

Robots: Zeta Danger, part 08

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVVA

Helios pulled back the blanket, revealing Sunsetter's new body beneath. It was just a skeletal frame at the moment, with only a portion of the internal systems installed. Internal sensors and computer nexuses were mostly dark, buried deep inside the frame. The multitude of myofibril muscle strands, actuators, and hydraulics had yet to be attached. And those were only the beginning of the robotic systems needed for the new body to be taken on.

"What the hell?" balked Sunsetter as she approached. Walking in a staggering body that was more missing than present, she reached out with her current hand and touched the hard metal frame that made up the skeleton of her new body. Over half again as big as her current, temporary body, the new structure was massive by comparison, even in spite of its incomplete state. "Did you start over?"

"Young one, you forgot how badly damaged you were when you awoke," said Helios. The older robot smiled at the young bounty hunter's impatience.

"Oh no. On the contrary, little else has been on my mind," Sunsetter complained. Her skeletal fingers touched the frame and she tried to move it, but couldn't. "It's heavy."

"It's reinforced, twice," Helios explained, straining to keep from gushing about the technical details he was all too keen to discuss. At length. "Your body was a masterpiece, to be sure, but it was held together by spotwelds and determination. I've taken your body and rather than merely get it up and running, I am making the system improvements that should have been implemented whenever repairs were called for."

Sunsetter leaned on the table, on hands that weren't hers, supporting arms that weren't hers. "I want my old body," she told him as if it were a shameful confession.

"This is your old body," Helios maintained with glacial patience. "Do not mistake fixing broken pieces for betraying yourself. Do not mistake habits learned through enduring and surviving as hallmarks of some ideal life. Everything about this body was a compromise. All I am doing is rebalancing the scales that you were so often forced to adjust to rather than care for."

Sunsetter ran her hand down the centerline of the body, the shape not unfamiliar. "This is my body," she asked of Helios, as much a question as an accusation. Her strong, hard voice softened. "It's all I have now."

"Is it?" asked Helios. "Have you not friends? Have you not hope?"

Sunsetter shook her head as she looked at her own corpse. "I have kind-hearted people I am indebted to," she said with a nod to Helios. "But not friends. And hope? No, I don't have hope." Her eyes razored as she again looked at her body and what she needed it for. "No hope, but I do have revenge."

Sunsetter plugged the battery into the wind collector, letting the charge transfer. The wind felt cold, blowing through the gaps and cracks in her body. She held her slender arms together, shivering a bit in the rocky cold. She stood atop a building in a canyon city, the structure carved out of the very rockface of the canyon. Almost a stalactite, it had been carved downward, hanging over neighbors built up from the ground. Winding back and forth down the crack in the world, the city was as gigantic as it was empty. Nothing moved except the dirt blown through the stagnant streets.

The battery beeped, the charge full. Sunsetter changed out another battery, a bit surprised by the healthy yield. She looked down at her wrist, checking her own charge. "This body can't go for half a day," she griped at the energy rating. She turned and looked up at the wide, cloudy sky of the Westrion Expanse. The whipping wind picked up and a cold chill hit Sunsetter again, making her curl inward slightly.

But with the wind came the roar of engines. Sunsetter turned towards the noise, then rushed to the edge of the towering building. She craned to look over the side to see a half-dozen vehicles come shooting down the steep road into the canyon city.

Sunsetter's hand moved with instinct deeper than her metal. Her hand flew to her hip, to where her blaster should have been. Instead, her skeletal fingers slapped the hard surface of her hip and felt nothing but cold metal. She looked at her leg, bereft of weapon, and felt a pang of defenselessness.

She shoved away from the rooftop ledge and leapt through the door down the stairs. She leapt half a flight at a time, coming down to the midpoint of the tower that hung from the side of the canyon. She ran down the empty hallway that connected the building to its neighbor. Her feet clanged heavily, no padding on her calcaneal pistons causing her knees and hip to ache in transferred pain.

She reached the far wall of the building and leapt out through the open window. Vaulting through the open air, she landed on the rooftop of the building constructed up from the ground. She sprinted across the surface for the rooftop access. Through it, she rushed around a spiral staircase to arrive at the main foyer just as Sal and Hetrid came running in through the

front door. The debris of a long-abandoned business foyer around them, Sunsetter gestured protectively at the young bots. "Get behind me," said Sunsetter, grabbing up her blaster from the pack by her sleeping pad. The hefty, single-handed rifle of a weapon was bulky and heavy in her hands, but what her body lacked, the skills of her mind reinforced. She looked for cover as she readied the blaster at the door, but Helios put his hand on the barrel and forced it down.

"You'll do no such thing," he told her, just before the door opened.

In stepped a tall bot. With the body of a VTOL flier, his wings flared wide when he stepped through the door. Broad, armored plates of his chest and shoulders tapered to a narrow waist and thin but powerful legs. Black armor over a gray frame, the bot's imposing shape was topped with an elaborate helmet of a head. From his forehead, single point extended forward like a horn. "Helios! My friend," said the bot. He crossed the foyer and grabbed Helios' arm, shaking it and the bot roughly. "So good to see you."

Helios looked disappointed, but still tried to smile, however tritely. "Nausicon. You're back sooner than I expected."

"Nausicon," whispered Sunsetter tensely

"You know him?" whispered Sal. Sunsetter nodded subtly.

"Well, things are not well on the upper world, my friend," said the big bot. He gestured to the other bots who had followed him in. Four others, all fliers, stood with their weapons in their hands. "Our efforts are on-going, but the war with the Rebels and the Central Authority takes its toll." Nausicon slapped both hands hard on Helios' narrow shoulders. The rough impact making Nausicon snicker. "Refugees like us must fight for everything."

"Refugees," Helios repeated. "And where did you escape from now?"

"Why, the Sinandrin Camps," Nausicon told him grandly. He turned his back and looked out through the glass windows of the foyer of what had once been an office. "We were there for less than a week when the Rebels drove everyone out. No word from the Central Authority when, or even if, the camps will be re-established." He turned around, his wings sweeping the dusty air through the room. "We require energy. Charges. Anything you can spare to keep us alive."

