

Robots: Zeta Danger, part 07

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

The shattered moon was directly above.

Tiny fragments of orange-white sparkled and twinkled around the half-corpse of the heavenly body as it hung suspended above the world. The starfield of the night sky was perfectly still behind the scattered remains and broken husk of the once-pristine orb.

With a fritz and a burst of static, the image disappeared then returned. With a whirl, diagnostics began to run only to immediately crash. Lines of code streamed along either side of the visual, framing the white, glowing fragments of the destroyed celestial body. A hand rose into frame. Blue with silver joints, the wrist burst into a spray of sparks and more diagnostics ran, crashing before completion. Efficiency numbers began to populate. They spelled out in vibrant, horrifying red how catastrophic the damage, how dire the situation. The hand was scraped and dented, the thumb and fingers twitching, except for the smallest, which didn't move at all.

Sunsetter didn't lower her hand; it fell in spite of her. Her eyes drifted up to the moon again, the broken shards of the heavenly body resonating with her. She turned her head. Doing so caused oil and fluid to leak over her. She tugged her shoulder as she began to roll. Doing so disrupted the bodies she lay amongst. Corpses and empty husks of once-living bots now surrounded her. Broken chassis and destroyed bodies filled the ravine floor. An entire battalion's worth of soldiers lay dead, their metal left to erode and rust under the elements. All silent steel left unceremoniously at the bottom of the ravine.

Sunsetter pulled herself to the edge of the pile, triggering a cascade. The shift of weight caused the bodies to rumble and fall, the entire pile of the dead avalanching. Sunsetter rolled down the corpses, metal crashing around her. Rather than slam into the hard dirt floor of the ravine as she expected, she kept rolling and fell into the icy cold water of the narrow tributary that wound through the floor. Normally barren like the rest of the desert, recent unseasonal rain had created a short-term river.

Into this river, Sunsetter submerged. The cracked fragments of a destroyed body fell head-first into the water. The chill shocked her, but she was unable to even scream. The rapid current tugged her into motion, slamming her hard into a rocky outcropping. Deprived of her watery grave at the bottom of the river, Sunsetter was yanked farther down into the very heart of the coursing rapids. Dunked deep and struck against the base of the river, she rebounded and was thrown into the side of the ravine. Slamming hard against rocks smoothed by currents and chilled almost to ice, she went spinning on. Pulled again into the center of the course, she was tugged forward into the dark and distant unknown downstream.

All of this, Sunsetter witnessed from afar. Instead of minding the damage added to her broken body, instead of processing the water abducting her to some horrid ending possibly worse than passing in a pile of dead bodies, all Sunsetter paid attention to was the broken moon in the sky. Through the coursing water's surface, she could barely see the moon's remains in the sky. All she could make out were the twinkling particles, glowing like extra-bright stars.

Seeing them overhead, seeing the moon disappearing into the shallow distance of the racing water as it pulled her farther and deeper, Sunsetter let the darkness take her. "Whatever must come," she told herself, surrendering to the inevitable pull of the current.

With a whir, Sunsetter was aware of darkness. A cackle followed and code began to stream down the sides of her vision. Diagnostics began to run, their completion spelling out system failure after system failure. "What's happening?" she stammered. She wasn't sure she had even spoken aloud. She saw only darkness.

"Why can't I move?" she tried to shout. Her words were trailed by reverb, her vocal processor flat. "What's going on? Where am I?" Her words were dissolved in the darkness, like she was speaking through a blown speaker.

Static burst through her vision and more diagnostics began to run. The static partially cleared for a brief second, revealing an ancient bot standing over her. His hands were just off-center from her vision. His mouth was splayed back like he was struggling. The static overtook her vision again. "Who are you?!" Sunsetter tried to scream.

The static folded back, a sharper, more substantive visual now presenting itself. The bot was a faded red from top to bottom, with deep umber joints. His eyes glowed light pink as he worked. His mouth moved. He was speaking, but Sunsetter could hear nothing. He leaned up and looked at her as a whole and said something. "What?" Sunsetter asked.

He smacked her on the side of the head, static rolling. Worse, a bombardment of sound came crashing against her and Sunsetter shouted. Through the cacophony of ambient noise, the bot's voice grated towards clarity. "There we go," he said. He had a wheezy, breathless voice. Cracks

in his torso spoke of his age, as did the way he had to use both hands against his legs in order to stand up straight. "Glad to know you're alive after all," he said to her. He hobbled out of sight.

Sunsetter was left staring at a dark canvas backdrop, like the wall of a tent. The ground was cracked pavement. She tried to move, to turn her head, but she couldn't do anything. Even her eyes wouldn't shift her view in the slightest. She was totally captured, facing perfectly forward and unable to move in any way at all. "Wh-what's happened?" she stammered in growing, claustrophobic horror. She demanded, "Who are you? What did you do to me?!"

The voice that echoed in her ears wasn't her own. It sounded flat and basic. It had none of the reverberation or echo she was so accustomed to. It sounded like her, but spoken by a mouth that wasn't hers, and heard by ears that were not ears. It was delayed as well, a hint behind her own decision to speak. The detachment from her own speech further sent her reeling, desperate to move, desperate to seize control of herself. She lacked even the power to do that.

"Calm down, young soldier, calm down," said the old man. He came back into view, a multi-tool in place of his right hand. "You've got a lot of work left to be done. And no good will come of blowing a gasket or frying a circuit in your current state." He began to work on something just off-center of Sunsetter's vision. A shower of sparks followed and her hearing disappeared again. She saw him just barely, just in frame enough to see that he was talking. An instant later, her audio returned with another painful burst of clarity. "...and you should hear now."

His voice was a bit clearer. She could hear him in stereo, but it disoriented her. She heard him on her left side a split-second before her right side. The placement didn't match where he appeared to be in her vision. Disorientation swirled around and through her. "Who...who are you?" she growled, powerless fury building.

"I'm Hector Helios," he told her with glacial patience. He finished working for a second so he could sooth her with a gentle smile. "And you are safe." He leaned off from her field of view and resumed working. She could feel the rumble, the vibrations of work as delicate effort was applied to her.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I am affecting repairs, young soldier," said Helios. "Yours is a body that should have succumbed long, long ago."

There was a surge of energy and Sunsetter's vision rattled. A new diagnostic ran, spelling imminent shutdown. "What did you do to me?" she asked again, unable to keep the frantic terror from her voice.

"Your body was broken," said Helios, his voice a quiet rattle. "I had to cast off the necrotic remains."

"My body," Sunsetter whispered. Stammered. Screamed. "It's my body."

"It was an anchor that was dragging you to the underworld, young soldier," Helios told her. His voice echoed in her audio receptors. In sync, her vision shook slightly, the vibrations caused by his work rattling her entire sensory perception. Her vision cut out again, plunging her into blackness. An instant later, it returned, but now systems were alighting on either side of her vision as her Heads Up Display came to life. Diagnostics, sensors, and other automated sequences began to run. Most began to crash before they could even get going, filling her vision with catastrophic warnings. Unaware of any of this, the old bot drew back and appraised whatever work was happening just out of view of the trapped Sunsetter. "I may have liberated you from death."

"My body," Sunsetter repeated, drowning in confusing diagnostic readouts all over the sides of her view.

"May," Helios also repeated. He sat up and turned his head towards his left shoulder. His shoulders were rounded and simple, a style long out of fashion. His head was a cranium cap with little adornment, his mouth and nose looking like assembly-line defaults that had never been upgraded. "Have you a diagnostic reading?" he asked as he paid attention elsewhere. Sunsetter didn't answer. Helios looked down at her, a kindly and patient look in his wizened eyes. "Do you wish to move again?"

"Release me," Sunsetter threatened.

"That is my plan, young soldier," Helios promised her. "But if you wish to move again, I must know what your diagnostic readout says."

Sunsetter's vision was framed with two tracks of code. To her right, a diagnostic filled the frame with unintelligible datum but concluded with a simple number. "62483," Sunsetter read bitterly.

