



TRANSFORMERS™ TIMELINES™ PRESENTS

DUNGEONS & DINOBOOTS



QUITE THE PRECARIOUS
PREDICAMENT, WOT?

Transformers Timelines Presents:

Dungeons and Dinobots

A Transformers: Shattered Glass Story

by S. Trent Troop & Greg Sepelak

Illustration by Evan Gauntt

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“Megatron has fallen!”

Starscream’s voice echoed through the war-fields of Khon as he looked down at the only thing standing between him and leadership of the Decepticons: Megatron’s wounded form, functional but near-helpless due to a well-aimed plasma blast to the midsection.

“Keep following his plan *to the letter!*” Starscream cried out as he knelt by his leader, extracting a medi-pack from his storage compartment.

In reply, the thunderous boom of Optimus Prime’s command roared over the cacophony of the battle. *“Autobots, advance! Crush the miserable Decepticons, grind them under your heel! For the glory of the Autobot Imperium, ATTACK!!!”*

Five Decepticons were entrenched in defensive positions around the recently rediscovered Arch-Ayr fuel dump. The Autobot attack had come quickly and with little warning. With Decepticon forces stretched thin across the planet, only a token yet determined resistance force remained to protect their find.

Megatron lifted his head, struggling to get upright, his voice uncharacteristically raspy and grim. “Situation, Starscream?”

“Huffer is a minor annoyance,” his second-in-command replied, gingerly helping his fallen leader. “I’ve got the dampener set up to block out Hound’s hallucination signals, which means he’s out of tricks. But it looks like Rodimus and Arcee are flanking to the rear, towards Sideswipe and Gutcruncher’s position. Prime is holding position on the left, behind the wrecked transport truck. We should be able to hold out as long as there are no surprises.”

Starscream turned as a horrible noise erupted from his right.

“You call yourself Optimus Prime, you sludge-sucking slag-spewing clunker?! You ain’t fit to lick the moondust off the real Optimus Prime’s mudflaps!”

Both Decepticons watched as their newest and strangest ally hauled a monstrosity-large cannon over one shoulder. Cliffjumper was an Autobot who claimed, among other things, to come from a bizarre alternate reality where the Autobots were the ones fighting for peace and freedom. Odd though his claim was, there was little evidence to suggest his story was anything but true. Megatron found the implication unsettling. Though this “reverse-Cliffjumper” served as a reminder that there was a “Megatron” who was every bit the monster Optimus Prime was, he felt it a small price to pay for what the Autobot had done for them.

After all, without him, Optimus would have gotten the *Ark* off-planet, and spread his goal of conquest beyond Cybertron and into the greater galaxy.

“Cliffjumper is certainly spraying enough cover fire to keep Prime occupied,” Starscream noted with horrified fascination. For a “heroic” Autobot, Cliffjumper was downright scary sometimes.

“Prime knows I’m down, and will press forward by himself any moment now. Cliffjumper is a valiant warrior, but few are a match for Prime. He’ll need your assistance. Give me the medi-kit, I will repair myself.”

“Should you-” Starscream looked worried but handed the kit over dutifully.

Megatron smiled through the pain. “Please, Starscream, it’s not the first time I’ve done my own in-field repairs. You act like my manufacturer. I need to be up and functional if we’re to stop Prime from taking the fuel. If he gets the *Ark* space-worthy...”

“I understand... but without reinforcements we may not be able to hold this depot. Though I am loathe to suggest it... we should consider destroying it.”

Megatron and Starscream winced as their comms roared to life with a blaring electronic tone. “Fear not, Mega-Dude! This is Soundwave, rockin’ the radio from Darkmount, and I bring you joyous tidings! For I have totally called in the cavalry!”

The two Decepticons looked at each other in confusion. “But... the other teams are all occupied.” A look of exhausted realization crossed Megatron’s face. “No. You didn’t. Not the...”

“Mayhem Suppression Squad! Bring it to them!”

A streak of white shot across the battleground. The racing land-vehicle split apart with an unusual whirring noise and leapt into the air. The vehicle completed its transformation to robot mode before landing on all fours, fists pounding into the ground. Autobot and Decepticon alike staggered as the ground shook, and burst of energy raced from the impact point to the Autobot line, sending Huffer and Hound flying.

The lithe form rose to its feet, turning to face Megatron and Starscream with a smile before snapping off a sharp salute. “Crasher reporting for duty, commander. We’ll have these Autobots on the run in nanocycles. Dirge, Thundercracker, strafing run on Rodimus and his pal!”



Megatron watched as the Mayhem Suppression Squad charged into battle. Amid the din of blaster fire and exploding shells he could hear the enthusiasm in their voices. Dirge's bright yellow form sped overhead, his engine noise vibrating armor and circuitry, homing in on the emotional control core of living machines to trigger bouts of crippling, maniacal laughter. Rodimus veered hard and sideswiped a support strut, transforming to robot mode and convulsing with laughter as he rolled, out of control.

Arcee, whose grip on sanity was tenuous to begin with, ramped a fallen beam and transformed in midair. Her copper-red form tumbled through the air, laughing hysterically all the way as her limbs flapped limply like a ragdoll's. Somehow she managed to maintain hold of her neutronic crossbow, which was disturbingly on-target. Gutcruncher deflected the blast with his shield and returned fire with his cannon-arm.

Arcee hit the ground rolling, sliding to her feet as if pulled upward by a string on her back. She smiled vacuously as she spun back to firing position. The smile faded as Thundercracker's multi-colored fuselage swooped low, quickly followed by a bubble of pure silence. Unable to hear the sounds of battle or the voices in her head, Arcee flailed madly until Gutcruncher was able to knock her off her feet with a concussion blast.

"Weaklings!" Prime's shout echoed across the battlefield as the jets scattered Rodimus and Arcee. "Must I do everything myself!?"

"Draw, pard'ner!"

"Wha-"

A burst of shells slammed into Prime's chest and drove him backwards. Spinning, Prime saw Bludgeon twirling his twin pistols on his index fingers before slapping them back into the hip-holsters. Bludgeon had installed this extra equipment, and more, after he caught sight of Earth transmissions focusing on their law enforcement units. From behind the yellow-and-green tank-form Decepticon leapt Carnivac, a red-and-blue canine mechanoid, who made a beeline for the Autobot leader, fangs bared.

Despite being outnumbered, Prime was easily a match for Carnivac's canine fury or Bludgeon's marksmanship. Working together, however, two Decepticons managed to keep the Autobot warlord off-balance and disoriented. Prime would raise a cannon to fire on the "cowboy" only to have the golden canine rend his arm with its teeth. When he tried to rid himself of his animalistic attacker with a well-placed punch, Bludgeon would hip-shoot explosive shells into his exposed vitals, followed by another artillery round from Cliffjumper. While Prime showed no signs of falling, his fatigue, disorientation, and above all, anger were obvious to all.

"You must admit, mighty Megatron, they are effective." Starscream followed his comment with a burst of pistol-fire that kept Huffer from sneaking up on Crasher, who was battering Hound senseless with repeated swings of her energized fists.

"It is not their skill that concerns me-"

"Come, villain! The Mayhem Suppression Squad has shown you its valor, *can you not do more?*" Carnivac's howling voice echoed through the battlefield as his foreclaws rent Prime's right knee. Driven by fury and humiliation, Prime managed to land a kick that sent the canine tumbling away.

"It is their... *enthusiasm.*"



Shortly after the arrival of the Mayhem Suppression Squad, the outnumbered Autobots began to fall back. Injured, harried and demoralized, they had managed to find cover behind a series of haphazardly-stacked transport trucks that had long since been melted together in some long-forgotten battle. The shelter provided them with cover while simultaneously preventing an easy escape.

"Well, they're trapped... how do we flush them out?" Cliffjumper mused. Like the Autobots, the Decepticons had gathered to devise tactics. Soldiers on both sides laid down suppressive fire, firing wildly over the cover. A long standoff seemed inevitable. "Explosives?" he asked hopefully. "Someone please say explosives."

Suddenly, the ground trembled. Caught unaware, Cliffjumper tumbled to the ground, followed by Dirge, who tripped over his prone form as he tried to maintain his footing.

“Crasher! Knock it off!” Cliffjumper howled from underneath the brightly-hued Decepticon.

The lithe white robot threw her hands up in the air. “It’s not me!”

“If it ain’t you then whaaaaaaat the smelt?!” Cliffjumper immediately began scrambling to move out from under Dirge. “Everyone... turn around!”

Every head on the battlefield turned, or eventually lolled in Arcee’s case, to see the source of the quake.

Coming over the horizon, trembling shelled-out buildings with the noise and force of their approach, an entire herd of immense metallic creatures rumbled towards the battlefield. The creatures were immense monstrosities; some rumbled on two legs, others on four, and some flew through the air on impossibly thin wings. They were bestial in form, bristling with claws, fangs and horns and they stampeded across the planet’s surface without regard to any structure or obstacle in their path. If a building or vehicle could not be easily avoided, the horde merely trampled it underfoot or tore it to shreds with tooth and claw.

“By the flame of my ember...” Starscream gasped. “What are they?!”

“Ignore them! It’s another of Hound’s nightmares!” Sideswipe shouted.

“Impossible! The dampener’s still running, and he’s still offline!” Thundercracker replied.

“Oh, smelt,” Cliffjumper gasped. “That’s... that’s Grimlock in the lead! They’re *Dinobots!*”

“What?” Sideswipe turned to Starscream, pointing an accusatory finger. “I thought there was only supposed to be *one* of those cast-iron lizards!”

The herd of Dinobots stopped a few dozen meters from the battleground. Each one was a fierce monster from an alien world’s antediluvian past. Grimlock, the monstrous mechanical tyrannosaurus rex from whom the others were obviously molded, took the point, roaring into the sky, calling the herd to a halt.

“Surprised to see me, Prime?”

The voice came from atop one of the largest creatures, a long-necked horror with a massive, whip-like tail. Upon the beast’s head stood a blue-and-copper mechanoid with ground-vehicle alternate mode parts. The mouthless Autobot had two wide flanges protruding from his helmet that flashed with sickly yellow-green light as he spoke. “It’s been gigacycles, but don’t worry, *I never forgot about you!*”

“Wheeljack.” Prime’s voice betrayed his usual hatred and a degree of admiration, optics narrowing. “You should be in Gygax.”

“You laughed at me, Prime, just like your troops, the University, and everyone else! You all laughed!” Wheeljack turned to survey the stunned assembly of battle-weary Autobots and Decepticons.

“He must have been funnier back then,” Dirge smirked, nudging Thundercracker in the midsection with his elbow.

“But who’s laughing now?” Wheeljack raved, arms wide. “I finished my project, and I will not be bound in a worker’s exile any longer! Behold my Dinobot army... each one a masterwork of engineering, generated in the form of the mightiest living beings of our soon-to-be colony world, Earth! And my unmatched genius has managed to duplicate and modify the artificial intelligence matrix of our favorite little killing machine, Grimlock, and grant the semblance of life to his brethren!”

Prime paused. Wheeljack was unstable under the best of circumstances. Now he had an army and an opportunity to exact his much-spoken-of revenge. “You make a good case, Wheeljack.” Prime’s voice was uncharacteristically pleasant. “All sins are forgiven, provided your Dinobots can perform. Let us start by having them destroy the Decepticons.”

Wheeljack paused, the pardon obviously not what he was expecting. However, mad as he was, he was not so mad as to fail to see the opportunity. “You heard the mech, my magnificent monstrosities... *destroy all Decepticons!*” Wheeljack shouted as loudly as his speaker mechanism would allow.

The optics of the mechanical horrors sprang to life and a chorus of screeches and roars filled the air.

“Me, Grimlock, say destroy!”

About a third of the Dinobots echoed Grimlock’s shout, while others merely growled and screeched in unfocused rage. A horned beast thrashed its head in a fierce howl as a smaller creature, similar to Grimlock but with a large, scythe-like claw on each foot, leaned sideways. The two smashed into each other and the impact rippled through the assembled herd. At once the assembled pack leapt into battle...

With each other.

Wheeljack screamed unheeded orders at his self-destructing horde until a powerful blow rocked the Dinobot he was perched on, sending the Autobot screaming to the ground into the middle of the scrum.



“Failure!”

Optimus Prime’s raging voice echoed through the hallways of Iacon. Though the Autobot base was well staffed and populated, due to the warning of the warlord’s shouts the corridors were empty, his troops scrambling to find important tasks that needed doing immediately and as far away from Prime’s throne room as possible.

Blurr and Side Burn both knelt before their leader, weathering his tirades. The two black-paneled Autobots remained silent as Prime fumed and stalked back and forth.

“We would have succeeded if not for the interference of your cousin,” Prime’s voice rumbled as he spoke, finally settling into his throne. “If you had killed her when you had the opportunity, we would not have been in this situation.”

After several moments, Prime added “You may speak in your defense, Blurr.”

“In all fairness, my liege,” Blurr said evenly, grateful his head was bowed to hide his expression from Prime’s gaze, “You didn’t require Sunstreaker to murder the traitor Sideswipe.”

