Transformers Timelines Presents:

Do Over
A Transformers: Shattered Glass Story

by S. Trent Troop & Greg Sepelak
Illustrations by Yuki Oshima
Colors by Drew Eiden

"Good morning, Dinocons!"

Starscream couldn't stop smiling even if he'd had the inclination. Through coincidence or luck, the Decepticons had managed to capture eight of Wheeljack's rogue metal monsters, the exact number that the Autobots had purportedly recovered. Refitted with neural upgrades to make thinking clearer, what had once been a pack of feral monsters were now… still incredibly low-intelligence robotic dinosaurs, but considerably less aggressive and easier to get along with.

The restored balance of power was less exciting to Starscream than the prospect of the scientific work that lay before him. The artificial intelligence matrix that ran these machines was the crowning achievement of Starscream's scientific career, a career he had been forced to abandon for the mundanities of war… and an achievement that had been pilfered by the Autobots' mad scientist and misused to make his beasts. Their tactical importance gave him an excuse to dive back into the inventor's role, if only for a few cycles. After all, these six creatures were of great value to the war effort, he reasoned, why not focus attention on-

Starscream stopped in his tracks. Did he just count *six* of them?

He swung back around and took a headcount. The mighty Goryu and his smaller compatriots were all slumbering in their recharging pens… but the smallest two, Overkill and Slugfest, had vanished. Their shared pen was empty save for the shredded nanocarbon cloth that served as their bedding.

"Overkill? Slugfest?" Starscream called out, his tone friendly and bemused. "Where did you get off to?"

Starscream quickly rechecked each pen, whistling lightly and patting his knees as if calling a pet. The smaller Dinocons hadn't snuck into another pen with any of their larger brethren. Nor were they hiding in the parts storage boxes, or under the workbench.

Goryu stirred, lifting his head and yawning wide before watching the increasingly frantic Decepticon with idle curiosity. The huge mechanical tyrannosaurus draped his head over the edge of the pen and followed Starscream with his optics. "Whut's goin' on?"

"Overkill and Slugfest are missing," Starscream groaned. He paused and moved over to the curious Dinocon. With a look and tone of parental concern Starscream addressed the still-groggy creature. "Did you see where they went?"

"Nope. Sorry."

Starscream's expression turned suspiciously worried. "You didn't… *eat* them, did you?"

"Whut? No! Never!" Goryu looked shocked and rubbed his foreclaws together innocently. "Well, don't think so… maybe if I wuz starvin' and they wuz bein' mouthy, but they weren't and I wasn't…" The monster opened his mouth wide, showing a disquieting array of teeth. "Ai' i' 'ere, ah 'ey?" he gawped, trying not to close his mouth while speaking.

"No, it's okay. I believe you, calm down." Starscream shook his head. "Excellent progress on your diction, by the way. My brain upgrades must have been more effective than I thought… and you can close your mouth now."

"Thanks. I feel lots smarter."

Starscream tapped the communications panel built into his wrist and dialed in the usual frequency. "Starscream to Soundwave."

"'Sup, dude?"

"Overkill and Slugfest have gone missing. I think they may have gotten out of the corral." Starscream opened Slugfest and Overkill's pen and began sifting through the nanofiber scraps as he spoke, internally berating himself for going through with such a patently ridiculous search. After all, it wasn't like they could size-change or anything. "I need you to run a check on the security system, see when they got out, if they did."

"Totally on it! Soundwave rockin' out!"

For the next few moments Starscream searched the pen for any sign of struggle. As he brushed the shredded bedding aside, his fingers connected with something unexpected. Starscream gingerly lifted two rectangular metal cartridges from the bottom of the enclosure.

"Starscream to Soundwave, I think we've got a clue here… someone left a pair of octaltrack data cartridges in the pen."

"Think someone dino-napped 'em and wants a payoff?"

"I don't know… any luck on the security recordings?"

"I hate to be the bearer of bogus tidings, but… nothing heinous on the tapes. There's some minor glitches here and there, probably some systems self-recalibrating…"

Soundwave continued talking, but Starscream had stopped listening. The cartridges in Starscream's hand began to tremble softly, then shook violently, drawing Starscream's attention away from Soundwave's exhaustive security report.

"Soundwave! The tapes are booby trapped!" Starscream shouted into the comm as he tossed the cartridges into the corner, turning away from the point of impact and shielding himself with his arms.

After an agonizingly long moment of silence, he turned slowly, peering through a small gap between his arms.

Overkill and Slugfest were sitting in the pen, looking at him with a mix of curiosity and confusion.

"Where… where did you two come from?"

Overkill cocked his head in curiosity. "What? We always been here. Well, not before, but since you brought us here…"

Starscream paused, trying to properly process the realization that hit him. "You… you were the cartridges?! You *transformed*?" Starscream gasped.

"Yeah, guess we did," Slugfest replied idly, scratching behind his head with a foreleg.

"But… but you can't transform!"

"Of course I can!" Slugfest swung his tail wide and raised his head proudly. "I'm the coolest!"
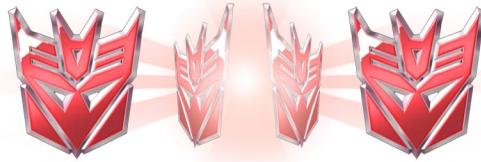
"Is there a security risk?" Megatron asked aloud as he skimmed the reports in his hands. Throughout Kaon's main auditorium, the conversation of dozens of Decepticons was focused on the newest additions to their forces.

 "I've triple-checked them… no alterations to core programming, no tracking bugs or listening devices, no shell programs or brainwashing." Starscream shook his head. "They're just like they were when we captured them..."

"Except… now they have embers," Megatron interjected. "Now, they are truly alive."

"Primus save me," Cliffjumper mumbled under his breath.

"Several are certainly smarter now, and there's been some personality shifts, that's to be expected. I ordered Bombshell to give them a complete psych evaluation to make sure they won't be dangerous. Preliminary tests are promising."

"And our intruder?"

"If there was one," Soundwave replied. "Someone might have remixed the security recordings to hide what was going down… but they must have a most excellent brain. *Totally* rates at least a nine. I can't find anything, but I'm still looking."

"Understood, but I'm at a loss to explain the spontaneous creation of eight embers… and if it is the work of a mysterious benefactor, the *why* is just as important as the *how*. If anyone saw anything suspicious last night, report it to your group's security head."

"Do you think this might be related to anything you saw on your adventure, Cliffjumper?" Starscream interjected. "Your description of the events was somewhat vague."

"I don't think so." Cliffjumper and Sideswipe turned to each other. "I mean, it was kinda weird, all things considered, but nothing… extra-weird," Sideswipe replied. "Grimlock had wandered into some cave in the Rad Zone, we followed and clashed a bit with Rodimus and Blurr… got the drop on Grimlock, but he fell into a chasm. We all thought he was destroyed, and we were all too damaged to keep going, so went our separate ways. We got really turned around on the way out, I don't even remember where exactly it all went down."

"And that's it?" Starscream asked.

"It's all in our report."

Starscream sighed. "All right. I'm sorry if I implied any distrust. Your word is as good as fact as far as I'm concerned."

Cliffjumper grunted a noncommittal reply. As far as he was concerned, something was wrong with the story… even though it was *his* story as well, exactly how he remembered it. But some piece of code deep in his processor was telling him *there was more… something… but what? What **really** happened down there?*

He shook his head clear as Starscream's voice echoed through the briefing room again. "Very well. The mystery of our Dinocons will have to wait. We have a more urgent matter to attend to… and with that, I turn the floor back over to our magnificent leader, Megatron."

"Uh… thank you, Starscream. My fellow Decepticons. Our espionage agents have confirmed that Prime is nearly ready for a second launch of the *Ark*." Megatron's voice betrayed his concern. "This time, however-"

"Wait, he's *what?!*"

Every head in the room turned to Cliffjumper.

"He's rebuilt the *Ark* and is planning a second launch," Megatron replied, his tone betraying his mild confusion. "That's why he made the push for the fuel depot."

"So what was all that brouhaha with my glass gas and collapsin' the launch platform and all that slag when I first got here?! You tellin' me it was all for nothing?!"

Megatron raised his hands quickly in a placating gesture. "Please, Cliffjumper, do not sell yourself short! Your arrival in our universe, and your role in stopping the initial launch will forever be heralded as one of the greatest moments in Dece- er, Cybertronian history! Your actions without a doubt have saved billions of lives, and were the only reason we were able to stop the launch, even do some genuine damage to the ship when the platform collapsed!"

"But that is just it… you were the *only* reason, and it is something that Prime could never have accounted for before-hand. But now he has. Reflector reports that he's increased the guards around the new launch site, added several anti-air artillery emplacements… plus large portions of the platform are now reinforced by natural stone, which is not affected by your glass gas. We knew we could not destroy the *Ark* while it was still grounded. It was ultimately a delaying tactic to destroy the platform… but an invaluable one, because it gave us the time we needed to complete Project Doubletake."

"You seem a little freaked out about that," Sideswipe muttered to Cliffjumper, giving him a sideways glance as Megatron began to tap key codes into the podium before him.

"Well… yeah. I been tryin' to figure out what new weird plan Prime was cooking up for weeks! It never even occurred to me he'd try the same thing as last time!" He shrugged and shook his head. "That's a new one on me."

Megatron looked up as the lights dimmed, and the display system cast the holographic image of a golden starship over the assembled Decepticons' heads.

"Behold… the *Nemesis*. When Prime launches the *Ark*, we will pursue in the *Nemesis* and take the fight to him, wherever he goes. We will be taking volunteers for duty once the meeting concludes. All interested parties are to report to Cliffjumper."

"Me? Why me?"

"You have personal experience, so Sideswipe says," Megatron replied. "You've spent a considerable amount time on Earth… your knowledge of the inhabitants and their ways will be invaluable."

"Oh. Terrific."

A low tone chimed through the room, prompting the majority of the Decepticons in attendance to check their personal communications systems.

"It's mine, apologies," Megatron said, stepping back from the podium. "Starscream, if you'd take over for a moment."

Starscream stepped forward. "We must act quickly. Prime has worked hard to rebuild the *Ark*'s launch platform and get the ship upright in record time… and I think I know why." Behind him, the visuals shifted to a billowing cloud in space, lit from within by thousands of pinpricks of light in a striking variety of colors, tendrils of stellar dust light-years long streaming from the main cluster. Cybertron itself popped up just outside one of the tendrils, a bright dotted line streaming from the planet, arcing close to one of the outer strands.

