

Transformers Timelines Presents:

A Team Effort

A Transformers: Wings Universe Story

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“He is our sal-vay-tion! Not some mythical creatah of the dusty datatracks sitting idle in the Hall of Records, but an actual plating-and-gears Cybertronian come to delivah us from the cruw-el shackles of the Autobot Council, which was designed only to tie us down. To keep us underfoot! His name is Powah. His name is Might. His name is Bravery. His name is Unstoppable!

“The path he has laid before us will delivah us from the death and de-cay that we have come to know as our civilization, and bring to us the glory, the powah, the vent of fresh air that will enable us to rise up, transceeennddd the wretched confines of this planet, and reach out to the heavens themselves! Our empire will spread through the vast-ness, the dark-ness, the black-ness that sur-rounds Cybertron, and to the faraway lights in the night’s sky.

“There we will find our life’s blood. The rich bounty that will restore our strength! We shall sip from the divine streams of oil that flow into great pools as wide as oceans, masticate on the holy, ever-pure minerals reaching up from the very grounds that we lay our weary heads upon. Then we shall re-turn from the cosmos—bringing with us the won-ders we have seen—we will rebuild Cybertron; restore it as it should have appeared during the so-called ‘Golden Age’. It will be in our own image. The Autobots will be cast down from their high perches, giving room for every Cybertronian to have his fill. Not only of the substances that we need to fu-el our bodies, but they will have their fill of freedom as wey-ell. Of e-quality. And in-teg-rity. And above us all will sit not an in-de-cis-ive council, bickah-ring while the most poor and wretched of us fade off-liinnee and slip into The Eternal Void. No, sitting above us shall be but one Cybertronian. The wisest that this world has ever seen! Yessir, it will be Him! His immense gloriousness there to take us by the hand and walk us down the path into the light!”

“Oh, give it a rest!” Datamine cradled his laser rifle while he scanned the increasingly less-dark horizon. The flames were getting closer. As a low-level criminal from the Badlands, the black-and-orange mechanoid had seen the Decepticon

movement as a means to something much greater than the measly credits he had been...acquiring. Identity theft and system hacking could only get a bot so far in this day and age, what with the network hounds patrolling every data pathway from here to Iacon. So if the Decepticons offered power, and, more importantly, riches, why not enlist? Greed is good, after all. The Decepticon cause was all fine and dandy for a while, but what he didn't count on was the propaganda. The daily brain-washing, dispensed by babbling tools for the greater cause like Abacus, was starting to wear his processors thin. "We've heard that all before, Preacher-Bot. Can it for someone who gives an improper fraction about all that non-sense."

"For serious." Deadbolt waved his rifle in the air. "Some of us Decepticons don't believe a smelting word of that scrap those warlords try to fill our heads with. We just want to do two things—fighting and shooting!"

The purple-and-mauve self-declared Decepticon cleric bowed, "And such is His wisdom. Through accepting each and every Cybertronian into his fold, no matter whether the robot be burning bright with intellect or dim as a 4-jurn bulb, he has shown us all the light."

Datamine stretched a finger towards the looming fire, which was creeping forward. "Is THAT part of 'His' plan, too? For the sake of the coefficient, he left us here. Abandoned us. And now he's ignoring all of our comm messages! If he was so great, don't you think he'd—I don't know—SEND THE BACK-UP WE REQUESTED TWO SOLAR CYCLES AGO?!"

"His cunning has a place for us all in his Grand Schematic." Abacus placed one hand on his chest and stretched the other towards the sky dramatically. "We must have faith in our-selves that we might live up to his ex-pec-tay-tions."

"We have THREE Elite Guard squads coming after us! 'His' only expectation is that we die! What kind of noble quest for freedom and equality is that a logarithm for?" Datamine poked at Abacus' chest plating with an index finger. "I should have listened to Falcon's pitch instead and joined up under Deathsaurus. Did you know that he has a stack of gold coins as tall as an Omega Guardian? Now that's the type of complex polynomial I can get behind!"

"Deathsaurus hordes for himself what He will provide for all." Abacus brushed aside Datamine's accusatory finger.

Datamine huffed, then turned his back on the stubborn preacher. "So far His Quotient-iency hasn't provided even one single quadratic equation. Not the variables, not the constants, or even the—Oh!" The Decepticon's rant came to an abrupt halt when he noticed the blue dot of light that suddenly appeared in the center of his chest. Realization took just a nanoklick to sink in. "By the Radix with an Exponent of Zero..."

Deadbolt stared at the small circle of light bouncing across Datamine's chest. Either he didn't understand what was happening, or he tried to lighten the mood. With Deadbolt, though, you could always count on it being the former. "Datamine?"

"Yeah?"

"I think Abacus called us dumb before."

"I think so, too."

The Decepticon bunker turned from a pale gray-silver to a dazzling orange-ochre as its insides filled with a towering, scorching fireball. Hovering overhead, its engines drowned out by the devastation below, the giant white-and-blue bomber watched on as its bombs tore the structure and its occupants to shreds.



An image of the explosion lingered for a nanoklik before it twitched, sputtered, and faded from the screen, which hovered half a mechanometer from the floor. The explosion had been large enough to be captured by one of the Decepticon spy satellites orbiting Cybertron.

For a moment the room stayed silent, until an echoing voice bounded from rusted wall to rusted wall. “Why should we care about that? Those were Megatron’s troops; I say, good riddance!” Trannis stood in the shadows, with only the light from his optics visible to the other members of the Decepticon War Council.

The reply came in a groan, a buzz; a fully-synthesized voice with no mechanical mouth to help shape the words and make it seem more “natural”, as an organic would say. “That may be, Trannis, but do you think the Elite Guard cared who they fought for? Who they served? Those of you gathered here today, make no mistake—the Elite Guard would have treated your forces the very same way. They want to dog us until our servos freeze and our machinations fail.”

“What you say, Straxus, is quite true.” The light from the singular yellow eye centered in the purple hexagonal face flared, burning bright and intense as Shockwave spoke. “The Elite Guard seeks to destroy all Decepticons. Even if they should fall under the jurisdiction of Zardak’s Maladroids, Cannonball’s Maraudicons, Preditron’s Destronges, Hook’s Constructicons, or Reflector’s Photons.”

Even in the smallest of arguments, Preditron’s fury was known to roar throughout the halls of Kaon’s makeshift citadel. Now it was nearly deafening. “And what would you have us do, then, Shockwave? Shrink with fear? Withdraw from the battlefield forever to lick our wounds and cower at each shadow that passes us by?” The blue-and-yellow Decepticon turned to the Warlord seated across from him. “Straxus, I know this is not your hunting strategy. You thirst for battle as much as I. Surely you do not agree with Megatron’s spokesperson?!”

Straxus’ optics glowed like two burning embers piercing the dark. “Do not misunderstand me, Preditron. While I fully recognize the threats we face, I am no coward. And should you dare think to even imply as much ever again, you know the full wrath that the ruler of Darkmount can bring to bear.”

“Oh no! Oh dear, oh dear! Threats and violence amongst each other do not become us. Oh no, no, no!” Falcon screeched from behind his podium. “We have called these War Councils in order to share intelligence and battle plans, not turn into the Autobot High Council ourselves!”

“It pains me to say this, but Falcon does speak the truth.” Zardak’s voice was muffled by the battle mask that was ever-present over his face. No one had ever seen the black-and-purple robot’s real visage, and, by his will, no one ever would. “Let us not get distracted by these trivial disputes.”

“If we may be so bold as to be the ones to change the topic of discourse...” Reflector paused a moment to assess the sinister stares that permeated the darkness of the citadel. As three individual robots sharing one voice, the other warlords considered him/them an oddity. It didn’t help matters that his/their entire army also shared his/their same face. As the other Decepticons stared, it was as though he/they could feel their ravenous optics picking at his/their armor plating, seeking to pierce through to the vitals inside. “The Elite Guard tears through our front lines everywhere. We are losing ground. We suggest we find something to help turn the tide of this war.”

Trannis raised an optic, an action that remained obscured by shadow. “And what, three-tongue, do you suggest?”

“A weapon. An energy source. A warrior.” Reflector’s voice was calm, tempered, and entirely in contrast to the thunderous shouts and bellows from the other Decepticon warlords. “We’re sure each of us are working on some master plan we’d rather share with each other. We just need to reveal our secrets and coordinate our plans.”

Hook glanced between the faces and optics protruding from the dark. “Yes. That sounds like a fair deal. Let us discuss each of our plans.” The Constructicon himself held particular interest in a new technology that his spies had uncovered in the ruins of Gygax.

“Very well.” Straxus’ voice pinged in the dark. “Let us discuss how to destroy the Autobot Elite Guard.”

Shockwave’s singular gold optic glowed intensely as he absorbed the information divulged by each warlord. This was exactly as his master had planned; with the data gained from this scheme, Megatron could exploit each Decepticon Warlord’s interests, and use them for his own ends.



“Pow! Bam! And just like that, we were sitting in the middle of the Decepticon fortress. Oh! And, being a Decepticon fortress, it was full of Decepticons! But the four of us, we scared them!” The black, white, and orange robot shifted in his seat as he made the shape of a laser rifle with his finger and thumb. “They all ran away when we started firing, pcc-cch-chow, pcc-cch-chow! Just like that! So we ran after them, shooting all the way. Pcc-cch-chow, pcc-cch-chow! An—”

“Sprocket, who are you talkin’ to out there?” A gray, blue, and green robot inquired of the talkative Elite Guardsman.

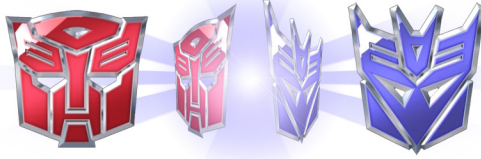
“Rumbler! Glad you’re here! I was just telling Councilbot Halogen about how we broke into the Decepticon fortress at Gygax. Isn’t that right, Councilbot—”

Rumbler let out an exasperated sigh and rubbed his optics beneath his orange visor. “Sprocket, d’we hafta go through this again? Councilbot Halogen is in Iacon. With the rest of the High Council. And we’re all tha way out here in Detrona. Halogen is in Iacon. We’re in Detrona.”

“I’m not sure I fol—”

“HALOGEN ISN’T HERE! YOU’RE TALKIN’ TO. NO. BODY!” Rumbler slammed a fist against the side of Sprocket’s green four-wheeled vehicle.

“I know that!” Sprocket exclaimed, then put a hand up to cover his mouth as he whispered to Rumbler, “But I think Councilbot Halogen takes offense when you tell him he doesn’t exist.” Sprocket gave Rumbler a wink and a nod, then turned back to his conversation with the invisible—and, for all logical explanations, imaginary—council member.



“How’d the meeting go?” The interlocutor was obscured by the dark, but Gutcruncher knew the owner of the voice anyway. He always stood in that same spot just outside turn five-four-six-three-two of the Transmorpher Freeway. Always looking up at the sky.

Gutcruncher sighed a very familiar sigh. “Same as the last two meetings; I may as well have stayed home.”

“Nothing happened, then? Nothing of consequence?” The other Decepticon’s gaze remained fixed on the skies overhead. The stars twinkled and bounded about in the blend of blacks and blues that swirled across the heavens, but the Decepticon paid all of this no mind. Instead, he looked past the stars, past the blues that dipped into the black. He looked at something that his optics told him wasn’t there, yet his processors insisted must be.

Gutcruncher stared at the same area of black by which his compatriot was transfixed. He shook his head, unable to see anything of interest, and remembered their conversation. “No, nothing. Which more than likely was for the best. Why would I want those imbeciles privy to my own business?”

“So, I take it you didn’t tell them about...” The Decepticon’s voice trailed off, but his optics narrowed, indicating the point in space at which he had been staring.

“No.” Gutcruncher sighed. “Have you even seen it yet? Do you know where it is?”

“Seen? No.” The Decepticon paused for drama’s sake. “But I have *heard* it. Each night it sings to me. And I know where the song carries me.”

Gutcruncher stared incredulously at the other Decepticon. “O-kaaay...”

“I’m *kidding*.” The other Decepticon broke off his gaze and turned to look at Gutcruncher. The light from the stars above finally braved the dark and revealed his face; the silver face mask glimmered like the stars themselves, the light’s reflection bound in place only by the emerald confines of the robot’s helmet. “Math. Math is how I know where it is. By tracking gravitational anomalies and cross-analyzing with the brief instances of blocked starlight, I’ve pinpointed the object’s exact location.”

“Finally, Charger, some *good* news!” Gutcruncher clenched a fist in front of his chest. Although he barely understood most of what Charger had been saying about his discovery, the Decepticon leader did understand two words, “incalculable energy.” And those two words were more than enough to spur excitement within Gutcruncher’s rigid grill structure.

“Anticipating your positive reaction,” Charger turned once again towards the stars, “I have sent Take-Off to acquire transportation for us.”

With a forward tilt of his head meant to mimic a grimace, Gutcruncher stared silently at his flamethrower trooper. Charger raised an optic. “Was my anticipation in haste?”

“No, Charger, that I have no problems with.” Gutcruncher buried his face into the palm of his hand. “It was the other part of your sentence that I dread.”

“Take-Off?” Charger asked.

“Precisely.” Gutcruncher slinked away into the dark. “Come on, Charger, time to head back to base...and hope that Take-Off doesn’t mess things up too much.”

Charger pivoted on his heels and followed Gutcruncher underneath the towering freeway and towards the passages below. “I apologize. I had not realized Take-Off was so inept.”

Up ahead, formless in the black, Gutcruncher’s voice echoed through the halls. “Oh, he’s not inept. He’s just dumb.”

“Oh,” Charger puzzled over Gutcruncher’s statement as the floor beneath his feet began to slope downwards. The buzz and whirl of the Decepticon headquarters at the end of the shadowy, winding corridor started to softly fill the hallway around the two Decepticons. Murmurs, compared to the clamor they were heading towards. “I’m afraid I don’t quite see the distinction.”

“You will.”



As he stormed from the hangar, the annoyed Elite Guardsman heard a voice behind him. “Rumbler, where’s Sprocket? Our meeting’s in... fifty-six nanokiks.” Tap-Out glanced at the chronograph embedded into his wrist. “You know how the boss-bot feels about punctuality.”

Rumbler spun to face the smaller green robot. “That tool’s insane! He’s out there talkin’ to some politician that he thinks he sees. But he can’t. Because he’s not there. He’s just talkin’ to an empty room!”

