

Robots

Zeta Danger part 5

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

Sunsetter saw the town's glare well before she saw the town itself.

She stopped at a sign just within sight of the town, pronouncing itself as 'West Haven'. The town slogan was 'the most fun the farthest from anywhere'. Beneath were sign posts pointing to a dozen major cities hundreds of kilometers away. She hoped that was a joke but the numbers looked believable. She motored in.

In her vehicle form, Sunsetter's four wheels kicked up a modest dust trail behind her. This patch of the Westrion desert was very flat. Mesas rose in the far distance and a few mountain ranges gave the horizon some variety, but the nearer plains around her were unremarkable. It meant the lowering sun overhead had no shadows to cast, making it that much harder to gauge distances. The desert was at its most surreal when devoid of landmarks.

Sunsetter arrived and reconfigured. Her blue chassis lifted up with a burst of motion and folded in on itself, reconfiguring from a sleek four-wheeled land vehicle to a bipedal robot. Sunsetter took a moment to simply look at the town, trying hard to grasp what it was she was looking at.

West Haven was a gaudy, viciously colorful town. It's wide array of structures had been built less with an eye for unique architecture and more like a series of engineering dares. Buildings leaned and tilted in creative ways and involved shapes and gaps that defied function and defied reason. It was a unique place visually, with three and four-story buildings that looked out of place in the vacant desert, like the heart of some metropolis carved free and passed through a psychedelic before being planted in the opposite end of the world.

Sunsetter spotted a few bots walking about. One to Sunsetter's right had rounded shoulders, clearly a replacement compared to the rest of his boxy frame. Down the walk, a pair of locals were decked out in flamboyant colors, as if they were trying to make up for the dreary desert that waited in every direction beyond the town. Maybe a handful total were within sight and they all looked like every other resident of the Westrion Expanse: rugged robots barely hanging on, slightly rusted and with chipped paint. They looked eager to cling to the illusion of civility and entertainment in the garish embarrassment of a town. Most carried a weapon of some kind, usually a repurposed tool. Memories were short but most could remember the time before the fighting between the Central Authority and the Rebels had spread worldwide.

Walking hesitantly, Sunsetter looked all around at the forced glitz and glamor. It felt beyond artificial, but not quite faked. She headed towards one of the few conventional-looking buildings; a squat brick with one door,

three windows and a raised platform that passed for a porch. Across the wall over the door were the letters that read 'Sheriff'.

Setter stepped up onto the porch, knocked once, and then opened the sturdy door. Inside, she found the sheriff attending to three prisoners. The rear of the building was a line of four cells on each side. The cells were narrow cubicles with open screens. The prisoners were held in place by a security camera attached to a gun, a simple force shield, and shackles on their necks and each limb.

"Hold on," called the sheriff as he filled a charging pack from the atmospheric condenser. Attached to the window on the side of the building, it headed up to the roof where Setter assumed a condenser rod was positioned to draw in all ambient electricity for kilometers. Four batteries in hand, the sheriff walked through his office into the rear and handed out the battery packs to his prisoners. He took the final one and plugged it into the side of his abdomen. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

The sheriff of West Haven was a slender bot with narrow shoulders, bulbous forearms and calves, and a faceplate that was heavily scarred. Dark green with light blue highlights, he had the look of a two-wheeled vehicle. He was made for speed and given his evident wear, he probably hadn't lost a single nanosecond of that speed. His eyes were gently glowing, a sign that his systems were quite ready for the much-needed charging.

"I just pulled in," Sunsetter told him. "I'm working for the Central Authority, tracking down a Rebel who calls herself Systema."

"The Warbot?" exclaimed voice from the back. Sunsetter and the sheriff both turned towards the prisoners. "The CenA going after the Warbots?" said the prisoner. As Sunsetter approached, she saw the prisoner was a smaller robot. Maybe two-thirds her own height, he had a gatling gun for a left hand and a faceplate where a mouth usually was. A dark green body and thick, textured wheels on his thighs and shoulders spoke of the humid environments he where was used to operating. The little bot snickered and said, "And they sent one she-bot?"

"I didn't think the Rebels were too keen on gender discrimination," Sunsetter told him. She sized him up for a moment and guessed, "Jaguarion, right?"

"My reputation proceeds me," he chuckled. "What's this about you going after Systema? What about the other Warbots? You'll have an easier time tracking down Parker. Or that coward, Deaddon."

Rather than engage him, Sunsetter checked the cells to either side of Jaguarion. Both held Rebels. To Jaguarion's right as a boxy brute with thick shoulders and a cannon barrel sticking out of her back. Treads made up her

legs and the visor plate instead of eyes only emphasized the sneer on her mouth as she glared down Sunsetter. Opposite her was flier. Frighteningly skinny waist, broad shoulders, and long, lanky limbs, he had a sharp chin and a nefarious look in his beady eyes. Wings jutted out from his back that prevented him from turning in the cell.

"The other Warbots aren't who I'm hunting," answered Sunsetter, returning her attention to Jaguarion. "Just Systema."

"They've already been captured," deduced the flier on Jaguarion's left. He spoke with slow words like a knife slicing a jugular tube. His evil-looking mouth warped in sick grin. "She had a hand in it too." He slunk towards her, only able to move a bit thanks to the restraints on his hands and legs. "Or maybe she's good enough, she captured one or two of them herself."

"Psychotron won't be held back," growled the tank in a voice accustomed to pronouncing violence and little else.

"Shut up," the other two Rebels told the tank. She looked down at the floor, like a pouting child.

"Enjoy your evening meal," the sheriff told the three. "I'll wake you in the morning for your fresh air." He guided Sunsetter back to the front of his office. He rolled down a metal grate, separating the cells from the office. It provided added security and even some privacy to the prisoners, but openings in the grating provided ample ability to subtly monitor their status.

Once the metal was lowered, Sunsetter asked, "Jaguarion's a major player in the equatorial belt. What's he doing here? And how'd you capture him?"

"It's one of the benefits of being in this...tourist trap," said the sheriff, with a scoff as he looked demonstratively at the town beyond his office walls. "Everybody comes through here. There's no energy for kilometers. And I mean it. And it's wastes almost impossible to navigate in every direction." He walked to his desk and keyed in some commands on an outmoded command console, causing a video screen to raise up. "You said you're CenA, right? Or with the Central Authority?" he corrected before Sunsetter could. "Call me old-fashioned but if you're hunting a bounty, can I see the charge? And the warrant if you've got it." Sunsetter produced both on a data tablet from a pocket in her back. She handed them over without hesitation. The sheriff began to read over them both, then plugged them into his screen to download the pertinent data.

"Why is there no industry?" Sunsetter asked. "Usually the wastes are picked for mining operations."