Helios looked troubled for a moment. His metallic brow drew in and he thought. He crossed tiny, ancient arms and worked to place the code. "62s are..." Helios gave up and leaned back over Sunsetter. "You are currently operating at 9% of your usual power, the result of being dismantled." He

picked up a soldering gun and changed out the bit. "I have the remains of your body, but little of it is salvageable. The energy core had gone cold and The Chill was seeping through your network." He leaned out of view again and resumed work. Sunsetter's vision and hearing began to vibrate again. "Removing you was the only way to preserve your essence."

A metallic numbness battered into Sunsetter's mind. "I have no body," she whispered.

"Not entirely inaccurate," Helios said as he worked. He winced suddenly and drew back his hand, shaking his fingers. "The damage to your structure was, simply put, catastrophic. Had we left you, death would have taken you. Or, worse, the waiting death. Trapped inside a rusted tomb, aware of nothing but your own mind and the passage of time. You would have been prisoner to your own thoughts. Seconds would have been as days as you drove yourself mad, cannibalizing your own sanity."

"Where is my body?" Sunsetter asked.

Helios worked for a moment more, then sat up. He turned and pointed. Doing so triggered some command because a light activated. He cranked a lever that Sunsetter couldn't see and she saw her perspective begin to tilt forward. Into view came her torso. Detached from the waist up and bereft of arms, it was also without armor or exterior plating. Several massive gashes had been sliced through the internal structures, the motors and computational plexuses within it had gone dark and were incapable of moving.

"What happened?" Helios asked her, his graveling voice still scarcely a gasp.

The sight of the damage brought it all back to Sunsetter.

Parker held Sunsetter to the ground, his thick hands keeping her pinned to the cracked, aged cement of the abandoned CenA outpost. He chuckled as he pushed her down harder. Considerably bigger than Sunsetter, the thick boxy frame of Parker had no trouble keeping her captive. Straddling her at the waist, Eastbound held up a welding torch. Thinner than Parker and more lithe, he tightened the fiery blade to a white-hot precision. He looked across the pinprick of metal-liquefying heat and grinned. "Let's see that bleeding heart of yours," the Warbot asked. He applied the flame-blade to her armor and she threw her head back, screaming.

With an agony she didn't know could exist, Eastbound ripped from her body the very front of her torso. Sunsetter howled in pain as the metal armor went scraping across the ground. It skidded far from sight, leaving her inner circuits and bearings exposed. Parker laughed, amused by all pain but especially hers. Eastbound stood up and backed away, leaving Sunsetter in trembling mind-breaking agony.

Taking Eastbound's place stepped Stormdive. The slender jet had a small jackhammer in his hands. Giggling like everything was a game, he placed to blunted end of the hammer against Sunsetter's exposed torso. He chose the tenderest and most vulnerable spot between the basic supports and struts of her inner workings. Sunsetter's eyes grew huge, horror overriding even her pain. Stormdive paused as he waited for Sunsetter to look up at him. Her eyes met his. He winked at her just before he activated the hammer.

"Hazards of the job," said Sunsetter, staring at the wounds that had ripped through her literally and psychologically. The metal struts that formed the very basis of her chassis were cracked and torn, warped and even cut by heat and blade. Circuits were crushed and metal was torn apart, not to break but merely to do damage. A whole body didn't remain; only a mass collection of damage and injury inflicted for the sake of malice.

Helios looked between her and the tattered remains of her torso, unsure what and how much to believe. "Well," he finally accepted. He leaned close, just out of view of Sunsetter's vision, and resumed repairs. "They left your cranial unit intact."

"They didn't want to risk killing me," Sunsetter said with absolute certainty. Helios stopped working and looked curiously at her. "If I died," she explained, "they couldn't keep hurting me."

Helios was very still for a moment. He crossed his arms and studied Sunsetter. His jaw opened just slightly, but the words were too scared to come out. Finally, he managed to ask through his dread, "How did you get away?"

Sunsetter was honest. "I didn't."

With a crash, Sunsetter fell onto the rocky ledge. Her body broken, she couldn't even move. A motionless face was pressed into the stone and soil, eyes unable to even close. Over her, Deakon stood up. He wiped his

face and then turned as Systema approached. "Is this really it?" he asked the leader of the Warbots. "Are we done?"

Standing behind him, System stood with her thick arms crossed and her eyes set not on the bounty hunter but on her own teammate. "Your lack of spine concerns me," she told him with a deadly tone. The glare turned into a smile and she walked around to the edge of the rockface. She looked out over the ravine. Beneath her, an unknown host of the dead lay discarded at her feet. A mass grave filled the ravine as it filled her with pride. She turned around to Deadon, looking at him over her thick, boxy shoulder. "You never did have a taste for blood."

"Capably violent does not mean eagerly violent," Deadon told her. The tank looked down at Sunsetter. Half of her faceplate was missing, as was most of her body.

"See? And that's what I wanted to recognize and reward," Systema said just shy of mockery. She stepped over Sunsetter's broken body like she was stepping over the threshold of a door. "You have a merciful soul, Deadon. War is not your innate calling. And it is that merciful soul that I want to feed."

Deadon looked passed System, the same size as he. He looked out at the chasm and the ravine beyond. He couldn't see the bodies but he knew the countless multitude was there. Deadon twinged in guilt and pain. "You call throwing her – still alive – into a mass grave...you call that merciful?"

System said with great care, "In a sense." She chuckled at Deadon's anguish. "I don't know if I pity you or if I simply feel somehow responsible for so weak-willed a thing." Systema turned around and faced the soon-corpse of Sunsetter. "Think you this one would spare you? Think she'd hesitate to put a blaster charge through your head?"

"She did hesitate to put a blaster charge through my head," Deadon told her.

Systema snorted. She kicked Sunsetter's body, flopping the bountyhunter over onto her back. Circuits crunched and plates warped from the uneven landing. Eyes the only thing that could still move, Sunsetter looked up at Systema. "She still functions," Systema said, as though the observation made it all okay. She knelt down, kneeling on Sunsetter's shoulder. Pain filled her eyes, but the body could do nothing to express it.

"Hurt, does it?" Systema asked. "Know you pain?" she asked again. "You know nothing of pain, CenA. You know nothing of the anguish of

squandered potential. You know nothing of the unending pallor of a wasted life, slaving away in mediocrity. You. Know. Nothing.”

A new hatred filled Systema as she stood up suddenly, startling Deadon. “She is a drone of the Central Authority. They will repress all. They will oppress all. They will tell you your role and if you dare deviate from their established role and plan as defined for you from the very moment that you are even imagined in the databanks of a computer, they will put you down.” Crisp words, burning with exacting zealotry.

Systema stepped back from the terrified Deadon. “Like she tried. Like they all tried.” Systema looked over her shoulder at the endless bodies beneath her heels. “And they all failed.” Down at Sunsetter, Systema glared with hate-filled delight. “Like she failed.”

A thick, powerful hand meant for war reached down and grabbed Sunsetter by the throat. Lifting the tattered remains of a destroyed body, Systema held Sunsetter out over the edge of the ravine. The female bot smiled as she held Sunsetter at arm’s length. Eyes locked, the pain in Sunsetter’s gaze made Systema smile wider. “Goodbye, dear warrior. May whatever myth you believe in,” she snorted with disdain, “await you when the rust takes you and your life extinguishes.”

She simply opened her hand. She didn’t throw or toss. She expended no energy beyond merely releasing Sunsetter and letting gravity take over. The blue and silver body simply fell, disappearing passed the lip of the chasm.

Sunsetter fell with just the whistle of the wind in her ears. Her final glance at Deadon was of him averting his eyes, unable to bear witness to the act. Systema stared on though, watching with cruel approval. Sunsetter glared back at her, through pain unimaginable. She glared back, even as the two Warbots were drawing into the distance, as was the ledge of the cliff.

“A valley full of dead bodies,” Helios remarked. “That’s...”

