

Robots

Zeta Danger part 3

By Robert V Aldrich

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FROM THE MIND OF
RVA

Sunsetter rose from behind the boulder and fired three shots. The blue blasts sliced through the air, pelting the rock face of the canyon. The blasts scorched the rocks and tore deep holes through the matter. Setter ducked down behind the rock to avoid the return fire.

Deadon stood from the small ravine he was hiding within and held out his hand. His boxy, camouflaged forearm opened on all four sides and missile compartments popped out. An entire battery of missiles shot forth in a counter-clockwise sequence. Like a swarm of angry hornets, they spun with geometric perfection at the boulder. Staying crouched, Setter dashed out from behind the rock just as the missiles reduce it to vapor. She ran sideways, her blue frame reflecting the midday sun overhead. She fired wildly with her blaster, pelting the canyon wall and Deadon alike.

Taking a hit, the Warbot screamed in pain and dropped to one knee. He covered a gaping wound in his chest, the most significant hit Setter had scored. His armored chassis had been burned away by her blaster, his inner servos and mechanics exposed. He gasped in agony at the sight of his inner workings. He looked towards Setter as she ran towards him.

Forgoing her blaster, Setter sliced at Deadon with a sword. The blade slashed easily through the air. Thanks to a terrified dodge, the slash took off only a piece of the antennae on the left side of Deadon's head. He fell back into the ravine and kicked Setter's feet. His massive, blocky leg slammed hard into her nimble shin and she fell straight down. Deadon rolled at Setter, elbowing her in the back of the head with a loud clang of metal hitting metal. Driving Setter's face into the dusty ground of the canyon, Deadon leapt to his feet.

Hobbling away, Deadon tried to get through the narrow pass of the canyon. He stumbled through the tiny gap, only to get caught when his chest proved too wide to get through. The Warbot checked on Setter, seeing her shaking off the disorientation of his elbow. Deadon gasped in hysterical fear and pushed harder. "Come on, come on!" he yelled at his body. Seeing Setter getting to her feet, Deadon held up his left arm. His hand retracted inside his forearm and a short blade of pure energy formed. Deadon clamped his eyes shut and lobbed off the very front of his chest, affording him just enough room to slide through.

The Warbot fell onto the far side of the canyon and screamed in pain. He rolled onto his back, howling as his inner workings sputtered and sparked at the loss of still more of the forward chassis. Deadon gasped frantically for a moment, then willed himself up. Through the rocky gap, he could see no sign of his pursuer. He gasped again and scrambled to his feet. He started

to run, only to hear rotors. He looked up and saw Setter in flier mode passing over the canyon. Deadon stared for only a second, then the violent instincts of the Warbot took over. He leapt forward and reconfigured into his vehicle mode. A small, mobile tank with a giant gun and a missile emplacement on the left side, Deadon lifted his barrel into the sky. "Die!" he screamed before pulling off a shot. The powerful blast blew away dust and rocked the whole canyon. The red energy shell passed just beneath Setter and she reconfigured into robot mode.

Setter dropped out of the air and fired two blasts. The first hit the ground before Deadon but the second struck him right beneath the barrel. The pain shocked him and he reconfigured abruptly with a shout, returning to robot mode. In the instant he was reconfiguring, Setter did the same. She dropped forward into vehicle mode, this time her third form, that of a car. With the squeal of her wheels, she shot forward at Deadon. The Warbot only realized he was being charged in time to spew profanity.

Setter reconfigured at full speed and leapt at Deadon. Punching him at sixty kilometers an hour, she knocked him back against the gap he'd just pierced his way through. She slammed into the wall of stone as well and was momentarily disoriented.

Deadon recovered first and punched Setter in the back, then kicked her in the same spot. Slamming her head into the rock, he tried to elbow her in the neck but she struck him first in the exposed chest. Deadon screamed in pain and fell to the ground, clutching his chest.

Setter turned to the Warbot and lowered her blaster at his face. "Surrender, Rebel," she told him, panting through grinding teeth. In too much pain to speak, he shook his head. He tried to raise his right hand, the missile ports opening but Setter stepped on his elbow to pin his arm to the ground. She put the barrel of her blaster to his temple. "Surrender," she repeated, adding, "This is your last chance."