Tap-Out smiled. “I don’t have to remind you ‘that tool’ is your brother, do I? Or, more than that—your TWIN brother?”

“So?” Rumbler arched his back and glared down his nose gear at Tap-Out. “Whatchya sayin’?”

Tap-Out wandered over towards the door that led to the hangar. “I’m saying that sometimes the missiles don’t fall far from the sprue. Maybe whatever design flaw is causing your brother’s...loopiness is inherent in BOTH your blueprints. Maybe you should have a doc look into that molybdenum92-sized processor of yours to make sure you’re not going to go all glitchy on us, too.” Tap-Out’s smile grew even wider.

“Or how ‘bout I just make your face go all ‘glitchy’ after I introduce my fist to it several dozen times?” The gray, blue and green robot’s stare was ice-cold. Tap-Out fought to keep a shiver from running through his servos.

“Good point. Consider the question dropped.” Tap-Out leaned out the doorway. “Hey, Sprocket, meeting time!”

“Roger and wilco, little chief!” Sprocket leapt up from the powder-blue seat inside of the Stealth Team’s all-terrain Attack Cruiser, leaving his conversation with the good and impossible Councilbot behind. “You whistle and the cyber-hounds come a-barking!”

“What’re ya talkin’ about? ‘Cyber-hounds?’ Grow up, Sprocket!” Rumbler berated his twin brother as he passed.

Sprocket ignored the remark, twirled a chair around at the meeting table, and plopped his aft end into its hard metal surface with a *clang*. Tilting his head down slightly, a digital chronograph appeared in the lower right-hand corner of his visor. “Hey, look at that! I’m right on time! And the boss is nowhere to be seen...Shoot, he’s late for his own meeting!”

“How many times do I have to tell you,” A bright-yellow robot emerged from an adjacent hallway. “Your chronograph runs point-six-eight-seven-five nanokliks fast. Screws up every mission.” Powerflash’s smile bisected his face in a playfully sinister way. “I’m never late.”

“Of course not, sir.” Tap-Out noticed the data disk in Powerflash’s hand and grinned. “What have you got for us this solar cycle?”

Powerflash slid the disk into a receiver underneath the white table that occupied most of the room. The rest of the Stealth Team looked on anxiously as the yellow robot keyed in the necessary identification codes. After the verification sequence was acknowledged, a giant, three-dimensional fabrication of Sentinel Major’s face began to orbit above the table. “I’m Sentinel Major.”

“You’d think he’d get that, since we already put in our Elite Guard IDs, we already know that,” Tap-Out whispered to Powerflash, who shot him a warning look.

The simulated image of Sentinel Major twitched and whirled to face Tap-Out. “I heard that!” Tap-Out shrunk from the giant, glaring face of the Elite Guard Supreme Commander. “Now, ask me a question.”

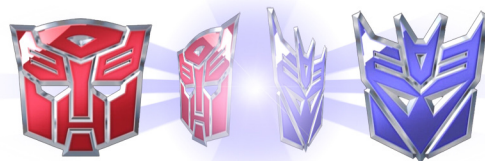
“What is our mission?” Powerflash leaned forward in his chair.

“I’m not sure I heard that.” The rotating head stopped in front of Powerflash. “Did you say, ‘Hot as Armise Sun?’” The Major’s head bobbed expectantly in front of the Stealth Team’s commanding officer.

Powerflash groaned. “No. What. Is. Our. Mission.”

“Did you say, ‘No one taser my shin?’” The projected face rolled its optics. “Fine. If all you ‘bots want to do is make gibberish small talk to a pre-programmed message, I’ll move things along. Here is your mission.”

Powerflash turned and glowered at Tap-Out, who could not help but chuckle at his superior’s frustration.



The noise from the bar could be heard as far as two city blocks away. It was a known gathering place for the most wretched and villainous Decepticons...and the most honorable and noble Autobots. In this tavern, faction symbols meant nothing, often leading to drinking games between Constructicons and Protectobots, or karaoke battles waged amongst Cassettrons and Recordicons.

Weaving through the boisterous crowds, Take-Off was overcome by the bar’s atmosphere. The bright, pulsating lights, the pounding rhythms, it was all intoxicating even without taking a single sip of Energon-spiked oil. Just as the bar began to spin, and he was about to lose himself in the living sea of mechanoids swaying to Radio AM Robot’s latest single, he saw his mark. The gray-and-blue robot sitting in the corner had made a reputation for himself as someone who could get a hold of anything. And with a name like “Axer”, it probably wasn’t through asking politely. Or by filing the requisite data work.

Which meant that he was exactly the right machine for the job when you wanted things kept quiet and off the books. Both things that Take-Off knew Charger would be anticipating.

Axer paid Take-Off no mind as he sat down across from him. Instead, the bounty hunter kept his optics on two female Decepticons giggling at the bar. After a cycle or two, the uncomfortable silence began to nag at Take-Off, who attempted to break it by drumming his fingers on the circular bar table in front of him. “Uhhh. Hello?”

Axer didn’t reply, he just nodded. It was more like a tilt of the head. Subtle, suave, or just plain rude, Take-Off couldn’t decide which.

“My friends and me, we’re looking for transport to a classified destination. Myself, my boss, two accomplices...and no questions asked.” Take-Off shifted uneasily on the rusted, mangled bar stool. “Heh.”

Axer’s gaze remained on the bar, even though the two female Decepticons had left. “You know my rates, right?”

“Oi! He talks!” Take-Off straightened his posture. “Erm. I mean, yes. Yes I do.”

Axer once again fell silent.

“I know all about your rates because I’m a Decepticon.” Take-Off looked down at the bright purple symbol in the center of his chest. “But you probably already knew that.” A nervous smile spread across the Decepticon’s blue face.

“But I’m not just any Decepticon; I’m part of Gutcruncher’s secret crew that’s trying to take over Cybertron for themselves. That’s actually where the transportation comes in. We have a brainy guy—who tries to play it smooth, but you should see it when he loses his temper—that’s been following these readings from space.” Axer still hadn’t flinched. Take-Off cleared his vocalizer, shifted on the stool and continued. “Let me tell you, Charger—his name is Charger—is obsessed with this thing. Every day it’s ‘asteroid this’ and ‘meteor that’; it makes you wish it would end like a forced reboot.”

The chatty Decepticon leaned in closer, in full swing now, talking as fast as his vocalizer could generate the words. “Somehow he found out that this asteroid has a vast amount of energy stored in it. I think he said something about lasers, and sensors, and relativity, and spatial something or another. Anyway, it’s like a hundred warehouses of Energon...times ten! So Gutcruncher is practically bonkers when he hears this news, but he wants to keep it quiet so that none of the other Decepticon warlords make a play for the asteroid. Because Gutcruncher is planning on using it all for himself; he wants to destroy the Autobot Elite Guard with it. Have you heard about the Elite Guard? They have been a pain in the aft. Nothing but. Right now they’ve got the momentum in the borderlands, pushing our troops back. And they’re not even calling this a war! Can you imagine that? We’re out here every day fighting for our lives, and they’re back in Iacon calling it a ‘skirmish’. What is that? A Hall of Education-yard fight? It’s just mad, that’s what it is. I’m a little off-topic, but this type of energy isn’t on any of the known charts, but when it’s compared to identifiable energy signatures with a similar...spectrums or something, this is some powerful stuff. Gutcruncher doesn’t know how he’s going to use it just yet, but he’s just insanely clever. He’s the type of ’con that can take a Stratotronic fighter jet and turn it into a mobile headquarters and still have enough left over to build a tank. The ’con is good. The Elite Guard might as well give up now.”

Axer swiveled his head to look at Take-Off. A sardonic look spread across his face, however, Take-Off ignored this. He was too immersed in his story.

“That’s actually why I joined up with Gutcruncher; he’s smart, but not egomaniacal about it. Megatron and Deathsaurus? Feh, they don’t care if you exist. Because they know they’re smarter than you are, see? But Gutcruncher, he’s a machine’s machine. A mechanism of the people. Completely down to Cybertron and actually willing to talk to you. Sure, he might try to sell you some scrap metal when you’ve agreed upon a case of pulse rifles, but he’s a good mechanoid at heart. And you can’t really blame a bot for trying to make a little extra coin on the side, yeah?” Take-Off finally realized that Axer was staring at him in disbelief.

As he raised an inquisitive optic ridge, Take-Off asked, “What? Am I going too fast for you?”

The Decepticon bounty hunter across the table leaned back and crossed his arms across his chest. “Oh. I was just waiting for you to tell me where Gutcruncher’s headquarters are, and his sleep mode schedule for the next deca-cycle.”

“Huh?” Take-Off scratched his head. “You know, now that you mention it, I think this asteroid thing is weighing on his processors with a mean aggression. I have seen him skulking around the headquarters at unusual cycles of the night. Sometimes I’ve seen him go topside to sit under Transmorpher to stare at the stars. Pretty much in Charger’s usual place. Do you know the Energon-Os ad b—Oi?!”

Axer grabbed Take-Off’s wrist to silence him. With the tip of his chin, he indicated a robot sitting at the bar. It was the robot that Axer had been keeping track of all night; the bounty hunter had only covered his observations with his leering gaze directed at the fine curves of the fairer socialites that frequented the tavern. He placed an elbow on the table, leaned over to Take-Off, and whispered, “That mechanoid across the room is an Autobot. If you take a closer at the symbol on his chest, he’s Elite Guard. And, guess what? He’s been listening to you carrying on this whole time. So, for your sake, I hope that was all some elaborate cover story. Or else your boss just might have a few choice words for you next solar cycle.” Axer winked and stood up.

“Right...” Take-Off fidgeted nervously.

As he walked past Take-Off, Axer leaned over to whisper in the Decepticon’s audio receptor, “And don’t you ever approach me again, *chatterbox*. I have a reputation to uphold, and you? With one sniff I could tell you were the type who brings everyone down with him. I don’t need that.” Axer paused for a moment. “Good luck finding a ship.”

Take-Off watched as the bounty hunter, smuggler, and all-around criminal disappeared into the crowded bar room. Then he spun quickly to catch another glimpse of the Elite Guardsman that had been eavesdropping on Take-Off’s tell-all. He saw a flash of yellow and green, but the winged robot used a pack of vid-heads for cover, and he too vanished into the crowd.

Unable to believe his own foolishness, Take-Off buried his face into the palms of his hands. He dreaded his return to HQ; he didn’t want his gut crunched. Whatever that process entailed, it did not sound like a pleasant one. He slouched further, and when a waitress walked past, he made sure to order double. His shady acquaintance might have left, but he was going to need the extra courage when he returned to base.



“And that’s what I saw.” Sentinel Major’s holographic face had been replaced by Delta-Seeker’s ghostly visage. Cast in ethereal shades of blues and cyans, the Recon Team member’s expressionless visor was even more lifeless as it hung in the middle of the Stealth Team’s conference chamber. It was more like looking at the hull-casing of a tri-valve vaporizer than an Autobot’s face.

In one disturbing instant, the hovering, hollow head morphed from Delta-Seeker back into Sentinel Major. However, Delta-Seeker could still be heard complaining in the background of the recording, “See?! I’m great at blending into a crowd! How about you reconsider my application to the Stealth Team now?”

The recreation of the Major’s face ignored the whining taking place at the edge of the microphone’s range. Instead, it continued to focus on the mission at hand. “So, Powerflash, I hope you see the problem we face. We can’t let anything like the energy that Flake-Off goon was describing fall into Decepticon hands. If it exists. And I’m sure your team will, as

always, come up with a creative plan to thwart Gutcruncher's scheme. If *that* exists, too. Make it something worth *my* stamp of approval."

Powerflash nodded, acknowledging the information that the recorded message had just supplied. Slowly he let his gaze drift back down to the other members of the Stealth Team seated at the large conference table. His expression was grim. "Did anyone NOT hear the part of the story where DS was spotted by the Cons? Because that stuck out in my mind."

"Yeah. And that punk thinks he can join our team? The bot just doesn't haven't any concept of 'stealth'." Rumbler was slouched in his chair, arms crossed in front of his chest. His usual glare emanated from his face.

"No." Powerflash raised a weary optic at his mechanic. "Well, yes. But, more to my point is, the Decepticons aren't really that stupid. I know we try to downplay them as incompetent or just plain thick-processed, but they do have some smarts. I don't see them being the type to walk into a bi-factioned bar and blab all of their secrets."

Sprocket, who was lost in tracing the dividing line between two adjoining sheets of the table's metal with his finger, interjected, "So...it's a trap?"

Tap-Out turned in his chair to face the Stealth Team's pilot. "Well, they do call them 'Decepticons' for a reason."

"Oh! I just got that!" Sprocket grinned from cheek guard to cheek guard.

Rumbler sneered at his brother, then asked, "If it's a trap, what're we gonna do to spring it?"

"Walk right into it." Powerflash leaned back in his chair and paused for a moment. Then he added, "Or, rather, have Tap-Out walk right into it."

A surprised look swept across Tap-Out's face. Albeit a disingenuous one, since he had been given the same orders before. More times than he wished to count. "Hey! Why is it always me who has to walk into a trap?"

"Because of that six-five-three-five-six-dash-nine-two-nine-two-dash-three-four-six body of yours. Do you realize how many Cybertronians have that same chassis?" Powerflash raised a finger each time he mentally added another name to his count. "I can think of ten off-hand, and that's without even leaving this block of town."

Sprocket leaned forward and squinted at the former bodyguard. "Yeah... I think I had an uncle that looked like you..."

"Shut up, tool." Rumbler's grip on the table tightened as he glared at Sprocket. "We never had no uncles."

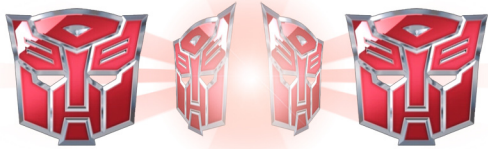
With his index finger, Sprocket rubbed his chin until a look of realization sprang to his face. "Oh yeah, that's right!"

Sprocket's brother let out a long, exasperated sigh. "Alright, Boss-bot, so what's the rest of our plan?"

The Stealth Team leader rested his chin in his open hand as he stared off into the distance. "I'm going to need some green electronic paint..."

"More of it?" Rumbler groaned. "You know how hard it is to get your hands on that stuff after the Council banned it?"

Powerflash apparently didn't hear his mechanic's complaints. "And get some black for Tap-Out."