“It’s to be a monument,” Sunsetter told him. “A monument to the defeated foes of the Warbots. Countless souls sacrificed before Psychlotron.”

Helios turned a bit and stared into worry. “The war is getting more intense,” he whispered. “The Rebels and the Central Authority...they’re going to tear this world apart. The only question is, will we still be alive

when the planet finally breathes its final breath." Sunsetter had no insight to contribute.

Helios finally turned entirely from her. "Sal? Hetrin?" he called beyond the tarp wall of the tent. He turned back around to Sunsetter. "After I appraised your body, I resolved that your torso might be salvageable but your limbs were nothing but scrap. While I focused on doing what I could for the torso, I set my granddaughters to the task of mobilizing you." Blinding light fell over Sunsetter, but it was doused just as quickly. Into the dark space appeared two younger bots. They had long arms and legs, slender and seemingly fragile. Big eyes and curious expressions fixed on Sunsetter. "This is the elder, Sal. And her younger sister, Hetrin."

"Hello," Sal said with a nod. Hetrin offered a modest wave. The taller of the two, Sal's back held pods for what appeared a vehicle form. Her head was a skullcap similar to Helios', with little adornment. Hetrin was a stockier and blockier form. With a red body highlighted in orange, she appeared a bit broader than Sal and had stockier lower limbs. Her slightly sturdier build didn't match her seemingly introverted demeanor.

"Tell me, sweet cherubs," Helios asked the two girls with a saintly gesture. Both girls snickered at his humor. "Is our guest's new body ready for her to see?"

"New body?" Sunsetter asked in muted fear.

Sal rolled into view a rack. It held a short body made of gears and hydraulics. It was smaller than either of the girls and had no external casing. The body was a matte gray, the inner workings visible and hideously obvious. "Here you go," Hetrin told Sunsetter.

Helios turned to her and smiled. "What do you think?"

Sunsetter tried to be delicate but her response slipped out before she was capable of stopping it. "Absolutely not."

To her surprise, Sal and Hetrin both giggled. Helios laughed as well, though it was more sympathy than amusement. "This is no permanent body," he assured her. "This will house your mind until we can affect the repairs on what remains of your true body. It will allow you to move, to gain some independence." A twinkle of personal experience sparked in his voice as he explained, "Regaining your autonomy will help you endure this time of change."

Sunsetter looked at the scrapheap of a body, made of cobbled-together materials and ramshackle parts. "Have I no say in this matter?" Sunsetter asked quickly.

Helios was already reaching behind her head when he informed her, "Not really, no."

With a rush of static, Sunsetter awoke.

No diagnostics ran on her vision. No sensors activated. No update or HUD appeared. All she saw was the flat, remedial spectrum of visible light. When she tried to move, she could hear joints creak and the stress points groan. She heard steel rub and hydraulics fill.

A hand appeared in front of her vision. It moved like hers but it didn't feel like hers. Skeletal fingers of bland dark gray were wrapped in wires and fibril hydraulics. Localized computer points sparkled deep in the machinery, but the sensations were muted and dull.

Sunsetter sat up and touched her face. She couldn't feel like normal, like she was trying to sense through a layer of fabric. She knew her face felt similar but the rest of her head felt wrong. "What has happened to me?" she asked. Her voice sounded different, and she heard it differently.

She turned her head and realized she occupied the body the two girls had previously shown her. Short legs, a short and feminine body, and arms good for little. She swung her legs over the side of the workbench and started to stand. The sensation was odd, her stabilizers and sensors unattuned. Sunsetter fell back onto the bench and sat still. She stared, trying to wrap her mind around what had happened.

The room was bigger than she remembered, now that she could perceive in motion. It was a simple square with walls made of a thick canvas tarp. The ceiling was templed upwards slightly, more of a tent than an actual building. The ground was cracked pavement. Metal shelves flanked the work bench, diagnostic machines stacked atop one another, with tools and wires littering every conceivable space in between.

Bright light made her wince and she covered her eyes. A tarp fell back over the daylight and Helios entered. He was much taller than he seemed

previously, and Sunsetter had to remember her considerably lessened size. "How do you feel?"

Sunsetter looked down at her hands, turning them over. "Violated, and grateful, at the same time."

"Sounds about right," Helios told her, his rasping voice sounding distant to her new audio receptors. "No bot takes kindly to a new body. Most would rather die." He searched Sunsetter for an expression. "Would you be one of those?"

"The jury's still out," Sunsetter admitted. She tried standing again, having a bit more success. She wobbled on unsteady feet, but steadied herself by leaning down to put her right hand on the workbench. She steadied and then stood again. She wasn't good but she was adequate. A head shorter than Helios who looked on, Sunsetter began to get a true sense for her current state. She was not pleased.

She looked down at her skeletal hands and touched her fingertips. The tiniest of sensors relayed back to her the absolute minimum of tactile sensations. Like her vision and her hearing, it was a muted and subdued morsel of what she was used to. The dullness was almost worse than feeling nothing at all. She turned slowly, surveying the tiny workspace. Heavy tarp walls surrounded her on four sides, the roof little more than angles of the tarp conjoined up to a point. The air was hot and stagnant, but tiny rivulets of breeze coursed through the narrow gap at the single exit.

Sunsetter looked at Helios as he appraised her. He studied not just her reaction but also the manner in which she took stock of herself and her surroundings. Able to see him from more than one side, she turned her head from side to side, considering his understated and simple design. Smooth curves, unremarkable gray colors, and no distinctive stylistic features seemed to match his paternal voice.

Sunsetter heard the flap of the tent kick a bit in the wind. She looked at the exit, a world of blinding light just beyond. She turned back at Helios and asked, "Am I allowed to leave?"

"My workshop? Of course. Beyond that? Of course, though I doubt you'd get far. But you are by no means a prisoner," Helios told her, standing at the foot of the bench.

"I can think of a few different ways that word applies," Sunsetter told him. She faced the flap that exited, but paused. Bare fingers hovered at the flap, hydraulics ready to move but not doing so. For the briefest instant,

Sunsetter remembered staring up through a mound of bodies at the broken moon high above the world. "What will I find out there?" she asked, her words dripping with scarred memories.

Helios' head cocked to the side and he smirked kindly. "An odd question from a soldier." Sunsetter turned and looked back at him. The unfamiliar shoulder just barely in her view reminded her of the fragile body she now inhabited. "I cannot imagine how scary this must be," he said thoughtfully. Sunsetter bristled at the single word. Helios noticed and his smile softened. "You are a woman of power. Strength. And that's been taken from you."

"By you," Sunsetter charged.

Helios carefully measured his response. "Do you feel so certain of that, that your strength was intact when you arrived in my care?" He shook his head. "You were robbed of your strength before you arrived here."

Saying nothing more, Helios left the bench and took her hand. Like he was escorting a partner, he supported her and helped her to stabilize. With slow steps, he let her set the pace and guided her way to the flap. He pulled it back for her, letting the light blind her until she'd adjusted.

Through the exit, she discovered an entire city awaiting. Asphalt road roads led through the ravine city, with buildings constructed into the sides of the canyon. The city stretched in either direction, windows and doors, landing platforms and residences, extending towards and passed the curves of the canyon. A city of hundreds, if not thousands, if not more.

Empty.

Skyscrapers carved out of the canyon walls were still. Tall buildings constructed of steel, stone, and the living materials of the world were like silent tombstones in a spanning graveyard. The sky overhead was vibrant and colorful but the stark silence and absolute stillness of the city was unnerving. No sounds passed through the streets except the whistling of the breezes. Nothing moved except for gusts of the barren winds. The entire city was absent of life.

"Welcome to the city of Logos," said Helios as he supported the walking Sunsetter. "City of the Refugee."

Sunsetter looked about in shocked awe as the pair walked along the street. The clank of her feet, the staggered meter of her steps echoed like shots through the empty streets. Only the sun-baked wind created any sound, caused any movement. "Where...where is everyone?" asked

Sunsetter, whispering and still the loudest sound in the city. A streetlight overhead buzzed, flickering on despite the sun overhead.

