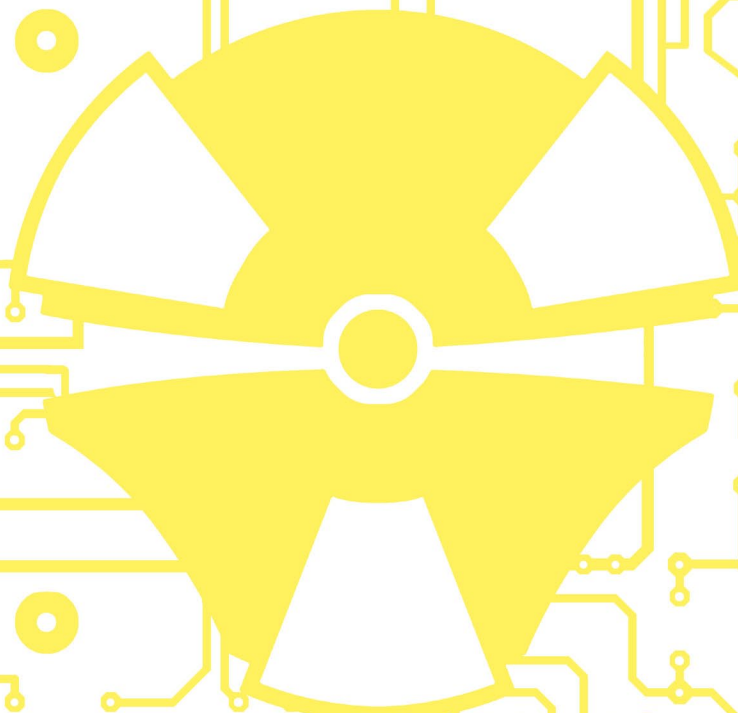


**Transformers Timelines Presents:**

# **Transhuman**

## **A Transformers: Shattered Glass Story**



**by S. Trent Troop & Greg Sepelak**  
**Illustrations by Casey Collier & Greg Sepelak**  
**Colors by S. Trent Troop**

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“Inverted vortex capacitor?”

“Inverted vortex capacitor operational!”

“Barium shield capacitors?”

“Barium shield capacitors operational!”

“Pipefor?”

“Pipefor... wait.” Starscream looked up and across the large, amphitheater-sized room to his assistant. “What’s a pipefor?”

“For blowin’ exhaust, dude!”

Soundwave ducked immediately, just barely missing the wrench thrown at the back of his head. “Okay, okay, don’t get all thrash on me, boss-dude. Everything on the checklist is double-checked. We’re ready to rock.”

Decepticons moved throughout the large hollow cavern deep within the volcano where the *Nemesis* had crashed so many months ago, checking wiring and reinforcing support struts. Over the last several weeks, they had been busy with clearing the plug at the top of the mountain, and assembling what they hoped would be their salvation—a stellar spanner; which would enable near-instantaneous travel across the cosmos, and re-establish contact with their homeworld of Cybertron.

Starscream pressed his finger to the activation switch and flinched, expecting the console to explode for the fourth time this week. To his delight, the console remained in one piece and the screen lit up into waves of static. “The stellar spanner’s signal booster is working perfectly. We’ve established communication with Cybertron! Kaon, do you read?” Starscream’s voice filled with hope. “Megatron?”

The white noise on the screen broke into multi-colored bands, coalescing into the visage of a blue-and-red robot.

“No, but I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to talk with you once he gets back from Helex!”

Soundwave jumped from his chair. “Heatwave, *duuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuude!* You’re still rollin’!”

Starscream’s face split into a grin. “This is wonderful! We thought we’d lost you to the Autobots’ own spanner experiment!”

“Great to see you all again,” the face on the screen replied. “I’m not quite sure how it all worked out myself, but I’m safe and sound... well, as much as I can be back here on Cybertron. What happened with the Autobot spanner? We’ve not seen nor heard glass nor gears of Rodimus’s crew here, so unless Optimus got to them first...”

“The spanner was destroyed, thankfully. Regrettably, Rodimus is still at large.” Starscream tapped out a command sequence on the control panel. “I’m transmitting the spanner specs we’ve been working from. If we can get two linked spanner terminals, we can finally get this thing rolling.”

“The Constructicons have been glitching to work on a big project like this for a while. You’ve just made their solar cycle.”



It had taken a little under a week before the Decepticons on Cybertron were ready to test out their own spanner. Megatron’s face lit up the viewscreen.

“Everything seems to be functioning properly on this end. Scavenger assures me his team has accounted for all of the holes in the stolen data. And we have a volunteer to come through the first beam from Cybertron. I believe we are ready.”

Three of the Decepticons’ human allies stood nearby, the eldest rubbing his hands together. “This is amazing,” Professor Henri Arkeville grinned, watching the activity around him. “I mean, I worked on so much of this, but... to finally see it come to fruition!”

Will and Rick, his two assistants, had video cameras at the ready to record the moment. But Rick seemed pensive. “Where’s Sephie? I can’t believe she’d miss—”

“We are ready to activate the spanner!” Starscream called out. “Stations!”

“Everybody, after four!” Soundwave shouted as the Decepticons manned their posts. “FOUR!”

The spanner surged to life, first with a low hum and then with a thundering roar. The sky over the volcano opened and a bolt of blue-white light surged down through the hole and into the metallic ring at the center of the cavern. Then everything stopped.

The spanner gate opened, letting a gust of warm air with a metallic tinge sweep out. Of all the assembled robots and humans it was Professor Arkeville who made the first gesture.

“Shockwave, on behalf of mankind and the Decepticon Earthforce, I welcome you to our world.”

Arkeville raised his metallic hand in greetings as a towering robot stepped out of the newly-built stellar spanner. The golden visitor was less human in form than the other Decepticons; his head was elongated, his only facial feature a single crystal-blue sensor-eye. His left arm—nearly as long as he was tall—ended in a multi-pronged cannon, where his right hand was an inhuman claw partially covered by a large shield sporting a pair of blaster barrels. His angular form would have been terrifying to behold were it not for his smooth, gentle movements. His slight hunch, sometimes using his cannon as a makeshift cane, made him appear wizened, despite his shiny armor.

Behind him tottered a squat, human-sized drone. The orange-and-black machine’s movements were comical in comparison, as its legs were each little more than a foot and ankle.

“Greetings, Professor Henri Arkeville of Earth.” Shockwave’s voice was raspy, yet friendly, with a trace of British enunciation. “Megatron has seen fit to appoint me as Ambassador to the people of Earth. This is my aide, Fistfight.” The little drone replied with a series of electronic twitters.

“Shockwave? Never thought I’d be glad to see what passes for your face.” The voice belonged to Cliffjumper, the bizarre heroic Autobot from another dimension that served as Starscream’s right-hand ‘Con.

“Nor I yours,” Shockwave chuckled, his eye blinking in time with the sound of his voice. “I have many questions of theological importance for you, my enlightened colleague. I do wish to learn more about this creator Primus of which you have spoken.”

Cliffjumper paused and replayed the statement in his head. There was no irony or sarcasm to be found in it, which was what he usually got whenever anybody mentioned Primus. Cliffjumper knew the existence of Primus to be irrefutable fact; faith wasn’t necessary when your own creator manifested itself in front of you to battle a rampaging, planet-eating dark force of ultimate destruction. Despite his spark-felt personal experience the beings of this universe treated such tales with, at best, a sense of amused curiosity.

The outright mockery had long since stopped among the Decepticons. A few dented fenders had seen to that.

“Say what?”

“I assure you, I am in earnest. This entity would seem to bring a beacon of light and hope to our beleaguered world, and I believe you to be its avatar.”

“... You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“I do not joke.”

Cliffjumper shrugged. “I guess some things never change, no matter what universe you’re in.”

Shockwave didn’t seem to react to that. “In the meantime, there is much to be done. Megatron has authorized one half of Earthforce to return to Cybertron, to be refreshed by reinforcements from Cybertron.”

The approving murmurs and cheers of satisfaction among the gathered Decepticons were broken by Soundwave’s familiar voice. “You heard the ‘Con, let’s fire up the Spanner.”

It took minutes for Starscream to hand-pick the contingent that would return to Cybertron. The battle-weary Decepticons gathered in the spanner’s ring. All of them looked around with nervous anticipation. Few of them trusted the spanner, but a trip home was worth the risk.

Starscream and Soundwave resumed their posts and began the warm-up sequence for the galaxy-spanning device. The assembled machines and men looked on in anticipation as the low whine of the spanner’s engines grew into a thunderous roar. The sky cracked, light flashed, and the air was filled with a single sound.

‘piff’

The sound of failing breakers accompanied the base-wide blackout. From within the spanner, a half-dozen mechanical voices let out a simultaneous disappointed groan.

“You dudes all still in there?”

“Yes.”

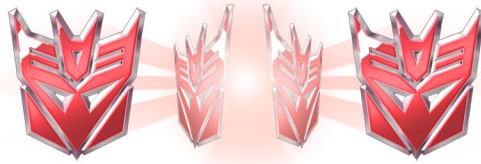
“We’ll get you out... as soon as we get power to the door.”

“Power surge—seems like it’s always happening,” Starscream grumbled. “Probably wiped the transmit logs; we’ll have to start calibration over from scratch. Looks like reinforcements will have to wait until we get all the kinks ironed out.”

“I would help, but my specialty is interpersonal relations, not science.” Shockwave shrugged. “Fistfight knows pi to a few million digits, if that helps.”

Starscream chuckled. “We’ve got it covered, thank you. But it may take a few days.”

“Patience is a virtue, after all. We will survive.”



“You missed it! This big one-eyed Cybertronian Ambassador guy came right through the spanner! And then they said half the Decepticons could go home, and then ‘boom!’ the spanner just conked out and blacked out the whole base!”

“Sounds awesome.”

Rick was more enthusiastic than normal. Despite this, Sephie barely looked up from her PDA. He noted for a brief moment how frustrating yet appealing that was and then leaned down, trying to lock his gaze with hers through the narrow gap between her dangling bangs and low-slung glasses.

“Why did you miss it?” Rick paused. “You never miss a big tech demo.”

“Well, it was supposed to be a surprise but...” Sephie’s restrained demeanor gave way to raw excitement. “I just got off the phone with R. J. Blackrock, I’ve got a job in his R&D department! My graduate thesis on Cybertronian actuator mechanisms did it.”

“Whoah, whoah, whoah... Blackrock? The oil company? Out in *Maine*? I thought the Professor had lined you up with a job working for Mr. Babel.”

“I know but... I did this myself.”

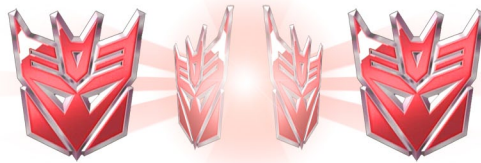
“Sephie, you’ll, uh... be across the country.”

“Oh, c’mon, I won’t forget you guys. And we’re best friends with several hypersonic jets... it’s not like visiting will be an issue.”

“But I...”

“What?”

“Nothing, it’s not important.” Rick smiled awkwardly. “Awesome news. Just, yeah... awesome!”



Sephie wasn’t accustomed to feeling small.

Even among the Decepticons, Sephie was self-assured. The raw might and majesty of the Cybertronians made her feel mighty and majestic just by being in their presence. This office building, however, made her feel small.

Amid the rush of suit-and-tie-wearing employees she felt anonymous. Dressed in her plain blue suit with her hair pulled back she felt invisible as she poured over lines of code.

“Beller!”

The voice belonged to Grady, one of the lower-end programmers. He was running through the research department, shouting her name every few breaths. When he finally made it to her workstation she looked up.

“Yeah Grady?”

“He-heh...” He flushed for a few moments. “You remembered my name. Cool.”

“Yeah, I’m good with names. What’s so important? The building isn’t on fire, is it?”

“No... This is big, Beller, really big!”

“Call me Sephie.”

“OK, Beller, no problem.” He didn’t seem to realize he was still using her last name, so Sephie ignored it and moved on. “It’s Mister Blackrock!”

“Is he okay?”

“What? Oh, yeah...the screaming and everything.” Grady shook his head. “No, he wants to see you! Jack told Wallace who told me to tell you to go to his office right now.”



The moment Sephie stepped off the elevator into Mr. Blackrock's penthouse office, the feeling of smallness left. The whole world sprawled out beyond floor-to-ceiling windows, giving the viewer the sensation of godlike size and power.

R. J. Blackrock stood and walked around his desk, greeting her with a handshake and a megawatt smile. He reminded her much of the rock-and-roll stars her parents used to listen to; the kind whose greatest anthems about rebellion and freedom were now relegated to the oldies stations. He was tall, tanned, lean yet clearly still fit despite his years. Dirty-blond hair fell in messy waves from his head and a goatee framed his perpetually-smiling mouth. Only the idle rich could get away with dressing like he did in an office building; rumpled plain white button-up shirt with faded jeans that had clearly been worn a long, long time.