"The long range sensor net indicates that, within twenty-four megacycles, Cybertron's path of travel will take us close to a strand of the Plait Nebula, a nigh-unnavigable field of stellar debris, newly-forming stars… and gamma radiation. After that, the planet will be close enough to the Nebula that the radiation will throw off Transwarp projections too much to correct for. We'll be effectively grounded for point-one-five vorns… over a 'year' of Earth-time. The effects on Cybertron's surface will be thankfully minimal, as it's an outlying region of the Nebula. Course projections indicate we'll be far enough from any true hot-spots to be in danger… but communications worldwide will be impacted. We'll be hard-pressed to communicate with our outlying cities and bases, never mind trying to get word to or from off-planet.

"Prime will make his push now, and if we can't follow immediately, he'll be unopposed until Cybertron clears the Expanse… and that's more than enough time for him to plunder Earth's resources and become unstoppable."
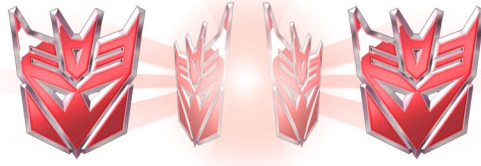
"Okay, Soundwave… you're on the comm, and you've got the whole batch of tapes with you… plus Slugfest and Overkill." Cliffjumper made a few notes in his datapad. "Report to Section Three for lodgings."

"Righteous."

The line for assignments on board the *Nemesis* was moving slowly. The alternate-universe Autobot had taken it upon himself to thoroughly question any Decepticon that made him suspicious… which meant nearly the entire garrison, despite his having spent several weeks living among them. He had just ushered Soundwave and his companions past the security checkpoint when his communicator buzzed.

"Cliffjumper, have you seen Megatron?" Starscream asked over the open comm link. "I can't find him anyplace, and we need to go over the details of his plan so we get it right the first time."

"Not since the meeting," Cliffjumper sighed, hardly paying attention to anything past the initial inquiry. "He's probably double-checking the guidance system or dealing with the fuel storage. If I see him, I'll have him call you."

"Please do. I'll see if he's over in master con-"

Cliffjumper sighed as he cut the comm off without a word, allowing him to focus on the huge, tank-like red and white Decepticon slouching up to the interview spot.

"Wait a minute... who are you?"

"Demolishor."

Cliffjumper eyed the Cybertronian before him, the twin cannons pointing up from each shoulder, and the targeting reticule that covered his right optic. He scanned the Decepticon's file on his datapad, looking up to give the Decepticon an evil eye. "I don't remember any Decepticon named Demolishor."

The Decepticon snorted. "Did you know everyone on the planet?"

Cliffjumper paused. "I thought I did… any rate, why are you volunteering?"

Demolishor shrugged and blinked his yellow-gold optics. "I suppose I just don't like Prime. Bustin' his lackeys' heads ought to be some fun, at least… but mostly, I want off this slaghole of a world. Earth has got to be better than this."
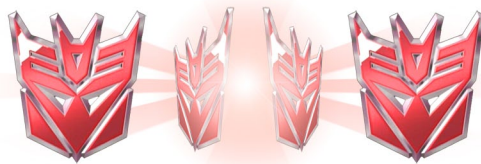
"I can't argue with that. All right, you're in. Next!"

As Demolishor slumped towards the ship, a gleaming blue and red robot of a body style Cliffjumper had never seen strode forward.

"Name?"

"Heatwave, sir."

"… Oh, smelt this. You're in. *Next!*"

The ruins of the Temple of Knowledge loomed on the horizon. The skeletal remains of grand spires and high walls seemed to claw at the twin moons that rose behind them. Looking upon the ruins, Megatron was immediately struck by the idea that they were somehow haunted. The very idea was absurd, but all the skepticism in the galaxy did little to smother the lingering malevolence that lurked in the temple's shadows.

Megatron had stuck close to the ground through the entire journey. Now that his goal was in reach, he took to his robot mode, unfolding and extending his limbs in the few seconds it took his gently descending form to reach the ground. From there he walked through rough terrain, careful to keep to the shadows whenever possible. The last few kilometers of his journey saw the ruins grow from a distant row of broken pins and needles to a towering forest of rotted spires.

The Temple's former entryway was now little more than a free-standing arch at the end of a wide metal courtyard. At this distance, the remaining walls could be seen in detail. What at a distance appeared to be stones were data-cons, golden-hued meter-wide computer modules filled with dozens of crystalline circuit boards. Age and neglect had rotted through the cases and tarnished the mechanisms from within and without.

"Boltax?" Megatron called out, his voice echoing unnaturally in the ruins. "I am here, as you asked."

Only the sound of a weak wind causing rotted archways to creak ominously answered.

"We didn't think you had survived…"

A faint snap and the sound of a piece of metal debris tumbling down an incline rang out. Megatron turned toward the sound and swung his shoulder cannons to face the intruder.

His gaze met nothing but an empty door frame.

"I don't mean to be rude," Megatron turned slowly as he spoke, scanning each nook and cranny for signs of life, swinging his arm-mounted cannon from shadow to shadow. "But if this is a trap, I have to say you could have picked a nicer locale. There's no reason to make an ambush a dreary affair."

"Don't shoot! Please!"

A small mech staggered from the darkened hovel, its battered, faded body little more than pipe-like limbs connected to a utilitarian frame. Antiquated camera-lens eyes, one dark and cracked, looked up to the mech four times its height, the flap of metal that made up its mouth open in terror.

"You have nothing to fear from me, stranger… where is Boltax?"

The ancient, ramshackle mechanoid spun its head around nervously. "Boltax? Don't know a Boltax! But need help! Him! H-he took the others! Holding them! We were safe here, no-one ever came… but him! I escaped him! Help!"

"Who? Who took the others?"

"*I did, tool.*"

Before either mech could react to the voice, the smaller mech's upper body burst into flames. The machine clawed at its own chest in desperation, a strangled scream escaping it before its remaining optic went dim.

Megatron stepped back, cannons ready again as the corpse collapsed into a smoldering pile.

"Thanks fo' comin'."

The voice was sharp and cruel, the tone and inflection making those three words, innocent on their own, sound like a dire threat. Megatron twisted around again, this time his gaze met a faint figure that stood in the shadow of a decaying tower, leaning nonchalantly against it before swaggering forward into the moonlight, the flame-cannon in his hand waving idly back and forth.

The red-and-white robot was made of alien land-vehicle components. An amber-colored visor did nothing to hide the twin optics glowing beneath, his smile a twisted affair revealing far too many teeth.

"Ricochet." Megatron trained his cannons on the newcomer. "Release your hostages and surrender. Where is Boltax?"

"Boltax? Boltax…" Ricochet's frown was wholly insincere. "Oh, yeah, him. He been dead for gigacycles, not long after the Underbase vanished. I just got a hold a' some of his tech is all… made a nice lil call wit' it."

A snarl crossed Megatron's face for a fleeting moment. "You are in serious need of a debugger. If you wanted my attention, you could have simply shown up at any Decepticon base and surrendered. Now, I'm going to have to bring you to justice. You're going to pay for what you've done to these innocent mechs."

"Oh, Megs, don't be like that! I just had a surprise I wanted to show you, and I di'n't want your friends to ruin it! We wuz gonna pop it on you tools when we got to Earth, but I just couldn't wait to show ya. Nightstick?"

A second robot with land-vehicle components stepped from a patch of blackness, barely knee-high to Ricochet. Largely midnight-blue with orange accents, the mech strode forward with a swagger that belied its tiny stature, stopping with its arms folded a few meters from Ricochet, watching Megatron with clear contempt.

Megatron simply laughed. "A Micromaster? Amazing! I must congratulate you, Ricochet… once again, the Autobots have succeeded in playing *catch-up*. You have one last chance to surrender."

The Autobot's head rolled a little, the lazy, unhinged smile never leaving his face. "Torque me."

"Have it your way. Megatron, transform!"

"Ah-ah-ah… I don't fraggin' think so!"

As Megatron launched into the air, Nightstick followed suit, but leapt towards Ricochet's outstretched arm. The robot collapsed in on himself, folding into a sleek vehicle mode, but then unfolded again, parts shifting once more… and landing in his larger partner's hand in the form of a large rifle.

"Eat Targetmaster, chump!"

Ricochet squeezed the trigger and a meter-long unbroken stream of plasma burst forth from the Nightstick's barrel. The blast was too late however, as Megatron's thrusters pushed him up and out of harm's way, transforming to flight mode in midair. The blast streaked past his lower chassis, missing Megatron's flight system by mere centimeters.

But that was only the first stroke.

Its path now unobstructed, the bolt lashed out and struck a corroded data-con pylon. From there its dispersed energy split into four separate bolts, continuing their flight in random directions. Megatron had just managed to lock down the last of his vehicular components when the first of these bolts, having careened off three other pylons in the meantime, struck him in his right wing. The second and third bolts struck in sequence, in the right booster and the nosecone section, respectively.

The final bolt would have struck Megatron's midsection had the first three not sent him tumbling to the ground.

As Megatron's systems crashed one by one and he slipped into stasis, Ricochet's braying filled his dimming senses, joined by the sound of transformation and Nightstick's own chorus of laughter.

"He's gonna get out!" Scoop groaned, glancing back nervously. "And he's gonna be mad when he does!"

Ricochet's vicious smile quickly melted away. "Oh, smelt, that's a good point! I mean, why wouldn't I have thought of that?" His face contorted in anger as he slapped the shaking bright-green mech across the back of his head. "Tool! You'se a frakin' bulldozer, act like one fer once in yo life!"

"But he's going to kill us dead! Deader than dead!" Scoop groaned, rubbing the spot where he'd been struck.

"Go get a drip-pan if you're gonna be leaking the whole time you're here, you strutless pile of tin," Crosshairs grumbled from the other side of the room, reclining in a makeshift chair, his feet kicked up on Megatron's drone-tank. The black and red robot idly picked something off one of his wrist-mounted cudgels. "He's not getting out, and even if he does… he's only got one place to go… down."

Ricochet stopped for a moment to admire his own handiwork. The ruins of the Underbase provided him with plenty of raw materials. Megatron's chained form now dangled over an old coolant shaft. This pit sported a line of low-intensity cutting lasers at its opening, followed by a mass of slowly rotating gears. A little further down, a row of plasma torches sparked slowly, casting a hellish glow up the tunnel.

Two smaller mechs also hung by Megatron, both of similar build to the one Ricochet had murdered outside. They whimpered quietly as they watched Ricochet's every move.

The Autobot smiled, lazily swaggering across the room, arms waving with a showman's air. "If'n he breaks loose, or if I throw this big switch on the wall, he gets zapped, ground up an' roasted… it ain't gonna kill him, but it do dump him inna thousand-meter drop fulla old cables and nasty sharp edges, and at the bottom of it all… the ol' standby, big-aft fraggin' vat o' acid!" Ricochet looked up into Megatron's face with a grin full of evil intent. "You gettin' alla this, Megsy?"

