

# Robots

## Zeta Danger part 2

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Sunsetter flew towards the sunset.

Her two ducted fans were tilted slightly forward, allowing her to cruise towards the dwindling darkness rather than chase after it. Beneath her, the great chasms of the western desert stretched out as far as the eye could see. Lifeless and desolate, the chasms and canyons were nothing but a giant crack in the very surface of the planet.

Stars twinkled brighter and brighter in the sky as the sun disappeared, taking the daytime sky with it. The descending night was like a marching royal with a long and colorful cape trailing after. Setter pondered the thought, that of monarchs and royalty, until the sun was gone. Night overtook the sky entirely now. The stars looked like LEDs on a circuit board.

A patch of light up ahead caught Setter's attention. It was a town. Situated between two great plains, the town was perfectly set in a crevice that ran towards the horizon, like a jagged relief in the endless monotony of the plains. Long shadows extended from the junk heap well outside of town as well as a large dig beyond it.

She coasted towards the ground until she was flying just over it. With an electronic shift in her systems, she reconfigured. The rotors quickly jerked under her chassis as two wheels shifted out to join two more on her lower frame. Her automobile mode hit the ground with a squeal of her tires and she revved her engine to keep from losing too much speed too fast. She had a little while before she would reach the town but the bots of Westrion didn't trust triples like her. But then, they didn't trust strangers either, so she wasn't sure what she had to lose by just buzzing in. All the same, she drove into town.

As Setter neared, she was disappointed, even with her low expectations. The town was little more than a series of shacks, cobbled together from scrap or cannibalized from ancient transport vehicles or even space-faring vessels forgotten to time. Most were built atop the unremarkable ground that was cracked open against the most boring stretch of nothing in all the universe. Most of the structures were situated near to the rises and pits of the broken surface.

She arrived at the very center of the sliver of town and shifted forms. The rear of her automobile form extended out and opened into bipedal legs. The wheels at the front of her form shifted inward just as her rotors had done previous and two arms came forward. The front lowered down and her head rose up, the female form of a bot taking shape.

The bots around her didn't gawk or stare so much as watch her with bored disinterest. They weren't staring at the stranger or glaring at an intruder so much as simply watching the new thing that had arrived, standing out as much as any new thing ever did.

Setter looked around at the old bots staring and decided to approach the nearest of them. He looked to be an old scrap hauler but in his robotic form, he looked more like a pudgy old man. "Where's the law?" Setter all but demanded.

The old bot chewed on a strip of vulcanized wire. "Out at the Pit." He spat murky oil near Setter's feet.

"Which way is the pit?" she asked, crossing her arms.

When Setter arrived at 'the Pit', she went from disappointed to surprised. Like a lot of small towns in the Westrion expanses, this town was built around an exposed access point in the surface of the planet. Unlike most small town this particular exposure was not some trivial break but a truly epic crater. A massive hole had been dug, or demolished, or both, to get at one of the power cables that ran underground. The entire expanse was far bigger than it had first seemed from the air and was far larger than the town that supported it. A great conical feat of improvised engineering, the shaft was an artificial descent of interlinking, winding paths all heading down to the bare center. There, at the base, an access point had been built into the cable, though it was crude and looked ready to breakdown at any point.

Around the access point, however, was a massive mine that spread almost out of sight. Spanning clockwise through the surface of the planet, the great mine narrowed steeply all the way down into a deep basin at which several black mines traveled deeper beneath the surface of the world.

Setter arrived at the edge of the Pit and reconfigured into robot form. She approached the edge and looked down, genuinely awed by the magnitude of the mine. She looked around the edge and saw work camps set up near the mine at different points, multitudes of bots traveling up and down the ravine by way of the winding spiral that circled clockwise.

As she stared at the sight of bots digging into the ground, she noted a small cadre of enforcement vehicles coming up the spiral towards her. Red and white lights spun as they drew near. Setter turned, her hand settled on the handle of the blaster at her hip but she didn't draw. The leader of the four enforcers reconfigured first and approached. "Hold there," he said fiercely but not threateningly. Setter made a show of holding up her hands, not in surrender but merely cooperation. "Who're you?" he asked.

"I'm here under the Central Authority," Setter told him. She slowly reached behind her back. One of the vehicles reconfigured and started to draw a gun but the leader held out his hand and stopped him with a stern look. Setter withdrew the warrant and approached. "I'm after a criminal who calls himself Eastbound." The bot took the warrant from Setter and reviewed it. "And you are?" Setter asked.

"Sheriff," he said as he read the warrant. Seeming satisfied, he handed it back to her. "You after all the Warbots or just Eastbound?"

Setter didn't answer. "I tracked Eastbound here."