Terror filled Deadon's eyes and terror fueled strength. With a sudden roll, he threw Setter off his arm. She stumbled and as he rose, he kicked straight back and caught her in the stomach. The mighty kick knocked her into the canyon wall. Not waiting to see how successful he'd been, Deadon reconfigured again into tank mode. He didn't turn but raced forward at the highest speed he could manage.

Knowing his tank mode was no match for either of her vehicle modes, Deadon drove on. He turned his turret back around and began to fire madly into the canyon he was now escaping. Aim sacrificed for fury, he unloaded everything he had. As his treads kicked up dirt and dust, red blasts from his turret tore into the canyon wall. Whole sections of stone and rock collapsed, sending up a cloud of dust that enveloped his own trail.

Deadon turned around just in time to see a thick ravine approaching. Deep but not too narrow, he kept pushing towards it. Just before reaching the deep chasm, he engaged his hover jets. The tank lifted off the ground only a few centimeters but flew at equal height right over the crack in the world. Halfway across, he turned his turret again.

Out from the cloud came racing Setter. In her vehicle mode, her wheels spun with dust still clinging to them like four vertical tornados. The roar of her engine echoed in the mouth of the canyon as she shot like a bullet right for Deadon. The instant Deadon finished crossing the ravine, he fired.

The timing was perfect. Setter was only beginning to reconfigure, shifting from land vehicle to flier when Deadon's shot hit. Striking the inner side of the ravine, Deadon's blast took out a huge chunk of rock. The ground beneath Setter's wheels crumbled beneath her and the dual-rotored flier succumbed to gravity.

Deadon reconfigured and rushed back to the edge of the ravine. He checked down into the darkness, able to see the rocks falling into darkness. He gasped frantically, still in pain, as he looked around for options. Seeing nothing nearby, and only the canyon mouth so far away, he panicked. At a loss for any other ideas, he opened his missile compartments again and fired more shots. The missile swarm spread across the ravine, taking out more and more chunks of rock, falling until they plugged a whole section of the ravine.

Deadon panted for a second, then wiped dust from his face. He looked about, knowing in his robotic soul Setter wasn't gone. He glanced at the sun, then turned and faced deeper into the Western Expanse. Clutching his exposed chest, he staggered into a jog, heading into the desert.

Through heat trails on the shifting horizon, Deadon saw a mirage. He stumbled to a halt, instinctively clutching his exposed chest. He teetered under the burning heat of the sun and stared. Edging out of sight as the far distance churned and rolled like a snake boiling from inside, Deadon saw something. He wasn't sure what, but it was better than the pale, beige nothing in every other direction.

He began to stagger towards the shifting shape, unsure what he was seeing or even if he was seeing. Afraid the heat was shorting out his optic sensors, he surrendered to the delusion of finding anything and stumbled forward.

The flickering shape gained consistency. Then length. Then size. Then it's true form revealed itself.

Deadon stumbled into a small town.

Built beneath a giant dome, the town was half-submerged and entirely covered by the dome. Shaped and colored to look like the desert all around it, the entire complex was almost hidden from scrutiny. Once he realized there was civilization, Deadon raced towards the shade. He was desperate, to escape the heat if nothing else.

The Warbot reached the edge of the town and fell inside. Through the narrow gap between the overhead cover and the surface of the desert, Deadon tumbled down. He landed on caked sand that had been blown inside by the desert winds. On his back, he laughed deliriously as his metal body groaned and ached, the heat dissipating painfully. Deadon laughed for a long time at his good fortune, even as he was pained into immobility.

When his body cooled enough that his joints ceased groaning, he finally sat up. Around him had gathered an entire community of strange-looking bots. Slender, narrow bots like he'd never seen stared cautiously. Gathered in a semi-circle around him, they watched the stranger. Narrow eyes of desert dwellers fixed down on him with distrust and caution, but not aggression.

Deadon sat up, causing some of the locals to back away from him with a murmur of accented whispers. "Where am I?" he asked. Some of the bots looked at one another but they said nothing, the majority still staring. "Do you speak Common?" he asked, a little breathless, his body still scalding hot. He repeated his question in several different languages.