"Sephie Beller... How's everything on Project Shieldbreaker? I've been hearing good things about you from Professor Morris."

"Good, sir."

"Don't have much time, going golfing with Senator Shore, so let's get down to brass tacks, shall we? Sephie, you know what we've been working on, so I don't have to explain the details."

"Actually, sir, I've only had clearance to see subsections A and R... I know it has to do with lasers."

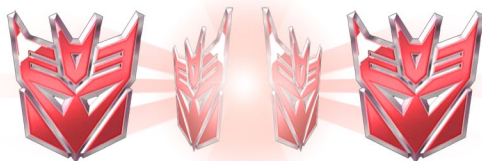
"You figured that out from subsections A and R? You are good," he chuckled. "As you know, we've been getting hit pretty hard by these space robots. They drink oil and whatnot and the evil ones have been costing us a lot of money."

"Yes?"

"Well, we're unveiling the Mega-Rig next week. Millions of gallons of oil, siphoned up from the ocean and then processed and used, immediately, to manufacture high-energy hydrogen fuel cells, on-site, no shipping required. I'm sure you can guess why I've called you here."

"Um... no, sir?"

"I understand you know the leader of the Decepticons, that Starscream fellow, *personally*. I was wondering if you might not invite him and some of his friends in case the Autobots show up. Plus, it will be good press for everyone involved."



"I find this uncomfortable."

"Eh, c'mon Starscream. You aren't going to let a formal event beat you. Just smile and give the humans a bit of the 'howdyado' when they ask." Cliffjumper elbowed the Decepticon leader. Intellectually, he knew this was not the monstrous

Decepticon betrayer from his own universe. Emotionally, however, he couldn't help but find the Decepticon jet's discomfort hilarious.

"Cooperation with organic species is an important skill to master, brother," Shockwave added. "I am interested to meet this Blackrock fellow, and I've heard much about Senator Shore; I understand he's in attendance."

"Dudes, seriously... eyes on the stage, it's starting!" It was Starscream's turn to chuckle. Soundwave was never known for his appeals to quiet or order.

The speech was being held on the exterior platform of the Mega-Rig, a massive oil derrick miles off the Louisiana coast. The crowd was assembled in front of a makeshift podium. More than twenty men and women—most of them press or VIP guests—sitting in folding chairs placed before the brass podium, with the Decepticons standing wherever they could on the surrounding areas of the platform. The high-tech control center behind the podium gave access to the control rooms and the interior workings of the rig. It was out of this control center that Blackrock walked, confident and smiling, along a red carpet that lead straight to the podium. He took his place behind the podium and made a show of reaching for his notes.

"This is a big crowd, in more ways than one." Blackrock gave a disarming smile to the audience and a nod to Starscream, who returned the gesture. He paused, giving the audience an opportunity to chuckle at his joke before continuing. "Ladies, gentlemen, and ambassadors from the stars, I humbly welcome you today to witness the fruition of Blackrock Industries' efforts to solve the greatest crisis this world has ever faced. This crisis is, quite literally, the struggle for power. For you see, power is what keeps us going. This is something we have in common with our Cybertronian friends, for you see, in a very real way, we all eat oil."

"Oh, not *literally*, of course, but we till, water, weed and harvest with machines that run on petroleum. When the crops grow they are refrigerated, shipped by truck or plane, and delivered to your home, where you cook with electricity or natural gas... again, products of oil. Without oil, we starve, or we freeze, or we broil. Our economy is based on a carbon sludge, and most of the energy it contains is lost... utterly wasted.

"But no longer! Using cutting edge technology, we can convert 95% of the potential fuel energy of raw crude oil into usable energy by creating hydrogen fuel cells. And once these fuel cells become standard, any energy source we find can be used to produce them, permanently freeing us from—"

"Human filth!" The metallic voice seemed to ring out from the empty ocean. "This energy extractor is now under Autobot command!"

The sea to the west erupted in a spray of white foam, a pair of massive metal hands grabbing the side of the derrick across from Blackrock's podium. Framed against the setting sun, Goldbug was the first of the Autobots to hoist himself onto the rig, his black, blue and gold frame gushing salt-water and the occasional fish onto the metal platform. As the crowd scrambled away, leaving a stunned Blackrock on the podium, Beachcomber, Big Daddy, and Elita-One rose up to his sides, followed finally by Rodimus Prime in the center of the line.

"Dudes! We're on!" Soundwave shouted. The Decepticons closed ranks dangerously close to the Autobot entry-point, placing themselves between the humans and the Autobot attackers.

"Hand to hand tactics, Autobots!" Goldbug shouted a second before his fist collided with Soundwave's faceplate. "We do not wish to damage our prize!"

"With cold steel odor on their bodies they move to connect." Beachcomber's face twisted into a grin as he circled Cliffjumper, waiting for the right moment to attack. "These boots are gonna *walk all over you!*"

Meanwhile, the sawblade that replaced Rodimus's left hand spun up to full speed just in time to deflect one of the crystalline swords that emerged from Starscream's shoulder armor. "And your best play by the same rules, Starscream... you wouldn't want to hit the natives, would ya?"

The Decepticon leader snarled as he pushed Rodimus back. "Hostage situations? Don't you ever come up with any new cowardly tricks, Rodimus?"

"That's Rodimus *Prime* ta' yous! *Ta' everybodys!*"

The two armies collided on the crowded platform in a mass of metal fists, blades and claws. Amid the howl of battle, a faint human voice shouted for reason among the panicked crowds.

"Quickly, get off the rig!" Sephie ushered the panicked dignitaries and businessmen away from the battle. The Decepticons were engaged with their Autobot foes. The closest of her allies was Shockwave, the strange robot dignitary standing as a

living bulwark against Autobot aggression directed at the humans. Once or twice she had turned to see him bludgeon Big Daddy with his cannon-arm to keep the Autobot at bay. Otherwise, his actions were entirely defensive.

The procession of human escapees led down a series of metal staircases to the mooring dock where Blackrock's yacht, their means of arrival, remained. Of the human guests only one lingered behind, a stocky, older gentleman wearing a white suit. "Senator Shore! You have to get out of here!"

"Blast it all, I won't have it!" The senator turned, staring at her with one eye, his lack of the other obscured by his white, silken eyepatch. "Letting metal monsters run roughshod over us... driving us into an enclosed space! That's not how we won the war! We stood and fought!"

"In the war you had weapons! And you're not..." She paused, realization dawning quickly. "Enclosed spaces... Get away from the boat!"

Blackrock turned from his position mere meters from the boarding plank. The crowd paused, their attention drawn back to the strange girl shouting down at them. "What? But it's the only way out!"

"Get back inside the rig! The Autobots have a hovercraft! And he wasn't up there, which means *he's down here!* It's a trap!"

Blackrock turned just in time to see a massive, clamp-like claw slice through the hull of his vessel from below. Metal tore and the sea frothed as a horrifying metal creature ripped the vessel asunder, sending the few deckhands already aboard toppling into the sea.

"Quickly! Up the stairs, we'll take shelter inside!"

Seaspray watched the crowd scramble back up the stairs as he crawled up the side of the sinking yacht. He had relished Rodimus's idea of using a boatload of hostages to force cooperation from the humans and their Decepticon allies. But that plan was ruined now. Even the deckhands had managed to escape onto the rig as he pulled himself onto the deck.

One human in the crowd caught his optic as she waved her fellow humans back into the rig; a slender, black-haired female.

The Decepticons' pet.

Oh, this would be just as good.

A missile snapped down over Seaspray's shoulder. Sephie didn't even hear the sound of the rocket engine firing up. She just turned and saw the plume of flame and white smoke roaring towards her.

And then the whole world was flame rushing past metal.

The heat was unbearable. Sephie could smell the cotton of her new suit smolder. Through her closed eyelids she could see the flashes of orange and red from the flames. She could feel the heat on her sides and the warm metal that cradled her curled-up form. She could taste the soot in the air mixed with the flecks of her own dried blood on her lips.

What stood out the most was what she could hear. She heard the roar of flames and the boom of the explosion. She heard the scream of metal tearing apart.

Through it all she could hear a voice boom from above. A pained, metallic voice that whispered, "I have you, my child. Do not be afraid."

"Shockwave!"

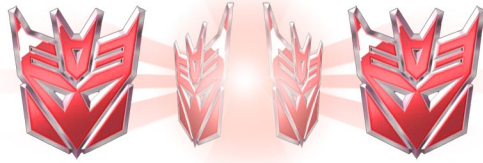
Shockwave rolled over onto his side. He slowly opened his good hand, revealing a singed but still breathing Sephie.

Sephie's ears rang and the harsh sunlight blinded her. A horrible sound—somewhere between a groan and a gurgle—forced her gaze to turn. Seaspray staggered backwards, a smoking hole in his chest. He gave Shockwave a glare before toppling over into the sea.

She felt a pair of arms wrap around her, the smooth faux-leather of the sleeves letting her know it was Rick. She couldn't hear what he was saying, but she could feel him shaking with fear and relief. Her eyes focused over his shoulder, past the running medics and the lapping flames of still-burning debris. She locked gazes with the immense golden cyclops that took the missile meant for her.







“Shockwave is stable.” Crasher’s voice was a solemn whisper that still managed to boom through the otherwise dead-silent meeting room. “Hook, Scrapper and Scavenger are standing by to come through the stellar spanner with fresh medical supplies and a pack of fresh Diagnostic Drones, just as soon as we get it back up and working.”

“He’ll live, but we don’t know how bad the damage is.” Starscream shook his head. Without warning he slammed his fist into the concrete wall of the Earthforce base. “Scrap it all! I wasn’t fast enough! This never would have happened if Megatron were here!”

“It could be a lot worse,” Sideswipe interjected. “If Shockwave didn’t carry so much of his alt-mode on his back, it could have extinguished his ember.”

“I never even met him before today...”

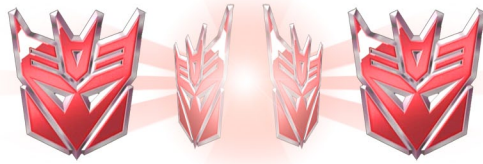
The whole room fell silent as every eye, human and Cybertronian, fell on Sephie. She hadn’t said anything since the battle.

“Sephie... This isn’t your fault.” Rick put his hand on her shoulder.

“He just leapt in. He knew it could kill him and he leapt in to save me.” She looked up, tears welling in the corners of her eyes. “One out of three billion humans and he sacrifices—”

“He’ll be okay, Sephie! He’s a robot!” Rick looked up imploringly at the Decepticons. “He can be fixed, right guys?”

The few seconds of silence were unbearable.



Sephie wasn’t sure why she’d agreed to this. Her anonymous online contact had been pressing for a meeting for weeks but she kept putting him off. For all the information he had on Cybertronian science and physiology, he could still be a creep or one of President Colton’s Greenshirts. Neither prospect was appealing.

She’d finally relented, agreeing to meet him in an abandoned automotive plant just outside of Tucson. Shockwave’s sacrifice had made her bold or possibly desperate. So she had walked, alone, into a completely dark warehouse building piled with rusted machinery that could hide almost anything.

On the other hand, she was also no idiot, which was why her hands were in her coat pockets, one gripping a can of pepper spray, the other a taser.

“Stormbringer99?”

“Here.”

Something large moved in the shadows.

There was no noise, no footfalls, as the thing had no feet. Its lower body tapered to a point, the entire assembly hovering silently in the air, a pair of dimly-glowing generators of some form seemingly keeping it aloft. Massive forearms, supported by thin biceps that didn’t look like they could possibly hold the weight, each ended in three wicked claws. Its face looked something like a fighter pilot’s breathing mask, a pair of amber optics glowing from within a helmet adorned with a pair of sharp-looking fins. The entire machine was nearly midnight-blue, with bright yellow stripes on the blades and fins that gave it a jagged profile.

Pepper spray was out of the question.

“Oh, *crap*.”

The machine regarded her for a moment, hovering motionlessly. “I am Stormbringer99. I am Jetstorm.”

“You’re Cybertronian!”

“Observant.”

Sephie tilted her head, looking the machine over. It didn't seem outwardly hostile, but it certainly wasn't making any effort to be friendly.

“So what are you, an Autobot? Decepticon?”

“Neither. I arrived long ago. I have been... watching.”

“Watching who?”

“Humankind. You.”

“Huh. You talk exactly like you type.”

“I do not type.”

“... Of course not. Silly me. So... what do you want? I assume it's not a date... but I bet you could get any table in the city.”

“Your species is in peril. I shall lend aid. The Cybertronian civil war will destroy humanity. You will be helpless to do anything but watch. This cannot be permitted.”