“Sir!” Sentinel Major saluted as Magnum entered his office. The Councilbot’s hands were folded neatly behind his back, and his straight posture revealed just how tall the robot actually was. As he came face to face with the Major, Magnum raised his optics in an inquisitive manner.

“I’ve sent Powerflash my message, sir. They will get underway with their mission by the end of the solar cycle. I guarantee it.” Sentinel smiled boastfully.

Magnum reached down to Sentinel’s desk and picked up the latest field report from each of the Guard’s six teams currently deployed. The missing report from the Special Ops Team—Sentinel thought it best to rename the squad due to the negative press that “Combaticon” was receiving in the media—felt like a twelve thousand kilounit weight on Magnum’s shoulders. The red and blue robot offered, half-heartedly, “Good work, Sentinel.”

Sentinel only heard the praise, not the tone of voice that carried it. “Thank you, sir.”

The Councilbot raised his optics from the report. “If we can stop Gutcruncher, our forces will score a major victory. He will be the fifth Decepticon Warlord to fail in the past four deca-cycles. Right after Thunderwing, Blue Bacchus, Octus, and Legonis.”

Sentinel wondered why Magnum was stating the obvious. “Yes, sir.”

“Then, as reports would seem to suggest, the Decepticon Warlords will be down to just eight. A much more reasonable number of ruffians to deal with.” Magnum’s gaze was directed past Sentinel and at the blank wall behind the Major.

“Y-Yes, sir.” *No, seriously, what was going on?* Sentinel questioned silently. He started looking for a camera, to see if he had forgotten if today was one of Magnum’s new “take a reporter to work” solar cycles. *Transparency. Embedded journalists. Hmph.*

Magnum’s gaze remained locked straight ahead. “Of course, we would be doing much better if we still had the Combaticons running amuck in Decepticon territory.”

Sentinel finally caught on. He didn’t empathize, but he at least now knew what was wearing on Magnum’s processors. It was the first time that a subordinate under Magnum’s command had been captured, or, the One forbid, killed. Of course, the same was true for Sentinel as well. Still, the Elite Guard Supreme Commander was a little baffled by Magnum’s reaction. Maybe all that time in the Council was making him soft? When Sentinel finally spoke, he did his best to mimic sympathy. “Sir, I understand how you feel. But the job still needs to get done. And I have Gigantron’s and Roadfire’s teams tracking down leads on the Special Ops Team right now. We’ll get them back.”

Magnum broke out of his trance and smiled the type of smile that was instantly recognizable as a lie. “Of course. Of course.” Magnum looked down at the report still in his hands, and then suddenly back up at Sentinel. “Gigantron?”

“Big Bang’s new, uh, callsign for Halo. He *loves* it.” Sentinel’s smirk looked like it belonged on a hungry Pneumalion.

It was enough to give Magnum pause. “Halo loves it?”

“No, Big Bang.” Sentinel didn’t hesitate as he changed the subject. “The Strike Team is currently preparing to join them.”

“No.” Magnum’s optics locked on Sentinel. “No. I have another mission for them. You see, I have...firsthand experience in how this situation can affect even the toughest of the Autobot military.” Magnum let his optics drift back to the report in his hand. He opened a new file and quickly structured new orders for Metalhawk. “Send the 201st here. Metalhawk worked closer with Onslaught than any of our other squad commanders. Right now I can’t trust that he’s not compromised. So, until further notice, he’s to remain off of the front lines.”

“Sir?!” Sentinel Major was already down one team, and now he was expected to do without a second? *If it wasn’t so serious, I’d laugh*, Sentinel thought to himself. “With the 349th and the 116th on the search-and-rescue mission, and the, uh, 45...uh...this is why I did away with the numbers...the Stealth Team working on this Gutcruncher case, my personnel are going to be stretched thin. I’m not sure if sidelin...”

“You’ll still have the Fast Attack Team in reserve,” Magnum stated flatly. His optics didn’t move from the datapad in his hand.

Sentinel opened his mouth to object, but the objection stayed put. Instead, he simply said, “Yes, sir,” and watched the Councilbot stride out of the door.

Sentinel sat with his frustration. ““You’ll still have the Fast Attack Team in reserve,”” Sentinel mocked in a voice deeper than his own.

“I’m part of the Sentinel Line; a relative of mine has fought and gone offline in every single Cybertronian battle. I know war. It’s in my fuel pumps. So when I say that one team in reserve isn’t going to be enough, I think I know what I’m saying. When Sentinel EnN, one of the first of my line, fell, do you think he was happy having just the one reserve team? No.” Sentinel fiddled with a stylus sitting on his desk. Then, in an instant, he bolted up straight. “Oh, gearslip, *that’s* what I should have said!”

In a rush, Sentinel slammed through his office door, hoping to catch up with Magnum. Instead, he rammed into a small black-and-red robot who was passing in the hallway just outside Sentinel’s door. *Kra-thap!* Both Autobots tumbled to the floor.

Sentinel sat up, simultaneously hoping that Magnum was both still nearby, and yet not so nearby that he would have seen Sentinel’s ungraceful collision. Without even looking at the smaller robot, but still scanning the hallway for Magnum, Sentinel asked, “Are you okay?”

The robot rubbed his head while trying to gather the pile of datapads now strewn across the floor. “Yup, no wo—Hey!” Suddenly, he realized who he had run into. “Sentinel Major! Wow! It’s a pleasure and an honor to be pummeled by your office door!”

Sentinel turned to see the small, black Autobot cradling what few datapads he had managed to scrounge up, and sighed. “Hello, Ricochet.”

Scrambling to his knees, Ricochet continued to pick up the rest of the datapads that he had been carrying. Sentinel looked on, curious. “Ricochet, why do you have so many of those?”

“I’m just doing my duty!” Ricochet puffed as he tried to lift the stack of datapads from the ground. “I’m taking them to the records vault for Big Bang.”

Sentinel tried to look around the stack and at Ricochet’s face, but failed to see anything other than the smooth gray frames of the datapads. “Aren’t you the Council’s liaison? Not our errand bot?”

The stack of datapads shuddered, threatening to topple again, as Ricochet shrugged. “I don’t mind. I’m just glad to be part of the team.”

“I...might have to have a word with Big Bang...” Sentinel trailed off as he noticed the datapad seated on top of the stack. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?” Ricochet tried to look around the pile he was carrying to see what Sentinel was pointing at.

“That.” The Major plucked the top device off of the teetering stack of datapads in Ricochet’s arms. “It’s an acquisition request. From Powerflash.”

Needed: 2,600,000.99 credits for fast ship. Space capable. No Autobot symbols. Easily piloted.
Cavernous cargo capacity. Hyperspace optional.

Approval granted. Signed: Sentinel Major 46.532314

Sentinel’s optics nearly bulged as he read the last line again.

Approval granted. Signed: Sentinel Major 46.532314

“I never...” Sentinel’s surprise quickly turned to anger, twisting his face from his trademark smirk into a pronounced frown. It hurt. Physically. “That glitched-up, no-good oil stain! I’m gonna...I’m gonna...”

As the orange and blue robot stormed off down the hall, with no particular destination in mind, he called out for his drone assistant, “R-Third! If you don’t want to end up like R-First and Second, get out here!” A round white robot poked its flop-eared head out of Sentinel’s office, pausing only a second before bounding down the hallway after its owner.

Ricochet stood in the middle of the hallway, alone except for the swaying mountain of information devices in his arms. “Sentinel? Sentinel?” In a hushed voice he pleaded, “I think I’m going to need somebody to open the vault doors for me...”



“Black is so not my color!” Another puff of electronic paint adhered itself to Tap-Out’s armor plating, obscuring his original paintjob. “And couldn’t I have at least a secondary color, too? Not just black all over?”

“Quiet down, and quit your wigglin’.” Rumbler unleashed another cloud of paint towards the smaller Autobot. “I only got ‘nuff paint left for one color on you.”

Tap-Out shielded his face from the electronic mist exuding from the nozzle of the paint sprayer. “Gah! Watch it! That almost went in my optics!”

“That’s why I said quit wigglin’!” Tugging on Tap-Out’s arm, Rumbler began spraying the green bit of armor that had escaped his original pass with the electronic paint. “Sprocket, how’re you doing with the boss-bot?”

“Oh, I think we’re getting there.” Sprocket steadied a paint palette in one hand as he leaned in with a brush in the other. Long, smooth strokes slowly turned Powerflash from his former bright yellow and red to dull green and silver. The Stealth Team commander leaned back in his chair with his optic lids shut. Sprocket dunked the brush tip in a container of cleaner, then turned to face his brother. “You know, I wanted to be an artist when I was younger. But I never really had the patience. That is, until Sensei Yokeatron taught me.”

Rumbler finished spraying Tap-Out and pushed the robot out of his way. He then leveled a finger at his brother. “Yokeatron?! You don’t even know Yokeatron!”

“I do too!” Sprocket shot back. “Just last stellar cycle he, Grandus, and myself went to the Fractal Amphitheater together!”

The mechanic crossed his arms and stared at Sprocket. “Uh-huh. And how do you explain Grandus fittin’ through the door? The guy’s enormous. Ain’t no way.”

Rumbler continued to stare as Sprocket laid his brush down, thinking. “You know, you just may be right. Grandus was probably my imagination. But Yokeatron, Yokeatron was definitely there.”

“ARGH!” Rumbler threw his arms into the air. “No he wasn’t! Just like Councilbot Halogen isn’t sitting next to you, appreciatin’ your work!”

Sprocket looked to his right, where there was nothing but empty space. “He is too!”

“I swear I—” Rumbler was interrupted by Powerflash’s raised hand.

“That’s enough family bickering, you two.” Powerflash opened one optic and directed it toward Rumbler. “If I hear one more smelting word coming out of either of your mouths, you’ll be cleaning the evacuation room with that paint brush Sprocket’s using.” The half-yellow, half-green robot leaned back in his chair again. “Now, Sprocket, finish painting me.”

The pilot shoved the brush into a jar of paint, then turned his head and stuck a metallic tongue out at his brother before going back to painting Powerflash.

“Hn.” Rumbler’s boots stomped the metal floor as he stormed from the room.

Without opening his optics, Powerflash called after him, “Rumbler, what did I just say?”

Rumbler stopped just outside the doorway and yelled back, “‘Hn’ ain’t a word. Sir.”

A now black—and still dripping—Tap-Out followed Rumbler out into the hideout’s garage. He watched the excess electronic paint slide down his armor, pool into a tear-shaped balloon, and fall. Each droplet of paint would jumble into a tiny bubble of static about halfway to the floor, then completely phase out of existence before hitting the steel plating underfoot. It was a clever technology, Tap-Out had to admit, even though he hated how it sent tingles throughout his body as it dried. Tap-Out waved a hand towards Rumbler, sending a spray of static buzz into the air. “Hey, buddy, so what do you think of your part in this plan?” A slightly sinister smile spread across his face.

“Oh. It’s just *great*,” Rumbler replied sarcastically. “Twelve megacycles alone with Sprocket, sealed in a fake utility chest. Just fun times.”

“At least you’ll both have your vocalizers turned off.” Tap-Out wagged his hand in front of his face, trying to shake the excess paint free. “Seems like that will make it hard for him to annoy you.”

Without turning to look at Tap-Out, Rumbler responded with a grunt, then added, “That bot could be in total stasis lock, and still find a way to irritate me.”

Tap-Out smiled. “Oh, he’s not so bad—”

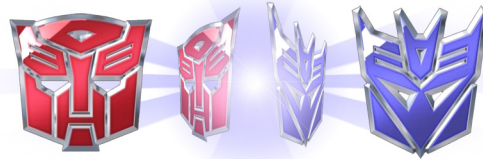
Sprocket’s voice roared from the next room, interrupting nearly every conversation in Detrona, “AND WE’RE DONE!” His needlessly loud brother made Rumbler grumble once again.

Powerflash stepped through the doorway, his disguise making him look like an entirely new robot. His usual yellow, red, and gray color scheme was replaced with green, gray, and black, and, moreover, he seemed to take on an entirely new posture and stride as well. A swagger, clean and cool, moved him across the floor of the hangar bay and over to his troops. Following close behind, Sprocket beamed with pride at the successful paint operation. “Halogen gives it the Council’s stamp of approval, Powerflash, sir!”

“Good.” Powerflash practiced his new posture, putting one hand on his hip while feigning an inspection of his fingertips. “And don’t call me ‘Powerflash’. I feel like a...Bad Boy. Isn’t that right, Dealbreaker?”

Tap-Out crossed his arms and leaned against a tool chest, like he had seen Swindle do so many times before. His vocalizers dropped in tone. “Yeah, Chief. Sounds good ta me.”

“Good. Then if everything is polished and shiny...” Bad Boy sauntered towards the hangar door. “Let’s go inspect that ship Sentinel bought for us.”



“You failed to acquire transportation?” Charger inquired. Take-Off cowered when he caught a glimpse of the irate Gutcruncher, unable to look the Decepticon warlord in the face.

“N-No. Sir.” The usually fast-talking Decepticon was nearly silenced by the glare coming from the robots at the end of the table. The dark, dreary room was Take-Off’s least favorite place in the entire complex. Shadows loomed in every corner, and the long, darkly colored table in the center of the chamber always made Take-Off feel like he was being judged, even when Gutcruncher and Charger weren’t sitting on the other end.

Gutcruncher’s faceplate remained motionless as he asked of Take-Off, “Tell me, how far is the breadth of your failure? Keep in mind that I know you, Take-Off. I know you well.”

The warlord’s stare chilled Take-Off to the core. “Uh. That’s it. I just didn’t get the ship. A-heh.”

The room fell silent. Unpleasantly silent. Take-Off couldn’t tell if Gutcruncher knew he was lying. *That’s the problem with faceplates; you can’t read them in the slightest.*

“But don’t you worry!” Take-Off blurted. “I’ve got another lead on where to get a different ship. A BETTER ship!” The gray robot rocked back and forth uneasily.

Charger raised an optic. “Indeed?”

“Oh, yeah.” Take-Off stretched out his arms, for emphasis. “A big one! I’ll get you your ship by the end of the solar cycle. No worries about it.”

“With you, Take-Off, there’s plenty to worry about.” Gutcruncher rose from his chair, his upper body disappearing into one of the shadows that clung to the walls of the rooms like a shriekbat. “Get to it.”