“No, I intended that job be done *properly*. I am continually beset by disappointment.”

“If I may, my lord,” Side Burn interrupted. “Undue attention to females is a waste of time and resources. In my associate’s defense, I must remind you that I did suggest reforming the Wreckers. They were our best wedge against the Mayhem Suppression Squad. And had the Decepticons been routed, surely you would have been hard-pressed to refocus Wheeljack’s madness towards them, and away from you.”

“Rise, and face me.”

The two robots stole glances at each other, and carefully took to their feet. Prime studied the pair; Blurr, a veteran warrior, his bodyframe still Cybertronian in nature, his lost left optic crudely patched with a plate of metal bolted over the hole, oddly incongruous with his slow, deliberate and above all elegant manner. And Side Burn, a young one who had risen far in short time, panels of black armor hanging off of his white and red bodyframe. Unlike Blurr, he had already altered his changeform to resemble that of an Earth vehicle in anticipation of their journey to their newest prize. His own left optic hid behind a targeting visor.

“You are both dangerously close to angering me.” Prime hunched over in his throne, resting his head on his folded hands. “Today’s loss of the depot only compounds my discontent. But recovering my Dinobot army is too important for me to waste minions on mere stress relief.”

“But Prime, the fuel for the *Ark*...” Side Burn waved his arms wide. “It is essent-”

“It is of little consequence!” Prime roared, silencing him. “Let the Decepticons have the fuel dump. Without a ship it is little more than foul-tasting rations... and dead mechs don’t need fueling.” Prime’s optics flashed in the dim light. “My current concern, my only concern, is the capture of the surviving Dinobots, including Grimlock. Especially Grimlock. He cannot fall back into the Decepticons’ grimy manipulators.”

“Then your order is...?” Side Burn sighed, lowering his gaze in acquiescence.

“All available Autobots who are not currently occupied with *Ark* repairs are to report immediately for capture duty.”

“And Wheeljack?” Blurr practically purred. “He’ll have to be dealt with... right?”

“Oh, indeed. He will be sent back to his pit in Gygax.” Prime could see the disappointment cross Blurr’s face.

“Lord Prime, majesty, your highness... if I may.” Side Burn smiled wide, his golden optics shimmering. “Wheeljack may have failed to put the Dinobots under control... but he did manage to perfect their manufacture, which is still an advantage we can exploit. Perhaps an... alternate punishment would be in order?”

“Such as?”

“The *Ark*’s computer system is still a shambles thanks to the traitorous Cliffjumper. Basic computer maintenance is far beneath Wheeljack’s skill, and it would insult his intellect greatly to have to work on it. Wheeljack learns a lesson in humility while simultaneously speeding the repair process.”

Prime stroked his chin, optics going from Side Burn to Blurr. The former merely smiled, the latter glared at the former.

“And if he decides to sabotage the systems?” Prime growled.

“Simply make it crystal clear to him that he will be coming to Earth with you.” It looked as though Side Burn’s grin would split his head apart.

Several moments of silence passed before Prime’s laughter split the air.

“Wonderfully deviant, Side Burn. I see big things in your future... if you are careful.”

“Thank you, my liege.”

“Go join the Ark repair crew to supervise... Wheeljack will be joining you shortly, after he reports to *Ratchet* for an Earth-mode retrofit. Blurr!”

Blurr jolted in shock, still shuddering in horrified fascination at the thought of Ratchet being put in charge of Wheeljack’s new form. “Yes, lord?”

“Go find me some Dinobots.”

“... yes, my lord.”

As soon as the door to Prime’s chambers closed behind them, Blurr grasped Side Burn’s shoulders and slammed him into the corridor wall, dislodging some long-deactivated Decepticon Micromaster corpse that decorated the hall. He leaned in close, glaring at him with murder in his optic. “There’s something wrong about you. Why do I get the feeling that you just don’t belong here?”

“I do not understand, Blurr. I’m just a humble bot in this grand army. I am merely doing my small part for the glory of the Imperium.”

Blurr shoved, pressing Side Burn harder into the wall.

“Can the exhaust fumes and listen to me closely, Side Burn, as I do not intend to repeat myself.” Blurr pressed closer to the robot’s face, good optic locked on the one behind Side Burn’s viewfinder. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, but you *will* stay out of my way. *Accidents* happen that way.”

Side Burn blinked innocently. “I would not dream of it.”

Blurr snorted and shoved, as if pushing himself away from the offending mechanoid. Without a word, he folded into his vehicle mode and tore off in a burst of black light.

Side Burn simply dusted himself off with a smile, picked up the fallen corpse and returned it to its hook.



“We have an unparalleled opportunity here!” Dirge smiled. “There’s dozens of Dinobots on the loose, we can grab ‘em, bring ‘em back, and Starscream can fix their AI so they’ll work for us. That’s something to smile about, right?”

The Decepticons stood in a loose circle inside the Arch-Ayr’s main hangar. Reinforcements had arrived from Darkmount, and most of them were loading what supplies and energon rods they could find into Astrotrain’s shuttle mode.

“I don’t know... is it really worth it?” Cliffjumper rumbled, pacing nervously. “The Dinobots where I come from were big and strong and hard to drop, all right... but they were a major pain in the tailpipe. Couldn’t trust ‘em to not run off on their own whenever they slaggin’ well felt like it on a good day, never mind the occasional takeover attempt. And they were technically good guys, and had actual sparks... er... embers, whatever.”

“Are you *sure* the Autobots are the good guys in your universe?” Gutcruncher rumbled.

“Get torqued,” Cliffjumper snapped, not even looking back. “These things we just faced down... they’re just brainless monsters.” He paused, waving a hand to the open hangar doorway, where numerous Dinobot corpses still smoldered. “And there’s a lot more of ‘em to boot, even after that little feedin’ frenzy thinned the herd.”

“I appreciate your concern, Cliffjumper... but for once, I agree with Dirge’s sunny outlook,” Starscream smiled. “I’ve been wanting to get my hands back on my AI matrix ever since Wheeljack hacked my files. We could undo plenty of damage with a few Dinocons of our own.”

Megatron nodded. "I agree. This could be quite advantageous. Unfortunately, we can't spare everyone for the mission... but a few small active squads would work fine. Even one or two reprogrammed and repurposed creatures can help turn the tide. Astrotrain and the Micromasters will have to transport the recovered fuel back to Darkmount, and we'll need to keep most of the engineering and construction staff on hand for Project Doubletake, plus a security force to cover them..." Megatron shook his head. "Our resources are limited. Starscream, gather a dozen of our best mechs and get them in the field for this 'Dinobot Hunt'... but no risks. We cannot let this distract us from the real danger Prime has presented us."

"The Decepticon Army can count on the assistance of the Mayhem Suppression Squad in this glorious mission!" Crasher saluted with her pistol, face completely straight.

Megatron let slip a low sigh. "I am grateful, as always, Crasher."



"Well, will you look at that?"

It hadn't taken long for Cliffjumper to locate one of the wandering Dinobots. The beast in question had managed to make it to one of the toxic bayous adjoining the Rust Sea. It was grazing on the crystalline growths that sprang up like reeds along the bayou's edge when evaporation solidified the sea's innate trace energon content. The red-and-gray Dinobot was about a third of Cliffjumper's size, and its design clearly marked it as having a memory-cartridge alternate mode similar to those employed by Soundwave and Blaster.

The creature was blissfully unaware of Cliffjumper and Sideswipe's presence, largely due to a low outcropping of pitted metal that served as a makeshift hunting blind. Cliffjumper peered at the Dinobot through a particularly large hole in the outcropping. "It's a Stagnosaurus, I think that's what the humans call it. See the plates and the spikes?"

"I'm paying more attention to the cannons on its sides, personally." Sideswipe was careful to keep his voice at a low whisper. "Any ideas on how to proceed?"

"Just one. *Geronimo!*" Cliffjumper grinned and leapt from his hiding place at a dead run.

"But Geronimo was killed back in the early days of the *hey get back here!*"

Before the Dinobot could react, Cliffjumper tackled it from the side. The creature thrashed and howled as it was wrestled to the ground.

"Why bad robot hurt Slugfest?" it yelped in shock. "Everyone love Slugfest!" The sharp metallic plates on the Dinobot's back slashed back and forth while its tail swung wildly, but Cliffjumper's longer reach and greater mass gave him the advantage. "Slugfest am coolest!"

"Yeah, yeah, just hold still pal... I got a nice restraining bolt for ya that'll keep you nice and still..."

"Slugfest am saying you will be sorry! Slugfest has big friends!"

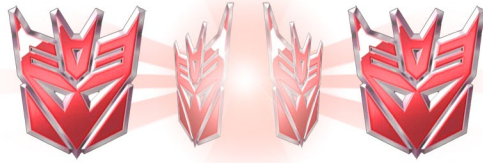
"Yeah, yeah... I've heard that one before." Cliffjumper grinned and pressed the restraining bolt to the back of the Dinobot's neck, shutting down the creature's motor controls.

"Cliffjumper! Look out!"

Sideswipe's warning came a few seconds too late. A mass of armor and fangs burst through the tree-like crystalline growths and loomed over Cliffjumper and his captured prize. In contrast to Slugfest's red coloration, this Dinobot was green and white with gold and blue accents. It was also immense, similar to Grimlock in form but of a far greater size. Without pause the creature glared at Cliffjumper, its fangs, claws and row of gleaming horns all aimed straight at the alien Autobot's vulnerable form.

"Me Slugfest say me have big friends!"

"Oh slag..."



The monstrosity glared at Cliffjumper, who had quickly taken his hands off the small Dinobot.

“Not Slag!” it roared, causing crystals to plummet from their perches and shatter to the ground. “Slag am ugly and stupid. Me am handsome and awesome!” the Dinobot bellowed.

“Easy there, pal... I can see that.” Cliffjumper raised both hands. “You got a name?”

“Me *gore you!*”

“What kinda name is-”

The Dinobot’s roar of rage shut Cliffjumper up quickly. It paused and cocked its head to one side. Its optics narrowed as it looked Cliffjumper over with a mix of suspicion and wariness. “You have red face. Me *stomp* red face. But face am *purple* face, me not kill purple face. But face *red!* Confused! *Angry!*”

As the Dinobot lowered its head, a spinning teal blur sailed over Cliffjumper’s shoulder and struck the creature between the eyes. Cliffjumper watched as Sideswipe’s baton bounced off the thick skull and sailed through the air in an arc, following it as Sideswipe made a rocket-powered jump to intercept. The former Autobot caught his weapon in midair with his free hand, and hefted both cudgels overhead.

“Heads up, fangs!”

With a warrior’s yell, Sideswipe brought the twin clubs down on the monster’s skull as he sailed downward.

Unfortunately, the beast’s head was heavily armored and its sheer size limited the effectiveness of the attack. Cliffjumper rolled to one side as the creature staggered back more from confusion than injury, its right paw narrowly missing him.

The attack had managed to draw the Dinobot’s attention,



however, and it lowered its head and began to barrel after its attacker. Deciding that flight was the best of all possible reactions, Sideswipe quickly took to his vehicular form, pursued by the rampaging beast through the crystal-littered lowlands around the swamp.

“Cliffjumper, I could use some help here!” Sideswipe howled over the comm. as he smashed through a thicket.

“I’m on it!”

“Where are you?!”

“I just told you! *I’m on it!*”

Cliffjumper hung tenaciously to the creature’s tail with one hand, struggling to get a grip. Putting the spare restraining bolt he held between his teeth, he managed to get a second hand-hold and slowly inched his way toward the creature’s head. The crawl was difficult, as the beast’s armor had few protrusions and its clumsy gait rocked and shook Cliffjumper with piston-crushing force.

“Cliffjumper! I think I bit off more than I can chew!” Sideswipe shouted.

“I’m coming, I’m coming!” Cliffjumper shouted back, and realized too late his mistake as the restraining bolt flew from his mouth and tumbled off into the distance.

“Slag it all!” Cliffjumper managed to grab one of the creature’s horns with a final lunge. “Might as well see where I was goin’, at least!” He clung to the Dinobot’s neck with all his strength as the lumbering beast chased after Sideswipe’s vehicle mode. Every few seconds the Dinobot belched forth a stream of silver-white mist that solidified into a rapidly-spreading pillar of ice. Sideswipe managed to swerve out of the way of each projectile, but the bolts were coming closer with each attack.

“Slow down, ya crazy tyrantosmarmus!” Cliffjumper howled, punctuating his request by punching the creature in the neck twice, to no effect.

“Shoot it!” Sideswipe shouted. “I can’t keep this up forever!”

“I can’t, the glass gas’ll blow back in my face!”

“That’s a terrible weapon!”

“Why don’t you just beat it to death with a *missile* if you’re so smart!”



“This jive-turkey is really gettin’ on J’s nerves!”