"We got that, if you think a couple of bots with a tent and a shovel constitutes a dig. In any direction, you'll find a few dozen empty veins were the duped and desperate are sure there's gonna be energy or precious metals in the next few meters. Anything more serious and I got to shut it down. There's a major junction a click south of here," he told her. "Closest to industry we got. Turns out this town is actually located right on top of one of the Vena Latitudinas." Sunsetter did a doubletake. "Yeah, this place," the sheriff agreed with her incredulity. His computer beeped and he handed Sunsetter back the warrant and the bounty. He sat down, the seat groaning under his unremarkable mechanical weight. "You think of the major conduits of power being the site of more important places, but...well, there are a couple of dozen of the major Venas."

"I guess," Sunsetter dismissed, crossing her arms. "Back to why I'm here."

"I haven't seen Systema," he told her, leaning back in his seat. "But it is possible she came through town if her stay was brief. I've been busy." He pointed back towards the cells.

"How did you capture them?" Sunsetter asked again.

"Oh, it's not too interesting of a story," he said honestly, not modestly. "Cornered them, one by one. Still not a hundred percent sure what they're up to." He looked at the divider between him and the prisoners. "I'm letting them sit in there and think things over. One of them will crack out of sheer boredom. Odds are, they ain't going anywhere important and they ain't up to anything important. Jaguarion's the big one and I think he got moved up here by the Rebel High Command or whatever they call themselves these days, just to take some of the heat off of him. News we get about the Equitorial Regions ain't much but I know it's been a firefight for a while." Sunsetter only nodded. "Why don't you head over to the pub, or the general store? Most everybody will be there by now. Everybody that'll be in town today, anyway. Spending what few credits they got to make a few credits more."

"I didn't see a lot of people walking into town," Sunsetter remarked.

"More than you'd think, but this IS a tourist town after all," said the sheriff. Sunsetter wasn't sure if he was kidding or not, and his tone didn't clue her in. "People come and go all the time. Town's population varies by the hour. There are a bunch of digs half-a-day away. A few towns that you could get to before sundown if you left at sunup."

"Many strangers in town at the moment?" asked Sunsetter.

"Stranger than you?" the sheriff harmlessly insulted. He gave her a shrug. "Most of our visitors only stay a few hours, just long enough to

charge up. Others, they like what they see." He scoffed. "We got games, we got videos, we..." He scoffed again. "We got games."

Sunsetter glanced again at the metal divider, then nodded at the sheriff. "Thanks," she said, rapping on his desk before she saw herself out. Through the door, she was again confronted with the blitz of colors and lights. She had to halve the sensitivity of her optics just to figure out which building was the pub. She crossed the main thoroughfare, trying to figure out why the city even had a roadway that big.

The pub was a square building that stood like an obelisk to indulgence. Smooth sides and curved edges helped to showcase its reflective sheen. Bright lights glittered like they were jealous of the stars and determined to outshine the sun. There was an electric hum as the lights blinked on and off. The few pedestrians that walked down the streets on business cast multi-colored shadows, often conflicting and contrasting with one another.

Sunsetter ascended creaking steps and discovered that the entrance that she had thought were simple swinging doors were in fact tinted sliding doors. They opened and inside, the bounty hunter found a considerably more lively crowd.

To her left was a sweeping bar dotted with locals and two bartenders rushing about. The locals were obvious: bright colors, noticeably less dust, and circus-style builds. Their bodies were made for show and service while they wore the looks of those weary of customers. At the rear corner, opposite the entrance, was a passage to the rear of the building and undoubtedly storage. From it came a barrel-chested bot carrying recently-charged batteries. The right wall was made up of two stages, upon one of which a pair of bots were fooling around with improvised instruments while an entertainment bot provided them with a melody to work with. Chairs and tables filled the intervening space, another dozen bots scattered amongst them. Some were locals, providing an entertaining game and guaranteeing the visitors they wouldn't lose too badly.

A banner hung from the roof. Bright and vibrant, it showed the sigil of the Central Authority. Its threadbare complexion spoke to how well it was maintained, while the oil stains and smoke marks spoke to how well it was respected. Or even noticed. Beneath it, the floors were scratched and scraped but frequently cleared. Dust and dirt from the desert was piled in the corners but kept off the floor as much as possible.

Sunsetter walked to an empty space at the bar and picked up a mostly-empty glass. She sniffed the contents and held the glass away in disgust. "Are you drinking raw oil?" One of the bartenders approached, a burly bot with short legs and arms thicker than Setter's legs. "Is this oil?" she asked him.

"Yep," he told her. He took the glass and dunked it into a bin of brackish water, swung it at the floor to sprinkle off the fetid droplets, then dried it with a rag. "We get it imported. You want some? Hot, cold, refined, or...ahem, distilled. Any variety you want?"

Sunsetter couldn't help but sneer at the mere suggestion. She turned and looked at the crowd with renewed curiosity bordering on astonishment. "I'll stick to energy, thanks." The bot next to her had passed out, the only thing keeping him on his stool was the propellers of his vehicle mode wedged between his torso and the floor. "I didn't know places like this actually existed," she said, mostly to herself.

"You mean dive bars in the middle of nowhere that serve subterranean milk?" the bartender asked the back of her head. The use of the colloquialism turned her around. The bartender smiled brusquely and resumed cleaning. "You ever had crude?" Sunsetter nodded and not pleasantly. "It gives you a kick, no doubt. For some bots, that experience is all that's going to get them through the day. And if a bot can survive in this land, between the heat and the boredom, and want to gum up their internals with pure oil, who are we tell them otherwise?"

Setter didn't have a response. She watched the catterwailing of the two on-stage. One was battering a decent rhythm with a pair of metal pans and two ladles in each hand. The other bot had improvised a guitar-like instrument but couldn't get a consistent sound from it. Meanwhile, the entertainment bot – a large block of lights, screens, and speakers – was putting out a consistent pulse of melody along with simulated orchestral backup.

"I'm looking for a bot," Sunsetter said, turning back to the bartender. She was surprised to see him gone. He was at the far end of the bar, filling a metal stein with crude oil. He handed it over to a red bot with orange trim, accepting a dozen chips in return: metal discs that represented a universally-recognized energy value. He rushed back over and smiled. "A bot," Setter repeated. "Her name's Systema."

"Like the Warbot?" the bartender asked. Silence didn't fall over the whole pub but it did get much quieter around Sunsetter. A few eyes at the tables traveled from their cards towards her. Several at the bar near her glanced down towards her, curious but not quite astonished.

Sunsetter nodded. "Not like the Warbot; THE Warbot. I've tracked her into the wastes and I think she came into this town." Setter made a bit of a show of looking over both shoulders at the crowd of people, some of whom had the decency to pretend they weren't listening. She made eye contact with a few. Some glanced away, some returned her gaze without

hesitation. "I want information on her, nothing else. Other Rebels, other crimes, don't interest me," she stipulated for the benefit of her audience.

