

TRANSFORMERS TIMELINES PRESENTS:  
**COALESCENCE**  
A TRANSFORMERS: SHATTERED GLASS STORY



By **JESSE WITTENRICH**  
Edited by **LUKE THOMPSON**  
Illustrations by **JOSH PEREZ**  
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He shivered. This was a mistake.

No, it could not be. At least not one of his own making. How would that be possible? He was practically a god, one of the Thirteen...He played back the moments prior: he had the most vile Decepticons at his command, a galaxy at his mercy, and his hands were all but clasped on unlimited power... But then there it was, the one thing that could stop him.

He shivered again.

Broken, defeated, he found a fold, a seam in reality at the same moment the spear had torn through his skull and ripped through the workings underneath. It was a desperate escape... or as close to desperate as he had ever become. In his haste and weakened state, he had made a... Miscalculation. He had passed through the fold and tumbled far farther than he had ever intended. He was farther from the core than he had ever traveled. He could feel the essence of energy and existence changing around him. Polarities darted and twitched. It tickled.

Static filled every sensation. His ultimate destination screamed into realization.

His whole being shivered.



Two years later...

“Did you really think you’d get away?”

Sephie Beller’s voice echoed down from the rooftop above the New Energy Resource Research and Development Laboratory campus.

*Emulator*, she mentally corrected herself. If she was going to make this whole superhero thing work, she had to start thinking of herself as one. She had certainly given enough of Sephie up to become Emulator, so why keep using her ordinary human name?

Below, two thieves balanced a large piece of machinery between them. It still had loose wires snaking out at one end from where they had cut it from the wall. Even with her background as the ingenious Dr. Arkeville’s student teacher, she had no idea what the device was meant to do.

Her blue and gold costume shimmered and glistened. Costume. That’s what it appeared to be to anyone who catch a glimpse of her in action. However the metal plating could now be considered part of her own body after the deal that she had worked out with the factionless Cybertronian, Jetstorm. She tried to shove aside her sudden thought of how

her colors matched his. Was it an example of his ego, forcing them on her? No. She didn't belong to anyone.

“Wow. Someone took this whole ‘super’ thing a little serious, didn't she?” One of the two thieves that Seph...Emulator had come to stop snarked. A rich Jamaican flare unraveled from his tongue. He shrugged and the gray hood over his head fell loose, revealing gorgeous bronze skin that dazzled in the sunlight. His luxurious midnight black hair bounced and rejoiced in its freedom. It almost took Emulator's breath away. She fought her impulse to gasp.

Underneath the dark, almost black denim jacket that he wore over the hooded shirt, Emulator noticed something about his arm. Light blue metal shined white from sun's glare.

A digital voice filled Emulator's right ear. “What is it? What's going on?”

Emulator refocused with a slight shake of her head. She whispered her reply to the interlocuter on the other end of the microphone.

“Looks like a couple more Transhumans; the Autobots must be recruiting again after the Witwickys refused. Rick, I'll need your eyes.”

“You got them,” Rick's voice buzzed as his fingers clicked across a keyboard.

With the transmission ended, Emulator called down to the duo of thieves, “I guess I just like a good retro look. What should I wear? Black and silver pleather?”

“With those legs? That's something I'd like to see.”

“Grindor, I swear...” The other thief's South African accent sung in a sharp tone. Emulator mused for a second how she could pinpoint the accent so quickly and remembered the British and Australian science fiction shows in which she had indulged herself Freshmen year. She used to think it was an embarrassing secret... But then sci-fi became reality. Giant sea monsters from below the Earth's crust had been one thing, but alien robots? Now she knew she might as well be a character in an Arthur C. Clarke or Isaac Asimov novel. She had even heard Cliffjumper occasionally mention his bewilderment with how this Earth seemed five years ahead of his when it came to technology and innovation.

Emulator's face twisted for a moment, “‘Grindor’? Really? That's kind of disgusti—”

“Relax! I'm a skateboarder. I can do all these grinds on railings and... Stop looking at me like that! It's a perfect explanation for a street name!”

Charging the energon that flowed through her veins and arteries in place of the blood that had once done the same, Emulator's eyes began to glow an ominous shade of purple.

“I'd... still think about changing it.”

A flick of Emulator's forearms caused an invisible sonic pulse to emit from her hands. She aimed her palms at the rooftop, her fingers dancing subtly as she adjusted the fre-

quency and pitch, then with a sonic burst and a lunge from her sinewy, toned legs, she was airborne. Increasing the intensity of the pulses emerging from her extremities allowed her to maintain a hovering position that she tried to use to intimidate the thieves. It didn't work on them.

"I guess we'll do this." Grindor's partner in crime dropped her end of the device, yet somehow Grindor kept it aloft.

*Not "somehow", Emulator thought, the Cybertronic implants must be adding strength to his already bulging muscles. Stop looking at them.*

The South African tossed back her hood, revealing short platinum gold hair and splendidly tan skin that tried its best to obscure a line of freckles that ran across her nose and collected on her cheeks. She took a step back with her left leg and braced herself for some yet unseen force. Her blue eyes flashed yellow for an instant.

Emulator winced. "This is going to hurt, isn't it?"

The thief's reply came in a crooked smile that slithered up her cheek. With her elbow locked and arm held straight, she swiftly swept the upper limb in a winding motion. After three or four times through the arc, she snapped her arm at a halt in front of her with her palm upwards and two fingers extended. The scent of burning ozone wafted and everything metal at this end of the campus started to crepitate. The escalating electricity in the air then cracked and a blue lightning bolt surged from the thief's outstretched fingers, dashing at Emulator. It struck her in the side and she screamed out from the blinding pain.

"Aaerggh! Sweet mother of... Just... Gah!"

"Try to use the soundwav..." realizing his mistake in nearly uttering the name of the Decepticon whose powers Emulator last copied, Rick instantly corrected himself, "...Sound pulses to keep hovering. Without being grounded, without that change in resistance, the electricity should pass through you."

Emulator hissed at the voice in her ear.

"Ugh, Rick, I'm half metal and half skin and bone. I'm the living embodiment of a 'change in resistance'."

The singed skin at every seam with a metal plate cried out in an agony that agreed with her completely.

"Fair point, I gues – Oh sh... She's amping up again!" At Rick's warning, Emulator turned in the air. She saw the same arm spinning that had heralded the last lightning strike, and flung an open palm towards the figure below.

"Not again!"

The sonic pulse sliced through the distance between them and collided with the thief before she could start her attack. She screamed and covered her ears, but her hands did noth-

ing to stop the barrage of sound on her eardrums. The South African thief then collapsed to the ground with a thud all but deafened by Emulator's emissions.

Grindor dropped the device and tried to run to her. Emulator's sonic blast knocked him backward. "Sureshock!"

Emulator reduced her pulses to a controlled sputter and landed on the street. "Sure-shock'? That's a bit on the nose... It is catchy though. Rolls of the tongue."

Grindor fell to one knee, throwing himself over Sureshock. He lifted her motionless body and cradled it gently. "What did you do to her? Did... Did you..."

Emulator raised her eyebrow and scrunched up her mouth. "I don't think so. She should just be unconscious."

"Should be?"

"I've gotten pretty good at controlling my powers. Practicing on pickle jars, watermelons... I didn't Gallagher a single one of them. I even managed to not explode a burrito."

Grindor's silent glare plunged deadly daggers at Emulator.

"Come on. I'm joking. She's..." Emulator saw a trickle of blood temporarily pool in Sureshock's ear and then drip to the asphalt. "...fine?"

Before she could react, Emulator was tossed across the campus. She twirled a half turn in the air, and then skidded on the pavement. Propping herself up, she looked back to see what hit her, and gasped. A wall of... something had formed between her and the two thieves. Behind the wall, everything wavered and started to fold together, but Emulator could make out a third person now standing next to the two thieves.

"You two ge- out of here. I c- hold her off." The voice was muffled and seemed incredibly distant. Emulator had to strain to hear it. Somehow the semi-transparent wall was blocking – or at least dampening – the sound on the other side. That might prove problematic against her sonic powers. Obscuring the motion so that the trio on the other side of the wall couldn't see her test the wall, she tossed her hand subtly and sent out a small burst. As expected, nothing on the other side even fluttered or flinched.

Emulator's eyes darted to the device that the group had been attempting to steal. It was still on her side of the wall. She charged up a sonic pulse and slid it back even farther. "Sorry to break it to you, but it looks like you'll have to leave empty-handed... Whatever they call you."

"H-ywi-e."

Emulator's mouth pinched. "Sorry, what?"

"H-yw-re. They call -e H-yw-re." The answer was louder, but still muted.



“Still not getting it.”

“H-YWIRE!”

Emulator shrugged. “Highwire? Uhm... Okay... I guess your little funhouse mirror trick is something out of a circus act. So... uhm.. yeah.”

“No it – ” The third thief paused for a moment. “Ac-uually, sure. Le-s go wit- that.”

With that the thief waved his hand and the image from the other side of the wall stretched and squished. Then flipped. Emulator’s eyes tried to track the three would-be criminals, but by the time any sort of sense returned to the image from the other side of the barrier, they were gone. The wall then soon dropped, leaving Emulator alone on the campus. She sighed and raised metallic fingers to her ear.

“Did you see them, Rick? Where did they go?”

There was a pause. The only sound was a dull electronic whine.

“Rick?”

“I’m looking. When the third creep showed up, there was some kind of interference that glitched out the camera drones. I’m checking to see if there any outside of whatever... perimeter... around you guys...”

Emulator could hear keys being clicked on a keyboard again. She rolled her eyes and made a mental note to remind Rick that it was easier to use the touch screen; keyboard shortcuts were so two years ago. *It’s 2011 for crying out loud!*

“I... can’t find them.”

Walking over to the device the thieves had been trying to steal, Emulator gave it a quick evaluation. It was covered in dents and scrapes. And it was leaking what might have been coolant.

“This thing is pretty trashed...”

“But at least they didn’t get their hands on it.”

“Yeah...” Emulator trailed off for a moment. “I guess that’s something.”



“Any of youse mooks happen to set youse eyes on Huffer? The little bucket of smiles had a date with the comm console a cycle ago.” Rodimus fumed. He was used to his team being laxer than Optimus’ troops; it’s how he knew he was a better leader. A cooler one anyway.

But he had his limits. He also a trace of concern: since Saber disappeared months ago, three other Autobots had gone missing as well. If Huffer was a fifth it would lower Rodimus’ cool-factor more than a few points.

Brawn and Prowl exchanged a glance, but neither gave a response. A low mumble came from the red and gray robot hunched over a screen with alternating sine curves looping back and forth.

“It’s okay. It’s not like I have anything else that I would be doing. You can leave me here, I’ll be fine.”

“Might be that you’d be fine, Hubcap. But I’m gettin’ ‘xhausted of lookin’ at youse mopey mug.” Rodimus waved his hand in front of his own face. “Even with that face-plate thing we’s makin’ you wear over dat never-endin’ frown of youse.”

Hubcap dipped his chin towards the ornate chrome grill in the center of his chest. “Yeah... I’m useless.”

“Durn right.” Rodimus muttered. His head snapped up when he realized he had said it louder than he had meant. “What? You tellin’ me it ain’t true?”

“Maybe \*ahem\*” Prowl rubbed his thumb against the side of his nose. “Ask Inferno about Huffer? He’s got... an affinity for the Minicars.”

A suave smirk sauntered across Rodimus’ face. “Heh. You know what, Prowl my bot, you’s pretty good at detectivatin’ when you’s not snoopin’ around placin’ youse own clues.”

After a quick half turn, Rodimus pointed back towards Hubcap. “Yo Dreary Delahaye, drop a line in on our favorite blaze buster.”

“\*Sigh\*”

An image flashed on the communications screen. A tall black and green Autobot stood with his back to the camera, in front of him was a smaller robot with a sparkling black and blue paintjob. Either there were several layers of gloss on top or the paint was still wet.

“Tailgate, I’m telling you, this is going to make you gleam.”

“I ain’t gonna ask what’s goin’ down over there.”

Inferno spun to face the camera. “Rodimus! Oh... We’re just painting each other’s chassis and having a bit of a gab sesh.”

“I said I wasn’t gonna ask...” Rodimus cleared his throat. “While I gots tha chance to talk to the both of youse though, either of youse seen Huffer?”

Inferno stroked his lip with his index finger thoughtfully. “No... I can’t say that I have.”

“Me neither.”

“Hasn’t been no one around here seein’ him either. But say. You wouldn’t have dolled him up to look like *another bot* just like you doin’ to Tailgate there, would’ve you?”

Tailgate slouched, gloom claiming his face. Under his breath he muttered, “I knew this made me look like Blurr. Paint me back.”

Inferno smiled at Tailgate. “Hey. Even if you did look like him, Blurr was a pretty guy. Well he was before the whole eyepatch thing.”

The black and green robot then turned back to the camera. “Huffer isn’t really into the make-overs. My sleepover parties with him are tea parties and gossip. He’s the cheery, chatty sort.”

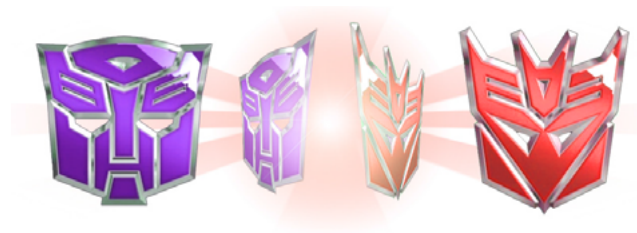
“Hrm.”

“You might want to talk to Side Burn though. I saw the two of them talking a couple days ago and I swear I almost saw a frown on Huffer’s face.”

Rodimus pointed to Brawn, who grinned.

“Takin’ that under advice, Fernie. I’s owe you.”

“Wait, Rodimus.” Inferno called out quickly. He leaned in closer to the camera and lowered his voice. In the background, Tailgate sullenly crossed his arms. “Do you still have any of your chromium blush lying around? I think some of that and Tailgate’s cheeks will just pop.”



“Standing here among our friends here on Earth, I can’t help but feel honored by the shared respect and honor you have respectfully shown... Grrgh!” Starscream tossed the datapad with version thirty-seven of his speech across the room. “How does Galvatron write these things so elegantly? I don’t know what I’m doing.”

The white and blue Cybertronian jaguar curled in Starscream’s lap ignored him.



“Ravage, I said...”

“What...” Ravage yanked his focus from the digital screen on his left foreleg, his eyes wide in surprise. He then shut them and butted his head against Starscream’s chest. “Oh. Hai.”

“Don’t give me that. I know you weren’t listening. Again.” Starscream stuck his lower lip out in a pout. “You’re supposed to be my assistant.”

Ravage’s attention had already drifted back to the glowing green screen on his foreleg. “Oh. Sure #MyBad. But this @MegaPapytonLuvr0147725331 is totes wrong. Edgelord levels off the charts wrong. He says the Upside Down would be better if the monster was scary and goopy. But, like, imma be serious here... Mirrorverse. Right? ‘Course I have to send it in so many Yats cuz his handle eats all my character count.”

“If only you could be my speechwriter. I could say so much without saying anything at all.” Starscream scratched Ravage’s back. The feline robot arched its rump, and an expression of sheer bliss appeared on his face.

“You could signal to Soundwave on Cybertron and see what he could come up with. #ScoreThoseBossPoints.”

Starscream thought for a moment. “Oh. That would be... interesting.”

An urgent voice from outside Starscream’s office called out. “Starscream! He’s here!”

“Good. A distraction...” Starscream placed Ravage on the floor and stood. The Decepticon objected by swatting at Starscream’s ankle, which he missed. To cover his gaff, however, he stretched his paw out and pretended to groom himself with his iron tongue.

Blitzwing popped his head through the doorway. “Should I send them in?”

““Them?”” Starscream raised a brow.

“You don’t think I’d let this traitor out of my sight, do you? What kind of Autobot would I be then?” The grating voice abraded Starscream’s audio receptors already. The voice was soon joined by a scowling Autobot prodding his head between Blitzwing and the door frame. His horned red helmet was all too familiar.

“Ah, Cliffjumper.” Starscream pinched the bridge of his nose, a gesture he learned to mimic from Earth television. “Why don’t you both come in.”

Cliffjumper spun around to the Decepticon behind himself and Blitzwing. “You first. I’ve already had my back to you long enough to make my servos itch. It’s a wonder I don’t have an energo-blade lodged in me somewhere by now.”

The Decepticon didn’t bother to reply. He simply strode past the other two robots and

into Starscream's office. The aerospace commander forced a false smile.

"Oh, Cyclonus. Galvatron informed me that I could expect you as captain of the next vessel here." Starscream managed his platitudes as he gestured for Cyclonus to sit. The other robot stayed where he was, causing the commander's fake smile to widen. "But I wasn't expecting you here so soon. Blitzwing, Cliff-"

"But- " Blitzwing began to protest, then Cliffjumper cut him off.

"I'm staying right here. With both eyes locked on this guy's manifolds." Cliffjumper sneered. Cyclonus rolled his eyes and tossed his head dismissively.

"Okay. Fine. Blitzwing, it seems I'll have my body guard should Cyclonus gain a sudden urge to start riddling me with laser fire. Why don't you go get an update on the power relays from Triggerhappy? I don't want him getting eager and booting the whole system while Slugslinger and Misfire are still working the lines. Misfire might be modular, but his brain has gone through a few too many replacement parts if you ask me."

Blitzwing paused for an instant and assessed Cyclonus. The red armor, and orange ears and wings made him seem almost demonic from Terran perspectives, and there was something about how the robot held himself that creeped Blitzwing out. Still though, the gray and crimson Triplechanger obeyed his orders, and nodded to Starscream before leaving.

With Blitzwing out of the room, Cyclonus spoke, "So do you trust me?"

"Not even a little. I've been saying as much since all the way back at Cybertron." Cliffjumper set his hands on his hips.

"Not you."

"Megat – *Galvatron* – gave you his trust, so who would I be to argue?" Starscream held his fist to his mouth and bit his knuckles as he breathed, "*He's* the one that you killed after all."

"Hmph." Cyclonus scoffed. "Well I won't be around here long, so you won't have to worry."

"Worry"? Who's worried?" The small red Autobot gritted his teeth. "That's hardly the emoti-"

"Cliffjumper. Shut up." Starscream shot a stern look at the shorter robot, who opened his mouth but then thought better. "Cyclonus, other than your red shadow there, you'll be free to spend your time here however you want. No one will bother you."

"All the same, I think I'll stay onboard the *Annex* while Blast Off offloads your supplies from Cybertron. And while the... petroleum – I think you called it – from your trade with

the humans is packed into the cargo hold.” Cyclonus chewed on his words. “It might be for the best.”

“If that’s what you want.” Starscream waved his hand towards the door. He watched as Cyclonus left, trailed by Cliffjumper.

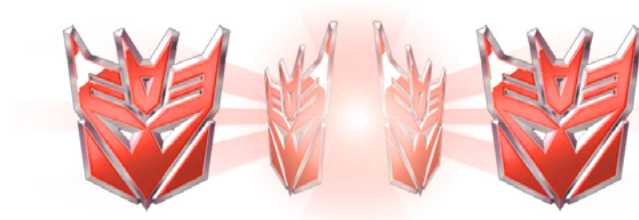
As the Autobot and Decepticon exited, Blitwing popped his head back in and offered a reminder, “Starscream, you also still have a Walter Barnett waiting to hear your progress on the Transhuman cyborgs...”

Blitzwing caught Starscream’s glare and slowly withdrew from his office. The door slid and sealed closed, and only then did Starscream let his posture droop.