Jazz’s annoyance was shared by Goldbug, though the latter was far less vocal about it. They had managed to corner one of Wheeljack’s monsters; a winged, beaked horror, with green-black armor and red claws. Unlike the others, this one was more intricate, more organic in appearance. The beast perched on an old observation tower and eyed the two Autobots warily. “I say we cap it,” Jazz snarled, reaching for his flamethrower.

“And I say Prime wants it alive,” Goldbug muttered. “So stow the missiles. And get to climbing.”

“What’s that jibba-jabba?” Jazz crossed his arms and straightened his posture in an effort to appear more imposing. “I ain’t climbin’ no tower after no flyin’ monster!”

“It’s very simple. If you climb the tower, only you are at risk. If we fail to bring back a Dinobot, then we’re both at risk... and this way you get to prove your bravery to Prime after that humiliating retreat during the bombing of the *Ark*...”

“Then you climb the tower!” Jazz waved his fist defiantly. “J got nothin’ to prove!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it... you really should.”

“I say we take a vote!”

“What would be the point? There would be a tie!” Goldbug balled his fist in frustration. He deactivated his optics for a few moments and forced himself to calm down.

“Says you, tool!” Jazz pointed to the horizon. Two automotive forms were rolling in their direction at high speed. “We got company.”

Goldbug put a nervous hand on his blaster but relaxed as the vehicles came into view. “Excellent.” He waved his arms to flag down the approaching forms. “Rodimus! Blurr! Over here!”

As usual, Rodimus arrived first. “Heh, Goldbug what’s the haps?” he grinned as he slid into robot mode, barely braking before transforming.

“I see you’ve located our quarry.” Blurr took his time shifting his body back into a humanoid configuration.

“Yes, it seems we could use a hand.” Goldbug replied.

“Heh, good thing I got two, eh?” Rodimus couldn’t help but smirk at his own comment. Blurr and Goldbug shared an incredulous look for a brief moment. Blurr stood, shocked at Rodimus’s apparent foolishness. Goldbug’s narrow optics, however, betrayed intense suspicion.

“I think it best that Jazz, being ever so skilled and brave, goes up the tower to flush the beast out,” Goldbug sighed, arms folded against his chest. “He, however, prefers a democratic process.”

“I vote he goes up,” Blurr replied.

“Ditto.” Rodimus added.

Jazz growled low, missile racks swinging into firing position over his shoulders. “Vote or no vote, I pity the tool that thinks he can force me to climb a tower.” Jazz once again crossed his arms and stared hard at his comrades.

The assembled Autobots raised their guns in unison.

“Any you tools got a cable?”



Sideswipe was living up to his name.

A stray blast of ice-breath from the towering Dinobot had intersected with his path. Unable to stop, Sideswipe was now at the mercy of the nearly frictionless frozen surface of the planet. He drifted, then skidded and finally lost control, plowing sideways into a row of crystals. The impact was neither lethal nor injurious, but it left him stunned and flipped over onto his vehicle-mode side, pinned between a number of jagged crystal formations, wheels spinning helplessly as his systems tried to get him fully online again.

The Dinobot in question had not intended to lead its target. Cliffjumper’s continued presence on his neck had fouled its aim. The beast was pleased with the results nonetheless, and bellowed in triumph. “Me win! Me best!”

“Why is diction so difficult for these things?” Cliffjumper grumbled. The Dinobot had stopped running now that its main target was helpless. Its chase halted, it turned its attention towards Cliffjumper, spinning around as it tried to bite the back of its own head.

“You come down!” it shouted.

“You’re nuts,” Cliffjumper replied. “I’m staying right here where it’s safe.”

“Not safe! Me get you!” The creature reached up to swipe at Cliffjumper with its forelimbs only to find that, no matter how he stretched or twisted, his claws just wouldn’t reach. Frustrated, it resumed shouting. “Gaah! Arms *useless!* You come down or else!”

“No, I’m fine.” Cliffjumper gripped tight and shifted himself so he was staring at the Dinobot’s left eye. Once he was certain the beast could see him Cliffjumper gave a wide, mocking grin. “Why don’t you come up and get me?”

“No! You come down!” it shouted, trying to throw him free by shaking its head wildly.

“Ha! You’ll never get me down,” Cliffjumper smirked as the beast staggered a little, trying to think. “You’ll never figure out how.”

“Oh, yeah! Me smash head into ground! Smash you flat!”

The Dinobot crouched low to the ground then threw himself upward, twisting his body. The resulting momentum flipped him over and he threw back his neck, driving his head into the ground with the full force of his weight and strength behind the blow.

Unfortunately for the beast, Cliffjumper had released his grip in mid-flip before activating the Wave Crusher he wore on his back. The waterski folded open, revealing a set of wings and a pair of flight thrusters. The immense Dinobot came crashing to the ground as the jets kicked in and carried Cliffjumper safely to the ground a dozen meters away.

“Well I’ll be slagged. He did figure it out!” Cliffjumper laughed to himself as the beast moaned before falling still. He turned and yanked several shards out of the ground, dislodging Sideswipe’s prone body from the tangled crystalline growths that held him. Properly extracted and his position righted, Sideswipe returned to his natural robotic shape.

“How you feeling?”

“Pride hurts more than my frame,” Sideswipe muttered, pulling a restraining bolt from his storage compartment. “Let’s tag and bag this thing before it gets up again.”

“You’re welcome.”

Sideswipe didn’t reply as he affixed the bolt to slumbering beast. He slowly circled the Dinobot, examining its form. “Big one... Starscream will be happy, for sure... Oh, *this* is discouraging.” Sideswipe tapped the creature’s hip with one of his clubs, motioning to some Cybertronix etched into its armor. “Hmm, ‘D-322’. I hope that Wheeljack screwed up and scrapped a few hundred of these before he got to this batch. Good thing he was stupid...”

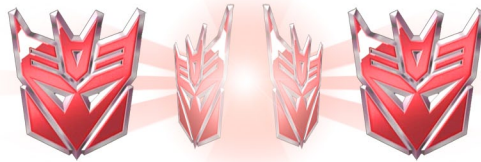
“Stupid and aggressive,” Cliffjumper replied. “Let’s call in the big guns to haul this guy back in.”

“On it.” Sideswipe tapped his commlink. “Yeah, Soundwave, we have one... Slugfest and, lets see... ‘Goryu,’ he said his name was, I think. Home in on my signal... and send Astrotrain.”

“Oh, hey, this is interesting...”

Sideswipe turned back at the sound. Cliffjumper was surveying the horizon through his rifle scope as he spoke. “What is?”

“A lone Autobot, few clicks off, and moving fast... could be worth checkin’ out.”



“Just where are you going, Huffer?” Sideswipe kept one club at the Autobot’s neck. Huffer hadn’t seen Sideswipe’s approach. He had been in a hurry and cornering him in the wastes had been a simple matter. The black-and-gray Autobot was trapped between Cliffjumper and Sideswipe now.

“I... um... I’m going home, I mean, isn’t it a great day for a drive?” Huffer smiled. “I’m sure glad I got caught by you guys, you used to be Autobots, you’re gonna understand, right?”

“I still am an Autobot... just the *right* kind,” Cliffjumper said with a derisive sneer on his face, punctuating it with a *clunk* as his glass gas pistol-barrel tapped against Huffer’s head. “Let’s talk, Huffer... your gun is busted up and you’re running scared... which Dinobot did you run into?”

“Hey, I love that you want to pay attention to me, but honest, I haven’t run into anything.” Huffer’s grin never left his face.

“Listen Huffer, you’d better talk. My partner here isn’t quite what you’d call sane.” Sideswipe leaned in and continued in a hushed whisper. “He believes in Primus.”

Huffer gave Cliffjumper an uncharacteristically odd stare, then shrugged. “Okay, how’s this? I’ll tell you, for say, three energon rods.”

“What? How about I put my fist through your carburetor and make you dance?” Cliffjumper made a short lunge for Huffer, but was halted by Sideswipe’s arm.

“Two rods,” Huffer replied.

“You’ll take one and like it!” Cliffjumper’s outburst caught everyone, including himself, by surprise. Huffer paused and then nodded.

“One rod it is. Gimme.”

Sideswipe extended the rod in one hand. Its sickly green-yellow glow cast strange shadows across the ground. Huffer reached up to snatch the rod but Sideswipe withdrew it. "First... who did you run into?"

"It was Grimlock. He was headed toward sector Alpha-Seven, honest!"

"That's what I wanted to hear." Satisfied, Sideswipe handed the energon rod over. "Cliffjumper, we need to intercept Grimlock before he gets lost in that sector."

"Shouldn't we wait for backup?"

"No time. Let's roll. But first, we'll make sure Huffer is locked down so he can't cause any-" A quick glance revealed that Huffer had already managed his escape.

"Trouble."

"Let's go after him, he can't have gotten far." Cliffjumper was already loading his glass gas gun in anticipation.

"He's harmless. Grimlock, however, can do some major damage... and I'd feel better if he was doing the damage for our side. Let's roll."

From his hiding place behind one of the nearby crystalline growths, Huffer smiled to himself. Not shabby. Grimlock would surely turn those two into fine metal shavings, and at least he knew roughly where Grimlock was. Prime could send a larger force to corral him. And he'd managed to make off with an energon rod.

It would all turn out okay in the end.



"Jazz! Let go of the scrapping bird!" Rodimus shouted into the sky.

"Let go of the bird!? You slaggin' tool! The only thing J hates worse than flyin' is fallin'!"

"Swoop no drop!" the beast squawked between bouts of joyous laughter, despite the added weight of Jazz clinging to his talons. "Swoop love new friend! You come all way up to see Swoop! Me show new friend fun! We loop now! *Whooooooooooooooooooooo!*"

"Auuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuugh!!!"

"Don't worry, Jazz, I'll get you down!" Goldbug shouted.

Rodimus cocked his head. "I'll bite. How?"

Goldbug raised his rifle and took careful aim.

"Oh, no! Don't be pullin' that-" Jazz managed to shout.

A bolt of red light surged from Goldbug's cannon and struck Swoop in the left wing. The Dinobot and his passenger fell to the ground with a deafening clang.

"Like that."

"Whadda riot!" Rodimus howled, slapping his knee.

"Curiosity compels me, Goldbug," Blurr sighed, shaking his head. "Why not just shoot the creature while it was an easier target... say, when it was on the perch?"

Goldbug strolled over casually and slapped a restraining bolt on the beast. "If I'd wounded its wing while it was up there, we'd have never have gotten it out of the tower."

"I hate you tools!" Jazz's voice was little more than a groan coming from beneath the collapsed Swoop. "Get off your bumpers and help me!"

"New friend break Swoop's fall! Swoop love new friend!"

"Shut up!!!"

A few meters away, Blurr held his hand to his comm. "Do you mind, Jazz? I am attempting to have a conversation!" Blurr listened intently to the communicator for a few moments before dismissing himself. "Rodimus, leave this... 'Swoop' to these two. Huffer just sent an alert, he has a location on Grimlock."



Grimlock's trail led Cliffjumper and Sideswipe through the badlands and into the Rad Zone, a wasteland of heavy ambient radioactivity and violent weather patterns. The landscape was peppered with outcroppings of jagged metal and unexpected drops and ditches, while the sky seethed with sulfur-laden clouds.

"At least he's making it easy for us to follow him," Sideswipe muttered.

His companion simply nodded. Where Grimlock hadn't trampled the pitted and decaying terrain, he had simply torn through it. Following the path quickly, however, was impossible. Sideswipe and Cliffjumper had to maneuver slowly to avoid the countless pitfalls and razor-sharp obstacles, both natural and formed by the Dinobot's passing, that littered the terrain.

Eventually, the trail veered out of the flatlands, into a rough area of hillocks and old bunkers left over from some forgotten stage of the war. The trail vanished at the top of one of the more treacherous hillocks, next to the entrance of an ancient bunker.

The entryway had once been a massive, vault-like door. Years of neglect in the Rad Zone had broken and weathered the doors until nothing was left but fragments. The result was a gaping, cave-like pit lined with fallen chunks of irregular metal blocks. The whole edifice gave the impression of a gaping maw.

"He went in there," Sideswipe said quietly, indicating the pit.

"How do you know?"

"Claw marks." Sideswipe pointed to one of the stalagmites at the base of the entrance. "The metal underneath looks new, where everything else is corroded. These were made recently."

"Inviting," Cliffjumper muttered as he pointed up at the bunker. "Any idea how deep that goes? We could have him cornered. I'll get back to you on if that's good or not."

Sideswipe shook his head. There was something stiff and deeply uncomfortable about his demeanor, but Cliffjumper couldn't quite place it. "No idea."

"Okay, that's enough."

Sideswipe paused. "What?"

The smaller Autobot jabbed a digit into Sideswipe's chestplate. "It don't take a codebreaker to realize that you're on edge, and it's more than just the fact that we're spelunking into who-knows-what after a metal-rendin' monster." Sideswipe tried to move past Cliffjumper, but the smaller robot refused to step aside. "And you've been this way ever since we hit the Rad Zone."

"I don't want to talk about it," he growled warningly. Sideswipe attempted to push by again, only to be stopped by Cliffjumper's outstretched hand.