The bartender took another empty glass and 'cleaned' it like the first. "I can't recall the last time we had a missile tank come through town. Plus, I heard she's uh..." He seemed to blush, then whispered, "She's a triple-mode bot." A few of the other bots around Setter stiffened in revulsion.

Sunsetter didn't respond or react. She simply waited to hear more. "We get Rebels often," the bartender admitted freely. "Heck, I know for a fact there are a few in town right now, but I doubt they know anything about Systema. And if they met with somebody like her, they'd let others know about it, believe you me."

"Is there anyone else in town who might know, or anyone outside of town, nearby perhaps, that might know?" Setter asked.

"You might try Clutchjumper at the general store," suggested the bartender. He snickered. "He's skeezy enough to associate with someone like Systema."

Sunsetter nodded and rose from the bar. She crossed halfway through the very center of the pub when a spot of dizziness hit her. She stepped back and grabbed the back of a chair, several nearby card players noticing. "Easy there," said one older bot. His left eye was blue, his right green. He had a mouthplate and a rim down the center of his head. "The fluctuations'll get you."

Sunsetter took a second to get her footing. She focused on a window and the shadow from outside that fell across it. The shadow shifted and pulsed rhythmically. She thought the shadow was shaking until she realized it wasn't the shadow but the pane of glass itself. Piecing the stimuli together, she realized there was a subsonic pulse right beneath her.

"It's the power conduit," said one of the other bots, returning to his role in the card game. He had clamps for hands, a tiny opposer doing the job of a thumb. "You get a pipe that big just meters beneath our feet, you're bound to get some anomalies."

"I'll bet," was all Sunsetter said. She rushed to shake off the experience and walked out.

The general store was a two-story affair with 'Clutch & Claim' written across the sign over the door. A wrap-around porch with a variety of seats coalesced to a double-door entrance. Through the doors were racks of

materials and provisions. Spare parts, raw materials, wires and pieces of all varieties, and battery packs of every make and mold.

Sunsetter passed down the center aisle, the tips of her shoulders necessitating she walk at an angle. Doing so faced her at some batteries and she paused, picking up the box with rubber ends, meant to hold a charge. She turned the unit over, considering its design with surprised approval.

"You like that?" came a voice. She had to turn her head but not her body. "We got those in last month. They're top-rated against heat erosion." Sunsetter moved to the end of the aisle and turned to find a small bot missing one leg. The replacement leg had no joints, little more than a crutch under his hip rather than his shoulder. He was a bulbous little thing with a frame that had multiple paint jobs, all of which were warm colors and none of which quite equaled his half-smile. "Howdy," he said. His eyes flickered like an underpowered lighting rig.

"Are you Clutchjumper?" she asked at the bot that barely came up to her waist.

The little bot laughed. "Yes ma'am, I am he." He looked down at his pseudo-leg. "As for this, which so caught your attention, I took a shot from some Central Authority a decade back and never got the hydraulics working again." He began to walk towards the counter at the rear of the store. His steps were almost melodic as he hobbled along, head raising and lowering with each thump-step, thump-step, thump-step.

Sunsetter followed him to the counter of the store. "Why not get a replacement leg?"

"A replacement leg ain't my leg," he said. He used a series of familiar handholds to get up onto a step hidden behind the counter, allowing him to stand at a height more familiar to most bots. "Of course, I still got it." He turned and pointed to a badly-damaged leg hung on a plaque over the door into the back room. "I get it down and tinker with it some days. I plan to get it working again someday. But until then, I don't want some other leg. I want my leg, the leg I had when I came off the assembly line."

"Most bots around here share that zealotry?" she asked.

"No, not really," he admitted with a laugh. He began to put away pieces like a child putting away toys. "Most ain't got the luxury of loyalty to their body. Of course, that's the ones that got the money for replacement parts." The workspace of the counter now clear, he gave Sunsetter his full attention. "So now, tell me your story."

"I'm looking for a bot," she told him. "The oil slinger at the pub said you might know her."

"I might," he nodded. His smile didn't grow but it shifted enigmatically. "Former Central Authority?" he asked. Sunsetter didn't respond. Not even a flicker to her eyes. The enigma of his smile only grew. "When I ask bots for their story, they usually at least make a quip about it being boring. You jumped right passed the modesty and got right to the here and now. Tells me you got a story."

"And I don't feel like telling it," she said.

Clutchjumper nodded. He looked her up and down with a scrutiny so intense, she would have believed he was scanning her. She considered drawing a weapon but before she could, he said, "Triple-changer." Again, Sunsetter's expression didn't change, yet the anger in her eyes stoked like a fire catching. "Never understood the stigma of triples, of trilogies." He smiled harmlessly as he used the colloquialisms. "Don't know who thought up bots can only have two forms but it seems rather limiting. Frankly, I enjoy the idea of a world where there's more than two forms, but that's just me."

Anger cooled but the raw emotions didn't. "I'm looking for a bot," Sunsetter repeated, making clear her patience was limited, as was the scope of her conversational interests. "She's a Rebel. She's a missile tank." Clutchjumper nodded thoughtfully, but didn't speak. "Her name's Systema."

Recognition crossed his eyes. "The Warbot. Leader of the Warbots, if I'm not mistaken. Parker's the biggest but Systema's the one who calls the shots."

"That's my understanding too," nodded Sunsetter. She looked back at the shelves of parts. "You see many Rebels through here?"

Clutchjumper didn't hide it. "Fair amount. We see more people who claim to be Rebels then really are, of course."

The comment rolled off Sunsetter, a trait Clutchjumper noticed. "So," she asked, turning back to him. "Do you know where I can find Systema?"

His hesitation was hard for Sunsetter to read. She didn't know if he was hesitant or just didn't know where to begin. She couldn't decide if he was having a crisis of conscience or merely not sure how to parse through the details. But he knew something; that was abundantly clear.

Before that could be shared, however, the entire store shook. As if the establishment had jumped suddenly to the side, the shelves all kicked, the contents going wobbling quickly to the floor. Sunsetter caught herself

before she was thrown off her feet. Clutchjumper wasn't so lucky. He fell back off his shelf and his true leg fell from the plaque over the doorway. "What the hell was that?!" he exclaimed before his fallen leg bumped him in the head.

Sunsetter drew out her blaster and went running to the door. She threw it open and saw people flooding out into the street, all of them just as confused as she. Down the street, she saw the sheriff. He exited into the street and took one look around before he spotted smoke rising from the far horizon. "Get to cover," she yelled back to Clutchjumper before she darted into the street.

Sunsetter sprinted over towards the sheriff. The town rattled and shook in the wake of the explosion but no aftershock followed. A few signs fell and dust rattled from second and third-stories, but damage was minimal. As Sunsetter neared, the sheriff told her, "Pretty sure that was the power station."