“I never thought I’d see the day where I might actually to agree with an Autobot over our own leader. But that would-be assassin...” Starscream hesitated as he thought about how Megatron had changed more than his name when the power of the Thirteen revived him. They weren’t the same person; their dear Megatron was no more. “*Successful* assassin getting released, getting a full pardon, and getting immunity from all related charges...”

Starscream’s chin slumped as he let out a sigh. Ravage silently strutted from under the desk, rubbed against aerospace commander’s leg plating and purred. Starscream’s lips curved into a slight smile. “Thank you, Ravage.”

“No problem.”



A stifled voice emerged from inside the bulkhead, “Is it working?”

She stared at Darkwing bent over on his knees as he unplugged and reconnected every wire and bus port inside access port underneath the communications console. Something was working.

“Hello, Crasher? Do we have a signal yet?”

“Huh, oh. Uh. No. Not yet.” Crasher adjusted the frequencies on the console, trying to hide her steel blue bashful cheeks.

Darkwing slid back out of the bulkhead and plonked his rear end on the metal grating that stood in for a floor. “Starscream is going to have my skidplate. He wanted this thing to pick up anything even part-Cybertronian, so we can track down those humanformers. Or whatever he called them.”

A warm smile slipped diagonally across Crasher's face as she leaned over the white, red and blue Decepticon sitting on the floor. "Alright mon Ailenoire, let me in there and have a look."

"Since when do you know anything about..." Darkwing gestured at the circuit boards. "And did you just start speaking in French?"

"I did some research. The humans call it the language of love. That's weird, right? If you want someone to fall in love with you, you can only speak the one language?" The curve of her mouth spread wider. "So, yeah, I've been studying up."

"So have I, but even though everything is set up the way the text files suggested... Nothing." Darkwing frowned. "I should just give up and admit defeat."

"Don't say that! I'm sure we can figure this out." Crasher pressed her wide chest against the back of Darkwing's azure helmet as she pretended to glance past him. The other Decepticon's dim red visor, though, continued to look straight ahead, transfixed by the wires that mocked him with their inutility.

"I don't see how..."

"What about that?"

"What?" Darkwing tilted his head to see what Crasher was seeing.

The larger Decepticon behind him wiggled, pressing tighter to his back. Her arm slithered around his and she laid her chin on his shoulder. She pointed at nothing in particular, and whispered with her lips brushing his audio receptor. "That. Right there."

Darkwing's visor pinched in confusion. "That's... Just an EPS output."

"Is it?"

The smaller robot turned his head, Crasher's face was still just inches from his own. "I thought you said you were studying up on this?"

Crasher jolted back, a scowl started digging its way into her face. She picked up the loose end of a power conduit and jabbed it into a socket in the bulkhead, causing the console to blare to life. She then crossed her arms and let her impressive frame slouch. A huff from her ventralizer covered her quiet complaint, "I *meant* I had been studying French."



“They’re getting more powerful; their implants are more efficient.” Emulator rubbed a burn salve at the edges of her human skin. “Any idea who they are? This Grindor, Sure-shock, and Highwire?”

Rick rested his head on his fist. “Ffht. No. I’m running the drone video through the facial recognition program that you... borrowed from Dr. Arkeville’s server. They’re either not part of the government’s database or they’ve been deleted.”

“So nothing to help us track them down and take them by surprise. Just the usual head-to-head crash bash next time they try to take something...” She rubbed the salve into one of the more sensitive burns and grimaced.

“Emulator... What are you going to do?”

She didn’t reply. Instead she let out a quiet sigh and hung her head. Her bedraggled raven hair tumbled over her face.

Rick repeated himself, “Tell me... What are you going to do?”

A trembling hand swept back a lock of fallen hair. She tilted her head up slightly, but still didn’t look Rick in the eyes. “I’m going to go see Jetstorm.”

Rick turned away, “You know I don’t like that.”

“It’s not up to you though, is it?” Frustration tangled with Emulator’s voice. She then sighed again, “You mean well, Rick. But I know me. I know the limitations of these implants. I know what it’s going to take to beat these new cybertronically-enhanced super villains the Autobots are making. I need... I need Jetstorm.”

“And there’s nothing I can do to talk you out of it?”

“No.” Emulator put on a guise of bravery. “I’m going to do this.”

Whether still from the fight or from her nerves, her legs felt weak and shaky. With effort, she willed one foot in front of the other until she was at the door. Hesitating for a moment, she glanced back at Rick and then pushed her way outside.

The gray sky swirled overhead, was it an ominous omen or just the typical “May Gray” spring weather in San Diego? Emulator shrugged to herself and fought off a shiver. She aimed her palms at the ground, emitted her sonic beams, and took off.

In her experiences with comic books and science fiction novels, flight always seemed like it would be a peaceful gift. Lifting away from your troubles on the ground and elevating past your worries... In reality, though, it was far less liberating. Emulator had to constantly keep adjusting for thermals and downdrafts or risk plummeting through the aerial currents and towards a spinning ground. When she left the heavy, oceanic zephyrs and hit the first pocket of arid desert air, she tumbled out of control. It was only for the briefest of seconds, but it shook her confidence as much as it shook her body.

After regaining control of her descent, Emulator decided it would be better to set down and walk the rest of the way. She studied the mountain range in front of her and thought to herself, *I suppose that should be "climb"*.

A small metallic portal was hidden in a crevice between two of the mountains. Rocky crags obscured it from most angles of view, but Emulator had been there before and knew to look. The metal was dull and brown, but when the layers of sand, dirt, and light oxidation were wiped away, there was still a shine to it. She keyed in a series of colored pictograms, and the circular door rolled upwards using massive teeth on its outer edges. Light filtered through the hatch, revealing a massive laboratory within. Gigantic machines and towers of servers lined each wall, and in the middle of the room were various apparatus hanging from the ceiling.

The equipment wasn't the only thing occupying the lab. Jetstorm hovered near a computer terminal and angled his thrusters slightly so that he could spin to face Emulator. "Well, well, well... The prodigal babe returns!"

"Thanks for reminding me in just one sentence why I haven't been back in seven months..." With her face set deep into a glower, Emulator had to combat her own body to stop it from charging the energon in her system.

"The bionic girl and her attitude. Thanks for reminding *me* why I wasn't missing you." Jetstorm's eyes flared red. "Soooo, why are you here if it's not for my oh-so friendly hospitality?"

"I..." Emulator swallowed a significant portion of her pride, "I need another upgrade."

"Oh! Why didn't you say so?" The blue and yellow robot with jet fins instead of legs thrust his hips to one side and held up a hand dramatically. "Fifth floor and going up... cranium regulation units, neuro-sync stabilizers, transonic beam sensors, positron relay fluxuators, phototronic info gatherers, cybordefinition translators, and, oh yeah, a whole heaping lot of *nothing* for you!"

Jetstorm bowed at the waist and pointed a talon-like digit at Emulator. The Transhuman superhero sneered.

"Why?"

"Why? The little lady wants to know why?" The robot started counting reasons off on his fingers, "One: you're the one who left, two: plans have changed, and three: well, I never really liked you in the first place. So why don't you take your half-metal caboose, vamoose, and never come back!"

"No." Glowing purple energon veins lit up across Emulator's body. Her hands trembled into a sonic blur. "*You* kept pushing for more and more upgrades, *you* wanted a revolution in human-Cybertronian dynamics, *you* wanted me to be your little toy to show off

in front of a world just waiting to pour their accolades on top of you. And now I'm back, standing here and ready to make all of your dreams come true."

Emulator stiffened her lip and continued. "If you of all Cybertronians turn that down, I'm going to start getting suspicious. Suspicious that these other cyborgs I've seen running around are your handiwork as well, and you made them as my replacements. So you'd be to blame for all of the crimes that they've committed. And, more personally, the thrashing they gave me. You don't want me to blame you for that, I'm itching for some pay-back."

"Ah-ha ha-ha ah-ha ha ha," Jetstorm arched back and burst into laughter. His bait had worked... All it took was a little cooperation with Side Burn, although that thought still made him queasy. "Aw my bitty botty Betty has grown herself a backbone. I didn't need to jab a carbon fiber one up her spine after all."

"Bite me."

"I don't have a mouth." Jetstorm converted his thrusters and jet fins into rudimentary, blocky legs so that he could land in front of Emulator. He then stretched out an arm and padded a small surgical bed with his right claw hand. "Now, hop on up and we'll get started."

Emulator sat softly on the bed and reluctantly leaned back. She pursed her lips and through gritted teeth asked, "How far can we go?"

"Ms. Beller, we can make you as powerful as you want. And even more powerful. We can make sure that those little thieves that you've concerned yourself about don't ever get away from you again."

Setting her jaw, she furtively replied, "I'm not Ms. Beller anymore, I'm 'Emulator' and only that. If you want to take the rest of my human body, to make me fully robotic, go right ahead. That will prove who I really am now, once and for all."

"Oh then let's pull up the drafting table. NAVI..." A computer monitor hovered towards his voice, Jetstorm yanked it close. On the screen, a blank wire frame waited to be manipulated. "...We've got a whole new body to design!"

Emulator watched Jetstorm construct a render of what she would soon be, while Sephie Beller fought back her tears.



*What are you going to do?*

Nearby in the rocky desert mountains, Rick sat waiting in his van. Emulator had kept the coordinates to Jetstorm's laboratory a secret from him, but how could Rick have been one of the top students in Dr. Arkeville's class and not have learned the technological tricks he needed to track her here?

The radio shook the van. The lyrics for "Nothing's Going to Change My Clothes" tore at Rick's ears, trying to get into his head and drown out his thoughts. He gripped the steering wheel tight enough that his knuckles changed from white to a pocked reddish-pink.

*You can't let her do this. Sephie was warm, cheerful, energetic. She was... everything. She...*

He set his forehead against the wheel. Somewhere beneath the pounding music, his voice quivered, "C'mon, Rick. What are you going to do?"



A maroon and gray tank kicked up a cloud of dust and debris as it sped across the sandy, salty basin of a long dead ocean. The golden setting sun set the tank's usually pinkish-red Decepticon symbol aglow in hues of orange and auburn. With their claws digging in, a white and magenta winged-wolf creature and a white and blue dinosaur did their best to hold onto the back of the armored vehicle.

"I can't believe Starscream still won't agree to nothin' with these cyborgs." A puff of rock and sand was thrown into the air almost to provide emphasis. "It makes sense to me. Our little friend Sephie seems to have turned out well enough. Although she's off on her own who knows where. And now the Autobots have their own team of 'em? Scrap. They're handy. We could use 'em."

"Demolishor, aren't we supposed to be out on patrol? I think we passed the perimeter a few mechanometers back. Or farther." The voice came as a growl.

The tank didn't seem to have heard the wolf, although it did increase speed. "Can ya imagine it, Fangry? What if it was you who were partnered with one of these special humans? Or Squeezeplay, how 'bout you?"

"But we're partnered with you." Squeezeplay's saurian tongue clicked.

"Sometimes I really don't get why. You never use us. Never, other than a patrol or two, include us in your missions. Barely even listen to us..." Fangry's gravelly lupine snarl interjected.



Demolishor revved his engines, drowning out his small ally's complaint. "I'm just sayin' now that Starscream is to make that speech announcing a new Decepticon base on Earth, this planet is all of our future. I figure we might as well embrace that all the way, right?"

Fangry leaned over to Squeezeplay, "I think we're heading even farther away from base. Can you sync your GPS with Soundwave's satellite?"

"I... No." Squeezeplay clicked with confusion, "I can't get a signal. I'm getting jammed..."

Inside his tank mode, Demolishor smiled.

Up ahead was a line of jagged rocks, and beyond those, the rock stretched up to become mountains. Demolishor aimed his tank mode at a crack between mountains and didn't slow down despite hitting unforgiving rocky outcroppings. Fangry and Squeezeplay bobbed and caromed as they dug their talons into the tank's metal.

"Where the Pit are we?" Squeezeplay's clacks were filled with panic.

Fangry growled, "Take us back to the Decepticon base. Now!!"

The tank continued to roll forward. The two Cybertronian animals looked to one another. Squeezeplay nodded and began to convert, his chest split in two and his dinosaur head hinge and folded in the resulting cavity. His tail sprang to life and green-gold eyes started to glow as the tail formed a new head and neck. Squeezeplay's dragon mode flapped its wings and, along with Fangry, took off.

The winged beasts didn't get far, however. Two massive metal hands grabbed them and brought them back down to the ground. Demolishor leaned in, his single eye glimmered. "Stay down, ya two! There's a hidden laboratory here that I came by it not long ago. I need ya guys as back-up, that's why I brought you. We gotta keep low, though – lower than the rocks and stone – or else we'll set off their radar. Ya with me? Squeezeplay, ya have to be."

Fangry shot the white and blue dragon a worried glance. He wasn't the most trusting Decepticon, but he knew his friend; Squeezeplay's intense sense of duty would have him follow Demolishor anywhere he asked. The wolf stood up on its two legs and scowled, "Alright. Let's go."

A smile once again appeared on Demolishor's gunmetal face. "Follow me. And stay close."



“She’s deaf???! If I see that super golden girl again, I’ll... I’ll...” An enraged Grindor rampaged through the engineering lab, throwing tools across the floor and upsetting shelving units. At least that’s what he imagined he was doing. Since it was an Autobot lab, he could barely lift most of the tools and the shelves were as solid as a parking garage.

Side Burn rolled his eyes as Grindor used all his enhanced strength but still only managed to flip an electro-spanner over. The Autobot then grabbed the wrench-like hand tool before it wobbled from the work desk. “Like I said, Sureshock’s human ears were damaged, but I easily found replacements. Slag, they’re probably better than those organic gooey thumpy things she had before.”

“Ear drums?” Highwire was only half-listening to the argument on the other side of the lab. His attention was captured but the new hydraulics and impact absorbers in his limbs. He was never a physically strong person, so he was fascinated by the power of his new metal arms.

Side Burn closed his unshielded eye, using the targeting scanner over his left eye as protection from the hyper-welder’s burning glare while he worked. Blue sparks flew and a puff of smoke billowed into the air. “Hrm? Oh yeah. Those things. Ear drums.”

“It was like she didn’t even care. She blasted Sureshock and then started making jokes. I just want to... *Gah!*” Grindor kicked a laser drill of some kind. It didn’t wiggle.

Sureshock groaned. “Grindor, *please* keep it down...”

“Yeah, Grindor. Seesh.” Side Burn leaned in over Sureshock. He held her head between his finger and his thumb trying to hold it steady. “This is already *way* tougher than it looks without you making her all jumpy. It’s, like, all about precision.”

“By the way, that’s something that I’ve been wondering about. Why are you the one who handles our... upgrades? You don’t really seem like the scientist type. I mean you ended up not even knowing what that machine was we tried to steal.” Highwire quickly added, “And not caring that we failed to get it.”

Side Burn murmured under his breath, “As long as you put up the fight you did, I wouldn’t call the mission a failure.”

He then said aloud, “Hey, I’m a lot smarter than I look. *A lot* smarter.”

The black and orange Autobot then blew a waft of smoke away from a fresh weld and continued, “And believe me, you would *not* want someone like Ratchet or Hoist doing this. They like to start pulling things apart without having to worry how they go back together. And that’s if Ratchet doesn’t get... curious.”

“Ratchet weirds me out.” Grindor muttered. He was still looking for something he could knock over. “But I thought Hoist was just lazy.”

“*Side Burn!*” A deep booming voice roared through the lab.

“Slaggit. \*Sigh\*” Side Burn puffed as he arched his back. He loosened his hold on Sureshock, letting her stretch for the first time in what felt like hours. “What’s up, Brawn?”

“What are you... Are you playing with your humans again?” The edges of Brawn’s mouth curled just barely enough to show his disgust. “We finally manage to break Tailgate’s habit and now Rodimus lets you bring in the strays.”

Grindor shot back, “‘Strays’? We can kick your can easily enough!”

“Speaking of Tailgate,” Brawn continued matter-of-factly as he ignored Grindor’s fuming, “He and Inferno seem to think you might have been the last person to see Huffer before he disappeared. Would you know anything about that? His disappearance that is?”

“I... uh... Hahaha...” Side Burn laughed nervously and rubbed the back of his head. “Why would I... How would I... Which one was Huffer again?”

Brawn frowned. “Am I supposed to believe that?”

“Heh... I...Ugh. Slaggit.” Side Burn’s voice dropped from its feigned nerves and into something more sinister.

Although his facial expression remained unmoved, Brawn gasped as Side Burn’s eyes flared bright red. The black and orange Autobot then appeared to separate - blocks of him broke off and reassembled themselves with serpentine motion, causing him to double in size. Side Burn’s face split, his jaw unhinging and swinging open wide to reveal horrific teeth. He howled, and flung both arms forward. They stretched into a flow of individual components. Pouring across the lab, they snatched at Brawn. Long scythe-like fingers sliced through the air, menacing the Autobot Minicar. Brawn tried to stay cold and calculating as the metallic monstrosity edged towards him. He puffed out his chest and tried to steel his will.

He ran.

Instead of chasing the fleeing Brawn, Side Burn turned to Grindor, Highwire, and Sureshock. The trio of Transhumans were terrified, but the familiarity that they had developed with Side Burn prevented them from running like the Minicar had. That and Side Burn had begun to shrink back to his normal size and his craven face was quickly replaced with a reassuring smile.

“Well, heh, it looks like we’ll have to speed things up. Time to show you my *real* lab. It’s awesome, you’ll love it.”



A bouncing haze churned within metallic caverns. It was an effect spawned from the broiling temperatures and erratic air currents weaving between iron pylons and steel grates. Yet somehow the frost edged onward.

“The three are reporting improvements in their missions.” A yellow, orange, and white robot announced. “Although the program has been accelerated due to unforeseen interference.”

“I see...”

Icy snaps and cracks echoed throughout the caverns. Frozen crystals chimed as they rattled together. The lumbering blue and purple form leaned down to gaze at the robot.

“What does the other one think about that?”

The yellow robot bowed, his soft voice failed to rebound off the high walls the way the ice horror’s had. “He sees no issue. The results will still be the same. We will be whole once again.”

“Then that is all that matters.”

The yellow robot nodded. “Yes. My Idol.”

“Our patience will be rewarded. But for now... Come. Closer. I need your heat.”

Flames burst from the small robot’s clamp-like hands. He hesitated briefly and, behind his faceplate, chewed on his lip.

“Sunstorm. Closer.”

Although he took a step forward, Sunstorm craned his neck as far backward as he could. He shut his eyes.

The icebound creature stretched its arm out, creating a chorus of creaks and moans. Its hand hovered over Sunstorm. Fire erupted from Sunstorm’s claws and spun into twin twisting towers of flame. Sunstorm winced and fought a scream as he gave his all to keep the fires lit.

The ice began to melt from the behemoth’s hand.

“You’re the only one. Who makes me warm...”



The space ship's bridge was empty. Cyclonus had given his crew an extended shore leave so that they could mingle with their brethren on Earth. Even Cliffjumper had taken the opportunity to reunite with friends, although the captain of the *Annex* could be sure that the Autobot had ordered the Decepticon gunners below to keep a lock on the vessel. Cyclonus sat at the navigational conn and let his mind wander. It took him back to the days when Alpha Trion's messages had seemed so clear. Falsely professing to be one of the original Transformers to have inhabited Cybertron, the old Autobot seemed to have such profound wisdom in each word he'd utter. He knew Cybertron and knew what was best for it. His vision was without fault – it should be he who led all Cybertronians. No Megatron, no Optimus, no division between the factions. It would mean a strengthened society, a strengthened planet, a new sense of unity and prosperity.