The sheriff was not amused, but he relented. "He's here." He turned and looked out at the mine. "I haven't a clue where, though. Didn't know there was a

warrant for rebels." He looked to Setter. "If you'd called ahead, I could have had my men looking for—" When he turned back, he saw that two of them were still in vehicle mode and the third was still halfway to his gun. He sighed and rolled his eyes. He abandoned that reasoning and told the men, "Head back to the office. I'll meet you there."

"Yes sir!" all three answered in unison and then drove off, sirens going. Setter watched them drive by, unable to keep from smirking.

"They mean well, but..." he started to explain. "And they're not as dumb as they seem."

Setter didn't linger on the deputies. Right to business, she asked the sheriff, "You know Eastbound came through here, and that he's still here?"

The sheriff nodded. "Yeah, he arrived a while back. Maybe half a cycle? Might have been a full cycle. Ain't much difference in our days 'round here, sorry." He offered as some consolation, "I know he didn't leave."

Setter looked ready to refuse his folksy certainty. "How do you know that?"

The sheriff wasn't phased for a moment. "Well, we can monitor all the bots in this area, down to the individual unit." He turned and gestured towards the massive line running over the mine. "We monitor energy consumption, resource removal and management, all of it. The arrival of a bot is documented, as is the departure. If a bot just wanders off, we'll know about it within a nano-cycle. If he left this morning, we would already know. We were down at the basin when you first drove into town," the sheriff told her.

"And that's why you knew to head up," Setter realized.

"Correct." He shook his head. "That said, we've got a population of sixteen hundred workers, just in these camps." He gestured around the edge of the mine. "Back in town, another couple of hundred. Finding Eastbound could be tricky. If he's a Warbot, he's going to be looking to avoid detection, especially by the Central Authority."

"You haven't seen him since he arrived?" asked Setter.

"Sixteen hundred bots," the sheriff reminded her, gesturing at the camps again. "I got fights every day. I got bots trying to steal energy, steal materials. I can't keep tabs on bots who, as near as I can tell, are keeping their heads down. Half these bots probably got warrants," he said. "Just not for anything worth a bounty hunter's attention. Least not until now."

They stood looking at the mines. A big bot pulled a huge chunk of material out of the ground and others began to swarm over it, chiseling away at its parts. "Are the mines dangerous?" asked Setter.

"Very," said the sheriff. "Ain't a bot that goes more than a deci-cycle without needing repairs. I ain't stepped one foot in the mines and I got to get patched up at least a few times a cycle."

"There's a body shop?" asked Setter.

Sheriff nodded. "Six, although they're all run by Foundation. His main shop is back in town. His five outposts around the camps and in the basin are just for small stuff. His office is where the real repairs are done." He seemed to realize what she was getting at. "He's likely to have seen Eastbound more recently than I have." A groan of metal could be heard and the sheriff looked down into the pit. He saw a metal chain break and a wrecking ball nearly took a bot's head off. "Oh boy," he sighed. The nearly decapitated bot leapt onto another bot and the fight turned ugly fast. "You go see Foundation. I got work to do." He shifted form back into vehicle mode and roared back down the side of the Pit. Setter watched him go, then turned to head back towards town.

Setter pulled up to a large circular building. Broad and squat, it looked less like a medical repair bay and more like a fort, with reinforced stalls around the circular form and a heavy door at the front. On the far side of town from the Pit, she'd passed it on the way in and assumed it was a defense post. Learning it was a medical bay made her curious.

As Setter pulled up and reconfigured into humanoid form, the heavy door rolled up. A commanding silhouette appeared in a blinding, pure light coming out of the repair bay. Whatever impression of daunting strength died quickly when the door stopped halfway up and the bot who was stepping out banged its head.

The bot stumbled forward, holding his head, groaning in unexpected pain. He had a green body with white highlights. A bit on the tall and slender side, he moved with just a hint of gangly disorientation. His head was topped like a crown and he had a faceplate instead of a mouth. "Ow!" he groaned lowly as he doubled over.

"Are you the doctor?" Setter asked as she approached, stepping up the slight ramp towards the door.

"Normally I'd say yes, but after that, I'm too ashamed," the doctor said. He stood up and was sporting a cracked casing just above his eye. Circuits were visible. He tapped it and winced before asking, "How bad does it look?"

Setter studied the break with some genuine approval. "Pretty bad."

The doctor just shook his head, unsurprised. "Name's Foundation. What can I do for you?" he asked the stranger. He hobbled back inside, his entire frame appearing cobbled together from spare parts and spot-welded by himself.

"My name's Setter. I'm tracking a bounty for the Central Authority." She followed him into the repair bay without invitation. Inside was a well-lit medical bay with four stations and plenty of supplies. The sturdy fortress-like walls made sense now.