He skipped forward half a step and leapt to the ground. In doing so, his chest opened up and a wheel extended forward. At the same time, his legs folded up behind him, a second wheel dropping to the ground simultaneously. The instant rubber hit the dirt, he began to race for the horizon, still completing his change into vehicle mode.

Sunsetter leapt as well, her arms folding over her back as her chest rose up. Her legs bent back so that her feet came to her hips, the front of her body landing on armored wheels that were kicking up dirt instantly. As a four-wheeled vehicle with sleek curves and a low chassis, she had little trouble keeping up with the sheriff as they chased towards the explosion.

"What are the chances it was an attack?" Sunsetter asked, yelling over the whipping wind.

"Couldn't say," said the sheriff. "The power station isn't as well maintained as it used to be, or as well as it should be. The crew there, they get careless."

"Maybe letting the pub serve oil is part of the problem," Sunsetter remarked.

"I'd rather them sell pure crude in front of me where I can keep tabs on it than sell half-and-half behind my back," was the sheriff's rationale. Sunsetter couldn't argue with it.

After only a dozen moments of paired driving, they saw the power station rising out of the horizon. A giant domed space, it rose up like one of the mesas that dotted the dusty landscape. Given the rusted shell and the uninspired, utilitarian design, Setter forgave herself for not noticing it when

she came into town. From a distance, it easily could pass for a small mesa. Up close, it was a large half-sphere that had been mostly transparent ages ago when it had first been built. Now, rust held it together more than its own weldings. The ring of strong armor around the base of the dome hid the interior, except for the smoking hole in the side. Three workers came stumbling out from the nearby door, coughing as they tried to dislodge smoke and aerosol debris from their internal systems.

The sheriff reconfigured and ran to the nearest bot, stabilizing him as he started to slump over. "What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," said the bot, a stocky-looking hauler. "We were shifting towards the geo-sources when the entire wall just..." He gestured with a sweep of his hand at the break in the wall, coughing some more.

"Alright, sit down, sit down," said the sheriff as he began to appraise the injuries of the workers. Sunsetter went to the blown hole in the wall and studied it. The explosion had warped the metal inwards from top to bottom. She stepped up onto the metal, coughing a few times herself as smoke infiltrated her respiratory cooling systems. She only made it a step before she reached a secondary armored wall. She could see charred metal and warped wires, cooked insulation and ruined machinery. Tremendous damage had been done but only to unremarkable systems. The explosion hadn't even gained them access to the interior of the power plant; just the external layers of its systems.

Sunsetter exited and coughed again, dropping to one knee as she tried to clear her systems of the thick black smoke that was rising higher into the sky. "Don't go getting caught up in this too," warned the sheriff. He stepped between Sunsetter and the hole and readied to enter.

"It's not open," she said. One last hack and she rose to her feet. "It's just the outer wall. The damage is almost cosmetic." The sheriff was confused. "It was a bomb, planted about this high," she told him, gesturing with her left hand. She checked the exterior of the power plant. "Are there external sensors? Or at least cameras?"

"Are there going to be more?" the sheriff asked rhetorically.

"I don't see anymore," Sunsetter said, beginning to move counterclockwise along the power plant. Just as the sheriff began to go clockwise, there was another explosion. But not from the plant; from West Haven.

The sheriff and Sunsetter both turned and looked into the distance, glaring angrily not at the explosion but at their own failure to see it coming.

With a cloud of dust trailing each of their tires, the sheriff and Sunsetter pulled right into the heart of town. Garish lights and gaudy colors highlighted the terror on the faces of the few civilians hidden within view, watching with morbid curiosity from around corners and behind cover. The sheriff took off for his office and threw the door open.

Sunsetter checked the ground of West Haven's main thoroughfare. Several sets of footprints led from the sheriff's office into the center of town, but she lost them in that mass. The blowing wind didn't help. As she tried to reason which direction the three prisoners would have run, a blast passed over her shoulder. She tore free her blaster, ready to return fire, only to see no one immediately. She backpedaled to the office and ran inside, only to find the steel barricade still separating the sheriff's space from the prisoners. Through the windows, she could see Jaguarion and the others still in their cells. "What the hell?" asked Sunsetter.

The sheriff was just as confused as he ran passed her. He looked out and another blast hit the doorframe by his head, the purple bolt of charged energy striking the metal wall and leaving a blackened mark. He swung back in before a second shot might prove to be more accurate. "They're in the pub," he told Sunsetter. He turned back to the door, readied himself, and then reconfigured into his two-wheeled form. He tore out the door, barely enough clearance to make it through. He zipped across the street, a few shots half a second behind him. He leapt through the opposite building and disappeared from Sunsetter's sight.

The acrid stench of singed atmosphere left by the energy blasts burned her olfactory sensors. She inched to the door and checked through it, then looked back at the three Rebels on the other side of the blast shield. She didn't need to see them all that clearly to know they were smiling.

"This is the sheriff," Sunsetter heard him shout. It took her a second to realize he'd gone out the back of the building opposite the sheriff's office, a giant establishment that seemed to serve sensory deprivation experiences to visitors of West Haven. His voice carried but was diffused by the angle of the streets. "Throw down your weapons and come out."

She couldn't see where the sheriff was hiding but she could guess with the direction the blaster fire was aimed.

Taking the chance, she abandoned the sheriff's office and went darting down the street. She made it two buildings before blasts zoomed about her. She dove into a polishing shop and rose behind a stack of wax sealant more useful for aesthetics than actual protection against environmental damage. Her blaster raised, she looked out the window and spotted the sheriff hiding behind a pillar on a nearby walkway. "What is it you want?" the sheriff yelled towards the source of blaster fire.

"We got a whole bunch of your town in here," yelled a female voice. "You surrender Jaguarion and the others to us and we'll let them go."

"Alright," the sheriff yelled. "You got demands, we can work with that. Let's be reasonable. Just stop with the shooting, you hear?"

"Just making sure we understand one another. Don't do anything stupid and we won't do anything violent," she yelled from inside the pub. "Lot of bots might lose their heads if you push us."

"I got you," said the sheriff. He risked stepping out from behind the pillar. When no shots came for him, he began to walk laterally down the walkway, never turning his back or even his side to the pub. Sunsetter watched the central establishment like it was a threat all its own, then stepped out of the polish shop.

The two very carefully approached one another, meeting in the middle of the street. "No idea how many are in there," said the sheriff. He turned his jaw, a gesture of frustration Sunsetter saw often in stoic lawmen.

"Prisoners or captors?" asked Sunsetter.

"Yes."

Sunsetter checked the sky, then glanced back at the sheriff's office. "Did they try to get the Rebels and couldn't?"

"You sure they're Rebels?" asked the Sheriff. "Rebels ain't the only source of the world's problems."