"Tough. You know I'm not gonna give up on this."

Sideswipe stared down the red robot for several seconds. "Fine. We go much further, and we're going to find corpses, okay? Corpses I put here. This is where the ambush went down, where I was left for dead."

"So what? It's not like I've never seen scrap before. Autobot and Decepticon, and you know it," Cliffjumper sniffed, arms folded over his chest. He gave Sideswipe a long, level stare. "What aren't you telling me?"

There was a long pause before Sideswipe spoke, optics turning away from the Autobot.

"It was stellar cycles ago. Prime set me up, but he didn't do it close up. So he didn't find out until too late that I walked away from that fight. The ones that didn't? This is where they'd be."

Cliffjumper turned slightly, eyeing the darkened passage warily. "And? You're still stallin'. What are you afraid that I'll find out here?"

"You."

"Wha-?"

"This is where I killed *you*."

After a few moments, Cliffjumper palmed his face and shook his head.

“That’s it? All this over that?” Cliffjumper sighed. “I... he, the other me, whatever, was probably a crazed monster, like the other Autobots around here. Big deal and good riddance.”

Sideswipe turned, shooting Cliffjumper a nasty glance. “Actually, he was trusting, forgiving and rather amiable... provided you weren’t in his crosshairs.” Sideswipe paused for a moment then shrugged. “Unfortunately, he had a habit of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was... insubordinate... after Prime had my commander Drench executed. So Prime hired some freelancers to take me out. Cliffjumper showed up and got in the way.”

“So... it ain’t that you killed him, but you were in the area when someone else did?”

“I was the target, so it was my f-”

“Got it. So, self-absorbed drama-bots are a multiversal constant. Thanks for the heads-up.” Cliffjumper turned and began walking further down the corridor.

Sideswipe’s expression was one of genuine confusion as he sought a reply. “You aren’t at least slightly concerned?”

The Autobot didn’t even look back, drawing his glass gas gun again. “Look, finding my own corpse is gonna be maybe the three-hundredth weirdest thing I’ve had to put up with since getting to this dimension... ranking somewhere between Bombshell’s group therapy sessions and the weird aftertaste energon has here. Compared with an army of crazed Dinobots and the Mayhem Suppression Squad, that ain’t even close.”

“Let’s go.” The lights on Sideswipe’s chest flashed on, casting light and jagged shadows into the blackness, illuminating nothing but bare, worn walls that stretched downward, beyond their sight. Sideswipe drew both his cudgels warily.

The bunker was as decayed and worthless on the inside as it was outside. The initial chamber slanted downward and went deep into the hill. At the back of the chamber, the rear wall had collapsed, or had perhaps been destroyed by combat. Beyond it was a cavernous access tunnel. Every few feet bore an indication of Grimlock’s passing; a scrape on a wall, a claw mark on a ventilation pipe, a dent in a floor-plate. Straight-shot tunnels became winding passages, and Cliffjumper rapidly lost track of his bearing. The only two things that seemed consistent in the journey were the pair’s downward motion, and the lingering uncomfortable silence.

“I don’t get what you were worried about. Its not like a wreck would last long out in the Rad Zone anyhow.” Cliffjumper said after a few tense moments. “Heck, the whole side of the mountain looked picked clean.”

“Hold that thought...”

“Oh, what now?”

Sideswipe ran his fingers along one of the walls. “This doesn’t look like an access tunnel. It looks like a tomb.”

“Again with the morbid junk. Yes, there was a shoot-out, bots got slagged, I get it! Can we move on to something else now? Like a Dinobot?”

“No, I mean literally! I think we’re specifically in a tomb! Do you know anyone who decorates access tunnels?”

Cliffjumper turned his foot-lights to the wall that held Sideswipe’s attention. Strange pictographs covered the stone surface. Some long-forgotten hand had chiseled crude representations of Cybertronian robot forms into the surface alongside odd semi-pictorial letters. The figures acted out what seemed to be funerary rites in a disquietingly stiff pantomime, each step laid out, left to right, in sequential order from death, to interment before a large crystal-like object to a final disassembly under the watchful eye of a vague mechanical figure holding an ornate sword. The pictographs then repeated in reverse order on the opposite side of the central image.

“That’s... bizarre. They look almost Egyptian!” Cliffjumper ran his fingers over the symbols. “But they coulda been here for hundreds of thousands of years or more... too worn an’ too much rust to be recent.”

“They look what? What’s an Egyptian?”

“It’s an Earth thing... one of their first big empires, I think,” Cliffjumper commented as he examined the wall. “Built big monuments, walked all funny...”

The awe in Sideswipe’s voice caught Cliffjumper unawares. “You’ve been to *Earth*?”

“Yeah, ‘bout twenty-five years ago... okay, technically a lot longer than that, but that’s when I woke up there.” Cliffjumper smirked. “I forgot you all were so slow with your space program.”

“Whose years?”

“Theirs, one-eighty-third of a vorn or so. Nevermind.” Cliffjumper snorted. “It don’t matter... can you read it?”

“The pictographs are totally alien, but the writing is an ancient Decepticon dialect... I can only make out a little bit... let’s see... ‘cho’rk’, that means ‘sacred’, ‘zansh-kor-re’ that would be... oh... that’s creepy.”

“What?”

“It means ‘depart’... or at least ‘zansh-kor’ does. The ‘re’ is an inflective, it indicates a warning.”

“So, it’s warning us not to leave?”

“No, I think it’s telling us to-”

GET OUT.

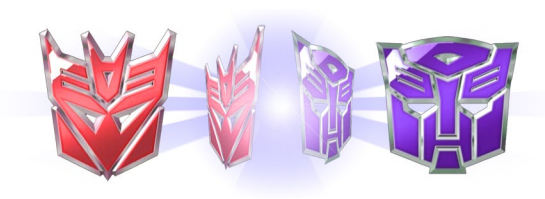
The voice seemed to emerge from every surface, shaking the corridor violently. Both Cliffjumper and Sideswipe held their footing, but dust and grit from the ceiling covered them before the rumbling subsided.

“Okay, well, it’s been a blast, but I think we’ll be going now!” Cliffjumper blurted out, spinning on one foot. “We’ll just find the exit...”

Sideswipe grabbed his companion’s shoulder. “It was this way!”

“That way’s a solid wall!”

The two Autobots blinked and spun in confusion. Both could swear the tunnels were different just nanocycles before.



“Oh, yeah. Grimlock came this way.”

Rodimus rose from his kneeling position, wiping dust and flakes of corroded metal from his armor. “Looks like two others. Lotta scuffing, scrapes an’ treadmarks.”

“How do you know that?” Blurr grumbled, a shade accusatory.

“Ain’t gotta be a genius to recognize scuffs and scratches, m’mech. Why you jumpin’ up my tailpipe? You been like this since we hit the Rad Zone.”

“This area is well suited to ambushes and is rife with mutants,” came the curt reply as Blurr strode past Rodimus into the cavernous bunker. “Keep what passes as your wits about you.”



Cliffjumper knew something was wrong the moment he felt the stone under his foot give way. The block continued to slide down after he reflexively jerked backwards. The sound of stone grinding past stone was followed by a sharp click and the thrum of unseen machinery springing to life. A crashing thud from behind caused the two mechanoids to spin around. The way behind them was now blocked by a massive slab.

“Of course... it’s a trap. If that don’t just fit the rest of our day.”

The corridor before them was like most of the others; unidentifiable rock, lined with odd symbols and dimly lit. This one, however, differentiated itself with metallic spears that lashed out from every angle, only to withdraw and then strike again.

“Lovely,” Sideswipe grumbled, peering into the gauntlet ahead. “Looks like this goes on like that for over thirty meters. So now what?”

“We cheat.”

Cliffjumper withdrew his glass gas gun, fiddling with a dial on its side before taking aim. He squeezed the trigger, unleashing a long, billowing cloud of gas into the chamber ahead instead of the compressed-air-bursts he

normally used. The gas began to dissipate almost instantly, and the blades continued to shoot out from the walls at every angle. Nonetheless, Cliffjumper seemed pleased with the results.

“Now, when the next one comes out, see if you can club it.”

“If you say so.” Sideswipe took a hesitant step forward. The closest spear lashed out smoothly every few seconds. He watched it pass him four times and then, when he was certain of the timing, he swung his bludgeon through the spear’s path. The club struck the spear at mid length.

The blade’s altered physical makeup buckled and shattered with the impact. Shards of broken metal skittered in all directions like glass.

“Now we just hack and slash our way through the trap and come out on the other side.” Cliffjumper smiled, pleased with his own handiwork. “The stuff’ll wear off in a bit, so let’s not hang around long, okay?”

Traversing the corridor was a slow process. Sideswipe smashed each trap in turn after Cliffjumper gave the corridor ahead of them a coating of glass gas. The spears moved in a predictable pattern, which made the going easier.

Two-thirds of the way through the corridor, Cliffjumper screamed.

One of the spears had not been moving in synch with the others, and had found its mark, impaling him just above the knee. The spear, weakened by the glass gas, broke off as soon as Cliffjumper’s weight shifted. Unable to withstand this fracture, it shattered throughout.

Sideswipe grabbed hold of Cliffjumper before the wounded Autobot could fall into another mass of blades. Sideswipe redoubled his efforts, pushing forward while aiding his companion’s limping progress. Both Autobots collapsed as soon as they cleared the tunnel without further incident.

“How is it?” Sideswipe knelt to inspect the wound.

“Gnnnnn. I think the spear broke inside me. It’s gonna take a lot of work, provided it doesn’t cause permanent damage.” Cliffjumper winced. “The metal should revert to normal in a cycle, that’ll keep it from splintering more.”

“I thought your ‘glass gas’ was supposed to make metal as brittle as, well, glass. That’s some tough glass.”

“Shove somethin’ sharp out fast enough and it’ll penetrate, don’t matter what it is, really.” Cliffjumper tested his weight on his wounded leg and began to limp carefully down the hall. “Hey, Sideswipe?”

“Yeah?”

“Ask me again in a cycle, but I think I might hate this place.”



“Hey, check it out! Energon rods!”

For once, Rodimus was astute. There was a small cluster of food-grade energon rods in the middle of the floor of the corridor. Moreover, there were a scattering of energon crystals and scraps of armor around them. In the dim illumination of the hall they stood out clearly, shimmering emeralds in the darkness.

Blurr could swear that they were moving forward at a steady but almost imperceptible pace. “So there are. Be careful-”

“Heh, my lucky cycle...” Rodimus reached forward with a glint of greed in his optics.

“Wait!” Blurr reached out to stop his companion, but it was too late.

Rodimus’s outstretched hand met with brief resistance followed by a cold, spreading numbness as his limb stuck fast in an almost perfectly transparent wall of something that was revealed only by a series of ripples that spread outward from its surface.

“Wha?! Blurr! I can’t feel my hand! I can’t move it! What’s goin’ on?!”

Blurr sighed melodramatically. “It’s stuck in some kind of force-field, greasehog. Just pull it out and let’s find a way around it.”

"I can't! Something's pulling me into... whatever this is!" Rodimus's arm was encased up to his elbow. Blurr grunted in frustrated exasperation as he grabbed Rodimus by his free arm and attempted to yank the Autobot warrior free. The field merely rippled in response and redoubled its pull, drawing Rodimus in up to his shoulder. In the depths of the field, faint swirls of silver, black and purple wafted away from Rodimus's limb like wisps of colored smoke. "What's that?"

"That, my ever-so-competent companion, is you." Blurr sighed, letting go of Rodimus's arm. Folding his arms over his chest, he paced the width of the corridor, examining the field. "This ten-meter cube of energy would seem to be digesting metallic matter. It just sweeps along the energon leavings."

Rodimus whimpered, looking back at his teammate. "So I walked into a trap?"

"If only. That might leave you with some pitiful scrap of dignity." Blurr moved close to the nigh-invisible wall and stared with his remaining good optic. "I believe you are being eaten by custodial equipment."

"Oh, you gotta be scrapping me!"

"No, *it* is. This field moves and digests far too slowly to be an offensive or defensive weapon." He fixed Rodimus with an evil smile. "Why, you might float in there for a mega-cycle before it managed to erode you completely."

"This ain't funny! *Stop it!*" Rodimus's chest had begun to sink into the field. He held his face as far from the wall as possible but that would soon be sucked into its paralyzing grip.

Blurr simply shrugged and raised his rifles. "If you insist."

"Wha- *no!* *Stop!* *Not like th-*"

The volley of energy slammed into the surface of the field, sending ripples in all directions. The entire wall lit up as the laser refracted in a thousand directions and faded as harmless light.

"Well, that won't work."

Rodimus's free arm flailed wildly, half his body was already entombed. "*Do something!*"

"I tried," Blurr shrugged. "Frankly, Rodimus, I don't like you, and I don't feel like putting any more effort into this."

"You scrapping knockoff!" Rodimus growled and raised his free arm. The photon barrels that doubled as his vehicle-mode exhaust pipes lined up with Blurr's chest. "I'll smoke you if you don't get me out of here!"