Outside the door, Roadgrabber stood waiting for Take-Off. “So, whud’re the damages?” Roadgrabber chucked his thumb back in the direction of Gutcruncher’s dark war room.

“I told them that I have a lead on another ship.” Take-Off’s pace quickened to get out of Gutcruncher’s audio-receptor range.

The purple-and-black robot followed suit. “‘N do ya?”

“Of course not!” Take-Off exclaimed. “When do you think I tracked one down? After that first failure, but before the inquisition? Think, for once in your miserable life!”

Roadgrabber was taken aback slightly. “Hey! No need to git ornery with me, Take-Off! I’m jus’ askin’.”

“You’re right.” Take-Off sighed. “I apologize. It’s just... I can’t believe I screwed this up so badly. I was always told that I talked too much, but that was usually just at parties and thrashers. This is a new low.”

“Uh-huh.” Roadgrabber could sense one of Take-Off’s unstoppable rants coming on. Much to his surprise, though, Take-Off apparently was able to control himself.

“But, anyway, that’s why you’re coming with me on this next one.” Take-Off grabbed the other Decepticon by the shoulder.

“Wait. Wha?” Roadgrabber didn’t like the sound of that. He could barely stand being in the same room with Take-Off for more than a few cycles. “I dun’ think I sh—”

Take-Off interrupted, “But remember, Roadgrabber, who was it that stumbled across you in Median, eh? You smelting OWE me for digging your sorry skidplate out of that rust heap.”

“Ya’re neveh gonna fuhget that, are ya?” Roadgrabber sulked.

“Nope.”



“She’s a beaut. No doubt about it!” Rumbler ran his hand down the side of the freighter. Each piece of plating joined cleanly and smoothly with the next, giving the ship a sleek contour that Rumbler had to appreciate. *Darklon* was officially decommissioned twelve stellar cycles ago, but pirates and bounty hunters had been running her since. The ship may not have received the best maintenance, but she was in better shape than some of the ships that the Elite Guard had at its disposal. *It beats the mud flaps offa* Beast with Wings, Rumbler mused to himself as he checked the ship over one last time.

“Isn’t she, though? I’m surprised we got her for as cheap as we did.” A disguised Tap-Out followed the ship’s curves with his optics. “That Breakaway ‘bot that sold her must have been desperate.”

Rumbler leaned back and nodded to the black robot behind him. “Yeah, well, his loss, our gain! Let’s just hope she soars as good as she looks.”

“Then all we have to do is send out word that that we’re looking for passengers.” Powerflash raised an optic at Tap-Out. “Are you ready for that?”

Tap-Out smiled. “Of course. I was just waiting for you to ask.”

Powerflash, disguised as and beginning to adopt the role of Bad Boy, turned back to Rumbler and Sprocket as Tap-Out ventured out into the black market world of Cybertron. “A’right bots! Looks like this here is yer time to take up as yer ol’ fashion’d stowaways. Play nice, now!”

Rumbler lingered, hesitating as long as he could before making his way towards *Darklon*’s cargo bay. “Y’know... Maybe I should give the ship one last inspection before going to bed.” The mechanic started for the cockpit.

“Seems t’me that you’ve had more than enuff time to figure things out here.” Bad Boy rubbed his chin.

Rumbler turned and raised an optic. “You sound like a farm-bot when ya talk like that.”

“As long as it makes me appear honest as well.” Bad Boy clasped Rumbler by the shoulder and shoved him into *Darklon*. Rumbler tried to resist, but his boss pushed even harder. “Now, quit yer squirming and take Sprocket to tha hideaway!”

Inside *Darklon*’s cargo bay, Sprocket sat behind a control board. The flashing lights reflected across his visor, making his face look like one of Rosanna’s retro dance floors. The pilot stared intently at the controls, as though they were talking to him...

“Sprocket! Get your lugnuts over here! It’s time for us to hide,” Rumbler yelled from across the bay. As the cycles passed without any glimmer of a response from his brother, Rumbler grew increasingly impatient. “Sprocket!”

Sprocket giggled. “Hehe! Well, *Darklon* has quite the sense of humor! But she also promises to fly right by Powerflash’s command. Or Bad Boy’s. Whoever.”

Rumbler just stared at Sprocket. Eventually his lips formed a single word. Or, at least, close enough to be considered word-like. “Wha?”

“I was just talking to the computers that run the ship.” Sprocket paused as he caught the look on Rumbler’s face. “What? You’re a mechanic. You know how these things work. The pilot runs the computers, and the computers run the ship. So those computers have to be smart. REALLY smart.” Sprocket tapped his forehead.

“So when you talk with them, you’ve got to be smart, too. Dumb pilots push their buttons.” Sprocket turned quickly to look back at the control panel, and a smile crossed his face. “I thought you’d like that one!”

Stomping across the cargo bay, Rumbler grabbed Sprocket and pulled him towards the hollowed-out utility chest that was meant to shield their signals from the Decepticons. “You’re a tool, you know that, right? A weird, no-doubt tool.”

Sprocket smiled as Rumbler opened the lid to the chest. “Yeah, well, *Darklon* doesn’t really like you.”

“Shut up.” Rumbler shoved Sprocket into the fake chest sitting in the corner of the cargo bay. The bottom of the chest phased and shimmered as Sprocket passed through. The hologram bounced again when Rumbler crawled down through it

into the cavity below. When the lid closed, the hologram stabilized, and all Rumbler and Sprocket could do was wait for the signal from Powerflash. And for someone to let them out.



Dealbreaker leaned against a light pole, a cy-garette in hand. The fumes from the artificial neuro-enhancer wafted playfully in the beam of light, and then disappeared into the black. Cy-garettes functioned by interfacing with the nodes inside a Cybertronian's mouth, providing a surge of additional power for the robot's processing output, as well as temporary upgrades for the sensornet. They were dangerous—known for spreading nasty viruses capable of damaging several key internal systems—and addictive, not to mention Tap-Out hated the flavor and smell that registered on his sensors. However, it was all part of his new character; Dealbreaker. The smooth, suave con-artist looking for the quick credit. And cy-garettes were part of that world like ballobots and hyper-fluid were a part of basketrek. The seedy and deceitful needed the extra boost in processor speed to ensure they always stayed one step ahead of their marks.

Taking the cy-garette from his mouth, Dealbreaker blew a cloud of fumes into the air, and fought back a spastic cough. Bootleg cy-garettes were prone to generating unwanted feedback, particularly with new users. And models that tended to overheat as much as the cy-garette in Dealbreaker's hand, they gave out the worst feedback. A single cough could give Tap-Out away. Luckily, no one was around. Yet. Dealbreaker followed the billowing cloud of smoke with his optics as it lifted into the sky above the speedway that hung above his head. The Transmopher bisected the Badlands like a gilded ribbon across a rusted piece of scrap. Commuters wanted to get through the rugged, desolate terrain as fast and as comfortably as they could, making the Transmopher look entirely alien compared to its surroundings. The roadway was brilliantly lit, polished, and an example of Cybertronian architectural achievement. The Badlands, though, were dark, filthy, and barely more than a massive trash dump for the rest of the planet. Which made for the perfect place for Decepticons, and any other outlaws fleeing the grasp of Autobot law, to bunker down and hide. Tap-Out didn't have nearly enough fingers to count how many notorious Decepticons he knew had bases buried deep under the rust and garbage heaps that made up the landscape.

As Dealbreaker put the cy-garette back in his mouth, he heard a noise coming from the dark under the Transmopher. A whirl followed a click, soon trailed by a piercing stream of light pouring through a widening crack in the black shadow below turn five-four-six-three-two. *Show time*, Tap-Out thought to himself.

Two silhouettes appeared in the bright doorway, then disappeared as the doors, and the blinding light with them, closed behind the forms. Dealbreaker nodded towards the now-invisible Decepticons. "Afternoon, Sport. Who's your friend?"

Take-Off stepped from the shadows and into the light beaming down from the fixture on the pole above. "I think the more important question is: who are you?"

"Fair enough." Dealbreaker locked his optics on his cy-garette as he twirled it between two fingers. "You can call me the answer to your problems. Or Dealbreaker, if you're so inclined." Still looking at his hand instead of the Decepticons in front of him, Dealbreaker smiled sinisterly.

"An' why you here? Care ta ansawah that one, too?" Roadgrabber emerged from the blackness, light glistening off of his purple armor.

"Why, gents, I've heard about your needing a ship, and by your good fortune, I happen to know just where you can find one." Dealbreaker's optics shifted from the cy-garette to Take-Off.

The Decepticon didn't like the way this stranger was looking at him. He was obviously a professional confidence artist; someone that couldn't be trusted. So the way his optics hungrily sized up the two Decepticons gave Take-Off's manifolds a shudder he couldn't shake. "Let's say that's true. And let's say we need it desperately. That's still not enough for us to want to deal with...you."

"Yeah. Yaw'r shiftay," Roadgrabber added.

Dealbreaker rolled his optics, then flicked the spent cy-garette off into one of the abundant trash hills that littered the Badlands. "You bots don't get how it works, do you? How new at this are you?"

Take-Off suddenly felt the need to look at another nearby light pole, since he was unable to look Dealbreaker in the optics.

"Um. Hm." Dealbreaker swaggered over to the two Decepticons. "Well, let me tell you how this works. I'm just the barker. The Face and, as you can probably already tell, the Voice. The Hands, Brain, and Optics are back at our ship, *Darklon*. I assume you've heard of it." Dealbreaker paused. The only response from Take-Off was a blank stare. "Yeah, well, I take you back to our hangar, you size up our ship, talk to its captain, then we make a deal. How's that sound?"

"I dunno..." Take-Off rubbed the back of his head. "Does this captain look more upright than you?"

Dealbreaker chuckled. "So I've been told, Sport." A black arm with black wheels attached grabbed Take-Off's shoulder, while another gestured east, where a two and a half megacycle drive would lead them back to the waiting *Darklon*. "What say you then, hm? Ready to check out the flight that'll lead you to your destiny?"

"I...guess." Take-Off sputtered. "I guess it's worth a shot. Anything that'll save me from Gutcruncher. You see, I lost the first ship that I was supposed to charter. I lost it because of my big mouth. It seems like it's always flapping. So I tend to get carried away. Like this one time I was with my buddy Roadstorm. These three ruffians from Rigel III caught us looking at their lasercycles. They were fantastic rides, let me tell you! Anyway, Roadstorm was going to trans-scan one of them, because he loved the paint deco. And I mean *loved*. The guy sounded like me whenever he talked about it. On and on and on, about the flames, the shade of orange, the chrome on the fenders. There was even this pinstriping that must have taken, smelt, half a solar cycle to paint. It was just absolutely flawless. Anyway, so these thugs see us gawking at their rides and think we're trying to ja—hah! Ow!"

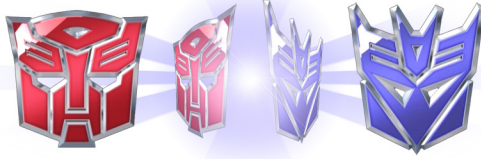
Roadgrabber's fist connected with Take-Off's jaw. Not hard, but it was the most effective way Roadgrabber could think of to silence the ranting Decepticon. "Dun' mind 'im. Like he said, he gits carried away."

"I'm sure." Dealbreaker turned his back towards the Decepticons. Something that took all of Tap-Out's willpower to do. "So, what say you, Sport? Feel like a little drive?" Dealbreaker's arms folded, his legs retracted, and his head was pulled down into his chest, leaving a four-wheeled black vehicle idling in front of Take-Off and Roadgrabber.

Take-Off looked to Roadgrabber, who shrugged. "Yeah. OK."

Both Decepticons tucked their limbs into their chassis and armor plating covered their heads. Take-Off was now a three-wheeled, turbo-powered Speedstar. The kind a Cybertronian would find at the center of one of Polyhex's notorious—and illegal—road races. Roadgrabber, on the other hand, was something similar to a junk pile on wheels...and looked like he could move just as fast. Twin wings emerged from the sides of the purple heap, indicating that he had at one time gained the capability to fly. Now, however, Roadgrabber was content to stay on the ground. "Dumb buzzahs 'n tha sky just like ta draw 'tention ta themselves," Roadgrabber had once complained, when Take-Off asked about his wings. Take-Off let it be, assuming that there was a story that Roadgrabber didn't want to share. Or a story Roadgrabber didn't want Take-Off to share with every machine that he ever met.

As the three vehicles traveled east, Tap-Out sighed with relief. Part one of his mission was now over. Now they just needed to seal the deal, and put up with a bunch of Decepticons inside the close quarters of *Darklon*. Deep inside his vehicle mode, Tap-Out shook his head. *That sounds like a FANTASTIC time.*



As they pulled up to the *Darklon*, sitting in the middle of its own docking bay surrounded by towering walls that obscured whatever activities its crew conducted, Take-Off's spark soared. *This isn't your run-of-the-mill operation*, Take-Off thought, *and it's probably WAY more security than that slummer Axer could ever offer*. It was true. The entire place was garnished with all of the assets of proper professional criminals.

"So you say that you mechanoids are Neutrals?" Take-Off inquired of the black sedan that began to slow in front of him. "You look prepared enough to join the Decepticon ranks. Easily."

Dealbreaker doubled in height as legs extended from the hood of his car mode and arms pulled themselves free of the undercarriage. When his head emerged from the rear of the car, a smile was plastered across it. "And why would we want to do a reckless thing like that, Sport? Sure, if we became Decepticons, we'd get more than our fair take. But as Neutrals, we make money from *both* sides. You see, Autobots are just as in need of a ship as Decepticons. Oh, they'd never admit to using grifters such as ourselves, but you'd be surprised how many Autobot creds we have jingling between our cup-holders."

The Decepticon paused for a moment, considering what he had just heard. "Yes, I suppose that's true..."

A voice calling from inside the ship interrupted Take-Off's train of thought. "Well, well, are these the 'cons we heard about?" A green and black robot strolled down *Darklon*'s loading ramp. "The gray one certainly has a...dashing deco."

Take-Off was taken aback. "Heard about?"

Roadgrabber raised an optic. "Dashing'?"

"Every con and bot from here to Treskellon that has a ship is conversin' about you two." The green robot held out his hand. "You should be glad we got to you first. M' name is Bad Boy. You and me, we should be...friends."

Take-Off ignored Bad Boy's hand and instead winced. "If they're talking about us...What exactly are they saying?"