“But why me? Why not talk to the President or somebody?”

“You have understanding. Vision.” He extended his right claw. Dangling from its tip was a shimmering net of golden ribbon. “A gift.”

“What is it?”

“Power.”

She raised an eyebrow, looking into its unblinking optics. “What do you want in return?”

“Nothing.”

“Horsehockey. There's a catch.”

“Technically correct. I want you to use this to save your species. Nothing more.”



“That's right, run! Run for your miserable lives!”

Butch Witwicky laughed maniacally from his perch on his Autobot partner's shoulder. He watched with glee as the student body of Franklin Burns High School fled in all directions.

“Is it getting excited?” the Autobot smiled. “Oh, Butch likes going on a rampage, doesn't it?”

“That one!” Butch pointed and laughed at the fleeing crowd. “That's Presser, head of the cheerleading squad! She laughed at me when I asked her to Prom... zap her good!”

“Oh look at it want revenge, that's so precious! It thinks it's machines!”

“Tailgate?”

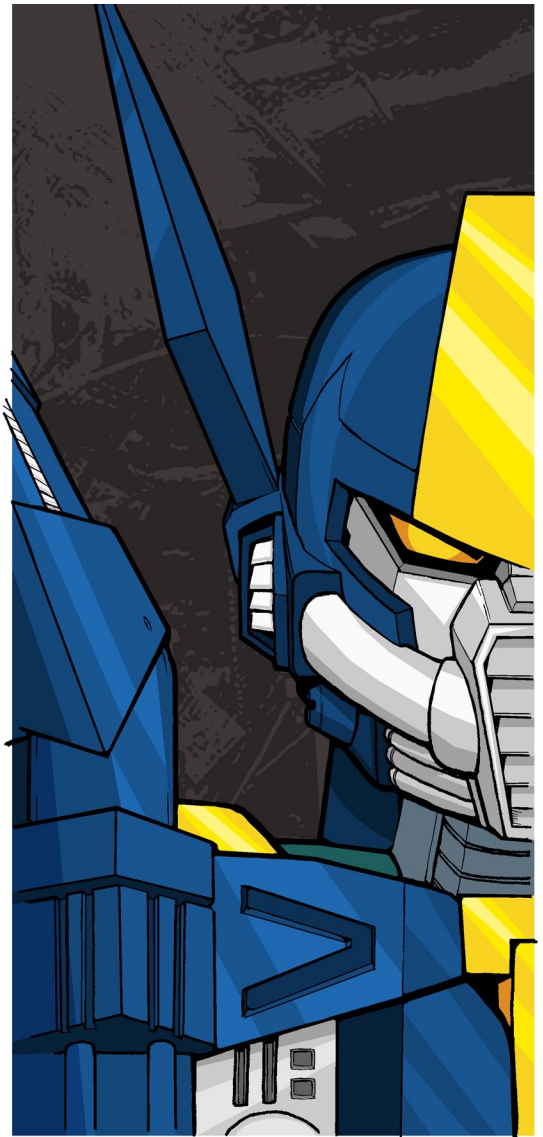
“Yes?”

“Stop treating me like a pet and start maiming my former classmates.”

Tailgate enjoyed these outings with his pet. Of course, Butch was a human, a social animal, that once adopted would see its Cybertronian owners as members of the same pack. It was just basic animal psychology. If left unattended, the humans would get anxious, bored, or worse, and would become lethargic and grow fat on treats and reality television. Exercise like this kept them strong and healthy, and put a shine into their manes, though the ample product Butch used seemed to have the same effect, in excess.

“Stop right there!”

Tailgate looked down at the female human. She was wearing a baggy jogging suit, but something metallic covered her neck and hands. The glint of a web of golden circuitry reflected the flames from the burning school building. Tailgate was always impressed by how close humans came to speaking actual language. It was adorable.



“Hey. I know you,” Butch spat. “You’re that goth chick that hangs out with the Decepticons.”

“Butch, your temperature’s going up. You want a new friend? I don’t see its car... it’s a stray! We can take it home and you can play together.”

“Gah! Shut *up*, Tailgate!”

Sephie sniffed. “Not if you were the last *boy* on Earth, Cybertron, and all points in-between. Let’s skip to the chase. What do you think you’re up to, Butch?”

“Revenge, babe. These losers used to laugh at me...but I’ve got the giant robot, and now I’m the one that’s laughing!”

“Someone’s going to stop you, though.”

“I don’t see your Decepticon buddies, babe.”

“I don’t need any help. Humanity is stepping up.” She raised her hand and extended it towards Tailgate’s aquamarine-and-yellow form. Slowly her hair rose, as though defying gravity, and she closed her eyes, concentrating on the robot before her.

“Aw, it wants to-”

A bolt of golden energy leapt from Sephie’s fingers, striking Tailgate dead-center in the chest. He staggered backward, forcing Butch to scramble for purchase on his shoulder.

“Ow! It stung me!” Tailgate snarled. “Bad human! I’m going to have to put you down!”

“I would love to see you try.”

*I would love to not feel like my stomach’s about to drop out of my butt*, Sephie thought to herself as the Autobot stepped forward. *Well, here goes. I got it mad... now let’s hope this really works.*

And then, all doubt was gone as she felt the power flow through her body. The first blast had given Sephie a feel for what the suit could do. It was as though it were alive, guiding her at the speed of thought as she leapt out of the way of Tailgate’s giant metal foot. She had only to will it and another arc of lightning lashed out to strike the Autobot in the knee, rendering his leg numb and clumsy.

“*Bring it.*”

Tailgate took an uneasy step toward Sephie before losing his footing. Sephie leapt backwards as the massive robot tumbled down onto his hands and knees with an immense crash, Butch clinging to his helmet to keep from spilling on the ground. But her sense of accomplishment was short-lived. Tailgate’s fall had been genuine, but it closed the gap between himself and his human foe rapidly. Before Sephie could sprint out of the way he braced himself on his left hand and lashed out with his right, plucking her off the ground in one smooth motion.

“Look! It’s got Cybertronian tech!” Tailgate chuckled as he regained his unsteady footing. “Isn’t that cute... *but it’s WRONG!*”

Sephie wriggled in his grasp, and the Autobot responded by tightening it. She howled, light flaring from her metallic undersuit. Butch leaned in closer to Tailgate’s head. “Uh, dude, what are you doing to her?”

“Draining her tech’s power with my magnets. Neutering helps ease a bad temper in some cases.”

“You know, you really have no clue how humans w-”

A lurch cut him off. “What’s wrong?”

Tailgate’s face was frozen in shock, save for the occasional involuntary twitch. “By the spires...”

Butch turned to look at Sephie. Light was almost pouring off her now. Her eyes glowed gold.

“What the...”

The next thing he knew, he was face down in the dirt. Picking himself up, he saw Tailgate struggle to pry himself from the hole he’d punched through the school’s main building, a deep trench gouged out of the yard from his flight.

Butch’s hair stood on-end; the air was charged with electricity. He turned slowly, gazing up at Sephie.

Her track suit was torn in several places, and slightly on fire in others. The holes revealed a glowing web of golden light that covered most of her skin. Raven hair floated and waved as if underwater, electric sparks dancing among her locks. She smiled almost serenely as she examined her hand with glowing eyes.

“Interesting. Ferro-cobalt magnets coupled with an electron siphon to capture metal opponents and drain their energy reserves with a single beam. Vampiric, but very useful.” She turned to the Autobot as he got to his feet. “I bet you get amazing gas mileage.”

Tailgate’s roaring charge was cut off by a curling beam from Sephie’s hand, wrapping around his body. He screamed as smoke started to seep from his joints.

“Very useful indeed.”

Her other arm flung out, her golden eyes glaring at Butch. "You! Stop staring at me like that!" The boy scrambled backwards like a crab as the electric bolt struck less than a foot from a very painful point on his body.

But Sephie's attention was no longer on Butch, or Tailgate. She stared transfixed at her own hand. The web of lights were shifting on their own, twisting and bulging as they shone brighter. The beam holding Tailgate in place vanished, and the Autobot slumped to the ground.

"Wha... what's going..."

The courtyard lit up in a flash, forcing the onlookers to shield their eyes.

Butch was the first to regain consciousness.

The ground where Sephie had stood was scorched in a radiating pattern that stretched out six feet in every direction. The air was thick with the stink of ozone. The students furthest away had merely been temporarily blinded. Others were stunned or knocked unconscious by the blast. Tailgate, for all his size and power, had absorbed the brunt of the blast and lay, immobile, on the ground a few feet from the blast zone.

Butch turned slowly, following the smoking trail to where Sephie lay prone, against the crumpled side of a formerly very expensive car. Whatever she'd done, it was over. She wasn't moving. He wondered if she was just knocked out or...

The sudden dry gasp of breath answered his silent question. Her right hand twitched and jerked unnaturally, bolts of electricity surging across the shattered remains of her exoshell.

"Tailgate, we gotta move, man... before she gets back up!" Butch hissed, unwilling to draw her attention by shouting.

"hnnnugle... summon...call S'ciety... f'r Pr'vntion... of Cruelty t'... Autobots..."

"Funny. Come on, let's go!"

With a groan, Tailgate shifted into vehicle mode, Butch leaping into the driver's seat through a busted window. Coughing smoke from his tailpipe, the Autobot rattled into gear and peeled out as fast as possible.



"Give her air!"

"Is she okay?"

"Holy crap, her cl-"

"Shut up and give me your jacket!"

Sephie opened her eyes. Every part of her tingled with odd sensations. She slowly lifted her head as someone placed a heavy jacket over her upper body. Students crowded around her, though a ring of cheerleaders seemed to be pressing the crowd back. Another ran forward with a second jacket. "Here Lisa, got another one."

The cheerleader kneeling by Sephie's side laid the jacket over the prone girl's legs. "You okay?"

"Uhhhn. I think so. Wow. Didn't expect that to happen."

"That was really brave the way you stood up to that twerp and the killer robot. You some kind of superhero?"

"Nnf. Maybe. They... wait! Where's the Autobot?!"

The cheerleader held Sephie's shoulders down. "Don't worry, they ran for it! Just relax. Besides... you're kind of..."

Slow, cold realization hit Sephie. She lifted one arm and stared at the few charred scraps that remained of her tracksuit. Her bare arm was covered in slightly-paler lines where the foil undersuit had once been, as the last fried circuits crumbled off her like dried clay. Reluctantly, she pulled the coat away from her neck and peered down.

"Eeeeeeeeee!"

The head cheerleader helped the quickly-curled-up girl cover herself more. "I'm sure one of the girls has a sweatsuit she'll lend you. Jesse?"

"But mine cost me a hundred and fifty dollars!"

"No! That's okay!" Sephie quickly wrapped the jacket around her upper body, tying the sleeves behind her back. "I just need to get to my car!"

“But...”

Several students ran after her as she tore barefoot across the parking lot. Reaching the car at the streetside, she didn't even bother with the door, but dove through the open window. “Thanks for everything, really, but I gotta go!” She hit the gas, praying she wouldn't get pulled over, and thankful she'd had the forethought to leave her wallet and keys in the glovebox.

“Wait!” Lisa yelled as Sephie peeled out. “What's your superhero name?”

“*I haven't thought about it yet!*”

The school's quarterback quietly stepped up behind Lisa. “Hey... you think we're ever gonna get our jackets back?”

Lisa watched the car without a word as it disappeared into the distance. For the first time in her life, the gears in Lisa Presser's head were really turning.

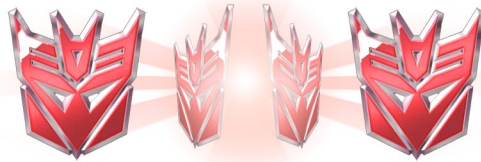
“Just, you know, that's my letter jacket...”

One lone human took on a killer robot from space and basically won. And a girl at that. A pale, kind of skinny girl. Sure, she had some super-sciencey stuff, but...

“I mean, it cost me-”

“Oh shut up.”

Well, there was those two loser computer nerds in the back of her English class....



The drive home had been frenzied. She had grabbed random clothes from her dresser without her usual ritual of picking just the right combination of skulls and indie bands. All that seemed pretty irrelevant now. She had managed to peel most of the material off, but scraps still clung, sparking randomly and making her muscles twitch disturbingly. The rush of adrenaline had only abated slightly on the way to Jetstorm's hiding place.

“Jetstorm! It went wrong!” Sephie shouted through the pain, into the darkness. “You said I could control it!”

Just as before, Jetstorm melted noiselessly from the shadows.

“My error. Biological systems incompatible with our technology. Neural interface will not function properly.”

“Please! I nearly beat one of them! It was amazing!” She wiped a stray lock that had fallen into her eyes as she ranted. “Okay, sure, I nearly flash-fried myself and lost a bit of modesty in the process, but I know I can do this! I know what it feels like to be one of you!”