"Then you'd better hurry. Once the field gets your head, you'll probably lose all motor control."

"I'm not bluffing!"

"Then shoot me... *if you've got the bearings!*"

Rodimus's face twisted with rage as he fired with both barrels, but Blurr simply shut down his one good optic. The bolts of purple-white light struck the blue-and-black robot in the chest and then... halted. Rodimus stared at the lingering bolts of light as they hung in the air for a few seconds before dissipating entirely. Blurr's chest bore twin scorch marks, but the bolts failed to penetrate more than a few micrometers.

Just as Rodimus's head slid past the field he saw Blurr transform to his vehicle mode. The change was nearly instantaneous and left shadowy afterimages that lingered ever so briefly before fading out of existence entirely.

Within half a second Blurr launched forward in flight mode, his hood slamming into Rodimus's midsection, though the spreading numbness had ensured that the younger of the two Autobots did not feel the impact. For a brief moment Blurr felt the iron grip of the energy field, but his momentum carried both himself and his companion through the field and out the other side. Rodimus fell, still numb and totally limp, in a heap several meters down the corridor. Blurr returned to robot mode as soon as he slid to a stop on the opposite side.

"Wh't d y'd'?" Rodimus mumbled, limp on the floor beyond the field.

The other robot dusted himself off nonchalantly. "Trade secret. Any rate, with the exception of a few dents on my hood, I'm no worse the wear for the experience. How are you, Rodimus?"

"Oh, he's doing fine."

Blurr turned at the sound of a familiar voice. Cliffjumper stood with one foot on Rodimus's chest, his glass gas gun aimed at the still-disabled Autobot's head. Behind him stood Sideswipe, who regarded him with a smile before speaking. "You? Not so much."

"Cute trick." Cliffjumper growled. "I didn't think you were that fast."

"He steals speed." Sideswipe knew Blurr would not respond to casual questioning. "He normally won't risk trying it with weapons fire, though. His reaction time has to be perfect or he just gets hit. You getting soft, Blurr? Risking your life for the kid ain't your style."

"This isn't a normal situation," Blurr sighed, raising both his hands. "I assume you're going to kill us both, Sideswipe. You know, for old time's sake."

“You know, your needling grew tiresome long before I defected.” Sideswipe withdrew one of his clubs and pointed it at Blurr.

“Are you ladies done?” Cliffjumper limped over to Rodimus’s prone form, keeping his gun trained on Blurr. He reached down to pull Rodimus to his feet. “Because I am. We’ll send a crew down after Grimlock later, but right now, I’m calling this a wash. This place is too weird to mess with, let’s just get the smelt out of here and then try and kill each other in a safer place, all right?”

“Sounds fair,” Sideswipe replied.

“Good, keep your gun on the monocle jockey. I’ve got beardo here.” Cliffjumper hauled Rodimus up with both hands. “I just wish I didn’t have to carry him.”

“Surprise, shorty!”

Rodimus’s formerly limp body lunged forward. The impact slammed Cliffjumper against the chamber wall. “I recover, like, real quick... so sorry, capture’s cancelled. Now we renegotiate!”

“Rodimus!” Blurr shouted as he moved to intercept Sideswipe. “Stand down!”

Rodimus slammed Cliffjumper into the wall again, this time with more force. “Why? So you can surrender to these turncoats?”

“No, you troglobyte,” Blurr sighed. “Because the wall... you know what? Never mind.”

Rodimus turned and glared at Blurr. “What do you-”

The wall gave way, swinging open like a revolving door. With the whole of his weight pressed against Cliffjumper, Rodimus and his captive tumbled through the opening as soon as the hidden passage fully released its locks. Both robots vanished behind the door before it swung back into place. A loud pneumatic hiss and the sound of hidden bolts locking into place echoed through the chamber.

Blurr had only a moment to smile before Sideswipe’s fist connected with his face. Caught on his blind side, Blurr lost his balance and tumbled to the ground.



Cliffjumper hit the ground on his back with a loud clang. The fall hadn’t been overly damaging, but he’d definitely felt something crunch as he hit bottom.

The chamber was almost pitch black. Only a faint purple light shone from a few meters away. “Oh, my achin’ back... I’m gonna need fender work.”

Cliffjumper froze as the sound of a revving engine echoed through the chamber.

“I hear dat.”

“Rodimus.” Cliffjumper got to his feet and turned on his vehicle-mode headlights. The one in his left foot was shattered, but the right foot lit the chamber with a low yellow luminance. In response, Rodimus’s own lights sprang to life. “I’ve been meanin’ to put my fist through your tacky beard ever since I met you.”

“Whoah, hold it!” Rodimus raised his hands. “Before you and I rumble, ya think we might wanna figure out where we is?”

“Why would I want to do something like that when I’ve got you dead-bang?”

“‘Cuz we’re trapped, stupid!”

Cliffjumper turned slowly, always careful to keep one optic trained on Rodimus. The room was cubical, twenty meters wide, tall and deep. Above them was the chute that led down into the chamber, well out of reach. The stone walls bore strange hieroglyphic markings. “Ancient Cybertronian... we’d need a linguist to make sense of this crazy moon-language.”

“How ‘bout understandin’ gettin’ out? You got a flight pack, right? Lets truce and haul tailpipe outta here.”

Cliffjumper’s smile faded as quickly as it had come to his face as he realized what the loud crunch was when he landed. His Wave Crusher flight pack had absorbed most of the impact of his fall. A quick examination of its mechanisms

confirmed the damage was too severe. One wing was all but broken off, dangling by a few wires, and the main thruster port was clamped shut. “No good. You think I could reach the vent if I stood on your shoulders?”

“Even if I trusted ya not to leave mere here, not likely. We’s stuck hard. Comm ain’t responding either.”

“Hm... the walls are stone... I can’t use my glass gas to break through them. Try your blasters.”

“Baddabing! Baddabang! Bah-da-**boom!**” Rodimus raised one arm and fired the twin exhaust-cannons on his wrist at the far wall one at a time. The blasts slammed into the stone, sending dust, sand flecks of rock in every direction. A moment later the dust cleared and the smirking Autobot walked over to examine his handiwork. “Not even a decimeter deep. This’ll take forever.”

“Nice blasters. This universe sucks.” Cliffjumper paced nervously despite his limp.

“Ey, up your pipe with a windshield-wipe.”

As Rodimus prodded the crater the wall groaned and shook slightly. “Maybe it ain’t so thick after all! Sounds like it’s gonna crumble!”

“Um... Then why is the other wall rumbling too?”

The rumble behind both walls grew louder. Cliffjumper felt the wall he was inspecting tap the edge of his foot and took a step back. The wall slid forward, slowly, inch-by-inch, as the once square chamber became noticeably more narrow.

“Slag,” the two moaned in synch.



Blurr rubbed his jaw and sat up. The punch had managed to crack his reinforcement frame and self-repair would take decacycles at best. Despite this, he couldn’t help but grin as he looked up at his attacker. “Good to see you too, Sideswipe.”

“Blurr, you’ve got some bearings. Where’s Cliffjumper and Rodimus?”

“On the other side of a sealed trap door. Beyond that, I neither know nor care what is happening to the traitorous lunatic and the bottomless well of self-destructive idiocy.”

“You’re one to use the word ‘traitor.’ How’s Ultra Magnus doing these days, anyhow?”

“Better than Drench, to be sure,” Blurr purred. “Interesting how we wound up here, of all places. Where it all started, where you went rogue. A punch on the jaw... ooh, I’m devastated. Isn’t that a little weak? Where’s the righteous rage, Sideswipe? Where’s the ‘shoot first ask questions never’ Firestormer credo? Where’s the merciless Seeker efficiency?”

“We have to find Cliffjumper. See if you can blast the door open.”

“I am sorry,” Blurr scowled. “*We* don’t have to do anything. If you recall, ‘we’ is a pronoun indicating a group of two or more individuals, of which the speaker is included. *I* am not a part of any such group with *you*.”

A low, mournful howl filled the corridor, followed by the sound of shuffling metal feet.

“Shhh... we aren’t alone.” Blurr drew his gun and stared into the looming darkness ahead. “This corridor you came down, were there any other branches?”

“Four of them.”

“Then our guests could be from anywhere. We need to move.” Blurr withdrew his second rifle and peered nervously into the darkness, waving both weapons in separate directions.

“What about Cliffjumper?” Sideswipe demanded.

“What about him?”

“He has Rodimus with him. That means we both have a stake in this.”

“Well, I am certainly brimming with concern for Rodimus. I mean, that is why I let him fall down the pit on his own.” Blurr did nothing to hide the loathing in his voice. “I have dragged his grease out of the fire too many times today, never mind the innumerable times since I had the misfortune of making his acquaintance. If he doesn’t get hurt he’ll never learn. And there’s too much at stake to slow me down.”

“You really want Grimlock that bad?”

“Grimlock?” Blurr laughed. “You’re kidding! That was my mission at first, but now... did it ever occur to you to wonder *where we are?*”

“Enlighten me... where are we, Blurr?”

Another howl filled the air. This time it was far closer.

“Does that give you a clue?” Blurr pointed into the darkness. A vague form shifted in the shadows and trudged forward, shambling into the light from the depths of the corridor. It was huge, nearly as tall as the corridor and walked with a strange, uneven gait. It was mechanical, though its black, armor-like hide looked vaguely like sinew and muscle formed from metallic cables. Its form was roughly mechanoid, but its mouth was a vicious metal beak and its arms ended in cruel serrated hooks that thrummed and vibrated with a life of their own.

“Mutants,” Sideswipe gasped.



Cliffjumper braced his arms on either side of the ever-narrowing chamber. “If you’ve got any ideas, now the time’s to try them!”

Rodimus glanced around the room. The trap was crude but effective. The walls would simply crush them both flat. Whenever the smelting pool needed filtering, Optimus would often use a similar press for his midday entertainment. After a few seconds of pondering, a look of realization crossed Rodimus’s face. “Look for a hole or a spike or somethin’!”

“What?”

“You don’t make a trap like ‘dis without an auto-reset! Chances are it’s mechanical, less chance of weapon discharge triggerin’ it!” Rodimus shouted as he scrambled along the narrowing chamber.

“Rodimus! Over here!”

Rodimus worked his way back to Cliffjumper’s position. Along the bottom wall was a small, roughly-square hole about five centimeters wide. Facing it on the opposite wall was a protrusion of the same size that extended about half a meter. “Looks like it’s designed to smash us and release. I’m going to try and break the trigger free, force it in early.”

Despite Rodimus’s struggles, however, the trigger wouldn’t budge from the floor. Oriented sideways in the narrowing chamber, Rodimus felt the walls first scrape, then grip, his shoulders.

“We’re running out of time!” Cliffjumper shouted.

“I need somethin’ to trigger it... I... hold still!”

Cliffjumper bit back a scream as Rodimus grabbed his knee with one hand and twisted. Within his wound he felt the remaining spear shaft shift and then begin to twist as Rodimus yanked it from the wound. The chunk of shrapnel was only half the width of Rodimus’s hand.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Cliffjumper shouted. “Trip it!”

“It don’t reach! Hang on!”

Rodimus threw his weight to the side, forcing his shoulders free. The pressure on Cliffjumper increased immediately. Rodimus took aim with his arm blasters and fired.

There was a loud bang followed by a click as the walls began to slowly pull apart from one another. Cliffjumper, no longer held up by the walls, collapsed, his right leg paralyzed from the knee down.

“Now what?” Cliffjumper grumbled. “We still don’t have a door.”

“There’s no debris in here. Either we’re th’ first down here or there’s gotta be an ejection system.”

The sound of hidden machinery triggering echoed through the chamber.

“I really, really wish you hadn’t said that,” Cliffjumper groaned, letting his head hit the floor.

Then the floor gave way.

After several minutes of screaming down a rapidly-thinning chute, Cliffjumper landed on a pile of loose parts. The debris was a mix of solidly compacted metal and loose components left over from the compactor’s previous victims. Rodimus lay a few meters away.

“I’m such a bolthead!” Rodimus groaned, sitting up.

“No argument here.”

“No, see, the traps, the symbols... these are the old tunnels. ‘Dis is where the Omega Terminus is.” Rodimus had gone from dejected to ecstatic within seconds.

Cliffjumper shook his head and groaned, examining his knee. “And why should I care about that?” he sighed, looking for some decent scrap to patch his wound with.

“Look, I know we got off to a rough start an’ all that, but look. You think I’m all gung-ho for the bossman? Naaaah... I’m the big noise for the Autobot cause, and this civil war thing... fuhgettabodit! Waste of time, we should be mercs, m’mech, bringing in the big fuel for doing what we do best... But Prime’s got the backing and the boys... but hear me out...”

“Do I have a choice?” Cliffjumper grumbled.

“The Terminus, it’s a computer that, get this, grants life to Cybertronians. We find it, and we can build an army... a big one, big enough to take Prime down but good. You’re a ‘bot, m’mech, traitor or no we can work togedda... you can have your own squad, even!”

