

Robots

Zeta Danger part 4

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

Stormdive's eye twitched as he read the report. A transparent data screen extending up from his left forearm, it read short, clipped text of only the most basic information of the day's headlines. No pictures, no exaggeration, no explanation. Just facts. Cold, unfeeling facts.

Stormdive dropped his robotic hand, letting the feed deactivate automatically. His body was made of hard edges on the inside and curved edges along the sides. A pair of wings extended behind his shoulders almost like a cape, in line with a pair of pauldrons for shoulders. The nosecone of his vehicle mode stuck out from his chest, the stubby nose of an aircraft seeming to point his way.

With a scowl, he sat back against the boulder and stared at the sky. Endless blue above called to him, a freedom in the sky unlike anything found on the ground. Near him, two other robots looked at the Rebel. "What is it?" asked a thick, blocky robot with a desert camo color scheme.

"Deadon was just captured," Stormdive lamented, staring into the endless blue sky overhead. His accent stood out, with a flowing tone that contrasted the hard and clipped words of the desert dwellers. His thoughts soared above his terrestrial body as he added, "Eastbound and Parker were captured before him."

"Deadon?" asked the blocky robot in a Westrion accent. "Isn't that one of the Warbots?"

"I am one of the Warbots, you imbecile," Stormdive snapped. "How'd you miss that?" The thick bot didn't respond. As if what little sympathy he had spent, Stormdive turned and faced over the rocky embankment. The deep gulf between long mesas in the rocky Westrion expanse whistled with the late morning wind. A burst of dust went skating against the three bots, tiny grains of sand pelting their metal chassis.

"Is the Central Authority trying to round y'all up?" asked a younger bot, a flier like Stormdive. Rotors stuck out from his back, keeping him from sitting on any of the rocks and small boulders that dotted the top of the canyon mesa.

"Apparently, Twister," Stormdive said with too much sarcasm. He looked up at the sky again, like it was home. "I mean, I guess it makes sense. We're..." He scoffed and shook his head angrily. "The Rebels depend on us, to say the least." He looked out across the canyon, into the endless desert of stalwart mesas and hidden canyons. He looked at the desert not unlike he looked at the sky.

"If that were true, why're you here with us, robbing an energy shipment?" asked the blocky bot.

"Staying under the radar, Rockyroad," Stormdive practically sang. He stood and looked over the rocks. Passed them was a deep ravine, at the base of which were long-rusted tracks for a transport. "Now what are we doing again?"

Rockyroad glared at Stormdive. "Do you pay attention to anything?"

"Only the important stuff," he remarked.

"We've got three teams," Rockyroad repeated for the umpteenth time, pointing around the deep ravine with the barrel of his blaster. "When that transport comes down, we jump on it and bring it to a halt. You fliers are to engage any defensive drones it lets out."

Stormdive nodded. "And what if the transport isn't a vehicle but a robot? What if it's Iron Horse?" He looked right to Rockyroad. "You think all nine of us can take Iron Horse?"

"You think they're going to send Iron Horse along this backroad just to deliver an energy shipment?" the leader of the assault asked condescendingly.

Stormdive smiled to one side. "I think you underestimate the Central Authority."

"I think you need to know your place," Rockyroad snapped. "You're hired help here."

Stormdive smiled with a cruel edge. He looked to Twister and urged the young boy, "If that train reconfigures, you run."

"I ain't no c-coward," Twister said defiantly but nowhere near confidently. Stormdive chuckled at the crowd he'd found himself among. "You think the CenA is going to come for you?"

"Eventually," he said with absolute certainty. "Me and Systema. Her, then me, or me and then her. Or maybe they got whole teams going after all of us." He scoffed nihilistically. "I mean, it makes sense. We ARE the Warbots. And we're not together right now. Divide and conquer and that stuff."

"Transport's coming," Rockyroad warned the crew with a steely growl. He stared across the ravine, seeing a flashing light. He suddenly jerked his head back to Stormdive. "Why you got to say that its Iron Horse?"

"I don't know that its Iron Horse, fool," Stormdive exclaimed back at him. "I'm just saying there's a chance."

"They wouldn't send Iron Horse," Rockyroad argued. "He's one of the Centurians."

"He's part Centurian, but yeah." Stormdive's mocking tone only irritated Rockyroad more. "That's what I mean. If they're sending a transport this far out of the way, by this antiquated of a path, they're trying to make sure nothing gets this energy. The CenA, the Central Authority, absolutely would double-down and make sure they sent a bot capable of handling whatever got thrown at it. That means somebody like Iron Horse."

"It's not Iron Horse," Rockyroad argued.

"How do you know?" Stormdive asked, enjoying the uncertainty and anguish his questions were causing Rockyroad. He chuckled. "That's what I thought."

The air took on a roar of pressure and the throb of supersonic vibrations. "Here it comes," said Rockyroad. "Get ready." Stormdive slapped Twister on the shoulder as he looked down into the ravine, practically salivating at the coming action. "Here...it...comes..." said the gang's leader. The instant the train appeared, he yelled, "Go!"