"We speak Common," came an answer from behind the crowd. The bots parted for another bot not unlike Deadon to approach. He was a broad bot, built like a tank or a cargo hauler. He had small wings on his shoulders and a heavy helmet of a head that showed the carbon scarring of battle. Massive arms and a body thicker than some ship armor came over Deadon, dwarfing him in almost every manner. "Who are you?" asked the massive, powerful bot.

Deadon knew a battle veteran when he saw one. "My name's Deadon." He decided against standing.

"The Warbot," said the warrior. He sniffed in disapproval. Deadon said and did nothing. "You're a Rebel."

Deadon looked to the worried crowd. "I'm a Rebel," he confirmed cautiously. In his HUD, he began cycling through his weapons, ready to fight if it came to it. It looked about to come to it.

"We've withdrawn from the fighting, and the Central Authority," said the broad-shouldered bot standing over him and looking down on him.

"Who's we?" Deadon asked with a careful glance at the crowd. Returning war-weary eyes to the big bot before him, he smirked. "And who are you?"

"Obelisk," said the thick bot.

The name clicked in Deadon's head and he chuckled. "I heard of you." He began to sit up, unafraid now that he had a name and an identity to put to the bot. "The CenA escort bot." When Deadon stood, he was still a head shorter than Obelisk. "I heard you went down with the Vimana."

"I did. I died that day," Obelisk confirmed without hesitation. "I decided to stay dead."

Deadon smiled, more in stunned shock than humor. He looked at the skinny bots that still watched the pair. "What is this, some kind of...of peace commune?"

"More or less," nodded Obelisk. "And we don't allow the Rebels or the Central Authority."

Deadon looked challengingly at Obelisk. "Well, I'd say that makes your list of friends real short."

"Longer than you'd think," Obelisk warned him. "And we haven't had to call in any favors in a long time. We keep to ourselves and let others handle their business. We don't bother and we expect not to be bothered."

Deadon nodded sourly. He looked at the timid faces of the narrow bots. "And I'm bothering you."

Obelisk nodded. "And you're bothering us."

Deadon's bravado waned some. "Look, I don't want any trouble," he said in a hushed tone, barely even audible to Obelisk. "And I don't want to bring any trouble. I don't know what you've heard about the Warbots, but..." He considered his comrades and decided it wasn't worth talking further. "I'm fine with what you people are doing here. Like you said, you don't bother anybody. But I got a hunter on me."

"We figured," said Obelisk, glancing down at Deadon's chest.

"Just let me stay long enough to fix my wounds," Deadon nearly pled. "Just give me two days. Let me cool off, get this fixed, and I'm gone." He added, "I'm gone and I've forgotten everything I saw. When I return to my team, when I return to the Rebels, and they want a report, this town doesn't exist." Obelisk hedged. He considered the bad shape of the bot. Deadon mouthed pathetically, 'please'.

The town's defender took a slow, deep breath. He finally said, "You got a day. But we'll help repair you, then you get on your way. No matter your state, though, you leave tomorrow at sundown. Got it?"

Deadon gasped in relief. "Oh geez, yeah, thank you. Thank you!"

Obelisk turned like he already regretted his mercy. "Let's get him a room and some materials." He began to walk away, taking a slow glance behind at Deadon, reminding the Warbot that he was being watched. Deadon's relief was tempered with worry.

With a loud crash, a pile of scrap was dropped onto the ground.

In the small hut no bigger than a single room, Deadon began to immediately sift through the materials. "This is all we could find," said the slender bot that had dropped off the hodgepodge of materials. "Everything else is made of ceramic."

Deadon looked up from where he sat on the floor. "You guys are ceramic?" he asked the bot. The young male bot was white with gray highlights. He had a narrow abdomen and a slender but sturdy thorax. He was all curves and smooth edges, totally opposite Deadon's boxy frame. "What do you reconfigure into?"

Answering his second question first, the bot bent backwards and shifted forms. His arms opened, becoming closer in size to his legs. His abdomen folded open, revealing solar plates. "You're a collector," gawked Deadon. "That's...that's...cool," he laughed.