Sunsetter didn't answer either way. She turned back and called into the pub, "We'll exchange some batteries for a prisoner. Sure you're getting hungry right about now. Plus you expended a lot of photon charges."

"We're not negotiating," the sheriff told her quietly, half-turned from the pub. "I can get some of the locals and put together a brute squad—"

"A brute squad? To do what?" She looked at the sheriff and told him curtly, "A brute squad will get killed. Get themselves killed, get you killed, and get the prisoners killed. You don't have any experience handling this and I do. And right now, my experience says we need to know how many of them are in there. Hostages and terrorists."

"No tricks," yelled the woman in the pub.

Sunsetter gave the frontier lawman an 'I told you so' look, then shouted back into the pub, "How many batteries should we get?"

"All of them," said the woman.

"I was hoping she'd tell us how many were in there," said Sunsetter, already heading back to the office. She headed into the sheriff's station and grabbed all the batteries she could immediately spot. She began to fill them with the charging station. She heard muffled words and glanced back at the Rebels in the cells. They were all speaking to her, but the barricade all but silenced their voices. She made eye contact with each of them, making sure that they saw her acknowledge and ignore their attempts to speak. She returned to filling the batteries.

The antiquated collector had so many broken parts repaired rather than replaced, it was more jury-rigged than built. It hummed when she plugged a battery into its port, a sign of buildup somewhere along its circuitry. After just a few batteries, its reserves were quickly depleted. "No, that's fine, I don't need any," the sheriff told her with a scowl. She returned the look as she emptied out the last of the charges.

Moments later, Sunsetter walked with a small collection of batteries held against her torso. She approached the pub cautiously, her blue body glinting in the flashing lights of the town. With all the people hiding away, peeking out from behind corners and glancing out through windows, West Haven was staggeringly quiet. So much so, her footfalls on the hardpacked dirt could be heard over the wind.

Sunsetter passed right by the sheriff who kept an eye on the front of the pub. He said nothing to her as she passed, sparing her only a cautioning glance. She didn't react. She walked back down the street, gusts of dusty wind buffeting her. She ascended the steps and headed in through the pub's double-doors.

Inside, the floor was cleared. The tables and chairs were shoved against the walls or used to barricade the entrance. Patrons were all sitting against the bar, kept under the watchful eye of two Rebels. They were big types, brutes originally meant for construction, or deconstruction more accurately.

Away from them was the leader. A female bot like Sunsetter, she was considerably bigger. A flier, she had two angled wings coming off her back and blasters extending from her upper arms. Eyes addicted to cruelty watched studied the arrival with obvious intelligence. When Sunsetter entered, the bot turned to her and smiled. "And who are you?"

"Passer-through," said Sunsetter, affecting not a terrified look but not wanting to appear brave either. She approached the woman with the armful of batteries but the bot pointed her at the bar. "Are you...do I have to..."

"Just put them down," the leader said, like she was guiding a child through the simplest of actions. She approached Sunsetter as she laid the

batteries down. "Now," she said with almost maternal tone, "Pick who will be liberated?" She gestured at the crowd with her blaster, all while keeping her glowing purple eyes locked firmly on Sunsetter.

She looked over the dozen hostages, knowing nothing about any of them. She spied the bartender from earlier and pointed to him. "Him. You should let him—"

The leader of the terrorists shot him dead. A clean blast, it went right through his head, incinerating the majority of his cranial unit. Melted metal and scorched circuitry flared as the instant heat dissipated. The others screamed while Sunsetter watched in surprise as his body teetered, then fell over against the other bartender, too terrified to shout.

The terrorist leader turned Sunsetter's attention back to her by gesturing towards her with the tip of the blaster. "Now we understand each other." The female bot was totally unaffected by the murder she'd just committed. "Go out there and tell the sheriff that Incognia is here." For the briefest moment, Sunsetter's eyes widened, her jaw dropped. For one second, her fear betrayed her. "Tell him that he will release Jaguarion and the other two," Incognia explained patiently and clearly. "Tell him if he does not, I will terminate one hostage every. Five. Minutes." She smiled and very lightly stroked Sunsetter's face. "Do you understand me?" Sunsetter nodded, face a taut and controlled mask. "Good," said Incognia, overpronouncing the word like she was teasing a child. "Run along then."

Sunsetter stepped around Incognia and slipped out through the front doors. The sheriff was waiting and by the horrified expression, he could guess at the nightmare news that was coming. "It's Incognia," Sunsetter whispered urgently to him, not turning around to be seen.

"What?!" he gawked.

"The Butcher of Bastrion herself," Sunsetter whispered. "You need to go and release Jaguarion now."

The sheriff was beside himself with surprise. "Well, h-how many does she—"

"I'm going to guess you didn't hear me," Sunsetter growled quietly at him, with her back still facing the pub. "That's Incognia. You give her what she wants and hope she's satisfied. She just murdered the bartender for absolutely no reason except to make her point and, damn it, she made it with me at least."

The sheriff sighed and shifted his weight from one hip to the other. "Well blast it."

"She says she's going to execute prisoners every five minutes until Jaguarion and the others are released," Sunsetter told him. She strongly urged, "I'd go unlock those cages." She began to walk.

The sheriff caught her arm and they turned to face each other. "Where are you going?" he asked. His unshakeable stoicism was tainted with fear. Real, genuine fear.

"Are you joking?" Sunsetter gawked. Eyes huge at the insanity of the man holding her elbow. "One, she's not Systema and I'm after System. Two, that's Incognia. Two really good reasons for me to be somewhere else. Anywhere else."

"You're going to bolt?" the sheriff asked.

The bounty hunter emphatically responded, "Uh, yeah. I don't need this. And let's be honest, neither do you. Hand over Jaguarion and keep your head down."

"I need your help," the sheriff insisted.

"I'm on a job," Sunsetter reminded him. "And it isn't this," she added for emphasis. She pulled free of his grip and resumed walking.

The sheriff turned and faced the pub, exhaling again. Staring at it and not behind him, he said aloud, "They need your help too." He shifted his weight again, then turned and looked over his shoulder. Sunsetter had stopped walking.

"Sheriff?" called Incognia. He and Sunsetter both turned in tandem towards the pub. They couldn't see her but they could hear her, and feel her eyes upon them. "You've got four minutes. Release Jaguarion and the other two."

"She keeps saying the other two," noticed Sunsetter. The sheriff glanced back at her. "She hasn't said their names. I don't think she knows who they are."

"Bring them here, sheriff," Incognia shouted. "Bring them here and bring a haul of energy."

"How much energy?" the sheriff asked.

He heard her snicker. "All of it, of course."

The sheriff slowly nodded. He backed away a few steps and turned once he reached Sunsetter. They both began to walk. "Something's up," said the sheriff as they followed their similar shadows back towards his office.

Sunsetter turned around abruptly and yelled to the pub. "We're going to release the Rebels, the prisoners," she added. She waited half a second, listening. "Then we'll bring you the energy. It's going to take longer than five minutes."