"You seem to be plenty alive," said Hetrid. Helios shot her a warning look.

Nausicon saw her and smiled. "Oh, your eldest has become even more lovely." He started towards her, but Helios stepped between them.

"Charges, we have," said the patron of the city. "We are honor-bound to help all refugees. Take...what you need...if you need."

"Oh, my friend, we are in such need," Nausicon told him with a smile on one side of his mouth. He glanced back at the four-winged warriors who flanked him. Armored fliers with the same black-over-gray frames, their forward-swept wings ran almost parallel to their bodies in their bipedal form. Practically twins, only their heads and a few stylistic differences distinguished them. Nausicon told his team, "Charge your reserves." He faced Helios and clapped his shoulders again. "We have a long flight ahead of us."

"I'll bet," whispered Sunsetter, to herself.

In the darkness of the canyon night, Sunsetter stared into the fire. A battery pack was plugged into her side, the charge slowly filling her. She looked up when Sal appeared through the doorway. The smaller of the girls knelt and sat next to Sunsetter, her own battery pack plugged into her arm. "I hate it when Nausicon is here," she said guardedly, clever eyes averted to watch the corners of the room. "I hate the way he looks at me and Hetrid." Her kind face sneered in distrust.

"As you should," said Sunsetter. Her robotic face didn't sneer easily but she managed.

With a head shaped almost like a crown, Sal tilted her gaze at Sunsetter. "You said you knew him. What did you mean? Did you meet him as a bounty hunter?"

"I know him by his reputation," said Sunsetter.. She admitted to herself, "I think I only know people by their reputations." As she spoke, she held her hand out so that its shadow on the wall vaguely resembled a multi-car train. She scowled, then shook off her uncharacteristic introspection. "What I meant was, I've seen his kind many times before. They..." She glanced at Sal's big eyes drinking in every detail of what she said. "They...like to exploit," she chose carefully. "They show a shred of kindness and softness in times of hardship, and use that to convince young bots to..." Sunsetter shook her head.

"What?" asked Sal. She laughed a bit, asking, "Am I too young to hear?"

"You may not be too young to hear but I'm too disgusted to say," said Sunsetter. The reversal unsettled Sal more than any details might have. "I didn't see any sigil on Nausicon or his team. Are they Rebels or CenA?"

"Neither," said Sal. "They're...I guess they're mercenaries. They seem to be whatever works for them at the moment." It connected with her and she said, "Kind of like you."

Sunsetter's mood soured further. "I guess I deserve that."

"Deserve what?" asked Hetrid as she and Helios entered the chamber. Without windows, the night wind brushed through, buffeting the firelight.

Sal admitted, "We were just talking about Nausicon."

"Put him from your mind, child," said Helios as he sat opposite Sunsetter. "He'll not be back anytime soon."

"How do you know?" asked Sunsetter. Helios looked through the flames at her. "They said they'd come from the Sinandrin Camps. That's a high-level penal work camp at the northern edge of the Westrion Expanse. Where do you think they're heading now? What do you think they'll do when they're done?"

"Bots live on a gradient," Helios told Sunsetter. "Some bots don't accept help when they need it; others take more help than is necessary. It is natural that some would help themselves to more than their share."

"Maybe, but you don't have to aid them in taking too much," Sunsetter told him.

"The war has taken too much," Helios told Sunsetter.

"Precisely," she said. "You can't just give energy away to those who don't need it."

"And am I to be the judge of who needs and who doesn't?" asked Helios. He spoke slowly and deliberately, not arguing but instructing. "On what standard should I apply their need? How should I go about designating value and worth? What should they do if they disagree?" Sunsetter could tell he had a point but she couldn't see it. "Civilization is a beautiful thing, but it attempts to codify and systemize. Perhaps that is good, perhaps it's..." He failed to find the right word. "But some don't fall easily into systems. And those who are marginalized are too easily pushed back, or purged all together." A heavy shadow fell over his thoughts, a shadow cast by long memories. "Once one bot dictates the value of another bot – says you are more deserving or you are not deserving at all – then civilization is reduced to a hierarchy. No longer an ideal; merely an organizational chart."

Helios stirred the fire, the flames throwing chaotic shadows on the walls of the high-rise. Sal and Hetrid watched their father speak in ways they were unused to. "And when I said the war has taken too much, I do not refer exclusively to energy and resources. I meant more than anything our ideals." Into the flames he stared, seeing similar flames in his own mind. "War expends resources to hurt and destroy, rather than create and help. The more resources are used, or destroyed, the more war consumes. War is a wildfire, a plague. It will destroy resources and it will destroy lives. But what it doesn't have to destroy is our ideals."

Helios shook his head. "I don't know what good I do here, but I know I believe. I don't know what might be the best or most optimal use of my efforts but I know that I am committed to helping anyone, helping everyone, helping all. As soon as I say 'you are not worthy of my help', as soon as I deem a need undeserving, I have done what even war could not do: I have betrayed my ideals."

"Ideals must give way to realism," said Sunsetter.

"Ideals that crumble in the face of adversity are not ideals; merely intellectual fashion," Helios told her. "The harder things become, the more important we hold true to the ideals we hold dear."

"The graveyard is full of bots who held true to their ideals," Sunsetter told him.

Helios snickered sadly. "The graveyard is full of bots who held true to their ideals, and of bots who compromised them. The graveyard is full regardless."

Shadows and silence continued on.

With the dawn came the morning wind. Biting cold out of the shadow mixed and clashed with the superheated gusts that came off the top of the canyon. Whirlwinds kicked up in the dust-lined roads that wound through the canyon.

With the wind came Sunsetter, as though ill news blown in from afar. Her shadow was thrown over Helios as he worked in his tent. She let the flap fall behind her as she entered. "Come to argue more about war and idealism?" asked Helios as he grimaced, straining to release a frozen actuator.