Megatron's face was impassive. "I do believe so. You weren't satisfied with merely one cliché deathtrap, so you went with five."

"Anythin' worth doin' is worth overdoin'." Ricochet laughed for a few long moments before stopping abruptly, spinning and slamming the switch down with force.

Both of the smaller prisoners screamed in terror. A split second later, the one to Megatron's left plummeted into the maw below.

The next twenty seconds were horrible, the noise of the shaft echoing upwards and throughout the ruined chamber. Megatron glared at Ricochet with laser-like intensity as the Autobot smiled with mock politeness. In the distance, Scoop was curled up into a small ball, whimpering.

As soon as the execution was over, Ricochet clapped his hands together. "*Sprang*, that was fun. Minions! Gather round and... wait, where's Pinpointer?"

Crosshairs shrugged. "I dunno."

"You can't even keep track of your own livin' partner?! I don't pluggin' believe this!" Ricochet paced the room. "I done give you two glitches the chance to finally *not* be useless, saved you from bein' Prime's next ceilin' decorations! I

done gave you real power! You two owe me, an' owe me big time, got it? So you better straighten up, an' straighten up good!"

Scoop cowered into a corner, while Crosshairs merely shrugged.

Ricochet grumbled something under his breath. "Get yer guns ready, boys. I gots a call to make, an' we gots to make a real good impression."
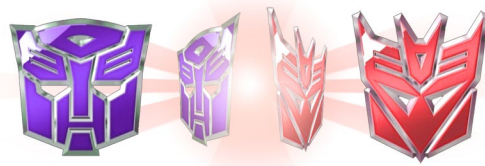
"Code up, Deceptitools!"

Ricochet's face filled the entirety of Kaon's main display screen, warped by his proximity to the broadcast lens. "I know you're all ready to punch yo' tickets and make fo' the wild black yonder, so without further ado..."

Ricochet pulled back from the camera, his grinning visage twisting as it shrank back to normal size and proportions, revealing both Megatron and a smaller, shaking mech each dangling upside down from the ceiling, flanked by Scoop and Crosshairs. Each Autobot aimed a wicked-looking weapon at the Decepticon leader, neither one taking their stare from him, though Scoop's aim was quite shaky.

Megatron's face remained neutral, carefully staring into the camera.

"*Megatron!*" Starscream gasped.

"That's right!" Ricochet laughed as if in response. "In this corner, we gots the King o' Lame, the Champion o' Breakfasts, his High Heroicness, Megatron!" The grinning Autobot pulled up a recording rod and pressed the play button, resulting in a chorus of his own voice shouting "Boo!", "Hiss!", and "Murder the bum!"

"You've got to be scrapping me," Cliffjumper muttered to himself, dragging his palm down his face.

"And in this corner..." Ricochet pointed to himself and grinned. "We gots the Sultan o' Smash, the Compactor o' Trash, the Master o' Murder… Ricochet!" A series of mock cheers and adulations from the recording device rang through the comm channel.

"Now you best listen *smart*." Ricochet's tone had shifted to deadly serious, staring into the monitor with a look of utter contempt on his face. "The ransom demands'll be delivered in one megacycle… an' if anyone tries anythin', then…" he chuckled darkly and motioned to a large lever on the wall. "*This is gonna happen to him!*"

The smaller prisoner had barely gotten the scream out before Ricochet hit the lever. Numerous Decepticons turned away from the screen, shutting down their audio receptors.

"Nasty way ta go," Ricochet sighed once the hiss of acid had died down. "An' in case you was wonderin', the ol' Temple o' Knowledge is completely fraggin' impenetrable, *so you better not even try*. Piece out!"

The image on the screen collapsed into a single pinpoint of light and faded to nothing, Ricochet's braying laughter echoing throughout the Decepticon comm room.

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Dead silence hung over the assembled Decepticons for several moments after Ricochet had terminated the call. Finally, Starscream was the first to speak. "Rescuing Megatron takes priority! We will mount a raid immediately!"

"Oh, no, you don't!" Cliffjumper snapped, stepping in front of the much larger Decepticon. "You're keepin' your tailfins right here!"

"But Megatron-"

"Look, this ain't easy on me either, alright? Usually *I'm* the one runnin' off half-cocked with a flimsy excuse and antiproton cannon on full charge. Bein' the responsible one of the group is weirder to me than one of Dead

End's happy little sing-alongs." He rolled his optics dramatically. "My Prime'd probably call this a 'learning experience.' Anyway, Megatron was kidnapped as a distraction. You don't name-drop your hideout unless you want company. They're tryin' to stall our launch! But Prime won't wait! He'll beat us to Earth, and by the time we get a new launch window, he'll have taken over the whole planet!"

Starscream looked positively sick. "I can't just leave Megatron to die!"

"I can't either! He saved my life, and he's the closest 'bot to sane around this place! But Ricochet wants us to send a full force to get Megs back… or at least our most valuable troops! They're needed on the *Nemesis*! We need a small force, someone who's good at getting in quiet, not loud and forceful… which leaves me out." He tapped his datapad, scrolling up the Decepticons' roster. "What about the Micromasters? They were good at this kinda thing back in my home universe."

Starscream seemed to calm down, if only just a little. "I… concede your point. We currently have Astrotrain's squad running final adjustments to the *Nemesis*… but the Predacons and Whisper are on standby, and battle-ready."

"We used them to sneak into the launch complex last time, right? Well, Prime's not the only one who can use a plan twice. I'll tell 'em. And Starscream..."

"Yes, Cliffjumper?"

"No matter what happens, when the *Ark* launches, the *Nemesis* has gotta launch." Cliffjumper paused. "With or without Megatron."

"Hyu glitches are ze zorriest batch of zcrap I haff evah zeen! Do hyu zink hyu gots vat it takes to earn a unique chassis? *Ha!* I zink hyu are zorely mistaken!"

Blaster paced back and forth, his deep-gray, boxy form shaking with barely-controlled fury, feet moving in a clipped, precise rhythm. Before him, a squad of completely identical silver-colored robots of nondescript features stood at ramrod-straight attention. A step above drones, the triangular-headed, large-eyed mechs were all smooth-lines and simple curves, owing to their "war wheel" alternate modes. Each one would have looked comically harmless, were it not for the massive cannons that made up their left arms.

The crowd stood before the *Ark*'s launching platform, as other Autobots piled supplies and arms into the craft.

"Hyu vant to know vhat I zink?" Blaster hissed.

"*Sir, yes, sir!*" the assembled crowd shouted in unison.

"I zink hyu miserable Zcrounges are going to vind up in ze scrap yard, crying for hyu manufacturer! But it iz mein job to make zhure zat doesn't happen! Zo hyu! Zuck in zhat pipe, straighten up, feet togezer! Ven I zay 'atten-shyun!' hyu give me attenshyun! Hyu!"

The random Scrounge caught in Blaster's glare stood extra-ramrod-straight.

"Zir, I mean, sir, yes, sir!"

"Vat are hyu?!"

"I am a Scrounge, sir!"

"Hyu are vat I *sez* hyu is! If I choose to call hyu Little Mhiz Zparkle-Bootz, hyu will answer, unterstand?!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Unt vat is zat hyu have zher, hanging off hyu verthless chassis?!"

"This is my special arm, sir! There are many like it but this one is mine!"

"Guut!" Blaster grinned. "Hyu are all going to Earzh! Hyu may be zinking zat hyu will die on zat organic zoaked pile of dirt! Vell, *hyu von't!*" Blaster leaned uncomfortably close to another random Scrounge and stared into its large, reflective optics. "Hyu know vy, Little Mhiz Zparkle-Bootz?"

"No, sir!"

"Because Prime von't let hyu!" Flecks of oily spittle hit the Scrounge's face, but it didn't dare flinch. "Hyu vill get blasted und beaten und crushed to bits, but hyu vill keep functioning becoz if hyu drop dead vithout permission, ve'll bring hyu back just to kill hyu again!"

High above, in the *Ark*'s main bridge, Optimus Prime watched the scene below with bemused interest. There was little point in trying to terrify the Scrounges, especially since they had all been installed with slave drives to keep them obedient and quite literally under Blaster's complete control should he choose to turn it on. But it gave his coordinator someone to yell at without having it interfere with the preparations for liftoff.

"Everything is proceeding according to schedule?"

Jazz grinned behind his commander. "Everythin's goin' accordin' to plan. We'll be ready to launch right before we hit the expanse."

"Those meddlesome Decepticons will follow."

"Oh, no they ain't, boss-bot," Jazz grinned. "My bro Ricochet has seen to that."

Prime paused. When he finally spoke, his tone was low and even. "Elucidate, please, Jazz."

"…Uh…"

"*Explain*."

"Oh. Y'see, Ricochet faked a distress call from Boltax an' lured Megatron to the ruins of th' Temple of Knowledge. Tool walked right into his trap!"

"Megatron… has been captured."

Optimus Prime spun around so fast Jazz could have sworn he'd felt a minor whirlwind. Throughout the *Ark*'s bridge, Autobots stopped their preparations. Prime's tone had the effect of triggering primal self-preservation routines, and each one was on guard for his next move.

"Smelt yeah," Jazz replied, keeping his smile up in the face of Prime's reaction. "My bro's got him locked up tight. Them Decepticon tools'll never launch without their boss. We can-"

"*Betrayers!*"

The force of Prime's outburst forced Jazz back a step, and sent a few lower-level Autobots desperately looking for an exit. Prime leveled a finger at Jazz, eyeing his top bodyguard with unconcealed fury.

"Nobody, and I mean *nobody* kills Megatron but me! No one else *can* destroy him but me!"

Jazz recognized the tic in Prime's optic and backpedaled quickly. "But Rico ain't gonna kill him, bossmech! He knows better! He jus' hold him 'til after-"

Optimus closed the gap within a second, hand clutched around Jazz's neck. He lifted the shocked Autobot off his feet, glaring into his visor.

"Hold him? *Hold him?!* Are you both as deficient as your speech routines make you out to be?! Megatron will escape his bondage, there is no question!"

Jazz clawed desperately at his leader's hand, static filling his voice. "But… Earth'll… be ours! No-one'll… stop… us… there!"

"*And no-one will be able to stop Megatron here!!*"

Prime hurled Jazz across the room, the Autobot landing in a heap against Rodimus' seat, vacated just seconds before.

"I will not leave Cybertron to him! Continue the preparations… I am going to end this now! By my hand and my hand alone, *Megatron will die!*"

"My liege," Blurr pleaded, pointing at his datapad, running to catch up with Prime as his leader stalked to the exit. "The launch window! We only have megacycles left before Cybertron will begin feeling the effects of the Plait Nebula!"