"We don't get too many with the Authority this far west," said Foundation, going to a mirror. He took out a small laser welder and tilted close to the mirror.

The instant he touched metal to metal, a spark of showers sprayed out, along with an intense but tiny spot of light. "Must be a heck of a bounty." Setter didn't answer. "Who's it for?"

"His name is Eastbound," Setter told the doctor. Foundation stopped patching up his crack. He stared at her through the mirror. "You know him?" Foundation wasn't sure if it was a question or an accusation.

"Yeah," the doctor said, going back to the patch job. By the seams visible across his body, he'd done plenty of patchwork on himself. He turned his head a bit and winced in pain. "Yeah, he's...geez...he's down in the Pit somewhere." He checked his work, then resumed, sparks spraying off his metal cranium. "He's a nice guy. A bit of a jerk, but a nice guy." The doctor stopped and splashed some water on the weld, causing it spit and sizzle. He confirmed the job was adequate and put away the tool. He turned around and faced Setter. "What's he wanted for?"

"He's part of a terrorist group," she said. "The Warbots, specifically."

Foundation didn't seem too surprised to hear that. He just nodded, crossing his arms. The nod turned into a headshake and he just said, "Wow." He sat up and approached her, his footsteps echoing heavy on the floorplates of the repair bay. "You need to talk to the Sheriff first. He's—"

"I already did," Setter told him. "He's the one that told me to speak to you."

"Me? Why?" Foundation asked with huge eyes.

"He thinks you've seen Eastbound. The sheriff claimed not to have seen him in deci-cycles."

The doctor rolled that around and nodded. "Yeah, probably. Sheriff's busy." He shifted his thinking, scratching absently at the welded patch on his brow. "Yeah, I saw Eastbound...I don't know, two or three centi-cycles ago. Um..." The doctor looked at a loss. "He seemed fine. I mean, you know, banged up from the mines and who knows what else he'd gotten up to. He's a delinquent, you know?" He spoke of Eastbound like he was a class clown. "He's always heading to where there's a game of cards or..." The stern look of indifference on Setter's face reminded him of why she was talking to him. "Uh...he's, uh, he's in the Pit somewhere. He's a little guy so he's probably down in the mines themselves. They put the littlest bots to work down there and let the bigger bots do the excavating up top."

"But you're confident he's there?" Setter pushed.

The doctor nodded. "Oh yeah. We've got these scanners, neat things, that monitor energy consumption and material use. If a bot leaves, we'd know about it."

"That's all I needed to know," Setter said, departing abruptly.

With a roar of dust, Setter went barreling down the winding road into the Pit. She coursed along the spiraling pathway, zipping nimbly between the giant tires and treads of massive terrain movers, as well as the more nimble and agile working bots that were scattered all throughout the worksite. They all turned as the blue four-wheeled vehicle went shooting by. The spiral tightened the closer she got to the bottom until finally she just drove out over the side of the ledge and reconfigured halfway down.

Setter landed dramatically and rose amongst a crowd of stunned worker bots, all frozen in surprise. All except the Sheriff who melodramatically applauded. "We get it. You're a badass." He approached Setter with just a hint of a catch in his hip joint. "Find your bot?"

"No, but Foundation confirmed he's likely down here," Setter said. "I want to meet with the workers in the mines. Can you summon them?"

"Yeah, no, it's fine, I don't have anything else to do," the sheriff answered passive aggressively. He headed to the mouth of the mine, a diagonal hole right in the surface of the planet, heading straight down at a steep angle. The sheriff put his fingers to his mouth and whistled so loudly, glass on a few bots' torsos cracked. Even Setter clamped her hands over her auditory sensors to dampen just a hint of the pain. "E'rebody out!" the sheriff yelled with a powerful, bellowing tone so forceful, Setter wondered if it could be weaponized.

The sheriff strolled over to Setter and asked, "How is he being transported out of here?"

"I have reinforcements," was all Setter would share. She stood with one hand on her hip, the other sitting on the butt of her pistol, while she watched more than two dozen bots of assorted colors but similar sizes all filing out. They looked painfully at the daylight and waited to see what was the hubbub. Setter quickly surveyed the bots and said, "He's not amongst them."

"Back inside," Sheriff told the workers.

"But—" one of them protested.

The sheriff didn't listen. He just walked onto the next mine opening and whistled again, repeating the process. As they waited for the next group to exit, Setter asked, "What if he's refusing to come out?"

"I'm keeping an eye on the sensors," the sheriff assured her, watching the first of this cadre of bots arrive into the light. "If somebody's hiding, I'll know."

"Can we force him out?" Setter asked.

The sheriff shrugged. "I don't know about 'we', but yes." Setter rolled her eyes.