Rockyroad leapt over the rock and reconfigured at the same time. The robot's chest came forward as his legs kicked back. His arms came under his body and by the time he slammed into the wall of the steep ravine, the four wheels of a rugged, all-terrain jeep made contact. The squeal of rubber was echoed by similar vehicles all descending in unison, tracks of smoke and dust flying down in their wake.

"Here we go, kid," Stormdive yelled. He leapt into the air, doing a flamboyant backflip as he went. Stormdive's arms and legs folded in and down as his snub-nosed cone extended above his head. His body became one long, slender cone, ending in an aerodynamic tip. Two wings were all that differentiated the jet from a missile. Once in jet mode, Stormdive cracked the sky with a burst of force and flew over the ravine. Cackling madly, he strafed the rocky edges with blaster fire, doing little more than knocking loose pebbles and filling the ravine with din.

Emboldened by his fellow flier, Twister stepped up onto the rocks and reconfigured as well. His arms went over his shoulders and head, while his legs twisted up under his hips. Tiny wings sprouted from his sides as the rotors on his back extended to more than twice their resting length. Spinning rapidly, Twister's rotors took him into the air and he laughed, firing wildly as well.

At the base of the ravine, beneath the cacophony of blaster fire, Rockyroad and the others reached the bottom. A pair of desert vehicles with gun-placements on their backs stayed ready while the others reconfigured into their robot modes. Weapons bristling, they ran to the cargo cars and blasted open the doors. Within were rows of insulated batteries, cooled to

near-absolute zero. Rockyroad began to hyperventilate at the sight. "Alright," he called to the others. "Let's get these—"

He was cut off by three attack drones launching out of the train's engine. Tiny eagle-like interceptors, they swung tightly around as small but deadly Vulcan cannons extended from beneath their bodies. Eight spinning barrels began to whirr just as they started to pepper the air with blaster fire.

The lead drone only got off a few shots, however, before Stormdive came spiraling down out of the sky and eviscerated the drone with his own blaster fire. The tiny flier erupted in a massive explosion from unspent charges and the other two drones peeled off. They rocketed up into the air, heading for their new target. Stormdive laughed as he flew straight up, heading high into the sky.

Once he reached purely vertical, he shifted form and came to his robot body. His upward propulsion gone, he instantly began to drop. He glanced over his shoulder as wind whipped and slammed his arms down on both sides. His fists took out both drones with a gravity-powered clothesline. They exploded but he dropped faster than the force of their deaths. With a quick shift, he reconfigured again and was flying casually by the time he returned to the ravine.

The bandits were unloading batteries by the armful and throwing them into one another's storage placements. Stormdive dropped onto the roof of the train and walked down the hub. He giggled and fired into the train. Rockyroad jerked his head up at the blaster fire. "What are you doing?!" he yelled, his arm full of batteries. "That's not a security station. That's medical transport."

"You don't know that they don't have CenA guards in there," Stormdive laughed. He fired again. "Besides, this will make sure nobody comes out." He kicked the roof. "Huh!" he challenged. "Come out, CenA!" He kicked the roof again and laughed. He fired behind him as he walked off the car, blasting for the sake of blasting. He dropped down off the storage car's roof and stepped inside. He grabbed a couple of the remaining batteries and laughed. He tossed one into the air, spinning it before catching. He opened a port in his chest, putting the batteries away for later.

When he hopped out, he saw Rockyroad and the others still loading up the last pieces of their treasure. He yelled, "We good?"

"Yeah, we're good," Rockyroad said, stuffing himself to the gills with batteries. "You and the boy, take the route back to the hideout."

"Will do," Stormdive said. He reconfigured on the ground this time and burst into the sky like a space rocket. He reached the blue heavens

above and spun as he ascended. "I love easy jobs," he broadcasted to Twister as the helicopter started to follow him.

"Me too," came a female voice from the far distance.

Stormdive barely had the chance to shift his attention before two blaster bolts tore through the air just behind him. Flying out of the west was a blue and silver flier. Embedded rotors in wings on each side of its chassis spun almost silently as the flier closed on them. Stormdive had no mouth to smile but his laughter conveyed his delight. "Let me guess: the CenA stooge that got Deadon."

"You got one right," said Setter as she fired again. "I'm not Central Authority and I'm no stooge. I got Deadon, though. As well as two other Warbots."

Stormdive flew in a wide, vertical circle to try and come behind Setter but she strafed to avoid being caught from behind. "You a bounty hunter?" he laughed. "CenA can't even send their own people after little ole Rebels?"

"Why risk losing a jack when an ace will always get the job done?" Setter asked, firing two missiles. They immediately arced back and went screaming at Stormdive. The narrow jet jerked his wings vertical at the last second so the two missiles skated within inches of his body without making contact. "Nice move, Rebel," Setter praised caustically, turning and firing blasters. Stormdive avoided them with ease.

"Stormdive!" yelled Twister, just barely catching up with the pair.

"Stay out of this kid," the Warbot called. "I need to stretch my wings and this loser will do nicely."

"Underestimate me at your own peril, Warbot," Setter told her prey. Maneuvering above him, she reconfigured. Her rear tail opened and out extended a pair of legs. The rotored wings shifted back behind her shoulders as arms extended out, one hand holding the humming blade of an energy sword. Setter dropped straight out of the sky, slicing through the air with the powerful sword. She nicked Stormdive right on the rear wing, along the tail of his circular body.

