sheriff.

Up onto the second floor, they entered a hall of six doors, numbered up one side and down the other. The sheriff said nothing and pointed at room five. Hauler nodded and took his place at the door. The sheriff moved to door two. They readied themselves, counted to three, and then both kicked in the doors.

On both sides of the hallway, all they found were empty, single-bed rooms. The two robots swept into each room, looking for Setter and finding no sign of her. They exited and, at a loss, descended the steps out of the inn. It was only when they reached the base of the steps that Setter peaked out the door of room four. Seeing no one but hearing the departing steps, she contemplated following.

Down on the first floor, Heavy Hauler stormed up to the bartender. "She ain't in either room."

"Told you she might have left," he said. Heavy Hauler expressed his displeasure by shoving the glass cutter off the bar top. The bartender didn't move for a second as the fragile device broke on the floor. His eyes came and focused on Hauler. "You are one more stupid move away from getting boxed, little 'bot."

Hauler leaned close and the unintimidated bartender did the same. It was the sheriff that broke up the pair. "We ain't got time for this."

"No, you don't," the bartender assured Hauler.

Heavy Hauler let himself be pulled away and he and the sheriff departed the inn.

The bartender picked up the glass cutter and surveyed the damage. Deciding the device was unsalvageable, he shoved it off his bar again. He faced the door as his fists crumpled into tight balls of anger.

With the dawn sun at her back, Setter drove west.

There was little noise from her powerful motor as she roared forward with the town in her rear mirrors. In the distance, she saw the mesas which marked the beginning of the canyons that pocket marked the whole territory. The surface of the planet was broken open, with gaping chasms and rising mountains that stretched into the sky. It started here and would only intensify across the spine of the world.

After several hours of driving, Setter abruptly leapt out of her vehicle mode and reconfigured into her bipedal form. She landed in the middle of the flatlands and glanced around defensively. Realizing there was no cover but also no place to hide, she forgot her exposed status and knelt down to the ground.

The surface of the wastes at this point was mostly dust-covered metal. Not quite a fine level of silt or sand, it created a continuous layer across the solid sea of flat, all the way into the horizon to the east, north, and south. Only west broke the monotony of the end of sight.

In this dust, beneath the hot sun, Setter studied prints. Little more than tiny dots in the sand and dust, it was none the less clear that it wasn't some naturally occurring patch of bare land but the remains of a footprint. Setter looked into the west and grew confident. She rose and studied the mountains and mesas in the distance as the hot winds blew the

dust into the air. The air called loudly like a restless spirit and the unfettered burning sun baked down on her.

Setter dropped forward, reconfiguring into vehicle mode. Following the subtle tracks, she kept driving.

The canyon didn't begin gradually, it was simply a gaping mouth that opened abruptly and disappeared into the great depths below.

Setter reconfigured when she saw the huge mouth of the world open before her and approached the edge. Like some tectonic plate deep within the planet had separated from its neighbor, the canyon ruptured open like the planet had literally been torn apart one day. The break was jagged and uneven, not just at the sides but down into the canyon. There was no clear view down into the depths of the world, at portions there were practically bridges of raw ore that stretched across the gulf. Elsewhere, the view down was ended by darkness and distance, not obstruction.

Around the canyon, the mesas had grown like fungus beneath moist nature. They looked like long-eroded structures of some lost civilization that predated robot-kind. They dotted here and there and had loomed over her as she approached, but now they were about her and they intensified their frequency the farther along the canyon she would go, turning into full hills and mountains.

Setter rejected the thought of turning into her flyer and instead remained on foot. Silent as her rotors were, they could never be as silent as careful footfalls. She drew her blaster and walked ahead down the first obvious path. It led down along the dip in the canyon, slowly winding along the jagged break in the planet's crust, until it reached a distant bridge connecting the two sides almost half a kilometer down.

Setter walked, looking for signs or tracks but noticed nothing. Thanks to the desert wind of the wastes, she was without a viable path to follow. In the absence of a trail, she trusted her instincts and went about eliminating options. Starting with the first branch on her right, she began exploring the canyon.

