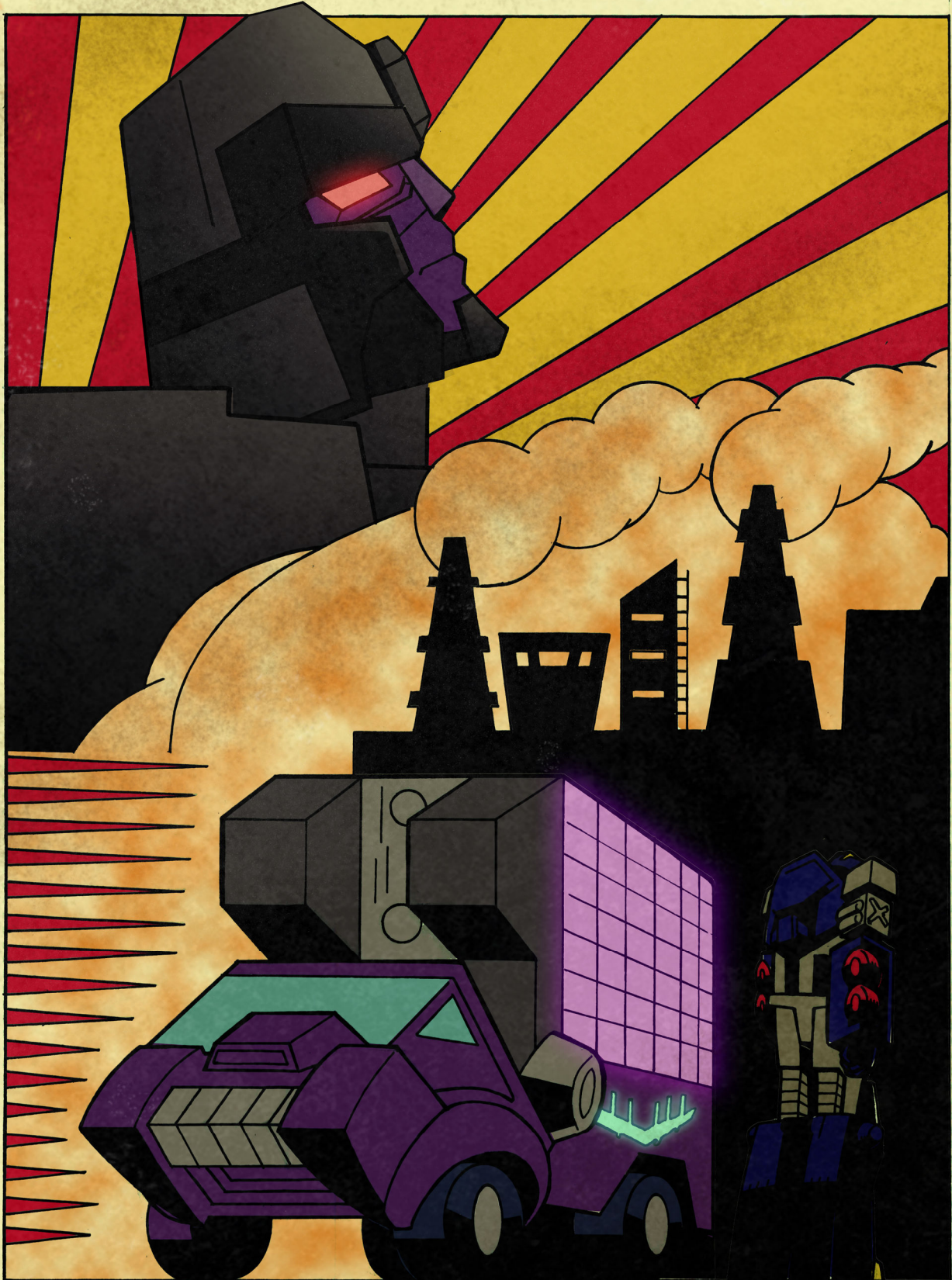


TRANSFORMERS TIMELINES PRESENTS
IDENTITY POLITICS



**A BEAST WARS: UPRISING TALE BY JIM SORENSON
WITH DAVID BISHOP**

**ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOMOYA HOSONO
COLORS BY WINSTON BOLEN**

"What the frag is wrong with you?" demanded the massive, still standing, blue and brown Maximal he'd just bumped into. In truth, Scorponok hadn't been paying attention to where he'd been going, his processor dancing with visions of the new flow maximization algorithm that had occurred to him in the dead of the previous night. The subsequent collision, on the threshold of the local Dynamic Energon Distilleries plant which was the primary employer in the region was, no doubt, his own fault. From where he had landed on the ground, he tried to blurt out an apology, even as he scrambled around the ground picking up both the scattered contents of the container the Maximal had been carrying and his own datapad.

"Sorry, sorry, I wasn't--I mean, I didn't see you," he stammered from the ground. He felt his regret subroutines come to the fore as he picked up his datapad and noticed it was cracked. After he'd taken such good care of it, too. At least it would probably still function. It would be ages before he'd be able to save up enough of his meager rations to purchase a new one.

"Didn't see me?" the Maximal asked incredulously. "Maybe next time you should watch where you're going!"

A smaller gray and brown Maximal, with a blue torso and an enormous red visor, glanced nervously about, then put a calming hand on her companion's shoulder. "Stockade, we don't have time for this."

Sensing danger, Scorponok hastily finished gathering the various work-related tools and circuitboards and placed them into the D.E.D.-branded box. He hoisted himself to his feet awkwardly, the box open in his hands. He extended his arms, proffering the package. "Here you go, um, Stockade, no harm done."

The smaller mech snatched it out of his hands, then gestured with her head to her large companion. "Come on, Stockade, it'd be stupid to stick around any longer."

Please go, Scorponok silently urged. Stockade glowered at him for a moment, then lifted her right hand and extended her index finger. "Next time," she said, "don't go bumping into any Maximals." She made a stabbing gesture at Scorponok's chest that came just short of physical contact.