"Yeow!" he yelled, diving at bank to keep from getting further slashes. Setter reconfigured and fired futile blasts after him. "Holy crap!" he called, dodging and weaving. "Kid, give me some cover!"

Twister blasted at Setter with his forward gun batteries but she slipped between the twin shots with little concern. "Stay out of my business, son," Setter yelled back at Twister as Stormdive disappeared into the horizon.

"Stormdive's my crew!" Twister yelled.

Setter banked suddenly, inverting herself to come at Twister from straight above. "That just makes you collateral," she told him before blowing off his rotor. Twister screamed in pain and dropped out of the sky. Trailing black smoke of serious injury behind him, the young brigand fell to the ground. He reconfigured at the last second and managed to touchdown on his feet, then rolled to lessen the abrupt impact.

Twister came to a screeching halt far from the point of impact, his rotors completely blown off. His chassis scratched and banged up badly, he groaned, unable to move for a moment. Just rolling over was an effort. When he finally caught his breath, he looked up to see Setter walking towards him.

The female robot had her sword in her right hand, her blaster in her left. An all-business scowl crossed her face as she aimed the blaster at Twister. The boy's eyes shone and he held his hands open in surrender. "Let me make this perfectly clear, son," Setter told him. "Stormdive is my prey. You get between me and him again and I will end you." She lowered the blaster. "He isn't worth your loyalty," she promised him earnestly.

"H-he's part of my team," Twister stammered defiantly, his hands still held up.

"Then where is he?" asked Setter. "Why isn't he here to help you?"

She left the youthful robot to ponder that question. She reconfigured into flier mode and rose up into the sky, heading in the direction Stormdive had disappeared.

Night.

Twister arrived at the ancient hotel in the middle of the dead town. Forgotten by the ages after a nearby mine of tin had gone dry, the town was little more than a husk of forgotten memories. It was as dead as the dreams of those whom had once lived there. No lights were on and no movement was to be had. Once-sturdy structures of modern design had fallen into disrepair through the years. The once-fashionable décor becoming ugly with time and wear.

Twister pushed open the door of the hotel's entrance to find light inside. A single lantern burned brightly off one of the new batteries. The windows were blacked out and sleeping pads were laid in the corners of the room. Rockyroad sat under the light, carefully arranging the batteries in neat, even piles. At a nearby table ruined by erosion, four of the crew were already gambling with cards, passing off charges to be owed once their

share was paid out. In the corner, crackling light from a welding torch sparked and sizzled as the final bots did repair work.

"Where's Stormdive?" Twister asked, looking exhausted. He approached Rockyroad and flopped down behind him.

"No one knows," Rockyroad said, still counting. He pointed to a far stack. "That's your pile if you need to charge."

"Yeah," Twister said eagerly, grabbing a black brick from the pile. He opened the rubber top and uncoiled the wire beneath. He plugged the battery into his system and exhaled slowly as light returned to his body. Dormant systems went active, one by one as he felt renewed. "An Authority bounty hunter jumped us."

The card game stopped. Even Rockyroad turned to Twister. "She just wanted Stormdive, though. If she cared about our heist, she didn't say anything."

Rockyroad went back to distributing batteries. "She can have that loot. He's more trouble than he's worth."

"What a rude thing to say," said Stormdive. Again, all eyes turned to the entrance as the Warbot entered with a flair for the dramatic. With the doors thrown open behind him, the flier strode into the hotel lobby with weaponizable overconfidence. "And after all the good luck I've brought this team." He went right to the batteries and yanked one up. He tore off the entire rubber top and plugged it directly into the port on his side.

"That weren't your pile," Rockyroad told him.

"Who cares?" the Warbot scoffed, laughing. "Make it my pile. Or take one out of my pile. They're the same thing." He turned and paced in the shadowy lobby. "Hey ya, kid." He thumped Twister in the chest. "Thanks for the help with that CenA bounty hunter."

"You ran," Twister accused.

"Of course I ran," he confirmed with an incredulous laugh. "I was injured, badly. Her lucky shot damn-near split my fuselage. And I knew you could handle that twit." He popped Twister again in the chest. "I believed in you." His confidence and good mood soured a bit. "Was I wrong to?"

Twister balked. "N-no. I could...I just felt—"

"Who cares?" Stormdive laughed. He turned and faced them all, pacing back up to the rear of the lobby. "We did it! We got the energy! We've got enough charges to last until this time next cycle. Longer. And

with plenty to spare!" He jammed his hand at the massive pile that Rockyroad was divvying up. "Look at that haul!" he cackled. "I don't know what you bots are so glum about, I really don't."

"We're glum because some Central Authority bounty hunter is on our tail," yelled Rockyroad. Getting up, he abandoned his loot division in favor of the more pressing matter. "Now we got to splinter to avoid her tracking us."

"She ain't tracking you," Stormdive derided. "She don't care about you small fries. She's after the main course." He thumbed at his own chest. "So you leave her to me and you just..." He flittered his fingers at them. "You go on about your business and I'll take care of our little latcher-on." He looked at and spoke condescendingly to Rockyroad. "Don't you worry that pretty little face of yours." He grinned and reached up to gently paddle Rockyroad's cheek. The bandit leader had enough.