"You're down to three now, sister-bot," yelled Incognia.

"If you're going to execute prisoners while we unlock them, what incentive do we have that you aren't going to kill them regardless?" Sunsetter yelled. The sheriff watched her curtly, uncertain what her goal was. She got no response, then yelled, "Give us five minutes and we'll bring you the first Rebel."

"Bring all three," yelled Incognia.

"Three of them, two of us," called Sunsetter. "We can only move one at a time. We'll bring you all three of them, and then the energy, but you got to work with us too." Her knee twitched, something the sheriff noticed. He looked at the bot with eyes of a stone-cold killer and the all-business face that showed her fear. His worried expression drifted to the pub, to see if her gall was going to pay off.

Silence. Only the dusty wind blowing in through the alleys of the town. "What's going on?" Sunsetter asked herself, whispering like all the world would leap at her uncertainty. Her trigger finger itched to go for her blaster.

"Get to moving, little trio," Incognia finally called.

Confusion crossed the sheriff's face. His face tightened, then went flat as his eyes went wide. He stiffened in surprise and turned an intrigued face towards Sunsetter. "No..." he slowly whispered.

"Shut up," she growled at him and turned.

"You've got a third form?" he asked as he walked behind her. "You're a triple-changer?"

"Yeah, I do and yeah, I am," she answered standoffishly.

"Why didn't you say something earlier?" he asked.

"Because bots like you make a big deal out of it," she said irritably.

"Bots like me?" the sheriff argued. "What kind of bots are bots like me?"

"Bots with two forms," she spat angrily. Arriving at the sheriff's office, she threw open the door and took out a blaster. She shot it straight up, piercing the ceiling and startling the three Rebels. "Listen up, tin cans," she

shouted at them through the security wall. "You're getting transported out of here."

The sheriff walked passed her and began to release the rolling security wall. "When I asked for your help, I didn't think you'd take the lead."

"You want to deal with Incognia?" Sunsetter offered with eager cynicism.

"I'm prepared to," the sheriff said. The rolling wall began to rattle upwards. "But now I'm curious what you've got planned."

"Give her what she wants and hope she goes away," Sunsetter told him. "Same thing I told you to do." The rolling barricade out of her way, Sunsetter walked into the jail. She looked at the three prisoners. Jaguarion in front of her, she considered the tank to her left and the flier on her right. She looked again at the tank. "You. What's your name?"

"Iron Siren," she told Sunsetter. "And you remember it." She pointed right at Sunsetter. "It's the last name you'll ever hear."

Sunsetter thought for a moment then nodded. "Yeah, okay, that was close to intimidating but I had to think about it too much. Come on. You're being freed." She looked to the sheriff who had watched the whole exchange from the office. "Let her out."

The sheriff considered this for a moment, then turned to his desk. He began inputting commands. All the while, Sunsetter and Iron Siren watched each other. With a sudden flicker of light, the protective field began to lower. Sunsetter drew her blaster as the field pixelated in its descent, like a video screen. Iron Siren took a deep whiff and exhaled with relief. "Claustrophobic?" Sunsetter asked. Iron Siren only sneered at her.

The sheriff came over with a metallic wand. He waved it over her restraints in a pronounced and deliberate fashion, causing each cuff to fall away. As they did, the heavy cords retracted slowly with the clink of metallic fibers. Freed, Iron Siren stepped out, her heavy footfalls echoing. She rolled her massive shoulders back, the metal groaning from inactivity. Thick, powerful hands flexed while her armored chassis twitched as she once more felt the space her thick body took up.

Finally able to stand at full height, she was considerably bigger than either the sheriff or Sunsetter. A face meant for war and used to nothing else looked condescendingly down on them both. "Why am I being freed?"

"There's a terrorist event, you dolt," said Jaguarion. "You are no doubt being traded for hostages."

"He's right," said the sheriff. "The perp wants the prisoners taken to him. Said Systema doesn't like to be kept waiting." Jaguarion and the flier both smiled at each other, as if happy their time had come.

"Move," said Sunsetter. Iron Siren glowered at her, but turned. She began to exit the jail facility. Once the three were beyond the cells, the sheriff began to lower the metal grating once again. Iron Siren waited under Sunsetter's watchful eye and the cautious aim of her blaster.

Once the gate sealed shut, Iron Siren half-shouted at the bounty hunter, "I told you Psychotron would not be held back. Ours is a goal too noble for the weak to oppress with their..." The voice of an angry god stuttered as her vocabulary failed her. "...with their weakness."

"Yeah, that's great," Sunsetter told her. "Get moving."

Once the three exited onto the street, the sheriff told her, "The pub."

Iron Siren looked at the street and didn't move. "Come on," Sunsetter demanded. She realized Iron Siren was searching the garish buildings, trying to discern the lights. "It's that one," Sunsetter told her, pointing towards the intersection and the pub at the far end.

"Oh," said Iron Siren. She turned and began walking. Sunsetter and the sheriff watched her go, then looked at the buildings as well. Concurring it was an understandable mistake given the town's aesthetic, they fell in behind her.

The walking wall of a woman stomped towards the pub with a grimace. She reached the front steps and stopped. She looked back at her captors and gave them a glare. She gestured with her fingers in the form of a gun and mimed taking a shot at Sunsetter. Doing so earned her no reaction.

Iron Siren began up the steps, causing them to groan. With her second step, the metal sank a bit, the plank of the stair bending in slightly. She went on and passed through the double doors. As she entered, Sunsetter whispered to the sheriff, "Clever test, saying it was Systema and not Incognia."

"I thought so," the sheriff whispered back. "Shows they at least don't know what's going on." He shouted to the pub, "That's one prisoner. We'll bring you the next one. My people still okay?"

"They're just fine, sheriff," yelled Incognia from behind the doors. "Just keep your end of the bargain and I'll keep mine."

Sunsetter scoffed. The pair turned and started back. "We've got to figure out how to get them out of there."

"What happens when we hand over Jaguarion?" asked the sheriff.

"I don't know if the energy is a ploy or not," Sunsetter reasoned. "But if Incognia really wanted to, she could have taken your little rinky-dink jail. So why is she doing this? And what's she after?"

"And why involve the power station?" the sheriff further reasoned. He and Sunsetter exchanged worried looks but kept walking.

The metal gate slid closed and Cloudrige rubbed his narrow wrists. He turned on spindly legs towards the sheriff and smiled happily. "So is it just Systema or are all the Warbots present?" He turned around to Sunsetter and teased her, "I thought Systema was your quarry."

"She's got backup," Sunsetter told him.

"Oh-ho," laughed Cloudrige. "How adorable you are, my dear. Your cowardice belies one for whom the ground is a thing to be seen from afar."