But it was a lie, the whole smelting lot of it. Alpha Trion was, of course, an Autobot and that was their nature. He used and manipulated Cyclonus as a blunt instrument to batter the Decepticons and then tossed him away when he was done. He didn't want prosperity, nor did he want to make Cybertron great again. He only wanted power and personal gain. He was corrupt. He was evil.

Yet despite that, Cyclonus' allegiance with the aged Autobot had happened. It was history. Shouldn't he be punished for it? Why did Galvatron release him from his jail cell? Why did Galvatron forgive him? He didn't forgive himself, and though he'd never voice it to Krunix, his callow yet well-meaning counsellor, he didn't think that he'd ever forgive himself. He knew that he'd always find his own punishment for himself. Somehow, somewhere.

A clamor rang out behind him, and Cyclonus spun to face two Decepticons who weren't part of his crew. He jumped to the worst-case scenario: "If you're here for retribution against me for what I did to Megatron, I won't fight you. You can even string me up afterwards as a lesson to anyone else who'd be tempted to choose betrayal."

The two white and blue robots froze. After a few short moments, the smaller one spoke, "Uhm. Starscream sent us for maintenance on the Operations panel."

"He sent the commander of the Mayhem Suppression Squad to conduct routine maintenance?"

The larger robot pointed her thumb at her partner, "Well he's here to do the repairs. I'm just here to do any heavy-lifting."

"Oh." Cyclonus flicked his head and ran a hand across his face. He gestured with the other hand towards the Operations station. "Calling them 'repairs' might not be accurate. It's a new ship; they've *never* worked correctly. They're sluggish, the lights behind the controls cut out, and in an emergency, the whole thing chimes an annoying lullaby instead of blaring the usual warning klaxons."

"Sounds like Stonecruncher and Excavator are up to their old pranks. Those two pick

a body style yet?” The smaller of the repair crew already had his head inside the conn. “Oh, by the way, I’m Darkwing. So you know who to blame.”

Cyclonus tightened his mouth and inquired, “Darkwing? I thought he di...”

“That was Darkwind. With a ‘D’. Different guy. I’m not as funny.” Darkwing paused then added, “Not that I thought he and his brother were all that hilarious.”

“Nor did I.” Cyclonus adjusted his crossed arms and stared straight ahead.

Darkwing glanced back at the Decepticon ship commander. He quipped under his breath, “Why doesn’t *that* surprise me?”

The other white and blue Decepticon had kept quiet during this exchange, letting her emotions bubble. Her eyes darted from Darkwing to Cyclonus, waiting for one of them to acknowledge her. She couldn’t take it any longer though, “Oh, and I’m Crasher.”

Cyclonus raised one of his dark metallic eyebrows, “Yes... I am familiar with your rec-”

“Oh, right.” Crasher cut Cyclonus off when she remembered that Cyclonus already knew who she was. She put her hand on his chest to make sure he stopped. Surprised by its rigid grill structure, she held her hand there a second or two longer. Her eyeline falling to meet where her hand was. Her cheeks flashed the same bashful blue as before. Cyclonus tried to hide his face as it turned a warmer gray.

“Ah!” Darkwing called from inside of the control panel. “Yeah it was definitely those two Micromaster menaces. Look what was in here.”

The Decepticon repairman pulled out a metal plaque with “Constructor Squad *rules!*” scrawled across it in Cybertronix.

“I’ll have a word with Galvatron when I get back to Cybertron.” Cyclonus pinched the metal plate with his thumb and index finger and sneered at it. “How long will it take to reverse their high jinks? I’ll add that to my compliant.”

“It’ll take a little while just to track down exactly what they did.” Darkwing dug around in the bundles of wires for another second, then did his best to quip, “Looks like we’ll be intruding on your little Fortress of Solitude here. I hope you don’t mind the company.”

“I would have thought I’d be the one asking that...” Cyclonus trailed off. His eyes floated from one Decepticon to the other, and he fought the need to grin.



“Youse all ready for this?” Rodimus whispered. He stood with his back flat against the wall and cradled his flamethrower. “We’s gonna go on ‘three’.”

The massive black and purple Autobot to Rodimus’ left rolled his eyes. “You know he’s probably long gone by now, right?”

“Jetfire, a leader’s gotta not put his troops in the line of danger when he can help it any.” Rodimus’ eyes darted to the door. His cowardice was exposed when he swallowed hard.

Jetfire shoved Rodimus aside and grunted, “Yeah and a leader goes in first.”

The massive black robot tucked his jet wings protruding from his back out of the way and forced open the door to Side Burn’s laboratory inside of Autobot headquarters. He was followed by Prowl, Bluestreak, Inferno, and Brawn. Rodimus’ face twisted in defeat. *Slaggit. There goes my ranking.*

The Autobot mission leader hopped, then charged after the other five robots. On the other side of the door, the laboratory was empty. It was just as Jetfire had said. *Slaggit again!*

“Are there any clues where they went?” Jetfire let the arm holding his rifle fall to his side.

Prowl and Inferno studied the work benches while Bluestreak searched the storage shelves. The blue and silver Autobot rubbed his chin as he looked over the spare stock of energon pumps and servo hydraulics, “Nothing yet, boss.”

“Hey youse mooks! Youse know I’m the bot in charge here!” Rodimus stepped in front of Jetfire. “Prowl, Inferno, youse keep where youse at and do youse lookin’ for clues. Bluestreak, go over to the far wall and set youse eyes over there. Brawn, where was Side Burn standin’ when you last saw him?”

“That won’t tell us anything.”

“Yo Jetfire, Imma get tired of youse mouth pretty quick over here!” Rodimus snapped. “Brawn, where had you and Side Burn been?”

“Back there. By the door we just came through.” Brawn nonchalantly waved behind him.

“If that isn’t gettin’ interestin’...” Pretending that Brawn’s words meant something to the investigation, Rodimus stroked his goatee. “Prowl, see if there’s isn’t nothin’ by the door.”

“That’s useless,” Jetfire scoffed.

“Hey!” Bluestreak’s voice from the other side of the lab interrupted Rodimus’ objection. “I found something!”

The blue robot yanked a shelving unit away from the wall. The metal of the shelf spat sparks into the air as it groaned against the flooring, its only protest to being made to give up its secret. With the shelf removed, a passageway stood unveiled.

“Ah-ha! See? I was the one that told Bluestreak to go peepin’ over there!” Rodimus beamed. “Who’s bein’ the high and mightiest now, Jetfire?”

“Yeah, well, a leader is still the bot who goes in first.” The large Autobot jammed the heel of his hand into his commander’s shoulder and charged for the hidden passage.

Rodimus waited for Jetfire to pass by, then massaged his arm and sung under his breath, “Owwwww...”

The familiar sound of photon fire and a blast of light drew Rodimus’ attention back to the passageway.

*FHZZT!*

Its dark unwelcoming gullet now trembled with a red shimmer. The scent of burnt electronics started to waft throughout the laboratory.

Rodimus hustled over to the spot where Jetfire’s body lay on the ground. It was scorched with paint and metal blisters deforming its heavy armor plating. The hidden lasers that have been triggered by Jetfire’s careless foot falls still had puffs of smoke drifting from their lenses.

“Heh. Well Jetfire, a *good* leader knows he oughtta be scannin’ for booby traps before bargin’ into the unknown.” Rodimus flicked two fingers at Prowl. “You go right ahead and do youse thing, Prowl.”

Prowl gingerly strode into the passageway. He marked the trigger that had led to Jetfire’s demise and announced after having moved on, “We’re clear two meters in.”

Inferno grimaced at the still smoldering remains of Jetfire. “Should I douse him?”

“I’m tempted to keep him flamed and fiery for a bit. Seems fittin’.” Rodimus guffawed. He kicked Jetfire’s helmet, and a plume of smoke floated from what used to be Jetfire’s mouth. “Heh. Don’t that fill the ember with the right amounts of joy? Alright. Youse go ahead, Fernie. Get him spritzed down.”

“Guys... Sir... You’re going to want to see this...” Prowl’s voice came from further down the passage. As Rodimus, Brawn, and Bluestreak followed its sound, they saw more booby trap triggers marked in yellow. Prowl’s work.

When they caught up with the Autobot patrolman, they stopped and sneered. That is except for Brawn, who stayed expressionless. In front of them were the five missing Autobots, starting with Saber and ending with Huffer. They had been strung up and



dissected with some of their parts lined up in storage bins and other parts missing entirely.

Brawn stated bluntly, “I guess we know where Side Burn got all those replacement parts for his humans.”

“I finally got his flames out. What are you guys looki – ” When Inferno saw Huffer, Pipes, Windcharger, and Fallback dangling from the ceiling, the Autobot firefighter fell to his knees. The Minicars still had terrified expressions on their faces. Their eyes and mouths were stretched into fear and agony. Rage and sadness ripped at Inferno’s ember, as the Minicars’ silent screams roared in his ears. His frame began to quiver and tears crowded the corners of his eyes, a mournful wail escaped twitching lips, “No... Not the little ones!!”



Still folded tightly inside his anguish, Rick didn’t notice the approaching vehicle at first. Although it being such an unusual convoy, and taking place in the middle of an empty desert, it screamed for attention: First came a tank, its two main batteries loaded with a total of four missiles... and each articulated launcher had a tiny monster grasping onto it for dear life. Next, seemingly with the tank, was a small black sedan with two human occupants. Last, and following quite a distance behind but speeding up fast was a black coupe with a gray hood. Inside were three familiar humans. Rick recognized the tank as Demolishor, but couldn’t place the other vehicles. The large Autobot symbol on the roof of the black coupe, though, was all Rick needed to see to hypothesize what he was witnessing was a pursuit of some kind. He cranked his van’s engine and grabbed for the gear shift.

Before Rick could come to Demolishor’s rescue, however, a giant hangar door opened in front of the convoy like a gaping maw in the desert. Sand poured from the door as it revealed itself, spilled onto the vehicles as they passed through without slowing down.

“Waitaminute... something’s not right.” Rick muttered to himself as he leaned forward to peer through the van’s windshield. “How did Demolishor know about Jetstorm’s lab? And...that Autobot... It’s not chasing them...”

Leaving the van running, Rick leapt out and ran for the metal portal on the side of the cliff face. He slammed the door release, but nothing moved. Instead a red light flashed above the digital keypad, warning that the lock needed a passcode. Rick took a step back and swept a lock of blond hair out of his face. He spun and then glanced again at

the keypad. It was a touch screen – Sephie’s favorite new tech gimmick. Out here in the desert though, fine grains of sand had fallen across the screen, and from in certain light Rick could almost... Yes! There they were. Sephie’s fingerprints had wiped away the sand and Rick could not only see which pictograms she used, but also where she had dragged them to stack them in order. *So much for high-tech security*, Rick thought.

The portal rolled open and white light burst out. Rick slipped in, immediately ducking for cover behind a computer bank. He peered over the top of a server case, trying to stay out of sight. It was a nugatory effort, however, as the room in front of him was empty. Jetstorm had hovered off to some other part of the compound just moments before, leaving Rick free to explore the lab alone. Finding nothing but more computer servers and twisted tangles of cables, Rick gave up looking around the physical lab and made a beeline for a large computer monitor hovering with anti-gravity engines. Rick typed away at the screen frantically. *Where is she?*

A mechanical whir from above drew Rick’s attention towards the ceiling. A sprawling apparatus began to unfold and lower. Surgical arms, laser welders, endoscopes, and monitors all unhinged and dropped into the middle of the laboratory. Embedded within the apparatus, a medical pod spun to face Rick. Emulator was strapped inside.

*They haven’t started yet!* Rick rejoiced as he eyed Emulator. She was the same as she was when he had last seen her; the upgrades and redesigns that she had come for hadn’t been added yet. Or preparations even begun.

Somewhere on the other side of the metal walls, a robotic voice called out. It was distant, but it sounded like it was getting closer. Rick rushed to undo the straps across Emulator’s chest.

“Just what do you two think you’re doing here?” The faraway voice exclaimed. Rick recognized it as Jetstorm.

“I need to use your stuff.” That was Demolishor. “I’ve got a couple of volunteers here and a couple of not-so volunteers.”

Rick didn’t know the next voice. “Sounds like you’ve been slacking over there with the Decepticons. I just need a few final tweaks and my components will be ready. And I managed to get all that done while coercing Rodimus to buddy up with Alpha Trion.”

“Starscream refused to respect my gumption. In fact, he denied all aspects of the project. I’ve had to keep things rollin’ without actually gettin’ hands-on just yet. Don’t fret though; I’ve got it all planned out and I got my... supplies. I just need the tools.” Demolisher sounded anxious, maybe a little nervous.

“Still sounds like you’re a little behind. I guess I’ve gone blind and didn’t see that you sent the same progress report as Side Burn and myself? I’d be sweating in my boots if

I were you.” Jetstorm’s pompous voice carried more easily than the other two. Even his asides were clear, “If I could sweat. Or had boots.”

“Since I’m further along with my components,” Side Burn interjected brashly, “Let me finish mine first.”

“With you two goin’ on about me being far so behind, Surely I should do some catchin’ up before Side Burn goes on tinkerin’”.

“No! Me first!”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, please, you’ll both get a chance at the laboratory...” Jetstorm crooned. Then snapped, “But only after I’m done because, oh yeah, it’s *my* lab! You two sit down, keep your mouths locked and watch your little components – yours in particular, Demolishor. Those pocket Monstercons are already trying to scratch their way into the communications systems. I’ve had to shut them down.”

“Er yeah...”

“Now if you’ll excuse me,” Jetstorm’s voice came even closer, “I left something sim-mering on the stove.”



“Rrwarrrroouu!!” Fangry howled. The winged wolf attempted to pry open the sealed compartment door. “How did we fall for this?”

“We were following Demolishor’s orders.” Squeezeplay’s snaps were riddled with annoyance. “He betrayed everything that Decepticon symbol on his chest stands for.”

A third party spoke up; it was one of the humans from the black sedan. “You sound like you don’t want to be part of this. Can’t you see the importance of what we’re doing here?”

“Donnie, I don’t think they were asked to be here. They probably don’t even know what’s going on.” The other human nudged the first with his elbow. “Should we tell them?”

“Nestor!”

Fangry growled, “Tell us what, *Donnie*?”

The two humans looked at each other then turned back to the Decepticons. Donnie began, “That we’re going to be your new masters...”



Rick draped Emulator’s arm around his shoulder and struggled to get her to sit up. “Come on, Sephie, we have to get out of here!”

Emulator’s eyes fluttered open for an instant, then she groaned groggily. She had obviously been given a kind of general anesthesia, and wasn’t going to be any help. Rick could hear Jetstorm coming near; they weren’t going to make it to the exit hatch.

“Alright, Ms. Em, pop the cork, dim the lights, and let’s get you out of that skin...” Jetstorm gasped and placed both hands over his mouth when he discovered the empty surgical bay. He then clenched them into fists. “What the what?”

“What’s going on? What’s the matter?” The black and orange Autobot questioned as he came running in.

Rick watched from where he knelt behind another server bank. Emulator was lying next to him, her hand in his.

“‘What’s going on?’ Like you don’t know someone is trying to sabotage my component. Which one of you did this?” Jetstorm flailed a clawed hand to the empty bay.

“You met us when we got here and we haven’t split up since.” Side Burn protested and swept his hand back towards Demolishor. “It wasn’t us.”

Jetstorm jabbed his fingers at one of the hovering computer monitors. “Not going to fess up, huh? I’m locking all exterior ports and hatches. No one is getting away.”

“Rick...” Emulator’s voice was weak and strained. “What are you doing here?”

“Stopping you from making a huge mistake. Look.” Rick whispered, He pointed to Side Burn and Demolishor, who were now searching the laboratory.

“Is that an Autobot?”

“It is. They keep talking about ‘components’... And you’re one of them.” Rick explained with a look of concern on his face.

“I don’t...”

“They just locked us in. And shut down communications.” Rick bite his lip. “Do you have any ideas?”

Emulator rubbed her head. “Why would I? I wanted to be here, remember?”

“Yeah, but you can’t want to stay now after, you know, the deception. And crazy mad scientist talk.” Rick’s voice pitched higher.

Drawing her legs into a ball, Emulator buried her head in her knees. “I don’t know, I’m still in a fog. My head is starting to pound.”

“Well you better decide fast. I have a feeling that if they find me, I’ll wind up on a surgical table getting hacked up into cyborg myself.” Rick smirked. “Or is that what you want? A sidekick? You could call me, I dunno, ‘Circuitmasher’ or something.”

Emulator reached out and stroked Rick’s arm. “Oh Rick... That’s a terrible name.”

Rick smiled back.

The moment was short-lived though; it was interrupted by Side Burn’s panicked scream.

“Oh. Oh no. It’s happening.” The black and orange Autobot started padding himself. “Is anyone else feeling this? I can’t be the only one. Oh, Boltax!”

Jetstorm snapped at Side Burn. “Will you shut your trap? Of *course* we feel it. Now hold my hand.”

Side Burn held out his hand, which Jetstorm grabbed roughly. Demolishor outstretched his arms and completed the circle. Instantly after the ring was made between the three robots, their arms shifted. Bricks of metal unfolded from each robot and melded into the next, Side Burn, Jetstorm, and Demolishor where now one interwoven device. They stared at the center of the ring where a cloud of purple energy was starting to form and then transform into a robot’s face. The trio chanted.

“All hail the Underbase.”

The translucent purple robot head rolled its eyes and started sarcastically, “Yeah, yeah all hail the Under-whatever. Listen, you need to get back here. Right now. Our big friend with the icy demeanor isn’t doing all that well. He keeps trying to drain Sunstorm dry to stop from getting even colder. So if you could go ahead and finish up with the rest of those components, that would be great...”

“Our sovereign Cybaxx, if we could get just a little reprieve for a short while, we’d be appreciatin’ it.” Demolishor smiled unconvincingly.

Cybaxx’s face drooped into a questioning glower. “Demolishor... I have a progress report here from you that says you’re further along than even Side Burn. You weren’t lying, were you?”

“I, uh, \*ahem\* No, sir.”

“Good.” Cybaxx nodded. “Then from what I gleaned in your reports, I expect you each can finish your assemblies during the voyage home. So, uh yeah... Why don’t we all just do that?”

“Of course, Illustriousness! We’ll get the engines revved and roaring and on their way.” Jetstorm fidgeted.

“We’ll be out here waiting.” The purple hologram blared, flickered, and faded.

“Is he gone?”

“Yeah...” Jetstorm glanced down at his arms and lashed, “Let go of me, you idiots.”

“Oh right.” Side Burn and Demolishor closed their eyes and their arms retracted back to their standard configurations.

“We’re sooo shafted.” Jetstorm sighed. “NAVI, Voice code: Jetstorm. Afterburn.”

“Recognized. Engines engaged.”

The laboratory hummed and shook. Rick and Emulator’s eyes darted around the room. They both came to the realization at the same time, “We’re in a ship!”

“Can you blast a hole in the bulkhead before we blast off?” Rick’s eyes were wide with dread.

Emulator shook her head, “I’m still too woozy. No way can I build enough of a charge for anything like that.”

Rick’s head whirred about, looking for a way out. His hands gestured wildly. “Maybe... uh... Maybe we can crosswire a hatch and blow the lock so we can pry open the door... Or we can find a weapons port... Or...”

Emulator clutched Rick’s shaking face. “Rick... I don’t have enough control for a sonic boomer, but Soundwave had other gifts. Other powers. I have them all.”

His eyebrows furled in confusion, “What are you talking about?”

“Telepathy.”



“Aaaceergghh!!!”