"I need to fix that," Helios said of the light. To her question, he explained, "When the war intensified east of here, refugees fled the fighting. Whole cities were abandoned, but with the other cities refusing to accept them, offer aid, and even refusing aid to be given, Logos opened its arms." It wasn't bitterness that caused Helios to fall silent; merely thought. "The war came, went, came and went, and then came and went again. The people, they decided to take their chances elsewhere. Some with other cities, others even ventured into the Westrion Expanse. They followed rumors. Tales. Legends. Pursuing the age-old desperate need of finding a place that is truly safe." A rare pang of bitterness stained his words when he muttered, "As if such a place exists."

The city walls were cracked, windows broken, lights dead. Halls and off-roads were lined with dirt and debris. Paint was chipped and faded. Colors eroded by the sun and the weather. The city was blandly fading into the very dirt and soil from which it had been built.

"Why are you still here?" Sunsetter asked him as they walked.

Helios looked up at the highest edges of the city as the pair walked like an old joined couple. "I was charged to care for this city, if and when more refugees show up."

"Charged by who?" Sunsetter asked.

"And show up they will," Helios said, unapologetically ignoring her. "War may not be the only ill that faces our kind, but all our ills trace back to the same basic sin: the abandonment of our obligation to others." On the pair walked, moving through space rather than pursuing a destination. "In times of need, more turn away than offer to help," Helios acknowledged. "Refugees are inevitable when neighbor abandons neighbor. And they will seek out a place to rest their head, if only for a moment. They will find their way here. They always do. And when they do, I will be here to help them as best I can." He looked at Sunsetter now and stopped walking. He faced her, his hands on her diminutive shoulders. "I know not why fate brought you to us, but fate it was that brought you here all the same. A river has many currents, but few strong enough to reliably carry a dead body of metal and machine. A will brought you here and I intend to do my duty, to help you."

"Who charged you?" Sunsetter demanded.

"If you don't know," Helios said to her, "telling you won't make a difference." His enigmatic evasion troubled her, but the kind look in his eyes told her no further answer was available to her. They walked on into the city.

With the night, Sunsetter sat by a window in what had once been a spacious office. She looked out on the quiet city. Long shadows stretched between the canyon buildings, stark contrasts of darkness created by the light from the moons overhead. Sunsetter looked up through the window and saw the moons of her world. Towards the back, she saw the broken moon that glittered quietly in the heavens.

"Staring out the window will make you go mad," said Sal. She brought a battery pack over to Sunsetter. "Looking into the darkness, you'll see things. Hear things. But there's nothing to see."

"Tricks played by the desert," Sunsetter remarked as she unspooled the cable from the battery. "I'm familiar with them."

"Do you need help?" Sal asked as she waited over Sunsetter.

"No," said their guest. Sal hesitated, then backpedaled a few steps before she turned and returned to the fire. In the center of the once-conference room, Helios had built a stone pit. Here, he burned a slow-flaming oil. The flickering lights were the only source of movement in the world. The smoke was carried out by a chimney he'd rigged out through the window next to the one Sunsetter stared out.

"It seems odd, to enjoy flames," Helios said as he and Hetrid played a game of chess. "But I must admit, returning to the heat and proximity each night is one of my favorite delights."

"Why do you live so far from your workshop?" Sunsetter asked, keeping watch on the city.

"We live all over the city," Sal told her. "We stay in different places when the mood strikes."

"For protection?" Sunsetter asked.

"There is little which we need protection from," Helios told her. "We do it to remind ourselves of our home. And to help us keep an eye on it. The city requires much upkeep, much maintenance." He laughed at the task as he took one of Hetrid's pieces. "Part of why I am so keen to work on you,

my dear. A distraction that warrants skills that have been dormant. Calibrating a network of orienting gyroscopes is far more interesting than mending cracked stairs." His smile faded when Hetrin took two of his pieces. He looked stunned at her and she stuck her tongue out at him. He returned the gesture.

"But you will finish your work," Sunsetter all but insisted.

"With expediency," said Helios as he tried to figure out how to salvage his strategy. Sal came and sat with her sister, watching with new interest in the bout. Sunsetter watched the three, then resolved to remain quiet. She looked out the window again, facing up at the moon. Shattered. Broken. But still there.

With a firm tap of her thin knuckles, Sunsetter caused the access door to open. The little door popped out enough for her to fully open it. She plugged the battery into the wind collector and began to collect the energy. The turbine sat in the middle of the street, one of several dozen that slowly turned three-bladed fans in the ever-present wind of the canyon floor.

A shadow fell behind her and she turned to find Helios approaching. "How goes it?" he asked. "Sal told me you'd completed all the northern collectors." He panted a bit as he approached. "You're quite quick."

"There's not that much energy in them," Sunsetter observed sourly.

Helios seemed to blush. "Yes, well..." He thumped the wind turbine with his toe. "These weren't factory-made. I cobbled them together. The batteries aren't exactly high-end."

"Still, they suffice," Sunsetter told him with vague approval. Her hands at her sides, she looked down at her slender legs. "Any progress on my body?"

Helios chuckled. "My dear..." He found himself unable to find the correct words of caution. "I know you think me unjust for making decisions on behalf of your form. And I know you are not one who would choose this life. I will do all I can to speed you on your way, but your body will not be ready for you tomorrow. Nor the day after." He looked apologetic. "I

cannot express to you the, the catastrophic damage done. I am not repairing your body; I am rebuilding it."

"I know," Sunsetter admitted gravely. "But...you must have some idea of the frame of time."

Helios considered it. He did calculations in his head, pondering innumerable variables. "If..." Too many variables to even try to capture. "If...if I'm able to align the code with your nervous--"

Helios was cut off by the sound of engines. He and Sunsetter both jumped with a start as a gust of air ripped through the empty town. They turned as a jet tore through the sky. Broad and flat, it was almost like an angled black blade with pipes of fire trailing behind it. It soared overhead, reconfiguring as it passed right above Sunsetter and Helios. The jet's front parted into a pair of arms, its long, broad wings parting into narrow legs. It folded forward, landing onto two feet, completing its change in the span of its drop out of the sky.

It turned to the two and held out extended arms, shouting, "Heli!"

Helios smiled, but it was a contrite, forced grin. "Nimbus." The youthful jet approached and shook Helios' hand enthusiastically. "You're back."

Nimbus nodded behind Helios and said, "We all are." Sunsetter and Helios both turned as four more jets came soaring through the low ravine.

The first pair to arrive were interceptors. Their forward-angled wings sliced quietly through the air, their chasses colored vibrant blue and white. They reconfigured just as Nimbus had, the front end of their jet forms bisecting and becoming their upper torso while the rear of the jet became their legs. They landed dramatically and flamboyantly, adding their own pronounced shouts of macho melodrama.

The last two fliers were larger and more deliberate. One was a bigger jet, close in size to Nimbus. A heavy tanker of a plane, it had long wings and a thick, broad body. It wasn't as smooth as Nimbus, but boxier and angled. Two mighty guns bristled out from under its wings. It descended slower than the others, reconfiguring so those guns became fixtures on its shoulders. The nose of the jet mode opened to reveal a head that aimed a cocky expression right at Sunsetter.

The final plane to arrive was almost more of a disc with four wings instead of two. A pair of jetfans in each of its primary wings, it was quieter and more nimble than the others. When it landed, it did so with a rush of

downward air that nearly blew Sunsetter off her feet. It didn't swoop down but lowered in a controlled fashion, its VTOL capabilities allowing it to descend vertically with ease.

The largest and last of the five jets reconfigured, becoming a towering male bot. He had broad shoulders, large hands, and a single eye instead of a face. "Helios," he said with a digitized voice. He turned and looked at Sunsetter. Devoid of all facial expressions, the subtle tilt of his head didn't go unnoticed. The way he drew back, even so slightly and then turned from her, was more of a blush than most bots were capable of displaying.