"I will be back in time. The launch will *not* be delayed."

"Smooth move," Rodimus rumbled to Jazz as the doors hissed shut behind Prime. "If you two retreads hadn't said a smeltin' word, Prime would've been so fixated on Earth he'd have forgotten all about Megatron." He gave the groaning Autobot a small kick, but couldn't hide the smile playing across his face.

"And it'd really suck if this caused Prime to be late."

Razorclaw surveyed the landscape before him through his beast-mode eyes. The crumbled edifice of the Underbase was ominous indeed, more so thanks to the roiling, semi-acidic clouds that filled the sky. The building was intimidating, but it was the wide, flat plain of metal before it that worried him. There was an extremely conspicuous lack of visible defenses, which only made him more concerned.

A direct assault was out of the question in this sort of situation. Without cover, however, any assault was direct.

"Today's lesson is infiltration and rescue," Razorclaw said, turning back to his fellow Micromasters. "You will be graded on creativity, effectiveness and, of course, success."

Divebomb the eagle and Rampage the tiger sat in rapt attention, carefully hanging on their teacher's every word and movement. Sideswipe's jet-form "partner" Whisper, however, was clearly off in his own little world, clutching a hammer in his claws while carefully eyeing some tiny scavenger in front of him.

"Ok, teach, then how do we get in?" Divebomb cocked his head to one side in his usual manner as he asked the question.

"Start by surveying the situation."

Divebomb and Rampage began surveying the landscape. "There!" Divebomb pointed a claw at a small black speck on the metallic plain. "An access vent, looks rusted over and abandoned."

"What? The smudge? That could be anything," Rampage muttered. "How do you know it's a vent?"

"I can see it. I have good optics."

"That you do, Divebomb... but then the question is, how do we get to it?" Razorclaw replied. "They'll see us coming for sure."

"Not if they *hear* us coming first." Whisper pushed his way to the front of the gathering. "Watch this, you'll like it."

"Whisper, *don't!*"

Whisper ignored Razorclaw's protests and shifted to his miniaturized stealth-bomber mode. Within seconds he was airborne and headed upward in a wide, circling arc. Moments later he drifted out of sight into the clouds on the far side of the complex.

For several minutes there was silence.

A thunderous roar rose up in the distance. Though indistinct at first, the cacophony resolved itself into the sound of dozens of jet-engines roaring from above the clouds. The sound of an invading force of airborne Decepticons filled the air.

"What is he doing?!" Divebomb howled over the din, the ground beginning to shake beneath them. All around, ancient structures rattled, rusted supports snapping and dropping free.

Rampage pointed a paw at the field. "That!"

The once-bare field quickly became a mass of opening panels as autoguns slid free, aiming skyward. Laser fire added to the cacophony as the cannons aimed at nonexistent planes and the falling debris to the edges of the open area.

"We've got our opening! Predacons, run for it!" Razorclaw shouted before leaping from cover. His students gave chase, ducking and weaving between the swiveling cannons. Despite Whisper's distraction, a few turned to track the mechanical beasts, but succeeded only in destroying other emplacements as the Predacons slipped behind them for cover.

"Grate in two meters! Almost there!"

The grate was there, rusted, pitted, and forgotten amid the corroded wastes that surrounded the old temple.

"How long do you think Whisper can stay up there?" Rampage growled as he ripped the grate free from its recessed housing.

"I have no idea."

"Oh, about two cycles ago," Whisper replied.

All three Predacons spun, gawping as Whisper gave them a friendly wave. "Neat, huh? C'mon, let's go! There's evil-doers to smack around! Last one in's a mudflap! WHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!"

Whisper hurled himself down the open shaft, followed shortly by the stunned Predacons. By the time they hit the ground, Whisper was nowhere to be found.

"Okay, students… what have we learned?" Razorclaw whispered as his optics adjusted to the darkness.

"Fools rush in," Divebomb replied obediently.

"Sometimes you have to be loud to go unnoticed." Rampage added.

"Both good answers," Razorclaw nodded. "One more, though… Sometimes, crazy works."

"Oh, smelt, they're sending a whole army!"

Scoop ran madly in a circle before finally scrambling behind Crosshairs, trying to make himself as small as possible. Despite his attempts, his hulking form was still considerably larger than his makeshift cover.

"If there was a scrapping army, they'd be coming through that door!" Ricochet pointed at the sealed security door on the other side of the room. "They'se bein' *cute,* tryin' to go all black-ops on us. They tricked the autoguns."

"Yeah, but that's still guys in the base, right?" Crosshairs leaned on Scoop's shoulder, examining his fingertips with casual indifference. "That's still bad or something."

"Oh, no…"

"Hrrrnn…" Ricochet looked up at Megatron. "Your crew… they this stupid?"

"Not really, no."

"Figures." Ricochet turned back to his subordinates and spat. "What you tools waitin' for? Find 'em. Kill 'em. Twice if you gotta! I'll finish Megs here off when th' time is right."

The two filed out of the room amid grumbles and undignified whimpering. They had only been gone for a minute when Megatron spoke. "You're bluffing."

"Heh. Naw, they definitely gonna kill yo' rescue squad." Ricochet gave a short braying laugh.

"Not about them, about me." Megatron smiled down at his captor. "You won't kill me."

"An' why not?"

"Because of Prime."

"Say whut?"

Megatron gave a knowing smirk. "Optimus Prime. And his obsession. He won't be able to live if some flunky finishes me off. He'll blame you for having stolen his victory, and he'll tear you apart very, very slowly. And you know it."

"Oh… oh smelt, you're right!" Ricochet gasped, bringing his hands up to his cheeks. "Shock, he'll be so torqued he'll tear poor *Crosshairs* 'ta little… itty… biddy… bits."

Megatron's smirk faded.

"Don't gimme wrong, I love gettin' credit where credit's due." Ricochet's grin returned. "But if there's a beat down to be had… well… Crosshairs is due a good aft-kicking. I can spare a li'l humility fo' that kinda payoff."

"I don't know about this, Crosshairs," Scoop groaned as he turned down another winding corridor. The ruins of the Underbase grew increasingly more labyrinthine as they moved further from the central temple. "This doesn't bode well for us, no way."

"Bah," Crosshairs replied from several paces behind.

"I'm serious! This is how mechs get ground up. First we go into the dark, scary tunnels, then we split up, and then a monster grabs us!"

"You run too many horror sims. There's no such thing as monsters."

"What about the Terrorcons, or the Dinocons, or-"

"Okay, there *are* monsters, but they aren't here," Crosshairs grumbled. "But I'm here, and I'm trying to put in a minimum effort before we give up and go back to camp, so cut it out and just pretend to look, deal?"

A sharp metallic clang issued from the right corridor.

"W-what was that?" Scoop looked up in sudden shock.

"How should I know?" Crosshairs grunted. "Go check it out."

"What? Why don't you do it?"

Crosshairs gave Scoop a bored look and stretched his free arm out in the direction of the passageway, grasping with theatrical weakness at the air a few times. "Sorry... can't reach it."

An annoyed look crossed Scoop's face for a moment, though it was soon replaced by his usual nervous countenance.

"You'll back me up, right?"

"Whatever."

Scoop shuffled in the direction of the noise, stepping with deliberate slowness toward the dark tunnel. Several times he looked back at Crosshairs, who gave Scoop a nod of lazy approval for each glance.

Scoop worked his way through thirty meters of tunnel before he completely lost sight of his companion. The old maintenance tunnel was ragged with opened maintenance panels and rusted ports where, ages ago, the Underbase's computerized components once rested.

"It's really dark!" Scoop shouted back towards Crosshairs.

"Turn on your lights!" came the faint, echoing reply.

Scoop remembered why he had not thought of it sooner when he turned on his vehicle-form's lights. In robot mode, his headlights and work lamps all faced downward, and while they could be swiveled slightly, they could not move in a forward axis, giving him a remarkably bright view of his own feet.

Another clang rang out in the darkness. A piercing scream forced its way from Scoop's vocoder as he reflexively drew his weapon and fired wildly into the darkness. The violet-tinged beams of white light were unable to light the corridor but were more than sufficient to cast distorted shadows across the irregular tunnel walls that inspired new wellsprings of terror in Scoop's mind.

In the darkness, Whisper ran a clawed digit along the holes in his wing. The Autobot's gun had narrowly missed anything vital… but it left the oddest wounds Whisper had ever seen, though. There were no burn marks or shorn metal. The paint wasn't even chipped. Most startlingly there was no pain, as though the sensor clumps had been instantaneously unmade where the beams struck. There were only utterly clean holes, so perfectly formed that they might have been part of his design. *That's weird… and so much for flying,* Whisper thought to himself. *I can't out-fight him. Well, hex-nuts. I might just have to use my brain.*

"C-c-come out! I know you're there! I have a gun! I have lots of guns!"

Foolish Autobot! Your pitiful weapons cannot destroy that which lingers here!

The voice from the darkness seemed to echo from every corner of the catacombs. Scoop staggered back a step in shock and surprise. "Wh- who are you?!"

Who? WHO?! I am Boltax!

Scoop spun madly, trying to cover every spot in the area with his twin-barreled cannon at once. "B-B-Boltax?! But, but, but you're dead!"

My ember flows through every micrometer of this crumbling edifice, this once-hallowed pillar of knowledge and light that you defile with your sickening presence!

"Ohnononononononononono…" Scoop stammered. "This is not happening, this is just not happening!"

Whisper shut down his audio projectors to keep from broadcasting his manic giggle. He could hear Scoop's joints rattling. He could also swear he heard the sound of a thin but steady stream of liquid spattering against the floor. This was priceless comedy.

You dare?! Dare desecrate my sanctum… my body?! Whooooooooo…

"Nononononono!"

"Scoop, if I may… I really think we need to work past this fear of an omnipresent disembodied spirit of vengeance and work towards a more positive outcome, wouldn't you agree?"

Whisper paused in his eldritch moan. He could have sworn there was only one Autobot there… and what was that slag all about?

There was another burst of gunfire, and Whisper hunkered down. A few stray shots hit his little barricade, kicking up dust as small holes popped into the fallen masonry.

Your attacks are futile! I am everywhere, yet nowhere! There is no tech support here! You are doomed, forsake all hoooope!

"Scoop, I do hate to mention this, but I'm afraid that this cowering in fear might begin to impact our achievement of the mission statement." the voice continued. It seemed to be trying a comforting, helpful tone, but came across as wheedling and obnoxious. "Perhaps, and this is just a suggestion, we could try for a just a smidge more effort? It'd be really appreciated."