They did the dance twice more before the sheriff reported, "Somebody didn't exit." In an instant, he went from reading a display on his forearm to all business. He whipped out his blaster with precision born of well-learned skill, while going from aloof to intense. The workers all frantically parted, urged on by the deputies,

moving out of the way of the sheriff as he rushed to the entrance of the mine. "Hey!" he yelled down into the mine. "I said come on out of there!" He listened but got only cold silence as a response. Setter arrived next to the sheriff as he surveyed the darkness. "Mine goes down at least half a kilometer," he warned.

"Is it a straight path?" she asked.

The sheriff scoffed. "You wish."

"You know these mines," Setter said to him. "Why don't you—"

He stopped her right there. "I never stepped foot in a mine and I ain't about to start now. I'll cover the entrance. You go get your bounty."

Setter exhaled in irritation and drew her pistol. More of a single-handed rifle, she let her trusted weapon lead the way into the darkness. Just a few steps into the mine and darkness quickly began to envelope her. The material of the ground beneath the surface of the planet was highly absorptive, a dark gray metal with the slightest give that rendered the world into pitch black almost instantly.

Setter considered her lights but opted instead to activate her dark vision optics. A purple lens shifted down over her eyes, but it provided little benefit. Lights it would have to be. She activated the forward lights on her chest plating, just down and in from her shoulders. She began to inch into the darkness, listening. She heard nothing, not wind blowing through the caves, not even her own metallic steps. Whatever the material was around her that made up the main passage, it absorbed more than light.

The path descended at a sharp angle, branching off into tributaries that wound along tight, narrow routes, only to end abruptly. All leading back to the same tunnel, Setter was relieved that she would at least find it easy to make her way back to the main entrance. "Nowhere to run, Eastbound!" she called. She heard minimal echo and wasn't sure how to proceed.

Her uncertainty was swept away when her quarry responded. "I ain't Eastbound!" yelled a distant voice, a voice whose echo was swallowed by the material. "Let me leave and there ain't gonna be no trouble, CenA!"

The jab at the Central Authority took Setter a second to figure out. "I'm looking for a bot named Eastbound," she called. "He's a terrorist. If you're not him, I don't know you, I don't care about you."

"I don't believe you!" yelled the other bot. His voice sounded closer as Setter tried to inch her way forward. She detached a small light unit from behind her back and activated it. She set it carefully into the ground to shine forward, then deactivated her own lights. She began to continue to inch forward, careful to control where her shadow fell.

"I want out of here!" yelled the bot. A narrow, squat bot with heavy arms and narrow legs, he cupped a tiny holdout blaster in his hands as he hid against a slight outcropping just adjacent to the main passageway. "I don't want trouble, CenA, but I'll do what I have to!" He peeked around the corner and saw the light

shining right at him. He ducked back in and panted fearfully. He closed his eyes and shivered in fear, then yelled, "Don't make me hurt you!" He turned to check the light again.

Setter's pistol was right in his face.

"You won't," she threatened, her finger curled around the trigger. She shoved the bot into the far wall with a bang and he dropped the pistol at impact. Setter stepped in close, putting her pistol under his chin. "Where's Eastbound?" she demanded.

"Y-you was serious?" the bot stammered.

"I don't care about some energy-siphoning coward," Setter told him harshly. "I care about my bounty and that's not you, that's Eastbound." Her hand tightened on her weapon. "Where is he?"

"I-I don't know," the bot stammered, his eyes huge in terror. "I-I ain't seen him in a deci-cycle, easy."

"Where was that?" Setter demanded.

"He was at one of the choppers," the bot shrieked in fear.

"Choppers?" Setter asked. She shook the bot again. "What do you mean, choppers?"

"Choppers," the bot repeated. "You know, a chop shop. They do body work. Unregistered body work."

Setter shoved him into the wall again, putting the pistol's barrel right against his eye. "You mean Eastbound has been modifying himself?"

"Well, y-yeah," the bot admitted.

"He's a Warbot!" Setter yelled. "He can't do that!"

The terrified bot just stammered fearfully. "I don't know. Maybe it ain't permanent. Maybe he don't care. Maybe he's giving up being a rebel? I don't know. I don't know Eastbound real well."

Setter glared for a long moment before she grabbed the bot by the back of the neck and shoved him up the steep walkway of the mine. "Come on," she said, kicking him in the legs. "Get moving!"

"Y-you said—" the bot stammered.

"I said I didn't care about some low-scale energy siphoner; the sheriff does," she said, kicking him again and forcing him out of the mine.

"Did he know where Eastbound is?" asked the Sheriff as one of his deputies escorted the bot away. The deputy threw the small bot into the back of one of the other deputies, reconfigured as a prisoner transport. Once he was inside, the

transport bot's doors shut and he wheeled off, making the long trek up the spiraling path of the Pit. It wasn't long before the siren died down from the distance and the ambient din of the work being resumed.