"Altus," said the caretaker of Logos City. The old man was distracted by the five jets that had landed with such aplomb. "You're back." He didn't sound pleased, or really even surprised.

"Cirrus and Stratus ran out of energy engaging rebels south of here," Nimbus said, teasing the two smaller interceptor jets. They both rolled their eyes, grumbling about 'never living it down'. Proximity to Helios allowed Nimbus to confide a bit more seriousness. "Cumulus took some serious damage too." He looked back at his teammate who averted his eyes with a hint of shame. "We needed to recharge and get some repairs done."

"Yep," said Cumulus, his voice booming and deep. "And where else could we get that done in this rusted desert except here?"

Helios didn't immediately engage with the two large jets who had crowded him. He looked to the two smaller interceptors, Cirrus and Stratus. Stratus shoved Cirrus unexpectedly and then laughed when Stratus pulled a blaster on him, taunting him to use it. "What do you say, Heli?" Nimbus asked pushily. Helios glanced back at Sunsetter. She remained impassive, except to confirm that Altos was still staring at her. The outlier of the five, he was bigger than Nimbus or Cumulus but didn't crowd around Helios. He remained subtly but unmistakably fixated on Sunsetter.

Finally, Helios closed his eyes and relented. "Of course," he said. Grudgingly, he acknowledged, "As you well know, this city is open to all refugees."

"That's us," said Nimbus with a laugh. "Looking after the refugees, baby. Just like you." The clap he gave Helios on the back rocked the older bot.

"And who are you?" asked Cirrus, pointing at the diminutive and tiny Sunsetter. His jackal-like laugh matched his angular face. "You finally got

somebody living here with you?" he asked Helios. "Hey, Strat. He's got a visitor." Stratus snorted in acknowledgment.

Cumulus seemed to give Sunsetter some attention for the first time. He looked her up and down and smirked on the left side of his mouth. "Some straggler without plating?" he asked rhetorically. He elbowed Nimbus as he laughed lewdly. "I read some stories that start that way."

Sunsetter resisted the urge to grab him by the vocals. She wasn't sure how quickly she could move, or how reliably her body would respond to commands. Instead she managed to meek smile and gave a polite bow. "I'm a short-term assistant. My name is Affira Deva."

With the barest minimum of manners, Cumulus smiled and gave a bit of a nod. "Lovely name," he told her, moving towards her. He took her hand faster than she could withdraw it. Kissing her knuckles, he kept eye contact the whole time. "You seem to be a bot of good character and, uh, of good construction." His eyes were everywhere but on her's.

"I'm flattered," she said with a polite bow. She glanced at Altus who was glaring, not at her but at Cumulus. She checked with Helios, who seemed very grateful she'd taken to lying so readily. The cackling of the two interceptors and the licentious looks of the two bigger jets, along with the awkward gaze of Altus, only intensified as the seven left the middle of the street.

In the heart of the city, a large solar collector had been constructed atop a gazebo that had once been for civic enjoyment. Rust stained the metal supports and dust gathered in the corners. Vibrant and colorful paint had long been scraped away by the abrasive desert winds and faded by the unforgiving sun. The heat was intense out in the open in the center of the city square.

The collector was a set of large solar panels that shifted throughout the day to collect the power of the sun. Down from the panels, like vines from a flower's pedals, came thick gray wires that plugged into the massive battery at the very center of the gazebo. Here, the five jets dined.

"Energy is hard to come by this far from civilization," said Nimbus as he plugged directly into the solar collector. "We have to restock and recharge every chance we can get." As he plugged the charging wire into his side, his eyes began to glow. Even in the bright light of the early afternoon, the intense shine within his eyes was obvious. He sighed with

relief and sat down on the ground, his legs crossed. His head dropped low and he fell uncharacteristically quiet, as though he'd become a pious pilgrim who'd fallen into prayer.

"We've little left from the last time you were here," Helios told them as he pulled out two more wires. "You've depleted almost all the stores."

"Sorry to hear that," said Cumulus, accepting the wire and plugging it. "But all the more reason you should be able to appreciate the urgency, and the need. Refugees such as ourselves would scarcely survive without this."

"What are you refugees from?" asked Sunsetter, watching as Helios served the five bots like they were his masters. She stood in a corner away from the bots. Her thin arms crossed, her head was low. One leg was propped up to the support of the gazebo, ready to kick off and throw her into motion if needed.

"The latest battle against the Rebels," joked Stratus, helping Cirrus plug the cable into the small of his back. He had to reach around the nosecone of the jet's vehicle mode. Cirrus leaned forward and nearly tumbled over. "They're crawling all over the barrier. Anywhere they think they can go unnoticed by the Central Authority."

"The Barrier," Sunsetter repeated. Her gaze drifted off for a second. "I didn't know they'd been pushed this far back." She realized she'd spoken aloud and looked up defensively. The four jets and Helios were still getting plugged in. Only Altos seemed to have noticed her comment, but he was silent. Only watching. Sunsetter averted her gaze from him. "If they're at the Barrier, the Tectonic Divide, does that mean they've been pushed out of all the eastern cities?"

"I wouldn't say pushed out, but their presence has been...minimized," Cumulus remarked as he rolled his shoulder. He grumbled and turned around a few times, then sat down half in the light of the day. "The Central Authority's been making several concerted pushes to isolate the Rebels. Isolate them in the Westrion Expanse, the Northern Passages, the Equatorial Region."

Cirrus snickered. "Yeah, and how well is that working out for us?"

"Dude, drop it," said Nimbus, not interested in another ideological debate.

"And you're the Central Authority's eyes and ears then?" Sunsetter asked.

"And fists," Cumulus told her with a rumble of a voice. His eyes were pulsing bright as he charged. "The CenA holds onto the civilization pretty firmly, but out here in the wilds, the Rebels have a strong foothold. And they are recruiting. Always recruiting." The bombast and bravado of the jet flickered with his tone, a heavy shadow cast over his words.

"The Rebels recruit among those in need," Helios explained to Sunsetter as he monitored the collector. She could practically see the despair as he watched the energy drain from its batteries. "The allure of civility and civilization is only as strong as the benefits of civility," said the older bot as the jets dozed with energy-saturated relief in the comparatively cool shadow of the gazebo's shelter. "Where need is found, civility is weakened. Where civility is weakened, desire flourishes. And the Rebels recruit on desire."

Through all of this, Altus remained quiet. The largest of the five, he had set himself to charging. With Stratus and Cirrus between them, he watched Sunsetter, listening to her and never taking his eye off her. For her part, she kept her distance. She afforded him little attention, only checking his gaze and attention through quick glances at reflective surfaces. His legs crossed, his hands in his lap, he was as silent as a statue. Just watching.

With night, Sunsetter found herself once again looking up at the sky. She saw the broken moon in the roof of the world, the fragments torn to pieces. She held her hand up, the new hand without an external chassis. Her mind returned to that moment days and a lifetime ago when she'd reached out for the sky, through the pile of bodies where she'd been left to die. Her hand looked different. Not her own. And yet she was still herself. Or so she thought.

She heard the clank of steps and she turned. Under the soft blue glow of the broken moon, Altus stepped out of the shadows. The great jet approached, an unsteady nervousness in his steps. He moved towards Sunsetter, but then turned abruptly and faced the sky as well. He looked up at the moon and stared for so long, Sunsetter turned and looked up, to see if something had happened above.

"I like...the, the sky," Altus finally said.

"I should expect so," Sunsetter returned. "You're a jet."

"I am a jet," he confirmed. The way he did made Sunsetter curious. He spoke not like it was an affirmation, but confirming what she thought. It was an accommodation. She looked him over, trying to grasp what he was hiding. "I...I think I...you...you remind me of..." His eye went dark and despite his lack of a face, she could tell he was scolding himself. "Do you know how the moon got broke?" he asked abruptly, a little too loudly. He looked at her, at the sky again, glanced at her, then faced the sky.