"No," Sunsetter said as she came and appraised her body as it laid on the bed leaned back at an angle. "I feel bad for my tone late night." Her reflection was caught in the smooth curve of an armored pauldron. The blue

with silver highlights of her shoulder looked familiar, even if the specific angles were more inspired than identical.

“Your tone?” remarked Helios, surprised. He snickered and kept working. “Your tone was not a problem. Nor were your questions. Hatrid and Sal, I love, but they tend to take what this old man tells them as irrefutable truth. I welcome constructive challenge to my thinking.”

“Odd for a bot who hates war to welcome conflict,” said Sunsetter, her stylized arms crossed over the exposed female body.

“I detest war, but adversity is a different matter,” maintained Helios, distracted with a frictionless joint. “Adversity and strife can elicit great strength and growth from us. But only when constructive, and healthy, and helpful. Some bots maintain that it is strife what gives us strength. Nay, it is strife combined with reflection and recovery. It is not enough to survive an encounter; you must survive and heal. Some bots think that because they still function after a traumatic experience, they are mightier or that they are...they are repaired. Functioning and healed are not the same thing. Nor is functioning and optimized. Actualized. Often, survival means continued damage that goes neglected. For the ego will not entertain the notion that the damage was so great.”

He set aside the actuator. “But this old man is prone to rambling when my brain gets a good chat.” He stood from the stool he’d been sitting atop. “I’ve begun working on the exterior frame. I’m like a child that way. I like to do what is most fun, and the internal workings are like play compared to the external chassis.”

“I like the color,” said Sunsetter, nodding at the blue and silver of the left pauldron. “But this is shaped very differently.” She touched the shoulder and realized, “This isn’t my body.”

“As I said previously, your body could be repaired only so much,” explained Helios. “But used as a frame to make something greater?” Sunsetter glared at him. “I must confess, I am making use of this opportunity. I was not always the caretaker of an empty city, looking after refugees who rarely appear. I was once capable of plying my craft, but that opportunity rarely presents anymore.”

“Why are you here?” Sunsetter asked, pointedly and directly. “I’ve been here a week and you’ve yet to give a straight answer. You always evade answering.”

“And I shall continue to do so,” Helios told her, unashamed. “My past doesn’t concern me, nor should it concern you. It was, and now the here and now is. So focus on what is. And what is...is that your body is taking shape. Soon, you shall be able to walk out of here. Or ride. Or fly.”

"You are keeping me as I was," Sunsetter said, equally relieved and amazed.

"A trio, yes," confirmed Helios. "I don't know why some are born with three forms instead of the common two, but I don't have any desire to impose some sense of...mundanity upon you, or upon anyone. You had three forms before and that is reason enough for me to make sure you continue to have three forms."

Sunsetter backed up from the body, able to see it more completely now. Dark silver and gun-metal gray formed the underchassis atop which blue armor with silver highlights stood out. The wings of her flier mode were above and behind her shoulders, the embedded rotors in the same spot they'd been. She touched the four-bladed fan inside the wing and spun it, the subtlest hint of a smile appearing for a brief second.

Removed from the tiny details that had been changed over the course of the repairs, the blue-and-silver body looked more familiar than not. Scars and wounds that had been made souvenirs were gone, replaced with a gleam and polish. The pristine cleanliness alone felt like a challenge to her emotional well-being. Staring at her own reflection in the armor, she told him, "Thank you."

Helios smiled kindly. "It is my pleasure. Truly. I only wish I could speed this up. It'll be another week, I suspect. Possibly less." Sunsetter nodded. "Then you shall...what? Return to the Megalopolis back east? Or will you pursue your quarry, the Warbots?"

Sunsetter was quiet. Her arms still crossed, she turned away from Helios but didn't leave. "I am not one for revenge," Helios remarked with a precious honesty, "but I know the fire that burns inside you. I know the need to pay back the pain that one feels. And pain, they dealt you. They are why you are here, why your body was broken." He sat once more on his stool, the aged metal struts groaning under even his marginal weight. He asked her rhetorically, "Do you return the favor, once the chance is again afforded to you?"

"Would you advise me not to?" asked Sunsetter, turning away from her body to face Helios. "Are you telling me 'when will it stop? I get revenge and then they get revenge for my revenge, then I get my revenge for their revenge for my revenge'?"

The smile on Helios' face spoke to his lack of surprise. "I'm an old man," he told her as he typed on a keyboard, studying the data the screen showed him. He retrieved from a tray a circuit solder and a scalpel. "I wouldn't think to tell anyone else how to live their life, how to conduct their affairs."

"You asked me what I would do," Sunsetter said back.

"Not to dictate your actions," Helios chuckled. He clarified, "I'm merely nosy." In spite of herself, Sunsetter chuckled. "You are the way you are for a reason," said the elder bot. "I wouldn't think to change that. Just as I wouldn't think to give you two forms, I wouldn't think to talk you out of—"

The sound of jets roared overhead.

Sunsetter and Helios both looked at each other, simultaneously surprised by the sound and worried by it. Helios turned and rushed out of the tent with Sunsetter right behind him. They exited just as Nausicon dropped out of the sky. Reconfiguring dramatically from his flier mode, the black jet landed in a pronounced crouch, one knee dropped to the ground.

His head rose and he saw Helios, an evil glint in his eye. What he said was no greeting, but a poisonous threat. "Well hello, my friend." He stood and stormed towards him. Overhead, the other four jets who flanked Nausicon landed on nearby buildings. Black shadows with nigh-identical builds, their gray undercarriage provided only visual texture to their dark presence. Two fore and two aft, the bots touched down in gusts of wind and dust, landing spaced out to provide plenty of cover fire if needed. Or desired. Sunsetter looked up at the spacing, recognizing the strategic decision. She faced Nausicon with a new level of concern.

"We arrived at the Newave Oasis, only to find Altus and his boys," Nausicon said, almost as an accusation.

"They visit from time to time," Helios confirmed for the larger bot that loomed before him. "Like you, they travel through the wastes often. Like you, they make claim of refuge."

"They aren't refugees," Nausicon all but demanded. "They're Central Authority." Helios said nothing. "They claimed they knew we were coming that way."