“Doubtful.”

Sephie reached into her knapsack and withdrew a stack of papers and disks. “I have Professor Arkeville's cybernetics research. I have medical supplies from the *Nemesis*, I have a supply of energon... I can improve the process, but I need more... more information! I need equipment!”

“Cybernetics. You do not seek replacement. You seek... upgrades.”

“Yes! None of this foil bikini crap! I want the real thing!”

“You require assistance.”

“With what I'm thinking about? *Yes!*”

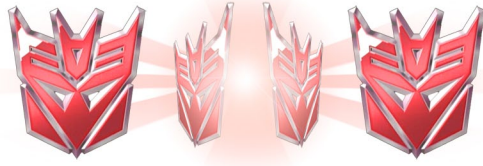
“Understood. Will assist.”

“*YES!*”

“Understand. Procedure requires... *sacrifice.*”

“Yes, yes and yes!”

“Brace yourself. Pain... inevitable.”



“Guys, I have an announcement to make.”

Sephie stood at the doorway to Professor Arkeville’s lab. It was midday now; Rick and Will were at their usual task of struggling to make sense of the chaotic jumble that passed for the Professor’s filing system. Rick turned faster than Will and stopped cold. Instead of her normal indie-hipster threads, Sephie was wearing a taupe trenchcoat and wide-brimmed hat that covered her up almost entirely.

“Um... interesting fashion choice, Sephie.” Rick replied, giving her a confused once-over. “I know retro is in, but... are those new boots? Since when did you do gold?”

Sephie looked down. She’d forgotten about her boots. She shrugged and let the coat drop.

It took several moments for either boy to find their voice.

“Wh... ha... whu... wh-what did you *do* to yourself?” Rick exclaimed.

The greater portion of Sephie’s skin was covered—or replaced, it was difficult to tell which—by a highly polished gold-and-navy colored metal. Subtle hinges and joints formed at her elbows, hips and knees. While her right hand was still quite human, her left was bulkier, replaced with a metal frame of interlocking plates and pistons. The metallic skin revealed normal human flesh around the neck and face, with the occasional uncovered scrap peeking through.

“I upgraded myself.” Her voice, despite all the changes to her body, was still fully human.

“Upgraded?!”

“With human and Cybertronian tech.”

Will still stared, gape-mouthed and silent, as Rick sputtered. “We... we have to separate you... get you back to normal!”

“Even if it were possible... why?” Sephie flicked out her hand, light glinting off her fingers. “I’m stronger now. Smarter. More powerful.”

“Less human.”

Sephie paused, a look of mild hurt on her face. “Not at all... I could have easily shut off my emotions, regulated them, but I didn’t. This isn’t some science fiction movie... I’m not a monster, any more than wearing glasses or getting an artificial heart makes you a monster.”

“But you’re part machine.”

“So is the Professor, and that doesn’t seem to bother you,” she replied matter-of-factly. “The only difference is, I choose to be.” Sephie smiled and admired the glimmer of light across her golden hand. “I’m a literal self-made woman... and best of all, I’m not helpless anymore.”

“What about love?”

“Rick, why in the world would you think that I would take that out... and why is it such a big deal to you—” Sephie froze. “Oh.”

Rick kept silent, but the flush on his cheeks spoke volumes.

“Oh Rick... I’m flattered, really... I mean, your elevated heart rate and body temperature alone means that this...” She gestured to herself. “Doesn’t make much difference for you.”

“Dude... She’s half robot.”

“Shut up, Will.”

“Rick, I’m... I’m still not perfect.” She smiled as comfortably as she could manage. “I don’t know how to handle these sorts of things. You’re a lot younger and—”

“It’s okay,” Rick said. “You don’t have to.”

“There isn’t time, Rick.” Sephie drew herself up again. “Everything else aside... I have important things to do and there just isn’t time.”



R. J. Blackrock stood at the edge of Arizona Bay, staring into the ocean. He could see the bone-white forms that jutted out of the sea for miles, dotting the view here and there like tiny rocks in a tide pool. Most that remained were made of stone, but they were not rocks in the traditional sense. The few buildings that survived the cataclysmic sinking of California now dotted the sea floor and, in a few places, jutted above the ocean at low tide. Everything along the San Andreas Fault was abandoned, both on land and in the sea.

Thanks to the efforts of men, monsters and nature itself, Arizona Bay was foreboding, forbidden and fortified. The Autobot base rumored to be beneath the waves could not have been in a better location. Even if one was brave enough to breach the quarantine zone along the fault, it had to be by land, as the sunken cities made large scale ocean travel—and ocean warfare—impossible.

“Pitch another one in.”

Blackrock watched as his assistants lugged another weighted oil drum to the water’s edge and hurled it in. The slope of the rocky beach was sharp, and the drum rolled underwater along the incline until it fell out of sight.

The tracking beacon on the drum fed its location back to Blackrock’s laptop computer. The drum, weighted as it was, was rising back along the incline.

“Finally.” Blackrock turned to his men. “Head back to the perimeter, I want to make a good impression.”

When the drum came back into view it was clutched in the hand of a towering black-and-purple humanoid figure. Indigo flames decorated its chest, leading Blackrock’s attention to its shockingly human face, complete with moustache and goatee. The arm that did not grasp the barrel ended in a gleaming buzzsaw.

“This youse garbage?” the creature spoke, paying no attention to the seawater that gushed out of its joints.

“Rodimus *Prime*, I presume.”

“Youse is right, and yeah, you do.”

“I am R. J. Blackrock, owner and CEO of Blackrock Petroleum and Energy Concern. You raided my energy station.”

“An’ so’s youse lookin’ for payback. I knows the score.” The black machine chuckled darkly. “You done bit off more than youse can chew.”

Three more creatures of similar stature waded out of the sea, taking up positions behind their leader.

The human looked impressed, but didn’t show any signs of fear or awe. “Ah, and these would be Goldbug, Side Burn, and I believe... Beachcomber? I’ve done my homework on you all. I do this with every potential business partner.”

Rodimus’s bark of laughter echoed through the bay. “Oh, this is rich!”

“The canisters are simply a courtesy gift. Processed petroleum. I don’t know how you like it, so I went with a standard premium unleaded. If you prefer additives to reduce emissions or clean engines, we can add those as well.”

“The fleshling seeks to bribe you, Rodimus Prime.” Goldbug’s voice came as a hiss, partially muffled by the saltwater that still flowed off his form.

“Yeah, thanks for the reminder of why youse is *second* in command,” Rodimus snapped, dropping the barrel unceremoniously to the ground. “Five barrels o’ oil. Sorry chief, but protection don’t come that cheap.”

“I assumed as much, mighty Prime.” Blackrock bowed slightly. “But that’s not why I’m here. I want to know how much weapons would cost.”

“Weapons?” Rodimus laughed. “Look at the sprockets on this guy, eh?”

“I can solve your fuel problems *completely*,” the human smiled. “More gasoline, ethanol, diesel, take your pick, than you could ever eat, drink, whatever you do with it. Even some of our new hydrogen fuel cells. And all I want is protection and technology.”

“Arrogant! Foolish! Ridiculous! Why shouldn’t we simply take your fuel, human, along with your life?” Goldbug took three steps forward and rose to his full height, showering droplets of oil-tinged seawater down on the industrialist. “Grant me the pleasure of his execution, Rodimus Prime! I tire of these fleshlings’ inconsiderate natures! Especially with the frequency they’ve been attacking our troops!”

“My troops.”

“Your troops. Regardless, they should know their place in the natural order!”

“Shift down a gear, Goldbug,” Side Burn rumbled. “You underestimate humans and their usefulness.”

“Burn’s right,” Rodimus snickered. “Remember what our, ahem, advisors, have said? This kinda arrangement is low-risk and ongoing. Ya ice the little fleshlings, and next thing you know, you yourself is diggin’ fuel out of the ground like some common service drone.”

“Does that mean you are interested?”

Rodimus gave him a long stare, lips curling into a smile. “Start your pitch, *Mister Blackrock*.”



Sephie was once again wearing the coat and hat as she walked into the planning room. Starscream and Soundwave were on monitor duty, just as she had planned. She cleared her throat, but Starscream spoke before she could.

“Sephie... you have something to say?” Starscream’s gaze was stern, disapproving and almost parental to Sephie’s eyes. Still, she took off the coat and hat, revealing her new self to the two Cybertronians.

“The Professor told you, didn’t he?”

“Yes. He did.” Starscream’s expression shifted from one of disapproval to one of concern. “Sephie, why did you mutilate yourself?”

“It’s not... it’s... it’s an improvement!”

“You cut away healthy tissue to experiment with grafting technology—stolen technology, by the way—to your body.” Behind him, unseen, Soundwave rubbed his forehead. “I stand behind my assessment.” Soundwave cradled his head in his hands, shaking it slowly.

“I... I did it so no one would have to take a missile for me again,” she snapped. “So I wouldn’t need protecting, so I could help for real.”

“Clearly you do need protecting, and not just from the Autobots...but from yourself.” Soundwave turned and raised a finger to interrupt, but Starscream’s pause was too brief. “You have no idea what that technology will do to your body or mind. You may have just shortened your life by decades. One blown neuro-circuit and you could experience forms of insanity unknown to your species or my own.” Soundwave threw up his hands in frustration as Starscream continued. “All because you didn’t think to consult anyone before you started playing around with your own biology. Even if by some miracle it works, you aren’t a soldier and the Autobots are. You aren’t thinking clearly and you’re certainly *not* going into battle. Perhaps we should schedule some sessions with Bombshell and get to the root of why you did this.”

“But you haven’t even seen what I can do! You don’t know any of that!”

“Sephie, dudette, please, we’re not the bad guys here,” Soundwave slid forward before Starscream could respond. “Look, Screamer knows science in a big way, and if he’s worried about what’s goin’ on, then there’s something to be worried about. We’re both worried.” Soundwave’s voice was softer than usual. “We’re only concerned about your health.”

“You’re confined to quarters until Professor Arkeville and I can find a way of safely de-weaponizing your implants. We may be able to modify them to appear normal, or at least like normal prosthetics, and give you a chance at a normal life.”

“Boguuuuuus,” Soundwave sighed, drawing the hanging ends of his bandanna over his visor.

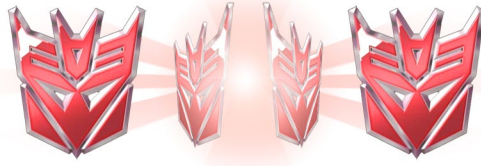
“Fine!” Sephie stormed out of the room and slammed her fist into the door controls as she stomped past. Her muffled shout made it through the door. “Be that way! You’re just... you’re a JERK!”

There was a long silence.

“That went poorly, didn’t it?”

“Dude, you know science in a big way, but maybe I should, like, send Ravage to talk to her?” Soundwave scratched the back of his head. “Cuz, like, no offense, Screamer-dude, but he knows people in a big way.”





Sephie stared at the wall of her room in the Decepticon base. The unfairness of Starscream's reaction stung more than any surgery ever could have.

The ring of her iPhone roused her from her thoughts. Reflexively she reached for a phone that wasn't there. She caught herself as the number flashed before her vision. Recognizing the number, she tapped the metal covering her temple. "Mister Blackrock? I'm sorry I'm not at work, but I had to take medical leave after the attack and..."

"It's not that, Sephie!" His voice sounded hushed and worried. "It's the Autobots. They're offering to back off if we reactivate the pipelines along Arizona Bay so they can refuel whenever they need to."

Sephie groaned. One of the Decepticons' biggest advantages was that they had a small but steady supply of energon, having outfitted their base with a vast array of solar collectors, wind turbines and a hydroelectric generator in a nearby river, plus as many energy-saving measures as they scrape up. Meanwhile, the Autobots were making do with pilfered fuel, meaning their operations had to be small, often underpowered teams.

A steady supply of petroleum would change that, and quick.

"Mister Blackrock, you can't deal with them! They'll betray you!"

"I know! But there were four of them, they forced me to say yes, but..."

"But what?"

"The main pipe station leading toward old San Diego, I told them it would be a perfect fuel depot. It's inside the quarantine zone, too close to the bay for the government to risk a tactical nuclear strike. But it's the perfect place for an ambush."

"You want me to tell the Decepticons?"

"Yes! The Autobots want me there to discuss terms at noon tomorrow. Please, Sephie, you're the only one I can count on here!"

She bit her lip. "I can't promise anything... but I'll try."

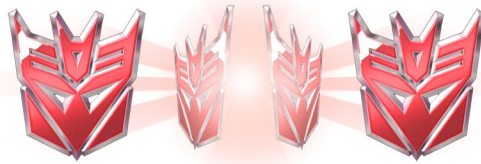
"Thank you. You have no idea what this could mean."