"I see you're frettin'. Don't do that." Bad Boy grabbed Take-Off's hand and shook it firmly. "They're just saying you needed a ship, is all. And maybe something about an asteroid? I don't know. Things change each time you hear a story."

"Each. Time." Take-Off swallowed hard; a response he mimicked from the organics he once encountered on Sectus Four. Emotional little bug people, they were.

"Yes, but, like I mentioned earlier, don't fret. We've got you now." Bad Boy waved the Decepticons towards the ship. "How all that talk got started, though, has been something of a mystery to me."

"That...was...my fault..." The gray Decepticon's optics darted away. "I've been known to... 'chatter on undeterred' as a certain superior of mine would say. Well, I was sitting in an unsavory bar with an even more unsavory Decepticon and I guess my nerves got the worst of me. All of a sudden I was just talking and talking. It wasn't until the Decepticon stopped me that I realized I had given away all of our secrets. That's why I have Roadgrabber with me this time. Roadgrabber is...well, I found him in the bottom of a great big hole. He hasn't said much about how he got there, but he insists it was after battling an army of GADEPs or something. He—"

"Hahahaha!" Bad Boy chuckled. "My bot, it seems like you've been granted the gift of gab. Just like me."

“Uh...thanks?” Take-Off’s optics angled worryingly.

“You’re quite welcome.” Bad Boy smiled. “It truly is a special gift. There are those robots who refrain from discourse almost entirely throughout their lives. To me, that would be a life left empty and un-lived.” The green robot put his hand on Take-Off’s shoulder, sweeping his other hand in front of a computer bank of some kind as though Take-Off should be impressed. However, the Decepticon didn’t know enough about mechanics to even feign knowledge of the buttons and screens in front of him. “That perception of mine started when I was but a young protoform workin’ in the mineral fields of Gadgetian. At the time I was content to toil alongside the others, sowing the essential elements and chemistries that would cause the naturally-occurring crystals to grow to harvestable size. A tedious process, now that I look back upon it. As I grew older, however, I was afflicted with a powerful wanderlust; a need to go off and meet new Cybertronians. Through talking with each of them, my gift unfurled. Blossoming into a crystalline flower as magnificent as any you would have seen in the gardens of Crystal City.”

As Bad Boy crafted his story, Take-Off stood entranced by every word. Although the Decepticon liked to talk, he was never so floral in his execution.

“You see, as Cybertronians, we have an innate need to gather information. It’s one of our most primal needs, buried somewhere deep in our processors. Some try to collect that data by sealing themselves in a room and studying anything they can get their hands on. Others, through listening. But mechanoids like you and me? We have to be more direct in our approach. We talk. We *ask*. And then we get our answers. No sittin’ around waitin’ for them to come to us. Think of it this way: does the stealthy cyber-puma of Thistal Eight sit and wait for her prey to bumble out in front of her? No. She stalks it and takes it down on her own schedule. When she feels the time is right. That, m’bot, is how I want to live my life.” Take-Off nodded in agreement as the two robots walked the *Darklon*’s hallways, continuing their discussion.

When Bad Boy’s tour of the ship was over, Take-Off hadn’t learned a thing about the vessel, but was already sold on it being their ship. Bad Boy had practically hypnotized him with his agreeable character and, of course, his skills of discourse.

As they left the ship and climbed down the loading ramp, Take-Off turned to Roadgrabber. “So, what do you think?”

The purple Decepticon shrugged, and offered only, “Eh.”

Dealbreaker and Bad Boy watched as the two Decepticons transformed into their alternate modes and took off down the main road leaving Detrona. Only when their dust trails faded into the distance did the two Autobots break character. “You laid it on a little thick, don’t you think?” Tap-Out chuckled.

“Nope. I think it was just right...” Powerflash smiled.

“So, what do you think?” Tap-Out asked.

“I think he was telling the truth. That whole asteroid story of his, I think it’s real.” Powerflash stared at the now-empty road in front of him.

“So you mean if we go through with this plan...we’ll be taking the Decepticons right to a source of energy that our scientists can’t even identify or tell us how powerful it really is?” Tap-Out shook his head.

“Yup.” Powerflash grabbed the smaller robot by the shoulder and smiled. “That is, unless we change up the plan a little. If this asteroid is the bait that Take-Off describes it as, we might want to start building the trap. And radio Sentinel, tell him we’re gonna have a warlord just *dying* to make his acquaintance.”



The dark chambers that housed Gutcruncher's war room somehow seemed brighter as Take-Off swaggered towards the two Decepticon warriors, each seated on opposite ends of the long table that occupied most of the room. The green, orange and gray Decepticon glanced up from the latest battle plans in time to see a triumphant grin slice Take-Off's face from cheek to cheek. "I take it you found a ship? At least, for your sake, I hope you did."

"Oh, I did." Take-Off's smile didn't fade even after Charger turned to glare at the gray Decepticon. "And I've got a feeling you're going to like it!"

"Does it have a Crystalline Regulator?" Charger's tone was flat.

"No." Take-Off rubbed the back of his head, unsure of his answer.

"Or Neural Centre Control?"

"Maybe?"

"Phase Tracker?"

"Possibly."

"Sensory Triggers?"

"I don't know."

"Megasonic Reactor?"

"Uh..."

"Multi-Target Prioritizer?"

"Well..."

"Core Regulator?"

"You see..."

"Did you even ask if it *flies*?" Gutcruncher's vocalizer boomed from across the chamber.

"*Ahem*" Take-Off nervously wrung his hands in front of his chest. "No. Not exactly. But they demonstrated each of their systems, and all of them were in operating order. Also, you should see how these Neutrals run things, sirs. It's like they're practically Decepticons! From their hangar to their security, they're organized."

Gutcruncher wanted to berate Take-Off further for not inquiring more about the ship, but he couldn't. The Decepticon Lord didn't care how ornate or how decrepit the ship was; he just wanted to get to Charger's asteroid. Now. So, much to Take-Off's surprise, he waved off the rest of the questions that Charger had for the recon unit. Instead he simply said, "Charger. Get your gear. We're going."



From inside *Darklon*, Gutcruncher watched as Cybertron floated below, falling away until it looked just the size of a Galleon Lunar Dollar. He silently commended Take-Off for his work in tracking down a ship of this caliber, something which Gutcruncher wouldn't have imagined possible. *That little loud-mouth is either far more talented than I had anticipated, or he got lucky.*

Just then, Take-Off entered Gutcruncher's quarters. The look of concern on his face was obvious. "Um, Sir?"

Gutcruncher pulled himself away from the remarkable sight of the stars drifting outside of the port-hole window. "Yes, Take-Off?"

"Sir, um, remember when I told you this ship was too good to be true?" Take-Off rubbed the back of his neck.

Gutcruncher narrowed his optics. "I believe your words were, 'I've found the perfect ship!' But, please, do go on."

"Yes, well..." Take-Off coughed. "I think it may not be as perfect as I had described it... You see, I was in the cargo bay, doing inventory on Charger's equipment... Something he has A LOT of, by the way. How did he manage to carry all of that on board himself? That's just impre--"

“The point, Take-Off. Get to it.” Gutcruncher sighed. He could feel the throbbing in his processors that he always got whenever he listened to Take-Off’s incessant voice.

“Right. Anyway, in the cargo bay, I think I detected two Autobot signatures. Just briefly. Half a nanoklik at the longest, and it was very faint. It could have been a malfunction of my sensors, an Autobot satellite passing just outside the ship’s hull, or some kind of radiation leak playing tricks on me.” Take-Off wrung his hands as he hoped for one of these alternatives—something that meant he hadn’t been duped by Bad Boy and Dealbreaker, landing one of the most powerful Decepticon warlords directly into an Autobot trap.

“I...see.” The optic lid above Gutcruncher’s left optic twitched. *Looks like it wasn’t skill or even luck after all,* Gutcruncher thought to himself. “It looks like I may just need to have a chat with our two new ‘Neutral’ friends on the ship’s flight deck.”

Take-Off nodded, as he backed up silently. He wanted to get away before he found Gutcruncher’s ire directed towards him.

“Oh, and Take-Off? Get Charger. Track down those signatures. I want to know *exactly* what caused them, and if it turns out that you’ve led me into Autobot hands...well, you know what happens to failures, don’t you?”

Take-Off winced. He remembered the burning pits below Gutcruncher’s headquarters in the Badlands. The glowing orange of molten metal seared into his memory circuits, and the terrified screams echoed in his audio receptors. “Y-yes, sir.”

The Decepticon spun on his heels and raced down the hallway as fast as his servos could carry him. Gutcruncher listened as the *clonk, clonk, clonk* of Take-Off’s boots smashing against the metal plating that comprised *Darklon*’s flooring disappeared into the distance. In contrast, the Decepticon warlord folded his hands neatly behind his back and casually strolled from his quarters. Although each weighed a significant amount more than Take-Off’s, his boots managed to remain nearly silent as he made his way towards the control room.

Gutcruncher had demanded that his quarters be the closest to the flight deck, as he wanted to ensure that he was always in the know. He didn’t like trusting other robots with his own safety, especially those willing to trade in their own ethics for a bundle of credits. And that was exactly how this Bad Boy and Dealbreaker had presented themselves, as oil-thirsty cutthroats that only cared about the next score. The next payday. It was a quality that Gutcruncher admired, no doubt about it. However, when in close quarters with those sorts of machines, one had to watch one’s back. And front. And sides.

Stretching out a clenched fist, Gutcruncher knocked on the bulkhead near the entryway onto the flight deck. “You two, I need a word with you.”

The pilot’s and co-pilot’s chairs remained motionless. Staying where he was, Gutcruncher tried to peer around them, to see if either robot was actually present. However, all that accomplished was for him to see more of the back of the tall, black seats and the stars visible through the viewscreen in front of them. The Decepticon warlord took another step into the forward cabin, trying to keep one optic on the twin chairs, and the other on the door behind him. As he reached the chairs, he noticed a light flashing on the panel between the seats.

Autopilot: On

In a rush, Gutcruncher spun both chairs around. And both were empty. That’s when he felt something press against the plating on his back. It wasn’t the first time he had felt the sensation, so it was quite easy for him to identify it. The round muzzle of a laser blaster was unmistakable.

“Lookin’ for someone there, stranger?” Bad Boy taunted, pressing the blaster against Gutcruncher’s back even harder. The green robot waved for Dealbreaker to come out of hiding. The Cybertronian in black armor stepped into the light. In his arms was a gun nearly as tall as the robot himself.

“So, I take it this is an admission of guilt, hm?” Gutcruncher turned his head sideways so as to get a look at the two formerly-Neutral machines out of the corner of his optics. “You are indeed working for the Autobots.”

“‘Working’? I’m afraid you have it wrong.” Wiping his hand across his chest, Bad Boy scraped off the electronic paint and revealed his true allegiance. “We ARE the Autobots.”

Gutcruncher lowered his head and stared at Bad Boy and Dealbreaker from under his brow. “So, I take it this means I’m now the Elite Guard’s prisoner?” Below the mouthplate that covered much of his face, his cheek twitched. This wasn’t how he had expected he’d be taken down.

“Not quite yet.” Bad Boy’s vocalizer transformed from the thick accent of a southern farm-bot to a voice worthy of an Elite Guard squad commander. “We’re still going to your asteroid. If it’s as powerful as your buddy Take-Off led on, we can’t just leave it out there for another Decepticon to happen across.”

“And so you need our expertise, then?” The Decepticon Warlord held back a laugh. “The Elite Guard isn’t as all-powerful as we were led to believe!”

Powerflash brushed from his fingertips the flakes of dried electronic paint that he had scratched off of his chest. “Oh, no. We don’t really need you. We just want to rub your faces a little deeper in your failure.” Powerflash’s smile was evil enough to belong to a Decepticon.

“Tap-Out, how about you take our esteemed guest to his NEW quarters, hm?” Powerflash grabbed Gutcruncher by the shoulder, holding him in place while he pulled out a pair of stasis cuffs. With a click, the stasis cuffs closed around the Decepticon’s wrists.

New generation stasis cuffs caused instant and total immobilization. However, these weren’t new gen. These were old gen. Really old gen. Instead of freezing an enemy in place, they interrupted a robot’s processors just enough to temporarily disable its more aggressive sub-routines. The end result was a Decepticon happy to go wherever you told him to go. Much more practical for Elite Guard groups outnumbered two to one and unable to drag a heavy prisoner to his cell.

Powerflash watched as Tap-Out led a cooperative Gutcruncher down the hall and towards the waiting brig. As they passed a porthole window, the Decepticon stared at the stars twinkling in the black. “The stars...They shine...Like little angels...I wanna catch ‘em...” A smile spread beneath his mouth plate and his optics drooped at the corners.

“Yup. Little angels alright.” Tap-Out nudged his back. “Keep moving.”

Now that they had blown their own cover, Powerflash decided it was time to let Sprocket and Rumbler out of their box. Of course, doing so meant that he would have to get past three angry Decepticons, who Gutcruncher probably tipped off before he came to confront Powerflash and Tap-Out.

An interesting challenge, Powerflash thought to himself. But just a challenge. Those three should be pushovers. One’s a brainy scientist, and the other two are dumb lugnuts. That should be just enough to flex my servos after sitting on my hands this entire mission!

At the doorway to the cargo bay, Powerflash stopped to watch the Decepticons. Each robot was looking for something. In their own way. Take-Off held out a flashlight, leaning this way and that trying to peer into the nooks and crannies of the

cargo bay's wall plating. Roadgrabber, on the other hand, was pawing at anything and everything on the shelves of the far wall. When not a single can, tool, or device was left standing on a shelf, he'd move on to the next. Meanwhile, Charger stood in the middle of the cargo bay, more concerned with the beeping gun-shaped object in his hand. *Obviously some kind of scanner*, Powerflash deduced. As Charger aimed the scanner at the seemingly empty utility chest in the corner, the device emitted a plethora of noises ranging from beeps to whirs and even a bell or two. He had found Sprocket and Rumbler.

That...makes things a little more difficult. Powerflash gripped his blaster tighter and stepped into the cargo bay. Charger turned to see the green robot holding a red blaster in front of his chest, obscuring what looked to be some kind of damage to his paint job.

“Captain Bad Boy, would you care to explain why we've traced two Autobot signatures to your cargo bay?” Charger's flat tone failed to give hint of any emotion. His optics, though, betrayed his stoic expression and revealed the fury that lurked beneath.