"I can't, Holepunch! Boltax will *get* me!"

Whisper peered over his barricade, not sure what he was looking for. While Scoop remained curled up into a tight ball, the arm bearing his weapon seemed to be moving of its own volition, as if trying to drag the rest of his body upward.

"Surely if he could get you, he would have done so already?"

The voice was coming from the gun itself.

Your demise will be slow and painful! Antroids shall devour your optics while razor-snakes constrict your mechanisms!

"Oh no he's toying with me oh nonononononono…"

Your warranty is voided! Your head is a bucket, you suck turboworms, I hate your feeeeeeeeeeet!

"Now Scoop, I'm not saying I don't appreciate your… effort… but perhaps it would be best if I shepherded this little intruder project for a while, okay?" Scoop's hand released the cannon, the arm snapping back to cover his head more. The gun's twin barrels spilt apart, spinning as the central body converted into a tiny orange-hued twin-rotor helicopter of unfamiliar styling, its cockpit turning to Whisper's position.

"Ah yes… there you are."

Whisper fired a pair of sonic pulses from his hands, but the helicopter swooped effortlessly out of the way. It transformed in midair, converting into a humanoid shape, its arms the same rotating cannons as its gun mode. Whisper bolted as the tiny light-pulses streaked through the air, creating perfect debris-free holes in the barricade and floor behind him. This regrettably put him out in the open.

"Scoop, take a look!" Holepunch called as he slid back into copter mode, spinning to cut off Whisper's escape. "I've identified the problem! It's just a single Micromaster making noises!"

"He's *small*," Scoop replied tentatively. "Small isn't so scary… unless…"

"He's not a puppet, Scoop."

"Good!" The Autobot rose, face contorted in pained rage, drawing his auxiliary cannon, the smokestacks on his torso swinging forward into firing position. "This is for *scaring me!!*"

The sound of screaming and weapons fire drew Crosshairs' attention from the idea of a short stasis nap back to his absent companion. The red-and-black Autobot rose to his feet and managed three steps before a sharp impact on his back sent him crashing back to the ground, his gun falling from his hands and skittering across the ground.

A low rumble and the rhythmic flapping of wings filled his audio receptors as he felt claws at the back of his neck."

"I know how you work, Autobot… or don't work, as the case may be. Stay down, it's easier that way," Rampage growled.

"Trust us, fighting is more effort than you want to put into this." Divebomb landed in front of the fallen Autobot and extend the talons of his right leg menacingly.

"This is going to be a whole thing isn't it?" Crosshairs sighed. "Pinpointer. Little help?"

"Who's he talking t-"

"Gah-reetings unprepared adversaries!"

Both Predacons' heads spun towards the sound of the voice. Crosshairs's gun, effectively a blue box with warheads pointing out of one end, sprouted a pair of arms, lifting itself up and padding along the ground, aiming itself at Divebomb. "The name's Pinpointer. Don't bother committing it to long-term memory, you won't be around for very long at all!"

Three missiles streaked towards the Predacons. Both leapt out of the way, but Crosshairs didn't budge, barely watching the incoming rockets.

Each one curved in its flight inches away from Crosshairs's face, streaking upwards to track Divebomb.

"Fire-and-forget missiles!" Pinpointer laughed, doing an odd little dance before folding up into a similarly-boxy vehicle mode, tires squealing. "We figured Crosshairs's rather lackadaisical methodology of dealing with adversity required a weapons system that would not tax his rather limited dedication." Rampage dodged as a small cannon on Pinpointer's top side shot a stream of hissing liquid in his direction.

"Whatever," Crosshairs muttered, flicking a small pebble away before rising to his feet.

The missiles tracked Divebomb's every movement, but the eagle's speed and maneuverability kept him just out of their reach. He weaved through a maze of pipes and struts, and was rewarded with the sound of one missile detonating well behind him. But a quick backwards glance showed the other two were still on him.

"See, you made me get up." Crosshairs clenched his fists, extending a pair of club-like gauntlets over his hands. "Now I'm going to lay you out."

"*We*, pal… *we're* going to do it." Pinpointer assumed his robot mode and closed in on Rampage as Crosshairs approached from the other side. "We are going to have a delightfully delicious time pummeling your cranial circuitry all across the immediate area."

"Pinpointer, shut up."

"Okay, Scoop, you're at about a Nine, now, and I need –*yow!*– I need you at about a Four!" Holepunch yelped, ducking behind a fallen slab.

On the one hand, Whisper could appreciate a good berserker rampage. Scoop was apparently releasing quite a bit of pent-up frustration all in one go. On the other hand, this one was threatening to bring the tunnel down on his head.

As Whisper dodged another volley of weapons fire, he wondered if that would really be such a bad thing.

"So you finally manufactured a pair of bearings, huh?" Whisper's voice echoed from the ceiling.

"There you are!" Scoop whirled around and fired toward the voice, disgorging a chunk of paneling from the ceiling.

"Nope, not there! Step right up and try your luck!" The voice came from behind Scoop this time. Once again the Autobot turned and fired.

"That's the way, sport, hurr-ry, hurr-ry, hurr-ry! C'mon, hit the Micro and win a prize!" With every taunt, another volley of white-hot lead spat from Scoop's chest cannons.

"Scoop! Stop it!" Holepunch shouted, realizing his mistake a microsecond too late.

Scoop immediately whirled and fired toward the noise. Holepunch threw himself to the floor, narrowly saving his own metallic hide.

While Holepunch was saved, this left the path between Scoop's shot and the nearest support beam completely unobstructed.

Charred, crumpled and finally undermined, the ceiling gave way. Derelict databanks and long-dead processors tumbled from the level above and buried the two Autobots in a heap of obsolete hardware.

Whisper, now insufferably pleased with himself, crawled up the pile, posing dramatically at its apex.

"Aw, now they won't be able to hear my witty retorts." Giggling madly, he leapt over the cave-in's detritus and ran toward what he assumed was the center of the complex.

"Stand still so I can crush you!" Crosshairs shouted as his gauntlet-clad fist crumpled the steel where Rampage was standing seconds before. "This is getting boring!"

"Quite the facile feline, aren't you?" Pinpointer landed a kick into the dodging tiger's midsection. "Fortuitously, despite my rather voluminous chassis, I am as well!"

By the time Rampage hit the ground he was in robot mode. "Autobots, pah, always talking! Come and get me."

"Oh-kay." Crosshairs raised his arms in preparation to attack.

"No, Crosshairs, prostrate yourself!" the Targetmaster shouted.

"What?"

"*Duck!*"

Crosshairs dropped down just in time to allow Divebomb and the pursuing missiles to sail harmlessly over his head.

"An utterly predictable plan… trying to shepherd my ordinance into the back of my unwary partner." Pinpointer laughed as he threw an unsuccessful punch at Rampage. "Your endurance certainly cannot outlast theirs! Why not concede and embrace the inevitability of annihilation?"

"You're still talking!" Rampage growled. "Stop talking!"

"I could most certainly do that, but it seems to vex you so."

"What is wrong with you?"

"It's nothing personal, I just needed you to be sufficiently distracted so Crosshairs could perforate you."

"You're his gun! How-" Rampage turned just in time to see Crosshairs's chestplate glow. What he thought was simply a horizontal decoration extended out from his body, a barrel opening up from the center.

Rampage leapt for cover just as the weapon fired. A violent blast of plasma struck the ground just behind him, the force of the blast hurtling the metallic feline over Pinpointer's head and into the far wall. The floor where Crosshairs had fired now bore a smoldering, red-hot crater as wide as a Micromaster's chest.

"Rampage!" Divebomb shouted. He attempted once again to guide his pursuers into the larger of the two Autobots, but the Targetmaster's shout warned Crosshairs in time.

"Concede defeat, you avian idiot!" Pinpointer shouted. "I turn into a seeker-missile launcher, of course I know that antiquated feint! I can easily predict your immediate action before the idea even formulates in your processor!"

"Really!" Divebomb rose to the top of the ceiling and lived up to his name. "What am I trying now, loudmouth?"

Streaking straight down between Pinpointer and Crosshairs, the Predacon eagle pulled up centimeters from the floor and shot away to the side. Unable to adjust in time the missiles collided with the already weakened floor.

As the smoke cleared, a pained groan rose from the ground. Crosshairs looked down as the metal beneath his feet buckled and finally collapsed. He lost his footing and tumbled gracelessly into the floor, which crumbled under his weight. Before Pinpointer could react the hole had spread under his feet. Neither Autobot had time to do more than flail wildly at the ragged edge of the pit before they tumbled out of sight into the blackness below.

The two Predacons peered down the chasm into the inky blackness. "If Razorclaw were here, he'd be asking us right now 'Well, students, what have we learned?'" Rampage mused.

Both paused as the unmistakable sound of launching missiles echoed up from the depths.

"Never turn your back on a foe you haven't confirmed as defeated!" Divebomb howled as the two bolted, a pair of missiles streaking up out of the gap and arcing in mid-flight to home in on them.

"What's that Prime? You'se breakin' up. I think you'se too close to the Rad Zone."

Rodimus stood alone in the *Ark*'s communications room. The rush to get back into space had forced certain cutbacks, and communications was a low priority. The dimly-lit chamber was a little more than a mass of unsecured cables and patched-together components.

"-ot launch -- I - annot return -"

"Sure thing, you can count on me." Rodimus tapped the power on the communications console and began entering data into the auxiliary launch console to its left. He was halfway through shutting down the magnetic platform clamps when a voice from the hall interrupted him.

"What's going on here, Rodimus?" Goldbug's voice carried a tone of knowing disdain. Behind the yellow-and-black seeker was Blurr's blue-and-black form. Both bots stared at Rodimus with a look of mistrust.

"Prime's orders, we launch if he can't make it back," Rodimus replied with a cold smile. "That's what I'm preparing for."

Blurr stared coldly at Rodimus. "That doesn't sound like Prime."

"No, it doesn't." Goldbug took a step forward and grabbed Rodimus's left arm, looking carefully at the spinning tool that had recently replaced his left hand. "Your buzz saw is covered in foam insulation… I'm willing to bet it's the same insulation Blaster just installed under that comm panel a mere three cycles ago."

"Okay, you gots me." Rodimus smiled, jerking his hand from Goldbug's grasp. "Question is… you gonna rat me out, or are youse on-board? We gonna hang out here for frag-knows-how-long 'cuz Prime's got tunnel vision on Megs? Somebot's gotta take the initiative, might as well be me… or *us*."

"Sounds like Optimus isn't the only one with tunnel vision," Blurr growled. "I'm calling Prime."

Goldbug grabbed Blurr's wrist, halting his reach for the control panel. "Let's not be too hasty, my friend… let's hear what our… ambitious comrade has to say."