Stockade wheeled around, ready to storm off, and found herself face-to-face with Impound, a Predacon security officer hired by the D.E.D.'s administrator. While the plant nominally fell under Maximal Command Security Force jurisdiction, the administrator had invested in private contractors who were always on-site and, or so he'd heard, were far less inclined to demand a little extra to investigate malfeasance. "There a problem here?" asked the green and burgundy mech.

Instantly, Stockade's demeanor changed to one of humility. "Oh, sorry, officer, no problem. Just giving my, heh, pal here a little friendly advice."

Impound stared hard at Stockade, then at Scorponok, who kept his vocoder studiously off. The security officer then turned to the smaller Maximal, who was fidgeting nervously. "Rav, you got something going on I should know about?"

"No, officer," she sputtered, "I didn't take anything."

Impound's expressive brows raised. "Who said anything about taking anything? I think the two of you had better come with me." Rav gave a nervous start, then took off running for the exit. Impound raised his arm, retracted his fist and replaced it with a launcher, then fired off a plasma net.

Stockade took advantage of the confusion to run as well, but rather than run out of the D.E.D. and into Impound's line of fire, she tried to run deeper into the facility, no doubt seeking some alternate means of escape. Unfortunately, history repeated itself and she again ran directly into Scorponok, sending them both sprawling. By the time Stockade managed to pick herself up, Impound was in position with a pair of stasis cuffs.

The security officer pawed through the box with practiced efficiency, quickly locating a microchip that looked to be of great interest to him. He turned his attention to Scorponok, who was once again picking himself up from the floor. "Good catch. How'd you know she was smuggling out access codes?"

"What?" Scorponok asked, startled. "I wasn't--I mean, I didn't--"

The guard smiled. "Got it. Right place at the right time. Well, you probably just kept the plant from being robbed blind, so either way, good on you, friend." He hustled off, the two prisoners in tow.

Huh.