Darkwing jumped up from under the Operations console. “What’s going on with her?”

“I don’t know.” Cyclonus awkwardly stood by, unsure what to do. “She just started crying out and holding her head. Is that common with her type?”

“What?”

“Her type. You can’t sense how her brain is different?” Cyclonus raised a brow. “She’s a cy–”

“Gahh! I don’t care how my brain is different!” Crasher howled in pain. “Just get her words out of it!!”

“‘Her’?”

“‘Words’?”

“It’s... It’s Sephie. Aiiigg...She...” The white and blue Decepticon fell to her knees. “She’s too loud!!”

Darkwing set a hand gently on Crasher’s back. He leaned over to look her in her face, but she had her eyes shut tight. Each breath was a heavy puff. “What’s she saying?”

A flare of anger swept over Crasher’s face. Her eyes flipped open and her lips snarled. “I don’t know! I don’t care right now! Aeerrgh!!”

Darkwing wrapped his arm around her. He set his other hand on her shoulder. “If you listen to her message, hear what she’s trying to tell you, maybe she’ll stop.

“Okay.” The large Decepticon looked up at him, her eyes darting. Servo lubricant pooled in their corners. She nodded slowly and took a deep breath. “She’s... in a ship. Jetstorm’s ship! She’s with Rick...They’re taking off. They were trying to turn Sephie into a component? Hrnh! Sephie, please say it quieter! She... we have to stop them. We have to save her!”

Cyclonus turned away. He clenched his jaw and, without moving his head, his eyes flitted back to the other Decepticons. They were the first Cybertronians to truly trust him after Galvatron pardoned him, if they needed help...If they needed a ship...

“Cliffjumper is going to be furious.”

“He’ll get over it. Can you boot up the navigational controls?” Darkwing pulled Crasher up from the deck plating.

“I can handle navigation if you can manage propulsion.” Cyclonus glided towards the helm on purposeful steps.

The two Decepticons in white looked warmly at one another. Darkwing's face silently asked if Crasher was alright. She ran a hand down his helmet then blinked and nodded.

“Much better.”

“Crasher, stay there at operations,” the red and orange Decepticon captain instructed. “With just the three of us, we're going to have our hands full.”

The *Annex* powered up and lifted into the air. Decepticons across the ground hustled to find out what was going on. A fervor of confusion and discomfiture swept over the crowds of Cybertronians below.

As the ship began to move, one of the robots on the ground chased after it; Cliffjumper let loose a serious of profanities that would even make his Decepticons blush. The vessel picked up speed and in a burst of acceleration, left the Decepticon base behind. Skidding to a stop, the pursuing red Autobot let out one last word that rang out louder than the rest.

“*Traitor!*”



“Rodimus... This is kinda peculiar.”

Rodimus sat across his throne, with his head lying against his fist. He kicked his foot softly. “Skids, you could be callin’ this whole world ‘peculiar’. What’re you goin’ on about specifically?”

A black and red robot at the sensor grid jabbed his finger into a holographic map of the United States. The projection complained about the interference, the deserts between Nevada and Arizona buzzed with static. “Specifically, boss. A space ship. Blazing towards the stars like petrorrabbit forced from its vacu-chamber.”

“The Decepticons skedaddlin’ early?” The Autobot leader considered the map for a moment then bolted upright in the throne. “Side Burn.”

Inferno pirouetted on his heels. His face contorted with all its anger and pain. “We need to follow him. Pay him back for what he did to the Minicars and Saber.”



Skids ignored Inferno and explained a new signal flashing on the map, “Rodimus, you’re right. On both accounts. The Decepticons have launched their ship, it’s headed right for Side Burn. Or, well, what’s probably Side Burn.”

Rodimus slouched back into the throne. “Oh good. The Decepti-creeps can go get our revenge for us and we don’t gotta risk nothin’. Not to mention theys gonna be losin’ they’s aerial-orbital advantage pretty soon here. Go get notice to Jetf – heh, force of habit – Prowl and start him on roundin’ up his troops.”

“Wait... You mean we’re not going to chase after Side Burn? How can you -?”

Rodimus interrupted Inferno, “That’s *zactly* what I’s meanin’.”

“But...”

“Fernie, leave the commandin’ to the command team. Don’t youse got a tea party with Outback or Fastback or somebody to get to?” Rodimus’ face descended into gloom.

Inferno narrowed his eyes at Rodimus. “Yeah. I actually do have a brunch with Gears...”



Sunstorm collapsed onto all fours. Smoke poured from his various hydraulics and seams. “Idol... Please...”

The mountain of ice and snow thundered in response, “I need more.”

“I can’t... I can’t give you anymore. You have to stop...Please.” The yellow and orange robot buried his head in his hands.

“I need to be mobile when they arrive. Warm me, Sunstorm, or I’ll take your flame myself.” A powder of frost fell as the giant attempted to lean forward. It barely moved.

Sunstorm lifted his body, but then caved in. “I... I...”

“Yeah... I think you might want to give him time to regenerate his power levels.” A purple holographic robot rezzed into existence and floated in front of Sunstorm. “If you’d want my opinion that is.”

The massive ice-covered being acknowledged the hologram, “Cybaxx.”

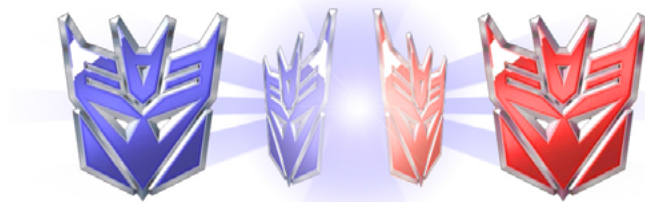
“We’ll have you warm and toasty... or, right, at least less frigid when Jetstorm and the others get here.” Cybaxx glanced up at the giant. “For now, I thought I should inform you that the array has been otherwise constructed. Yeah. We just need the last half dozen pieces and we can try a gateway.”

The giant moaned. The hologram of Cybaxx had no idea if it was a sign of approval or discontent. It nonetheless added, “We will be whole once again.”

The tintinnabulating of the giant’s ice shards echoed in the chamber. It was laughing. “Yes, you will piece back together all that has been separated. The lost universes now isolated and alone will be as one.”

“The All-Knowledge will be recovered.”

“You can have the knowledge. I am more interested in the new realms... and the weight they will bring to topple the balance.” The giant managed to ball a fist. Frozen crystals cracked and sloughed off its limb. It turned back to Sunstorm, the yellow robot couldn’t bring himself to look at the giant. “But first I need heat...”



“This here is going to be a real work of art!” Demolishor bowed over the surgical pod. Nestor was inside, his knees and hips had already been rebuilt with metal joints. Rich blue metal plates covered most of his body, white armor enclosed his chest and torso.

Nestor squirmed in Demolishor’s grip, “I’m not sure I want to be ‘art’; I just want to be a super-human samurai cyborg.”

Donnie stood nearby, his magenta and gray armor gleaming. “Ahh, Ness is gonna be so pretty! Everyone who walks by is going to break down and cry from his sheer beauty!”

Side Burn leaned around Demolishor to examine Nestor. “Are you guys almost done over here? I said you could go first while Grindor, Highwire, and Sureshock looked for Jetstorm’s lost...Emulator, was it? But we’re almost there. Can’t you hurrrryyy?”

“I’m not going to rush nothin’ just because you can’t keep your britches on.”

“What are you talking about? Britches? I don’t even wear britches! What are britches?”

Side Burn shrugged his shoulders. “Will you stop using that hokesy-folksy Earth dialect? And hurrryyy up... Come oooonnn...”

Nestor cocked his head forward. “Hey. Hey! I might not want to be scrutinized as art, but I also don’t want to be some mangled, madcap mess!”

“Will you all be *quiet!!*” Jetstorm shouted and waved his arms in frustration. “I can’t even hear myself process over here! Not to mention coordinate Side Burn’s little meaty-metal search party. I don’t get it; it’s a tiny ship! Where could she be hiding?”

“He really doesn’t sound happy.” Rick couldn’t help but smirk as he looked out the ventilation port of one of NAVI’s floating monitors.

Emulator squeezed by to get a better look out the same vent. “I have to admit that I got a happy tingle just now.”

“Yeah there’s a magnetic charge getting built up by the active computer screen. Needs a degauss.”

She punched him in the shoulder.

“Hey! Watch it!” Rick rubbed his arm playfully. “That was your *metal* arm, I think you bruised the bone!”

Emulator smiled. She opened her mouth to say something, but then suddenly shifted and peered down at the three Transhumans returning from their latest search. She could have sworn that Sureshock gazed up directly at the monitor that they were in. “This is one amazing hiding spot that you found, but I think we might want to find a way to keep moving. It’ll be the only way to stay ahead of them until we land.”

In a trice, the monitor shook violently. Emulator and Rick bumbled and tumbled over one another. Jetstorm’s voice rang out close. Extremely close.

“How do you like that? It looks like you’re telling the truth.” The blue robot barked. “They’re right here.”

Emulator and Rick shared their shocked expressions. Had they been discovered? No. It was something else; Sureshock and Jetstorm were staring at the monitor screen.

“It’s the Decepticon ship. They’ve followed us!”



“They’ve spotted us!”

Cyclonus scowled more than usual, “I said not to get too close!”

“I’ve never driven a space ship before, I don’t know how close is too close! I was just following your steering!” Darkwing complained in a frump.

Cyclonus crossed his arms, tossed his head, and replied with spite, “Don’t blame my navigation. My course would have had us at a proper distance the whole way...If the engines weren’t set too fast.”

“Maybe if Mr. Stoic said things with his words, I’d have known to slow down.” The white Decepticon at propulsion sulked. “I’m not a mind scanner over here; No matter how much I need to know what you’re thinking.”

“Boys... This is cute and all, but maybe we should stop fighting among ourselves and worry more about getting weapons ready.” Crasher raised her brow.

“I have to stay at navigation. And Darkwing at propulsion. So...” Cyclonus waved a hand at Crasher and then pointed to consoles across the command deck. “It’s all up to you. Lasers are there, torpedoes over there.”

Her eyes bulged. “On opposite sides of the bridge? Who designed that?”

Cyclonus sneered. “There’s supposed to be a crew of a dozen up here at any given time. Two dozen in combat situations. The symmetrical stations shouldn’t have been an issue.”

Crasher converted into her new heavy cruiser mode and rolled for the laser controls. “Oh smelt me. It was *you*, wasn’t it?”

“The Constructor Squad thought that is was sensible.” Arching his back triumphantly, Cyclonus put on a smug face. “They mentioned so twice.”

Now back in robot mode, Crasher shot back, “The Constructor Squad who just pranked you?”

Cyclonus winced and let his posture deflate slightly. Before he could reply though, Darkwing spoke up.

“Uh guys... We might not need the weapons.”

Following Darkwing’s gaze, Cyclonus saw the same object appear on the monitor. It was a cube floating in space. Each side was made of a stacked golden lattice, each layered until it looked like a convoluted mess of metal. It also seemed to glow; a faint amber aura encircled it completely. The other ship was headed directly for it.

“They’re going to get there before we’re in weapons range.” Crasher explained with frustration in her voice. “What do we do?”



“Doesn’t this thing have any guns? Even just a couple of pea-shooters?” Demolishor stood close enough that his ventralizers breathed exhaust down Jetstorm’s neck servos.

“It’s a science ship meant to stay cloaked as an Earth mountain. So no, Demolishor, it doesn’t have *any guns*.” Jetstorm slapped a clawed hand at the Decepticon. “But if we want to make you useful and get you off my back, we can hang you out a window and see what *you* can hit!”

“Hey... Just askin’.” Demolishor said sheepishly.

Side Burn curled his lip, “So, like, what is the plan then?”

“We land. We let our big holy cube over there protect us, like all good gods do.” Jetstorm tapped his chin. “And then we pray for a good excuse why we don’t have all of our components done yet.”

“Mine are.” Demolishor grinned. His remark was meant by cold glares.

Side Burn stuck out his tongue and pulled at an eyelid with his index finger. “You call those...things you made ‘components’? Those are just people with metal bits.”

“That’s just to make them compatible with the Decepticons we all put in the hold. Organic brains. Cybetrionic bodies. Binary bonded and just what we’re lookin’ for.”

Jetstorm and Side Burn glanced at one another, perhaps jealous that they did not think of the process. Instead they had been replacing human tissue with Cybertronian materials piece by piece. A much slower process as they needed to wait for the human bodies to accept the alien technology... A process that suddenly both remembered they hadn’t finished. Side Burn’s eyes grew wide and stressed. Servo lubricant dripped from his forehead. “I... Uh... I need to get to work.”

“I guess I’m still stuck with an excuse.” Jetstorm’s face scrunched in misery. “Anyone have a pen and paper? We’re about there, so I should probably get this right...”



“These readings... I have no idea how I’m supposed to interpret them.” Crasher’s forehead plating furled as she bent over the console. She had converted and sped back over to the operations conn. “That yellow light from the cube? It’s gotten more intense. The photons are registering as mass... I don’t know what that means, but the computer seems to think it’s important.”

Cyclonus wrinkled his nose and gave orders to the Decepticon at propulsion, “Darkwing, back the ship off.”

“Uh... I’m sure I know how to do that.” Darkwing’s voice drifted as he keyed prompts into the console. On the fourth try, he exclaimed, “Ah! There’s reverse!”

“Too late!” Crasher said in a panic. “The glow is targeting us. It’s about to –”

“Hold on, brace for impact.”

Crasher and Darkwing gripped the control panels in front of them as Cyclonus instructed. It didn’t do much good as the ship lurched violently and tumbled, sending the Decepticons toppling skidding around the command deck. Warning klaxons blared to life – a soothing Brahms composition – and if they weren’t enough, red lights flashed to life. The ship careened again from another impact, the deck tilted at forty degrees, causing the robots to grasp desperately at the floor grating.

“That doesn’t feel like energy beams!”

“Crasher said it before, Darkwing. That glow was becoming mass... Something solid. It actually physically *hit* us.” Cyclonus ground his teeth as he struggled to hold on.

“How...?” Darkwing stared incredulously at the view screen. The yellow aura that had once encapsulated the cube was now collected on the near side with a long protrusion sweeping out towards the *Annex*. The front half of the ship appeared to be lodged inside of the light.

Crasher crawled up the Operations screens. “The only ‘how’ I care about is ‘how do we get loose?’ That... thing has a tight hold on us. I wouldn’t try the engines, unless you want to tear us apart.”

Losing his grip on the grid, Cyclonus started to slide. Sparks flew as he tried to get a new hand hold. Crasher stretched out one of her mighty arms and grabbed his hand as he skidded by. He looked up and nodded his appreciation. His face was far from its usual neutral gray.

Dangling from the communications controls, Darkwing huffed. “Well... how are we going to save Sephie now?”

“I might have an idea...” Cyclonus offered. He leaned over one of the monitors at the Operations station, pointing at a schematic of the ship. “The solid light doesn’t cover as far back as the rear shuttle bay. We can open that and leave.”

“Leave -?!”

“If you can get back to propulsion, Darkwing, charge the engines. Not to full, but make it look like we’re at least *trying* to escape. Maybe we can use that to distract them long enough for us to slip out the back, and around this coruscated construct.”

“That’s fine for you two,” Crasher’s scowl permeated her voice. “I don’t have a space-faring alternate mode.”

“When we get to the aft hold...” Cyclonus grunted as he climbed his way up past the navigational controls. “...Convert into your patrol mode. I’ll hold you.”

“Not that I was...uh...looking...but aren’t those biceps of yours bulging like that because they turn into jet mode thrusters?” Darkwing snuck a sly peek back at Cyclonus. His eyes then gave the same look to the Mayhem commander. “Crasher, I can hold you tighter.”

Crasher’s cheeks flushed blue.



“Landin’ gear just touched down.”

Thud.

“What is that?”

Thud.

“Is the Underbase under attack?”

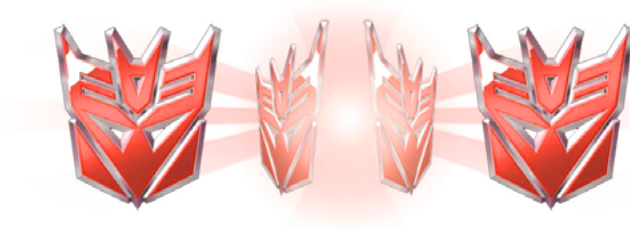
Thud thud thud.

“No. Those are footsteps stompin’ around inside the cube.”

“Say...what? Open the doors...Who could possibly be *that* big and that *inside* our defenses?”

The doors to the cargo hold creaked and complained as they opened. Clouds of sand were coughed from the aperture. A pair of legs – ice-covered and frozen – came into view. It was a giant robot, thrice as tall as any of the trio aboard the science ship.

“No... Not *him*.”



The solid light protrusion looked even more unique from outside of the ship. Even with the occasional burst from the *Annex*'s engines, the whole scene looked still. As though everything was tranquil and quiescent.

“It’s almost beautiful.”

<<We’re in space, Crasher. Remember? If you’re trying to talk, you’ll need to, you know, broadcast it.>> Darkwing’s voice chirped over Crasher’s internal radio. He was above her, his jet mode gliding silently through the starry blues and black. His robot mode arms hung down from the underside of the aircraft and wrapped around Crasher’s chassis.

<<Yeah, yeah.>> Crasher’s voice buzzed in her transmission. <<But now it’s going to bug you that you don’t know what I said, mon Ailenoire.>>

Darkwing wished she was wrong.

<<It looks like they landed just a few megameters ahead. Stay as close to the surface of the cube as you can to avoid being seen.>> The red and orange jet at the lead teeped a message straight into Crasher’s and Darkwing’s processors.

<<Yeah, the longer we can hide, the better. I can’t really engage in any evasive maneuvers holding onto precious cargo like this.>>

“‘Precious’? You darling bot, you.”

<<Crasher. Radio.>> Darkwing reminded.

<<I...uh...\*Ahem\* I think I see a hangar up ahead. I’d point if I had access to my hands.>>

Cyclonus teeped, <<I see it. Increase x-axis and approach it from a blind side.>>



<<Uhm...What?>> The chirping radio message wavered with confusion. Darkwing was accustomed to his robot mode more than his jet mode. He was after all a maintenance worker and not an aerial combat expert.

<<Fly up. Then back down at the hangar.>> Crasher's message buzzed with playful exasperation. <<This flying thing's not that hard. Maybe I should scan a plane when we get back to Earth.>>

<<With a name like "Crasher", I don't think you'd inspire a lot of confidence as a plane.>> Darkwing's chirp twiddled with amusement. <<Of course it's not that great a name for a car either.>>

<<Yeah, yeah. Like I haven't heard that one before.>> Crasher's automobile mode failed to express her feigned pout. <<Though for your benefit, it's because of my seismic stomp. I suppose it could have been "Shaker" but that gave even worse overtones.>>

A shy radio chirp eked out, <<I don't know. I'd like to see you shak- >>

<<**Darkwing!**>> Crasher buzzed with a blend of a pique and chagrin.

<<We're coming up on our approach.>> Cyclonus' teep interrupted. <<Are you two ready or do you want to keep on with your...whatever you two are doing?>>

<<\*Ahem\* Ready as I'll ever be.>> Darkwing chirped.

Crasher buzzed her preparedness, <<Hey, I'm just along for the ride.>>

<<We're going in then.>>

The red fighter swung wide and burst through the force shield protecting the hangar from decompression. Darkwing followed shortly after.

<<There's the ship!>> Crasher broadcasted loudly. <<Do you think Sephie is still onboard?>>

"Uh, Crasher" Darkwing's voice whispered softly. "There's atmosphere in here, we don't need the radios anymore."