Helios nodded, knowing the direction this conversation was going. Sunsetter was more explicit, asking, "So you think he told them?"

"Quiet, nudist," Nausicon warned Sunsetter. His eyes went back to Helios. In the very center of the street, the wind broke around Nausicon as he towered over Helios. Right behind the old bot, Sunsetter couldn't help but glance again at the four smaller jets, now in robot form, placed perfectly to deal with a small army. Bringing an end to her and Helios would be a simple task in their positions.

"Talk, old man," Nausicon commanded. He uncrossed his arms, his right hand dropping to his right side. Sunsetter saw no blade or blaster but she knew a weapon was within his grasp. "Do you tell the Authority where we go?" he demanded.

"I have no idea where you go, now, the day before, or ever," Helios maintained without hesitation. "I don't concern myself with the comings and goings of anyone. In this valley, or beyond. All I concern myself with is caring for those in need."

Nausicon's deadly gaze spied over Helios slowly, then his expression softened. Somehow, the half-smile seemed even more deadly than his glower. "You are quite the charitable bot," he said.

"Altus and his team haven't been here in over a week," said Sunsetter, at Helios' elbow. She again glanced at Nausicon's bots, arranged overhead. Atop the four buildings, they'd turned the main city thoroughfare into a kill box. The nearest alleyways were dozens of meters and an eternity away. There was no cover within sprinting distance. Sunsetter cursed herself for getting caught in so perfect a trap.

She turned and looked back at the bot to her five o'clock. Atop a building six stories up, he extended long blasters down either side of his arms. His helmet-like head that protected two glowing eyes and a mouthguard was the most distinctive feature separating him from his black-and-gray twins.

Nausicon noticed Sunsetter's appraisal of her tactical situation. He looked up at his bots and smiled. "You're the smart one, aren't you? You know to look for death from above, not just in front." He looked at Sunsetter again, appraising her like he might consider raw materials to be turned into art. "What slice of heaven did you escape from?"

"Not heaven," Sunsetter warned him. Her hand itched again for her blaster, finding nothing but skinny chrome and weak, recycled metal.

Nausicon drank her in, even as he turned. "We were quite surprised to see Altus and his planes. It changes things for us. We thought the Westrion Expanse was safe from CenA intervention. If they're here, if they patrol these stretches, then that clearly isn't the case."

"Moving on then, are you?" asked Helios. He sounded like he knew he wasn't so lucky.

Nausicon scoffed. "Don't sound so hopeful, old man. One would think you'd be sad to see us go. We're what keeps the Rebels at bay."

Sunsetter tried to remain silent but "You're as bad as Rebels," escaped from her mouth. Helios turned halfway to her, urging her silence with a look and a subtle gesture of his hand.

Something about the comment seemed to register with Nausicon. His eyes slipped off Helios and grew distant. "I don't see it," he finally said. He turned his back to the two and began to walk away. "We're leaving." There was a finality to his words, a definitive course of action they were undertaking. "Stock up!" he yelled to the four bots.

With surgical precision, the four jets abandoned their placements. They put away their weapons as they moved to their new, pre-determined assignments. The two jets at the front reconfigured and took off. Speed caused them to disappear almost instantly, even as the roar of their engines echoed down the streets of the canyon city.

The two behind Sunsetter and Helios dropped down over the sides of the buildings. They landed with a simultaneous boost from their jets on their feet. Touching down, they paused to make sure there would be no resistance. Helios only sighed, resigned but not pleased. Sunsetter glared at the two bots, one then the other. The bot to her left barely acknowledged her, seeing her only as a potential threat. The instant he deemed her not that, she ceased to exist. The other bot, with the mouth plate, hesitated. His eyes met hers, then he turned away. Like his twin, he went for the nearest energy collectors.

"You just exhausted our supplies the day before," Helios exclaimed at Nausicon's back. "We have nothing left."

"We've a long trip ahead of us and likely no chance to stop for supplies," Nausicon told him, looking over his pauldron at Helios. "If we didn't have to flee so far, perhaps this wouldn't be necessary. But your actions force us."

"This isn't their fault," Sunsetter snapped, moving to get around Helios. He turned and stopped her from intervening. He was powerless to stop Nausicon, though.

The powerful jet snapped Sunsetter into the air, grabbing her by her neck and slamming her against the wall of the nearest building. "You try my patience, fembot," he growled, his voice like rocks crushed in a grinder. His fingers began to close, easily crushing the weak frame of her neck. "I would have no trouble..."

He fell quiet when there was a shout. One of his four jets exited the quarters where Sunsetter, Helios, and his two daughters slept. The bot came out with his arm absolutely full of batteries. Sal and Hetrid chased after him. "You can't take them all!" screamed Sal.

"They're taking the energy!" Hetrid exclaimed at Helios.

"We are in need," Nausicon told them, still holding the squirming Sunsetter off the ground. "You and yours are sworn to help refugees in need."

"You aren't refugees!" Sal shouted at him.

"Child," begged Helios, desperate as all peace threatened to shatter.

"They aren't just taking the energy; they're taking the batteries too," Hetrid told her father. "We won't survive without them."

"I'm sure your intrepid father can think of something," said Nausicon. He released Sunsetter and she fell to the ground. Her vision rolled, the metal of her neck warped, impinging the actuators. Helios ran to her side, inspecting the damage. "Of course, if you fear for your safety," said Nausicon, his expression blossoming. He turned from Sunsetter and two eyes slowly shifted over towards Sal and Hetrid. The eyes of a predator settled on the two young female bots. Hetrid backed up a step, as did Sal. Nausicon's smile widened. "We can always bring you with us."

Helios looked up in terror, stammering, "Wh-what?"

As if he'd forgotten Sunsetter existed, Nausicon walked towards Sal and Hetrid. His steps were as slow and deliberate as his words. "What say you?" he asked the two young bots. "Allow me to take you from this place." A smile of hypnotic confidence surrounded the girls. "Allow me to show you a world unimaginable to your young minds?"