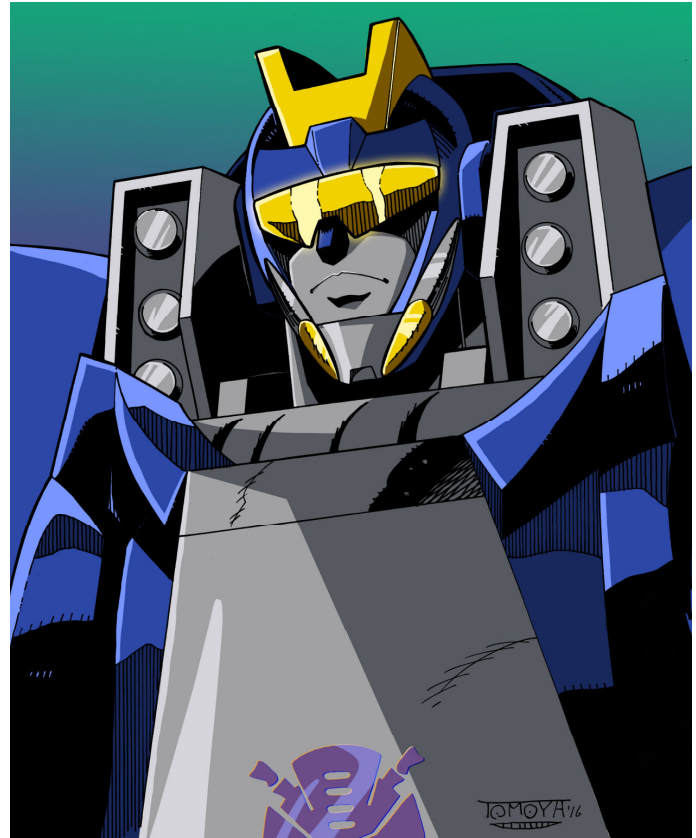


Scorponok thought little more of the incident for several days, falling back into his usual routine of 70% work, 20% leisure, 10% recharge. Work was as interesting as could be expected. The Builders tended to have two models of operation for society. Strict segregation was one, with some polities explicitly Maximal and others decidedly Predacon. The other was more subtle, but equally effective; putting one faction in management, the other in labor. Here in cosmopolitan Iacon, the second methodology was employed. Fortunately for Scorponok, the Dynamic Energon Distillery plant where he worked used Predacons in the leadership. He was but a lowly programmer, but at least he didn't need to abuse his small frame hauling energon cubes around.

He imagined that the Maximal laborers were thoroughly exhausted by the end of their allotted seven megacycles of work per day. Part of him was grateful that his contribution to the Builder Assembly, and by extension Cybertron, left him with enough energy in his circuits to do more than just crash in some dingy bar covered in the e-paint tags of the Destron Boys or the Firestormers or the Kospegos. He

enjoyed tinkering with algorithms and devising new programs, some of which he shared on the datanet. When he went online and interacted with those who shared his passions, he felt a true sense of community, something that was lacking in his day-to-day interactions. Other Predacons tended to be dismissive of him, due to his size, and the less said of Maximals the better.

A particularly difficult problem was occupying his processor cycles at the D.E.D. facility, three days after his run-in with Stockade and Rav. One of the condenser arrays was showing a 0.6% drop in efficiency, even though each of the seven individual condensers was at, or exceeding, 100%. The Maximal technicians who ran the thing swore that the wiring was good, so what exactly could the problem be? His mind was closing in on the solution--that one condenser running at 103% was niggling at him--when a message popped up on his console. 'The administrator would like to see you in his office.'



The administrator was a large, but not huge, purple Predacon. He was a relatively new addition to the plant, only arriving about twenty stellar cycles prior as deputy administrator, promoted to administrator around eight stellar cycles after that. Scorponok, in contrast, had spent his entire lifecycle working here, nearly five decades. Whereas the previous administrator, a mostly black Builder with two enormous purple claws, was seldom seen outside his office, this new administrator made a point of frequently touring the facility. He was rumored to be quite approachable, and was even seen occasionally chatting with the Maximals.

Nonetheless, Scorponok had never shared a conversation with the mech, didn't so much as know his name, and couldn't help but feel a certain level of apprehension. He stared at the message in the corner of the screen, taking up only a twentieth of the display surface and yet dominating his thoughts. Nanokliks ticked by, and the message showed no sign of spontaneously deleting. Slowly, reluctantly, he pushed his chair back from his display and trudged to the hover platform that would take him to the highest level of the plant. The 50 mechanometers from the platform's resting point to the administrator's office were a vast expanse. And then he reached the gleaming metal door, all that separated him from the being who could terminate Scorponok's employment in an instant, could probably get him sent to the Games. His own treacherous finger pushed the small button to the side of the entrance, requesting admittance.