"Oh slaggit! Will you make up your mind?"

"Ssshhh," Cyclonus urged. "There's something on the far side of the hangar. Just around the ship."

The crowd of Side Burn, Jetstorm, Demolishor, and five small robots came into view.

Crasher gasped. "One of those isn't Sephie, is it? What did those monsters do?"

"Hhrm..." Cyclonus started. "We have a something else to worry about first..."

“What’s more important than...oh...”

The red jet began to convert back to robot mode, his legs unfolded, his arms swung around into place and his head emerged from his chest. Cyclonus then landed and called out, “Everyone transform...And hope you have a big enough gun.”

Crasher dropped from Darkwing’s arms and converted into her bulky robot mode. Her jet compatriot then did the same, landing next to her. They joined Cyclonus’ stare.

The ice giant stood behind the trio of multi-faction robots and their small creations. Underneath the azures, blues, and frost whites of the frozen snowcapped ice daggers that encapsulated so much of its body, the monster was made of metal plates that were charred a dark carbon black. Numerous vents were placed throughout its body, each one choked with thick turquoise glaciers. There was a brilliance and glamor to the way its frigid casing glimmered in the light inside the hangar. It was a living, breathing oil-painting to inspire awe and astonishment.

Then it spoke, and the wonderment deformed into dread.

“Take the components to the gateway. You know where they go.” The voice rumbled, vibrating off the walls of the hold. “These... intruders are nothing. I can deal with them.”

“We’ll take ‘em down there right away.” Demolishor gestured for Donnie and Nestor to follow him. Both humans – now cyborgs – had converted into a new block-like mode and plugged themselves into Fangry and Squeezeplay’s chests. The Decepticons were helpless, completely under the humans’ control. At a single thought, Donnie had Fangry step forward and Nestor did the same with Squeezeplay.

“Right behind you, Demi.” Side Burn spun a finger in the air. Grindor, Highwire, and Sureshock followed him.

Jetstorm turned to offer his excuse, but seeing the giant distracted by the Decepticon newcomers, he decided it would be better to slink away with his brothers rather than risk inflaming the gelid titan. “I...I’ll supervise them.”

Cyclonus watched the other robots run deeper into the maze of chambers and hallways inside the cube. Then his eyes went wide as they snapped back to the ice giant, whose right fist was hurtling towards him. The nimble Decepticon was able to dodge the fist, but the concussion it caused as it buckled the floor plating knocked him from his feet.

Darkwing and Crasher leapt into action, firing as fast as they could with their pulse rifles. Balls of crackling white energy struck glassy icicles and frosted mounds of snow, but rather than shatter, the crystals absorbed the fireblasts.

The giant swung its other arm, snowflakes fell glistening as it moved. The ice spread

across the giant's metal plating, soon penetrating the elbow and shoulder joint. The arm lost momentum and slumped to the floor.

"Did the big guy just whiff at us?" Crasher glanced over her shoulder at Darkwing. He shrugged.

"No," Cyclonus interjected as he scrambled up from the floor, "I think you two did that. I think the ice osmosed your laser blasts and started to grow."

The frozen monster laughed, its icy coating clinked and chinkled; it was a joyful dance compared to the nightmare that was the laugh itself. "Is that what you think?"

"Yes. It is. Keep firing!" The red Decepticon barked. He then converted to jet mode and from his position still on the ground, fired his wing guns as fast as he could. Darkwing and Crasher unloaded their weapons from the other side of the beast.

The giant held its frozen limb in front of itself as a shield. Just as before, the ice appeared to soak in the energy blasts. However, this time the crystals didn't grow; the snowy casing stayed the same. Cyclonus stared in confusion for a moment, then waved for the others to cease fire. *If it wasn't the weapon fire that caused the ice to grow...*

The monster cut off Cyclonus' train of thought, "I was going to defeat you in a way this universe would understand and respect. With physical brutality."

It gave a studious gaze to Crasher and continued, "It seems though that I won't be able to do that...for a number of reasons."

Crasher kept her rifle aimed at the giant. She raised a disconcerted brow. "Huh? Anyone know what he's –"

"Now, I might as well end this with more...mystic means." The beast uncurled its fingers, intense effort willing the digits open. Frost and snow began to swirl him his palm; a miniature squall born from the ethers of nothing. The swirling became more and more violent as ice lances juggled over and around one another. The daggers started to gleam, a brilliant blue luminescence taking on the shape of a jagged orb. Orange flares burst out occasionally, only to be flicker, flutter, and be consumed by the radiating beryl glow. The outreaching beams from the orb stretched and purled faster and faster until they became a blur. Crasher took a step forward, throwing her arm across Darkwing to shield him.

The orb then erupted, a fusillade of energy and ice bombarded the Decepticons. Each of the trio were struck with chunks of frozen detritus, which imbedded itself at high speeds. The chunks expanded rapidly on contact, enveloping the three robots and making full-body frozen shackles.

"That..." Cyclonus growled, "...was certainly 'mystic'."

Darkwing tapped the ice block that enshrouded his legs and grappled with his left arm. “Yeah. If I were Darkwind, I’d say it was even kinda cool...”

Crasher stuck her lower lip out and threatened, “I *will* hurt you.”



“What do you think is going on out there?” Rick whispered.

He and Emulator were both still inside the NAVI monitor, listening as the fighting came to an abrupt stop. When the drumming of the massive feet receded into winding corridors inside of the cube, Emulator got up and forced open the vent on the back of the monitor. She had been racked with guilt throughout whatever conflict they had heard outside. If those were Decepticons, they almost certainly were there in because of her distress call. How could she sit by while they risked themselves to save her?

“We have to go help whoever that was... from whatever that was.” She sneered.

Rick gently grabbed her hand and tried to console her. “Seph... Em, we did the right thing. If we had rushed out there, they would have captured us too – it really didn’t sound like we could have made a difference.”

“Great.” Emulator pulled her hand away. “Are you really trying to make me feel better? We couldn’t do anything to help so... we’re still stuck here and just sent three sweet, very well-meaning robots to whatever fate they’re about to meet. We’re *fantastic* people.”

“Well, one of us is a person.”

“Don’t make me smack you with my metal hand.”

“But what I mean is,” Rick explained, “No one knows we’re here. And now that everyone thinks the situation here is resolved, we can sneak out there, free our would-be rescuers, and we can all get the hell out of here.”

Emulator’s chin dropped to her chest. Through gritted teeth, she corrected, “Jetstorm knows we’re here.”

Rick held a finger to his face and postulated, “For one thing, he doesn’t know I’m here.”

He saw Emulator's objection start to bubble and stopped her before she started, "Yeah, I know. I don't have any powers or anything to do any fighting, but we don't *need* any of that. We need stealth, not boorish strength."

"Okay... Maybe I can give you that."

"And for another thing, Jetstorm gave up looking for you. He did! If he thought you were still here, he wouldn't have skulked off, hoping a good excuse would save his butt." Rick smirked. "He thinks you got off back on Earth."

"Alright, alright. You've convinced me." Emulator peered back at Rick. The corner of her mouth arced upward. "Let's go make a prison break."

They both hopped from the hovering monitor, Emulator held Rick and took the fall with her powerful partially synthetic legs. She set him down, and he instantly pumped his fist in the air.

"Yeah-heah!"

Emulator rolled her eyes.

"What? I always wanted to be an actual side-kick on a mission. Not just sit in the van."



The large chamber looked like it could have once been filled with towering rows of book stacks in an infinite library. The mangled, gnarled remains of the shelves could still be seen, if one had a creative imagination. They had been cut apart, reshaped, and welded back together to form an enormous arch with a ramp leading up to the middle. There was something moving in the compartments on both sides of the arch. Something alive. Small robotic bodies of many configurations – some skillfully crafted, others a hodge-podge of parts – housed organic, alien minds from countless worlds. Each cyborg sat focused on a screen within the compartment, they typed away on projected light keyboards, inputting and computing sub-equations. Fractions of a larger whole.

Three average-sized Cybertronian forms strolled in front of the arch – A tall curvaceous blue and purple robot with wings on her back, a shorter black and red robot with thick wheels on her shoulders and body armor not unlike Crasher's, and a squat blue and red robot with a gold "X" shaped harness across his chest.

"Well, well, well," Jetstorm's sing-song voice was a chorus inside the immense cham-

ber. “It looks like someone’s been a busy bunch, doesn’t it? Who racked up the highest score, hmm? Strongarm, I’m looking at you, babe...”

“I didn’t do too bad.” Strongarm pouted.

The blue and purple robot chimed in, “Don’t listen to her, she did *amazing*. She’s just mad that I tricked her into helping; I made her think there was a new video game app where you go around and catch little critters out in the wild. I even made fictional gyms and refresh spots, combat training, all sorts of stats that had to be ranked... It was *so* convincing. Her face when she found out it was all real... You should have seen it!”

Strongarm’s face slouched and puffed in an exaggerated moue. “Windblade, *please*.”

“Yeah! It was just like that!” Windblade leaned around the shorter robot and put her face next to Strongarm’s. She pinched at one of the pink cheeks, causing Strongarm to wince and sneer. “It’s *so* cute. I could just nibble it all up.”

“Oh really?” Strongarm rolled her head to consider Windblade’s eyes. “You like it when I’m angry?”

Windblade caressed the cheek she had just been pinching, she slid closer so that her forehead rested against Strongarm’s. “It’s adorkable.”

“Prove it.” Strongarm beamed, the curve of her mouth stretching wider. The two robots locked lips, pressing conterminous to one another. Windblade wrapped an arm around Strongarm’s helmet, stroking its every camber and flare.

Demolishor and Side Burn fidgeted awkwardly. Jetstorm did his best to ignore the public display of affection and turned to the third robot attending the arch. “So. Hot Shot. I take it these ugly little ones were your work?”

“Eh. What to looks matter?” Hot Shot droned monotonously, “As long as they’re, I dunno, adequate at their job and whatever. That’s all I care.”

Demolishor was still staring at Windblade and Strongarm, he bent down to whisper to Side Burn, “Us three worked as a team on Cybertron and Earth. How come none of us never started doin’ stuff like that?”

“Because,” Having overheard the question, Jetstorm waved a dismissive arm and sighed flippantly, “I have standards. And I don’t have lips.”

Donnie swung Fangry’s head back and forth, taking in the scene. His modulated voice emerged from the wolf’s mouth, “I’m starting to feel a little weird here; you didn’t build us and bring us all this way just to watch your make-out parties...Did you?”

“Oh god.” Highwire’s simulated voice escaped his mechanical throat. “They gave us these robot lips just so they could start smooching on us too!”

Sureshock raised a mechanical brow and purred, “I don’t know if that would be so bad; the blue girl is sort of my type. I wonder how open they are...”

Demolishor patted an empty compartment. The neighbors in the nearby chambers glared out at him in annoyance. “Sorry, but you’ll do as much kissin’ as me and Jetstorm. Now up you get. There will be a short tutorial and... well you’ll be gettin’ the hang of it in no time.”

Side Burn lifted Grindor up to another cell. “We’ll be back to check in on you soon.”

After Donnie, Nestor, and Highwire climbed into their compartments, there was one rather conspicuously empty alcove left. The five other robots turned to Jetstorm. He shrugged.

“What’s everyone looking at me for?”



“Uhm. Yeah, so... What are we doing with these three?” Cybaxx’s hologram bobbed along beside the ice giant as it dragged the frozen Decepticons from the hangar. As though it was summoned by an unheard command, the duo was joined by an impressive cybernetic lion covered in a pelt of thick pink fur and ornate purple and silver fixtures. It tautened its jaw and pulled back its lips. Cybaxx stared at the rows of sharp knife-like teeth that were revealed and attempted to placate the creature, “Not questioning your imperatives or anything but...yeah...we’re going to need to fill out a couple dozen forms now. For *each* one.”

The giant replied in a voice like thunder across the tundra, “Do what your little mind sees right. That’s all meaningless to me.”

It gesticulated towards Cyclonus and Darkwing. As it did so, icicles snapped and crumbled, only to be replaced by thicker, taller crystals. “Take those two... somewhere to get them out of the way. This one,” it renewed its grip on Crasher, “Is going to the gateway.”

“Riiight...” Cybaxx stretched the word. “I’ll put them with the former sovereign. That will save a few requisition papers.”

“Still meaningless to me.”

Emulator glanced around the corner, she had no idea what either robot was talking

about, but the new problem was clear: splitting the Decepticons up would make the prison break that much more difficult. “Looks like we have a choice to make.”

Rick offered, “I think we should stick together. If we go after... who was that? Cyclonus and Darkwing? We can free them and they’ll help us go after Crasher.”

“Since when did you know the Decepticon personnel list?”

“I know a bunch of Autobots too.” Rick shrugged. “I thought it might come in handy if I was your... information support.”

“Oh,” She put her hand – her human hand – on Rick’s shoulder. She murmured warmly, “Well that’s kind of you.”

“So what do you think?”

“I...” Emulator cleared her voice. “I think we should go after Cyclonus and Darkwing. I really wouldn’t want to go up against that... behemoth myself anyway.”

She leaned out into the corridor, the small purple hologram was at the end of the hallway. The frozen forms of the Decepticons glissaded along behind it, towed by the robot lion. “Hurry, this place is a labyrinth; we don’t want to lose them.”

Rick nodded.

The two tracked Cybaxx along through the winding corridors, making sure they never got too close. Nor let the hologram slip out of view either. After nearly seven minutes of wandering, Cybaxx stopped, and the ice-capped Decepticons glided to a halt behind him. A vast, grated door lifted into the ceiling, the metal portcullis as thick as the Decepticons were tall. The gears lifting the door cracked and groaned in protest from the enormity of its weight. As soon as the hologram and robots were on the other side, the door slammed back to the floor.

“Come on.” Emulator waved back at Rick. “We can fit through the bars.”

“Thank god the giant robots who built this place didn’t have humans in mind when they designed their defenses.”

“Just imagine the trouble we could get into on Cybertron,” Emulator quickly added, “you know, if *we were* the supervillains instead of the heroes who fought them.”

She hefted herself up and crawled through one of the spaces in the grating. Rick followed her, needing her helping hand to pull himself the rest of the way up. On the other side of the grate, the hallway narrowed and the lights dimmed. Book shelves and rolling ladders had been torn from their moorings and fused together as cells and cages. The vast majority were empty, but those that were occupied held odd slender robots who sat on an oversized wheelbase rather than legs and were topped by an oddly large cranium. Each one babbled about cataloging or data filing in a loop that always ended with a similar comment, “Invalid file name. File not found.”



“That’s... kinda creepy.”

“Keep moving, Rick. And stay away from the cells if you can.”

Rick’s head turned to the side to inspect the robots even closer. “Why? Do you think these bibliognosts could be dangerous?”

“I don’t know.” Emulator clucked her tongue and continued playfully, “But I do know this is a prison, and prisons tend to hold deplorables as well as political detainees. So...”

“Fair point.” Rick sniffed. “I won’t start shaking hands with any of them.”

“Hold up. There they are.” Emulator’s voice filled with a brief panic, “quick duck over there so he doesn’t see us!”

The two humans ran and skidded behind a small pillar between a pair of prison cells. Cybaxx hadn’t seen them, but the occupant of the nearer cell spotted them.

“Greetings! State keywords for requested information or prepare for direct inquiry interface.”

The metal lion turned and narrowed its eyes at the prisoner’s unusual prattling, but then dismissed it and returned focus to the Decepticons.

“Ssh! Quiet down!” Rick pleaded with the robotic prisoner. “We already know what we’re looking for.”

The robot’s words loudly rang out, “Error. Keywords not recognized! File location not found! Initiating direct interface, deploying physical neural bridge!”

“Wait... what?”

Two tubules extended from the prisoner’s forearm and slithered towards Rick and Emulator like a pair of hungry pyrite-pythons locked onto a vapor-rat. They edged closer, Rick kicked his feet at them to try to make them keep their distance. It was futile.

“Em... Please tell me that hologram is gone.”

Emulator did a quick spin to glimpse at the Decepticons down the hall. Both were now secured in cells, and the lion had wandered away, but Cybaxx remained as he typed away at a handheld data pad.

“Not yet.”

Cybaxx’s head snapped up, he glared back down the hallway. The purple image then blurred and faded into a digital haze.

“He’s gone...wait...”

The purple hologram blinked back online in front of the curator robot’s prison cell. He looked down at the neural tubules in disgust. “Ugh...So...yeah...we don’t even permit

that on casual Fridays. So if you could go ahead and cover those back up, that'll be good."

Emulator peered out from the other side of the pillar. Cybaxx started to rez-out again, leaving just a single word floating behind as he did: "Disgusting."

After waiting a moment to ensure that Cybaxx was gone this time, Emulator and Rick ran full speed to Cyclonus and Darkwing's cells. The Decepticons were still iced over; Darkwing could turn his head to see the humans, but having been frozen in jet mode meant Cyclonus was nearly blind but for a single ceiling tile directly ahead of his cockpit.

"Please tell me one of you is 'Sephie'." The red and orange jet intoned. "I need something to go my way today."

"That's her." Rick pointed to Emulator, he then cleared his throat and corrected, "But call her 'Emulator'."

She patted Rick on the shoulder and affirmed, "'Sephie' is fine."

Rick smiled back.

"Hey, I'm sure that's a touching moment or something," Darkwing groaned as he struggled against the ice. "But I'm not so shoddy that I deserve this. Care to help a bot out?"

"I could try to find a resonate frequency to target with one of my sonic blasts. That might break you loose." Sephie held her palms up and willed enough energon to change her eye color to a familiar purple glow.

"Wait!" Rick called out, "Shut down the bars first!"

Sephie heard Rick, but couldn't stop. She had already begun to emit a powerful pulse aimed at the prison cells. The electro-bars on Cyclonus' cell twitched with a spasm and then nictitated to a violent click. The effect wasn't limited to Cyclonus' cell, though, and soon the energy grids securing every other hold began to twitch. One by one they shut down, and the hallway was filled with the custodian robots. All of them chattering away about pursuing information.

They spotted Sephie and Rick, and descended upon the humans, two dozen synthetic voices asking for a new inquiry. As they drew ever near, a command echoed through the hall. The robots stopped and buzzed.

"Mini-Cons! Halt interaction mode! Return to your cubicles for cataloging!" The voice was assertive, yet small. When a purple and pink robot stepped from a nearby prison cell, it was clear why the voice didn't boom or echo; the robot was barely larger than either Sephie or Rick.

“You’re not... another cyborg, are you?” Sephie’s eyes still blared purple, a sign her energon was at the ready should she need to fend off the newcomer.

“Gracious no.” The robot placed his hand on his chest. “I’m the former sovereign of this place. Welcome to the marvelous Underbase and behold its glories...that is if you can find such things in ruins and ancient rubble.”

Sephie and Rick studied him with skepticism.

“Oh yes, names. We should probably exchange those. I’ve been locked away so long I seem to be forgetting common etiquette.” The robot took a bow. “You can call me Beta Maxx.”

“I’m Rick, this is Sephie, and the two Decepticons needing a thaw are Cyclonus and Darkwing.”

“Oh right. Those two.” Beta Maxx snapped his fingers. “Wait here while I go get something to help with that.”

Beta Maxx scurried off.

The ceiling tile was beginning to bore Cyclonus. He called out, “What is it? What is he doing?”



Lumbering into the gateway chamber, the ice giant’s joints became stiffer with each step, each movement.

“Where is Sunstorm?” It bellowed. “I need him. Again.”

Windblade activated the VTOL engines on her wings, “I’ll go get him.”