"No, but he said Eastbound was getting body work done," said Setter as the two walked casually out up the ramp.

"Yeah, that happens," the sheriff lamented. "I try to shut down the chop shops but every time I do, two more seem to crop up. We get an outbreak of malignant rust once a year at least. Brings the whole operation to a stop while we got to purge everyone. And that's just the rust. We got one bot who had an actuator that was too big for his joints. He went to lift a rock and tore his entire body in two." Recalling made the sheriff just shake his head.

The anecdote had no effect on Setter. "I need to find the chopper he was visiting," she resolved.

The sheriff snickered cynically. "Good luck with that. I got a pretty good network of informants in the camps but even they don't usually spill who are the choppers, or where they've set up shops this cycle."

Setter looked out over the base of the Pit as work already resumed. Arrests, fights, and other calamities had little effect on the workers of the wastes. She pondered the workers themselves for a long moment when a thought came to her. "Maybe I don't need the chop shop," she wondered aloud. The sheriff was curious. "If he's getting work done, there'd need to be parts."

The sheriff thought as well, then nodded suddenly. "The trash dump," he concluded in agreement.

The dump was due north of the Pit, just barely within sight of the town but far too distant to be a casual trip for even the speediest bot's vehicle mode. It was a large heap of parts and machinery, the majority of which was rusted over from exposure to the elements as well as protracted age. The heap was made up of several humps of trash and scrap, the result of numerous dumpings well after the initial mound of garbage had avalanched.

Setter arrived in land racer mode, slowing as she neared. The dump was bigger than the town, which seemed hard to conceive. Parts of vehicles and machinery of all shapes and sizes were strewn about. The vast sea of forgotten refuse was in various stages of erosion and disrepair. Rust was only the start of the metallic afflictions that stretched into the distance.

She reconfigured into robot mode and surveyed the scene. Even with the cold spirit of a bounty hunter, Setter was uneasy in the dump. Rust was a malignancy that was impossible to ever truly purge, while littered around her were the parts of bots that had either been discarded or cannibalized.

With some gumption, Setter stepped onto the pile nearest her feet and steadied herself. She felt sick and had to take a moment just to balance herself,

both physically and emotionally. She looked up at the giant hump of trash and it seemed to span higher and higher into the sky. Setter's gaze rose on until she nearly fell back. She stumbled off the heap and knelt on the solid ground. Her eyes closed, she focused.

Without moving from her crouched position, Setter reconfigured into her flying mode. Twin fan ducts rose from her back and sprouted out as her limbs folded in. The dual-rotor flyer rose straight up over the trash dump and began to hover over the tall stacks, waiting for contributions to finally topple them. Her spinning blades were relatively quiet but in the absolute silence of plains, the soft humming from their rapid spins could still carry.

"Where are you?" Setter spoke to herself, trying to stay calm as she hovered over the rust-infested cemetery beneath her. She sent scans over the metal and scrap, not sure what she was looking for but hoping it would jump out at her when she noticed it. Jump it did.

A missile went shooting out from the gulf between two mounds of trash, strafing right through the air by her. Setter steered laterally, narrowly avoiding the missile by mere centimeters. She turned and faced down into the dump, spotting a bot that had blended in amongst the metal. Reconfiguring, Setter turned into robot mode, her sword drawing as she fell.

The bounty hunter slammed down onto the metal with a loud crunch, slicing through scrap indiscriminately. The bot that had fired at her with a shoulder-mounted launcher fell away, shouting. He was rust-covered to the point that he had no other color. He reconfigured frantically, turning into a hauler whose wheels ground the metal and kicked it up as he sought traction, spraying scrap at Setter. Facing away from their fight, the flat-nosed hauler went barreling between the junk. Setter dropped forward, shifting into her vehicle mode as well. Her nimble racer form had easily twice the speed of the hauler but on rubber wheels, she was at a sore disadvantage on the scrap metal ground.

The hauler rumbled over metal and junk alike, sending up a wave of debris as it rode at top speed. Setter tried to keep up but finally abandoned her vehicle mode entirely. She reconfigured into robot mode and chased the hauler on foot.

The transport vehicle drove right at a pile of scrap and slammed into it like a battering ram. Setter skidded to a halt as a massive pillar of rusted junk began to topple back over the hauler and towards her. Setter screamed and went into flyer mode, zooming out of the way just in time to avoid being taken out by the collapsing mountain. She coasted into the air high above the rust and regathered herself while beneath her, dust and debris were sent out from the impact like a shockwave.