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Rodimus smiled greasily. "Simple. We just launch. We get the too-loyal troublemakers off-ship and then we just go. We hit Earth, with Prime and the Decepticons both stuck here. All the energon we can plunder on a planet light-years behind us on the tech curve! We can take Earth with even half the crew we got now! You saw the human broadcasts, the worst they can throw at us is them 'cowboys' of theirs, an' those dinosaurs ain't no match for even our handful o' Dinobots!"

"And what happens when we come back?" Goldbug replied, his voice betraying both his avarice and caution. "Prime will take his revenge, in spades."

"Who said anythin' 'bout comin' back?"

The two Seekers both gave Rodimus a level stare. "What are you talking about?" Blurr hissed. "Of course we're coming back! Why wouldn't we?"

Rodimus returned their stares with a hard look. "Why *would* we?! Look at where we live for a cycle, you bolt! I mean, really look! Now, even if'n you ignore the corpses on the walls, which is really fraggin' creepy… we got a fraggin' pit full of fire in the middle of the main room, we gots rusty spikes coming outta the ground, we gots gapin' chasms every other meter… who puts that stuff there? Did you? *I didn't*. I don't think Prime did either. They been here long as I can remember. An' thanks to gigacycles of war, the Rad Zone covers half of what's left of the freakin' planet now, there's only enough usable energy left to launch maybe two warships tops… an' that's what's happenin' right now."

Rodimus spread his arms wide. "So's I ask you boys… why come back at all? This planet is a stinkin' pit, an' I don't know about you, but I'll be glad to never see its smelted, smeltin' surface a-smeltin'-gain!"

"This is treason," Blurr growled. "Shut down those engines."

Rodimus simply smiled tight, folding his arms across his chest. "You heard Prime… he said 'the launch will *not* be delayed', emphasis on 'not'."

"I'm sorry, Blurr… but you know how this works." Blurr turned slowly at the sound of Goldbug's cruel whisper. The Autobot's cannon was leveled at Blurr's back. "The leadership goes down, and everyone moves up in rank. It is a regrettable circumstance, but it will leave *me* in charge… with an equal partner, of course."

"Do you traitors honestly think you'll get away with this?" Blurr growled, arms moving to the blasters held at hip-level on his backpack. "You think you can take me?"

"Blurr, you of all people should know what pride goes before..."

THUNG. THUNG. THUNG.

Ricochet stared intently at the doorway, his face grim. His left hand held his Targetmaster weapon while his right gripped the release lever for Megatron's chains.

THUNG. THUNG. THUNG.

The rhythmic pounding on the other side of the door had been going on for several minutes. The barrier had started to buckle, and would soon crack off its tracks under the assault from outside.

"Time's up, Ricochet," Megatron shouted from his dangling position above the pit. "And you're not pulling that lever."

THUNG. THUNG. THUNG.

"We'll see 'bout dat."

"We certainly shall."

THUNG. THUNG. THUNG.

The repeated strikes bent and twisted the doors. With each strike Ricochet's grip tightened and the impulse to hurl Megatron down into the pit grew. Finally, the tracks popped, leaving the doors held up only by the ever-weakening frame.

THUNG.

The pounding stopped.

The door toppled from its frame, falling to the ground with a violent crash. The assailant strode through the cloud of dust and debris.

"*Ricochet! Stop right now!*"

"Okay, sure, no probs. Whatever you say." Ricochet's hand slacked on the lever and he lowered his weapon.

"And to think, Ricochet, you didn't believe me." Megatron turned his attention to the newcomer. "I expected you sooner, Optimus Prime."

———

Prime's gaze roamed the room, finally landing on his bodyguard. "*Ricochet*."

"Y-yes Prime?"

"This deathtrap is probably the nicest I've ever come up with," Prime said knowingly. "I am pleased you were able to get Megatron into it."

"Oh... course, Prime," Ricochet said through a fearful smile. "It is a nice one, ain' it?"

"Just don't be stupid and try and take credit for this."

"Course not, Prime."

"Taking credit for your lackey's work, Prime?" Megatron laughed from his elevated vantage point. "That's a little insecure, don't you think?"

"You fail to see the big picture, as always." Prime looked up, clearly taking pleasure at Megatron's plight. "Everything my minions do is because of me. It was my inspiration that put them on this path. I was the one who trained them, who nurtured them. I'm the one who compiled their code and debugged their systems. Their every accomplishment is mine to claim."

"And what about their numerous failures, Prime?"

"They must have something to have for themselves, do you not agree? What better gift than the proof that they're merely works in progress?" Prime pushed Ricochet aside and placed a hand on the control lever. "I had intended to tear you apart myself, Megatron, but fate has finally given me my due. With this trap I will destroy you and make it back to the *Ark* with plenty of time to make the launch window."

A loud clang echoed through the chamber, forcing both Autobots' gazes upwards. With a thunderous boom, steam billowed from the ceiling, pipes and ancient tiles plummeting, as a golden streak bore downwards.

Ricochet howled as Razorclaw plowed claws-first into him from above. The robotic wolf spring-boarded off the toppling Autobot, sailing through the air towards Optimus. Claws and fangs blurred through the air, but Prime quickly sidestepped.

"You mangy, impudent cur! Your pointless attack is too late to save your master!" Prime snarled as he reached out for the lever.

And his hand met only empty air.

Razorclaw turned and dropped a bent metal bar from his jaw. Prime glanced back to the control panel. The lever was missing, severed at the base. The surrounding metal showed the faint traces of claw marks.

"Let this be a lesson, Prime," Razorclaw grinned. "Opportunity knocks just once."

Prime's only response was a hail of cannon-fire, sending the Predacon scampering away.

"Yo, boss-bot!" Ricochet howled. "Megatron!"

With the momentum from the impact already swinging Megatron's bound form in a wide arc above the pit, the captive Decepticon leader focused a burst of thrust from the thrusters concealed in his legs. In his weakened state he could only manage a few short bursts, but the added momentum was sufficient to extend his arc of travel at its furthest point to the edge of the chasm below.

Prime tracked the swinging target with the twin barrels of his main cannon. "This is the end, Megatron. I only regret that this won't be more painful for you." Prime's finger squeezed the trigger slowly.

The shot rang out in chorus with Prime's howl of pain. Razorclaw, unnoticed, had sunk his teeth into the back of Prime's left knee. The sound of tumbling chain and the clang of a giant metal body filled the room as Prime swung to face his attacker.

"I've had enough of your mischief, beast!" Prime shouted. "It's time to put you down."

Twin beams of light struck Prime in the chest, sending him staggering backwards.

"How?!" Prime growled as he regained his footing.

Divebomb swooped in low, the length of chain gripped in his talons whipping Ricochet directly in the face. Rampage hit the ground, another chain held in his muzzle. Grabbing the other end, Razorclaw darted forward, clothes-lining the Autobot

across the ankles, sending him tumbling face-forward to the ground. Behind the attacking Predacons was the now liberated Megatron. Smoke trailed from the barrels of his shoulder cannons.

"Lesson two, Prime," Razorclaw grinned, spitting the chain out. "Always have a backup."

Megatron rose, the last pieces of chain clattering to the ground around him. "Now, Prime… shall we try this again?"

"*Hraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!*"

Megatron braced himself, but the force of Prime's mad rush still sent him sprawling backwards. "You can't stop me, Megatron!" Prime growled as he grappled with his adversary. "You are weakened, wingless, and ultimately doomed!"

"I don't have to stop you, Prime," Megatron smirked. "I only have to keep you here awhile longer!"

"Fool!" Prime wrenched one hand free and smashed his fist into Megatron's midsection, freeing the Decepticon commander to do the same. Megatron's fist made the greater impact. Prime clutched his midsection, dropping to one knee, trying to keep upright with his free hand. "I can… kill you with time to spare."

"You've many skills, but time travel isn't one of them." Megatron smiled. "Check your chronometer… the launch window is *OOF* fading! You'll never make it back in time, neither of us will!" He got both hands free and brought them down hard into Prime's back, forcing the Autobot leader to the floor, but not before Megatron's knee rushed up to meet his chest, cracking his windshield.

Prime coughed and spat as he pulled himself to his knees with a shudder. "Your mewling crew of weaklings will never leave you behind!"

"Unlike you, Prime, I can trust my mechs! They will follow the *Ark*, whether or not I'm aboard!" As if on automatic, Megatron spun, catching Ricochet in the middle of a sneak attack. His elbow smashed into Ricochet's face, arms jerking down to wrest Nightstick from the stumbling Autobot's hand. "And without you, your mercenary crew will tear each other apart!" Megatron stood over his foe, aiming the pilfered pistol at Prime's head. He chuckled as he watched Prime's body shudder with rage. "Face it… *it's over, Prime!*"

"*Never!*" Prime howled, swinging upward, both fists clenched tight.

Megatron merely back-stepped, effortlessly avoiding Prime's furious blow. The Autobot leader staggered into a clumsy spin that ended with his faceplate smacking against the floor.

"As your own minion would say… 'Smooth, tool,'" Megatron grinned, re-aiming the weapon.

Without warning, Megatron's arm jerked up, and the pulse beam blazed into the high ceiling. Autobot and Decepticon alike scattered as the beam split into multiple shots that bounced madly off wall and floor.

"What's going on?! I can't control my arm!" Megatron's limb swung wide, squeezing off another shot that only narrowly missed Rampage.

Ricochet looked up and laughed, despite his cracked visor and missing teeth. "You think those two glitches I hired could hit th' broad side of Broadside without help?! Shee-ock no! Them Targetmasters aim themselves by patchin' into yo' arm's motor control! An' they coded to only respond to their partner's energy signature… otherwise, they take over the arm completely!"

Prime had gotten to his feet, watching Megatron intently. "I appear to have underestimated you, Ricochet…"

"Ain't no thing, my liege. You wan Megs t' blow his own core processer out? Jus' say th' word!"

"Oh, no. He is *mine*. You stole one of my weapons, Megatron… fair is fair." Prime grunted as he lifted Megatron's drone-tank, attaching it to his forearm and activating the neutronic blade. Kicking Rampage out of his way, he charged Megatron with a scream of unbridled fury…

…and Megatron spun, bringing his possessed arm right into the swing. The room lit up as the blade sunk through Megatron's wrist, severing the hand cleanly.

The severed member and Nightstick went clattering to the ground.

Megatron gritted his teeth, managing a smile through the pain. "Thank you, Prime, I can always count on you," he growled, bringing the stub around to smack Prime across the faceplate. "*Rumbler*, release!"