The going was slow, her blue frame standing out against the gunmetal gray and rust colors of the canyon wall and the outstanding mesas. Every so often, she was sorely tempted to shift to a vehicle form to cover more ground or get a better idea of the topography of the land. Doing so might

help but one slip and Parker might see her. The last thing she wanted to do was end-up in a shootout with an artillery placement with a bad attitude.

The day dripped monotonously along like grains of sand through an hour glass. Setter backtracked constantly, reaching dead-ends and finding possible leads that turned up absolutely nothing. Her methodical search of the canyon yielded no results and was burning away the day. Despite how slowly the day had dragged on, the sun was setting sooner than Setter was ready and she had barely permeated the canyon.

Until she heard a metal scratch.

Setter dropped to one knee, defensively positioning her back to the canyon alley she'd been considering entering. She remained positively still, not even a servo whirring. She dialed up her audio sensors as best she could and listened to every detail.

She heard the scratch again. "Iron and flint," she mouthed silently to herself. She turned towards the sound. "A fire." She rose from her crouch and listened intently. She looked at the walls of the canyon, worried about how they would reflect sound. Yet a sound as minute as that couldn't travel far by echo alone. The breeze whispered a bit between the crags and cracks of the canyon but made little sound.

Her break came when she heard a furious barrage of scrapings and then cursing. Setter smiled. "Parker," she realized. She disengaged from the alley and, quieter than a shadow, began to track her way towards her quarry.

She found Parker in a cul de sac deep down off the canyon, through a winding gap barely twice as wide as she. The canyon had an outcropping near the bottom where Parker had set up a small camp. He was building a fire beneath the outcropping, trying to burn an oxygen log that would give off more heat than light all night long. A discarded log sat not far away, burned down to a blackened twig.

Parker had laid out a soft mat for himself, as well as a supply of energy collectors next to the outcropping. The scraped-up bottom edges suggested Parker had been moving it around the cul de sac all day to collect solar energy.

Setter remained hidden behind the curve of the gap leading into the open area. She contemplated how to handle her approach. Part of her wanted to just walk in, gun out, and try to take him prisoner. She was confident she could be a few steps into the opening before he even noticed her, what with the flash burns from staring at the sparks of the fire he was failing to light.

Alternatively, she could backtrack and fly over. High enough up and he might not notice. She could even reconfigure in the air and drop. The landing may or may not be a good idea but at least it would give her the chance to surprise him AND be right on top of him. She considered repelling down the sides of the cul de sac, but despite being a flyer, she didn't care for sheer vertical surfaces. And her confidence of doing it silently was nil. She readied her blaster. "The old fashioned way," she resolved.

One step into the cul de sac and someone yelled, "Parker! Look out!"

Parker's head snapped up from the oxygen log he was lighting and he looked right at Setter. Eye contact was made and it was clear to him why she was here. Rather than waste a moment on talking, Setter fired her blaster, not at Parker but at the oxygen log. The log burst in a shower of blue-purple flame and Parker was knocked back under the outcropping.

Setter lifted her gun up at the edges of the canyon above her and saw five figures looking down at them. Rather than pick targets, Setter fired indiscriminately up at them. Peppering the edge of the canyon with blaster fire, she drove the five faces into the darkness of the dusk and rushed for Parker.

She got halfway across the cul de sac when she began to take fire. Blaster shots rained down around her, intensifying in front of the outcropping and cutting her off from her prey. Rather than risk continuing her approach, she leapt into the air and reconfigured into her flyer. Twin rotors embedded within wings caught an updraft and lifted her quickly. A few blaster hits struck her but they did little real damage to her armored frame in this form.

Setter pierced above the edge of the canyon and reconfigured, dropping out of the sky, her sword ready. She spotted Heavy Hauler immediately, as well as his two cronies. They turned their blasters at her but she was ready. She landed nearest to Heavy Hauler who put the blaster right at her chest. She swept his weapon away and caught him in the chin with the butt of her sword. Knocking his face up, she then jammed the pommel forward to strike his throat. The throat strike jerked his head back down and she followed with a slicing elbow right across his lowered temple. She reversed the motion with a slash from her sword, cutting off the upper levels of outer plating on his cranial unit. A small explosion of sparks from the exposed circuits flashed off his head and he fell to the ground.