Another missile came shooting out of the junk heap and she went skating laterally through the air yet again. Another missile came for her, followed by a swarm of blasts like a storm of furious wasps. Rather than descend or dodge, Setter angled herself right at the bombardment and began to fire into the missiles. Rapid shots from her forward blasters peppered at the missiles, shooting all the

ones in danger of striking her before they could hit, detonating them in the space between.

She was unprepared for the explosion from behind as the first missile that she'd dodged struck her in the back. Setter howled in pain as she fell, knocked out of the air by the blast. She went careening into the junk heap, trailing smoke and flames. Her flyer mode slammed hard into the metal scrap and she went skidding into the rubbish.

Smoke rose from Setter's body as she lay motionless in the junk. The crackling of metal shifting from thermal expansion echoed in the deafening silence after the bombardment of explosions and blasts. A long trail of wreckage was left in her wake, metal and trash strewn in all directions from the force of her impact.

After a moment, that junk shifted. From beneath the surface of the pile appeared the rusted-over bot. Ancient and warped, the bot pushed trash away. He let out the laugh of madness and rose with surprising ease on the unsteady ground of trash. He began to slowly approach Setter, giggling madly to himself.

One leg was longer than the other and all four limbs were made from dissimilar materials, from different ages. His eyes were two different styles as well and while his face was half faceplate, he had a single glowing wing off the side of his face that lit up when he said, "You dead?" The ancient bot came over and nudged Setter's silent body. He kicked her side, an ugly hodgepodge of junk of a blaster in his hand. "Hey. Hey!" he shouted. He lowered the gun. "Guess I got you."

"Guess again."

The flyer spun its fans explosively, knocking her whole body forward and slamming her into the old bot. As he fell, she reconfigured into robot mode and landed atop him. Pinning the bot to the junk heap with her knee, Setter caught herself on her hands and gathered herself. Her left side was badly torn up and she was leaking multiple fluids.

Out came her blaster and she put it right to the old bot's face. "Granddad, you really messed up." She grabbed the old bot's throat and squeezed hard, causing his eyes to flicker. "Give me one reason why I don't blow your head off right now."

"Wh-wh..." The bot choked.

Recalling her true purpose, Setter relaxed her grip but didn't release the old bot. "I'm looking for Eastbound. You seen him, or you know where he is, tell me or so help me, I will—"

"The Warbot!" the old bot yelled frantically. "I-I seen him."

Setter was furious that this old coot needed to live even a minute longer, but she let go of his neck. She stood up and paced back. Her left leg was barely working and her arm hung limp on her hip. "Start talking, you piece of scrap," she snarled.

"Hey now," he said after coughing. "There's no need to call names."

"You tried to kill me!" she yelled at him.

"You was in my junk heap!" he yelled back, leaning farther back from her. "If you wanted something, you could've just asked."

"You got to the count of five," Setter warned him, holding her pistol at him. "One, two, three..." She counted very quickly.

"Eastbound!" the old man said frantically, holding his hands up in surrender. "I-I know where he is. He came by here every day for a few deci-cycles."

"What for?" Setter demanded.

"He was getting parts," said the old bot. He gave up being afraid of Setter's pistol and hobbled over to the rusted-out hulk of a transport vehicle. He sat on the hood, hydraulics in one of his legs hissing as he took his weight off. "He was making himself one of them shells."

That was a new one. "A shell?" asked Setter, utterly lost.

"Yeah, it's something Rebels are doing," said the old man. He didn't say Rebel with any affection. "They make a shell – just assemble it with spare parts usually – and they assemble it all over their body and can look like any other bot. Or even a specific bot. When they reconfigure, they have to jettison the shell but until then, you probably can't tell."

Setter's mind raced. She searched back over everything since she'd arrived before she looked at the old man. "How could you tell it was a shell?" The old man just sort of cringed. "How?!" Setter yelled at him.

"I don't know!" he yelped in fear. "They'd be clumsy? Banged up, maybe? Sure wouldn't be pretty."

Setter thought quickly, juggling everything. "Did you help him?" she asked the man with words warped by pain.

"Help him? I did it for him," said the old bot. He shrugged and shifted awkwardly. "Nobody talks to the rusted-out bot, even if rust ain't the scare e'rybody thinks it is."

"You built the shell for him?" Setter clarified. He nodded after a moment of thought, like he had to recall every event from the past cycle. Setter stared earnestly and asked, "Was it green?"

The door to the repair bay opened with a hiss and Foundation slipped out. The doctor carried an energy tank under his arm as he shut the door back. The sun setting in the far distance, the land around the repair bay was lit by the blinding lights from the pit in the distance.

And the lights of Setter's vehicle form.