Sephie tapped her temple again, disconnecting the call. This all felt wrong somehow, but she couldn't put her finger on why. Why did he come to her with this? She barely knew her employer as anything but a big face everyone obeyed, but he seemed to know a lot about her, and certainly her connection to the Decepticons.

Then again, maybe that was it. He could communicate with her secretly. How else would he contact the Decepticons without tipping off the Autobots?

But still. After what she just went through... she had something to prove to the Decepticons, Autobots, and even her friends. And she knew how to do it.

She'd need just a little more power first.



By the time Ravage had been sent to talk to Sephie, she was gone. Only a note, burned into the wall, was left behind, saying, "*Gone to stop the Autobots. Tell you when and how later.*"

"We have to do something!"

"You're right, of course, Rick." Starscream paused, looking at the assembled Decepticons and humans. "Sephie is intelligent, but this is beyond what could reasonably be expected of her. And even if she did design these upgrades herself, she couldn't have self-installed them. We need to find out how she did this."

"You mean we need to stop her before she gets herself hurt!"

“Of course, that goes without saying.”

“What’s the big deal?” Demolishor snorted as he cleaned a barrel-shaped finger. “It’s ‘bout time the humans fought back hard. More scrapped Autobots? Fine by me.”

“Wrong,” Cliffjumper snarled. “We have to stop her. I’ve seen this before, on my world. That kind of cybernetic enhancement turned a normal human girl into a mechacidal maniac who went after both sides. We gotta stick her in cryo now and work on a cure later.”

“Yeah, we all know about your nutball backwards universe, Cliffjumper!” Rick shouted, spinning on the robot, face flushed. “It doesn’t matter what happened there because nothing happens the same way here! You go on and on about it like it’s relevant here but it isn’t, so sit down and shut up!”

The Autobot glared at the trembling human as dozens of rebuttals piled up unspoken. He knew to his spark that it didn’t matter how many details were different, the story of this universe was the same as the one he’d come from. With everything he’d learned of this universe’s history up to this moment, he found the big things lined up the same. Ever since he’d found out Sephie’s full name, he’d been hoping this twisted funhouse of a universe would jump the rails... but no, it was right on track.

And it was nakedly apparent Rick was being blinded by emotion; the Decepticons may have been largely ignorant to it, having only met humans recently, but Cliffjumper had a few decades of time on Earth prior, had seen first-hand how the males and females reacted to each other, and how glitch-ridden their thought processes became when they interacted.

But one thing he’d learned, and it had taken him a long time to do, was that there were times you just didn’t fight back.

Rick paused, staring at the larger robot, waiting for an objection or response. When none came he spoke quickly and firmly. “That’s it, I’m going after her.” Rick’s brave statement had a twinge of determined fear in its tone as he stormed towards the door. “She might listen to me.”

The sound of sneakers squealing filled the room as Will, gripping his best friend’s arm and tugging, was dragged effortlessly across the steel floor. “Rick, you moron. She’s a super-powered... whatever! And she’s out *hunting Autobots*. You’ll get smashed flat in the crossfire!”

Rick only stopped when Cliffjumper stepped in his path.

“You can’t stop me! You can’t hold me here... you don’t have the right!”

“Actually, I do, and I also got the *might* to do it. But I ain’t. I just want you to stop and think first. Will’s right, you’re gonna get smeared. Unless you got firepower like we do.”

Arkeville was the first to find his voice. “Cliffjumper, are you suggesting we put him through cyborging surgery? Because if you are-”

“*NO*. I’m not. I ever tell you guys about the Nebulans? Human-like aliens who bonded themselves to Cybertronians in different ways. Many went through it to protect family and friends from the Decepticons... and now those who are still around are no longer welcome on their own homeworld.” He gave Rick only the briefest of glances before turning to Starscream. “I don’t think Sephie’s gonna listen to any of us-” He waved his arms at the gathered Decepticons. “-but she might listen to one of the humans. I don’t know what her sensor net is like, and if she catches us nearby, she may bolt. The humans are our only hope... but we need them to be safe. What if we made him a suit? Armor? Something. Not cyborg-stuff, just... some protection.”

“We couldn’t possibly design this kind of tech from the ground up in time. We’d need a base form to work from.” Starscream shook his head. “It’s impossible!”

A series of loud mechanical squawks erupted from the back of the crowd. Fistfight tottered forward on his short legs and gestured towards the scavenged reformatting equipment the Decepticons had rebuilt within their makeshift lair.

Soundwave tilted his head. “Dudes... I think Fistfight is volunteering.”

“Excuse me?” Starscream replied.

Another series of electronic beeps followed.

“Little dude says Shockwave’d want to protect the humans any way he could...”

“Fistfight does have a simple internal structure,” Starscream mused reluctantly, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “Retrofitting him to accommodate Rick as an exostructure would be... faster. He won’t quite be up to full Cybertronian Micromaster level capability, but... it should be enough to protect him.”

“Fine,” Rick sighed. “Let’s do this. Every minute she’s out there...”

Starscream nodded. “Soundwave, patch me through to everyone... thank you. Attention, all Decepticons. We need every capable unit on active search duty for Sephie, and to be ready to tackle the Autobots at the old San Diego pipeline. If you spot Sephie, do not engage. Repeat, do not engage. Alert Soundwave and we’ll get Rick or the Professor there as fast as possible.”



Sephie stood atop the fallen Autobot's chest. She touched her foe with her metallic hand, releasing an involuntary gasp as the smooth golden metal meshed to Groove's black-and-white body, finding a lump of neural-circuitry buried deep within. Synapses fired, circuits met, and the whole of her enemy's being opened up before her.

She understood. The patterns of ember and circuit, merging in the most unique of the robot's components: a chip, buried behind his ember. This was the source of Groove's power. The twin-barreled cannon was but a focusing mechanism.

She pulled back her hand and remembered the patterns. Sickly green energy danced between her fingers.

"Vhat ze scrap are you?"

She turned to Elita-One, who stared at her in horrified confusion. Sephie had happened upon the pair raiding a skyscraper building site for materials. So far only the local police had attempted to stop them, and had little luck.

"Humanity plus, humanity squared, transhuman..." Sephie gave the Autobot a grin. "They're all accurate. I'm what humanity needs to be... the next step; a self-determined, self-defined, self-designed being. You can call me Emulator."

"Oh, you're right on one thing, dahling. You are vhat humanity needs to be... *dead meat!*"

Sephie spun in the air, effortlessly slipping between the twin bolts of energy from Elita's rifle. Her outstretched palm unleashed a blue wave that latched itself onto Autobot's weapon. Elita tried to fire, but got no response. She tried to pull back, but found the gun locked in place, trapped in the magnetic beam.

And her hands were going numb. A quick diagnostic showed her energon levels slipping...

The Autobot staggered backwards as she let go of the blaster, which flew through the air, shattering against a rock. Elita stared hard at the bizarre human, letting her targeting sensor functions take over. She recognized the attack as Tailgate's, but that was impossible...

She paused. Were it possible for her to go pale, she might have.

"A power chip rectifier... zhat's not even possible! *You don't have an ember.* How can you have a rectifier vwithout ze Terminus putting it there? No one gets one vwithout an ember!"

"It's a blank. No power of its own," Sephie replied as she raised her metallic hand. To Elita's horror it transformed into a blaster-like device amid an unnatural whirring sound. Before the Autobot could dodge, a pale green blast sizzled through the air, slamming into her crouching form.

"Until I copy one. Store it for later use. Thus the name."

Emulator stopped. She didn't expect the Autobot to quip, given the assault, but no sound at all was disconcerting. Or motion, near as she could make out through the splash of green energy. As she cut the beam off, she saw that Elita was still crouched defensively, not moving a millimeter. All color had drained from her, surrounded by a pale monochrome haze that seemed to extend just a few inches away from her metallic skin.

Maybe she'd given her too much. "What did you just-"

With a flash, color returned to the robot. Emulator's confusion gave Elita the opening she needed. Optics narrowed, and she spun on one foot, pirouetting like a precision ballerina. Her other foot caught a rock and sent it flying into the augmented human, hurling her back.

Emulator picked herself up to the sound of screaming tires. "Oh no you don't!" she howled as she got airborne again. Elita was already speeding away, far faster than anticipated. She let loose with bolts of Groove's power, but the sleek roadster jukeed to the sides, dodging each one.

This would take... creativity.

She was keeping pace with the Autobot at least. Most of this city was still in varying degrees of construction, one of several major renovation and rebuilding projects still left over from the last war. Most were far, far behind schedule. *Plenty to work with.* Letting loose a blast of her own golden energy just to keep the escaping Autobot occupied, she reached out with her other arm, focusing Tailgate's power.

Steel fencing two blocks ahead, caught in the magnetic beam, ripped free of its foundations and snaked across the pavement, expanding out like a driftnet. The Autobot skidded, trying to dodge down a side-street, but caught the edge of the fence, shredding side-panels and sending her caroming off walls in an uncontrolled tumble.



Elita transformed to try and regain stability, but she had barely gotten to her knees before she was hit in the back with a blast of energy. She wailed as she felt lubricants drying and fuel reserves vaporizing. She shuddered and fell to the ground, pushed to the edge of stasis lock by Groove's power as wielded by the small metal-and-flesh being before her.

Elita stared up, helpless, as the human floated over to her, hand reverting to a humanoid shape. Emulator reached out slowly, moving her touch toward the exposed circuitry where the Cybertronian's left shoulder's fluid gasket ruptured.

"Whatever you did back there was quite a nice trick," she said as Elita's internal schematics flowed into her mind. "Don't worry... I'm sure I can find a much better use for it."



Arizona Bay lay before Sephie as she stood on top of a busted column. The Autobot base was somewhere along this desolate shore, but the Decepticons had never attempted to make an assault. Too risky, they'd said. The government too stayed away from the Quarantine Zone. The last war had ended in the berth of the brackish sea that lay beyond. The official line on quarantine was danger of radiation sickness or biological contamination. Sephie's new senses told her these worries were unfounded. She wondered then if her father was right, and the government feared their enemies hadn't been destroyed and still slept somewhere down there.

"Um... Hey Sephie."

Her new senses, it seemed, were much like her old ones, and would only warn her if she was paying attention. She spun, blaster-cannon ready, and paused at the sight before her.

"Rick? And... what is that?"

Rick stood in an orange and black mechanical exoframe. It was inelegant, even crude. A transparent crystalline shield separated him from the outside world. His hands gripped a pair of free-floating joystick controls linked to the exoframe's arms, and his feet melded into the calves of a pair of walker legs. Atop the whole structure sat a disc-like head with a single blue optic sensor. The colors and head design were familiar at a glance, though the rest of the suit was entirely new to her eyes.

"Oh, this is Fistfight. I figured you like, might need help."

"I don't need any..." She paused. "That's... that's kind of sweet. And brave, I guess. You can stay... but don't get yourself hurt. I'm the Transhuman here. How did you find me, anyway?"

The look he gave her was reproachful. "Because... because you're being overconfident. I had to think about what would be the most suicidal thing you could do, and challenging the Autobots on their front door was at the top of the list. Please, let's go."

"They're expecting Blackrock to be here. He still owns this station and the surrounding land, and they want him to re-open the pipes and turn it into a fuel depot. Rodimus will be here, and I can take them by surprise. All I have to do is take out Rodimus at least. Without him, they'll fall apart fighting each other to be leader, and mop-up will be easy."

Rick looked over at Sephie from behind Fistfight's alumicrystal cockpit shield. Beneath the golden armor and the raven black hair he saw the girl she was. A girl he desperately wanted to keep from killing herself. "They're not coming, Sephie!" he cried out. "This is suicide!"

"Which is it, are they not coming or is it suicide?"

"You know what I mean! This is a bad idea; let's just get out of here!"

"I have the right combination of power plans to stop them now. We can end the war here and now! Besides, I already sent the Professor the coordinates to where I am, if you haven't already. The Decepticons should already be on their way."

"Sephie, you don't have to be all... this. You can just be you. Isn't that enough?"

"Not really."

"But I like *you*." Despite the earlier confession, Rick still found the words hard to say. "The you, that you are. I like that you."

Sephie's expression relaxed, but Rick couldn't quite read what was there. It might have been hope, or compassion, or pity, or a combination of them. Before she could speak, however, the water swelled, and a dark shape rose from the depths.

"I'm gettin' really tired of humans who wanna kill me standin' on my doorstep," Rodimus snarled as his head crested the ocean's surface.

"As the only human-Cybertronian hybrid I order you to surrender to the joint forces of Earth and the Decepticon army." She smiled. "Or I will destroy you."