“Wait a minute...” Cliffjumper interjected.

“Two squads!”

“Will you shut up? I don’t want your glitchin’ squads, and you can take your offer and cram it.”

“Your loss.”

“This Terminus thing. If it gives life to all Cybertronians, then how the smelt is it hard to find?!” Cliffjumper crossed his arms impatiently. “Shouldn’t everyone remember where it is?”

“It don’t just hand out life for free, pistonhead. Legend has it that only the Terminus Blade can control it, and who knows where *dat* is. Otherwise, it does what it wants. And if it tells you to forget, you forget... so you wander up to the surface and... pffff! There it goes!” Rodimus gestured upward with his right hand to illustrate the memory flying up and away.

“That’s gotta be the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard, and that’s sayin’ a lot considering the past few days.”

“This from the guy who believes in ‘Primus’,” Rodimus chuckled. “Oh-ho! What’s this?”

Rodimus clutched a glass bottle in his hands. The bottle had been filled with nuts, bolts and screws of a variety of shapes and sizes. Inside the bottle the parts seemed to crawl and move. “Score, a bottle of scraplets! It musta been too small to get smashed in the compactor!”

“Gah! Destroy it now!” Cliffjumper tried to get to his feet but his knee collapsed out from under him.

“Look, I appreciate you’s crazy. It’s cool, m’bot.” Rodimus walked over and extended the bottle. “But I don’t wanna to die down here, and havin’ you alive helps that. So, want some?”

Cliffjumper drew his gun. “Back off!”

“Fine, just tryin’ to help... that’ll teach me, huh?” Rodimus pulled the stopper from the bottle and took a long swig.

“You idiot! You’ll kill yourself!”

“What’s got your circuits in a glitch?” Rodimus plugged the stopper back into the bottle and looked down at Cliffjumper in confusion. As Cliffjumper watched the numerous dents and tears in Rodimus’s armor sealed as tiny, insect-like scraplets crawled out of his body and sealed over the wounds. Within moments, Rodimus was whole, with hardly a dent in his exostructure, the scraplets falling from his body, corroding into a fine powder before they even hit the floor.

“What in the... but scraplets devour everything metal! They’re a freakin’ plague! *How are you not dead?!*”

“You musta gone really crazy in the Rad Zone,” Rodimus sighed, holding the bottle up to the dim light. “Like, extra crazy... *Beachcomber* crazy... yeah, scraplets eat metal. Dead metal, capiche? They turn it into living metal, by healing if it’s in a ‘bot... or more scraplets if its not.”

“Ugh... right. Opposite world. Good grief... wait a minute. They still self-replicate, and this planet’s almost nothing but dead metal... why don’t they cover the whole planet?”

“Water vapor... what else? Little bit o’ mist kills ‘em dead, which is why they’s in the bottle. Don’t last too long once they’re out in the open, an’ they disintegrate pretty fine.” He smiled at Cliffjumper, shaking the bottle a little. “They’s rare these days, this musta been down here for ages. I think I’d be lucky to make another find like this in a hundred solar cycles.”

“Okay, I get it, alright? I can’t believe I’m saying this... give me some scraplets and let’s find a service hatch out of here.”



“What did you think you were doing?!” Sideswipe shouted as he finally began to catch up to Blurr’s racing vehicle mode. “You said you’d cover me!”

“Simple logic!” Blurr shouted back. “I don’t have to outrun them, I just have to outrun you!”

The howls of the mutants behind them showed no signs of fading. The first one had been dispatched easily enough but it had not been alone. A pack of four mechanical monstrosities, each mad in form and in purpose, loped after the two fleeing mechanoids.

Then they stopped.

The quartet of horrors simply stopped in mid-chase. For a moment they squabbled and fretted as though in contemplation of further pursuit. Then they turned and walked away, any interest in further pursuit of their prey having vanished in an instant.

Distracted by these events, Sideswipe barely managed to revert to his robot form in time to avoid slamming into Blurr. The passageway had opened into an immense chamber fed by a dozen other similar passages. The vaulted dome featured six grand statues of ancient Cybertronian warriors. Sideswipe recognized a few of them from ancient tales, but the others were wholly alien to his memory. Each passageway opened upon a narrow ledge devoid of handholds or rails. Beyond that was a chasm that seemed to stretch down for kilometers before fading out of view. The chasm was lit by vents of flame and molten metal that burst from random locations along its rough, unpolished surface. The erratic bursts of orange-red light cast strange shadows across the statues that held the ceiling in place, giving the whole area a sense of malign dread.

In the center of the chasm was a circular island of stone and metal. In its center was an elaborately carved dais, above which hovered an irregular formation of crystal, framed on three sides by a wall covered on every inch with hieroglyphs. The great crystal glowed with a cold blue-white light, causing the carvings on the wall behind to dance in an eye-straining manner. As it rotated, its arrangement and proportions seemed to shift in illogical ways, as though it were continually changing shape, or changing the means by which its shape was perceived. Scattered about the island were piles of detritus that even from this distant vantage point, Sideswipe could recognize as having once been Cybertronians.

“This is...”

“The Omega Terminus. We found it.” Blurr’s grin was nothing less than sinister.

“The mutants were too scared to chase us here,” Sideswipe said in a low whisper. “And that doesn’t scream ‘get the smelt out of here’ to you?”

“Please, as though I would take the advice of creatures that haven’t managed to engineer thumbs for themselves.” Blurr continued. “Mastery over life... the ability to create new Cybertronians... does it not tempt you, Sideswipe? The possibility of being the manufacturer of a new Cybertronian race?”

“Gah... you Decepti... I mean... You wanna-be Autobots all sound alike!”

Blurr and Sideswipe turned to face the voice. A dozen or so meters away, Cliffjumper and Rodimus stood on a narrow balcony overlooking the pit. Behind them was a narrow garbage chute which, judging by the residue clinging to their armor, had been their means of entering the chamber.

“My struts and gearbox...” Blurr laughed. “You are far more difficult to kill than expected, Rodimus! I confess I am impressed!”

“Ask Mister Impressive if he knows a way out of here,” Sideswipe muttered. “This reunion aside, we’re still stuck with no way out except for a monster-filled maze.”

A repeated clicking sound drew the gathered Cybertronians’ attention to the central island. As if in answer to Sideswipe’s demand, a pair of narrow walkways extended in irregular sections to the ledges they stood upon, forming precarious bridges to the central island.

“I smell another trap.” Cliffjumper said aloud to no one specific.

“Too bad we don’t have any other choice.” Sideswipe nodded to Blurr. “You first.”

The bridge crossing might have been a lengthy process if not for the abundance of traps that both Autobot and Decepticon had faced. Neither side seemed particularly eager to linger on a strange and untested walkway. As such, the crossing was rapid and, much to Cliffjumper's surprise, uneventful.

"We have an unprecedented prize here. Prime will reward us well for this. No one save the Old One was said to know the Terminus's location... Rodimus, what do you think we should do about the Decepticons?"

"Who you callin' a Decepticon?" Cliffjumper shouted.

"I don't see that we have to do anything about them at all.. and I don't see that we need to tell Prime." Rodimus grinned. "We are at the, what's the right word for this? Oh yeah... cusp of a new age. What will Autobot and Decepticon mean if we..." He paused and gave a sly, one-eyed glance at his motley companions "Recreate the conflict in our own image. I mean, Bots and Cons? Penny-ante pig-iron waitin' for the scrapheap! I say we, all four of us, we make us a whole planet ready to *wreck-and-ruin!*"

The other three transformers fell silent.

"Seriously. Blurr, you got the tech skill, and like you said earlier, you'd be the manufacturer to a whole new kinda Cybertronian. Cliffjumper, you and I... you may not remember it, but we seriously busted some heads in the old days. And Sideswipe... you want a stop to meaningless war, right? Well, we'd be getting paid... none of this ideological hoo-ha that Prime's on about. How's dat for meaning, eh?"

Cliffjumper was the first to break the silence. "You sly bootleg. You've only been acting like a complete moron."

"Don't tell nobody." Rodimus stroked his beard and smiled. "I mean, it's a good deal, and really, if it comes to blows, well, me and Blurr will smoke your bumpers, so it ain't a hard choice, capiche?"

"You're insane," Sideswipe whispered.

"This from the dude who hangs with Mister 'The Planet Is a God!' Really, who's gonna stop us?"

As soon as Rodimus finished his pitch a cold wind blew in from the surrounding tunnels. A distant sound, vaguely defined and yet obviously angry, filtered through the room.

"Me. *Grimlock.*"

The four warriors turned to one of the larger piles of junk, which even now fell away as the first Dinobot rose from his resting place beneath it.

"What the... how'd that empty-headed lizard get down here?!" Rodimus howled.

"Me Grimlock answer voice. Voice lead here. Voice want me Grimlock here."

As Grimlock revealed himself, the Terminus began to spin with ever-increasing speed.

"Voice not want you here."

The vague whisper grew loud and furious as a bolt of red-orange energy surged from the crystal's surface and struck Grimlock in the chest.

Grimlock seized beneath the bolt. Panels and welds never meant to open cracked and split, shuffling and reconfiguring themselves in rapid succession. Legs bent backwards, split and sprouted twitching hands, jaws cracked apart to form tooth-soled boots and armor plating slid apart to reveal a hunched humanoid form.

"Meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee... Griiiiiiiiiim... looooooaaaaaaaaa..."

"He's transforming... how is he transforming?!" Sideswipe screamed through the sounds of grinding metal. "*Why is he transforming?*"

Suddenly as it had started, it was over. The bolt dissipated, and the only sound in the cavern was the constant background rumbling of the furnace below.

The four intruders hesitated, waiting for something to happen. The hunched form before them was still... but gradually a rasping wheeze could be heard emanating from the Dinobot.

"Me..."

One arm raised, digits outstretched, and clutched a fallen column for support. Slowly, laboriously, the new form tried to pull itself upright, rising unsteadily to its feet.

"Me... me...m...m...my... I... iii...I... Griimm... lock... waaaaannnt... to talk a little bit about the truly fascinating ramifications of directly applied neutronic rearrangement when applied to instantaneous mechanical re-engineering!"

Grimlock waved a finger in the air, having gone from rasping, pained monster to bizarrely erudite lecturer in mid-sentence, posture snapping from hunched to perfectly straight. "It is a fascinating subject, particularly in terms of practical application, wot?"



Rodimus blinked in shock. “Grimlock? I-is that you?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, it is I, Grimlock... and so much more now.” Grimlock looked idly upward for a moment and tapped his chin thoughtfully. “To be specific, that would be ‘so much more than *you*, now’. It does appear that there are certain linguistic idiosyncrasies that I, Grimlock, am still stuck with, however. But mustn’t complain too much, wot? Especially since this upgrade comes with...”

The jewel on Grimlock’s chest hissed, rotating slowly within its frame, revealing a glowing, pulsating red ball of energy within,

Blurr rubbed his remaining optic and stared. “By the... an *ember*? You’re alive?!”

“So it would appear, my monocular misanthrope. I, Grimlock, now possess all that which I, Grimlock, was once denied by designers and circumstance at large.”

Cliffjumper moved to Sideswipe’s side and leaned in. “So what do we *do* about this?” Cliffjumper hissed.

Sideswipe shook his head slowly. “I... I don’t know.”

“Well, don’t dat beat all.” Rodimus took a step toward Grimlock and smiled wide. “Well, these three may be all dumb-struck, but I knows opportunity. Welcome aboard, Grimlock, hope there’s no hard feelin’s for things I mighta said and, er... hit, ‘fore this all came down... right?”

Grimlock’s head tilted, almost bemusedly.

“Oh, my dear Rodimus, one could hardly blame you for such behavior! After all, you were dealing with... how did you put it? An ‘empty-headed lizard’?”

“Uh...” Faced with Grimlock’s menacing tone, Rodimus’s bravado slipped.

“Oh, it was an astute observation, lad. I was a snarling animal full of rage and pain. A mere stupid beast.”

Rodimus gave Grimlock an uneasy smile. “Uh, yeh. So now that we gots all tha-”

Before anyone could react, Grimlock shifted, dinosaur-form footfalls shaking the ground. He lunged, jaws clamping down on Rodimus' left hand, drawing a scream of agony from the Autobot. The Dinobot yanked his head back, leaving Rodimus staggering backward, his hand torn free at the wrist.

"Hnuh... muh..."

Grimlock spat his prize from his maw, sending it careening over the edge of the platform. He spun, swinging his tail in a wide arc. The clang of its impact against Rodimus' midsection echoed across the cavern, followed shortly by the clatter of the struck Autobot slammed into Blurr, sending them both tumbling into a far wall.

"So you forgive me Grimlock *being* stoopid beast!" he roared before transforming back to robot mode, and turning slowly to face Sideswipe and Cliffjumper.

"Oh, do not fear... I, Grimlock, have not forgotten about you," he almost purred. "As noted... certain aspects of I, Grimlock's previous life –if one could call it that– are still buried within, and it certainly can't be healthy to deny such urges all the time, wot? There are times when the cudgel is more effective than the energon scalpel, after all... and now I, Grimlock, am fully capable of both. How splendiferous."