"Naus," spoke one of the four. The jet behind Helios, the solitary figure with a mouthplate. "We...do we really need to bring..."

"Shhhh," he told his subordinate with a gentle dismissal. He leaned forward a bit, narrowing the gap between him and Sal created by his towering height. Hetrid recoiled with a terrified sneer, but Sal stood her ground. Nausicon reached towards her, one finger gently stroking her cheek. "I can show you things you can scarcely imagine, child."

Sal slapped his hand away. "I don't want anything from you, you...you..." She just shouted at him, a gross vocalization of her rage. Exactly like he had done to Sunsetter, Nausicon grabbed Sal at the throat and hoisted her into the air.

"Child, don't you dare test me," Nausicon threatened with the rage of a thousand suns. "Not like—" When he gestured back at Helios and Sunsetter, he found the old bot standing alone and a bit confused. "Where'd...?" Nausicon began to ask.

The metal pipe struck Nausicon across the side of the head, breaking as it collided. The blow knocked Sal free and the large jet went stumbling to recover from the blow. Sunsetter didn't give him a chance to, however. She rushed in at him and punched him in the back of the head, driving him to one knee. She pulled back her fist again and struck the spot a third time, his black helmet cracking.

The fourth punch proved disastrous but not for Nausicon. The blow thrown by Sunsetter, so full of rage and fury, shattered metal and actuators; her own. The body she had been loaned by Helios, the body of aesthetic marvels and simple movements, wasn't designed for combat. As such, the tender plastics and soft metals cracked and rent at the impact. Her knuckles broke like springs ripped asunder. Her wrist cracked like warm ice and her carpal supports went spraying over the ground.

What her body lacked in stability, it had adequately in sensors, so the pain of the damage was accurately felt. Sunsetter howled in agony as she stumbled back, cradling what remained of her hand. She tried to gasp through the pain, only for Nausicon to turn at her. He whipped out a blaster as big as her torso and held it at her head.

Delicate movements bought Sunsetter time as she slipped out of the way of the blaster's barrel. She punched Nausicon in the throat with her one remaining hand. She kicked him in the legs and then leapt up to drop-kick him in the face. He was knocked back to the ground and she landed on the pavement of the dead city.

Landed hard.

Despite her efforts to break her fall, break she did. Multiple supports cracked when she impacted the ground and the finality of her landing made her gasp. Her eyes opened wide and her respirators couldn't process enough air. She gulped to breathe, rolling onto her side as she tried to move.

Nausicon's nearest bot grabbed Sunsetter by the back of the neck as she struggled to roll onto all fours. He hissed hatefully through his robotic teeth at her. But when he tried to knee her in the head, Sunsetter leapt at him and struck him between the legs with her wounded forearm. The blow to the sensitive joint caused him to shout and stumble back. She stood up, elbowing him in the jaw as she did.

The point of his jaw won that battle at impact. Sunsetter's entire shoulder shattered when she hit him. Metal and fluids, springs and gears, burst out of her body and sprayed over dusty the pavement.

Sunsetter's arm dangled uselessly from her broken body. She shuffled uncertainly back from the bot and collapsed to her knee. She looked up at

him as he stood to his full height. His sneer showed a mix of delight and bliss at seeing her pain. Two fangs, exaggerated features meant only to instill fear, protruded from his mouth as he extended the blaster that ran the length of his left arm. Bereft of a weapon, she watched him take his time aiming the shot meant to go right between her eyes, leveling the barrel at her, drinking in the fear he convinced himself he saw. She grabbed her broken arm with the barely-working one and backed away. He smirked with delight and told her, "You should beg while your—"

Sunsetter ripped off her own arm and, in the same swing, slammed him across the head with it. Her shattered arm disintegrated in the impact and she skipped forward and kicked him in the stomach, knocking him off his feet. She leapt at the blaster she'd managed to knock free, catching it in midair. She whirled around at Nausicon and fired.

The rumble of the blaster caused her remaining arm to explode.

Unable to hold the weapon steady, it erupted in her grasp. She was thrown to unforgiving ground and went skidding through the dust. Her remaining arm ceased to exist just passed the shoulder, fragments of weak metal dangling by wires and broken pieces. Sunsetter's torso was riddled with shrapnel from the weapon, piercing her vital systems.

After skidding, she rolled twice in the dirt of the canyon floor before she collapsed onto her back with painful finality. Steam of broken hydraulics hissed through her ruptured seams. Circuits sparked and died. Her vision again began to roll, the weak details of the world dwindling fast. On her back, she stared straight up into the crystal blue sky beyond the canyon. Her equilibrium was gone and she didn't know if she was laying or falling, moving or still. For a moment, all she could tell was that maybe she was plummeting upwards into the gaping void beyond.

Her eyes caught sight of something on the edge of her vision. She locked onto it, the whir of her ocular motors about all that she could still perceive. Just up passed the edges of rock and stone, Sunsetter could barely see the moon. Her moon. The moon she'd stared up at so long ago, with a different broken body. The fragments of the shattered celestial form as broken as she was then, as broken as she was now. She felt a poetic kindred spirit in the sky, knowing soon she'd feel nothing at all.

Nausicon appeared above her. Standing over the defeated bot, he stared down at her for a long moment, then he put the blaster into view. Looking past it, he stared into Sunsetter's eye and smirked cruelly. Sunsetter felt a surge of heat, and then felt nothing more.

With a crackle and spark of power, Sunsetter saw again.

A painful, vibrant clarity struck her as her visuals returned with a vengeance. The tent in the room was filthy, stained by weather and mold from pockets of moist air caught in the otherwise dry desert environment. Rips and stains from spilt chemicals as well as kicked-up mud sprinkled along the bottom level. The hard cement floor was pocketed marked from dropped materials as well as the course texture of poured-and-left concrete.

The light overhead radiated inefficiently, giving off 68% light for the energy expenditure used to power it. The rest was lost to heat. Sunsetter's field of vision wasn't 120 degrees as it had once been, but closer to 150. She could process the light well beyond the usual spectrum. Deviations in air density as well as hers to see.