"It makes us fairly self-sufficient," the bot told him before shifting back into bipedal mode. "What other energy we need we either supply communally or we get from the solar and wind collectors of the shield."

Deadon looked at the ceiling of the hut, as if he could see beyond it at the slightly concave ceiling that covered, sheltered, and protected the town. "That thing's a collector too?" He laughed again at the ingenuity of the place, equally impressed and delighted.

"And yeah, we're ceramic," said the young bot. "Most of us. Some, like Obelisk, are metal."

"You got other strays you took in?" Deadon asked, going back to the scrap. He gave up for a second. "What's your name, anyway?"

"I'm called Solaris," he said.

Deadon snickered. "Of course you are," he said under his breath.

"What?" asked Solaris defensively.

"Just...the bot tradition of really obvious names," Deadon told him. "I think it's kind of classist, myself." On his soapbox, he couldn't stop. "I'm named Deadon. You think I can be a mechanic? You think I can be a governor or something? No. I'm a soldier." He scoffed. "I think half the

reason we have these wars is because most of us are made for war. Made, named, and disposed to it.”

Solaris lingered. “You don’t sound like a Warbot,” he said, squatting down to sit across the scrap pile.

“How many of us have you known?” Deacon asked him. The boy drew back self-consciously. Deacon nodded, used to such assumptions. He resumed searching through the junk. “Eastbound’s like me. Well, not like me, but he’s...he’s not as bad as Parker or Skyfall. Or Warhorse.” He said that last name with exclamation. He picked up a piece of metal and held it to his chest. He winced at the contact, then decided, “I think that’ll do.” He tossed the metal piece to the side for later. “It ain’t got to be pretty. Just get me to civilization.”

“We are civilization,” asserted Solaris. “We don’t fight.”

“Refusal to fight isn’t the same thing as being civilized, kid,” said Deacon as he kept looking through the scrap. “Nonviolence and wisdom aren’t the same thing.” A tube in his hand, he slowed. “However related they may often be,” he said to himself.

Solaris cut right to the intellectual chase. “Do you want to fight?”

“No,” answered Deacon simply and without hesitation. “Regrettably, I’m very good at it. And I enjoy it a lot.”

“You don’t want to do a thing that you’re good at, that you enjoy?” Solaris asked him.

Deacon put down the tubing. “When it’s one-on-one, kid? Sure. When I’m there and they’re there, and we know why we’re there, and it’s on the up-and-up and we’re both ready for it and we’re both in for it? Absolutely. Best thing in the world.” His eyes grew distant. “But when they don’t expect it...” His tone drifted a little. “When they aren’t fighters?”

He recovered himself mentally. “The CenA didn’t listen to us,” he told the veritable child. “We said things had to change. They said committee. They said review. They said...” He snickered, as if at himself for some gullibility. “They said patience.” He looked right at Solaris. “Change shouldn’t require patience. Not if it NEEDS to happen.”

Solaris was quiet. His slender arms wrapped around his legs as he listened, he too stared off. “I guess I never thought about it like that. I always assumed that people who fought did it for bad reasons. Violence always comes from bad things, because violence is bad.”

“Violence is bad, kid,” Deacon agreed. “But violence can come from very good things.” He regretted aloud, “I don’t think there’s anything that can’t come to violence.”

"But violence doesn't solve anything," Solaris said.

Deadon only said, "You'd be surprised." He decided the tube was worthwhile. "Thanks for the stuff, kid. You guys got a mechanic?" he asked of the town.

"Just a sculptor," he apologized. "We might be able to get you some ceramic parts. I wonder if they'd fit?"

"This metal'll be fine," Deadon assured him. He picked up the piece he'd selected and held it over his chest wound. He began to model it sarcastically, the flat gray contrasting with his camouflage body. "What do you think?"

"Very stylish," Solaris said with equal sarcasm. Deadon laughed, as did Solaris.