"Look, Grimlock," Sideswipe breathed slowly, raising his empty hands in a gesture of peace. "We don't have to fight..."

"Oh, I, Grimlock, fear we do. You see, there are things afoot far bigger than this mere conflict between Autobot and Decepticon... and right now all four of you are impediments that must be quickly excised for them to continue as planned. The Terminus wishes you to leave, and I, Grimlock, am *hardly* in a position to disagree with its motives."

"Okay, forget talkin'!" Cliffjumper howled as he pulled his glass gas pistol from storage. "We outnumber you four-to-one, lizardbreath!"

Grimlock paused for a moment. His bestial form would have attacked without pause, but his new intellect endowed him with a mind for tactics. A low, furtive whisper seemed to waft through the cavern, but only Grimlock seemed to understand the strange words that, while unintelligible, brimmed with menace and naked aggression.

"Do you?" Grimlock laughed. "Do you *really*?"

The room shook as the crystal began to spin in its strange, lopsided way. Four arcs of red-orange light surged from the Omega Terminus and fell into the heaps of broken machines that lay at its base. As each bolt dissipated, a shambling form rose from the debris.

Each risen corpse moved with a halting stagger. The leading corpses were all but unrecognizable as having been formerly Cybertronian. The one in the lead was little more than an endostructure with a few dangling support systems and components. Beside it strode a blaster-shot riddled body that carried its own head in its right hand. The presence of a single, half-sundered wing on the creature's back indicated that it once had a flight mode.

The entire assortment was hideous and unnatural, but it was the remaining two corpses that drew the assembled Cybertronians' attention most directly.

One bore superficial similarities to Sideswipe. The bodyform was of the same general scheme, evidence of a land vehicle alternate mode with the hood forming the robot's chest, but the details varied wildly. It was composed of smooth curves in contrast to Sideswipe's harder angles. Its markings and coloration were nearly identical to the former Autobot's, but muted and pale beneath the rust and green-white corrosion that covered its surface. Its head bore little resemblance though, a mouthless faceplate with a cracked, dim goggle-like visor. A gaping wound went through the creature's torso, passing through what would have once been its ember chamber. The outward peel pattern on its chest suggested that whatever impaled it had come from behind.

The other was dull navy and gunmetal gray, though similarly decayed and stained with corrosion. Its face was a ruined mass of wires and microfibers from the bottom of the nose down that quivered and shook with every staggered step the creature took. Its body bore dozens of blast-wounds, several of which went clear through to the other side, including one through the forehead. Despite its decrepit state and the difference in color, there was no mistaking the form.

"Cliffjumper..." Blurr's head pivoted from the blue and white horror that gaped jawlessly at him to the red-armored Autobot that gaped slack-jawed at its doppelganger. "Then you aren't insane!"

"Okay, I admit it, Sideswipe... this is weirder than I thought it'd be," Cliffjumper growled. "So if that's me, then the one sporting your paint scheme would be..."

"Drench," Sideswipe whispered.

"And just *where* did you think newly-embered Cybertronians came from? The *ground*?" Grimlock laughed. "The mutants, yes, the *mutants* are the mid-manufacturers of our creation... they scour the tunnels and wander the Rad Zone in search of raw materials... including more, how to put this? Pre-processed ones, and ferry them back here, where the

Terminus breaks them down and recycles them into new bodies with new embers! That is why the ancient ways put so many burial grounds in this area... so the mutants could find them.”

“The hieroglyphics,” Sideswipe muttered. “That’s why they’re symmetrical, going both ways...”

“Quite astute. But while a rebuilt body would be needed for a true life to be made, it is protoforms’ play for the Terminus to grant even a terminally damaged body the *semblance* of life! Why-”

“*Get ‘em!*” Rodimus screamed as he leapt toward Grimlock, with Cliffjumper immediately following suit.

“You interrupted, I, Grimlock’s *monologue!*”

Before either Autobot could tackle the ranting Dinobot, Grimlock struck them both with the club-like bludgeon formed from his beast mode’s tail. Rodimus and Cliffjumper toppled backwards and skidded to a stop centimeters from the fiery chasm below. “How dare you pathetic, insignificant plebeians show I, Grimlock, such unforgivable disrespaaaa-”

Grimlock’s rant devolved into a savage growl as his body collapsed back into his dinosaur mode. The beast staggered, clearly bewildered by the involuntary change.

“I don’t know what just happened, but I’m takin’ advantage of it! Rush ‘im!” Cliffjumper howled.

Cliffjumper’s shout drew the attention of the living dead mechs. The decapitated corpse swung its head like a screaming cudgel that Cliffjumper barely managed to avoid as he pushed past the corpses’ defensive lines. Spurred to action, the other zombies stumbled forward.

Rodimus had been too quick for the zombies’ initial clumsy assault. Tucking and rolling, he slid underneath the endo-frame’s flailing claws and into a stiff-legged kick from the Cliffjumper-corpse. The zombie’s foot connected briefly with Rodimus’s midsection, and had he been stationary it might have done grievous damage. His forward momentum, however, turned the strike into little more than a glancing blow as Rodimus barreled away.

Their initial targets now out of reach, the zombies instead turned their attentions to Blurr and Sideswipe.

Freed from the dead mechs’ attention, Cliffjumper and Rodimus alternated between firing their weapons and dodging Grimlock’s teeth and claws. Despite their numerical advantage and the Dinobot’s brief moment of confusion, the battle was a losing one. Insensible to pain and too ignorant to know fear, the dinosaur-form Grimlock proved every bit as relentless as in the days before his rebirth as animalistic instinct took over.

“Drench, are you in there?” Sideswipe shouted as his former comrade shuffled towards him. “It’s me, Sideswipe! You remembaaaaaaaaaaaaagggkkkh!”

Drench responded with a growl that was as much speaker feedback as verbal sound, and lunged forward with arms outstretched. Caught by surprise, Sideswipe collapsed under the weight of Drench’s shambling form, his batons clattering away in opposite directions. The unliving Autobot’s hands gripped Sidewipe’s neck, gripping with ironclad strength. Sideswipe’s fists flailed at the unliving wreck repeatedly, trying to target joints and force his attacker off, but the creature didn’t even flinch. Sideswipe could feel his systems growing cold, sensations dimming.



Pushing hard against his former comrade, Sideswipe brought his rocket-pack online, lifting the two several inches off the ground and sending them careening across the cavern in a spinning, uncontrolled rush. The monster's grip lessened only slightly as it clung tenaciously to its victim. Sideswipe managed to spin in mid-air, scraping the zombie along the ground, but it seemed to have little effect.

Smashing through the remnants of a stone column, however, did the trick, sending both robots tumbling in separate directions. As feeling slowly returned, Sideswipe pulled himself unsteadily to his feet. A quick diagnostic showed far too much red for his liking. The force of the impact had crushed one of his door-wings, emergency shutoffs quickly activating to stop the flow of fuel to the critically-damaged rocket pack thruster at its end.

Moreover, the endoskeleton already making its way towards him, and Drench was already upright, seemingly no worse for the experience, lumbering back towards his target.

Cornered by the undead Cliffjumper and the decapitated corpse, Blurr fared little better. Weapons fire did little to dissuade their advance, and Blurr found himself caught between the approaching dead and the sheer drop behind him. The corpses moved too slowly and stiffly to steal any meaningful speed from, yet there was an unnatural, unstoppable inertia to their movements.

Blurr managed to avoid the undead Cliffjumper's lunge, but the move put him right in the path of the decapitated corpse. The creature swung its own head hard, slamming into Blurr's shoulderpad. The initial impact of the skull was followed by a savage bite, broken teeth sinking into Blurr's armor. Blurr stifled his scream and managed to grip the creature's arm with both hands. He threw his legs forward and pulled backward at the same time, the sudden shift of inertia sending the off-balance corpse tumbling forward even as Blurr dropped to the ground.

The combined force tore the monster's fangs free of Blurr's shoulder and sent its body tumbling over the ledge. As his first attacker tumbled out of sight, Blurr scrambled to his feet, putting distance between himself, the ledge and the undead Cliffjumper.

At the other side of the chamber, Grimlock spun wildly to track the living Cliffjumper, only for his head to smash through another column, sending up a shower of dust and debris. His tiny arms batted at his head ineffectually, shaking to clear the grit.

"Ey, that's it!" Rodimus grinned. "Blind 'im! Go for the eyes!"

Both Autobots fired at the beast's head. The shots did little against his armor, but the flashes left image trails and forced his optics to shut down briefly to recalibrate, his limited processing power in this form struggling to compensate. Grimlock howled in pain and began lashing about blindly. "Me, Grimlock, kill you when see you!"

"That should keep him off us for a few clicks!" Cliffjumper shouted. "Hang on, Sideswipe, help's on the way!"

Cliffjumper turned and took careful aim before firing a rapid burst into the endoframe's exposed back, as Rodimus let the Cliffjumper corpse have it with all of his available weaponry. Though still groggy from his crash-landing, Sideswipe kept Drench at bay with a ceaseless barrage from his clubs. Energy pulses ripped through the mobile corpses' bodies, but if the creatures were aware of the attack, none of them showed any signs of it. Each blast or strike ripped loose chunks of metal and circuitry, but no matter how vital the destroyed component was, the corpses weathered the attack with little more than a twitch.

"How do ya fraggin' kill somethin' that ain't even alive?!" Rodimus shouted between bursts of weapons fire.

"Ain't even alive..." Cliffjumper turned to Rodimus. "The scraplets... give me the scraplets bottle, quick!"

Rodimus pulled the bottle from the storage compartment at his hip. "Don't take too much, we'll need ta' repair ourselves a lot if this fight goes on too much longer!"

"That wasn't my plan!"

Cliffjumper hurled the glass bottle against his rotting doppelganger's chest. The bottle shattered, sending thousands of nut-and-bolt shaped creatures against the monstrosity's form.

"What th' smelt you doing?! You're gonna make 'em stronger, you stupid mudflap!"

"Oh really? You said it yourself... your scraplets only devour dead metal, and rebuild the living from it, either to heal or to make more scraplets-"

Realization dawned on Rodimus as the shambling monster stopped its forward movement and, with a low groan, gazed down at its own chest. "An' those things ain't nothin' *but* dead metal!"

The scraplets burrowed into the creature's armor, consuming it from within. The zombie clawed at its own chest, trying desperately to dislodge the attacking machines. Its flailing only succeeded in spreading the infection to its hands, which crumbled away into piles of skittering nuts and bolts. The lifeless Cliffjumper-thing turned its hate-filled gaze to the living Cliffjumper and lunged forward.

The Autobot grabbed the corpse's outstretched arm and spun. The limb tore free, scraplets still clinging to it, as the body tumbled in the opposite direction. Rodimus shifted into his vehicle mode, rear thruster flaring and plowing into the Cliffjumper corpse, hurtling its rapidly dwindling form into the endoframe. The skeletal creature spun at the sound, but was unable to move out of the way before the undead Cliffjumper plowed into it. Both zombies hit the ground hard, shattering into an expanding spray of metal filings and rapidly-disintegrating internal components with a final, fading howl.

"Hey Sideswipe? *Need a hand?*"

Cliffjumper hurled the remaining limb at Drench's reanimated corpse. The creature lashed out with unnatural speed and swatted the makeshift missile away but the brief contact was enough for the scraplets to spread to its arm.

Sideswipe picked himself up as his one-time comrade began to fall apart, the scraplets devouring their way up its limb and into its body. He watched in silent horror and regret as the last remnants of his one-time friend were reduced to little more than dust.

"Cliffjumper..." he sighed as he made his way back to his teammate. "Remind me to punch you for that incredibly poor taste joke when we get back."

"Ha, hand!" Rodimus laughed. "We are hot, we are smokin'! Nobody messes with the Seekers!" he howled, pumping his cannon into the air in celebration

Cliffjumper and Sideswipe both gave Rodimus a brief, ugly glare, but didn't bother to respond.

"Stupid bots, you tricks no work!" Grimlock bellowed as he charged the assembled warriors. His optics once again gleamed with awareness of his surroundings. His massive bulk careened into Sideswipe and Cliffjumper, the impact sending them sprawling across the platform. A swipe of his tail and a swing of his massive skull sent Blurr and Rodimus down to their sides. "Me Grimlock destroy you!"

Cliffjumper attempted to regain his footing, but was met with a lash of Grimlock's tail, sending him flying into Sideswipe. The two of them skidded off the edge of the platform, scrabbling desperately for a hand-hold. Unable to stop his fall, Sideswipe grabbed for the ledge with his left hand and caught Cliffjumper with the right. The sound of straining gears and pistons rippled through the chamber as both Cliffjumper and Sideswipe hung on for their lives.

In the scramble, Rodimus had slammed into Blurr, both robots landing on the floor in a tangle of limbs. Grimlock turned to them as they scrambled to right themselves, grinning with evil intent. The beast turned and bounded over the shocked Autobots, spinning on one foot several paces away. He charged again, this time punting the pair hard before they could get upright. The two slid backward, each managing a tenuous handhold as the surrounding debris tumbled past them and into the void.