The tank emitted a mechanical chirp and released its magnetic clamps. The vehicle popped from Prime's arm and launched into the air with a cannon-blast. With the barest hint of effort Megatron swung his stump into place and the tank latched on with a loud clang and a mechanical hiss. At the end of the motion the cannon was aimed directly at Prime.

Optimus wiped mech fluid--whether it was his own or Megatron's he wasn't sure--from his faceplate. The tension was interrupted by the low chirp of a communicator. Prime kept his gaze on the cannon pointed at his chest.

"Go ahead, Prime, answer it."

"Comm open." Prime hissed. "What is it?... They **what**?! I told Rodimus to…"

Prime paused, his optics narrowing yet glowing with rage.

"Prime out." The Autobot commander looked over at his bodyguard. "*Ricochet*."

"Uhh… yes, Prime?"

"We will discuss this *later*." Optimus narrowed his optics, edging away from Megatron. "In the meantime… gather up your minions. Autobots, retreat!"

The Autobots reverted to their vehicular modes and began driving away at top speed. The Autobot Targetmaster guns latched onto their partners and laid down suppressive fire, forcing the Decepticons behind cover long enough for the Autobots to make their escape.

"Megatron!" Whisper's booming voice filled the chamber. The Micromaster skidded to a halt from the opposite side of the chamber. "Are you alright?"

"I have had worse."

"Awwwww, did I miss the brawl? No fair! My oil's still up!"

"I found your hand," Divebomb shouted as he hefted the hand over his head. "Shouldn't we find a medic to reattach this?"

Megatron chuckled as he looked upward. For now, it seemed, he was stuck on Cybertron. "Good work, Starscream… and good luck."

Prime saw the shimmering star that was the *Ark* from miles away, an increasingly smaller flash of light trailed by an ever-expanding column of exhaust. In the distance, a second trail of smoke and flame showed the path of the *Nemesis*'s pursuit.

Pushing his engine into overdrive, he barreled through his own security gates, his lackeys straining to keep up. Groaning Autobots littered the launch site. Some were in several pieces, scattered messily across the complex.

Transforming into a running stride, Prime grabbed one of the few standing Autobots. "Nightbeat… w*hat is going on here?!*"

Nightbeat stared fuzzily at Prime through a cracked visor for a few moments. "They... they got the drop on us, see? Threw us a fast one, pulled the plug on our optics, dumped us out of the ship! Everyone who they thought was too loyal to ya to threaten, nyeah! Me, Grimlock, Ironhide… lots of us, see?"

"*Who did?!*"

A hand gripped Prime's foot, dragging the Autobot leader's attention down to the crumpled form of Blurr.

"Rodimus… and Goldbug… I… I tried to stop them…"

Prime shoved Nightbeat aside and lifted Blurr from the ground with one hand, staring into the battered robot's working optic. "And failed! We must pursue them!"

"Nyeah, boss, we can't! We ain't got another ship, see? An' even if we did…" Nightbeat pointed to the sky.

Prime turned his attention upward. The dark starry night began to illuminate as sheets of wavering, multicolored light slowly appeared above them. The sky took on an eerie blue-white illumination.

"We've entered the Plait Expanse, see? Nyeah… we're trapped, pinned down, boxed in, goin' nowhere!"

Time seemed to stand still as Optimus fumed.

"*Nightbeat*. Tally up those who were dumped from the ship. I want a complete headcount," he growled, his gaze never leaving Blurr. "Scoop. Take your fellow Targetmasters to the Agonizing Rehabilitation Chambers."

"W-w-why me?"

"Because I know that you are more afraid of me than you are of them!" Prime shouted. "And as for you, Blurr…"

Blurr whimpered as Prime's optics glowed with the fires of the Ember Forge itself.

"…You have failed me for the last time."

The *Nemesis* escaped Cybertron's gravity mere moments before the edge of the Plait Expanse closed in on the world. Across the entire ship, sensors flickered and screens filled with static as the expanse closed in. The ship managed to keep its course, however, and kept the flickering image of the *Ark* in its sights. The Decepticons settled into their stations as they waited the megacycles needed to clear the radiation field.

On the bridge, Starscream stared intently at the main screen. He turned his attention to the sensor station and, by extension, to Soundwave. "How long until we can open fire?"

"Can't get a good sensor lock for another three cycles, Boss-bot."

"We should be ready for a jump," Heatwave interjected from the engineering panel. "They've got fifty light-years to cross, they'll jump as soon as they can. We can open fire once we reach the Sol system."

"Agreed. Be prepared."

After a long pause, Cliffjumper looked over from the weapons console. Starscream looked lower than he'd ever seen a mech in a long time.

"You did the right thing, Starscream."

"I know… that doesn't make it any more enjoyable to…"

"We have a jump… laying in coordinates now!"

Moments after the coordinates entered the computer the Transwarp engines roared to life. For a few moments everything seemed to slow to a halt. Then, like a rubber band stretched beyond its limits, reality seemed to snap and the crew of the *Nemesis* felt themselves hurtle forward. After a few harrowing moments, time and space resolved themselves to their normal order amid an unfamiliar sky. The main screen was clear now and showed an unobstructed view of the *Ark*'s flaring engines.

"Jump successful, still resolving our exact location!" Soundwave shouted.

"Open fire, all weapons!" Starscream shouted.

———

Seen from a great enough distance, it was as though two meteor showers were doing battle. Plasma cannons on both vessels spit bolts of superheated matter to collide with the enemy. Both ships twisted and spun through space to evade the majority of the missiles, but both ships still shook under the assault. Autobot and Decepticon crews struggled to shield themselves while straining to inflict ever more grievous injury upon the other side. The two vessels danced amid flame and plasma, evenly matched throughout the early moments of the battle.

When the *Nemesis* came too close to the *Ark*, however, the illusion of equality was shattered.

A beam of raw yellow-white energy tore through space, narrowly missing the *Nemesis*'s starboard hull. Throughout the ship, warning klaxons flared to life.

"Gamma radiation on the starboard decks is in dangerous levels!" Cliffjumper shouted. "It's a neutron cannon!"

Starscream groaned and tapped another series of commands into his console, directing another volley of plasma fire. "Heatwave, how many direct hits from that thing could the shields take, hypothetically?"

"Under optimal conditions, maybe two," Heatwave replied. "Shields are already damaged, though."

"What defenses do we have?"

"Distance. The gun has a firing lag we can detect. We can dodge it at this range, but if we get any closer it's only a matter of time. We're too big of a target. As long as they have that cannon we can't get close enough to finish them off!"

Starscream pressed a button on the command panel. "This is Starscream, Acting Commander of the *Nemesis*… Plan Theta is now in effect."

"If you have any doubts about this mission, you may stay behind." Astrotrain knew his squad would not stay behind but his sense of decency required him to ask. With a nod, each of the four Micromasters stepped forward to accept their mission.

Moments later, the Decepticon spacecraft blasted through the vacuum toward the *Ark*. Unlike the immense *Nemesis*, Astrotrain was small enough to slip through the barrage of plasma fire without taking severe damage. A single lucky shot, however, would be enough to destroy him and the Micromasters in his hold.

Fortunately, Astrotrain's zig-zag flight pattern kept the autoguns from maintaining a targeting lock, and the worst of the plasma bolts were intended for the *Nemesis* rather than him. Searing bolts of ultra-energized gas passed close enough to sear his armor as he hurtled through the narrowing gulf between his own ship and the enemy vessel.

The Autobot artillery managed nothing more than a few near-misses by the time Astrotrain assumed his robotic form a few dozen meters from the Ark's gleaming purple armor. With a final burst of thrust from the rockets now located in his legs he made contact with the ship's hull and latched on.

"Now!" he radioed to his Micromaster charges.

Submarauder was the first to leap from the access port on Astrotrain's back. The others soon followed. Submarauder, Fasttrack and Stonecruncher crawled along the ship's surface while Tailwind kept to his vehicle mode. While the grounded Micromasters tore at access panels and opened fire on gun emplacements, Tailwind ran low strafing runs on the ship's surface.

Astrotrain crawled slowly towards the neutron cannon. The Ark's armor crumpled under his grasp and he made his way, meter by meter, towards the cannon.

"The Decepticons have stopped firing on us!" Goldbug shouted from his sensor station.

"Did we score a lethal hit?" Rodimus grinned, spinning his buzz saw hand with a finger.

"No… we've got boarders! Astrotrain and a wad of Micromasters! They're tearing the outer hull apart!"

The main screen erupted in static, resolving into an image of the titanic Decepticon shuttle tearing free a gun emplacement and hurling it into the sensor mount, quickly returning the view to static.

"Ve zhould zend zomevone out to destroy zem!" Blaster shouted. "I haff two dozen Zcrounges to zend to *ze zlaughter!"*

"They'll be utterly destroyed!" Goldbug replied.

"Unt? Who cares!?" Blaster shouted back. "Zey turn into veels! Ja, zat's uzeful! I'm zendingk zem out!"

"I gots a better idea," Rodimus grinned as a pale blue and green planet grew in the main viewscreen. "How do you get rid of Praxian mech-ticks?"

"What are you talking about… ugh… Commander?"

"You burn 'em off."

——

"Planet dead ahead!" Soundwave shouted. "Major radio interference field, lots of water… it's Earth!"

"Astrotrain, we have to take the *Ark* down now!" Starscream howled into the comm. "Get out of there and we'll put our all into it!"

"No can do, Commander," the comm. responded. "You've got a ship full of Decepticons to keep safe. The *Ark* is ours."

——

"Astrotrain! They're making an atmospheric descent! Get out of there! That's an order! That's an -"

Astrotrain clicked off his communication link to the *Nemesis* and worked his way around the neutron cannon. Reaching its back, he wrapped his massive arms around its base and strained upward. The pistons and servos that kept the weapon aimed strained and bucked against him but ultimately proved insufficient. "Stonecruncher, sever the aiming mechanism!"

"I got a bad feeling about this…" Stonecruncher radioed back. Despite his hesitation, however, the small yellow crane-bot leapt into action. A few quick swipes of his reinforced clamp and hook hands rendered the control struts worthless. As Stonecruncher savaged the control struts, Astrotrain opened a side panel on the cannon and carefully ripped free a mass of wires.

"Everyone back onboard!" Astrotrain called over the communications link, muttering "I hope this works" quietly to himself after shutting it off. Letting the sparking cannon go, he shifted back to shuttle mode as his partners scrambled towards him. As soon as they were safely ensconced within his cargo hold, Astrotrain released his landing clamps and let himself tumble away from the *Ark*. The atmosphere pelted against him, heating his exterior surface and engulfing him in a corona of fire.

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A massive explosion rocked the *Ark*, sending the majority of the crew toppling from their positions.

"What just happened?" Rodimus bellowed.

"Ze neutron cannon fired unt hit ze engine array! Ve could not shift itz aim!"