Instantly, three laser guns were focused on Powerflash's chassis, following his every move. In response, Powerflash simply smiled as he inched his way towards Sprocket and Rumbler. *If I can even the odds before they start shooting...*

Charger raised his optic ridge. “Captain Bad Boy, we're waiting for an answer.”

“Um...Stowaways?” Off-guard, Powerflash accidentally dropped his arms just enough to expose the hole in his electronic paint job, exposing his true energy frequency as well. Charger's device erupted in a chorus of bells and whistles, eager to warn the Decepticons of another Autobot signature being detected. “Smelt.”

His cover blown, Powerflash darted for Sprocket and Rumbler's hiding spot. Laser fire followed his every move, leaving scorch marks on the walls and shelves of the cargo bay. A leap, clumsy and awkward, landed Powerflash directly in front of the utility chest. Although a high-res image file on a low-tier connection—a sitting digi-file—he could at least now make it three-on-three.

A swift kick jarred loose the lock on the chest, freeing the lid to spring open. The Decepticons stared at the seemingly empty chest, confused at why the Autobot had risked so much to open it. That is, until the bottom lining of the utility chest shivered, producing a rainbow of colors. Then, as though the chest itself exuded it, a head emerged. The white helmet glowed from the lights above, and the brightly-colored visor looked as determined as a robot could be. Almost frightening, even. The robot's mouth quivered...and then yawned. Sprocket's optics darted around the cargo bay, then finally found Powerflash lying on the floor. “Hey, Boss-bot, what's with all the racket? Can't a mechanism take a stasis nap around here?”

A hand sliced through the fake floor of the utility chest and pushed the white-and-black robot out of the way. “Move it, tool!”

Rumbler stood, lifting a heavy repeater. The Decepticons' optics widened in shock as a volley of bright blue lasers were cast in their direction. Charger pointed towards the hallway exiting the cargo bay. “Decepticons, retreat!”

“Your aim's atrocious, Rumbler.” Sprocket leaned forward, resting his forearms on the edge of the utility chest. “Not a single laser bolt came close to hitting one of them!”

“I wasn't aimin' to hit any of them! We want them ALIVE! We want them captured!” Rumbler grabbed his brother's armor plating and tossed him roughly from their hiding hole. “So get goin'!”

“Uff!” Sprocket's face slammed against the floorboards with a *pang!* “Didn't mother ever teach you to be nicer to your brother? To me?”

Rumbler leapt from the chest and landed with a *thud.* “We never HAD a mother; we're robots, remember?”

“Robots, schmobots, somebody had to build us!” Sprocket pushed himself up off of the metal grating and into a crouching position. “Who cares if I call them ‘mother’ or ‘father’? I tend to think ‘mother’ because the cookies were delicious... Smelt, we’re ‘twins’. How does that make sense if we’re robots, hmm?”

Rumbler ignored Sprocket’s smile and pressed on towards the retreating Decepticons. “‘Cuz we were built at the same time, with the same blueprints. ‘Nuff said.”

“Spoilsport!” Sprocket called after his brother, as he lifted himself from the ground. The white-and-black robot dashed out of the cargo bay and down the hallway.

Still laying on the floor, Powerflash rubbed his face with both hands. “What did I do to deserve those two?”



Racing down the narrow corridors of *Darklon*, Charger tried to think of his next move. That wasn’t easy with Roadgrabber blasting behind them every five nanokliks, without any particular target in mind.

Charger spun to face the trigger-happy Decepticon, his normally-yellow optics fading to orange at the margins. “Roadgrabber. Fire that laser one more time without aiming at anything, and I guarantee that you’ll wish you had been captured by the Autobots!”

“Huh? But I’m providin’ coveh fireh!” Roadgrabber strained to look at Charger over his shoulder.

Charger’s optics had now turned completely orange. “Perhaps you should provide cover fire when you know we’ve been followed! When you see somebody worth shooting at!”

“But if I see ‘em, they could shoot back!” Roadgrabber countered, as he fired another clip down the empty hallway.

Charger’s optic lid twitched, and the corners of his visor began to fill with veins of red. “Roadgrabber...I asked you to stop.”

Detecting the fury in Charger’s normally even-metered voice, Take-Off warned Roadgrabber, “Uh, I think you should probably listen to him...”

“Buzz-off!” The purple robot’s finger squeezed the trigger again. And again. And again. With each consecutive shot, a streak of red shot across Charger’s optics. Like a Tarillian Iron-Spider’s web, the crimson lines intersected, building up until the Decepticon’s optics were ablaze with scarlet.

Take-Off now pleaded with his friend, “Roadgrabber, I REAAALLY think you should stop!”

“Yeah, well, git lost, willya?” Roadgrabber discharged his ammo clip, and reached for a second. As he searched his storage compartments for another clip, he caught Charger out of the corner of his optics. The green robot was slouched, holding the sides of his head. “Uh oh.”

“Soddit! Why...Couldn’t...You...Just...LEAVE IT ALONE!!!” The Decepticon arched back, his voice a scream. A howl completely foreign to his vocalizers. It was a sound from a creature born of rage and anger. A creature now entirely in control of Charger’s body.

“Whut tha—?!” Charger grabbed Roadgrabber’s throat with one hand as he brushed Take-Off aside with the other. The recon unit’s head slammed against the thick, unforgiving bulkheads that lined *Darklon*’s hallway. His processors surged, buzzed, then went black.

“I...AsKeD...YoU...tO...StOp...” The green robot’s words were full of venom. Charger’s grip on Roadgrabber’s throat tightened, beginning to distort its structure. Roadgrabber could feel his ventilation become labored as the airways in his neck slowly crushed due to the force of Charger’s grasp.

“Please...I...Charger...Stop...” Roadgrabber pounded on Charger’s forearm, trying to get the Decepticon to let go. A warning blared in his head that his internal systems were starting to overheat. If Charger held on much longer, those systems would begin to shut down. “...Stop...”

Charger leaned in to watch Roadgrabber’s optics stretch wide and tremble. The flamethrower trooper practically salivated at the look of fear he was causing in the incompetent Decepticon’s face. “DeAtH cReEps sLOWLy...FiRsT yOu FeEL hiM cOmInG...A CoLd cHiLL tHaT tInGLeS iN yOuR HanDS aNd fEeT...iT SpReAds, TuRnInG iNto a SHIVeR tHAT rUnS uP YoUr sPiNe...ANd jUsT aS ThAt sHiveR rEaChEs tHe BaSE oF yOuR sKuLL, YoU SeE hiM...”

Charger pressed his face even closer to Roadgrabber’s, staring deep into his optics. “sO TeLL mE...dO YoU SeE DeAtH?”

A flash of blue and green across the lenses of Roadgrabber’s optics caused Charger to spin around. Down the hall, weapons trained on the Decepticons, Rumbler and Sprocket skulked toward their enemy. At the sight of the two Autobots, the hatred inside Charger burned even hotter. He flung Roadgrabber aside and galloped at the robots he hated most. He focused on the symbols emblazoned across each robot’s shoulders. The red face with boastful wings. As he stared, the faces smirked and began to laugh at him. At him! How dare they! They’ll pay for that! All of them! No one will escape his fury! The whole world...the whole galaxy will know his anger! The Elite Guard symbols grew, multiplied and spread across his field of vision until all he saw was a sea of red. Blinded by his hatred, Charger’s hands pawed wildly as he ran down the corridor.

“The ‘con’s crazier than I am!” Sprocket shouted, taking a step back.

Rumbler scoffed, “So?” The Autobot drew back a fist. Just as Charger reached the Autobots his vision cleared. He could see Rumbler’s fist in the air, but it was moving at quarter-speed. Red streaks followed the fist as though Charger could see motion itself. Then, in an instant, everything sped up to normal speed. Rumbler let his punch fly, and his fist connected with the side of Charger’s head. Charger sprawled backward, hitting the floor hard. His optics flickered, but ultimately failed as the Decepticon slipped offline.

The blue-and-gray Autobot stood victorious over the unconscious Charger. “That just makes him easier to hit.”

After hearing the commotion, Tap-Out raced to join with Rumbler and Sprocket, only to see all three Decepticons already subdued. “Wow, you two ARE good!”

Sprocket beamed. “Yup!”



Gutcruncher stared happily out of a window, almost entirely oblivious to the other three Decepticons that the Autobots shoved into their makeshift brig. Without turning from the stars that mesmerized him, he announced to his new roommates, “Look! Look how...Pretty! They’re...Sparkles...Sparkles that glitter...And jitter...And twitter...”

Charger glanced up at the Decepticon Warlord and then down at his own stasis cuffs. He tugged on the chain, testing their strength. “Don’t worry, my Lord, these have no effect on me.”

Take-Off giggled as he tried to stand up, only to fall back on his rear end again. “Yeah...He’s too...” Take-Off searched for the word “angry” in his databanks, but came up empty. So instead he said the next best thing he could find, “Not-happy... He’s got a fire beast! Deep inside him...RAWR! Hehehehehe! Rawr! ”

The other two Decepticons all started chuckling alongside Take-Off, unable to stop themselves. Charger rolled his optics as he slid over to the energy bars that sealed their cell. “These should be easy enough to disable...”

“Ohhh! Big pretty!” Still staring out the window, Gutcruncher’s optics grew large. Charger stood and walked to the window to see what his leader was gawking at. From the window, the two Decepticons could see a rocky ridge approaching fast, quickly making a horizon outside the ship. *Darklon* shuddered as she began her descent cycle. Her energizers slowed and her landing gear stretched from the belly of the ship, eagerly reaching for the rock now below the vessel. As *Darklon* closed in on the craterous surface of the asteroid, it created enough artificial wind to kick up a cloud of dust that lingered just off the surface of the giant boulder, unsure whether to rejoin its brethren on the asteroid or seek its freedom in the vacuum of space. Then the entire ship rocked as the landing gear touched down on the rock. *Darklon*’s engines wound down to a stop, and all was quiet.

Charger grabbed Gutcruncher and shoved him over to the energy bars. Gutcruncher resisted, trying to look out the window, but, thanks to the stasis cuffs, Charger easy out-powered the Decepticon Warlord. “Gutcruncher, give me your hands.” The warlord complied, watching Charger with the curiosity of a five-stellar-cycle-old protoform.

The bright green Decepticon stuck Gutcruncher’s hands out through the gaps in the energy bars. The stasis cuffs that bound his hands, however, struck the middle of an energy bar, showering the brig with a wave of sparks.

Roadgrabber stood hypnotized by the flying specks of light. He reached out and tried to grab them, snickering whenever they disappeared in his hand. “Ohhh...Fireflies!”

The energy bars began to waver and fade the longer Charger held Gutcruncher’s stasis cuffs in the stream of particles. Similarly, the effects of the stasis cuffs began to fade as the energy beam sliced through their housing and ate away at the intricate pieces inside. Eventually, the energy bars sputtered for the last time and then shut down entirely, their power stores drained by their fight with the stasis cuffs. Gutcruncher was left once again in his right mind, and with a pair of burned stasis cuffs barely managing to stay in one piece. With a tug, Gutcruncher finished what the energy bars had started, freeing his hands from the charred binders.

“Your gloriousness is radiant, My Great... I can touch it...” Take-Off sat transfixed by the sight of Gutcruncher bathed in the light from the corridor outside of the brig. “Brilliant...”

Gutcruncher looked down at the two incapacitated Decepticons on the floor. “Charger. Do something about those two.” The Warlord stepped from the brig. “Then go out and see your asteroid.”

Charger nodded, then turned to Roadgrabber and Take-Off, both of whom were now amazed by a spare spring that they had found someplace on the cell's floor. The green Decepticon sighed, then, in his most energetic, pleasant voice, announced, "Hey, you two! How would you like to see something REALLY shiny?!"

Both Decepticons spun to face Charger, their faces filled with giant grins. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

"Then follow me to the armory!" Charger rolled his optics as he strode out into the hallway. Roadgrabber and Take-Off happily followed.



Powerflash flipped a series of three switches on the control panel overhead. "Well, that's it. We're here."

Rumbler squinted out the massive window in front of the control room. "And where's 'here'? I don't see anything out there that could be considered interestin' by anybody. It's just a dead wasteland."

"A dead wasteland with a crispy, crunchy energy crystal center!" Tap-Out pointed to the screen to the right of the guidance computers. A blue line vibrated, then shot to the top of the screen, indicating *something* was out there. "I've never seen power levels like that!"

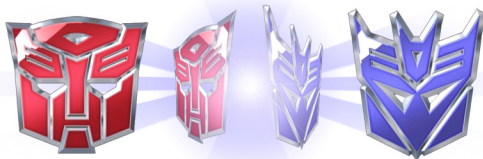
Sprocket nudged his way through the other members of the Stealth Team to look at the screen. Upon watching the line plateau, the robot whistled. "Wow. That's some mighty strong stuff. *Darklon* is warning us that the radiation it's emitting could be dangerous."

"I didn't hear nuffin'." Rumbler frowned.

"I told you, she doesn't like you. So she's not talking to you. Yeesh." Sprocket pushed his way back through the Stealth Team and paused at the command center door. "I'm gonna go get our gear to start taking samples. I don't know about you three, but the less time I'm sitting here soaking in rads, the better!"

"He's right." Powerflash rose from his seat. "Let's try to figure out what this stuff is so we can report back to HQ. And go get the Decepticons. That Charger might be able to help with some of the experiments."

"Yes sir!" Tap-Out saluted and plodded down the hallway.



Outside the armory, three pairs of stasis cuffs lay on the floor, a laser burn in each. A now armed, and fully mentally restored, Roadgrabber and Take-Off followed Charger down the hall and to the loading ramp. The Autobots had lowered the ramp as soon as they had landed, making it convenient for the Decepticons—they wouldn't have to hack the controls and lower it themselves.

So far the Decepticons had managed to remain undetected, but each cycle they spent milling around the ship was a cycle closer to their being discovered. However, Charger didn't want to risk any of the main corridors, instead choosing to go down utility passages and crawl spaces, hoping that way they would be less likely to encounter any Autobots out for a stroll. Roadgrabber was beginning to get impatient.

"Tern right herah, and we'll be out 'n a nanoklik." The purple robot pointed down a hallway.

"Turn right there, and we'll end up half a mechanometer from the C&C. We just escaped a cell; I'd rather not end up right back in it." Charger set a foot up on a metal rung and began to climb into another utility shaft.

"I'd rather fight 'n risk goin' back to tha cell than alla this sneakin' 'round." The corner of Roadgrabber's mouth curled in disgust.