"Whoah, whoah... Somebody's got manufacturer issues." Rodimus raised his hand and buzzsaw and smiled as sweetly as he could manage as he stepped out on shore. "Scrappin' me ain't gonna make daddy Starscream love you, little girl, or whatever it is you're after. Oh for the luvva... now the fat kid's got power armor? This is gettin' outta hand."

"That's muscle, you pile of spare parts," Sephie growled. Rick, despite the situation, felt himself blush.

"It's all nasty protoplasm to me, skinbag."

"Okay, Sephie, maybe you're right. Let's shoot him up some, *then* go home."

"Sorry kiddo, you I wasn't expecting... but her, fuggidaboudit!" Rodimus snapped his fingers, sending a small shower of sparks dancing across them as a loud metal click echoed through the ruins.

Rick spun, turning on his radio. "Starscream, come in, this is-"

Sephie's sudden scream cut Rick off. She fell to the ground as sparks began to dance off of her metallic skin. Rick had barely craned his neck to see when a photon charge from behind struck him in the back. Fistfight and his human pilot went tumbling to the ground, sliding to a halt fifteen feet away as Sephie's shrieks continued, then faded away as she fell into unconsciousness.

"Behold!" Wheeljack shouted as he stepped around an outcropping of rock, cradling a pistol-like weapon cobbled together from human and Cybertronian scrap. "The might of the humble microwave, bane of cyborgs of all stripes... cooks the fleshie and produces electric surges in the circuits."

"She offline?"

"And waste such scientific wonders?" Wheeljack snapped. "Don't insult me, Rodimus. I *hate* that. I kept it low enough to prevent any permanent damage; her frail human physiology still reacts to extreme duress with a forced reboot. Oh no... she'll be alive, hale and hearty when she wakes up."

"When will that be?"

"Just in time for her *vivisection*."



Rick awoke within Fistfight's cockpit.

Fistfight, however, was immobile. While the two of them had been unconscious the Autobots had taken advantage of the situation. The drone's body was now spot-welded to the remains of an armored car, positioned above the ground in such a way as to afford no leverage to break free. Fistfight and—by extension—Rick were immobilized.

From his trapped vantage point, Rick could see Sephie shackled by energy-bonds to an examination table. They were still in the Quarantine Zone, but Wheeljack and Ratchet had wasted no time establishing a makeshift surgical theater with his mobile tech equipment and various useful bits of rubble and scrap.

"It's a trap, Fistfight. Open the comm, we have to warn Starscream."

Fistfight's panicked beeping told Rick that the comm had already been disabled. Despite Fistfight's armor plating, the Autobots could have ripped Rick out if they had so desired. Rick could only assume that he was there as a hostage, or perhaps simply to witness Sephie's demise and bring Wheeljack some additional job satisfaction.

Ratchet was digging through a toolbox, carefully examining a number of wicked-looking instruments.

"Wake up, girl." Wheeljack stalked around the table. "There we go..."

"Wha... What?"

"Now, I'm going to ask you some questions while we take you apart. Please answer honestly, this is for scientific purposes." Ratchet handed him what could only be charitably called a surgical implement, a rod-shaped device that ended

in a half-dozen mechanical limbs, each tipped with a keen energon scalpel or a fine-tipped plasma torch. He adjusted it with expert care, letting each of the implements hover less than a centimeter over their intended entry points.

“Stand by for Exciter! *Salvation is his task!*” Beachcomber’s stilted voice shook Wheeljack from his anticipation. Sephie winced as the Autobot’s distraction brought one of the blades in contact with her arm’s metallic skin. Sensors registered minute damage that her brain interpreted as the lingering sting of a papercut. “To my ears the greatest sin, feel a bit like Beethoven!”

“What is he on about now, Rodimus?” Wheeljack hissed. “I am trying to work.”

“This is why I don’t let the freakshow stray too far, ‘Jack.” Rodimus tapped his communicator controls. “His senses are all tied up on the wrong frequencies... a wide-spectrum jamming makes him freak out.”

“A jamming field? Fires below... you’re going to claim my test subject as a hostage.”

“Yep.”

“You were *always* going to claim my test subject as a hostage!”

“Yep. Places everyone! Like we practiced!”



The Decepticons timed their approach brilliantly. Starscream had given his ground-based troops sufficient lead-time so that he could arrive mere seconds ahead of them. He spiraled out of cloud cover with a deafening roar, his vehicle mode cracking apart and reforming into his natural robotic shape just before impact with the ground. His boot-thrusters brought him to a hard stop, sending earth and rock scattering in all directions amid the scrap and ruins. Before the smoke could clear he leapt forward, landing with both arm-blades deployed.

“Surrender, Rodimus! We’ve got the drop on you!”

The smoke and dust from Starscream’s impact settled, revealing Soundwave, Crasher, Cliffjumper and Demolishor all standing behind him, having made their final approach during Starscream’s showy entrance. Slugslinger and Blitzwing landed in flanking positions, weapons drawn.

The only one watching was Rodimus, who leaned casually next to Ratchet’s makeshift operating table with his sawblade-hand positioned just over Sephie’s helpless form.

“Oh, wrong again, and again, *and again*, Starscream!” Rodimus grinned as he stared at his Decepticon counterpart. “You know, there was a time I actually respected you... well, little bit. Now? Not so much. Now, guns on the ground, or we’s e can discuss which half of the sidekick you want to take back to base with you. And please, let’s not get into how cliché hostage takin’ is... why mess with what works, eh?”

“Bad plan, Rodimus.” Cliffjumper smirked as he raised his weapon. “I’m a sniper equipped with glass gas. How do you feel about replacing that hand twice?”

“I ain’t talkin’ ta youse, stumpy!” Rodimus shouted. “And I gots more than just a hostage.”

The thrum of a plasma rifle powering up drew the Decepticons’ attention over to a wrecked armored car. Goldbug stood next to the immobilized Fistfight and his human cargo. The barrel of Goldbug’s weapon was flush with Fistfight’s cockpit.

“I gots two.”

“I can take out Goldbug,” Crasher hissed, crouched and ready to move. “Mayhem Suppression Squad training. We’re good with hostage situations.”

“Astrotrain and the Micros are on standby ready to crash this party,” Soundwave added.

Starscream stared at Rodimus. “We still have you outnumbered. You won’t dare shoot your only bargaining chips.”

Rodimus laughed. “Yannow, if youse hadn’t thrown up a jammin’ field, you mighta seen this comin’, Starscream!”

“Jamming field?” Cliffjumper looked at Starscream in surprise. Before he could continue, a pack of Autobots rose from every nook and cranny within the area, backed by a dozen Scrounges. Starscream could see two-thirds of Rodimus’s troops each aiming their weapons at the assembled Decepticon rescue team.

“What’s the old sayin’, Screamer?” Rodimus chuckled as he raised his cannon, aiming carefully at Starscream’s face. “It’s finished. Over.”

“Swear to me you will release Sephie and Rick, or we’re going to go down fighting, Rodimus. And I give you my word that if that happens I will end you before my time comes.”

“Fair ‘nuff.”



Rodimus surveyed his prizes with a look of delight on his face. Each of the Decepticons was lined up in front of the ruined remains of some meaningless human edifice, bound with energon manacles. Soundwave’s chest compartment was held firmly shut with a pair of quickly-welded iron bars, keeping his Recordicons securely inside. The Decepticons’ weapons were deposited securely in the wrecked armored car for safekeeping. He was not going to risk a lucky escape. Big Daddy stood at the front of a line of Autobot troops, his blasters held firmly in each hand.

Behind him, Brawn and Ratchet tried to keep Swoop from charging. The normally-calm Dinobot was struggling to get at the captive Decepticons.

“Gotta hand it to the fleshling, handin’ us the Decepticon heavy hitters in one go... Thanks for endin’ the war for us.” Rodimus smiled down at Sephie and then whispered, “And just between you an’ me... yeah, I’m gonna let Wheeljack an’ Ratchet have atcha right after.” He raised his voice once more. “Firing squad! READY!”

“NO!” Emulator screamed. “You can’t do this!”

“I can and I is.” He spread his arms wide. “Okay, Big Daddy, you gets first shot... maybe youse could shoot whichever one is jammin’ sensors and comm, so I can get the rest of the crew topside to enjoy dis?”

The entirety of the gathered Autobot force trained its weapons on Soundwave.

“Whoah! Dudes! I’m not jamming! Honest!” Soundwave shouted. “I totally thought you were, to keep us from calling for help.”

“Ominous, foreboding, sinister!” Goldbug turned, surveying the landscape in every direction. “If the Decepticons don’t jam our sensors, who does?”

“There!” Big Daddy howled, pointing twin blasters upwards. “Optics up, boys! We got company for dinner!”

Autobot and Decepticon alike turned their gaze upward. A transport plane roared overhead, and from its tail-end a humanoid figure toppled out and plummeted toward the ground. After a few seconds the figure was recognizable as a machine. Seconds later a series of parachutes deployed, guiding the form down just outside of the Autobot fortification. The parachutes cut loose, and the machine landed on its feet with an immense thud. Behind it, dozens of metallic orbs tumbled unaided from the cargo plane. Each meter-wide object smashed into the cracked earth and lay still.

“Who the smelt is that?” Goldbug said.

The machine could easily stand optic-to-optic with Starscream. It was immense and humanoid, like any of the Cybertronians gathered there, but it had none of the telltale signs of being one of their number. There were no vestigial wings or cockpits, no wheels or bumpers in its construction. It was bulky, heavily armored and bristling with weapons. Clusters of guns sat on its right shoulder and both forearms. Strategically placed spikes lined its gauntlets, knees, and chest to dissuade would-be grapplers. Its face was an impassive, motionless mask; an art-deco rendition of a stern male face framed in a Roman helmet. The whole thing was painted blood red, gunmetal and gold.

“Another Decepticon!” Rodimus howled. “Get him!”

Beachcomber sprang forward at his leader’s command, oil frothing out the corner of his mouth. Though half the newcomer’s size, he attacked without fear or compunction.

His frenzied courage did him no favors.

The machine moved faster than anyone expected. Beachcomber felt its fist for only the briefest moment before he flew, limp and unconscious, into the ground before Rodimus’s feet.

“I’m no Decepticon.” The voice, though distorted by amplification, rang out from somewhere behind its motionless steel face. “Just someone who’s tired of you robots thinking you can threaten whoever you want. Well, no more, *Rodimus*.”



“It’s Mister Blackrock!” Sephie shouted. “He’s come to help!”

“Behold Project Shieldbreaker... or, as I like to call it: *Centurion!*”

Rodimus pinched the bridge of his nose. “Oh boy. *More* monkeys in power armor. Tear ‘im apart, boys!” Rodimus pointed at the newcomer as he barked his orders. “Don’t stop till ya find the gooey liquid center.”

Wheeljack turned his microwave weapon on the immense machine for a few brief seconds before a missile from Centurion’s shoulder smashed into him. The explosion sent the Autobot scientist hurtling through the air. “I appreciate your contributions, of course,” Blackrock chuckled. “But given how troublesome a goose you are, I think I’ll rip you apart, and let my science boys reverse-engineer all the golden eggs I need.”

As Blackrock gloated, Goldbug and Swoop made their move. The Dinobot attacked high as Goldbug leapt for the knees, grappling with the armored giant despite the spikes and other forms of dissuasion.

“New friend play outside of tin can!” Swoop screeched. “Lots more Autobots to get to know!”

Within moments the two forced Centurion into a kneeling position. Big Daddy stepped behind the machine, guessed at where the pilot might hide in the machine and took careful aim.

“I didn’t come alone, my friends.” Big Daddy turned slowly to the sound of metal components opening up and reassembling themselves. Each of the metallic orbs was now a roughly sphere-shaped robot with a dome-like metal head. Three wheeled legs dropped from out of the bottom, matched with two cable-like arms. Each machine had a placid, emotionless face consisting of two circular optic sensors and a narrow speaker mouth.

More importantly, each machine carried above its dome-like head a human-manufactured approximation of a Cybertronian plasma gun.

“Behold,” Blackrock’s voice echoed from Centurion as the silver machines began firing in all directions. Big Daddy dove for cover. Swoop, being less observant, fell from Centurion’s back when struck by one of the plasma charges. “My Tele-operated Battlefield Ordnance Batteries.”

Without Swoop’s aid, Goldbug could not hang on, and Centurion hurled him away. The Autobots leapt into the fray, weapons fire lashing out in every direction, and the battle was joined.

Starscream groaned, straining futilely against his shackles. “Blackrock is overconfident. Even with those drones he can’t take on all of the Autobots for long. We’ve got to help him and *what is that noise?*”

His head turned to Soundwave. The Decepticons’ communicator turned, appearing oddly indistinct. “High-frequency vibrations sent through the bod, boss-dude,” he replied. “I just hit the right note and...”

His energon shackles fizzled and sparked, dissipating with an impressive light show. “Rock on!”