She motored closer as Foundation turned and stared in fear at her. "Not bad, Eastbound," she said. She reconfigured into robot mode, her blaster aimed right at him. "A shell was clever." Foundation hesitated, not speaking or moving. "And right now, you're trying to decide if maybe if you stick with the lie, maybe if you ride it long enough, maybe I'll buy it." Setter stepped forward, the blaster aimed right at his chest. "I won't."

Foundation checked her side and saw a mismatched plate on the left side of her torso, the shoddy welding job adequate until she could reach a real mechanic. "That old bot fix you up?" asked the bot, dropping the pretense of being anybody but Eastbound. His voice lowered a hitch and his words curled with an eastern accent.

"Since he put the gash in me, it seemed only fair," she said. "Clever," she added with a nod to the medical bay. "As the repair bot for the Warbots, you could probably pass as a doctor for a cycle or two, so long as nothing too bad happened."

Eastbound shrugged. "Even then. I just said the damage was too extensive. Once you start talking about axillary motor pumps and saphenous coolant lines, most bots' sensors just glaze over anyway."

"Where's Foundation?" Setter asked.

Eastbound smirked an evil grin. "Do you care?"

Setter shook her head in admission. "Not really."

That angered Eastbound. "You CenA's are something else."

Rather than argue, Setter warned him, "This doesn't have to go violent. Come with me peaceably."

"No, I don't think so," said the Warbot in disguise. "See I'm betting you can't fly with that patch job. Heck, I'm not sure you can even stand all that well. And me?" he asked her before he smiled kindly. "I'm in my prime."

The body ruptured at every joint. With an explosive burst, Foundation's body shot out like shrapnel. Limbs, torso, and face all spraying off behind him as Eastbound burst out of the rupturing body. The smaller bot leapt at Setter and struck her in the side of the head with a hard punch. Setter crumpled from the surprise attack's ferocity and Eastbound ran passed her.

In mid-run, he reconfigured into vehicle mode with urgency. Becoming a two-wheeled racer. Built low and lean, the nimble racer's small body moved with startling quickness. He zipped towards town, racing down onto the main street. He reconfigured with a leap and landed in a crouch, a small sword ready to use. "Intruder!" he screamed as loud as he could. "The bounty hunter's come to kill us!"

As bots along the main road turned, Setter came roaring in, unable to achieve a fraction of her top speed. She reconfigured into robot form and Eastbound backed away from her. "Surrender, Warbot!" she yelled, her pistol drawn and aimed right at him.

"See?!" Eastbound yelled to the bots on the street, along the businesses. "She's come to—"

Setter shot him in the side, catching him just above the hip. Eastbound howled in pain and dropped to his knee, his sword going skittering away. Setter began to approach when she heard the stomp of furious steps. She whirled around as a mob of workers from the Pit came to Eastbound's aid. Setter fired another shot, this one at their feet, dissuading their advance. "Back!" she yelled. "BACK!" She followed up her warning with another shot.

Eastbound turned his arm towards her and his palm opened to let fly a single-use blaster. The shot struck Setter from behind. The town's folk began drawing weapons but didn't near, uncertain who to help. Setter tried to roll off the shot that was more painful than damaging. She tried to stand as he made a stab at her head.

Diving away at the last second, Setter landed on her back, turned towards Eastbound. She tried to fire up at him but he knocked her blaster away with his sword and stabbed again at her. She just barely deflected the stab and drove the blade into the ground. She elbowed Eastbound in the side and shoved him away. She rolled to her feet and fought through the pain to get vertical, staggering away.

Eastbound ripped his sword free and turned to find Setter drawing her own weapon. Badly beaten and oozing coolant and lubricant again, the metal plate torn from her side, Setter was badly wounded but still held her weapon with deadly competence. Eastbound held his blade, half the size of Setter's, with no less skill. "She's here to kill us!" Eastbound yelled to their audience as he stared her down. The crowd of bots were hesitant, looking to each other for some indication of the truth.

"They aren't buying it," Setter told him, panting through the pain. "Whatever good will you had, you blew it when you blew off your façade. And once the sheriff gets here, you're done for. Your only hope is to surrender now while you still can."

"Or kill you," he growled, his eyes flashing with hate.

Setter told him with pity, "You can try."

As if insulted, Eastbound roared and lunged at her. The tip of his short sword narrowly missed her chest and she moved back and to the side before slicing down at him with her sword. Eastbound spun around from her slice and kicked her in the stomach, then leapt and stabbed after transferring the weapon from one hand to the other. Setter let the stab slide between her and her hand, then caught it against her body. She straightened up, hyperextending his elbow with a loud metal groan. She tried to stab him with her sword but Eastbound managed to disengage before she could impale his chest.