Soundlessly, the door parted at the seam in the middle and each half withdrew into the wall. "Ah, you must be Scorponok." The voice was smooth, cultured. "Come in, come in." Scorponok braced himself, then entered the cybercat's den. It was, he had to admit, rather tastefully appointed as cybercats' dens went. There was a minimalist aesthetic at play, far at odds from Scorponok's own cluttered little domicile. Two of the walls, including the one opposite and the one to the right of the door, were vast windows, overlooking the plant sprawling below the administrative tower which gave way to the outer sprawl of Iacon. The third, to the left of the entrance, contained two artifacts that must have dated to the Great War itself. One looked to be a mangled piece of purple metal, the sort of thing that might not warrant a second look if not for the soft but insistent spotlight trained on it and the small plaque below it. The second was a communicator, again purple; it was a primitive model, but the dents in it spoke of actual combat use. The fourth wall had the entrance embedded in it close to the wall containing the artifacts. Mounted on this wall, closer to the window, was what appeared to be a thickly framed picture of some sort, although from his current angle Scorponok couldn't see it well. In the center of the room were a pair of parallel couches with a low-standing table between them. The Administrator's desk-- huge, and empty but for a single computer terminal--was positioned in the corner near the windows, opposite the artifacts which had commanded much of Scorponok's attention.

The door slid closed behind him, and Scorponok realized he had entered the room. The Administrator was in the process of navigating around his desk to greet him. "Ah, I see you've noticed my, ha, little treasures."

Scorponok tore his gaze away from the two purple relics mounted on the wall. "I, uh, yeah, they're real nice."

The administrator closed the space between them and then they were shaking hands. If he noticed the extreme difference in height between them, he covered it well. "Feel free to examine them more closely," he said, with an accompanying sweep of his hand in their direction.

Obligingly, Scorponok walked over and examined each in turn. "You are looking at a piece of the *Nemesis* itself," the administrator boasted proudly. Scorponok couldn't help but let out a sigh of admiration. The *Nemesis* was the fabled ship that had brought the Decepticons to Earth, four million stellar cycles ago. This piece of twisted scrap was probably worth more than Scorponok would earn in a decade. Reluctantly he refocused his optics on the communicator. "And that once belonged... to Megatron."

Megatron. The name sent a shiver down Scorponok's backstrut. The legendary founder of the Decepticons himself. Champion of Tarn. Architect of an empire. The myth who battled Optimus Prime to a stalemate time and again, waging their forever war across the cosmos. Every Predacon was, to some extent, forged in his image. Scorponok was in the presence of greatness, however distantly removed. "Wow. I've never... I mean, I heard there's a museum in Kaon with this kind of stuff, but I never expected to see it with my own optics."

The administrator seemed to bask in the praise. "It's important to have a tangible reminder of our history. There's more to life than the here and now, don't you think?" Scorponok had no idea what he meant, so he merely nodded.

The administrator held his gaze for a nanoklik too long, and somehow Scorponok knew that the Predacon before him had perceived his lack of understanding. "Come, now, Scorponok, do you believe that your entire existence can be summed up in the time allotted to you? 7 megacycles of work, 2 megacycles of leisure, 1 megacycle of recharge? Is there not more you wish to experience? Perhaps a visit to the Museum of Decepticon Heritage in Kaon? Or some personal project you wish to see through to completion?"

This time Scorponok's rapid nods were genuine. He often felt that he lived for the 2 megacycles a day when he could craft his own software. The administrator seemed to sense the change in Scorponok's demeanor, and gave a broad smile. "But I didn't call you here to chat about ancient relics. I wanted to thank you for intervening in a threat that could have cost this plant severely."

"Ah, well, I wish I could take credit, but it was just dumb luck. I bumped into Stockade because I was too busy thinking about optimization algorithms to look where I was going."