“Excellent work, Soundwave! Now, get our weapons and get us out of here! Blackrock will need our help!”

Soundwave bolted forward, but his leap was immediately cut off by a blast from one of Blackrock’s drones. “Yo, dude! Friendly here!” He looked up just in time to see Centurion turn, arm raised. Before he could react, a concussion charge hit him dead-center, shattering the rear windshield that made up his chest and sending the robot staggering.

“Now now. Can’t have you all getting in the way... or getting away.” He pointed a forearm cannon at the staggering Soundwave, and an EMP blast dropped the Decepticon quickly. “After all, your technology is just as invaluable.”

“Oh, not fair!” Slugslinger howled as he struggled with his bonds.

“Blackrock, you’ll pay for this!”

The industrialist’s laugh echoed across the battlefield as the armor suit spun, catching the advancing Brawn by surprise with a firm kick to the midsection. “On the contrary, Starscream... I’ll be *getting* paid for this.”



Rick watched the battle unfold before him. It was only a matter of time before Blackrock or the Autobots won. If it was the Autobots, they would put an end to the helpless Decepticons, assuming any of them lived that long. Moments ago a stray shot from one of Blackrock’s drones shattered the armor plate on Cliffjumper’s right leg. The Decepticons were bound and helpless, and if Blackrock was the victor, he was going to disassemble them himself.

And in the middle of the firefight was a helpless Sephie.

All Rick could do was watch. Fistfight's defense systems would keep him safe enough and he was well outside the line of fire. The diminutive Decepticon fed Rick the data. Only a point-blank shot was likely to breach his cockpit at this range. With all motor functions lost, Fistfight could devote his entire energy reserve to the reinforcement field for his battle armor.

"Fistfight. On my mark, I need you to do something for me."

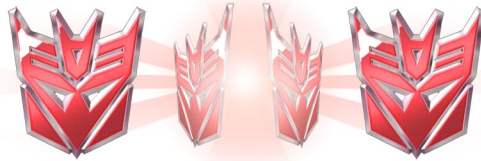
Fistfight beeped in response.

"I am going out there."

He winced as he was treated to a series of loud squawks in protest.

"Can't be helped. You can't move, I can. I'm the only one on our side who can! We're all toast if I don't do this!"

The cockpit opened and Rick smelled the ozone in the air. The unfiltered light strained his eyes and the ground shook with the noise of all-too-close explosions.



Sephie couldn't see what was happening. The operation table locked her facing up. She heard most of it, caught a few glimpses of her boss's new power armor. Most of what she saw was light from energy weapons that sailed too close.

She heard a scrambling sound behind her: something crawling, or possibly climbing, across the metallic surgeon's table. "Who's there?!" she shouted.

"Only me."

She looked up to see Rick's upside-down face smiling down at her. He was there in his jeans and letter jacket, normal and unassisted and vulnerable. Dirt and soot clung to his face and clothes as tightly as he held on to the almost comically oversized gun in his hands.

"Rick!"

"Hold still!" Rick shouted as he carefully braced the blaster and aimed it at the steel a foot from Sephie's shackled left hand. With his free arm he squeezed the trigger, projecting a three-inch wide laser beam down onto the examination table. Slowly he shifted it to the left, bringing it to the shackle without grazing Sephie's body. The metal vaporized under the assault.

The destruction of the physical shackle was helpful. More advantageous was the disruption of the technology within the shackle that held Sephie's new abilities in check. With the containment system compromised she was free to unleash the duplicated powers on her bonds.

"OK, let's get out of here," Rick shouted. "We can call for help. Astrotrain is--"

"Too far. There's no time... too many Autobots, and Blackrock's gone berserk... I've gotta stop them both, now."

Rick shook his head, waving his arms widely. "Wait wait wait whoah! I don't care how many powers you've snagged, you can't stop all of them... They're all over the place. There's just too many."

"I've done this before... smaller scale. If I can do it on accident, I can do it on purpose."

"Do what?"

"Rick?"

"Yeah, Sephie?"

"Run."



With the Autobots busied with Centurion and his drones, Sephie was able to make it to the imprisoned Decepticons. She approached Cliffjumper first, keeping him between herself and the fray to keep Centurion's gaze from her work. She

closed her eyes, pulling up the image of Tailgate's power plans. A decent magnetic tug on the shackles was enough to pry them open.

"Cliffjumper..." she whispered. "I'm counting on you to be yourself."

"Say what?"

"You're practical enough to free the others before you try and stop me." Her hand briefly brushed against one of his wounds before she took to the air. "And you know I'm too fast for you to catch."

Cliffjumper took a step forward as if to chase after her. "Sludge it all!" he growled before turning to Starscream and beginning work on prying off his shackles.



Blackrock couldn't believe his luck.

The Autobots were still coming, but they were tiring, their metabolisms burning through their fuel reserves fending off his attacks and those of his drones. The mass of hydrogen fuel cells in Centurion's frame gave him a peak operation time measured in hours. The Autobots felt pain and relied on binocular vision, just like human foes, whereas Centurion merely fed him damage reports and showed him feeds from cameras mounted on the front and back of the towering exoframe. If he hadn't had the element of surprise this might have turned out badly, but as it stood, his enemies were teetering, ready for him to push them over.

When he saw Sephie flying towards him, he wasn't concerned. Whatever modifications she had undergone since the last time they spoke face-to-face wouldn't make her powerful enough to crack his armor. The screeching metal pterodactyl biting his right forearm and the Autobot Commander under his boot took precedence.

Until he saw the relay from his rearview cameras of her lifting Goldbug off the ground with a magnetic beam. By the time he could turn to get a good look, the howling Autobot was already slamming into Centurion's side.

"Beller! What are you doing?" Centurion's speaker rumbled as he picked himself upright.

"Stopping both you and the Autobots from hurting my friends!"

A horrible screech drew her attention a mere second before Swoop barreled into her. Back in robot mode, the Dinobot's clawed fists raked wildly at the girl, cutting deep gouges in the ground as Sephie rolled out of the way.

Rodimus picked himself up, staring at the crazed Dinobot. "Whut's got into him?"

"Whatever it is, it's fortuitous," Goldbug moaned as he got upright. "This victory you've assured us has quickly become a debacle, a farce, a- LOOK OUT!"

Both Autobots leapt out of the way as a Scrounge barreled between them in wheel mode, chased by a pair of drones. The trio careened wildly, the Scrounge hitting Swoop's leg and flying through the air. Sephie took the moment of distraction to raise her blaster-arm and hit the Dinobot's raised claw with a hissing blast. Swoop roared and brought his claw down, only to have it shatter against Sephie's body as the glass gas she had copied from Cliffjumper took effect. As he roared in pain, she rocketed away, out of his reach.

As she left the howling Dinobot behind, she caught a glimpse of Centurion advancing towards the Decepticons. Cliffjumper had managed to get Starscream free, and both of them were working on getting Blitzwing loose, in the hopes that his built-in ordinance would turn the tide.

Both arms were raised and pointing cannons at their backs.

Sephie roared in anger and let loose a blast of Tailgate's power, yanking Centurion onto its back. Even before it hit the ground she was speeding through the air on a beeline, fists glowing with magnetic energy.

Her charge left her wide open for Ratchet to blindside her, bringing his arm-mounted crane boom right down on her back, swatting her to the ground. In blind panic she threw her hands up, a bolt of golden lightning striking the Autobot in the head, sending parts of his helmet flying.

"Medic's down!" Big Daddy shouted as he finished off another of Blackrock's drones.

"Fuhgiddaboutdat!" Rodimus screamed. "Scrape up the injured an' *make for the breakers!* Half the Deceps are free already! This job ain't profitable no more! Move it! *Now!*"

As the Autobots scrambled away and dove into the ocean, Sephie had clamped onto Centurion's back with her pilfered magnets. Centurion flailed, but the golden-armored human stayed tight to him. Blackrock's controls flashed red as smoke began to wisp from the machine's joints, Groove's fuel-evaporating powers sending system after system into shock.

It was the warnings over the hydrogen cells that had Blackrock sweating. Whatever Beller was doing was destabilizing them. The Heads Up Display gave them less than a minute before they went critical.

Panels in Centurion's back opened up, unleashing metallic tendrils that wrapped themselves around Sephie, locking her tight to the machine. Its head launched from its body, the chest opening slightly before Blackrock's control pod rocketed into the air.

Sephie's eyes opened wide as the suit's information flowed into her mind. She had no choice.

Channeling as much power as she could into flight, she launched herself, the Centurion armor still attached, into the air.

"What is she doing?" Rick howled from behind the armored car.

Starscream let his sensor net take over. "That suit is going critical! She's...she's getting it away from us!"

"SEPHIE! LET GO!"

Inside the control pod, Blackrock fumed. That prototype was expensive. But he'd proved that it could hold its own against Cybertronians. At least he could call it a successful field test, and the readouts and video he'd been recording the entire time were proof enough. A small squad of trained soldiers inside Centurions, backed by his Ordnance Batteries...

A warning beep shook him from his musings. Something big was coming up on his pod, fast.

"BELLER!"

The sky lit up with a flash. Rick's scream was cut off by the sonic boom that followed, shaking dust and crumbling a few buildings on the edge of collapse.

"Sephie..."

Rick slumped to his knees. He didn't even notice Starscream's approach from behind, dropping to one knee. "Rick..."

"She's..."

"I'm so sorry..."

"She's..."

"INCOMING!"

Starscream hunched himself over Rick's unmoving form as the others dove for cover. A metallic object screamed from the air, thudding hard into the ground a few meters away. As the smoke cleared, Blackrock's control pod rolled to a standstill. Hatches blew, and the billionaire staggered out, bloodied, bruised, but alive.

He looked up into the ring of angry Decepticons as he regained his composure. "What?"

Starscream paid the scene no mind. "Rick..."

"She can't be," the boy replied blankly. "She just can't."

"She was a good friend, a brave being..." Starscream whispered. "Rest in peace, Josephine Beller... Emulator... the first human Decepticon."

"You guys sure are quick with the eulogizing."

Heads snapped up.

Sephie descended slowly out of the sun. Soot and burn marks covered her, her left robotic arm trailing smoke. Her glasses remained on the entire time, though they were now twisted and cracked in. She reached up to put out a small fire in her hair as she settled to the ground on shaky legs.

"I don't think I ever want to do that again."

She nearly fell over as Rick grabbed her in a big hug. "Rick, careful!"

He looked into her eyes. "Too hard?"

"No, metal skin. Fire. Hot."

Rick jumped back, wisps of smoke steaming from his scorched clothing. "Oh."

The other Decepticons gathered around, Soundwave leaning on Blitzwing's shoulder. "Dude... she like, went totally pyrotechnic and is okay! Who's got that power? I'm totally jealous."

"Elita-One's power." She smiled weakly. "I stole it from her before I came here. It's kind of hard to explain, but she makes this tiny still-time bubble around her, and she's basically stuck in time for a few seconds... in effect, nothing can actually touch her, affect her at all. A little *deus ex machina*, I admit... or is it *machina ex homo sapiens*? Any rate... I'm okay. Don't think I'll do that again though... I could feel my systems burning out."

Cliffjumper shrugged. "I gotta admit, you did good, kid."

"Excellent, all's well that ends well, as Megatron would say." Starscream crossed his arms triumphantly. "Now all that remains is to turn Blackrock over to the proper authorities."

The look Blackrock gave the far-larger Cybertronian could have cut diamonds.

"Really? For what? I've done nothing illegal. You aliens are intruders, trespassers on my property, and you've cost me a lot of money by destroying valuable experimental machinery. You're not even American citizens, and whatever accolades and titles other governments may have given you mean exactly *squat* here." Blackrock gave the crowd an impossibly smug smile, brushing a lock from his face. "The government's tolerated your presence here so far, but how long do you think that's going to last now that you've assaulted not just an American citizen, but one of their biggest contributors and military technology contractors? Which reminds me. Josephine? You're fired. Your belongings will be mailed to the address on your file. I'll give you all three minutes to get out of here before I send in the tanks."

Cliffjumper balled his fists. "You slimy little..."

"Stand down, Decepticons," Starscream barked out, optics locked on the unflinching billionaire. "The current... crisis has been averted. The Autobots were sent running with no fuel gains, and significant personnel losses. Our work here... *for now*... is done. Demolishor, pick up Fistfight. We mustn't waste Mister Blackrock's time." Giving Blackrock one last calculated look, he turned to walk away, the other Decepticons grumbling as they followed suit.

All but Emulator, who stood slack-jawed.

"Sephie?" Rick tugged at her arm. "We need to go."

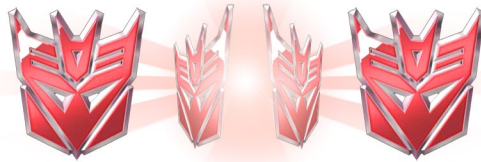
"Fired?"