Grimlock roared in triumph, the sound echoing throughout the chamber, and changing into a burst of maniacal laughter as his form shifted as well. Drawing his rifle, he loomed over the edge and stared down at his four opponents.

"Quite the precarious predicament, wot?"

Cliffjumper looked down, and wished he'd hadn't. Despite the infernal glow below, he couldn't tell where the chasm actually ended, or what was at the bottom.

"I, Grimlock, have you all now. Not very sporting, I, Grimlock, admit, but one takes what one is given, right gents?"

"You forgot one thing, Grimlock!" Blurr shouted upward as he struggled to maintain his grip. Less than a meter away from him, Sideswipe had managed to haul Cliffjumper up to the platform's edge. The red Autobot's grip was secured, freeing Sideswipe's other hand.

"Hm?" Grimlock turned his attention to Blurr. "And what, pray tell, is that?"

"You forgot just how deeply *incompetent* you are!" Blurr smirked.

Much to Cliffjumper's surprise, Grimlock was actually taken aback. "Excuse me? What did you say?"

"Your stupidity is blinding!" Blurr spat. "You expect me to believe, even for a microsecond, that you won't bungle this? That you, an ignorant, slathering heap of debris bound together by a pirated software and solder, could destroy the likes of me?"

"Dude, *shut up!*" Rodimus hissed.

A low growl emanated from Grimlock as he stepped with slow, deliberate menace toward the ranting Autobot. Here and there across his form joints began to twitch and panels began to slide back and forth.

"A big crystal shocks you once or twice and all of a sudden you're a genius?" Blurr continued. "This is a joke, don't you get it? The story is self-falsifying! If you think a shiny rock has made you smart, you can't possibly be anything but an imbecile of the highest power! Oh, wait... then you'd also be too dense to savor the irony! Trust me, it is amazingly delicious, you bearing-brained moron!"

Grimlock's form began to shake as his bestial side surged upward. For a moment he hovered between shapes, neither beast nor robot, lunging for Blurr...

And then he paused.

"Me... I, Grimlock, know what you are trying to do."

Blurr's grin vanished as Grimlock resumed his measured tone, leaning over the Autobot. "Trying to force a transformation to I, Grimlock's more savage nature and form by appeals to base emotion? I, Grimlock, frankly expected better." Grimlock slammed his tooth-lined foot down on Blurr's hand.

Blurr gritted his teeth, blocking out the agony as best he could. "I wasn't trying to make you angry."

"Please, what then, pray tell, was the point of that petulant tirade?" Grimlock twisted his foot.

"To distract you."

"You jest!" Grimlock laughed. "From what?"

"From me!"

Cliffjumper's shout drew Grimlock's attention away from Blurr just long enough, the Dinobot's upper body spinning, raising his cannon to fire at his attacker. The decreased pressure on Blurr's hand was enough to allow him to reclaim his concentration and drain the speed of Grimlock's spin.

The Dinobot ground to a halt just as Cliffjumper's shoulder slammed into his side. The statue-like form teetered precariously forward but did not fall. Sideswipe threw up his hand and grasped the Dinobot about the ankle. He pulled forward as Grimlock's mass wobbled forward. The immobile form lurched forward like a toppled statue, and fell past the dangling Autobots. Grimlock was seconds away from tumbling out of sight when he began to move again.

"I, Grimlock, will be aveeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeennnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn--"

No one heard the crash of a falling body or the ring of scattered parts in the depths of the planet as he vanished into the light.

Silently, the four pulled each other onto the stable ground of the platform. For a time the four Cybertronians, two renegades and two minions of Prime, stared at each other as they recovered, too weakened from the fight to deal with each other.

Then the hateful whispers returned, but this time, the voice was cold and distinct.

LEAVE WITH YOUR LIVES. NEVER RETURN.

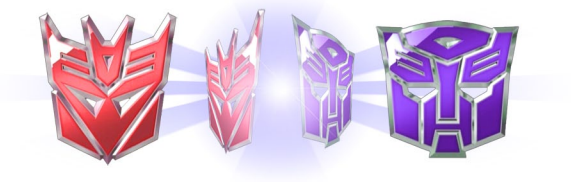
All four turned to the Omega Terminus as twin beams of light shot from it to the far wall. Where the beams hit, rock vanished, revealing two winding tunnels sloping upward.

"And if we don't?" Sideswipe asked, eyeing the exits warily.

YOU ARE OUT OF SCRAPLETS.

The four looked at the remaining piles of mangled robots that lay through out the chamber, and quickly split up without further conversation. Cliffjumper and Sideswipe went to the left, Blurr and Rodimus to the right.

And the Omega Terminus spun slowly behind them, the tunnel entrances sealing tight once they had passed.



"So, how we feeling?"

Rodimus' optics came online, though reluctantly. He immediately wished they'd stayed offline, as Ratchet's psychotically eager face loomed over him.

"Get away from me, you chopshopper!!"

Rodimus jerked, but steel restraints kept him secure to the operating table. It didn't stop him from trying. Facing down a hundred Grimlocks would be preferable to just five cycles under Ratchet's laser-scalpel. "I'll do my own repairs, I'll pay Fixit's price, whatever it takes! You lay a servo on me and a vat of scraplets won't be able to fix you up!"

"Hey, I'm done! Prime just wanted me to fix your hand!" Ratchet looked disappointed, but immediately brightened up. "But if you want, I can give you a new secondary vocoder!" He snatched something from a shelf, a greasy, grime-covered

piece of unidentifiable, horrible-looking internal machinery. “Just gimme ten cycles, and I can pop this right in there, giving you th-”

“No! I’m good! Hand is fine!” Rodimus screamed. “Just lemme outta here, you honk!”

“That’s enough, Ratchet.”

Both robots froze as Prime’s voice echoed through the operating room. A dark shadow flowed over Rodimus, and Prime’s face came into his limited field of vision, staring over him, haloed by the operating light.

“All things considered, you are very fortunate, Rodimus.” Prime chuckled to himself and continued, pressing a button on the table, releasing the restraints. Though he was free, Rodimus didn’t dare move as Prime continued. “I was having you fitted for a spot on the wall, but my most trusted advisors seem to think you have potential... so long as you are adequately reminded of your place.”

Rodimus stared hard at Prime and struggled to suppress his rage. As he clenched his fists, he heard a loud buzz and the sound of metal scraping against metal at high speed. “My hand!” Rodimus struggled to a semi-sitting position. Despite the surgery his hand was still missing. In its place was a free-rotating buzzsaw attached to the stump of his wrist. The blade had managed to slice a deep groove in the operating table in its few moments of unintentional use. “What did you do?!”

Ratchet looked genuinely hurt. “You don’t like it? But almost everyone has two hands! Five digits? *Pffff*. How boring! You, now... you’re interesting now!”

“I was interestin’ before, ya freak!” He waved his new appendage menacingly, the blade spinning to life with a sharp whine. “Maybe I should make *you* interestin’ too, by cuttin’ you a new-”

“*ENOUGH.*” Prime’s voice silenced the two bickering subordinates. “Ratchet would not have given you a real hand even if he’d been thusly inclined. This surgery, like everything in your life, is only possible thanks to *my* benevolence. It is the price of your failure. Fail me again and Ratchet’s experimentation will be the least of your limited concerns.” Prime paused briefly and gave a menacing chuckle. “Look on the bright side... perhaps you can use your new attachment to remove that ridiculous thing from your face.”

The sound of Rodimus’ teeth grinding rang in Prime’s audio receptors as he left the operating theater.



“Good news, my liege, our teams have acquired eight Dinobots, resulting in an seven hundred percent increase.” Blurr smiled as cordially as he could manage. He’d only been given rudimentary maintenance, and a lot of parts still throbbed with pain. But one of Hoist’s haphazard, who-cares patch-jobs was infinitely preferable to whatever Rodimus must have been going through with Ratchet.

Prime steepled his fingers before his faceplate. “And Grimlock?”

“I fear Grimlock was lost in the depths of Cybertron, my liege. He had gone rogue, if he had not been destroyed, Rodimus and I would have surely been killed...”

Prime’s hand lashed out and gripped Blurr by the throat. He lifted the smaller robot from the ground and glared at him. “And yet, I would rather have one obedient killing machine than two bungling failures.” He pulled the struggling Blurr close to his face, his optics bright red. “Tell me why I shouldn’t rid myself of your incompetence, and let you join Chromedome on the shelf. You two will have a *lot* to talk about for a very long time.”

“Decepticons!” Blurr rasped. “Cliffjumper and Sideswipe! If we hadn’t hurled him into the chasm he would have fallen into the hands of the two traitors!”

Blurr saw indecision flash behind Prime’s optics just before the Autobot Commander’s grip tightened. Blurr’s optic dimmed, and he began to focus on what little momentum Prime had. Just as he reached out to steal Prime’s speed he felt his leader’s iron grip go slack. Blurr’s vision snapped back just as he hit the ground.

“What go on here?”

The voice belonged to Grimlock. The Dinobot stood at the entrance to the hall in his beast mode, his tail swaying menacingly as he walked proudly into the room.

“Well, well... Grimlock. I was told you were destroyed,” Prime rumbled, glaring at Blurr.



“That stupid. Me, Grimlock, no hurt by falling.”

“Excellent. Come forward.”

There was a pause. “Me, Grimlock, no want to.”

Blurr looked up at his leader, who was silent, but practically vibrating with rage.

“Since... when... do you want *anything*?!” Prime howled, leveling a finger at the Dinobot. “You only exist to do what I command you to!”

“No! Me, Grimlock, do what me, Grimlock, want to!”

“My greatest weapon... free-willed and belligerent!?” Prime pointed an accusatory finger at Blurr’s prone figure. “This is *your* fault! Once again you prove yourself a connoisseur of incompetence!”

The sound of panels shuffling and parts rearranging drew Prime’s attention back to Grimlock. The Dinobot had taken on his robot form and stood defiantly before Prime’s throne. “Your assessment of Blurr’s capabilities is quite astute... however, he cannot take credit for recent events. They were beyond his control. I, Grimlock, *super genius*, am at your service, Optimus Prime.”

“Free-willed, belligerent and arrogant! I have enough minions who fit into that category!” Prime’s hand reached for the nearest loose object, an empty energon canister, and hurled it into the nearest available target, Blurr. The Autobot was too stunned to even think of getting out of the way as the missile slammed into his head.

“More than enough!” Prime roared. “Twenty cycles in the Agonizing Rehabilitation chamber for you both! No... for everyone!”

“I, Grimlock, appreciate your rage, my... liege.” Grimlock’s tone was even and self-assured. As he spoke he strode over to the *Ark* design terminals. “I am sure the entire army requires such discipline but, alas, I, Grimlock, do not. Nor would it be appropriate.”

Prime withdrew his quad-rifle and took aim. Grimlock noted the action, nodded once, and raised a single finger as a silent request for another moment to speak. Prime narrowed his optics and kept a firm watch on the suddenly-eloquent Dinobot.

“That is to say, it is inappropriate because technically, I, Grimlock, am mere cycles old, barely a protoform. Like most precarious children, I, Grimlock, am merely bored...”

Grimlock idly scrolled through schematics and power plans, the lit displays casting a blue light across his form. “My boredom has its roots in my gifts, my good Prime. If I, Grimlock, were properly challenged, insubordination would not be a problem. For instance, the *Ark* is an impressive ship. But I, Grimlock, think it would be far more efficient if it wasn’t destroyed in mid-flight by a fuel system error.” Grimlock pushed his finger against the schematics monitor to indicate a tangle of pumps and conduits.

Prime turned his gaze to Blurr. “Confirm it.”

Blurr began sifting through the plans at his own terminal at a furious pace. “It will take more investigation... but it seems that Grimlock is... correct.”

Prime’s optics went dark as he pondered his current circumstance. “Grimlock, you are welcomed back into the Autobot ranks. On a probationary basis.”

“Good show!” Grimlock laughed. “I, Grimlock, will prove more than worthy of your trust.”

“Blurr?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Find me something to destroy.”

Afterward

Slugfest did not mind the Decepticons' corral much. It was comfortable and there was fuel, and that Starscream one seemed quite nice, especially compared to Wheeljack. The brain-module upgrade he'd gotten made thinking a little easier too, and made him a lot less angry. Plus, the red symbol on his shoulder looked much nicer than the old purple one he had, even if it had to stand out with the help of a white outline.

But the noises were unfamiliar. The other Dinocons all seemed to go through stasis sleep too quietly and he sort of missed the hammering and welding noises from Gygax.

So when he heard the click of claws moving through the corral the sound was all the more chilling. He trembled silently as the door lock of his pen clicked open. The sudden flood of light blinded his sensors briefly. As vision returned to his optics a looming form faded out of the light.

"Grimlock?" Slugfest whispered.

"Shhh... Get others. We go quiet... Me, Grimlock, take Dinobots and Dinocons to secret place."

END