"We're supposed to have safeties!" Goldbug shouted. "I'll tear Wheeljack apart with my bare hands!"

"Ze Decepticons must haff sabotaged zem!" Blaster shouted. "Engine Number Sree is goink to–"

A second explosion ripped through the tail portion of the ship and the Ark's controlled descent became a free-fall. The *Ark*'s bridge crew lurched forward as inertial controls failed.

"Ve haff lost altitude control!" Blaster shrieked from the communications panel.

"Where is Rodimus?" Goldbug shouted as he forced himself back to his post.

"Ezcape Pod Vunn has deployed!"

"What?!" Goldbug struck the communications panel, denting the plate. *"That greasy, slag-sucking coward!"*

"Zixteen clicks to impact!"

"All hands to esc–"

"Too late! Ve are too deep in ze atmosphere unt goink too fast! Zey vill burn up! Rodimus may not survive!"

"That's one positive, at least," Goldbug grumbled to himself before reactivating the ship's intercom. "Brace for impact, all hands!"

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"*Most excellent!* The *Ark* is going down, dudes! It's on a crash course for the big blue west of the secondary northern continent!"

Aboard the *Nemesis*, cheers rang out as the *Ark*'s rear section erupted in a massive fireball, sending the craft plummeting into the atmosphere below.

Cliffjumper, however, peered at the tactical map, eyeing the projected impact point. "There's not supposed to be ocean there! What the smelt happened to California?"

"To what?" Soundwave asked.

"California, place I think you'd 'dig' if it was there," Cliffjumper muttered.

"Do we have a sensor lock on Astrotrain?" Starscream called out.

"Negatory, Screamer… I lost him right after the *Ark* lost control!" Soundwave called.

"Full sensor sweep, we have to find him!"

"We got other problems!" Soundwave replied. "I don't know how to say this, dudes, but we've been spotted!"

"Impossible, the humans don't have that kind of technology!"

"Apparently they do," Cliffjumper grumbled. "And worse, we've got an incoming missile! Scans indicate it is a fusion bomb, at least fifteen megatons!"

"Shields to maximum!" Starscream shouted. "Soundwave, jam its tracking mechanism!"

"Way ahead of you!" Soundwave tapped out a series of commands on the console. A pair of ports opened up and he inserted his hands into each port in turn. "Hold onto your bumpers, one mass EMP blast coming up!"

The *Nemesis* shook as its sensor array sprang to life. Electromagnetic energy spilled out of the ship in a silent, invisible pulse that tumbled across space. The planet on the viewscreen below flickered as power grids across the globe were momentarily disrupted. Nearby satellites shuddered and powered down under the electromagnetic assault. Pushed beyond the limits of its design, the sensor array sparked and finally shorted out entirely.

"Report! Did we stop the-"

For a brief moment, a second sun shone in the sky above the planet Earth.

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"-tain… Captain!"

Starscream's optics flickered back to life. The ship's systems were down and the only light available was that of several consoles which were burning like torches. Soundwave ceased shaking his commander and continued speaking. "The bomb blew, but I don't think it was a direct hit!"

"How is the ship?" Starscream asked as he took his feet.

"No way to tell, Boss-bot… Systems are totally crashed. Info's all junk."

Starscream turned to the remaining bridge crew. "Cliffjumper, Heatwave, see what you can find out!"

Heatwave placed his hands on one of the few non-smoking consoles, shutting down his optics. Cliffjumper swore he saw a faint glow emanate from the robot.

"No casualties! We still have a full ship, but systems are failing across the board! All automatic navigation systems are completely out, and manual navigation is only barely operational! Life support and heat shielding are marginal! All escape pods are still operating and have safe re-entry routes planned, but cascading systems failures mean they might not be safe for long! The ship should survive re-entry, but if we want to keep our mechs intact, we need to use the escape pods now!"

"How'd you do that?" Cliffjumper howled, incredulity briefly overtaking panic.

"The ship told me!"

"You know, I really should be used to answers like that by now!"

Starscream tapped a sequence into the sparking communications panel on his chair. "Decepticons, this is Acting Commander Starscream! Get to the escape pods, infiltrate and attempt to regroup when you get planet side..."

A chaotic hiss of static was the only answer.

"Comm is down, dude! Can't warn everyone!" Soundwave shouted from across the room.

"Give me half a cycle!" Heatwave called out, running to Soundwave's station. Placing one hand flat against the console, his other hand blurred as he frantically tapped keys. "I found a reroute path… there, you have ship-wide comm., but you better make it fast!"

"The short version, then," Starscream muttered as he jabbed the button on his console. "*All hands to escape pods!*"

A series of short chimes indicated acknowledgements from all sections. Through the flickering static on the secondary monitor screen Starscream could see dozens of escape pods falling away from the main ship like a hail of meteorites. "Heatwave, I need to know what condition the ship is in… do your thing."

Heatwave once again reached out to touch a panel. "All hands are clear. The ship's main systems are scrambled by an EMP pulse from a multi-megaton atomic explosion. A system reboot will take megacycles… and we obviously don't have that kind of time."

"What about manual override?"

"We don't have full thrusters, only maneuvering jets."

"I'll work with it." Starscream smashed a glass casing on the command chair and pulled the lever concealed under it. A set of maneuvering controls unfolded with a loud whirr and came up into Starscream's waiting hands. "Soundwave, get everyone left to an escape pod!"

"But 'Screamer, you'll..."

"We can't crash into a population center, and the autopilot is down." Starscream shouted. "Get to the pods!"

"It'll take two to bring this bird down, I'll stay." Soundwave replied.

"No way," Cliffjumper snarled, grabbing the control panels. "If we splatter, you're the one to contact Cybertron. I'm staying."

"But-"

"You wanna try and stop me?" Cliffjumper replied with a snarl. "Be my guest."

Cliffjumper's expression told Soundwave that further argument would be pointless. A few steps and he had cleared the bridge with Heatwave. Starscream smiled when he saw the flare of Soundwave and Heatwave's escape pods gliding away from the ship.

"Take the laterals, Cliffjumper." Starscream gave a determined smile and pulled hard on the controls. The ship groaned and buckled as its angle of descent shifted ever so slightly.

"Here we go again," Cliffjumper muttered to himself as the ground rushed up to meet him.

END

"I don't think I'll ever get used to that."

Downshift stared into the night sky. For nigh-on half a meta-cycle, the sky above Cybertron had shone with a vibrant blue-white radiance as the radiation of the Plait Expanse ionized the upper atmosphere.

"Ever notice how you don't really want to leave the planet until it isn't an option anymore?" he sighed, a hint of wistfulness in his voice.

"No," Powerglide replied. "I'm fine sticking close to the ground. High-flying craft just make themselves easy targets."

Kup shook his head and turned to the rest of Remote Patrol Six. Camshaft and Sandstorm were busy with the routine--and mandatory--radiation readings that Prime had imposed since the *Ark*'s launch as part of his vain search for a pathway to Earth. Everyone knew that without the fuel and resources needed to build a second *Ark* it was all moot.

Prime, true to form, did not care.

Warpath was in deep-shutdown mode as Hound stood watch at the edge of camp. The launch of the *Nemesis* had made the Decepticons bold and security had to be maintained.

"You know, they say the 'cons got that Stellar Spanner teleporter-thing almost working, instantaneous travel to Earth," Downshift replied conversationally. "If that gets going, we wouldn't even need a ship, just a smash-and-grab. You could keep your feet on the ground."

"Air-bot who doesn't like to fly," Hound grumbled. "What a fear to have."

"Fear… hah! I'll have you know I just find it *boring*. Big empty sky, feh. But you're one to talk. How long do you think it'll be before you can show your face at base, Hound?" Powerglide chuckled.

"Shut up, Powerglide."

"It was clever of you to use your power on Prime so he wouldn't punish you for real. I mean, you leapt out of the *Ark* on your own, *without* help from Rodimus's mutineers! Too bad that hallucination made him think you were torn apart."

"*Shut up*, Powerglide."

"Yeah, you're stuck with our sorry afts until you can come up with a story to explain why you're not dead. Or until Prime forgets that he saw the Dinobots eat you." Powerglide stood up and laughed. "And why? Because you're scared of getting dirty!"

"It's a planet of greasy dirty *things*!" Hound leapt to his feet and shook his fists. "Oily, squirting*, water-filled* waste-blobs with their filth and their mold and *their plants and their rocks and bugs and things!* If that doesn't scare you then you're the one that's crazy!"

"The master of fear is scared of fleshlings!" Powerglide chuckled.

"I… I'll show you what I'm afraid of!" Hound screamed. There was a low whine as his Psycho-Projector whirred slowly to life.

"That doesn't even make sense!"

"Hound, quit it," Sandstorm snapped, raising a hand.

"But he started…"

"I need you to look at this. So come over here or I'll tell Prime you're not dead."

Hound powered down the projector and reluctantly stalked over to Sandstorm's control console. "What?"

"This signal… have you seen anything like it before?"

Hound pondered the readouts for a few long moments. A look of recognition flashed across his face. "Signal is coming from Zone Y-AT. Someone needs to check this out…"

"Okay, you go," Sandstorm smiled humorlessly.

"Oh, yeah, and what's supposed to happen if I find something?" Hound replied. "Someone Prime assumes is alive is more reasonable."

"I'm on it!" Camshaft leapt into the air and converted to his vehicle mode, landing on his wheels. "This bot is ready for some action!"

"No," Hound repeated sternly. "Camshaft, you're next on watch, you owe me and I'm not getting stuck with another shift, exile or no. Someone else, Powerglide… Downshift, I don't care… they can take it."

Downshift glanced over at Sandstorm, who nodded in approval. "But… shouldn't we like… stay here? Together? Where it's safe?"

The whine of a weapon charge echoed across the camp. Downshift turned slowly, staring down the barrel of Kup's blaster.

"*Go*," Kup hissed.

Hound strode to the edge of the camp, watching the rapidly-retreating Downshift with a small smile.

"Watch duty?!"

A hand gripped Hound by the shoulder, spinning him roughly. Camshaft snarled into the gray robot's optics. "What's this scrap, Hound? I've got the speed, I got the skill, and you know I'm not afraid of anything that might be there! Why's that weak-strutted Downshift get the glory? He's not even one of-"

"Exactly," Hound smiled, slapping Camshaft's hand away. "Bots like us, we need to stick together… Now, see if you can come up with a good excuse for why I've 'risen from the dead'… I may need one sooner than I thought."

"Hound… what's going on?"

"If I'm wrong, nothing." Hound's mouth twisted into a cruel smile. "But if I'm right, then the game is going to change… forever."

TO BE CONTINUED IN REUNIFICATION...