Charger spun and stuck a finger in Roadgrabber's face. "I thought you would have learned not to test my temper by now."

"Whatevah. Just git us outside." Roadgrabber flicked the safety off on his pulse rifle. "Then we kin 'mbush tha Autobots when they git out thar."

"How do you know which way to go, anyway?" Take-Off inquired as he pushed a bundle of loose wiring from his face. "We were on this ship for a mega-cycle tops before we found out things were hinky. When did you get time to scope out the ship in this much detail?"

Charger snorted. "I never go anywhere without downloading the blueprints first. That includes ships. *Darklon's* firewalls were impressive, but easy enough to hack. From there I just pointed and clicked. Instant map."

"So where's next, huh?" Roadgrabber sneered. The utility passage was starting to get a little too cramped for his liking. He could practically feel the walls starting to close in around him.

"Actually, we're there. That vent will take us to the compartments just above the landing gear. From there, we just have to unbolt a plate of durasteel, and we're asteroid-bound." Charger slid the vent from its moorings and dropped both legs into the dark shaft below. His compatriots shortly followed, despite Roadgrabber's muttering about how small the shaft was.



Tap-Out turned the last corner and instantly knew that something was wrong. The usual steady electronic buzz of the energy bars was completely silent. The Autobot rushed to the brig, and his optics verified what his audio receptors had already told him; the energy bars were off. Tap-Out grabbed for his radio, but someone grabbed him before he had a chance. Gutcruncher tossed the Autobot against the bulkhead, which sounded with a resilient *clang* as Tap-Out's head collided with it.

Gutcruncher picked up Tap-Out's radio and hurried down the corridor. He wished he had time to dispatch the Autobot entirely, but he needed to guarantee that his Decepticons would be the ones in control of the ship when it left. One way or another.

With a click, Gutcruncher's index finger sprang open, revealing a screwdriver-type blade. The Decepticon warlord jammed the tip of his finger into the side of the radio and twisted. The face of the radio popped off, its vital wiring and circuit

boards cascading out into Gutcruncher's hands. *Ah, just what I needed*, Gutcruncher thought, as he pulled a small green-and-gold circuit from the heart of the radio.

Quick fingers pulled a bundle of wiring from the rest of the radio and soldered their ends to the circuit board. The resulting tangle wasn't pretty, but Gutcruncher knew it would work. Upon receiving the correct frequency, the circuit board would send out an electronic signal which would carry down the attached wires and into...

Gutcruncher yanked a metal tube from the storage compartment in his armor. He slowly twisted the lid and tilted the tube until its contents slid out into his waiting hands. The soft white substance looked like the average Cybertronian compound sealant, but looks were deceiving. Gutcruncher had spent stellar cycles working on generating the proper mixture of components to create an incredibly potent form of explosive. Certainly one strong enough to destroy *Darklon* utterly.

Using his screwdriver finger once again, Gutcruncher pried open a panel from the wall and secreted the explosive with the attached detonator inside. It was going to be his leverage should the time for negotiation arise.

After he shut the panel, he hurried down the hallway to rendezvous with his subordinates. For a plan that had nearly unraveled so many times already, Gutcruncher still felt as though he had the upper hand over these foolish Autobots. Gutcruncher smirked. *And the Decepticons always will.*



Powerflash and Rumbler wandered down the landing ramp, completely unaware that Charger and the other Decepticons had done the same just moments prior. The surface of the asteroid looked the same outside the ship as it had through the window; dead, barren. Rumbler kicked at the rock, stirring up a tiny cloud of dust that hovered just above the ground, unwilling to settle back down.

"Where's Sprocket with the survey equipment? This place is depressin' me." The blue-and-gray Autobot took in the landscape around him and shivered; this asteroid was no place for the living.

"He'll be along." Powerflash watched the stars rotate slowly above them. The subtle shadows they cast across the rock, the silent winds of space that occasionally lifted debris from the asteroid in swirls, the light blue fog formed by melting ice buried under layers of stone, it struck the Autobot leader all at once. It overwhelmed him with its beauty. "It's stunning, isn't it?"

Rumbler scoffed, "Sir, this rock is dead. And it wants everything around it to be dead, too. I can't say I see anything 'stunning' in that."

The Autobot commander patted Rumbler on the back. "One solar cycle, we're going to need to teach you how to appreciate the finer things..."

A noise from under the loading ramp cut Powerflash short. It was a faint *click*, but for mechanoids that carried as many guns as Powerflash and Rumbler, it was unmistakable. The noise was the bolt action of a fusion F-249 Quantum Pulse Regulator. More precisely, THEIR fusion F-249 Quantum Pulse Regulator.

"Captain Bad Boy, I'm afraid your Autobot comrade is quite right; the asteroid wants you dead." Charger emerged from under the ship with two smirking Decepticons following him. "Fortunately, instead of letting you sit here waiting for radiation exposure to corrode your wiring, the asteroid has chosen US to expedite things.

“So, if you don’t mind, would you drop your weapons? And put your hands in the air?” Charger cocked his head to the left, a sinister look creeping across his optics.

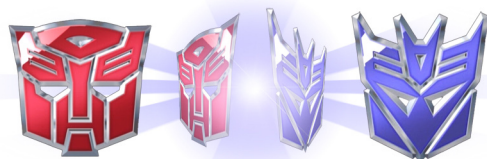
“Well, Rumbler, I guess we should do what they say.” Powerflash set his laser rifle on the rocky asteroid surface. Rumbler growled, tightening his grip on his blaster. “Rumbler, they’ve got us. Fair and square.” Powerflash smirked.

“Fine.”



Tap-Out’s optics slowly opened, and, unsurprisingly, Gutcruncher was gone. *He couldn’t have gotten far...I’ve got to warn the other Autobots.* The green robot reached for his radio, only to find an empty compartment in his wrist. *Oh, yeah, right...I guess I have to settle for the old-fashioned way.*

The Autobot took a few steps down the hall, then stopped and turned around. “First things first, though...”



Sprocket stomped down the loading ramp carrying a pile of scientific equipment stacked haphazardly in his arms. Seeing Powerflash and Rumbler, he called out, “I think I’ve got everything we need right here. Wanna help me set it up?”

“Sorry, Sprocket, but not right now.” Powerflash motioned to the Decepticons with a nod of his head. His hands were bound behind his back with a length of electrical wiring pulled from somewhere inside *Darklon’s* access passages. “We’re entertaining guests.”

Sprocket turned and smiled at the three robots holding weapons towards his chest. “Oh! Hey guys! Do YOU want to help me set this stuff up?”

“Is there somethin’ wrong wit’ him?” A quizzical look crossed Roadgrabber’s face.

Charger cleared his throat in an attempt to mask Roadgrabber’s question. “*Ahem* Why, certainly we will! Just bring it over here and then walk back over to your friends there.”

A smile emblazoned on his face, Sprocket happily complied. “Here you go! Have at it!” The white-and-black robot spun and walked slowly back to Powerflash and Rumbler, the smile a seemingly permanent fixture on his face.

“Tool! What’s wrong with you?! You just handed them everything they need to get the energy source!” Rumbler’s optics bulged as he was unable to believe what his brother had just done.

“Well...” Sprocket rubbed his chin. “Most of that stuff was theirs, anyway. It just seemed right to give it back to them.” The Autobot’s smile grew wider. “And as long as you’re already mad at me, what would you say if I told you I forgot to recharge the Pulse Regulators after the last time we used them?”

“Sprocket, I could kiss you!” A smirk appeared on Powerflash’s face.

“Yeah, who wouldn’t?” Sprocket turned and watched as the Decepticons extracted various measuring and processing instruments from their cases and began to assemble them.



Tap-Out slid to a stop as he saw Powerflash and Rumbler bound together at the end of the loading ramp. Sprocket was there, too, unbound but apparently doing nothing to stop the three Decepticons standing in front of him. *Well, not getting to them that way!* Tap-Out exclaimed to himself.

The green robot pressed himself against the bulkhead inside the *Darklon*, trying to get a better look at the robots outside. Gutcruncher was still nowhere to be found. *Great... Where is he?*

“Hello!” Tap-Out spun on his heels when he heard Gutcruncher’s voice behind him. There wasn’t anyone there. Instead, Gutcruncher’s voice was coming from *Darklon*’s intra-ship communications. “It looks like we have a deal to work out...”



“You see, we have your ship. And we’re about to have the energy source. So it would seem like we’re holding all the cards here.” Powerflash sneered as Gutcruncher snickered over the intercom. “Which means all we expect from you miserable Autobots is to stand there and let us finish. That’s it.

“Oh, and we expect you to keep standing there while we take your ship and fly back to Cybertron.” Gutcruncher chuckled. “A Decepticon will stay aboard your ship, to make sure you don’t try anything foolish. Everyone else will stay outside. Then, when we harvest our new energy, I’ll let Charger, Roadgrabber, and Take-Off back into the ship. And only them.”

“Doesn’t sound much like a ‘deal’ to me!” Powerflash yelled towards *Darklon*.

“I’m sure it doesn’t!” Gutcruncher shot back. “But your bargaining posture is...very shaky at best. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Hn.” If Rumbler’s optics could shoot lasers, they would have already burned through the ship’s hull and into Gutcruncher’s cerebral casing.

“And one more thing...” Gutcruncher added just as he was about to sign off. “I only see three of you out there. Tap-Out—if *that’s* your real name—you might want to head outside with your friends before things start to get messy out there. If I don’t see four Autobots out there in the next five cycles, then I might as well start subtracting some of them. Starting with Bad Boy.”

Sprocket swiveled to look at Powerflash. “Who’s Bad Boy?”



“I’ve got it!” Take-Off exclaimed as he stared at a sensor scope. “Just over the next crater, there must be a giant vein of...whatever!”

“Good. Grab the Autobots, let’s go.” Charger began his trek for the ridge of the crater, then halted. “Roadgrabber, go back to the ship. I have a feeling Gutcruncher will want to see this for himself.”

“Whatevah. It beats carryin’ these thingamabobs.” Roadgrabber dropped the laser drill he had balanced over his left shoulder and pulled out a radio he had pilfered from the Autobots’ armory. “Gutcrunch-uh, sir, I’m comin’ back. So ya kin git out herah and see yahr whatchamacallit.”

Gutcruncher’s voice crackled over the radio. “Why thank you, Roadgrabber.”



Charger climbed up the rocky surface of the crater and peered over the ledge into the pit below. In the middle of the immense divot on the asteroid’s surface was a crystalline monolith piercing through the stony terrain. The crystal cast a pulsating yellow light, making the rocks around it look like they were alive with shadowy creatures frantically crawling over them and into deeper crevices.

“It’s beautiful!” Gutcruncher exclaimed. “Charger, what are your readings?”

“It’s off the charts, sir.” Charger’s voice demonstrated no emotion. “It’s more powerful than we were thinking.”

“I *love* the sound of that!” The Decepticon Warlord swung his leg over the ridge and slid down the side of the crater. He looked up at the Decepticons and Autobots still standing above him. “How close can I get?”

“I’m not sure.” Charger shook the device in his hands. “Because of the intense energy signatures, acquiring definite data is proving troublesome.”

“Get down here, then. Tell me if I can touch it.” Gutcruncher winced as he stared directly into the bright yellow glow emanating from the crystal. “I want to touch it.”

Charger watched the Autobots kick up dirt and dust as they and Take-Off skidded down the crater towards Gutcruncher. “Sir, I’m not sure that’s prudent. Regardless of what my readings may say.”

“Smelt your readings. This is my victory; I want to hold it in my hands.” The Warlord stretched out his hand until his fingertips hovered just above the crystal. He pulled his hand back for an instant, then shot it forward. The energy from the crystal rolled up his arm and around his shoulder. Despite the warm sensation registering on his exterior sensors, Gutcruncher

detected no change, no harm to his superstructure. He began to laugh, starting as a chuckle, then evolving into a roar. The Decepticon reached out with his other arm, grabbing the other side of the crystal. “Charger! It’s magnificent!”

“I can appreciate its magnificence from here.” The green Decepticon kept his optics on his scanner as he ran it back and forth in front of the glowing tower of crystal. The scanner kept telling him the same thing; there was too much interference for a clear reading.

“Get over here and put your hand on the crystal. It’s exhilar—Oh!” The crystal began to shake, producing a shrill resonance that pierced the Cybertronians’ audio receptors.

“What did you do?!” Powerflash yelled at Gutcruncher.

“Nothing!” Gutcruncher spat back. “At least, I don’t think I did anything.”

The crystal now began to rock back and forth as the yellow glow grew steadily and increasingly brighter. Rays shot out on the sides of the crystal, dancing in a random pattern. Every time a ray hit the side of the crater, it tore a hole in the rock, kicking pebbles into the vacuum of space.

“Sir, I suggest we GET THE SMELT OUT OF HERE!” Take-Off panicked. He rushed for the wall of the crater, but never made it. One of the yellow rays struck the robot, stopping him in his tracks. His metal armor became aglow with amber light that penetrated every crack it could find.

“Powerflash, let’s go!” Rumbler jumped at the ledge of the crater, coming up short. As he fell back onto the asteroid surface, one of the crystal’s rays swept past him, hitting his leg. An arc of energy raced up the limb, and soon covered his entire torso.

Sprocket stared in dismay as his brother became entombed in flaxen lightning bolts. “Rumbler! I’ll help you!” As the black-and-white robot reached for his sibling, another yellow ray sprang from the crystal, hitting him in the side.

Charger, Gutcruncher and Powerflash froze, unsure of what to do next. Their indecision was their undoing, since as soon as they stopped moving, they were each struck by energy from the crystal. The crater was ablaze with the amber energy, the light flowing over every surface it could find.



“Sir! The fo’th Autobot turned himself ‘n.” Roadgrabber’s voice buzzed over the radio. “Gutcrunch-uh?”

Gutcruncher’s body lay unmoving in the crater. The yellow light from the crystal was now dark, as was the entire crystal itself.

“Gutcrunch-uh?!”

Pink light piped back into Gutcruncher’s optics as the robot came back online. “R-R-Roadgrabber?”

“Sir? Did y’hear me? I got the fo’th Autobot.” The radio filled with static.

Gutcruncher reached for the small black box on his arm. “Good...Good.”

“Whud’ya want me ta do wit’ ‘im?” Gutcruncher twisted the gain on the radio, and Roadgrabber’s voice came in clearer.