Surging forward, he grabbed Stormdive around the throat and drove him into the wall. Blaster to the Warbots' face, Rockyroad growled. "I'm getting real tired of your attitude," he seethed.

Stormdive giggled. "Aww, is that so?" His amusement seemed to know no end. He leaned close to Rockyroad's face as well as the barrel of the blaster. "Shoot," he challenged slowly and with great mirth. "Buuuut...look down first." Hesitant though he was, Rockyroad glanced down and saw on his chassis a small metal ball. With smooth edges that contoured right into the sides, the icosahedron was a deep brown, like wet mud in deep shade. The outermost side of the fist-sized ball was blinking very subtly. "That, right there, is a cerebral bomb," Stormdive explained. "And in case the role of 'cerebral' is lost on you desert-sucking losers, you should be able to figure out the bomb part."

Stormdive shoved Rockyroad back and he went stumbling back a few steps. At the table, the others had risen, more in fear than defiance. "That, right there, is connected to my noggin'. Oh, oh!" Stormdive giggled when Rockyroad went to yank the ball away. "Don't do that!" he challenged gleefully. "Pull it off and it will blow. Your feet might be left. Head may land somewhere still inside city limits."

The table was overturned as the card players all leapt up in terror. The sound of welding came to an abrupt stop as the pair turned, too scared to even get to their feet. Twister felt his fluids freeze, his whole body going numb. His eyes, like those of the others, were locked on that explosive latched to Rockyroad's chest. Their leader froze too. He swallowed, stunned by Stormdive's insane audacity.

"Anyway, as I was saying," Stormdive paced away, no longer feigning fear of Rockyroad. "That little doohickey there is connected to my brain. My

brainwaves keep it from blowing up.” He grinned and laid clear, “You have a very, very vested interest in my continued survival.” Stormdive walked right up to the stack of batteries and plucked up another one. He sniffed it, as if checking the vintage, and then tossed it callously back onto the pile. He looked at Rockyroad as if he’d forgotten the bandit existed. He wagged his fingers at the pile and encouraged, “Finish up. Then I’ll be out of your hair.”

“And this thing?” said the leader.

“Falls off in a day or two, once I’m out of range,” Stormdive said glibly. He headed for the corner.

“And what’s to keep us from incapacitating you and driving off, leaving you?” asked Rockyroad. Stormdive didn’t answer. He smiled wide and laid down in the corner, as if he was incapable of being happier. At a loss, the bandit looked down at the tiny blinking metal ball. He turned back to the pile of batteries and resumed working.

Twister watched the whole exchange from near the door. He finally settled into the floor and leaned back into the adjacent corner. He could only watch the Warbot, trying to understand him.

Not long after dawn, Stormdive landed on a rocky outcropping. At the foot of a massive, spanning canyon that wound through the Westrion expanse, the outcropping showed a wide view of anything and everything for kilometers. The jet reconfigured. As it did so, blocks and blocks of batteries came tumbling out of storage.

Landing on his feet, Stormdive began to toss the batteries into a small cave. Once they were all inside, he bent down and looked into the cave, seeing ten times as many batteries of all shapes and sizes. The cave was half-full of nothing but batteries, their hum of energy almost imperceptible. Stormdive chuckled, but then his chin shook. Laughter turned to paranoia and he brushed the batteries. “Don’t go nowhere,” he told the energy store.

The Warbot slid out of the cave just as he heard rotors. He whipped his hands down, causing two blasters to extend from his forearms. While he expected the bounty hunter, instead Twister revealed himself. Flying up to the outcropping atop a mesa towering over the canyon, the young bandit reconfigured and became a robot right before Stormdive and his twin blasters. The Rebel dropped his weapons and let them recede into his armored forearms. “What do you want, kid?”

"You left as soon as Rockyroad finished distributing the batteries," Twister said. "I wanted to..." He looked down nervously. "I wanted to...to learn from you. I want you to teach me."

Stormdive laughed. "Teach you what?"

"How to...how to be smart," the boy said. "You put that explosive on Rockyroad. I never seen anybody do something like that. I never ever would have thought of that."

"Kid, when you're one of the Rebels, you pick up all sorts of tricks," Stormdive bragged.

"Then teach me to be a Rebel," Twister asked.

Stormdive grinned. "Sure, kid. But to be a Rebel, you better know what you're getting into."

"I-I do," Twister insisted. "The Rebels, they're fighting the Central Authority. Because the Central Authority wants to control everyone."

"Close enough," Stormdive told him condescendingly. He turned and looked out into the desert and inhaled deeply. "I think maybe what you need is to meet some other Rebels."

Twister's eyes lit up. "Yeah, okay," he nodded eagerly.

Stormdive paced on the outcropping. "I got to think here for a second." He faced up, his arms crossing over the jet's nose sticking forward from his chest. "Where are some of the teams?"

"Teams?" asked Twister.