She spun around and fired at Heavy Hauler's nearest goon, striking him dead center in the chest. The blast burned the paint off his armor and sent out a shower of sparks. She turned and Heavy Hauler's last goon fired at her. He struck her in the shoulder, knocking her blaster from

her hand. He fired again and she blocked the blast with the energized blade of her sword. Two more shots and two more blocks but she was forced to back up.

She began to take fire from down the edge of the canyon. Setter turned and saw the town sheriff, blasting at her with his rifle. The first two shots missed, but the third struck Setter in the midsection and blew her off her feet. She was slammed into the far ground and Heavy Hauler's goon began to approach.

Setter frantically looked for her blaster, only to be shocked when the goon was shot from behind. She looked past the big robot and saw Silver Mine with his rifle opposite the sheriff. The town official yelled across the canyon at him while the goon turned his weapon on one of his own. Setter took the chance and threw her sword at him, piercing the big 'bot right through the chest. He howled loudly and fell over, his systems shutting down to keep him from going into failure.

Setter rolled over her shoulder to get defensively to her feet, her eyes set on the sheriff. She ran past Heavy Hauler's goon, yanking out her sword. She raced along the canyon, ignoring the blaster fire from the sheriff that whizzed past her head in panicked bursts. She was almost within range to take his head off when a powerful explosion knocked them both high into the air, taking a huge chunk out of the canyon wall.

Setter slammed hard onto the ground and went skidding. Her system struggled to keep functioning for a moment and she shook off complete disorientation. When she got her bearings and looked up, Parker slowly rose out of the canyon. Able to fly in bipedal form, he simply seemed to float up until he was able to step on the edge of the canyon and he began to approach Setter. She looked around for a direct to retreat but found mesas everywhere.

"End of the line, ass-thority," Parker told her.

Setter rolled her eyes. "I'm not—" She didn't even bother. It worked once, so Setter threw her sword at Parker. He swatted it out of the air, but doing so gave her time to reconfigure into her flyer mode. She shot straight up, trying to get above the mesas as quickly as she could.

"Not a chance!" Parker yelled at her and he balled up. His legs shifted back and up, practically inverting him as he began the artillery placement that Setter had so wished to avoid fighting head-on. Nine missiles stuck out from the launcher as Parker's alternative mode began to train on the Setter.

Above the mesas, Setter began to dart about evasively. Parker fired two missiles, their winding vapor trails distracting and unsettling.

Setter banked to the left as the two missiles zipped past her faster than it first seemed and she narrowly missed destruction. The two missiles rose into the twilight and banked back around, coming back for her from behind. Worse, Parker let loose two more.

Four missiles bearing down on her, Setter began to dive and closed in on Parker. She shot past the two new missiles and they turned. One turned slower than the other and managed to slam into the pair from before. The three missiles erupted in light that briefly turned night to day. The last missile was blown off-course but it quickly righted itself and resumed its chase of Setter.

She fired meaninglessly at Parker with her forward blasters, the Rebel indifferent to the glancing fire. He released a fifth missile at her, but she strafed out of the way, letting it whisk by her. She zoomed down at him, and then banked suddenly, climbing back into the sky. The missile that had been pursuing her struck just ahead of Parker and knocked the artillery embankment into the air, sending him flying. The Rebel reconfigured into bipedal mode to help with the impact but he still hit hard and was dazed by the force of the explosion.

Setter swung around as her momentum still carried her up and away from the explosion. One final missile swam through the air at her and she bombarded it with fire from her forward blasters. Tiny reflections of the shots slid along the missile's frame as it closed, her shots failing to miss the mark. It closed within striking distance and, rather than dodge, Setter reconfigured into bipedal mode.