The administrator's optics narrowed at the mention of optimization algorithms. Then he waved his hand, dismissing Scorponok's statement with practiced ease. "No need for false modesty. In my experience, mechs like you and I make our own luck, yes. Now, tell me more about these algorithms."

This was a topic Scorponok was all too happy to expound upon. He began at a high level, about how the grid could be fine-tuned to minimize the interference that each rectifier generated, increasing overall output essentially for free. Soon the administrator was pressing him for ever-more specific details, drilling down to a level that only the most savvy of operations experts could reasonably have been expected to know. By the time he was finished, Scorponok was astounded to realize the sun was close to setting. He'd spent over three megacycles in the administrator's office.

The administrator seemed to realize it too, and stood from the couch with an exaggerated stretch. Scorponok had noticed that all of the administrator's movements were larger-than-life. "I'm sorry to have taken up so much of your time, administrator," he apologized.

In response, the administrator slipped a paternal arm around Scorponok's shoulder. He normally tended to avoid physical contact, but somehow the administrator kept it from being awkward. "Scorponok, there is no need for you to apologize. I sense in you a... kindred spark, one with a greater destiny than those in power might at first realize. I suspect that this meeting will be but the first of many. And please, titles are so gauche, don't you think. Call me..." The administrator seemed to almost falter, and an uncharacteristic hesitance came into his voice. "Call me Gnashteeth."

Other mechs leaving the plant couldn't help but notice something of a skip in Scorponok's step that evening. He barely realized it himself, but for the first time in as long as he could remember, he felt optimistic about the future.



"Glad to be able to count on your support, Councilman Sigil," Double Punch purred.

"You've demonstrated your worth in the, ah, drab but necessary field of energy production," croaked the elderly mech on the other side of the vidscreen. Not that Double Punch was much younger.

"Halogen and I are eager to see what you can bring to the Assembly. We can use more Decepticons here. Kudon and Cross-Cut are starting to get... ideas."

Double Punch forced an attentive look to his face. The old politician played the senile fool, but there was a reason no one had managed to unseat him from his coveted position on the Builder Assembly. "Oh," he prompted.

"Indeed. They even floated the notion of bringing a Micromaster onto the council. Scandalous! What's next, a Cyberdroid? Or, worse, a Predacon?" Sigil gave a stuttering noise that was as much a cough as a laugh.

It was obvious what the Councilor was hinting at, but neither of them acknowledged it. Instead, Double Punch thanked his patron again and graciously ended the conversation.

Fine. He knew this day would come sooner or later. He put in a call to his protégé and steeled himself for the unpleasantness.

That evening, Gnash arrived half a megacycle after his plant closed. Punctual as ever. He was shown to the grand hall by Cerberus, Double Punch's ever-watchful bodyguard.

A brief mental command set his exo-walker into motion, and Double Punch's decrepit body was carried to the grand hall of his mansion. Like nearly all Builders, had been forced to sacrifice conventional mobility in the face of Cybertron's dwindling energy reserves. There simply wasn't enough energon that could be produced to power their massive frames. In the waning days of the war, it was not uncommon for entire divisions to simply lock-up where they stood. Various commanders employed different strategies; utilizing Micromaster squads was a popular one, as was using all of a unit's fuel to get a single warrior into combat. But even these gambits proved cumbersome and difficult to sustain. Meanwhile, the vast majority of society remained immobile, but far from inactive. They used what few resources they still commanded to wire themselves into the local networks, which were soon knit back into a

planetwide datanet. Soon whatever stigma there was against immobility was gone; in fact, the Micromasters who still walked around freely were looked down upon as a manual class, a fact they were none too happy about.

Then came the Maximals and the Predacons. No one seemed to know for certain where they had come from, but the rumors that came to Double Punch at high society soirées spoke of Terran involvement. They certainly revitalized society; smaller and more energy-efficient than even Micromasters, they could build and mend and harvest and transport, all of the things necessary for a society to function. But old hatreds die hard, and there were those who wanted to use the Offspring races to reignite the Great War. Certainly, Maximals built in the image of Autobots had little love for Predacons, forged in the tradition of the Decepticons.