"Most of the Rebels operate in teams, like I'm part of the Warbots," Stormdive explained. "Different teams have different specialties." He mentioned that as an afterthought. He paced for a moment more. "Nightmares should be north right about now. Fly north, and I mean due north, until you get to the snows."

"You can't take me?" Twister asked, a little scared.

Stormdive was barely able to contain himself. He glanced back at the cave to his back and panic filled him. "I-I got things to do. I got other places to...to check on."

The glance wasn't lost on Twister. "What's in the cave?" he asked, making the mistake of stepping towards it.

In a flash, Stormdive had Twister's throat in his hand, the barrel of a blaster in the boy's face. "DON'T YOU DARE TOUCH THEM!" he screamed.

His eyes were wide with madness, his hands shaking with fury. "They're mine, you understand! Mine! Don't you dare! Don't you DARE!"

"O-okay," Twister stammered, absolutely terrified. He dropped to his knees, too afraid to even stand. "Okay, o-okay, I'm sorry."

"They're all mine," Stormdive burned into the boy's mind. "Every last cave! Every last battery! Every last charge! They're all mine! They are ALL mine! Don't you understand me?" The blaster's hum began to grow. It was a hair's breadth from firing.

"I won't," Twister almost begged.

"I will kill you," the Warbot made perfectly clear. Twister only nodded.

Stormdive shoved Twister to the ground and backed away. He whipped his other hand forward, the second blaster revealing itself. "Go," he told the boy. "You go and you fly and so help me, you forget you ever saw me or mine. You ever see me again, you pretend you don't know me. You ever breathe about me or mine, I will carve you up." Both blasters were set on the boy. "Go. GO!"

Twister scrambled to his feet and leapt off the outcropping. Reconfiguring into helicopter mode, he soared into the air, heading south as quickly as he could. Stormdive let him get out of sight, then finally dropped his arms. The blasters receded and he turned to the cave.

Turning, he dove inside. He began to pull all the batteries from the cave, filling the outcropping with the cave's contents. His hands shaking, terror on his face, he looked around the foot of the canyon. "Nobody's going to take you," he told the batteries like they were children. He shook, clutching an armful of batteries. "I'm not going to run out," he stammered hysterically. "I'm not going to run out." He leapt into the air, reconfiguring with his batteries stored away. He shot into the distance, heading west.

The cave in the wall of the ravine was hard to see. Hidden behind the natural folds of the rock and dust, it wasn't until it was seen from beneath that it could be spotted. From it crawled Stormdive. His body covered in dust, he shoved the last of the batteries into the cave and backed away. He looked fearfully in all directions. Once he was certain absolutely no bot had seen the new location of his most recent stash, he pulled a rock halfway over the cave, obfuscating it further.

The ravine was a narrow canyon, little more than an eroded crack in the ground. The stony walls of the canyon rose up dozens of meters, smooth and flush with a clean break in the world, followed by the erosion of

centuries since. The boulder-strewn valley floor was awash with small basins where water would collect. Pocket-marked holes dotted what was little more than a desolate, unremarkable corner of nowhere.

Not satisfied with the look but content to leave it be, Stormdive reconfigured and took off into the sky. A thin streak of a vapor trailing behind him, he coursed through the endless cloudy sky, heading towards the west. Once he evened out to a comfortable cruising speed, he began to hum to himself. He triangulated his location using the various peaks and mesas of the Westrion Expanse. He was then promptly shot down.

The blaster bolt struck Stormdive in the right wing, blowing a hole out through the very center. "What the hey!" yelled the Rebel as he dropped to his right, plummeting for the ground. Air zipping past him, he reconfigured into robot mode. The port that had been his primary thruster in flier mode became his feet and they fired twin mini-jets. They didn't cease his descent but slowed it to a manageable speed until he dropped hard onto the desert floor.

The Warbot coughed as the dust from the impact abated and then he laughed. "Well, that's a fine how-do-you-do." He picked himself up and winced. He touched his wing and inhaled sharply when doing so caused intense pain. "Damn," he observed at the damage. A hole the size of his fist had been blown through his wing. Fragments of metal were gone, making an on-site repair out of the question. He transitioned his attention to his surroundings, looking for some sight of his opponent. He saw nothing in any direction, but with the canyons winding through the expanse, that meant little.

Stormdive whipped his hands forward, the blasters coming out. "Come out, come out, wherever you are!" he yelled to the endless open expanse. "I know you're out here!" he screamed with sudden hysterical bloodlust. "Does the little CenA bounty hunter want to come out and play?"

"I don't play," said Setter, rising up in flier mode from behind the nearby canyon. So small, barely a vein running through the land, it was almost invisible, only meters behind Stormdive. He whirled around but Setter didn't shoot at him but the ground he stood atop. Her blasters took out huge chunks of the rock and metal that made up the planet. Breaking along fracture lines, the ground gave out beneath him.

Stormdive fell into the canyon in a call of surprise. He fired his rockets but did little against the falling debris about him. In addition to slowing his descent, he began firing straight up into the veritable avalanche that was cascading down atop him.

Falling more than a hundred meters down the deep, narrow canyon, Stormdive fired upwards the whole way. Boulders burst like bubbles all around him. When he finally slammed into the ground, his left foot thruster bent in sharply. Stormdive screamed in agony and grabbed his leg. The rocks and ground, little more than dust and pebbles at that point, fell about him but he was oblivious to all but the pain.