Helios appeared in her field of view, studying something just off her vision. His gaze was earnest, an intensity she hadn't seen before. He looked into Sunsetter's eyes, staring into her. "You're almost ready," he told her. His words burned with focus. His eyes were boiling with anger.

With a surge, darkness enveloped her.

A single cursor appeared against black.

It blinked several times, then spelled out "Initializing..." The cursor at the end of the sentence pinged a few times as well. The black space became filled with lines of code streaming by a lightning pace. Filling the darkness, readouts and system initiations went off like digital dynamite.

A burst of white and Sunsetter could see again. Not only see, but move. Instinctually, she lifted her head and turned, feeling herself. Better than herself. No kink in her neck when she looked to the left. No ache in her hip or knees. Everything felt refreshed, regenerated, renewed.

Reborn.

She lifted up her right hand, the hand that had smashed against Nausicon's head. She found waiting a hand she'd never seen but knew perfectly. Familiar and yet novel, she turned her hand over and back again. Metal bulbs ending with pronounced ridges at the knuckles made for a powerful fist as she flexed her fingers tightly. The new steel groaned under the strength within her grip. The blue palm and back of her hand contrasted

with the mostly-chrome of her fingers. She looked past her fist at Helios who stood before her, his wizened eyes exhausted and fearful. Sunsetter asked beyond her hand, "The girls?" Helios' stare said everything. Sunsetter lowered her fist, her visual clarity surpassed by her sudden mental and emotional focus. "Where'd they take them?"

"South is all I know," Helios told her, his voice an emotional rattle.

"How long?" asked Sunsetter. She moved her legs, confirming she could. They were the same silver-gray underchassis she'd known before, with the blue armored greaves-to-feet that had carried her so reliably. Now, the armor was smooth and secure, no signs of repair, no dings and chips of long life and countless near-deaths.

She sat up from the table that stood at an angle. She began to activate systems, finding all her old programs available to her once again. Sensors awoke and her awareness of the world multiplied ten-fold. Combat programs and computational processes went to work. Under any other circumstances, she would be overjoyed. But now, she was in too great a rush to celebrate.

"Just under a day," Helios whispered.

Sunsetter stood up, flexing her shoulders. A touch broader than they had been, she felt a bit larger all around. She was taller by a few scant centimeters, but the subtle difference was especially noticeable after the diminutive size she'd spent the previous days inhabiting. She looked down at her side and saw her blaster. The familiar grip was half-hidden by the ridge of her thigh, the handle hard to see. At her back was her sword, the blade secured into the very frame of her armor itself. Confirming her weapons, she looked at Helios. "I'll get them back, but you need to be ready to leave when we return." He was delayed in responding, prompting her to be brutally clear. "They'll come back for you, come back for revenge."

For a bot so old, she saw almost juvenile confusion. He looked back towards the opening of his workplace, towards the city that was his. Sunsetter stepped forward, clearing nearly twice the distance in a single step as she had grown used to. "I can only do so much," she told Helios. She put her hand on his shoulder. "As indebted to you as I am, as I will ever be, I can't stay here and protect you indefinitely."

"Indebted," he repeated in a haunted tone, his eyes distant with thought and grief.

"As grateful as I am," she rephrased earnestly. She knelt, lowering her head so she could look him in the eyes. "Helios, you need to be ready to leave."

Helios wore his remorse with dignity. His gaze rose and his eyes sharpened. "Bring them back to me," he told Sunsetter. Then he held out to her an old blaster, military-grade and well-worn.

Sunsetter was hesitant to accept it, even as she immediately recognized the quality of weapon he was offering. She looked at the tool of a different age, for a different breed of war, then at Helios. "This was yours." He nodded. She reached out and took the blaster by the handle, pledging, "It'll protect your daughters."

"That brings me no comfort," he told her sadly. "Just...just bring them back."

Sunsetter nodded and stepped passed him, leaving him alone in the workshop.

Sal sat alone in the corner of the hollowed-out building. Ruins of a forgotten city, it was devoid of life as well as structural integrity. No ceiling and missing the far wall, it was little more than a closet in the middle of a debris-strewn field. Or it had been. Now, it was a prison cell. And in it, Sal sat in the very corner, pinned there by Nausicon.

Standing between her and the missing wall, taking up practically the entire exit, the great black jet was slow and deliberate in taking out a battery pack from behind his back. He meticulously uncovered the rubber stoppers from its charging port, while eyes that were a mockery of kindness fixed on the young bot. "I'm sure you're hungry," he told the young girl. She stayed in the corner away from him, fearful eyes glaring hatefully at him.

He unspooled the cable from the battery with meticulous movements. "We've rescued so many from their plight," he said softly in the nighttime. "Some were immediately grateful. Others...they, they struggled." He smiled at Sal. "They struggled, like a caged beast. So used to the confines of their poverty, of their desperation, the new freedom terrified them, scared them." He unspooled the whole cable and tossed it towards Sal, who flinched when it hit the bare dirt near her. "They lashed out, in their madness, in their fear." He tugged the cable back towards him and smiled again at her. "But their gratitude always manifested eventually."

"So I'm free?" asked Sal, a quiet voice trembling. Nausicon said nothing. "I-I want to leave then."

Nausicon shook his head. "I can't allow you to hurt yourself like that."

"Then I want to see Hetrid," she demanded.

"You two are in isolation, to allow you to purge your damaging routines," explained Nausicon patiently. "You've learned a dangerous and harmful way of living. Isolation is needed to re-establish healthy and sustainable subsystems."

"This is torture," Sal told him. Her voice could scarcely be heard. Her mouth trembled, her terrified voice scarcely a whisper. "You're trying to..." Her chin quaked. "Hetrid!" she screamed passed Nausicon.

Nausicon smiled, then laughed. "Lash out, child," he told her like a doting father, amused by the tantrum of a toddler. "Scream, flail, do all you need to. Purge these toxic remains of a damaging life from you." He stood and approached her. She crouched into the corner as best she could, desperate to create as much distance between her and the giant bot who crowded her. Bending over, Nausicon leaned close. "But you will see the freedom I've brought you." His smile grew, alit by the stars in the desert sky overhead. "And you will be grateful to me." He reached towards her.