“Good.” The giant continued to drag Crasher. “I will assume that everything is nearing readiness?”

“Uh, Eminence, about that...” Jetstorm spoke meekly, “I need to apologize. The missing component...”

“Hm?”

The blue and yellow robot stammered, “I’ll go back to Earth to retrieve it as soon as the ship is refueled and...”

The ice giant glared. Its voice started as a rumble, elevating to its usual gravitas as it continued. “Was it not your plan to lead her here? Did you not mean to let her and her compatriots track you in their own ship?”

“I...uh...What now?” Jetstorm pointed at Crasher. “Her?”

“Apparently I have a special brain.” Crasher shrugged as much as her ice block allowed.

Jetstorm straightened his posture, cleared his throat and attempted to sound as convincing as possible, “Right, yes, I knew that. And that *was* the plan the whole time; tricking her into following us here so that we could...uhm... make her a component.”

“Then everything is proceeding as we designed.” The ice giant boomed. “Fit her into the compartment and initiate the activation sequence.”

“You got it.”

Jetstorm waved for Strongarm, Demolishor, Side Burn, and Hot Shot to help push the frozen Decepticon into position. Crasher watched, unable to stop them. She could, however, still talk. “You didn’t know about me; you wanted to go get Sephie. Where is she?”

“Hnnh. The cyborg babe abandoned me before we took off.” Jetstorm grunted. “No one saw her scam. But her little round rear end has got to still be back on Earth.”

“She isn-” Crasher stopped herself. *She sent that message from the ship... while it was in space. She’s got to be here somewhere. Probably looking for some way to help. I... hope.*

“Hey.” A voice whispered near Crasher’s audio receptor. It was Strongarm. “I like your armor. I never thought I’d like white and blue together like that, but you really make it work.”

“Thanks.”



“So...He obeys you?” Rick gave a wary glance at the bushy pink and silver lion sitting in front of him. “He was doing pretty much everything Cybaxx was telling him to do before.”

“Oh my yes, he would do that.” Beta Maxx was sitting atop the lion. He reached down

and stroked its mane. “I brought him here to hide him from Cybaxx. Yes, I did. Didn’t I? Because he’s my good boy...”

“You hid him from Cybaxx... by making him Cybaxx’s service animal?” Sephie raised her eyebrow.

“With your friends being robots in disguise, I thought you’d understand.” Sephie could have sworn Beta Maxx’s cheeks dimpled. “We’re not always who we look like, are we?”

Rick waved a pointed finger at the lion. “Oh! The lion is an alt mode! The lion is an alt mode! Seph! Seph! The lion –”

“The lion is an alt mode. Yeah we get it.” Sephie rolled her eyes.

“I’m not registering any Cybertronian energy signal from him. How is that possible if he’s a Transformer?” Darkwing asked inquisitively.

“Let’s just say an old friend gave us an inspiration.” Beta Maxx waved Sephie and Rick aside. “Now if you’ll excuse me, the lion has some ice to crush. Lion?”

The pink feline stood, bracing itself. It arched its back.

Sephie muttered, “Oh god, if it’s going to roar to do this...”

The lion’s head spun to glare at Sephie as if it was insulted, its intense azure eyes burned. A triple-barreled energy disrupter emerged from its back, and aimed for Cyclonus. Glowing orange orbs built up at the ends of each muzzle, then the three beams surged forward. They slammed into the frozen sheath, shattering it into a slushy slurry. The Decepticon converted into robot mode and rubbed each limb, reactivating sensors that had gone into sleep mode.

“Thank the deities, I was starting to go numb in there!”

“You’re welcome.” Beta Maxx trilled gleefully. In contrast, the lion growled as he turned to Darkwing. His ice prison too soon became a pile of soggy snow.

Beta Maxx spun on his heels, “Now I do think we should be headed for the gate room and -”

Cyclonus grabbed the small purple robot’s shoulder, “First let’s get some explaining done.”

Darkwing tried out his servos, rotating his shoulders and flexing his knees. He groaned. “Yeah. Beta Maxx, Cybaxx...and if this is the Underbase, Boltax. Don’t tell me there’s isn’t a relationship there. Because that’s a lot of ‘-ax’.”

“Oh, well, but there is!” Beta Maxx explained. You see, I’m the one that commissioned this database, and I became its first sovereign. I brought four dozen galaxies

worth of information to its vast servers and returned to Cybertron. My apprentices, Boltax and Cybaxx, began to properly store and catalog the information we had gathered, but they came to a conclusion after making a rather big leap; there wasn't any point in continuing the mission. 'The information is in chaos,' they said. 'There's no trend other than entropy' they added. 'Additional information won't resolve the trend.' I implored, I insisted that we keep going, but they said the sample size would remain too small. That to unravel the chaos we needed to 'become whole again'. I resisted and they deposed me. Locked me away. Boltax then took over as sovereign and when he died recently, Cybaxx took over."

"'Become whole'?" Sephie questioned. "And what about Demolishor and Side Burn and Jetstorm? And the 'components' they were making?"

"And that abominable snow monster..." Rick added.

"Oh," Beta Maxx crooned. "So you've met a little bit of everyone..."



"Idol," Sunstorm's voice was weak, "You need my flame?"

The ice giant kept surveying the progress with the gateway, he didn't turn to greet the smaller yellow and orange robot. "Warm me."

It appended quietly, "I can't move my legs."

"That's where I'll start." Sunstorm stepped forward and winced again. It took the whole of his effort to create fires intense enough to melt the ice build-up. He moaned at the exertion.

Windblade opened her mouth to caution Sunstorm about spending too much of his life-giving radiation, but the ice giant glowered at her with piercing eyes. She bowed her head and scampered over to Strongarm.

Hot Shot glanced back at the giant. "Hey... The reading display things say we're about ready to energize the components. Or something."

The giant flicked a single finger in the air; a signal to proceed. Side Burn nodded and begun programming the machinery at the base of the ramp. Jetstorm hovered next to him pointing at dials and switches. Satisfied, Jetstorm's mouthless face contorted to

beam a rare smile. “It’s all set... Care to make a winded monologue to announce what we’re doing?”

“No.” The giant’s voice was as chilly as the snow that covered his body. “Do it. Now.”

The robots in the gate room peered at one another and let out a cheer, “We will be whole again!”

Jetstorm pulled a final lever, a hum filled the room then turned into a thumping. Energy bolts hit the walls of compartments holding the cyborgs. Multi-tonal screams cried out as the electricity flowed through Cybertronic body and organic minds alike. After the energy poured through the banks of metal and flesh hybrids, it collected in two spires towering over both sides of the gate. The arch itself light up in a sea of blinking blue and white lights. The lights then migrated to the inner edge of the arch where they formed a constant glow. A swirling blue cloud spun from the arch, filling the circular space within the gate. When the cloud met itself at the center, it blazed a bright white. The white light then grew to fill the gate, a beacon signaling the gate done just as gates do; open a portal into something else.

“So... who’s going first?” Jetstorm scrunched a metal brow.

With a nod of its chin, the giant indicated Hot Shot. “Him.”

“I’m sure I’ll do a fair job.” Hot Shot changed into his car mode and rolled into position at the base of the ramp. He aimed himself towards the churning white light. “I’ll keep my radio stuff open.”

“You do that.” Jetstorm set his hands on his hips.

Hot Shot drove up the ramp, paused briefly, and dipped into the energy vortex of the gate. Reality became a blur and everything around Hot Shot convulsed and frothed. He felt parts of his physical body falling away as his speed approached that of light. Soon he and the light stream were one and the same.

In a few seconds that to Hot Shot felt like hours, he emerged on the other side of the portal. His body frenziedly returned to the physical and he bounced and tumbled across metal-plated ground. He groaned as he converted into robot mode and tried to stand.

Back in the Underbase, Demolishor called into the communication station, “Hot Shot... Did you make it through?”

Hot Shot’s voice fizzed with static, “I did. The trip was...okay. I think I’m on Cybertron. It’s a metal world powered by energon. It’s...not really all that great. Or interesting. Or whatever.”

“I’m glad we sent the least excitable member of our crew through first.” Side Burn commented snidely.

“Hold on. I think those are Autobots. One is a sort of silver and blue race car thing with red windows. And the other has a large white, gray, and red curvy space form. Oh.” Even Hot Shot’s monotonous voice found a way to deflate. “They have red symbols.”

“Shut down the gate.” The giant ordered.

“What about Hot Shot, shouldn’t we try to get him back?” Strongarm pried. “There’s got to be a...”

“Sorry, Strong-Babe, the gate’s one way. We all knew that going into this mission.” Jetstorm shrugged.

The giant scowled. “Get ready for the next trial.”



“The Fallen?” Only a slightly raised metal brow belied Cyclonus’ confusion.

“I sure you had all figured that out by now. He wasn’t keeping it a particularly close secret.” Beta Maxx’s voice warbled.

“Right, yeah. We all knew that.” Darkwing coughed. “Who’s the Fallen?”

“My, my. Didn’t your little friend Cliffjumper tell you about the original Thirteen Transformers? The original Primes? It’s very important lore to the positive universes. Very important.”

“Cliffjumper...” Cyclonus glanced over to Darkwing. “...is a very *difficult* Autobot to have a conversation with.”

“Well, suffice it to say, they don’t build Cybertronians like that anymore. As you’ve no doubt seen he’s big, strong, and has powers beyond understanding.” Beta Maxx stroked his chin. “One might be tempted to call him a god.”

“Especially if they’re Norsemen.” Sephie scoffed. “So what does this magical god snowman want with your Underbase, and what does it have to do with Jetstorm and the rest?”

“Ah-ha! Right to the point, right to the point indeed! Very well, let’s go for it.” The diminutive purple robot pointed both his index fingers at Sephie. “He arrived over two years ago, in a flash of blinding light. He was an inferno of emotion, and just like the



fire ablaze on his back, seeking to consume all that he touched. He soon, though, found that our little universe flipped everything he knew on its head. Light became dark, hot became cold, fire...became ice.”

“And he got stuck here?”

“Stuck? No, no, no. You misunderstand. He can go back to any positive universe he wants.” Beta Maxx shook his head. “But that is exactly what he *doesn't* want. You see there is balance in those universes, in the form of his brothers and sisters. He is alone here though since they're reluctant to come this far... And he wants to go even further. You see he theorizes that there are more negative universes. And, well, I do believe he *wants* them.”

Beta Maxx felt Sephie's question about to leave her lips. He added, “As for the others you've encountered, they're more or less *sentient probes*. Cybaxx, Boltax and myself created them to go out and interact with anything that, well, caught our interest. To let them blend in with the inhabitants they're meant to study, they're constructed out of – oh what was that silly word that one small-minded alien used – Transformium. It's a simplistic term, but accurate given the material's ability to convert itself. Anyway, they malfunctioned and, as luck would have it, got stuck as Cybertronians. And fell for the Fallen's charm, just like Cybaxx.”

The purple robot shrugged.

Sephie grimaced. “That's some luck.”

“So we might want to head for the gate room now, wouldn't you agree?” Beta Maxx rested his chin on his open palms.

“Fine.” Cyclonus motioned to Beta Maxx with a flap of his hand. “You and your lion lead the way.”

The lion's silver nostrils flared and he snorted at Cyclonus. He then turned and genuflected, allowing Beta Maxx to crawl up his mane. The little robot then settled onto the back of the lion's neck and indicated an adjacent hallway, “This way lads... and mi-lady.”

Cyclonus saw Darkwing, Sephie, and Rick look to him. He flicked his head and through gritted teeth he said, “I don't need to give you orders; follow that lion.”



“This isn’t what I was promised.” Nestor tried to shake the fuzzy feeling from his head, only to realize that it was the dinosaur’s head moving. “I’m not even sure what *this* is. Except painful.”

“I think we’re batteries. Or a power source.” Highwire’s coiled arms bent like a rubber hose as he rubbed his forehead. His clamp-like hand clanked against the helmet ineffectively. He sighed and continued, “Somehow the Cybertronian circuits and electricity in the human brain combine into the type of energy they need for that big gate thing.”

“Really? That’sss what thiss is? That’sss dumb.” Highwire’s neighbor in the container below his scoffed with a hiss, “I mean, I’m nowhere near ‘human’. Look at me. I’m a sssnake from the planet Beast sstuck in this sssuit of metal.”

“And I’m just a regular Cybertronian.” Crasher winced at the sound of her own words sawing through her aching head. “With a regular robotic brain made out of processors and wires... I think.”

Jetstorm tapped on the containers, “It’s adorable, you trying to figure out your cages. But we’re trying to work out here... *so no more commentary from the peanut gallery!*”

“We gave you math to distract you from the discomfort.” Demolishor pointed to the screen in Nestor’s compartment. “Nothing like a good algebraic formula to focus your attention... and get those neurons firing up some added brainpower.”

“How thoughtful.” Donnie made Fangry snarl.

Side Burn rolled his eyes at Demolishor then announced, “We’re ready for a second try.”

“Send her next.” The Fallen indicated Windblade with the tip of his gelid finger.

“What? You can’t!” Strongarm pawed at Windblade, trying to pull her close. She tugged at the blue robot’s wrist, then threw herself around her waist. “Not her... please! Not her! Don’t do that to us!”

The taller robot straightened and steadied her lip. “It’s okay, Strongarm... We knew our missions, our roles. So have strength now, sweet. And remember the next time you enter a comp challenge... I’ll be online too – wherever I end up – as the Hanzo to your McCree.”

“Ahh. I wasn’t going to tell you this but... I’ve been playing Zenyatta as my main in competitions.” Strongarm sniffed.

“Oh Strongarm, going after those easy silver elims?” Windblade lifted the black and red robot’s chin. “That’s alright. Then I’ll be Genji.” The two grinned. Windblade took a

few steps forward and stopped, needing to steady herself. She fought it, but had to give a glance back at Strongarm.

“*Slaggit!* This isn’t right!” Demolishor bellowed. He pointed to the communications console and asked, “Strongarm, you know the controls, right?”

Strongarm rolled her eyes. “I think I’m good with a controller, yes.”

“Good, take over for me.” The robot who once pretended to be a Decepticon charged at the ramp in front of the gate. “I’m volunteering.”

The Fallen sighed, exhausted from the drama. He waved a hand. “Fine.”

A hum and whoosh signaled the return of the swirling white light inside of the gateway. At the top of the ramp, Demolishor took a slow breath into his ventilators. He heard Windblade’s voice call out behind him, “Demolishor... Thank you.”

The robot at the portal turned his head and nodded. “I knew you’d be appreciatin’ it.”

He took a step forward and vanished into the twisting fluorescent eddies.

“Demolishor. Are you there?” Strongarm’s question brimmed with static. “What do you see?”

Demolishor’s optic sensors booted on the second try. He winced, trying to focus his eyes. “I’m seein’ a... I’m seein’ a lot of bright. There are buildings, but they’re glowing or sparkling. I think it’s Crystal City. Pit, how did anyone live in this place?”

“I thought it was supposed to be beautiful?”

“I suppose it might be, but I can barely open my smeltin’ eyes!” A small robot caught Demolishor’s attention. It was a strange looking robot, thinner than most Cybertronians he knew with scrawny arms and almost no body armor. Demolishor searched for a faction sigil on the robot, but couldn’t spy one. “This might’n be tricky; looks like a Cybertron without war. I got a robot here but he ain’t Autobot or Decepti... Whoa, no.”

“Demolishor?”

“I take that back, there’s a war here alright. A slaggin’ Combiner War! I got a mean looking gestalt staring down at me right now.” Comprised of five or six robots that were each at least twice the size of Demolishor, the Combiner was huge. She grabbed a nearby building, crushing it into shards that chattered to the ground. She swept her other arm, toppling a tower.

Demolishor’s inner radio squealed as Strongarm inquired, “Is it an Autobot?”

“No... It’s a green ‘n purple Construction monstrosity. A Devastator. Purple ‘Con symbols and all.”

The gigantic robot trudged through a sprawling factory and roared angrily. Her long strides brought her directly over top of Demolishor, her height blocked out the sun. Demolishor was finally able to open his eyes, he glanced about. Without the blazing light of the star reflecting off the crystalline buildings, he could take in the surreal elegance of Crystal City. Every surface was a dancing prismatic rainbow, a joyful collection of light and shadow across every bend and cut.

“I can start seein’ it now, Strongarm.” Demolishor’s voice crackled through the communications station on the Underbase. “There ain’t no words... It’s like you said. The city is just... so beautiful. It’s almost like it’s alive...”

Demolishor fell silent, but his radio frequency stayed open. Side Burn cringed and Strongarm flinched when the whirring whine of a massive solar energy beam rifle filled the broadcast. It was followed by a deafening explosion and a pop as Demolishor’s channel went dead.

“Shut it down.” The Fallen’s voice rumbled uncaringly. “Prepare for the next attempt.”



“I’d suggest we slow down now, lion.” Beta Maxx patted the thick locks of the pink cat’s mane. “The gate room is just around this corner, so I would think any last-minute preparations should be made here.”

“Last-minute preparations... Like us grabbing a few guns instead of running in waving our fists?” Darkwing cocked his head and balled his hands into fists to make his point.

“‘Guns?’ ‘Guns’ you say? Why do you *really* think some... hmhrm... **guns** are going to do a thing against the mechanoids in that room?” The small purple robot on top of the lion chided. “But very well, if you want weapons, go ahead and reach your hand on into the lion’s mane and grab whatever fits your ambition.”

Cyclonus and Darkwing exchanged wary glances, then Cyclonus approached the lion. It turned and gnashed its teeth, giving the Decepticon pause, but he still slipped his hand into the cat’s fur. Feeling around, he gripped a handle and gave it a tug that produced a three-barreled rifle similar to the cannon used to melt the Decepticons’ ice shackles. He then waved Darkwing for his turn. The white, blue, and red robot hesitated, but followed Cyclonus’ lead, pulling out an energo-sword. Both Decepticons studied their weapons, then Cyclonus patted Darkwing’s shoulder.

“I think we should switch.”

Darkwing gripped the hilt of the sword and asked absent-mindedly, “What do you mean?”

“You barely have enough combat training to hold a gun. Do you know how to use a broad sword like that?” Cyclonus glided his hand over Darkwing’s and gripped tight, sharing the weight of the sword.

Darkwing tilted his head up and back. He felt Cyclonus’ chest directly behind it. “And I’m sure you do?”

“Yes.” Cyclonus answered bluntly.

The white Decepticon chewed on his lip. “Alright then, Mr. Perfect. Let’s swap.”

As two robots exchanged the arms, Rick pointed a thumb up at them and grinned. Sephie slapped at him playfully. She was about to speak up to the group, but Beta Maxx beat her to the punch.

“Alright then are we all happy with our little gifts? Yes? Good.” Beta Maxx adjusted his seat. “Should we pull out the old cliché of going on three or...?”

*“Aeeiiiiirrrhhh!”*

Crasher’s scream inside the gate room echoed through her Decepticon compatriots’ ears. Even if they had been waiting for Beta Maxx to finish, there was no waiting now. The assembled group of two Decepticons, an oversized metal and fur lion, two humans and a small purple robot charged to meet the waiting battle.

“The gate’s established and locked, Eminen...What the - ?” Jetstorm gasped, his hands going to his face. “Looks like we’ve got a couple escapees...And a lost little lamb to boot.”