With the dawn came hot winds through the gap running the circumference of the town. Deadon stepped out from his hut, the drape of cloth barely a door on the clay hut. His chest itched terribly where he'd welded the piece of metal over his armor. The patch job was ugly but it protected his inner workings. As he exited, he saw Obelisk walking by. "Hey, big man," Deadon said, rushing to keep in step with the bot. "Is there any way to get some energy? I'm starving."

Obelisk looked back in annoyance at Deadon but reconciled it was a reasonable request. "Yeah, we've got a communal account. I'll get you some charges in a bit, but I'm busy right now." He kept walking. Urgency to go the other way crept into Deadon's mind but instead he followed Obelisk, reaching the edge of a crowd of the locals.

Deadon felt a rush of *déjà vu* as well as disorientation, being on the opposite side of the on-looking crowd as he had been the day before. Paranoia struck him as he asked, "What's going on?" Obelisk didn't offer any response. He walked right into the crowd, the fragile-by-comparison bots moving out of his way. Deadon spotted Solaris. The boy glanced at him and the two shared worried looks. "What's going on?" Deadon whispered, coming over to Solaris.

Solaris whispered back, not to be heard over the murmurs of others. "You aren't the only stranger that rolled into town."

Deadon came to an abrupt stop. His optics turned and he looked through the crowd. Obelisk shifted as he spoke to the stranger and Deadon saw who it was. Solaris turned to him, worried. "What's wrong?"

Deadon looked terrified. "That's the hunter that was after me."

The nervous bots stood around Sunsetter.

She was collapsed on the ground just as Deadon had been the previous day. Banged up and passed out, she showed the wear of her fall and well as the abuse of the fights leading to it. The heat damage had affected her worse than it had Deadon; the blue of her chassis faded and the silver highlights darkened by exposure. She looked like total system failure wasn't out of the question.

Obelisk clicked his mouth and sighed at this unprecedented yet familiar development. He turned around and found Deadon. The Warbot returned the look, confirming who this was laying before Obelisk. "She's Central Authority," Obelisk said aloud to no one but so everyone could hear. He said with regret, "We have to help her."

"Do we?" Deadon asked with a scoff.

Obelisk turned away. "We helped you."

"She's metal and she's hurt badly," said one bot, touching Setter's shoulder. He withdrew his hand quickly from the scalding heat. The unconscious bot shifted protectively at the mere touch.

"We can't help her," said Solaris. "We don't have this kind of engineering. I'm not sure we even have the parts."

Deadon looked down on Setter, her eyes closed. "You've got the parts." He was whispering, speaking unwillingly. Obelisk turned back to him once again. "And you've got the engineering."

The big bot looked surprised by the insinuation. "I don't," he insisted.

"Not you," Deadon clarified, unable to look away from Setter. He circled a finger at the town. "We."

Setter exhaled slowly and her eyes opened. Robotic sensor pegs like lashes fluttered with the movement and she saw the hut's ceiling above her. The ceiling and Deadon. She immediately began to move but found herself immobilized.

"Uh-huh," Deadon said with a wry, angry smirk. "Yeah, I knew the first thing you'd do is go for that blaster." He wiped his hands with a buffing cloth, removing thick, caked grease. "Don't bother. I've paralyzed you for the moment." The Warbot rose from the seat next to the table upon which Setter rested.

Nearby, Solaris looked on, surprised at Deadon's admission. "You paralyzed her?!" he exclaimed.

The ceramic bot's presence surprised Setter but his protest didn't bother Deadon. "I just impinged the signals to the limbs. It's little more than a snip. Her internal repairs will fix it in an hour and I can fix it in thirty

seconds." He tossed the rag away spitefully – spiteful at himself – and returned to Setter's side, looking down angrily at her. "And I'm inclined to fix it."

Despite his words clashing with his tone, Setter realized the situation was less dangerous and more dire than she realized. She began to quickly look around at her surroundings. "Where am I?"

"That's...that's not important right now," Deacon told her.

"We should get Obelisk," Solaris said.

"Not yet," Deacon told the boy as he focused on Setter. He advised Solaris, "Sit down."

"But he should be here."

"Sit down."

"But he should be—"

"Sit. Down." Deacon's tone left no room for discussion. Solaris swallowed fearfully and lowered to the seat.