At ten thousand paces, Sunsetter bull's eyed Nausicon in the side of the head.

Nausicon's roar of pain was drowned out by the energy bolt ricocheting off his armor plating. He was knocked off his feet and slammed head-first into the wall. Bricks crumbled and dust was kicked into the air by the ferocity of the impact. Sal leapt up and shrieked, covering her mouth before she could shout any more.

Nausicon pulled himself to his feet, teeth clinched in violent rage. Fuming, he whirled around to see what had struck him. His jaw dropped when out from the sky dropped Sunsetter.

Landing on one knee, her arms held out, she had just barely finished reconfiguring into her bipedal form. The rotors in her wings continued to spin as her wings shifted back behind her shoulders. She stood to her full height, actuators still locking into place. Still decidedly shorter than Nausicon, she was at least no longer dwarfed by him. Vibrant blue and polished chrome was paired off with Nausicon's black and gray as the two stood on opposite sides of the destroyed room.

Nausicon looked her up and down, still rubbing the scalding, smoking wound on the side of his head. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"You'd recognize me if I was nude," she told him before blasting him with Helios' weapon. The powerful blaster knocked Nausicon against the wall with enough force to send him crashing through.

Sunsetter wasted no time. She grabbed Sal by the arm and yanked her to her feet, pulling her out of the tiny room. Walking briskly, Sunsetter pulled the shocked Sal with one hand and raised Helios' blaster with the other. As the pair of women left the ruined building, they exited into the heart of the dead city. In the distance, Nausicon's four jets were running, blasters at the ready, as they raced to find the source of the sound.

Before the four nigh-identical jets could come to Nausicon's aid or even process the sight of Sunsetter, she blasted at them. Sprinkling the air with bolts of charged energy, she sent the four scattering for cover. Dust and debris was kicked up by the suppressive fire, giving her and Sal just a hint of obfuscation. The bombardment of shots only delayed the jets' readiness, though.

"Move it," Sunsetter ordered, pushing Sal ahead of her. She stopped in the middle of the thoroughfare between the corpses of dead buildings. Just as the four jets peeked out from behind their defensive positions of stone and concrete, Sunsetter turned the full force of her might on the four jets. Helios' blaster in her left hand, she drew her own blaster with her right. Firing in tandem, she unloaded at full-auto on the four. The fliers quickly abandoned their attempt at offense and went scrambling for more substantial cover.

In a brief gap in her own firing, Sunsetter yelled, "Where's Hetrid?" Hiding behind the crumbling remains of a wall, Sal looked fearfully over the edge of the wall at the four jets. "Where is she?!" Sunsetter yelled. Sal looked at her, terrified, and finally shook her head. "Find her!" Sunsetter ordered. Sal lingered, not moving except to shake. "GO!" yelled Sunsetter. Sal was startled into motion, but the fright broke the spell of inactivity. She rushed off, running farther into the shadowy, nighttime ruins.

Sunsetter laid down more suppressive fire but began to take shots from the four jets who had made it to cover. She ducked down behind the wall where Sal had hidden herself. With a brief respite, Sunsetter checked the charges on Helios' blaster. As glowing beams passed overhead, visual afterimages of the shots of charged energy moving at the speed of light, Sunsetter put away his weapon. Reaching her own blaster with both hands, she started to stand when she spotted movement in the darkness of the broken room where Sal had been held. "Scrap," cursed Sunsetter.

With a burst of power, Nausicon erupted out through the darkness. In jet mode, he rammed Sunsetter and arched upwards, taking her into the sky. Powerful jets broke the sound barrier and she was thrown off his nose,

going tumbling into the air. "I don't know if your Rebel or CenA, but I know one thing: you'll die as easily as either of them."

Sunsetter held her arms and legs out wide, slowing her descent. "Sorry, lover boy," she yelled back at Nausicon. "If there's one thing the last few weeks have proven above all else..." She faced the ground again as she reconfigured into her flier mode. "...it's that I am extremely hard to kill."

Her chest elevated over her head as her arms folded in, bringing her wings to bear. Her legs bent backwards at the knee, feet attaching to her hips to become the rear of the flier. Wings caught the drafting air and slowed her further as rotors began to spin madly, gaining traction against the fall.

Sunsetter soared upwards, a blue-and-silver streak that carried her into the nighttime. She climbed at bank and turned around to see four explosions of jets beneath her. Nausicon's four partners were joining the battle. "I'm normally all for a one-on-one fight, little lady. When it's just business," Nausicon told her as he set a collision course, his sleek black frame hard to see by starlight. "But you interfered in a liberation. I take that personally."

"Liberation, huh? Is that what you call it?" Sunsetter asked.

Missile ports opened across the rear of Nausicon's fuselage. Dozens of tiny missiles came swarming out, leaving trails of vapor and light in their wake as they rocketed towards Sunsetter. She ducked low, firing off a barrage of countermeasures that exploded a few of the missiles, but not enough.

A battery of tiny cannisters exploded on, against, and near Sunsetter, knocking her out of the sky. The vacuum of air caused by the explosions, as well as the shockwaves, knocked her free of all control and she went plummeting. Worse, the four jets that were rushing to join Nausicon strayed suddenly and sought after her on a deadly intercept course.

Sunsetter tried to spin her rotors to get some control but she was flipping over and over in the air as she fell. "Scrap!" she yelled before reconfiguring. Turning back into her bipedal form, she held her blaster with her right hand and Helios' blaster with her left. Crushing the triggers, she fired indiscriminately at the four jets, peppering them with blazing shots from the two handheld weapons.

The four jets veered off and Sunsetter tossed away her empty blasters. She rolled in the air and reconfigured into flier mode once again. She caught the wind and slowed her descent just in time to survive the crash with the ground. She landed though not on landing gear but wheels.