Rocking back and forth, the Rebel flier clutched his leg, delirious in his agony. As he grew used to the pain and the sting of its newness wore off, he snarled furiously. "I'm going to rip your circuits out one by one, bounty hunter!" he screamed above.

"I'd like to see you try," called Setter, her voice ricocheting off the canyon walls. There was no sight of her however.

Stormdive stood and tried to fire the rocket of his left foot. A blast of flame came out but the pain intensified. He yelped and grabbed his foot again. "Is this how the CenA conducts its business?" he yelled to the sky. "You wound, then hunt down like a scavenger?"

He turned to head down the canyon, away from the crash site, only to have Setter put her sword blade to his neck. "I'm not Central Authority," she told him coldly. "I merely took a contract."

Stormdive smiled cruelly. "Hunt the Warbots down."

"Hunt you down," she told him simply, indifferently. The blue and silver robot pushed him against the wall of the canyon, the sword blade still against his neck, ready to slice through critical wires and tubes that would end him. "Hands out," she told him. Stormdive slowly smiled, recognizing the routine. He extended his hands wide, his grin equally extending.

Setter never took her eyes off Stormdive as she reached to her side. From a compartment built into her waist, she took a glowing fragment, a purple incandescent square. "Don't move," she warned, the blade still at his neck. She placed the purple square on his hand and Stormdive flinched at the electrical sting. She removed another fragment, keeping the blade at his neck. She shifted towards the other blaster and Stormdive's smile moved to one side.

The blast of missiles from his chest blew Setter off her feet and slammed her into the far side of the canyon. Stormdive was likewise blown off his feet, the backlash of the missiles and the force of the explosion doing almost as much damage to him as Setter. He crawled on the rocky base of the canyon and tried to get moving. He hobbled quickly and tried to reconfigure, but fell flat when his feet wouldn't align.

Setter was on him in a flash, her weight on his back and her hand on his head. Her blaster was buried deep against his neck, ready to blow his head from his torso. "That. Hurt," she growled, smoke rising from her chassis.

"That was the point," he seethed, his face buried in the ground. "You aren't taking me anywhere, CenA."

"I'm taking you or I'm taking your lifeless husk," Setter told him fiercely. She got up off of him and yanked him up by the nap of his neck. "Your choice which."

His arms bound behind his back, Stormdive lay face-down on the surface of the world. Dust blew into his face as a southerly desert wind picked up. He spat out the dust and strained against the electric cuffs on his hands. He looked behind to his hands bound at his waist. The cuffs were half-loops of metal with burning electric arcs completing the circle. The irritation became pain if he even twitched against the restraints and their magnetic hold was far beyond anything he could hope to force.

He looked beyond the cuffs, staring hatefully back at Setter. A small blow torch extending from where her hand should have been, she worked meticulously on his foot. "That's it," he snickered with pleasure. "Just a little to the left, please."

"Shut up," Setter cast at him, her entire front marred with damage from the missiles. "I'm only fixing you up so I can march your worthless carcass to the pickup."

Stormdive laughed. "What? These mesas too hard for your buddies to navigate?"

"No, they just aren't going to go that far out of their way to pick up trash like you," Setter said. "Now shut up before I rupture your Achilles actuator."

"Oh, you'd be carrying me for sure," said the Rebel. He looked into the sky and saw a tiny dot overhead. A grin crossed his face and he said, "Course, that's assuming you can keep a hold of me."

Setter knew a threat when she heard one. She turned from her repair job to see Twister descending rapidly. She stood and drew her blaster but not before the young bandit began to pepper her with shots. She called out in pain, barely able to return fire.

One shot from Setter's blaster caught Twister in the rotor, forcing him to reconfigure and land in robot mode. With Setter distracted, Stormdive

rolled onto his back, using the rocky ground to tear the purple incandescent square from his left hand. Pain like he'd never fathomed ripped through his body and for a second, he considered shooting off his own hand. But even through the pain, he managed to taking aim over his own shoulder. The blast suppressor gone, he shot Setter. Together with Twister, the two fired on her repeatedly, driving her to the edge of the canyon. The ground gave out beneath her from his blast and she fell with a shout. There was a long delay between the collapse and the sound of the rocky collision below.

Stormdive chuckled with delight, then rolled onto his face and screamed. "Get these things off of me!" he yelled into the ground. Twister ran over and figured out the restraints with only a glance. The instant they were off, Stormdive rolled onto his back and screamed again, this time grabbing the hand he'd used to fire on Setter. A residual glow was left by the blast suppressor and he rocked in pain. His eyes opened frantically, as did a module on his forearm compartment. He reached into his arm and grabbed wires. Tearing them free, he howled again, then fell silent.

Twister watched Stormdive sit for a moment, then cringed when he heard a sickly laugh rise from beneath him. "Eastbound better be able to fix this." He rose awkwardly, his hand now limp were wires dangled loosely. He tested the stability of his left foot, deciding it was adequate. He took a step and winced but determined the pain was tolerable. "Thanks for coming back for me, kid," he told Twister, patting the boy on the shoulder. In a chatty tone, he asked, "There a town I don't know about nearby?"