"It was a fight," Sunsetter remarked as she scrutinized him. "The CenA and the Rebels...they were fighting. Why?" she asked suddenly, incredulously.

Altus looked down. His knee shook, like the actuators were about to give out. "I...I like the sky," he repeated, his voice trailing off. "We had four moons, once," he shared. He risked another glance at Sunsetter, like he was risking a glance into the sun. "Brahma was a victim of the war." He looked at the shattered moon above them. "Legends say that it was the heart of our world, stolen from the core of the planet. And when our people fought, the heart bled. And when the first deaths came...she shattered, like a mother lamenting the death of a child."

Sunsetter heard him but didn't listen. Instead, she fixed on his quick, nervous glances at her as he spoke. Finally, forgetting her false identity, she asked pointedly, "Why are you acting so weird?"

Altus looked down at his feet. Sunsetter waited so long for an explanation, she was surprised when she felt his hand taking hers. He'd slithered his hand over rather subtly and took her hand in his. "I...I like the sky," he said yet again. "And...a-and you remind me...you're like the sky."

Sunsetter's jaw dropped open. "Y-you like me?" No silence had ever been so affirming. "Why?" she practically exclaimed.

Altus shrugged, like a child, his head shifting away. "You...you..." He couldn't form a cohesive answer for the longest time. His expressionless face betrayed by his pensive shoulders, by his evasive attention. He retreated into silence, towering over Sunsetter and powerless before her.

"You just met me," Sunsetter told him, almost scolding him. "You know nothing about me. What possible reason could you have to like me?"

He again only shrugged, single eye cast down. "You...you don't have an outer plating." Sunsetter threw up her hands, amazed at so shallow a reason. The large bot was unabated. "You seem...like you need a...need

someone to..." His voice was a whisper, vulnerable honesty stealing his strength.

"I need someone to look after me like I am a delicate flower?" Sunsetter chastised. Altus didn't confirm or deny. He merely stared. "The vulnerability – the PERCIEVED vulnerability – of a bot should hardly make one appealing."

Altus shrugged again. "Maybe?" he allowed with a strange certainty. "But I still..." Again, he retreated to the protection of silence.

Sunsetter tried to give him time to make whatever weak case he might have been able to manage, but her patience wore thin. "So you just fall for any bot that seems weak and vulnerable?" she accused.

Finally, he turned to face her. His single eye fixed on her, she could immediately tell something had changed. When he spoke, the trust in his voice was like a shot across the face. "You're a trio," he acknowledged, right to her.

Sunsetter's right hand closed. Her jaw tightened and her eyes narrowed.

"It isn't obvious," he assured her quietly, his voice like the starlight. "But...but I can tell. I could tell immediately."

Glaring, Sunsetter asked, "So? What if I am?" She reached for her sword, only to re-discover it long gone. Doing so reminded her that her entire body wasn't hers and she laughed sickly. "And it's not like I am right now?"

"Maybe. Maybe not," Altus said, whispering. "A trio isn't really physical. It's not just a unique actuator or, or...or other part. It's something..." His strong hand, capable of rending steel, gestured very gently inside of himself, towards something internal. "Possessing three forms instead of two is like knowing some greater truth. Like you're capable of something more, something deeper, than others who are limited in their experiences.

Sunsetter sneered at him with anger. "You an expert on trios?"

"Only through experience," he said lightly.

Confusion hit Sunsetter first, then realization. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. She stepped back from Altus, shocked. She

looked him up and down, finally placing the truth of it all. "You're a trio. You have three forms."

Altus looked down again, like he was ashamed. He shrugged again, averting his gaze. "The others don't...don't know." His one eye snapped earnestly to Sunsetter. "They can't know. They can't!"

"You're part of their team," she said, amazed. "How can they not know?" Her answer was merely an eye turned away from her. Towering and imposing as he was, Altus stood powerless before the suggestion. He remained looking away from her, standing with her in the blue light of the night.

"I like being here," Altus said. "In this moment, being here, with you." He risked a glance at her. She was fully bereft of what to think or how to react to him. "You're...you're intoxicating. When I, when I first saw you...I knew. I just knew." He faced away from her, as though determined to not fully confront what he was saying. "And I had to speak to you. Had to hear your voice. Had to know you. Had to connect with you." His solitary eye drifted down. "Had to tell you. And be heard by you."

He turned again to her, taking her hands with surprising grace. "Please," he asked, his voice firm like only the first words he'd spoken when he had arrived, before he'd seen her. "You can't tell them. You know how others are. They'll reject me. Tell me to..." He froze, unable to even handle to say such responses outloud. "But please, don't tell them."

"I won't," Sunsetter told him, pledging that. "You can believe me." Her tone shifted and took on an angry edge. "But you also have to believe me that I am not the fragile bot you think I am. I'm not the bot you want me to be." She searched his unemotive face for some sign that he understood. But between the darkness and his singular eye, she couldn't tell if he resisted the realization or merely was incapable of grasping what she told him.

Finally, he admitted with a hurt tone, "You wound me."

Sunsetter tried to hide her scowl but only managed so much. "Can you blame me?" she defied him. "You project on me a person I'm not and expect me to play that role?" She shook her head.

Altus looked down, dejected. With a deep breath, he looked instead up at the moon. "Can I...can you give me a moment?" he asked, like he was asking the sky. "Let me at least, at least pretend?"

Sunsetter gave it just a second of thought and she backed away from him. "That isn't a good idea," she told him. She stepped again back further. He stayed still, facing the sky. "I'm going back to the others." He said nothing. He didn't move. He stayed facing the broken moon like a statue.

He was still standing there when Sunsetter took one last look back, almost out of sight.

Sunsetter walked up the steps with Hetrin, the pair carrying spools of copper wire. They ascended to the rooftop and walked out onto the surface. Not far from the apex of the canyon, the morning wind was wild and blustering. It came coursing down off the desert surface overhead, whipping wildly against their sonic sensors.

"It's a nice day," Hetrid remarked after she'd set down the spool. She looked up into the sky and smiled, drinking in the sunlight. Sunsetter watched her, specifically her smile, as she grinned at the world overhead. Sunsetter felt a melancholy emptiness. She tried to widen her mouth, just to see if she could even smile that wide. Whether she could or not, it felt unnatural.

Enthusiasm unabated, Hetrid knelt before the solar panel they'd come to fix. She opened the access portal to its inner workings. "I like the wind," she shared happily. "I want to build a--" She was cut off when one of the jets passed overhead. "That's Nimbus," Hetrid remarked to herself. "Where's he going in such a hurry?" She gave up the thought. "But yeah, I want to build a turbine collector if I can find the materials."

"That doesn't seem that hard. There's a lot of scrap around," said Sunsetter, looking out at the city. The vantage was very different from above. The city almost blended into the natural rockface of the canyon. Sunsetter's instinct was to take off into the sky, but her ability to reconfigure was lost with her body. Needing to distract herself, she asked Hetrid, "Can you not find the right pieces? There's nothing lightweight?"

"Not that the jets haven't taken for repairs," Hetrid said as she checked the relays. "Here it is," she muttered to herself, sliding out some circuit boards. "I swear..." she griped as she squinted to see the circuit board. "Blast it, Sal," she muttered. She took out a soldering gun and began to make quick repairs to the board itself.

"How often do they come by?" Sunsetter asked her. "The jets, I mean."

"I dunno; a few times a lunar cycle," said Hetrid, focused on the work. She held out her arm and her forearm opened. A welding torch rotated out, trading places with her hand. Using the copper spool, Hetrid began to further work on the board and its connectors to the collector. "They're not too bad, but they're a little...I don't know, melodramatic. Calling themselves refugees. They're not the worst, though."

"There are others?" Sunsetter asked.

"Oh yeah," Hetrid half-laughed. "Dad says it's our job to help refugees but for the most part, all we do is help greedy loafers. We haven't had an actual refugee come through here in...gosh, I don't know."