Deacon returned a hateful gaze down on Setter, his stare bordering on murderous. "Intimidating the young, I see," Setter sarcastically praised the Warbot, wiggling to try and will her paralysis to end.

"Why are you after me?" Deacon asked. His words were less of an interrogation and more a plea. "Why does the Authority...why hire a hunter to come after me?"

"I'm after all the Warbots," Setter told him. "You were just next on my list."

"But why come after us?" Deacon queried, like the act made no sense.

"Because you're Rebels," she told him clearly and defiantly. "Because you're the Warbots. Because you're terrorists. Because you're seditionists. Because you're traitors."

Deacon backed away from Setter. "We're not traitors," he insisted weakly, knowing it would do no good. For his own peace of mind, he defended, "We're patriots." He looked at Solaris. "We believe in a better world." His gaze was apologetic but Solaris clearly didn't know what to think.

Deacon looked down at Setter again, a conflicted look in his eyes. "You can have a meritocracy, or you can have uniformity. Those who want uniformity are simply those without merit." He paced away from Setter, even turning his back to her. Setter tried to shift her arm at all but found her limbs still immovable. "But then I guess who decides merit, or who gets the chance to show merit, that's complicated." Deacon went and sat in a

seat like Solaris', only for it to break beneath him. He hit the ground hard and scrambled up. "Um, I'll...crap, I'm sorry. I'll...I'll fix that," he told the boy.

Setter returned his attention to her, saying, "I'm not going to debate politics with you. I don't care. I'm hired to find you and bring you in. That's what I'm going to do." Deadon sighed and turned away again, conflicted. He ran his hands over his blocky head. "I want to do it peaceably," she told him from behind. "But I don't have a problem fighting you. And I'll go through you if needs be. I get paid less if I just return your body but I still get paid." Deadon looked over his boxy, giant shoulder at her. "I'll also go through anyone else I have to."

Deadon turned slowly, a grave look on his face. "That was unnecessary. Don't threaten this place."

"It wasn't a threat," she claimed. "But the truth – the ugly truth – is that so long as you are here, this place will be in danger, as will those who reside within it. Kill me," she all but challenged, "and the Authority will send another hunter. But if I die, they'll know they need to send someone considerably more remorseless than me. And remorseless and cruel are very closely aligned."

Deadon weighed her comments with a despondent, hopeless look. He looked at Solaris and his dread. He gestured to the exit, telling the young bot, "Let's find Obelisk."

Beneath the shadow of the town's cover worked the ceramic bots. The non-metallic types built and maintained an array of communal projects. Condensers free-standing solar collectors, wind turbines, they were all readied for use. Among the workday going on around them, Deadon and Solaris spoke in quiet tones with Obelisk. The giant bot stood with his thick arms crossed, not liking what he was hearing. "She said more bots will come after her," Solaris reported. "She said they'll be crueler."

Obelisk only turned his gaze to Deadon for confirmation, getting it with a curt nod. "Not in so many words, but that's not wrong. Nor is she exaggerating," said the Warbot. "My dislike for the CenA, all politics aside, they are thorough. They will send more."

Obelisk stared, unmoving. "You knew this was coming." Neither accusation or statement, it was a supposition.

"I think I did," Deadon nodded with cynical confidence. His eyes trailed off, as did his tone. "I guess maybe I just hoped it wouldn't."

"What should we do with her?" Obelisk asked the rebel, like it was a quiz.

Deadon's eyes slid into the middle distance and he sighed. "There's only one thing to do."

In the hut, Setter tried to get her arm moving. Her legs had some responsiveness but her control was unreliable. Her thick limbs more spasmed and jerked than moved with their normal agility. Her left arm, too, would twitch and jerk but not exactly obey her commands. Her right arm, sitting next to her blaster, was still frustratingly motionless.

Deadon returned to the hut. He walked right inside, right beside the table, and put his fist right against Setter's face. The missile placements on his forearm popped open and the small explosives aimed right into her eyes. "I want you to remember this," Deadon whispered with deadly earnest. Setter stared defiantly and unflinchingly passed her death and up at him. "I want you to remember how this looks, how this feels." Setter's eyes slid to the missiles and was aware of the absolute certainty of death just a single command away. "With everything that I am, I want to kill you right here, right now."