Twister stared at the edge of the canyon, the gaping hole in what had been a flat edge. "N-no," he stammered. Remembering himself, he swung back around to Stormdive. "I didn't come back to save you."

"I don't care why you came back," Stormdive laughed. "You did. That's what matters. That's all that matters." His gaze grew a touch distant. "Nobody cares about motivations, just actions."

"You nearly killed me," Twister said at Stormdive's back.

"No, I threatened to kill you," Stormdive clarified like he was correcting a spelling mistake. "I don't 'nearly kill'."

"I wanted your help!" Twister yelled.

"Wanted, or want?" Stormdive screamed suddenly, whirling around. "You still want to meet some damn Rebels, then you check that tone, you ungrateful little brat, and you start walking!" Stormdive turned and his tone was completely conversational yet again. "You ain't flying with that busted rotor and I got a bum wing." He kicked his heel against the ground, almost enjoying the pain. "I can't even reconfigure on this thing." He turned suddenly to Twister. "You don't have a third form, do you?"

"No," said Twister, his face twisting in revulsion at the mere suggestion.

"No," Stormdive repeated, understanding. "Yeah, I figured not. Just checking." He began to walk, still heading west. "We have a hike ahead of us. Best get walking."

"The nearest town is rotations away," Twister called.

"I repeat: best get walking," Stormdive repeated.

"Except you're going in the wrong direction," said Setter.

Stormdive and Twister both turned as Setter's flier form came raising up from the canyon. Rotors sparking as metal ground against metal, her wings shifting as she wobbled in the sky. She none the less managed to ascend over the edge and reconfigure. She didn't turn into robot, however, but shifted down onto four wheels. Squealing at impact, she shot forward in vehicle mode and slammed into Twister. Rolling over him as he shouted in pain, she raced over him and went right for Stormdive. He turned to fire but his blasters were too late.

Rather than run over Stormdive as she had done Twister, Setter leapt at him. Fire bursting from beneath her chassis, she reconfigured as her forward momentum carried her right at her prey. Slamming both feet into Stormdive's chest, she knocked him hard onto the ground and he went skidding across the desert floor.

Landing unsteadily, Setter turned and fired her blaster back at Twister, startling him as he tried to get up. She turned back at Stormdive and shot him as he was in mid-rise as well. The two thieves stunned momentarily, Setter ran at Stormdive. Just as he got to his knees, she leapt at him, entangling his neck with her arm and swinging around him. She landed in a crouch, partially hiding behind him and her blaster to the back of his head.

Twister finally got to his feet, a chunk of his chest plating missing. Circuits inside sizzled, electricity subtly arcing out from time to time when he moved. He saw Stormdive with a blaster to Stormdive's head and froze. Setter held the position as long as she could before her leg gave out and she dropped to a knee. Damage taking its toll, her ravaged body was starting to give out. "What's your play now, CenA?" Stormdive asked cynically.

"Trying to talk myself into bringing you back alive," she warned him.

The grin of Stormdive was never more evil. "What a wicked thing you must think yourself. But you're nothing but a hypocrite and a fool." To Twister, he yelled casually, "Shoot this pile of rust." Twister could only

swallow, terrified. "Shoot her!" Stormdive yelled at him. "You wanted to be a Rebel. Be a Rebel. Kill the Central Authority stooge."

"You pull a weapon and I will end him," Setter told Twister over Stormdive's shouts. "Him or you. Or both of you."

"She isn't a killer, boy," Stormdive laughed. Setter elbowed him in the back of the head. It only made him laugh harder. "Oh, brutal you might be, but a killer? Please. If you were a real killer, you'd have killed me by now. Or the boy. Or, like you said, both of us." He turned to Setter and laughed in her face. "You're not a killer. You're pathetic!" Setter gently settled eyes of pure loathing on Stormdive. His grin returned with condescending intensity. "Prove. Me. Wrong."

In the momentary distraction, Twister took his chance. He held up a blaster and curled his finger around the trigger. Instead of getting off his shot, though, Setter beat him to it. Whipping her hand out, a single blast tore through the air and Twister's head equally. A sizzling hole was all that remained where an eye had once been. Through the chasm in his head, the far end of the desert could be seen, until he teetered and fell summarily.

Stormdive's smile wasn't abated. If anything, he looked elated. "You murdered a child. In cold blood." He looked like he couldn't have been more delighted.

"He raised a blaster," Setter told him. "He was armed. He had a weapon."

"A weapon of irritation, to a grizzled CenA bounty hunter like you," he responded. She stood and put her weapon back at his head. The presence of the blaster, the proximity of the death is threatened, had no effect on him. "And you telling me you couldn't have adjusted the intensity? You couldn't have...shot to wound?" he asked with a curl to his words. He giggled. "Oh, you are every bit as pathetic as I first thought. Better to be a weak coward with some consistency than a blubbering fool who does whatever she's told."

"You would do wise to keep your own advice," Setter warned him. She pulled him to his feet. "Now march."