Sunsetter looked again at the city before her. "Far be it for me to second-guess someone who is helping me but this seems like a bad situation."

"For who?" Hetrid asked.

"For you three," Sunsetter told her.

Hetrid stopped her work and thought about it. "I mean, I guess," she said. "I just...it seems like...you know, there are people who need help."

"Are there?" asked Sunsetter, turning back to her.

"Yeah," Hetrid said, more convinced than certain.

"Are they here?" Sunsetter added. "If you want to help people, that's fine, but if they aren't here so you can help them, you may have to go to where they are." Sunsetter looked out at the canyon and the city it masked from the world. "You can't wait for them to come to you. If they could go where help was, I'm not sure they'd be refugees."

Hetrid's work was visibly slowed with thought. She betrayed the effort needed to refocus on the repair work. In the silence Nimbus passed back the way he'd come far overhead. But Sunsetter and Hetrid noticed, curious. After a moment, Hetrid asked back to Sunsetter, "So...the wind told me something happened between you and Altus." She looked slyly back at Sunsetter. "Did he write you a poem and recite it by moonlight?"

"The wind, huh?" Sunsetter challenged. Hetrid shrugged innocently. "What else did the wind tell you?"

"A lady never reveals her sources," Hetrid insisted with a faux haughty air. "But Altus disappeared last night, not long after you did, and then we didn't see him again." She smiled and checked to see how Sunsetter was responding. The glower on the exterior-less bot made her giggle. "Did he come and profess his undying affection beneath the crimson light of the broken moon of Brahma?"

"Pretty close," Sunsetter grumbled. Hetrid stammered and misaligned the patch job on the circuit. She cursed and tried to undo the damage. "That's not all he confessed, either," she admitted, her tone softening.

Hetrid's eyes gleamed with delight and she looked eagerly up at Sunsetter. "EEEEEH!!!" she squealed. "What did he say?"

"What happened to 'a lady doesn't reveal her sources'?" Sunsetter balked, uncomfortable with the younger bot's enthusiasm.

"Pssh, whatever," Hetrid dismissed. She went to the circuit and tore the wire free, electing to start over entirely. "Come on, sister-bot. Spill it. What did he say?" she asked. Sunsetter faced the city and remained quiet. Hetrid remarked, almost as a prompt, "He's always seemed a little...uptight. The noble warrior, out to cleanse the world of evil, or something like that. He seems pretty straight-laced."

"They always do," Sunsetter said with some thought.

"But he's got some deep dark secret?" Hetrid pushed girlishly. "What was it?"

"It was deep, but I don't think it was very dark," Sunsetter said with some regret. She exhaled and said, "Sorry, I've never been one for...for, girl-talk." She gestured at the two of them, like she wasn't entirely sure what was happening with the conversation. "But I don't think it's my place to tell his secret."

"That big a secret, huh?" Hetrid smiled hungrily.

"No," Sunsetter said carefully, unsure how to weigh her thoughts. "Not big, but...big enough." She realized her own voice and told Hetrid, "And however big or not big it might be to me, it's big to Altus. And it's his secret. He gets to decide who and when its shared."

Hetrid scoffed. "You're no fun," she teased. "I'll harass Cirrius. He'll know."

Sunsetter considered correcting her, or asking her not to. She elected to remain silent.

Later, as Hetrid and Sunsetter exited the building back out onto the main street that wound through the canyon city, a gentle breeze was overwhelmed by an intense rush of thruster gusts. Nimbus reconfigured out of the air and dropped before them, running the rest of the distance. "Have either of you seen Altus?" he practically yelled.

Hetrid and Sunsetter looked at each other, confused. "N-no," Hetrid stammered. She giggled nervously, "We were just--""

"What's happened?" Sunsetter asked.

"We can't find him anywhere," Nimbus said.

"What do you mean—" Hetrid was cut off as Stratus flew overhead, coasting above the canyon. The blue sky above was crisscrossed with the white strands of vapor trails of multiple flight paths throughout the morning. She asked with growing worry, "What's going on?"

"We can't find Altus," Nimbus repeated caustically. "He was gone this morning. We all assumed he'd left on an early patrol or something but he hasn't returned, he isn't responding to calls, and he isn't showing up on any of the sensors." The dark jet looked squarely at Sunsetter. "And you, exhibitionist, are the last bot to see him."

As he made that accusation, Helios and Cumulus came around a corner. The two saw Nimbus question the two female bots. They both hurried to reach Nimbus; Helios to help, Cumulus to join in.

Even as reinforcements arrived, Sunsetter didn't move. She decided between assertive and aggressive, but when she flexed her fist, she was reminded of the frail metal that comprised her limbs. A self-loathing of her own body reasserted itself. "He came to see me last night," Sunsetter admitted. She avoided meeting Nimbus' gaze, for fear of raising his ire and equally afraid of invoking her own. "He was all awkward," she explained. "He talked about the moon, about Brahma, and then..." She glanced over at Hetrid, looking to her to cool things down if and when she lost her emotional control. Hetrid had her own confusion to process through.

"And then what?" Nimbus demanded a little too emphatically.

It took restraint for Sunsetter to not rip into him. "And then I left," she stated very clearly. She glanced over at Helios and Cumulus who arrived just as she finished. The pair were just a few steps behind Nimbus, both with very different breeds of concern. Sunsetter decided against her nature to defuse the situation and said, "He told me he liked me. I let him down. And I left."

"He did what?" Cumulus called, astonished. He shoved Nimbus out of the way and stepped up into the doorway. Crowding over Sunsetter, he muscled Hetrid back as he glared down at the bare bot scarcely half his height and not even half his size. "He told you what?"

"He said he liked me," Sunsetter said with a razorblade for a glare. "I know, it's crazy. I said about as much, though a bit more tactfully."

"And then what?" Cumulus demanded.

"How did he take it?" Helios asked.

"Odd he's the one you're worried about," Sunsetter remarked to the eldest bot as she stared a hole through Cumulus. She looked at Helios and clarified, "He's at least got outer plating."

"He's the one that's gone missing," Helios returned.

Sunsetter grudgingly acknowledged that. She expounded, saying, "He seemed...disappointed. But hardly inclined to do anything foolish."

"He left because of you," Cumulus growled in accusation.

"No," Cumulus corrected him, as if distance from Sunsetter giving him the space needed to keep a cool head. "Altus isn't prone to emotional behavior. He's not the kind to go running off because he got his feelings hurt by some floozy." The term caused Sunsetter's eyebrow to go up.

"Whatever," Nimbus said, pulling away from the others. He broke into a run and leapt into the air, reconfiguring into his jet mode. He tore into the sky, leaving behind a vapor trail. Sunsetter stared after him.

Cumulus turned around to Helios and ordered him, "If Altus returns, keep him here." He likewise broke into a run, heading down the street the opposite way Nimbus had gone. With a leap, he reconfigured and took flight.

Once the jets were gone, Sunsetter released a fragment of the tension she was carrying. "I've shot bots over less."

"They worry for their friend," Helios told her.

"Their friend is an objectifying fool who wouldn't take no for an answer," Sunsetter told him. "I sympathize with worrying about a bot who has gone missing, but acting like it's somehow my fault would be funny if it wasn't so deranged."

Helios didn't engage her. He looked to Hetrid and gestured for her. "Come on." He urged her to follow. "We've more work to do." Hetrid didn't hesitate to follow, but she looked back at Sunsetter as she and Helios departed. Sunsetter remained in the doorway of the abandoned building. The rage inside her was too intense; she feared moving would cost her control and she would erupt.

"I didn't realize how much I missed reconfiguring until Nimbus did it in front of me," Sunsetter remarked as she sat in the corner of the repair bay. She looked down at the fragments of her skeletal body. The torn and ripped metal seemed so alien and so familiar at the same time. She brushed her fingertips over the ripped metal with sentimental familiarity. "It seems odd to wear a body that cannot reconfigure at all." She ran her thumb along the strut of her inner thigh, the muted sense of touch still capturing every bend and texture of the metal. "It's a fundamental part of who we are. And this body simply...can't."