As the Warbot leapt back, Setter slashed and he blocked, a metal clang echoing on the street and off the multitude of stunned bystanders. Eastbound slashed in return and Setter had to block at his hand, unable to move quickly enough to escape the blow. She thrust at his stomach but he slipped by it and kicked under her sword to catch her in the wound. She shouted in pain and

dropped again. "Die!" he yelled, holding the short sword up to impale her through the back of the head.

A blast from the sheriff caught Eastbound in the back. He froze in surprise, a second shot knocking him completely off his feet. His eyes drained of light and he fell to the ground, motionless.

Setter stayed crouching, holding her damaged side as more internal fluids dribbled out. She looked at the sheriff as he and his deputies approached, none of them looking too proud of having only just arrived. "We found Foundation's body," the sheriff updated her as he walked by Eastbound. He offered Setter a hand. She stood on her own. "We got to the medical bay as quickly as we could and found the pieces of Foundation's..." The sheriff looked down at Eastbound and kicked him. "Whatever."

Setter sighed and tried to walk off some of the pain. "Would you lock him up?" she asked the sheriff as she paced away, unable to move without shooting agony all on her left side. "I'll take him in the morning." She grimaced and hobbled a bit.

"What are you going to do now?" the sheriff asked as she shuffled away.

"Head back to the junk pile to find some parts," she groaned in pain, heading northeast back out of town.

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Setter scrubbed at her left arm, vigorously scraping at the metal. She held the pumice stone away from her surface and held out her hand. She studied the scratches on the metal and scrutinized them for any sign of rust. A disapproving sneer sat on her mouth as she stared.

"You're scraping against the grain," said Eastbound, sitting next to her, bound by chains across the arms and neck.

"I know what I'm doing," she dismissed as she returned to scrubbing.

"If you've got rust, you're driving it deeper into the metal," the smaller bot asserted. He looked out into the blind desert that extended in all directions. "And that noise is irritating."

"The noise of the stone or your blabbering?" the bounty hunter asked her prisoner as she scrubbed.

"I'm bored, what do you want?" he told her as he watched the sun rising at the distant, aloof horizon. "There ain't nothing else to do but critique your poor hygiene."

In irritation, Setter slammed the rock down. "My hygiene is not poor." She picked the rock back up, started to resume scraping, then glared at him. "And

that's a pretty bold thing to say, coming from a bot that wore spare parts as a second skin for, what, a full deci-cycle?"

"Longer than that," Eastbound remarked without looking at her. "And I cleaned myself very thoroughly, thank you very much. Not a hint of rust or mildew or..." He stared into the east, distant movement on the sunny horizon catching his attention. His optics narrowed and zoomed in as a look of disbelief crossed over his metal face. "What is that?"

Setter saw a silver line appear in the distance and grow steadily larger as it neared. "That's your ride out of the Westrion expanse."

"My prisoner transport," Eastbound said, less than enthused. He stood without goading, Setter doing the same.

A giant silver bullet train pulled up before the two, coasting along the ground as comfortably as if it were on tracks. Its sleek metal body gleamed in the sunlight as a powerful engine caused the air to throb. A side door before the two bots hissed with a burst of steam. It popped open just a bit, then slid on down the train car. A textured ramp extended from the base of the train, right to Eastbound's feet. "Good morning, Sunsetter," said the train in a mighty, booming voice.

"Hello, Iron Horse," she said. She pushed Eastbound towards the train and he approached, heading up the ramp with minimal protest. From inside the car's very walls came a dozen mechanical arms, all reaching for him.

"Whoa, hey, hey!" he exclaimed, backing out of the car. Setter drew her pistol but Eastbound spoke to the omnipresent train. "Do you mind?"

"You rattling around inside me? Uh, yeah," Iron Horse told him.

"I'll go where you want, just tell me," Eastbound chastised like he was speaking to a child. A door opened to his right, heading deeper into the train. "Uncouth bullies..." he muttered, walking through the door. "Do I get a movie?" he called before the door shut.

"Two down," Iron Horse praised Setter. "You're doing better than anybody in the entire Central Authority has tracking down the Warbots."

"There's a reason they hired me," she told Iron Horse. "It may be a bit longer before I send a signal again."

"Next target that much further into the Expanse?" Iron Horse asked.

"That," she concurred. She scratched nervously at her forearm. "Plus, I got to stop at a...at a cleaning pool or something."

"Cleaning pool?" Iron Horse laughed. "You?"

"Yeah, well, I got rust on me," she admitted, embarrassed, having to avert her eyes.

There was a decided silence from Iron Horse. "Well...uh, good luck?" he said, far less jovial now. "Message me when you track down the next Warbot." He

began to chug forward before he'd even finished speaking. Setter gave him a snide look as he chugged into a wide circle before heading back towards the east. Setter turned and faced into the desert. She reconfigured into vehicle mode and took off towards the horizon and her prey beyond.