“Keep him there. I—” The Warlord turned to look at the now seemingly-inactive crystal, and sighed. “We’re on our way back now.”

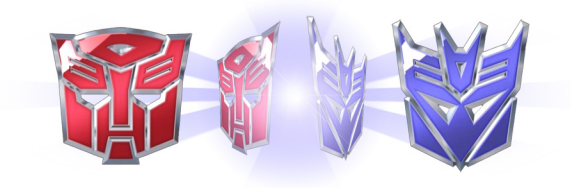
Gutcruncher got to his knees and slowly stood. Around him, all of the other robots were beginning to come online as well. He looked to Charger and Take-Off, who looked confused, but otherwise intact. “Decepticons! Transform!”

Nothing happened.

Gutcruncher glanced down at his arms; twinges of yellow remained between his joints, and the crystal’s energy still vibrated inside his armor. Gutcruncher sneered and repeated his order. “Transform!”

Still nothing.

The Decepticon warlord sighed, letting his entire upper body go limp. “Fine. Decepticons! *Walk* that way!” He flapped his right arm, pointing back towards *Darklon*.



Roadgrabber stood at the bottom of the loading ramp waiting for his fellow Decepticons to arrive. At his feet, Tap-Out sat bound in a cocoon of wires and zip-ties. The purple Decepticon fidgeted with another roll of wire, unable to decide if Tap-Out needed more.

The Decepticon looked up to see three robots running towards him, kicking up dust. Behind them, three more Cybertronians crawled from inside the crater. “‘Bout time!” Roadgrabber called to Gutcruncher.

“Can it!” The Decepticon leader huffed. “Get back into the ship and start the engines. We’re leaving!”

Roadgrabber scratched the back of his head. “Whud about that energy ya wanted?”

“It’s gone.” Gutcruncher pointed at Roadgrabber. “Now get inside!”

“Sure thing, boss.” The purple robot turned and leapt to the loading ramp, soon followed by the other Decepticons. At the top of the ramp, Gutcruncher slapped a button, causing the hatchway to slide shut. Most of the way. Before the lock had time to engage, a brilliant blue hand grabbed the massive piece of metal.

“You tools ain’t goin’ anywhere.” Rumbler managed to force the door open far enough to squeeze his torso through. The Decepticons responded by drawing their regulators and aiming them at the Autobot.

“Valiant effort, Autobot.” Gutcruncher smirked. “And a surprising feat of strength; I’ve never seen a Cybertronian handle that much pressure on their chassis.”

“Well. I’m fulla surprises.” Rumbler winced, trying to push the door back on its tracks even further.

“So I see. Bravo.” The Decepticon warlord mocked applause. “Unfortunately, though, it looks like you’re unarmed. And completely defenseless, since I imagine if you let go of that door, it will crush you to bits.”

Gutcruncher signaled to his followers. “So I’m afraid that when my minions shoot you, you can’t do anything to avoid the blasts, or fight back...”

The warlord stood back, relishing the look of agony on Rumbler’s face. Eventually, when he grew tired of the Autobot’s struggling, he called out, “Fire!”

Rumbler closed his optics, but nothing happened. No laser flashes, no melting metal, no sizzling servos, and, most importantly, no impending death. Rumbler muttered under his breath, “Thank the One for lazy Sprockets.”

Another set of hands squeezed between Rumbler and the door, then another. Shortly, the door slid the rest of the way open as Powerflash and Sprocket pulled and pushed with all of their might. Gutcruncher stared at the now-open doorway in the ship. “Impossible. There’s no way a Cybertronian—or three—could do that. That door should hold against 250,000 kilounits of force...”

Realization struck Take-Off first. “Hey! If that energy crystal gave them super-strength, maybe we have it to—Oof!”

Rumbler’s fist struck Take-Off in the mouth, sending the Decepticon flying. His green optics faded to black. “Super-strength or nothin’, you still got a glass jaw, sucka!”

Gutcruncher pushed Roadgrabber and Charger at the three Autobots. “Stop them! I’m going to go activate the auto-defense system. If we can’t shoot them, then the ship will!”

“But sir, I dun’ have no powahs!” Roadgrabber turned to complain as Sprocket jumped on his back.

“Yeee-hooo! Looks like we got us a vecteh rod-e-o, right herah! Geddie up, cog-poke!”

Sprocket kicked with all of his enhanced might, propelling the purple robot into the ship’s plating. “Hmm. I guess you weren’t used to the cogbot bucking back, eh?”

“Nuff playing around and sock this guy!” Rumbler lunged at Charger, who skillfully avoided him.

“I’m afraid that won’t be easy. Even if it is three on one.” Charger dodged another fist, and sent one flying right back at Powerflash. The yellow robot collapsed with a thud.

As Charger stood over Powerflash, something collided with the backs of his knees. The green Decepticon toppled over backwards, landing hard on the metal grating that made up *Darklon*’s floor. Tap-Out stepped on the Decepticon’s chest. “Make that FOUR against one!”

Charger grabbed Tap-Out’s foot and heaved him down the hallway. “Fool! You weren’t by the crystal. You don’t have the power.”

Transforming in mid-air, Tap-Out landed softly on rubber wheels. “That’s right, I wasn’t. Which means I can still do this!” Tap-Out shoved his accelerator to his floor boards and launched into the air. Sprocket and Rumbler grabbed each of Charger’s arms, holding him in place as the green car, still marked in places with black paint, rammed into the Decepticon’s head. The robot went down hard, his optics black before he even hit the floor.

“Just one robot left.” Powerflash glowered at no one in particular. “And he’s mine.”



Inside *Darklon*'s cockpit, Gutcruncher furiously pounded his fists against uncooperative panels. "This says 'Auto-Defense System', why won't you engage?!"

"Operator trouble, maybe?" Powerflash smirked. "Do you need a hand?"

"I don't need a hand to kill you!" Gutcruncher pulled out the radio he had tuned to the frequency of his home-made bomb detonator. "Just a single finger!"

Gutcruncher's index finger hovered just above the button on the radio. "The first thing I did after escaping from your faulty brig was plant a bomb inside this ship. If I push this button, this ship will explode in a fireball, killing every single Elite Guardsman on board."

"Uh, as well as killing you." Powerflash pointed at the Decepticon. "Just in case you didn't know that."

"Of course I know that!" The Warlord howled. "But I would much rather die in victory, than return to Cybertron in defeat!"

Gutcruncher pressed down on the radio's transmitter. "So long, Autobots, may the Pit be unkind! HAHAAHAHAHAHA!"

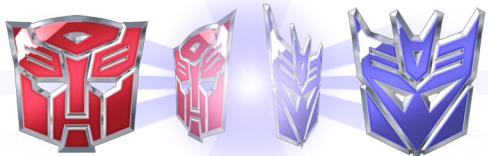
A muffled boom went off in the near distance. Gutcruncher pressed the transmitter again, and nothing happened. "Huh?"

As the Decepticon stared at the radio in his hand trying to figure out what went wrong, a blue blur of a fist connected with the side of his helmet. The force of the punch rendered the robot offline nearly instantly.

"Hey! I said he was mine!" Powerflash complained.

"Yeah, well, I like hittin' officers. Regardless of faction." Rumbler smiled. Which quickly faded as a massive explosion mushroomed from the crater with the crystal. *Darklon*'s command center was a sea of crimson red and vibrant orange light reflected from the inferno nearby.

Rumbler whimpered, "I think we should go back to Cybertron now..."



"Fliddeh huklepta gef tiddo fundo." The white Autobot with a remarkable similarity to Tap-Out leaned in closer with his over-sized lens tight against his optic. Powerflash recoiled, unsure what the robot was doing with the lens.

"Good news!" Crosscut announced. "Rest-Q says you're in perfect operating order!"

Rumbler snarled at the former diplomat. He never did trust him. ““Perfect’?! We can’t transform!”

“Jumpight fluate gruffen.” Rest-Q waved a dismissive hand towards his impatient patient. “Hefnugent.”

“He says that you’ll be able to turn back into Trans-Mode after the effects of the radiation wear off.” The silver robot mimicked the field medic’s gesture.

“And how long will that be?” Powerflash raised an optic.

“Gurnswikel.” The white robot shoved the door to the infirmary and stepped out into the hall.

Crosscut shifted, then cleared his throat. “*Ahem* He doesn’t know...”

The infirmary door bolted open as Sentinel Major swaggered into the room. “Trans-Mode. No Trans-Mode. Whatever happened, you bots did a dross of a good job up there.” The Major halted in front of Powerflash’s bedside. “Although I have to wonder what happened to Gutcruncher’s bomb. And why he couldn’t get the ship to work for him.” Sentinel paused, then muttered, “Or how you forged my name to get that ship.”

Powerflash ignored Sentinel’s last words and smiled. “Actually, sir, those are questions better answered by Tap-Out. And Sprocket.”

“Alright. Soldiers?” Sentinel looked expectantly at Tap-Out and Sprocket.

“Well...” Tap-Out started, “When Gutcruncher thought he knocked me out, just before he built the bomb, I was actually conscious that whole time. Barely, but enough. So when I saw where he hid it, I just simply relocated it...”

“Right on top of the energy crystal.” Sentinel Major narrowed his optics.

“Hey! I thought it was spent!” Tap-Out shrugged. “Besides, I couldn’t risk it falling into any other Decepticon’s hands, could I?”

Sentinel stared at the robot. “True enough.” He turned to Sprocket. “And the ship?”

“It’s what I said before; *Darklon* agreed to fly for Powerflash. No one else. So when Gutcruncher tried to get her to do something she wasn’t comfortable with...she just didn’t do it.” Sprocket smiled.

“Uh-huh.” Rumbler scowled. “Why didn’t she help with the door, then?”

“I told you. She didn’t like you.” Sprocket put his arms behind his head, laid back in his bed, and smirked.

Sentinel looked quizzically at the pilot. “Oookay. Anyway, I figured you bots should know that your explosion completely shattered that asteroid—which the science bots are saying wasn’t an asteroid, but part of Hydrus Four.” Sentinel coughed. He hadn’t paid attention when the scientists started spouting their facts and figures, and hoped that the Stealth Team wouldn’t ask any questions. “Whatever it was, pieces of it are now entering Cybertron’s orbit and will start to plummet to the ground in the next few solar cycles. We’re keeping an optic out for any of that bizarre energy crystal, but so far have found nothing.”

“Eh, even if there was any of it left, the Decepticons will think it’s just another meteor shower. They won’t know what happened out in space.” Tap-Out leaned back and put his feet up on a foot rest jutting from the end of the medi-bed. “I don’t think we’re gonna have any more trouble.”

Sentinel Major straightened his posture and walked out of the infirmary door. “For all of our sakes, I hope you’re right.”

Epilogue

The blue robot perched on his throne, watching the next proceedings in Kaon. It was more of the same bickering, but now, with news of Gutcruncher's capture, the Decepticon War Council did seem a little more focused.

Or, at least, the members who actually appeared at the meeting seemed focused. Shockwave apparently didn't feel the need to attend. And with the amalgamation of Hook's and Reflector's armies into Megatron's empire—each lured into Megatron's fold through his manipulation of the information they shared at the previous meeting—their chairs also sat empty. *He would treat the War Council as his own personal recruitment center*, Deathsaurus glowered at Shockwave's vacant chair. *No longer will he have that opportunity!*

Right now, Zardak was making some prepared speech about some relative of his making trouble for the Autobots' Centry Quadrant. It bored Deathsaurus, so he paid it little mind. He wished that Zardak would just get it over with, because up next to speak was Falcon. And Deathsaurus couldn't wait to hear what he was going to say.

Lyzack entered carrying another tray of oil. Deathsaurus looked at her curiously. "Lyzack, clearly you can see that I still have a goblet on the table next to my throne. Despite my affinity for fine-grade oils, I don't need more just yet."

"I know, my Lord, but this is for our guest." Lyzack bowed.

"Guest?" Deathsaurus raised an optic.

"Yes." Lyzack stopped in front of the throne, but looked at the tile on the floor. "Your scheduled meeting with the captain of your Skyraider-Seeker Brigade."

The Decepticon rubbed his chin. "Oh, yes, it had slipped my mind." Deathsaurus turned back to the screen to see Falcon rise behind his podium. "First, let me complete my voyeurism. Then, please, send him in."

Falcon steadied his datapad in front of himself, then leaned over to pick up a black box from the floor. "Oh my, oh my. I have such a captive audience indeed. Deathsaurus sent me here this night with a special present for all of you. What you see before me is a holo-projector filled with an important message from His Imperialness himself! All I have to do is press this button, and—"

No message played. Falcon looked at the box questioningly. "Oh dear, oh my, isn't that peculiar? There's no message, but...Ah, here we go! A countdown! It must take a moment to warm up. Just give it a nanoklik or two, and it should be ready t—"

SHRA-DOOOOM!

The black box exploded, turning the Decepticon council chambers into a hell storm of fire and smoke. As the explosion grew, it engulfed all of the warlords in attendance—Trannis, Preditron, Zardak, Cannonball, and Straxus—as well as Falcon and the camera that Deathsaurus had smuggled into the chambers.

Deathsaurus sat back against his throne, letting a predatory smile curve its way across his face. As soon as he was done savoring the moment, he waved to Lyzack, who hurried to the throne room door. As she slid the door back, a gray and red robot stepped through.

"Your Grace!" The robot dropped to one knee.

“Starscream, my loyal servant. Please rise. We have much to talk about.” Deathsaurus grabbed the goblet resting next to his throne and gulped down its contents.

“Such as the destruction of the Decepticon War Council?” Starscream bowed. “Forgive my eavesdropping.”

“Think nothing of it.” Deathsaurus waved a hand dismissively. “Consider it a perk of the meeting.”

“I’m honored.” Starscream smiled, but soon his optic ridge furrowed. “I must wonder, though, if it was a wise action to take. The Council was doing well to keep the Autobot Elite Guard preoccupied. Now, with the Warlords gone, they have fewer targets to aim at.”

Deathsaurus’ smile revealed two pointed metal incisors. It was less of a smile and more a sign of his aggression. “Don’t worry about that. I have something else to distract the Elite Guard.”

The Decepticon Warlord—now one of only two Decepticon Warlords on the planet—gestured for Lyzack to give Starscream one of the glasses of oil on her tray. “Let us discuss something more important; your promotion. It would seem the untimely death of my Lieutenant has left a position to be filled...”