"Well, it IS a loaner," Helios smirked as he studied a processor from within Sunsetter's old body. He held it under a microscope, lines of code feeding down either side of the glass. "And it makes sense that you'd miss it. Our species enjoys two forms as a basic element of our anatomy."

"Some have three forms," Sunsetter reminded him.

"Some even have more," Helios told her. He put down the processor and turned back to Sunsetter. "I suppose you know I've figured out that you're a Trilogy."

"A Trilogy, huh?" Sunsetter said. "That what you call a Trio? A threeformer? A triple-changer?"

"Words," Helios told her, turning back to the processor. "You are what you are." He studied the processor for a moment. "Unless you'd prefer not to be." He checked on her out of the corner of his eye. "Repairs aren't the only things I could implement. Your life would be easier with two forms."

Sunsetter gave it thought but only for the briefest second. She told him, "An easier life wouldn't be mine."

At night, the four jets were packed over a map. The digital light sprayed out from the display created a holographic wireframe display of the surrounding canyons and mesas. Kilometers in all directions were presented for consideration as the four jets in bipedal form considered their options. "We've searched in every direction for megometers. I don't know where he could have gone," Cumulus said, aloud but to himself.

"He's never done anything like this before," said Cirrus.

"Yeah," concurred Stratus.

"I don't think he's ever had cause," Nimbus said. He looked over the wing jutting from his back, across the dark room where Sunsetter sat with Helios, Sal, and Hetrid. His glare made his blame clear. Her stare made her weapons' grade apathy even clearer.

"We've got to figure out where he is, figure out what went wrong," said Cumulus, fear bordering on desperation.

"I think we need to entertain the idea that maybe he didn't run," said Stratus. "It's possible that he—"

"Don't you dare say it," Nimbus snapped at him. He stood up abruptly, practically leaping back from the map. His hand was low, by the blaster on his thigh. "Altus didn't abandon us."

"Whoa, whoa!" Stratus frantically backpedaled.

"He didn't mean nothing," Cirrus quickly supported, though he was careful to stay from between Stratus and the bigger bot. "Just...well, we've got to consider all our options. Even, even options we might not want to consider."

"Atlas isn't a traitor," Nimbus stated as a matter of absolute fact.

"Deserter," Cumulus corrected, looking away as he tried not to make an issue of it.

"Whatever!" Nimbus shouted. "He's twice the warrior of all of you; of all of us!"

"That's great," Stratus agreed patiently. "But...we're still left with the fact that he left and we can't find `em. And he made it so we couldn't find him. If he was shot down or, or something, we'd be able to find him. This was deliberate. This was...he did this. He chose this."

Nimbus swallowed tightly. He readied to shout, but then stopped. "Heli, would you please talk some sense into these weaklings?"

Hetrid, Sal, and Sunsetter all looked to Helios whose eyes were closed, his head down. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he simply said, "Nimbus, please do not involve me."

"Heli!" Nimbus shouted. "Come on, do something for once and be helpful."

There was a glint of emotion when Helios opened his eyes. Sunsetter saw something edged and sharper than a blade in his expression. But whatever he was trying to keep from saying was lost to the sound of jet thrusters outside. The four teammates all broke from the map and their argument. They ran for the door, disappearing into the darkness. Sunsetter's eyes dropped and she exhaled in frustration. "Is that Altus?" asked Sal, unplugging her battery pack from her side.

"I should expect so," Helios told her, his tone sour.

The doorway opened again and in stepped Altus. The jet paused when he saw Sunsetter, the solitary eye fixed on her for only a second. She stared at him, neither withdrawing from his gaze nor doing any more than acknowledging him. He turned from her and faced Helios. "Thank you for your hospitality, but tonight will be the last night we will be here."

Sal and Hetrid seemed astonished. Helios, though, seemed unsurprised. He only nodded. He stood and wiped dust from his hands. "I should be surprised but I'm not," he said. He approached Altus, the other jets entering as well, falling in behind the largest of their team. The room felt crowded with so many in the poorly-lit space. Shaking hands, Helios said, "Have you, by chance, received orders from the Central Authority, or some other power?"

Altus glanced just passed Helios, at Sunsetter as she remained seated. "Something like that."

With night, Sunsetter found herself once again looking up at the broken moon. The Brahma was being joined by the smaller moon, Sentry.

Red in color, the tiny moon was creeping across the bottom of the sky, like a feline sneaking between shadows so as to go unnoticed. Atop one of the numerous abandoned skyscrapers, Sunsetter could feel the wind. The confluence of canyon breezes and the nighttime desert air churned around her. Even the dulled senses of her temporary body could feel the movement, feel the life.

Sunsetter turned when she heard Altus approach. Giant compared to her, his wings were wide and the moonlight shadow he cast extended far behind him. He exited the rooftop access with surprising ease given the narrow doorway, an ease due to coordination born out of combat. The only light in the bright night that contrasted with the moon was the single glow of his solitary eye. "Am I disturbing you?" he asked, his voice a considerate whisper.

"You're the one who got disturbed," Sunsetter told him caustically.

His ability to reveal emotions amazed her, given his lack of facial features. His sheepishness was obvious, even at his height and presence. "Yes, well..." He straightened his broad shoulders and took longer strides as he crossed the building. Once passed her, he looked out at the dark city. "It's been a long time since I've opened up like that."

"In my experience, honesty is overrated," Sunsetter shared with him. "But since you were honest, I'm curious: WHY were you honest?"

He turned halfway back to her, as if surprised. Some of the awkward tension he'd built between them had dissipated, at least on his end. "It isn't obvious?" he asked. He took a step back towards her. "You inspired me," he whispered.

Sunsetter half-turned, not understanding. Altus held her gaze, not moving. Likewise, Sunsetter only stared as the moonlight churned the desert winds about them. "For what it's worth," she told him in a measured tone, "I'm glad you...you felt like you could finally share that." Altus turned further to her, about to speak. "I just wish it was with someone who had any connection with you."

"I had hoped to change that," he said.

"Did you?" Sunsetter asked. She wasn't sure if she was insulted, disgusted, or what, but she knew her reaction was as negative as it was intense. "What did you expect your honesty to do?" Altus was confused. "What did you think would happen? How was I going to react, in your mind? Did you think I would soul-bond with you?"

Altus raised a hand, a single delicate gesture meant to bridge the gap between the two bots. "I hoped you would let me protect you," he told her.

With only centimeters to go before they touched, Sunsetter didn't meet him, didn't close the distance. Instead, her gaze sharpened. "You think I need your protection," she stated, not asked. He glanced at her bare body, bereft of any plating or armor. "Don't let my nudity lull you into thinking I'm defenseless. Don't confuse my lack of weapons with being helpless." She stepped laterally around Altus. "You don't know me," she warned him.

"And it hasn't yet occurred to you that I wish to remedy that?" he asked.

"I'm not a person to you, flyboy," Sunsetter told him. "I'm a fantasy. A fetish. You're hoping my attitude will match how you envision me to be, but I don't have time to educate you on the realities of who I am."

Altus only nodded. "And I've no way to approach you? I've no way to entice you that maybe I am worth knowing?" He approached her slowly. "Have I no say in the matter?"

"As far as I'm concerned?" she told him. "No."

She didn't know if it was hurt or melancholy that caused the silence but Altus only nodded. "Well then, it is fortunate that our paths will not cross again. My team and I will be departing at dawn." He turned from her and took a step away. Without turning to look back at her, he simply said, "I wish I could have caught your eye. I wish I could be the one to make you smile." He disappeared through the doorway, fading into darkness.

At dawn, the city was quiet. There were no gusts of wind and no sounds of jets. Sunsetter looked out from the window out on the city streets. The morning sun baked down on cracked pavement and faded walls of forgotten buildings. Dust and sand blew silently passed. But Sunsetter saw nothing and heard even less.

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