Dropping out of the air, she turned in her descent and watched as the missile banked, threatening to return. She reconfigured back into flyer and her rotors caught the wind. She levitated again to dodge the sweeping missile as it ripped past her. She turned and fired at it. This time, she scored a hit against the length of its body as it turned. The explosion lit up the sky and rocked Setter but didn't knock her loose from the sky.

She returned to the ground in a controlled descent and reconfigured into a run. The sheriff was just collecting himself when he saw Setter coming. "Now wait—" he began to say when she punched him across the chin. The robot was knocked to the ground and skidded back from her fierce impact. "Listen, I—" I tried but she kicked his face and then stomped on his chest. "We don't support—" he kept trying to argue.

"This ain't about politics, you scrap heap!" she yelled, stomping on him hard. "This is about you trying to kill me!"

She backed off for a moment, letting the old bot start to rise. As he got to his hands and knees, she stomped his head again, stamping him face-first into the hard ground. Spiteful, she stormed around the wide

canyon edge and collected her sword. She walked passed the disoriented Parker and kicked his head like she was punting a ball in a sports game, then continued after the sheriff without ever breaking stride.

The sheriff was just beginning to collect himself when he saw Setter approaching. He took one look at the sword and began to stammer. "N-now wait just a—"

Setter impaled him through the chest.

His howl of shock was echoed by Parker's shriek of horrified astonishment. The sheriff's eyes sputtered as the light disappeared from them and his entire body hissed as the tension of life escaped. Setter whipped her blade from the dying bot's chest and turned to the Rebel. Parker stared up at her, his eyes wide and his jaw hanging open. Setter approached him slowly, the sword still very ready. "I didn't think your kind killed," he said, his hands raising in surrender.

"I'm working for the Authority today," she told him firmly, emphasizing the transitory nature of that affiliation, "but I'm not of the Authority. And you're coming with me." She rolled him on his chest and knelt on the small of his back as she bound his hands with energy collars. She ripped him up off the ground and shoved him back in the direction of town. Letting him start walking, Setter went and retrieved her blaster.

She paused in picking it up and glanced across the canyon at Silver Mine. The tiny robot still held the rifle he'd used to save Setter. She smirked at the sight of the unremarkable little bot and nodded to him, making him smile. She caught up with Parker and urged him on at gunpoint.

Out of the rising sun appeared a string of silver.

Setter rose from where she'd been dozing against a boulder that stood out in the open plains. Not far away, the heavily restrained Parker began to awaken, first at the noise and then at the rumbling. The Rebel looked around, bleary-eyed and began to ask, "Wha...what's happening?"

Out from the east appeared a train. Running along the ground as if it were a track, the big silver passenger train tore through the air at lightning speed, closing fast, only to slow as it neared them. The great vehicle came to a stop right before Setter and Parker, arriving right before them with surprising precision for so large a vehicle. A pair of doors opened

at the front and a strong voice came booming from within, "Successful hunt?"

"Something like that, Iron Horse," Setter told the train. She grabbed Parker by the nape of his neck and his hands, still clasped behind his back. With a powerful hoist, she threw him inside the front car. Parker landed hard and rose to protest, only to have mechanical arms grab him. He was drug towards the back of the car, protesting the whole way.

Setter watched him go until his griping was lost against the background noise of the giant robot. "Got something else, too," she told Iron Horse. With little effort, she hoisted Silver Mine up and set him onto the train's floor. "He's going east."

"Oh-ho," the train chuckled. "Anywhere in particular?"

Setter looked to Silver Mine to answer. The tiny robot was nervous about being on the spot and just shook his head. "Apparently not," she told the train. "Just get him somewhere he can get started rebuilding his life."

Even without a face, the train was clearly amused. "Will do, Setter."

"Good luck," she told Silver Mine.

"Thank you," he told her, beaming with gratitude.

A little uneasily, she nodded as the train doors shut. The train began to slowly kick into motion, heading in a wide circle so as to return to the east.

Setter watched the large train go, following its movements until the silver giant disappeared into the sunrise. Once Iron Horse was gone and the noise of his mighty engine was no longer even an echo, Setter turned and faced once again into the west. "Four more," she told herself. She reconfigured into her vehicle mode and drove into the wastes after her prey.