"The only thing I'm interested in seeing from afar is you," Sunsetter told him before she shoved him for the door. He didn't resist, seeming amused by the act. He shuffled forth and through the door, having to turn to slide through the opening. Out on the street, he looked at the sky and smiled with radiant delight. He turned back to Sunsetter and the sheriff as they both exited, their weapons drawn and leveled on him.

"Perhaps you'll tell me what's really happening," he asked. "Are we being taken to another town? Or perhaps to be executed summarily in some dingy corner of an alley forgotten by justice?"

"Believe it or not, Rebel, not everyone lies," said the sheriff. "We're doing what we said. You're being released because of a hostage situation. Now move."

Cloudrige began to walk towards the pub. "I am aware not everyone lies. If you did lie, you would be better at it. I shall ask again, what awaits me there?"

Sunsetter informed him, "Not Systema."

The flier's head snapped back, a chill running across his eyes. "What is this then?" There was no shake in his voice but certainly in his thoughts. "Not Systema? Then who?"

Sunsetter pushed him on with the barrel of her gun against his back. "You'll find out soon enough."

His steps lost much of their fearlessness. His knees practically shook as he crossed the intersection. With weak, unsteady steps, he ascended the stairs to the double doors. He pushed them open and looked inside, then his jaw dropped before he gasped, "No."

The blast caught him right through the chest. Sunsetter and the sheriff both broke in opposite directions. The sheriff slipped behind a pillar on the porch of the pub. Sunsetter ducked next to the steps, only the top of her head visible as she watched what would happen next. However, no further shots came. Instead, Incognia stepped out of the pub. The blaster of her arm aimed down, the barrel smoked with residual ion streams as she walked slowly over Cloudridge.

"I-Inco-cognia," stammered Cloudridge, crawling away from her, his hand covered the scorched torso armor of his chest. "I didn't know you were still alive."

"I am, you blubbering fool," she told him, glowering down at him as she drank with relish the sight of his pain. She stamped down on his foot, smashing his actuator and causing him to howl in agony. "And alive or dead, I do not suffer traitors."

"Traitor?!" he squealed. "I'm n-n-no t-traitor. I m-merely obeyed my orders."

"You were MY subordinate!" Incognia yelled. "I do not care what other orders you were given before you were assigned to me, you follow MY orders!" She dropped down onto Cloudridge's back, pinning him to the ground with her knee. She grabbed the back of his head and pulled him, craning his body and causing the flier's metal to groan. He flailed in terror. "I shall savor the agony you endure," she told him. "I shall pick from your body the limbs of your creation until you are nothing but a head and torso. I shall hang you on my wall so that your screams of pain may lull me to peaceful slumber." Her fingers began to close around his head, his cranium beginning to crumble. "I shall syphon from you the very life essence of—"

The strength of fear overwhelmed his own pain. Screaming hysterically, Cloudridge managed to throw himself out from under Incognia's grasp and her weight. Freed even for an instant, the damaged bot reconfigured into his flier mode. Wings spread wide and his slender body became the fuselage for a high-speed interceptor jet. Still screaming, his jets fired. Even upside down, he tore forward across the intersection, frantic to get away from her.

Once free, Cloudridge flew into the sky and arced for the horizon. Incognia roared in fury and readied to pursue him. She took a skipping step forward and nearly leapt up, but then stopped. She froze perfectly still, her

mouth slowly warping until she giggled. She looked to her left at the sheriff, hiding behind the pillar. She looked to her right, at Sunsetter kneeling next to the stairs. Incognia looked back to where Cloudrige was flying. "Cowardice saves you again," she whispered after him.

The Rebel spun around, firing in both directions with her blasters. Powerful blasts struck pillar and barricade alike. Both the sheriff and Sunsetter returned fire but didn't catch her. The Rebel flier was too nimble as she leapt back towards the pub. She turned as she did and landed atop the stairs, continuing her firing as she backed into the pub. In the span of a breath, she was safely back inside.

After a moment of calm, the sheriff admitted, "Well that was interesting."

"I must apologize," Incognia shouted to them through the door. "I'm afraid my disdain of that lowlife got the better of me."

"You sound like you didn't know he was in there," Sunsetter yelled.

There was a brief but noticeable pause. "I didn't expect to be so overcome with rage when I finally saw him again in person," she lied.

"Try again, rebel," Sunsetter yelled.

She was answered with blaster fire. Not at her, though; at someone inside the pub. "Need I remind you of the circumstances that led us to be having this little conversation?" the Rebel leader answered.

"What happened?" yelled the sheriff. "Is anyone hurt?!"

They could hear Incognia urge with faux charm for her hostages to speak. "She just missed us, sheriff," yelled someone Sunsetter didn't recognize but could tell the sheriff knew.

The sheriff set his hard eyes on the double-doors and was a long time in moving. He finally did rise and he backed away from the pub. "Tic-toc, sheriff," called Incognia.

Again, he and Sunsetter turned and walked back towards the office. "This doesn't make sense," Sunsetter repeated. The sheriff only fumed. "Incognia's too smart for this. A hostage situation to get these agents out of jail." She looked over her shoulder. "What's going on? Why has she taken the pub?"

They stopped, just over halfway to the office. "Why has she what?" asked the sheriff, regaining some of his lucidity.

"Why would she take over the pub?" Sunsetter asked. She held out her hand and stared at it. Even this far removed, she could just barely

perceive the fluctuations of the power conduit beneath them. Meters and meters away, the effect it was having on her internal stabilizers was obvious, however subtle. Sunsetter turned and faced down the street, out of town and towards the power station. "I bet that's why."

"You bet what?" urged the sheriff.

Sunsetter turned around entirely and stared at the sheer audacity of Incognia. "She's going to blow up the power station."

"She's going to what?!" exclaimed the sheriff.

"The attack on the power station, to lure us away? What if that was a backup plan?" suggested Sunsetter. "What if she intended to blow it, and when it didn't happen, she decided to...I don't know, send a pulse down the line or detonate an explosive beneath the pub?" The sheriff reasoned through the idea. The way his eyes narrowed; he knew it was more than possible. "If she blew up the power station, it would...it would destabilize the entire region."

"It might throw the planet off its axis," proposed the sheriff, beginning to agree with her. Neither was sure if he was being hyperbolic or underestimating the magnitude of the devastation.

"But either way, the Central Authority would have to respond," Sunsetter determined. "Assuming the planet survived," she allowed. The sheriff nodded, accepting that as either a given or an event they won't be around long enough to never forget. "They'd have to send troops. They'd have to completely reorganize their entire western strategy against the rebels, if not their global strategy." Sunsetter pointed at the pub. "That's the kind of bold thinking Incognia is known for."

The sheriff nodded, getting on-board. "So rescuing Jaguarion is just to buy her time," he reasoned. Sunsetter nodded. "Then what do we do? She's still got hostages."