Out from the burst of dust kicked up by her rough landing, Sunsetter went shooting out of the ruins in her vehicle mode. On four tires low to the ground, the slick racer made for the distant horizon, five jets swooping in behind her. Nausicon took the lead with the others forming into a diamond pattern behind him. "You want her alive?" seethed the jet to his far right.

"If it's convenient," seethed Nausicon. "But only if." He opened two bay doors, revealing two massive missiles. Their rears lit fire and the two tubes of death went shooting forward, rushing at Sunsetter. In her racer mode, she set the afterburner and gained speed, but the missiles closed. They arched low and hugged the ground, closing the distance fast.

With a burst of flame, Sunsetter leapt off the ground. Reconfiguring into her bipedal mode, she landed on one of the missile bodies, stepping off it as it passed beneath her. With her sword held in both hands, she leapt back at the five jets pursuing her. Going too fast to respond, they could do nothing but watch as she leapt right at them.

Her slice at Nausicon was almost perfect. Had the big jet not veered, she would have completely bisected him from nose to thrusters. As it was, she pierced him through the side, carving perfectly through the entire side of his fuselage. The blade of her sword shone in the night, the energy-enhanced edge leaving a ribbon of light as it sliced through the darkness.

Nausicon collided with the ground and went rolling dozens of times. Screaming as he fell, he left behind a trail of fire and destruction, his remaining missiles exploding as he crashed. His four partners all shot up into the sky, following different paths to find space in order to arc back around.

Sunsetter landed from her slice, skidding across the hard dirt of the desert. She rose, her sword's blade still humming as she stood ready. She glanced about for cover but only endless desert could be immediately seen. Bereft of blasters and other weapons, all she had was her sword. She stood her ground, took a deep breath, and readied for war and death from above.

High in the sky and closing fast, four jets careened through the stars and closed in, locking on her.

Four jets dropped into a chain formation, their missile bays opening.

Four jets began to lower down, to secure their shot.

Three jets were shot out of the sky by one.

The three explosions knocked the bots from their intercept courses as the fourth jet shot passed them, whipping into the sky. As it passed over Sunsetter, she heard screaming. She heard a roaring of fury and rage, but

not aimed at her. The solitary jet took into the night, its flames turning into nothing but pinpricks of light. The other three jets collided with the ground, explosions marking the end of their flights and very likely their lives.

Sunsetter turned and faced down the long path of ruin left by Nausicon's crash. She slipped her sword into its scabbard, then reconfigured into her racer mode. Strong wheels took her quickly down the path to heart of the impact. In a crater, Nausicon's remains were starting to move. In bipedal mode, his right arm and shoulder had been cleaved away. His right leg was half-missing, cut from hip to foot. The edges were still glowing from the friction of the precise cut. His neck was compromised. Every time he tried to move his head, he risked the joint coming out of the socket.

Half-dead eyes turned up towards Sunsetter as she arrived over him. Fear filled his gaze and he tried to move. With only two working limbs and a body in shock, he could scarcely shift at all. Sunsetter very casually approached him, the fires burning from his impact making the chrome of her body shine. "This must be so terrifying for you," she told Nausicon. "To be this powerless." She drew out her sword and slowly turned it blade-down. She looked down at her sword as the blade hummed, then at Nausicon. "You earned this," she told him.

"Stop."

Sunsetter turned around to see one of Nausicon's jets. In functioning order and largely unscathed, which of the four was obvious. His eyes glowed above the mouthplate that was twisted in a sneer. The blaster that ran down his arm was ready but it wasn't aimed. Nausicon saw him and reached at him with his left hand, gurgling in fearful hope.

"Don't," said the jet to his leader. He came over the lip of the crater and joined Sunsetter. A thousand questions ran through her mind, but the closer he came, the clearer it was he wasn't speaking to her. Sunsetter looked between him and Nausicon and then stepped away, clearing the path between them.

The jet looked down at his leader, eyes narrowing. Inside, some emotional dam collapsed. From it flooded something more toxic than hate, more poisonous than self-loathing. The black jet fired his blaster into Nausicon's face. He placed a second shot in Nausicon's chest, then again. Then still more shots as he fired, again and again, until his blaster was drowned out by his screaming. Sunsetter watched him take revenge, then turned away. She left him to his private retribution and instead exited the crater.

As still more blaster fire echoed behind her, Sunsetter saw movement in the darkness. She kept walking towards the ruins, soon to be joined by

Hetrid and Sal coming to meet her. As she neared, Sal held up her dropped blasters. "Forget these?"

"I wanted to give them a sporting chance," Sunsetter joked without a smile as she accepted her blaster. "Keep it," she said of the other. "That's your father's."

Sal looked at the weapon in her hand, stunned. "He gave it to you?" asked Hetrid, just as amazed. Sunsetter nodded.

"Then maybe you should keep it," said Sal, pushing it into Sunsetter's hands. She looked over Sunsetter's shoulder, the blaster fire finally starting to die down. "What's that all about?"

Sunsetter looked back as silence finally fell over the night. "I'm not sure, but I suspect it's...undoing victimization." To the two girls, she said, "Let's get you home."

Helios plugged the battery into the solar collector, watching as the LEDs began their agonizing slow march towards full. His knees creaked when he stood and he had to exhale once he was upright. A breeze came down through the canyon, carrying with it the sound of engines.

Down the path from the canyontop came Sal and Hetrid. In their vehicle forms, the two girls picked up speed until they were at their max as they reached the bottom of the road. They reconfigured without slowing into their bipedal forms and ran to their father. Helios shouted with joy and ran to them, embracing his two daughters. He hugged them close, crying as they buried themselves in his arms.

He held them tightly for a long moment, then glanced upwards. At the top of the canyon, he spotted Sunsetter. Her new body glinted in the morning sun, stark blue and shining chrome standing out against the drab of the Westrion Expanse. She looked down at him, their eyes meeting. She said nothing, and needed to say nothing. With one glance between them, she turned away. Helios held his daughters closer, relieved beyond all imagining. Above, Sunsetter took off into the desert, in pursuit of her prey.

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