The Fallen didn’t have time to turn his sluggish, ice covered body before the pink lion leapt into the air with its claws splayed and ready to attack. The cat landed on the giant robot and dug its front talons into his armor. The lion then kicked frantically with its hind legs, ripping and tearing ice, snow, and metal. The Fallen caught two handfuls of pink fur and slung the feline over his shoulder and heaved it to the ground, just missing Sunstorm who was still trying to melt the Fallen’s frozen hide. Beta Maxx skittered free across the floor, sliding to a stop at Side Burn’s feet. The Autobot looked down in shock but Darkwing leapt at him before he could react. The two robots tumbled across the floor, throwing punches when they could.

At the same time Darkwing jumped, Cyclonus burst into the room. He set his eyes on Jetstorm, but before he could cross the floor Sephie let loose a sonic pulse that threw Jetstorm against a wall. She growled, “He’s mine.”



It wasn't long before Cyclonus found his sparring partner though. Windblade drew her long, arched blade and challenged the Decepticon. Cyclonus readied his own blade and swung. The two swords clashed and crackled. Before long, Cyclonus recognized that Windblade was the better swordsbot; he fell back to defending her blows rather than delivering any of his own. To make things worse, he saw Strongarm out of the corner of his eye. She smirked and wound back a fist. Cyclonus deflected another strike from Windblade's sword, having no choice but leave himself vulnerable while he did so. Strongarm let loose a thunderous jab at his side. She felt the armor plating give under her knuckles, spurring her on to ready her other first. She was too eager. Setting her sights on her target, she didn't see Cyclonus' left hand let go of his sword. Nor did she see it convert into a jet thruster. Strongarm ducked, about to belt the Decepticon in the abdomen... which put her face in line with the thruster hand. Cyclonus ignited the afterburner.

Strongarm yelled in pain as the flames burst through her head. It took Cyclonus a second to figure out what happened; most of Strongarm's skull had come apart into a swarm of black metal cubes that dodged the blast. It started to reform back into her head, but the portions scorched by Cyclonus fell away. She screamed and grabbed her face. "Windblade!"

Windblade glared at Cyclonus, then gazed at Strongarm. Her partner's face black and charred, the right side was deeply scarred. Windblade dropped her sword and wrapped her arms around Strongarm. "Sweetie, I'm here. I'm here. Shhhh. It's okay, I've got you."

Cyclonus took a step back and his head snapped to his left. The gate was still open.

Side Burn kicked himself free from Darkwing. The Autobot glanced back at Windblade and Strongarm. Darkwing's eyes darted to Crasher. The two then turned to each other and recognized the same concern in each other's faces. They nodded, and Side Burn rushed to his friends while Darkwing headed for Crasher. Before he got to her though, he had to dive to avoid Jetstorm, who was once again knocked careening by Sephie's sonic blasts. The blue and yellow robot held the sides of his head as Sephie continued to bombard him with sub-sound. Jetstorm screamed and fired wildly in the air, missing everyone and everything as Sephie pelted his servos to disrupt his aim.

"You think you can manipulate me? Talk me into letting you cut me up and giving away my humanity? What gave you the right? How could you do that to me?" Sephie gestured to the wall of cyborgs in battery compartments. "How could you do it to all of them? I should put you and all of your kind out of our misery now."

A burst of sound destabilized the Transformium in Jetstorm's arm, the metal building blocks uncoupled at the bicep and severed the arm. Grunting from the exertion, Sephie emitted a more sustained sonic attack that prevented the arm from reattaching and eventually the building blocks of the severed limb stopped trying to connect and went dormant.

"Looks like I know your weakness." Sephie's lips curled into a snarl and her eyes burned a deep violet. "Ironic you're the one that gave me a way to exploit it."

"Cyborg-babe thinks she's got the upper hand..." Jetstorm glanced at the motionless arm on the floor and his eyes flitted at his unintentional pun. "Do you worst."

"Oh I will." Sephie aimed her palms at Jetstorm's other arm. "Cuz see, I've learned something from you: there is no good and evil. No superheroes and supervillains. We're just all shades of gray... Which means I don't have to follow some abstract 'heroic' guidelines about seeking revenge; I'm free to do whatever I need to do to get payback for your victims."

Rick reached for Sephie's shoulder, "Seph...What are you doing? This isn't you. I mean, I can't imagine what you're going through —"

"No you can't!!" Sephie lashed as she sent a small pulse that knocked Rick backwards. "It's not just what he did to me... but having to live with it. Every. Day. I can't look at myself without seeing what he did. *Feel* what he did. Now, I'm going to make him feel it. I'm going to carve him up a piece at a time until he knows the same nothingness that's inside of me."

Sephie let loose her sound blast, and glared as it ripped into Jetstorm's armor plating. Her eyes went wide as they took in the sight of the damage she was inflicting.

She watched the Transformium twist and writhe trying to stay in one piece, it was as though each strand was in excruciating pain, wounded and dying. Under the sonic onslaught, a number began to wither. Sephie stared at them and her browed furled. She didn't feel the relief or satisfaction she thought she would. She wasn't sure what she felt. It wasn't compassion or guilt, she still couldn't hold those emotions about Jetstorm, but whatever it was made her stop.

"You can't do it, can you? The little lady's developed a conscience." Jetstorm spat the words at Sephie.

"Maybe..." Sound pulses lifted her from the ground. "My mind is just about the only *human* thing that you left..."

Sephie launched herself through the air, towards the Fallen and his conflict with Beta Maxx's lion. On her way there, Cyclonus passed below her. The red and orange Decepticon sprinted towards Crasher's alcove. Darkwing was already there.

"I can't get her out of there, the energy current is too strong." His red visor bulged upward in a panic. "We'd fry her trying to yank her out... Not to mention ourselves."

"Can she hear us?"

"Maybe... you... ask *me* that..." Crasher's voice reverberated as her teeth chattered.

Cyclonus' mouth twitched in something that might have been a smile. It quickly shrank back into his usual tight expression. "Can you focus on the arch? Its internal pathways?"

"H-how would I do that?"

"I tried to tell you," Cyclonus said. "You have a unique cyberoscillation in your brain that can process and expel vibrational frequencies. That stomping attack is just the tip of the iceberg." He winced at the poorly-chosen last word.

"What-t-t?"

"It's also why your brain module read as organic, and why you're more sensitive to telepathic messages..." Cyclonus wanted to set his hand on her shoulder, but the white electricity bolts made it impossible. "Also why you're the only one connected to the gate that can do this. You're...unique."

"She certainly is," Darkwing grinned.

"You c-can both...tell me...how great...I am...later." Crasher's jaw was locked but



she still tried to smile. Her metal brow then curled. “Cy-Cyclonus...How do I d-do any...of...of that?”



Sephie watched as the lion jumped at The Fallen again. It was keeping the fighting as close-quarter as it could, since each time it allowed any distance between itself and the Fallen, the member of the Thirteen would unleash a freeze attack. So far the lion had been able to fend off each assault with a blast from the triple cannon on its back. *That's a pretty smart tactic for an animal*, Sephie thought.

She studied the dance. She hesitated getting involved since an arctic draft from the Fallen would do much more damage to her small body than the Decepticons or lion, even with her... modifications. Watching them from a few paces back, she saw her opportunity. It wasn't the giant himself but Sunstorm. Wherever the skirmish went, Sunstorm followed. He kept his flame throwers aimed at the Fallen's joints, making sure that the lumbering behemoth had enough range of motion to continue the battle.

Taking careful aim, Sephie unleashed a sonic burst that slammed into the fiery yellow and white robot. Sunstorm tumbled off his feet and into one of the control consoles. Sephie hit him again to knock him to the floor.

“Keep him down, Sephie!” Darkwing called across the gate room. “We're going to try something!”

The Fallen swung his head towards the Decepticons and then turned to glance behind himself. He suddenly knew the plan. His tussle with the mechanoid lion had driven him towards the bottom of the ramp, his foot toeing the edge of the metal grating.

He struggled to take a step away from the ramp, but his knee locked in place, ice spreading deep inside the joint. The Fallen beat on his leg with a snow-covered fist to free the joint, but the large pink cat released another furious strike before he could make any progress. Talons and fangs gouged at the Fallen's armor, plates were ripped free, and sensitive wires and hydraulics exposed. The attack was ceaseless and brutal. The Fallen tried to grab its foe, but each time found only teeth and claws rather than anything on to which it could hold. He roared in frustration and fell backward, toppled by the lion's weight on his shoulders.

“Now! Do it now!” Darkwing watched the Fallen try to get up, but tumble once again.

This time the drop brought the robot halfway up the ramp. “Crasher!”

“D-do you...want to do this...instead?” The Decepticon clenched her eyes shut tight and lightning bolts arced between her teeth. “I’m... t-t-trying!!”

Cyclonus leaned in as close as he could and whispered. “Picture the gateway in your mind, it’s the only thing there, floating in the black. It’s not made out of metal and circuit, you can look past that and see the energy current itself. It’s flowing towards the gate. It’s a glowing white stream splashing along the riverbed. It branches out as it enters the arch, little tributaries bending and turning into different pools. Focus on one of those branches, do you see it?”

“I-I... Yes.”

Cyclonus continued to whisper, “Good. Good. Now imagine there’s a rock face next to the river. You do a seismic stomp. What happens to the rock?”

“It’s falling into the river. There’s a splash... The current can’t get around it. The branch is drying up!” Crasher exclaimed. “That little segment of the arch has gone dark!”

Cyclonus glanced up at the gateway, the swirling white portal sputtered for a second then regained stability.

“You did it,” He confirmed. “You’re shaking the circuits enough to affect the gate. I told you that you could!”

“N-now what?” Crasher’s brow furled.

“Now we find the branch that goes to the input controls...” Cyclonus breathed the words, “Imagine that they’re flashing red. You don’t have to know where they are, your vibrations will do it for you. All you have to do is keep your eyes open...”

Darkwing kept watching the tussle between the Fallen and giant lion, and warned, “You guys might want to hurry...”



“I really don’t know who we should be rooting for.” Side Burn’s eyes darted from the Decepticons to the Fallen, to the portal, to the banks of cyborgs that he had helped create.

“I know who did this,” Windblade gestured at Strongarm, who she still cradled in her arms. “And that I wouldn’t mind giving him a matching scar.”

“But look what the Fallen made us do. What he charmed us into thinking.” Side Burn said through a clamped jaw. “It was kinda for science, it’s still a bunch of atrocities. I... I don’t even care about the All-Knowledge or whatever anymore. I just want to get back to what we were doing before.”

“Me too.” Strongarm’s voice came out as a rasp. “To molten slag with the rest of this, I liked meeting new people and starting conversations... Even if it was in intergalactic MMORPGs. If Cybaxx doesn’t see the value in that, I don’t care. I don’t care about him at all.”

Windblade slid Strongarm’s hand away from the wound on her face. It swept from just above her eye down to her chin, but it wasn’t as deep as Windblade had feared. The blue and purple robot gingerly traced it with the soft touch of her fingers. Her mouth tightened and she said quietly, “I don’t disagree with anything either of you are saying. As long as I get to punch Cyclonus.”



Sunstorm endeavored to get to his feet. Sephie discharged another sonic salvo and the robot collapsed back to the ground.

“Why don’t you stay down like your buddy Jetstorm over there?” Sephie’s voice snarled at the mention of the other robot’s name.

“I need to get to my Idol!” Sunstorm shot a quick burst of fire at Sephie. “I am his Chosen One, his apostle!”

Sephie rubbed her temple with one hand while her other hand expelled a torrent of sound. “Really? You guys are really making it hard to be a hero here. I just want to pummel all of you...”

As Sephie kept the yellow robot pinned, all Sunstorm could do was watch the Fallen’s increasingly futile attempt to fend off the pink feline. Both of the Prime’s legs were now immobile and his flailing arms were slow and sluggish. Sunstorm tried to blink away the steamy vapor from the corner of his eyes.

Latching its teeth onto the back of the Fallen's gorget, the lion dragged the massive robot up the metal lattice of the ramp and within arm's reach of the portal. The lion's claws slipped through the spacing in the grating, trying to gain more traction. It closed its eyes, giving one quick tug after another, inching the Fallen closer to the twisting surface of blinding white light.

The Fallen wasn't going to go that easily, however. With a howl of rage, he focused his will on his right arm, which erupted in razor-sharp frozen crystal. His hand was consumed by the icy flow shaping itself into a lance that doubled the length of his forearm. His other hand dug its fingers into the grating, holding fast. With a spin as quick as a glacial flow, the Fallen drew his ice lance and punctured the lion's side. The creature's eyes sprang open and it dropped its hold on the Fallen, letting out a mournful yowl.

"You pitiable fools don't realize the power with which you're dealing." The Fallen staggered, finding balance on his unmoving legs. His voice rumbled once again, "I am a Prime. I am of a lineage directly descended from Primus. I am a..."

The Fallen stopped. Cyclonus, Darkwing, Crasher, Sephie, and Rick clearly had no idea what he was talking about. "A challenger to Unicron? The Unbinder? Manipulator of the Well of AllSparks?"

"We...Don't really have any of that here..." Darkwing glanced back at Cyclonus. "Do we?"

Cyclonus shook his head.

The Fallen's voice softened, "You truly are a wilderness unspoiled..." A frozen foot pounded the metal deck plate as he took a lurching step forward, away from the portal. "It could all be mine. The glorious entropy to be sown and reaped. My siblings have a thousand universes each. Hrm. I will have *millions!* Starting. With. You."

"GREEOOOWLLLLL!!!"

In a flash, the lion stood, darted around the Fallen and surged into his chest, knocking him from his precariously balanced legs.

Cyclonus urged, "Now, Crasher!"

The gate pulsed and churned violently, building a charge that caught the Fallen in its pull. The giant robot felt his legs lift from the metal grating. He stretched his arms as far as they could reach but found nothing to hold. He toppled, spun, and plunged into the blazing white vortex. He was gone.

It wasn't over.

The lion too was trapped by the magnetic tow. Its claws flailed frantically as it rose into the air and towards the gate. Its blue eyes were wide as they skimmed the ramp, looking for salvation. They saw none.

As it was about to submerge into the blinding energy pool, it felt something grab its mane. Then another anchor snatched a hold of his front paws, and another around his mid-section.

Strange robot limbs made from segmented black ingots spanned the gate room, their owners straining to hold the lion in place. Windblade and Side Burn grimaced, trying to reel in their elongated arms, an effort that had no results.

“Can’t you, like, shut that thing down?” Side Burn yelled.

Cyclonus whispered to Crasher, “Can you?”

“N-n-no... No...control...” Crasher’s teeth chattered as she spoke.

Strongarm dove for the shutdown console. “This won’t respond either!”

“Are we even sure we want to save that mangy beast bot?” Still on the floor, Jetstorm propped himself up on his remaining arm. He watched the rescue attempt and rolled his eyes after seeing everyone stare at him. “Fine, fine. Go ahead. See what I care.”

Darkwing whipped around and grabbed the sword Cyclonus had still been holding. Before the red Decepticon could object, Darkwing had already rushed off with the blade.

“Darkwing, what are y -?”

“Something Crasher taught me. If you can’t get anything to work...” The Decepticon swung the sword down on the conduits connecting to the left collecting tower. “... check the power cord.”

The conduits spat streams of sparks as they writhed angrily, but the portal sputtered and dimmed. Then collapsed inward, an implosion of light and energy. The last remaining speck popped, then fizzed, and was gone. So too was its pull, letting the lion crash back to the ground.

Darkwing grinned. “Maybe I should give up my maintenance position. I might be better at breaking things than fixing them.”



Everything was white. There wasn't a trace of stars or planets or dust. There was nothing. There was the void.

The Fallen stared at his hands, his body glowed with a pinkish aura, a cosmic radiation that engulfed him whole. It was warm.

"Hrm. A positive universe. How shortsighted of them." In the white vacuum, the words carried no sound. The Fallen flexed his hands, the ice began to melt away into water droplets that floated around him. Caught in his orbit, they streaked across the blank canvas of the void before him like tears on a porcelain doll. They formed no pattern, there was no order to their arrangement. The Fallen flicked at a larger droplet and it burst into more chaos. He needed to make this universe a little messier. He continued aloud-but-silently, "After I've thawed and regathered my energy, I'll return. I'll try again, even if I have to start over from the beginning."

Something moved. It slipped quickly across his body. He squinted to try to make out what it was. It moved again. He saw it this time, it was a shadow, and it was growing.

He waved his hand in a swimmer's stroke to turn around in the gravity-less nihility and instantly his eyes went wide.

A voice roared through the void. It was an old voice, one of the oldest. Even without air and vibration it was heard. It would not be refused. To the Fallen, it was familiar. It said only two words, but they were words that permeated the Fallen with horror and fear.

***"I... Hunger..."***



Cyclonus held Crasher with an arm around her shoulders. She took three small steps forward, each getting less shaky than the previous. After the third step, Crasher waved him off. She looked across the room for Darkwing, who was helping the serpent from Beast climb down from her container. She hissed her gratitude and hurried to join others of her kind gathered nearby. She threw her scaly arms around a one-eyed white feline in black armor. "Uncle Daburu, you *are* here! I didn't know what happened to you after they grabbed uss."

The alien identified as "Daburu" smiled and nodded. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words did not come; he wasn't one of Hot Shot's better experiments.

“My Idol,” Sunstorm’s wail interrupted the reunion, “I am alone without you...”

“Man... This guy.” Rick gestured at Sunstorm with both hands. “How did the rest of you see this guy and not realize you were falling for the Fallen’s scam?”

Windblade and Strongarm peeked at one another. Windblade croaked, “Sunstorm’s always been prone to... zealotism. He’s not a great measure for that sort of thing.”

Sunstorm sulked.

Sephie put a finger to lip. “Speaking of your following bad leaders –”

“Hey!”

“Should we be looking for that Cybaxx robot? Or hologram. Or whatever he was.”

A voice bounced in from outside the gate room. “Oh you don’t have to worry about that. I found a way to, hmmm shall we say, keep myself busy while you were flexing all your various muscles and fortitudes in here.”

“Beta Maxx?” Sephie turned.

The small purple robot sauntered into view. “Cybaxx was gussied up as that little specter haunting around the halls because he’d uploaded himself from his meager physical body directly into the Underbase’s archives -to absorb the information more easily and quickly of course. I found the little worm, though, and extracted all his detestable corrupted files and pathways onto this memory drive here...”

Beta Maxx held up a small hard drive only about twice the size of his thumb.

“...I was just about to dispatch him, but then I thought it would bring more satisfaction... or maybe finality or closure shall we say... to the group if I did it here. Goodbye Cybaxx. You weren’t a good bot.”

Grasping the memory stick firmly with both hands, Beta Maxx wrenched it, snapping it neatly in half. He let both halves fall to the floor, they hit with a tiny, almost insignificant ting.

“That’s it then.” Cyclonus let out a sigh and let his posture slouch slightly.

Crasher’s eyes darted across the assembly of aliens turned into cybernetic hybrids. Daburu had his arm around his neice’s shoulder. “Not quite; someone needs to take these folks home. And make sure that they’re accepted back onto their planets.”

Sephie’s mouth turned down at its corners. “Abso-freaking-lutely.”

“I’ll do it.” Side Burn volunteered. He waved behind him at Jetstorm and Sunstorm.

“I’ll take them with me. We’re all due a little penance... and need to do a little good.”

“Well haven’t you developed a set of steel bearings. Who do you think you are to throw my name around like tha-ah-ah-AEGGHHHHH!” Jetstorm screamed, covering his audio receptors as he doubled over in pain.

“Do I have to go with you to keep you in line?” Sephie held her hands in the air, her eyes scorched purple.

Side Burn smiled. “No. I’ll do that too. You can trust me on that.”

“Can I?”

Sephie lowered her hands and turned. Sureshock spoke up, “He’s never lied. He’s withheld information or let us make our own assumptions. But never an outright lie.”