Sunsetter thought for a moment. She looked again at the pub. As she did, a gust of nighttime air ran into her, coursing down the street like a pipe. "If she wants to blow the conduit," Sunsetter thought aloud, "there's got to be energy flowing, doesn't there?"

"Turn off the energy," the sheriff concluded, in-step with her thinking. He and Sunsetter both ran for his office.

"Yes, you heard me right," the sheriff said into the communicator. He paced in his office, holding the large device to his mouth. "Reroute all power

through this portion of the conduit. Zero out all transmissions beneath West Haven.”

“Sir,” came the mousy voice through the communicator, “that will completely deactivate West Haven.” The sheriff looked at Sunsetter.

“I think this place is an eyesore,” she told him.

He snickered and assured her, “It won’t be for much longer.”

There was a long pause, and then the voice came back through. “Yes sir. Rerouting power now. Lights will be out momentarily.”

Sunsetter went to the door and pushed it open. “How long will it take before the power loss causes total—” Her answer came when the entire street shut down. The whole town was suddenly a vacuum of light. All the noise, all the blistering lights from a dozen points of interest, it all went eerily silent. Only the stark blackness of the desert night was found.

Sunsetter held out her hand and felt its stability. As solid as the mesas at the outskirts of the desert, it hung in the darkness. A breeze came and went, blowing fragments of the desert night by her, but her hand remained steady. Sunsetter turned towards the pub. Her lip curled slightly and she began to walk slowly towards it.

She checked behind her, at the sheriff who remained with a weapon drawn on the still-shackled Jaguarion. Sunsetter approached the pub, glancing towards the buildings that lined the now-dark tourist trap. She could hear fearful whispers. Blooms of emergency lights fell onto the street. The eyes of fearful residents fell down upon her, curious as to the source of the blackout. Her steps were the only sounds as the residents and visitors alike watched. Sunsetter glanced towards the general store and saw Clutchjumper watching her. Powerful backup lights in his hands, he was going to check on neighbors. He saw her and nodded.

Sunsetter neared the pub cautiously, her blaster drawn but not aimed. She called out, “Incognia?” She reached the steps and paused, standing on the indent where Cloudridge had nearly been executed. “Incognia?” she called again.

“I think she’s gone!” shouted someone from inside. Their voice was hesitant and frantic. Incognia might have been gone but the threat wasn’t over. Sunsetter walked up the steps slowly and neared the doors. “There’s a bomb!” the voice yelled.

Sunsetter pushed open the door very slowly and peeked inside. She saw a metallic sphere sitting in the middle of the floor. It rolled slightly from side to side, creating a tiny circle, as if it was circling some singular point on

the floor. When the doors opened, the rolling ball slowed but didn't cease its rotation. The crowd of pub-goers were still on their knees, all of them too afraid to move. All eyes were locked on the swirling ball.

"S-she said it was a multi-stage bomb," said the music player. He whispered, still too afraid to speak aloud. "She said if we got up, or if anyone came in, it would blow up."

"Clever," was the highest praise Sunsetter could give the plan. She took a step towards the sphere and its rotations slowed correspondingly. "Motion sensors AND proximity sensors." It was a mild complaint. She considered the bomb for a second, before she tilted her blaster's barrel towards it. The bots on the floor only barely processed what she was doing before she fired. The shot struck the ball dead center and blew the top off of it. Debris scattered everywhere.

Sunsetter sighed with relief and slumped her head into her hands. She wiped her face, then remembered the room was full of still-apprehended bots. "Go," she told them, gesturing at the door obviously. They clattered, metallic feet resounding as they rushed out. As the others ran out of the pub, the music player asked, "How'd you know that wouldn't detonate it?"

Sunsetter put her blaster away, explaining, "Rebels meet violence with violence so their traps are only destroyed, not deactivated. I figured I'd hit the right spot to deactivate it, or it'd be too strong for us to feel anything." His jaw dropped open in horror.

Sunsetter walked passed him into the back. She didn't need to search for more than a second before she spotted the hole that had been made in the floor. The creaking metal had been slashed open with an energy blade, and the ground beneath had been hastily excavated. The torn gap disappeared into cavernous darkness below. Sunsetter stared down into the blackness for only a moment before she went against her better judgment and dropped inside.

A surprisingly deep descent made her fire the rockets on her feet, slowing her into a controlled drop. In time, she landed on the base of an absolutely massive pipe. It was lined with rings of conductive elements, guiding the flow of the lifeblood of the planet. At least before it was deactivated. Now, it was filled with only darkness and silence. Not even the echoes of distant footfalls could be heard.

Sunsetter and the sheriff sat in the office together, the dawn rising through the windows behind the sheriff. They both had energy packs in their hands, letting the precious energy syphon into their systems. "Not sure how she got away," the sheriff said, as much admitting as confessing. "I went down that hole almost fifty meters before I realized it was the conduit. I didn't know they were empty."

"Me either," said Sunsetter. They fell into a similar, thoughtful silence.

"The Central Authority responded," the sheriff said after a thought. He turned to his computer and hit a few buttons. "They're sending a repair crew out here. Apparently, the conduits have to be kept vacuum sealed? By exposing it, the whole grid 'round here is compromised. They said it's going to be a quarter of a solar cycle before the system is returned to full energy."

Sunsetter shook her head, in disappointed awe.

"They're sending Iron Horse," the sheriff remarked. He added conversationally, "I always wanted to meet him." Sunsetter only smirked. "He's going to transport Jaguarion back to civilization." He over-enunciated the word with some cynicism. "Said they're giving me a medal." He turned in his seat back towards her. "I told them you were involved, that you basically took the lead." Sunsetter only nodded. "They said only..." He checked the message again. "Appropriate compensation will be applied at the conclusion of your contract." He turned back to Sunsetter. "So you get a bonus after you bring in Systema." Sunsetter nodded again. "The trail's run cold," the sheriff speculated.

"They always do," she said stoically.

Silence fell over them as they shared the post-tension depression. "At least we thwarted Incognia," the sheriff offered unenthusiastically. "Not a lot of bots can say that."

"Did we?" Sunsetter asked him. "Power system is all out of whack. A vast network of pipes that lead all over this side of the planet are vacant and will remain so for cycles. Iron Horse is bringing a whole team of repair crews here, taken off of who-knows-what job back in the metropolises?" Sunsetter stared out the window at the dawn like it was the puzzle they were exploring. "I don't know if we thwarted her, or merely played our parts."

She stood from the seat and placed the battery on the sheriff's desk. "But, as I said at the beginning, Incognia's not my target. Systema is." She gave the sheriff a single nod, then exited, resuming the pursuit of her prey.

For more sci-fi action, check out the dystopian love story, [Samifel](#). It's available now in ebook or in print. Or you can find more of Sunsetter's adventures and RVA's other writings at:

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