The missile pods retracted.

Deadon dropped his arm. He backed away from Setter, who was more confused than anything else. He shook his head and metallic tears grew in his eyes. He backed away to the wall and glared at her. "This place..." he whispered with soggy words. "You never saw it," he insisted. "You didn't see it, you don't know that it exists. You found me in a canyon in the middle of the desert and I surrendered. Deal?" His voice cracked when he asked.

Setter hesitated. She twitched her right hand, wondering if she could grab her blaster. Her thumb moved but not easily.

"DEAL?!" Deadon screamed suddenly. The missile compartments sprouted from his arm as he nearly punched Setter with his rage.

She slowly, calmly, turned her eyes up at him. He stood over her, ready to shoot sixteen missiles into her face. She countered by patiently tapping her gun against his inner thigh, poised to blow his leg clean off. He glanced down at the weapon but didn't backdown from his demand. His hand at her head, he tightened his fist.

She told him, "Deal."

Deadon sat on the rock in the middle of the desert, fixated at nothing. His elbows on his knees, his hands hanging loosely together, he just gazed in defeat. The sun overhead beat down on him and his temperature was raising but he didn't seem to care, or even notice.

Setter approached him, keeping a careful eye on her quarry. She checked back the way they'd come, where the commune's dome was little more than an unremarkable rise in the horizon. Setter saw movement approach from the distance. Slowly, the ceramic form of Solaris appeared, but he kept his distance, remaining little more than a discoloration in the heat trails. Setter neither acknowledged him or revealed him.

"It's been a long time since a place felt like home," Deadon said quietly, staring into the gaping desert ahead. "I'm so sick of fighting. I believe in the cause but..." He shook his head. "The other Warbots hate me because I want out." He absently thumbed back to the tank barrel that extended off his back. "I'd get rid of that thing if I could. Become a tractor."

"You really think you could do that?" Setter asked.

Deadon shook his head subtly. "I'd like to see if I could." He and Setter both turned when the long silver train appeared in the distance.

Iron Horse slid along the hot desert ground, shimmying under the dust as he arrived before the two. "Hey there," his deep voice called from within the long train. "How you doing, Sunsetter?"

Deadon smirked with much-welcome levity. He turned and looked slyly at the hunter. "Sun...Sunsetter? That's your full name?"

"Shut up," she jabbed at him. She removed her blaster. "Time to go."

Deadon stayed seated. He shook his head, his hands still hanging loosely off his knees. "No."

Setter put the barrel to his head. "We had a deal."

"We did," he acknowledged, unafraid of her or her weapon. "We do," he assured her with all the honesty he knew. "But I'm not going willingly. You want me on that train, you're going to have to make me."

Setter's hand hesitated. She glanced into the far distance, just barely able to see Solaris watching. She looked down at Deadon as he sat on the rock, unmoving and unwilling but also unresisting. Setter put away the blaster. She grabbed Deadon's arm and pulled. He remained seated, even as she tugged him. With his arm out, she was able to get a better hold and, with improving leverage, she forced him up. He didn't do anything but fight to stay seated. Setter practically scooped under his arm and had to hip-toss him into range of the train.

As Deadon stumbled forward at the train, its side door opened and a spray of tentacles came out. Restraints slapped around Deadon's wrists and ankles, his neck and waist. Powerful actuators and movers within his metal body flexed and Deadon resisted. He stared over his shoulder right at

Setter, his mouth twisting in hate. Then his eyes slipped off and he spotted Solaris in the far distance. Setter looked back as well, regretting Deakon noticing. The Warbot surrendered entirely. He went limp and Iron Horse yanked himself without further struggle.

Once the heavy door shut, Iron Horse whistled. "Shoo-wee, he's a fighter. How'd you get him to surrender?"

Setter watched Solaris slowly turn and, his head hung low, walk back to the commune. It wasn't but a moment before he disappeared into the heat trails. Setter's head hung low when she answered, with shame, "By being the bad guy."

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