Rick spoke softly, “Good, because I have something else in mind for Seph.”

“You do?” She raised an eyebrow.

“I... eh-heh... Yeah. You, me... Windblade and Strongarm taking the grand tour of Earth. It’ll do them well for them to learn a little humanity. And for you to relearn it.” Rick shuffled uneasily. “We can invite Sureshock and Grindor and Highwire too.”

“We’re plenty human, thank you.” Sureshock crossed her arms.

“Oh yeah? What kind of human names are those?” Rick put a finger to the side of his nose.

Highwire stepped forward. “I’m Shawn. She’s Joe, and he’s Derek. I assume those are better for you then?”

Derek patted Shawn’s shoulder. “Suresh – Joe, Shawn, and myself have already discussed it anyway. We’re going to go with whoever takes the others home. We didn’t exactly have the best intentions when we agreed to...this.”

He gestured to his green, black, and light blue armor. “And might do the universe better if we repay our jealousy with generosity.”

“And I’m going too.” Nestor’s voice clicked through Squeezeplay’s mouth. “I joined for the adventure, and space sounds a lot more exciting than anything at home.”

Cyclonus’ usual scowl deepened. “As long as you give us our Decepticon brother back.”

“Right...” Donnie nodded Fangry’s head and peered at Side Burn, Windblade, and Strongarm. “Although I’d like to study this suit back on Earth.”



“Excellent!” Beta Maxx burst in, “And Jetstorm and Sunstorm can load our new cybernetic hybrid friends onto Jetstorm’s vessel. I’ll start reeling in your ship, Cyclonus. What was it again? The *Annex*? The you can all be off on your merry ways.”

“You’ll stay here?” Darkwing asked.

“Why of course! I am its rightful sovereign of course.” Beta Maxx rubbed his chin. “I should get the Mini-Cons back into working order, and I’ll have a few more helping hands to get this place back to the way it’s meant to be. It will be a lot of work, a lot of work. But worth every last bit of it.”

Darkwing nodded and turned to Cyclonus. “Well, I guess when we get back to Earth, this is good-bye.”

“Perhaps... perhaps not.” Cyclonus looked suddenly embarrassed, but had already committed himself. “My ship doesn’t have a full crew compliment yet. I happen to have two spots open in maintenance. And it would help to have someone on-board who can root out any remaining surprises the Constructor Squad left...”

He trailed off, suddenly noticing a floor panel that required scrutiny.

Darkwing nudged Crasher and whispered loudly. “He’s blushing!”

Crasher giggled. “Probably just paint bleed,” she whispered back.

“Never mind,” Cyclonus mumbled and turned away. He was stopped by a hand on each shoulder.

“Cyke,” Crasher said, “you really have to loosen up a bit. Stoicism is great and all, but you’re going to go crazy if you’re so serious all the time.”

“I’ve been there and done that.”

Darkwing clucked. “Yeah, we have some work cut out for us too.”

*Smok!*

Cyclonus hit the floor plating hard. Windblade unclenched her fist and placed her hand on Strongarm’s shoulder. “Ok. Let’s go.”



Beta Maxx watched the monitor as the two ships left. “If it doesn’t warm your ember aiding those that need it...”

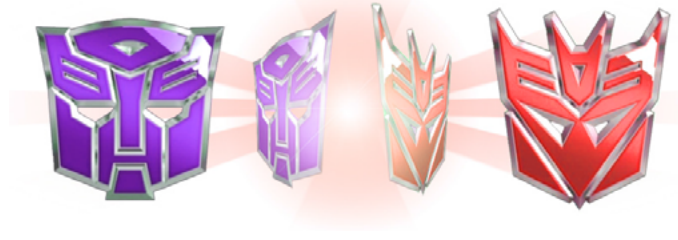
The lion stalked up behind Beta. Its wound was already closed and its gait was steady. It lowered his head and growled.

“They were right, you know. Boltax and Cybaxx. I absconded with thousands of universes of data from Axiom Nexus, and entropy *is* the natural order of the universe... The multiverse. Even if we’ve pushed the Fallen away for now, his influence is everywhere.”

“Perhaps.” A blue ring surrounded Beta Maxx’s hand as he typed his command codes into the computer console. The monitor screen split, now displaying a hidden database that had been locked out of Cybaxx’s reach. “But we still have a lot of reading to do, don’t we, Alpha?”

The lion rose on its hind legs, its beast head split and unfolded into arms. The old robot settled onto the throne once occupied by the Fallen.

“It’s always books with you. If it’s not something I need to know myself, I like to make up my history.” He sighed. “But, very well.”



## EPILOGUE 1

“We’re detecting a ship, it’s the *Annex*.” Blitzwing spun to inform Starscream. “Everyone is onboard, plus a couple old friends...and a pair of new ones.”

Starscream surveyed the battle torn Decepticon headquarters. Rodimus and his Autobot attackers were on the run, their retreat making them mere specks on the horizon. “Oh don’t they have *perfect* timing?”

“When I get my hands on Cyclonus, I’m going to rend his rotors so that he can’t ever slip away again.” Cliffjumper gritted his teeth.

“Give them a landing clearance...” Starscream thought for a second and added, “If there’s even anything left of the landing pad.”

“Yessir.” Blitzwing plugged away at the keyboard in front of him.

“\*Sigh\* I’ll write up the report explaining to Galvatron why the ship will be returning to Cybertron without the promised petroleum. Unless he wants what’s left of the burned and blown-up barrels.” Starscream took a step towards his office, then paused. He held his hand out behind him and waved it forward. “Come along, Ravage. I’m going to need your help.”

The white feline jounced along behind the Decepticon commander. “You make the lap, and I’ll lay in it, sir #EmergencyCute.”



## EPILOGUE 2

Deep under the massive metal surface of Cybertron, the ancient hallway stood testament to a time before war and strife. Its arched, vaulted ceilings caught and reverberated each sound they heard.

Each step.

Most chambers this old had fallen into disrepair or become home of any number of the planet's cyberfauna. This one, however, was kept pristine; not a single facet of the building had been altered since the cycle its doors closed.

The steps grew louder.

Not only was the architecture preserved, but so too was its function. Shelves of data-tracks and hard drives neatly lined shelves as tall as the ceilings, each one lit by a small glowing blue indicator bulb.

The steps stopped.

“Optimus Prime.”

“Drift, if you were any other Autobot, I’d scrap you myself and melt you down for my amusement. Maybe not that order.” The large purple and slate green Autobot Prime had been absorbed by the glowing holographic screen in front of him but now lifted his head to glare at the red and white robot now approaching. The screen accessed and displayed stacks 91083MR through 28987G, each file displayed simultaneously allowing Optimus’ own cataloging systems to process and sort every byte of information. “But since tracking me here demonstrates you have the hunting skills I need; I’ll forgive you rather than add you to the smelt.”

The red Autobot smirked, “Well that warms my ember... In a non-carapace-melting-life-ending way.”

“I was going to ask you down here eventually anyway.” The Autobot Supreme Commander waved his hand and the files on the holo-screen morphed into images. Three images, to be precise. They were part of personnel logs of some sort, with short profiles next to each photograph. Two of them were close headshot images – one was a robot with a cone-shaped helmet, and another had large yellow goggles and a domed head. Both robots appeared to have aerial alt modes. The third image was a screen

capture from a security feed. It showed a large white robot with blue stripes running down her chest and up her shoulders. “What do you know about the universe?”

“I know this isn’t the only one. Which means my motherboard was lying to me when she said I was special.” Drift held his pose as if expecting some unseen audience to burst into laughter.

Optimus ignored the quip. “Exactly. We’re no longer alone. Not in the multiverse... not in our own universe.”

“Are you talking about Cliffjumper? That little ragamuffin of an extra-dimensional intruder?” Drift played with his words and held out his hand to show how small he thought Cliffjumper was. It was a few feet off.

“Hm... Partially.” Optimus cocked his head to the side. “But I have my suspicion that there might be others. From universes with *similar* polarities to our own...”

Optimus trailed off and then broke the silence by clearing his throat. “\*Ahem\* Do you know why I formed the Autobots in the first place, Drift?”

“Power, greed, lust... You know. The classics.”

Optimus stared blankly at Drift for a moment. “I was a librarian.”

“Oh.”

“In my tedious hours, days, years, *decades* of processing and storing data and factoids, the only thing that mattered to me was the truth. That’s it. In stockpiling all of this infinite trivia – even more mind-numbing an endeavor than you’d imagine – I thought I would get somewhere close to finding out what the truth of existence was. Isn’t that what we all strive to achieve? To find out what our place is? Why we function? Doesn’t the definite truth of that *have* to lie out there somewhere?”

The expression on Drift’s face made it clear he had never held such existential pursuits.

Optimus continued. “In all of this... hunger for knowledge, I found that I was hardly original. I was simply following the path of something else that had already stalked for this prey. Something that was far ahead of me, yet willing to turn around and give me advice. This thing was glorious, a well-spring of collected and bound information. It was the All-Knowledge. It stood on high and shamed me that I had called myself a librarian. And it revealed to me the ultimate truth so that I need not waste my time trying to find it. The ultimate truth, the real truth is... that there is no truth. None whatsoever. Our existence is merely to have our names added to the historical ledgers. And as Optronix, my name wasn’t even a footnote. But as Optimus Prime, ruler of the Autobots and conqueror of worlds, I think I’ve done better.”

“No, I mean yeah. That new information has me just itching to start a civil war and blow up hundreds of my own kind. Or maybe start a famous food truck.” Drift’s lip curled. He had more than a sneaking suspicion he had just heard a load of Gnarly-hogwash. “I still don’t know what *you* want me to do though.”

“I received another message. Something is happening, something in the multiverse. I want to be prepared.” Optimus twisted in his chair and leaned back to face Drift. “I want an upgrade.”

Drift bite his lip and intoned, “Well, I’m flattered you’d come to me for something so... personal. But I’m not a weapons or fashion designer. Or an engineer. Or... Anything you’d need for anything like that.”

“I don’t need you for design.” Optimus raised an eyebrow. “Do you know I have a brother?”



### EPILOGUE 3

Five years later.

Three identical robots hovered over the communications screen with Galvatron and Ultra Mammoth's faces both squeezed into view. The blue glow from the screen waltzed across the three robots' yellow armor and horned helmets.

"We'll relay your query..."

"...Your petition..."

"...Your request."

They heard the footsteps near instantaneously. A blue and red robot burst in through the open doorway, his face beaming with excitement. The mop he held in his left hand barely cleared the door frame as he ran. "Did somebody just say '*quest*'??!!"

"Ugh..."

"...Heatwave..."

"...No."

Heatwave's face corkscrewed with disappointment. He mourned, "Why do you keep doing this to me?"

"The rest of your team..."

"...Is in the cargo bay..."

"...Why don't you go help them?"

"Fine." The blue and red robot slumped and plodded off. "I didn't want to go out on a journey today anyway, I heard the roundup from Cheyne is backing up travel corridors."

Heatwave continued to stomp through the hallway, his mop dripping a trail behind him. He arrived at the cargo bay and placed his hand on the scanner. The door opened energetically.

A red robot with a blue face and wings met him at the door. "Any news on...anything?"

“No, Quakebreak, they want us to continue cleaning up in here.” Heatwave grumbled through a frown.

A blue robot with a red helmet and face asked incredulously, “How can they keep us in here?”

“Yeah, ‘clean the cargo bay.’ ‘Move the energon scanners.’ ‘Install the Teletraan-14 server racks.’ Don’t they know we’re built for greater things?” A red and gray robot crossed his arms. The treads behind his shoulders bounced.

“What’s that, Landfall?” Twitching his rotor blades with curiosity, a red, silver and blue robot leaned over to Landfall. “What are we built for?”

“Uh... I dunno. Hunting Magiswords? Maybe checking for the other Primes?”

“All I know, Spinaway, is that we weren’t built for menial labor.” Heatwave sniffed. “Skytop, I think we need to revisit our plan.”

“Really?” The blue robot chirped. “I’ll go get the flash cards!”

“We don’t need those. We need a way off of this floating god of a planet.” Heatwave’s voice came out as a low growl.

“We could, you know, combine.” Landfall glanced sheepishly at Heatwave.

“You know the last time didn’t go so well.” Heatwave gritted his teeth. “We ended up getting into an argument and I yelled at my left foot for an hour. And it yelled back.”

“For the Prime of Combination or whatever, we don’t seem to do it right.” Quakebreak pondered. “So much for that strange little Aquarius robot’s stories about us being some kind of trans-dimensional guardian.”

Spinaway slouched and spoke into his chest. “So I ask again...what were we built for?”

“Hey. Hey!” Heatwave said sternly, “Rodimus is out there, Megatron is out there, who knows what happened to that Alpha Trion guy. We have plenty we could do to actually make a difference. Rather than rank lower than the lowest of the Constructor Squad.”

Skytop considered for a moment, then spoke up. “The ship that the Acolytes brought here from New Cybertron is still getting refueled in Hanger 1653. There are just a couple of Sweeps in there prepping for the return flight. So... That might be an opportunity...”

“It sounds like a pretty good one to me, actually.” Heatwave mulled, rubbing his chin while he did so.





“They’ve taken...”

“...Stolen...”

“...Appropriated the ship!”

The three yellow robots’ eyes were wide in panic. Two of them had started pacing the floor, driven by their fretting.

“Do not worry, my children.” The voice echoed throughout the chamber. It was so booming it seemed to have no direction to it. “Let them take the vessel; it has been planned.”

“We don’t understand then...”

“Why we forbade them from leaving...”

“...If this departure was part of your foresight, Unicron.”

The omnipresent voice chuckled and warmly explained, “Sometimes resistance is the best contributor to determination. And they will need to be filled with great determination for their mission ahead.”

“The plan was...”

“...To motivate them...”

“...By getting them to rebel?”

“Yes.” A jovial tone twinkled in Unicron’s voice, “Also the old proverb always rings true, ‘timing is everything’...”



Sitting in the captain’s chair aboard the *Annex*’s sister ship *Bouyancy*, Heatwave spun and asked, “Are we still clear, Quakebreak?”

“I’m not picking up anything on scanners. I don’t think they sent anyone after us.” The red robot enlarged the holographic scope displaying the quadrant of space around the ship.

“Good. That means we got away clean.” Landfall crossed his arms.

The robot with rotor blades protruding from his back rebutted, “Not necessarily, I mean they could have let us go.”

“Spinaway, you always were a cynic. We’re just *that* good. I’m telling you.”

“Maybe not! I’m picking up two pings closing in.” Quakebreak reported, “Wait... They’re in front of us?”

The blue and red robot at the center of the command deck ordered, “Direct all scanners towards the bow, let’s find out what’s out there.”

“Doing it. They have Cybertronian signals, but whatever they are, they’re a lot smaller than a ship.” Quakebreak’s fingers flashed across the board in front of him. “They’re Cybertronian.”

“You already said that.”

“No, I mean they’re Cybertronian... They’re two individual Transformers!”

Heatwave leaned forward. “What are they doing all the way out here?”

“We could ask them that rather than sit here guessing.” Landfall snarked.

“Hrnn. Bring them in.” Heatwave stood. “Spinaway and Landfall, let’s go meet our guests when they land.”

The shuttle bay was two decks down by powerlift. It was sizeable for this class ship as it doubled as the main cargo hold, and it also permanently housed its own shuttle with all the extra storage space built in for that. Heatwave entered first with his two cohorts flanking close behind. The two lone voyagers had already landed; one was a large – by organic standards; it was only a third the size of the other robots – yellow, black, and orange vespoïd alternate mode and the other a blue, purple, and yellow aerodynamic fighter jet.

“Want to show us your faces?” Heatwave called across the hangar. “Maybe share your names?”

The wasp converted first. His robot mode was strangely organic and his segmented eyes gleamed an unusual emerald. “Of course, my dear new acquaintances. Introduc-

tions would all around be appreciated, but to be the initiator: my designation is Waspinator, as adopted when I took on this beast mode. And I'm accompanied by..."

The jet's canopy blinked pink. The voice that spun out of its vocalizers was gruff and graveled. "I can introduce myself. Depth Charge. Maximize!" He then converted, his lithe robot mode stood head and shoulders shorter than red and blue robots still approaching.

"Heatwave. Spinaway. Landfall." The largest of the trio pointed to his companions.

"It's, uh, a pleasure to meet you, Waspinator, Depthcharge Maximize. Is that a surname related to 'Maximus' or something like that?"

"It's an activation code," Depth Charge rolled his eyes. "...And it's only related in some universes."

"What were you doing out here?"

Waspinator stepped forward. His voice buzzed softly, "We've been endeavoring to return home to Cybertron. The rest of our squadron - our leader, Scorponok, Tarantulas, Scavenger, and Quickstrike - as well as the prisoners - Optimus Primal, Cheetor, Rat-trap, and Rhinox - managed a departure on board a shuttle comprised of salvage from a pair of vessels named the *Graviton* and *Talon*, but the two of us were otherwise detained by the native inhabitants of the planet. Our travels though have carried us for thousands of years, perhaps even more than tens of thousands. What's our planet like in this era?"

Heatwave told Waspinator and Depth Charge about Cliffjumper's arrival from Primax 207.0 Epsilon, the Autobots' first attempted Ark launch thwarted by the Decepticons, Omega Terminus and the mutants it had created, the trans-warp battle between the *Ark* and *Nemesis*, first contact with Earth in the form of a nuclear missile aimed at the *Nemesis*, Rodimus' many attempts to overthrow Optimus. O-pods, sonic battles, Sephie Beller and the Trans-Humans, Cyclonus' assassination attempt on Megatron, the reunification of the original Nexus Prime, Megatron's resurrection as Galvatron, Starscream becoming commander of the Decepticons' permanent base on Earth, the Underbase, Optimus Prime's upgrade, and Ultra Magnus' invasion of Primax 207.0 Epsilon. The destruction of that universe and the survival of its Earth. Solarbot. The Gobots trying to save their home dimension. Takahasi-hakase's and Donnie Finkleberg's advancement of Demolisher's Robot Master technology. Rewind's theft of it to resuscitate Chromedome. Ultra Mammoth, Prowl, Silverbolt, and Ironhide's exploits on ancient Earth - which he didn't need to tell Depth Charge. Those robots' return to the present and their part played in reconstructing the Star Saber, which together with the Terminus Blade ended the multiversal singularities. The appearance of a heroic Unicron and evil Primus, and the reformatting of Optimus Prime into the redemption-seeking Nova Prime. Megatron from Primax 207.0 Epsilon returning to conquer New Kaon and the regions directly

north. The rebirth of Gaea who became New Cybertron, the Acolytes of Unicron, and everything else that Aquarius had told him of...

“Hold on...” Depth Charge waved for the history lesson to end. “*That* Megatron is still alive? And still being a huge pain in the skidplate? I thought I took care of him thousands of years ago; how hard is it to get rid of him?”

Heatwave shrugged.

“Pit. My home universe had it easy when our Megatron went offline while in stasis on the Ark...” Depth Charge muttered. He cleared his throat and said aloud, “If he’s on your hit list, then count me in. I don’t like to leave loose ends if I can avoid it; consider Megatron as good as gone.”

Waspinator pondered for a brief second then spoke up, “I decidedly have had enough fighting... But if this Starscream is in need of a speechwriter, I should have plans to offer my services.” He rubbed his shoulders at his wings. “Although I wouldn’t hold much anticipation for the return trip.”

“This ship can get you there in just three days.” Spinaway offered helpfully.

The vespoid robot stared then his mandibles clicked, and he shook his head. “Why does this universe hate me so?”