Rick tugged again. "Uh, yeah. Look, I don't wanna be around when the Greenshirts get here, so..."

"I'm... fired?"

Starscream stepped behind Sephie, lifted her up off the ground, and carried her away.

Rick rolled his eyes. "She's turned herself into a cyborg superhero, has practically lived with advanced robot aliens for a year, one of 'em from an alternate dimension... but getting *fired* is what stuns her?"



"Nobody's tailgatin' us, dudes. We're clear to head back to base," Soundwave announced over the comm frequency. Sephie rested in the passenger seat as Rick slept in the driver's seat, hands free of the wheel as Soundwave drove them home in his van mode. The drive back to base had taken several extra hours, as Starscream wanted to make sure that they were not traced by human or Autobot spies. An hour later they drove into one of the many hidden entrances to the base, a fake abandoned garage a few miles out from the Professor's lab.

"Rise and shine, big dude." Soundwave let Sephie exit the cab normally, but had to jostle Rick to the point of nearly rolling over to get him out of his seat. Soundwave returned to robot mode as the others filed in behind him. The jets had beaten them back to base thanks to their capacity for flight.

In fact, Starscream was waiting for them.

"Sephie, someone wants to say hello to you," Starscream smiled. The main door from the parking-bay to the rest of the base slid open and a still somewhat charred but otherwise mobile Shockwave walked into the room supported by his cannon-arm, followed by Professor Arkeville.

"Shockwave!" Sephie shouted, running forward to throw her arms around his ankle. "You're alive!"

"Yes, and so it seems are you."

"I never got to thank you for saving my life."

"It was my honor. You are a brave and noble being," Shockwave nodded. "And you saved my life, too."

"I did what?"

"Before you left on your..." The Professor changed his tone, pausing. "Just before you left, Starscream had the wit to scan you pretty thoroughly. The adaptations you made to Cybertronian self-repair technology to make it compatible with your own immune system—I'm still not sure how you did that, by the way—showed certain advantages. We managed to get two-way

communication with Cybertron going and some of the medics there walked me through applying the same principles to boost Shockwave's self-repair systems."

"Bonecrusher believes that, with sufficient development, we may be able to make some sort of automated repair chamber with the technology," Shockwave interjected.

"I'm just glad you're okay." She released Shockwave's ankle and turned back to the crowd. "Guys, I'm sorry I stormed off on my own without letting you in on my plan."

"You did very well indeed, Sephie. It looks like we were all a little wrong," Starscream said. "I regret my undiplomatic response."

The crowd murmured in agreement, save for Cliffjumper, who remained silent. Soundwave took the opportunity to push him forward a few paces, bringing him kneecap-to-face with Sephie. After an awkward pause, he spoke. "Sephie, I-um. Well, that is..."

"Cliffjumper... say it," Soundwave whispered.

"I was wrong. You can handle yourself and, if you wanna be a Decepticon, I think Starscream and Soundwave and everyone agrees... you've got a place on the team."

"I do," Starscream nodded. "You would undeniably be a valuable asset, and I stand by my quote-endquote eulogy."

Sephie looked up at the assembled robots. Since she'd met them, the idea of being among them like this, an equal among giants, filled her with awe.

"Wow. That's... you have no idea what that means to me. But... I don't think I should."

"Wait, what?"

"I'm really thankful. Really. But... I'm what mankind is going to become. Maybe not today, maybe not for a thousand years. But if I'm going to live up to the ideal of being a self-made being, if *humanity* is going to be able to, then we need to work for a day when we don't *need* others protecting us. I think I should strike out on my own, do things my way."

"Uh... Sephie, er... Emulator, dudette?" Soundwave stammered. "Are you *breaking up with us*?"

"I'm just saying we should save other people," she laughed. "You're fighting a war, I think I'll kick around for awhile, be here for my people."

"Bogus. She totally is."

Sephie flew over and gave the far larger Decepticon a hug against his crumpled chestplate. "You'll always be my totally rockin' friend."

She turned and smiled. "Rick, I'll miss you."

"You're going to visit."

"That's not a question, is it?"

"No, it isn't."

Rick took several steps that seemed, at the time, impossibly long and insurmountable. At the end of them, he gave Sephie a long hug. As he broke the embrace he smiled and spoke in a soft, wistful voice. "Oh, and Sephie?"

"What?"

"Gold's your color."



"Fine, I don't care!" Rodimus slammed his good hand down onto the table. "It's time we took stock of our current situation, jus' in case there's any *confusion*."

He glared angrily at the room. Autobots glared back, those that weren't wincing in pain from injuries not yet attended to. The main hall of the *Ark* was a lot emptier than normal, with a lot of Autobots having been returned to stasis after this latest debacle.

"The Decepticons got a functionin' stellar spanner, they now outnumber us and are receivin' reinforcements from Cybertron, mankind's done discovered the joys of power-armor, a rogue third faction is jackin' human-smelting-beings into cybernetic death machines and one... count it, *one* of these things managed to put half my best troops in the repair bay!

We'se down to five Scrounges, two of 'em in good shape, Blaster's still missin' along with half his tapes and the med-bay is packed... while our chief doc is missin' a large chunk of his cranium!"

Silence fell over the Autobot army. Rodimus could see fear in their optics but a few had glimmers of hope... or hunger. The situation was dire... and Rodimus was the leader. Unless their focus could be shifted, the assassination attempts would begin in earnest.

"Now let's not forget, I'm the merc what works. Yeah, we's hit some speedbumps on this road. That's just the *bad* news. Now... who wants to hear the *good* news?"

He could *hear* the question on their processors.

"The humans call it 'Christmas.' An' before someone opens their yap, I don't care what time a year it is. What I'm sayin' is... I'm openin' up the war chest."

A ripple went through the crowd, every face capable of expression turning to stunned surprise.

"You gotta spend energy to make energy, so's I'm doublin' energon rations."

The faces split into grins.

"We's abandonin' the *Ark* flight repair projects, instead we's gonna start strippin' this ship of all secondary armaments and, if you gots the struts for it, we're bolting them on to *you*."

Now there were shoulder-punches and low laughter.

"Any bot what brings in high-value tech or fuel from a human target gets a 10% pay bonus for the megacycle, and there's a 15% bonus for anyone who snuffs a Decepticon ember for good."

Rodimus smiled. He had them where he wanted them now. Even Goldbug seemed lost in thought at this new surplus.

"If you'se got a special project turned down since the crash, *baddabing!* Approved." He spread his arms wide. "We's goin' on the offensive, with extra offensiveness!"

Cheers and whoops exploded from the crowd, punctuated by the clang of shoulder-punches and headbutts.

"We'se throwin' everything we gots at-" Rodimus paused and glanced at the blinking green and white lights on his wrist communicator. "Talk amongst y'selves... I gotta take this."

Rodimus left the Autobots to their revelry, a greasy smile on his face. Oh, he was *good*. Optimus would have threatened everyone in the room, and he'd be facing an angry mob. Even if he survived, he'd have no forces left at the end, easy pickings for the Decepticons.

Fear was all well and good. A nice fallback. But right now, Rodimus had a bunch of troops who would happily jump off a cliff because he promised them they could fly. It almost seemed a shame to leave them, but there was pressing business to attend to.

As the door to Rodimus's quarters slammed shut and the dampener field activated, a single viewscreen flashed to life, a wizened face glaring at him with that look of haughty contempt Rodimus longed to remove with his buzzsaw, but for now...

"Yo, A-3. What's shakin'?"



"Your stress levels are up. You have second thoughts?"

"I need to tell them." Sephie winced. The modified dialysis machine beside her bed/operating table hummed steadily. "They're cool with this, they'll understand."

"No. You cannot inspire if you are seen as subservient." Jetstorm watched through the monitor as the damaged hybrid-being locked a carefully crafted golden limb into her left shoulder-socket. "Circulatory system adapting to mech fluid above projected parameters."

"I taste tinfoil."

"Passing side effect."

"I've been thinking... I mean, I had quite a rush, but now... what exactly am I going to do? I'm going to need income, and super-hero-ing isn't exactly lucrative. I'm unemployed, and pretty unemployable now. And I have a nasty feeling the

government's going to start looking for me, I can probably kiss my savings goodbye." Sephie paused, flexing her robotic arm. "What do I do?"

"Minor concerns. You survive. Correction: You thrive. Calculation: you will be instrumental in ending the Great War once and for all. You will be a hero, a savior."

Sephie paused. That was the longest sentence she'd heard Jetstorm utter, with just the barest hint of passion to his words. "But... I needed help, what if I need it again?"

"Any would have. You have me." Jetstorm paused. "Soundwave's talent acquired?"

"Yes, but I don't know how that will--"

"You must find something. Hidden. Important."



"Is Project Transhuman viable?"

Jetstorm's visage hung in midair, lines of light projected in the middle of a darkened room. "Yes. Subject proves human brains can match Cybertronian embers for every relevant metric."

"Splendid." The speaker nodded in the darkness, twin holograms and his own pair of glowing amber optics the only illumination in the room. "I have nudged Rodimus in the proper direction. He will ally with Alpha Trion, this I am certain of. Moreover, based upon his personality matrix, once he has done so it is 97% certain he will betray Trion given sufficient time."

"The Decepticons are resistin' the Transhuman project, as expected," a third voice rumbled. "Starscream is interested in the tech, but his morals are preventin' him from pursuin' it. Weird part is, even th' human Arkeville ain't happy with this."

"Unexpected."

"I'm keepin' my optic on Cliffjumper, though. He sez he's okay with the human, but he's nervy. He's waitin' for it to blow up in his face, I can tell."

"Isn't he always that way?"

"Yeah. But this is special, I think."

"Investigation?"

"Risky. He's already suspicious of me, an' I'm talkin' beyond the norm. There ain't a counterpart of this form from his universe he knows of. Without that Heatwave guy around for him to be all paranoid at, I gotta be careful an' not push too hard or he'll get really nosy. I had a hard enough time riggin' the stellar spanner without detection."

"Autobot's removal necessary."

Demolishor grunted. "Yeah. Needs to have an accident in battle sometime." He turned from Jetstorm to the other speaker. "So does that smelting Dinobot. It can *smell* us or something and it goes ballistic. I dunno how you avoid it."

"With great care. Our dimensional intruder and the Terminus's spawn are a concern, yes, but we don't need to act on them now," the machine in the darkness sighed. "We move too fast and we risk exposure. We're too close to blow it now. Blackrock getting involved makes things even more complicated... but we can turn that to our advantage, I think. He will further investigate human-technological integration in his quest for power."

"Untested variable. Humans are hard to calculate."

"As are Cybertronians."

"Indeed."

The room exploded in light, the hiss of a door cutting through the conversation. The twin holograms fizzled for a moment before vanishing, leaving the room's sole occupant disoriented as his optics recalibrated.

"Side Burn!"

The black Autobot turned slowly, hands raised. Star Saber stood in the doorway, energon lance raised but shaking. "What are you planning? Why were you talking to that Decepticon and that... whatever it was?"

"Oh, dear, dear Star Saber, you really shouldn't have seen that. Don't you know skulking around is bad manners?"

"I knew you weren't right! Something about you was always off!"



“And what do you propose to do about this?”

“... I'm gonna tell!”

“Quaint. A strutless wonder to the end. Think you can stop me from taking you offline before you say word one?”

The small Autobot yelped and unleashed a burst of energy from his spearhead as Side Burn lowered his hands. Weapons fire ripped into the Autobot's body, tearing open great, gaping holes in his form. Despite the damage he did not fall, he merely stood there, swaying back and forth, a look of vicious glee on his face.

Star Saber stared in stark horror. The wounds were not right. There was no endoskeleton, no differentiated components, no spurting mech fluid or sizzling energon flow. Beneath the skin Side Burn was nothing more than layer upon layer of gold-and-black crystalline circuit material. Even now the circuits were climbing over each other, reconnecting with one another.

“What... what are you?” He fired another volley of shots into the regenerating Side Burn. They were no more effective than the first. “*Answer me!!!*”

“Very. Very. Rude. Sneaking into private quarters and shooting robots.” Side Burn threw forward his arm, which split apart and stretched into long tentacles of gold-and-black circuitry. His hand found Star Saber's neck, thrusting him backwards and pinning him to the wall. “Silly Autobot. There is no Side Burn, and there never has been.”

“T-Teletraaaaagh... ek-ek-X... act-accct-ivvvv-” Star Saber tried to speak through Side Burn's grip.

“You and I are going to have a lot of time to talk about your manners. You may yet be useful.” The golden stare drilled into his victim's optics. Star Saber scrambled and clawed at the wall, Side Burn's arm, anything he could reach before a surge of electricity stunned him offline.

“All hail the Underbase, for *we will be whole once again.*”

**END**