"Sure thing, killer," he told her conversationally, like the accusation was a pet name. He began to walk, heading still towards the west. Setter walked behind him, sparring a subtle glance at the body of Twister, still face-down in the dust.

Through the wide desert, the pair walked slowly. Stormdive made no effort to outrun or fight Setter. He kept strolling easily along, smiling into the bright sunny sky, letting the heat rain down on him in unyielding pain. The dust and sand they kicked up as they walked for stretches over soil, then metal, then stone, then back. The harsh, open sky was aloof to the pair of robots as they walked. Heat vapors turned the horizon and the distance into shimmering, twisting illusions. The blue sky was washed out by the heat. Even the mesas of stone that towered over the canyons and fields of nothing seemed to be melting.

"See this is part of why I hate the Central Authority," Stormdive told Setter as he walked ahead of her. "Why capture us alive?" he asked her, laughing cynically, nihilistically. "It makes no sense. What are you going to do? Throw us in prison?"

"I don't know and I don't care," she told him, deadpan. Her body was sizzling from the heat. Her joints groaned painfully from heat expansion.

"If you're going to throw us in prison, we're just going to live at the expense of society," he told her like his questions weren't rhetorical. "And we both know the CenA values individualism and personal identity and sovereignty of the mind!" he mocked with an increasingly high-brow accent. "They ain't gonna reprogram us against our will." He said that with the opposite accent. Now he scowled, honest derision making him sneer. "So why not just kill us?"

Setter didn't engage him.

"That's what the Rebels would do," he told her, his smile gone. "They're honest like that."

"They, not you?" Setter asked him.

"I'm a Warbot," he told her, glaring at her over his shoulder.

"You say that like it makes a difference."

To that, Stormdive's gaze glassed over. "At one time it did," he admitted. Still walking, he expounded. "We're not mercenaries, but we're not regulars either." His walking slowed to a shuffling. "We're somewhere between loyal and aligned."

He stopped entirely. He turned to Setter and looked earnestly at her. "I guess maybe the Warbots are like you." Where Setter might have said something pithy, she only stayed silent. "How far differently must things have gone for us to end up on the opposite sides we're on now?"

"You really think the Warbots could work for the Central Authority?" she asked him. "You really think YOU could work for the Central Authority?" she specified.

Stormdive faced away. "No," he whispered. Some of his nihilistic bravado returned. "No, I guess not." He resumed walking. "I guess the Rebels were the only option for us Warbots. We're too powerful to be CenA and we're too opinionated to be unaligned." He scoffed and admitted, mostly to himself, "I guess we didn't have a choice."

He stopped again and faced back the way they'd come. "If we didn't though, I wonder if we would have picked the same." He stared. "That boy...he picked."

"You think he picked right?" Setter asked him.

Stormdive turned and walked again. His steps were far more hateful. "Whether he did or not, it doesn't matter now."

"These things itch," Stormdive complained, scratching with his bound hands at the blaster suppressors on his wrists.

"I don't care," said Setter. She paced behind Stormdive, her blaster drawn but not readied.

"I'm just saying," the flier griped. "They itch. It's like rust or something." He scratched. "Can't you take them off? I've been pretty compliant." He didn't get a response. "Come on, they itch."

"I don't care," she repeated, staring into the east.

Stormdive pouted angrily. "Can't you get me some water? I'm going to overheat."

"I don't care."

"Well, what about some—"

Without turning her head to him, Setter shot the ground right in front of his foot. Stormdive shrieked and leapt off the rock he'd been sitting upon. "What the hell?!" he yelled. Her point made, she grabbed his shoulder and shoved him back down onto the rock.

The ensuing silence didn't last long. On the horizon, a spot of silver appeared against the intense heat vapors. Stormdive noticed it and asked, "What's that?"

"Your ticket back east," Setter told him with relief.

Rumbling out of the east came a giant silver train. Rolling along the ground as if on a set of tracks, the smooth and polished train arrived right before the pair of robots. "Hey, is that Iron Horse?" Stormdive asked. He laughed and said, "Hey, we was talking about you just yesterday."

He didn't get a response. Instead, a door opened on the side of the second train car and from it appeared tendrils. "Hey, what the!!" yelled Stormdive as the clasps of the tendrils grabbed him. "Hey, this is cruel and unusual!" He continued to protest as he was pulled into the train, his voice disappearing as soon as the doors shut.

Setter strolled coolly towards the train. She gently tapped its silver frame, leaning on it emotionally and physically. "You okay there, Sunsetter?"

The use of her full name, and the anger she attached to it, made her smile. "Shut up, Iron Horse," she told the train. Her smile faded. "Just a bad day."

"Bad how?" asked the big bot, its voice echoing as if it emanated from the entire surface of the train.

"I'm just not quite as sure I'm on the right side," she said. She practically shoved off of him and started to walk west. "It's not about right, though. It's just about the job."

"Say it all you want, Setter," Iron Horse told her. "You'll never believe that." The great engine within the train started powering up. The mammoth machine began to course slowly back around, beginning its wide turn to head back into the east. Setter kept walking west until the sound of Iron Horse began to fade. Still walking, she glanced over her shoulder in his direction. He disappeared into the horizon and she was alone in the endless desert expanse.

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