But war was such a dangerous, unpredictable thing. The Assembly of Autobots and Decepticons who had been doing their best to keep society limping along hit upon a brilliant notion: the Games. Maximal and Predacon, pitched against each other as in the days of yore. And they really were a sight to behold, mighty warriors fighting for their lives, and the honor of their home polities, and the glory of their respective factions. Double Punch couldn't help but watch them and think of his old time in the ancient pits of Kaon. Get a little too much engex in him and he'd tell of the time he and Borehole tore down part of the arena to crush Hydrau. He still cherished the look of shock and horror on the face of the audience members who realized they were about to die...

He shook off his recollections as his walker brought him down the magnificent spiral ramp that led from his living suite to his central hall. It was an ostentation, to be sure, but a necessary one. While most social interaction took place holographically, one could always tell if a projection was in virtual or physical space, and luxuriously-maintained physical spaces large enough to host a gathering of Builder holo-projections were a sure sign of social status.

Gnash waited patiently in the center of the grand hall, with Cerberus waiting unobtrusively by the door. If Gnash's optics took in the mighty red and gold weapons mounted tastefully on the wall, trophies from his gladiatorial days, they did not show it. Of course, the Predacon he thought of as a friend had been here many times before. "Welcome, welcome, glad you could make it on such short notice." Gnash nodded his head slightly in acknowledgment. They both knew that the Predacon had little choice in the matter, but Double Punch was never obnoxious about his status. Not with one as capable as 'Gnash' was, anyway. "Energon wine?" he offered.

"I would be delighted, Chairman," said the Predacon, and the sentiment seemed uncharacteristically genuine.

As he watched Cerberus pour two glasses by the wine cabinet, Double Punch wondered what had put Gnash in such a good mood, and felt briefly guilty knowing that he'd soon disappoint his loyal subordinate. Naturally, Double Punch was served first. "Oh? Good news to share, Gnash?" he asked as he imbibed deeply. Concentrated on the drink as he was, Double Punch failed to notice how the

Predacon's optic's flashed at the mention of the diminutive. His plant administrator never had much liked the moniker.

"Rather, yes." Gnash savored the last word, drawing it out as he took the crystal glass and swirled the wine around. So far he'd only taken a few token sips. "But I'm sure that's not why you summoned me here."

That was very Gnash. Straight to the point, keeping cards close to the torsoplate until it was time to throw them down. "Perceptive as ever. The time has come for me to make a play for the Assembly itself."

Gnashteeth gave a wild smile, one that hinted at his own ambitions. "Congratulations! Your excellent chairmanship of the Dynamic Energy Distillery organization must have caught their attention."

Double Punch picked up on the insinuation, of course. When Gnashteeth came on as deputy administrator of the Iacon D.E.D. plant, Double Punch was the administrator. Playing nursebot to a plant full of Maximals and Predacons held little interest to the former gladiator, and production had been stagnant for stellar cycles. Gnash had changed all that, gradually accumulating more and more authority as Double Punch left operations to him. Astonishingly, the Predacon had a real aptitude for it, increasing output while simultaneously improving morale and decreasing accidents. Double Punch became the rising star of the D.E.D. corporation, and when its Chairman, Bulletbike, was arrested for fraud, Double Punch slid naturally into his position. Gnash was promoted to administrator of the plant, an unheard-of honor for a lowly Predacon. Even still, he continued to help Double Punch's career, sending best practice binders and technical improvements Double Punch could roll out across D.E.D. plants all over the world. In the twelve stellar cycles he had been helming the utility, D.E.D.'s energon compressors had gone from providing 18% of the world's energon to an astounding 26%. All in all, Gnashteeth was Double Punch's secret weapon.

Not as secret as I'd hoped, mused Double Punch. Sigil's meaning was clear; Double Punch had been slumming it with the Offspring races, and if he wanted a spot on the Assembly, that had to end now. He turned his tone hard. "Yes, and that means I'm going to need to name a replacement as chairman."

Gnashteeth preened, uncharacteristically missing the sour edge Double Punch had put into his voice. Ego, he thought, that was Gnash's flaw. Time to rip off the medipack. "It's not going to be you."

That got the Predacon's attention. "What?"

"Gnash, be reasonable. You're already the administrator of the Iacon facility, the flagship of D.E.D. operations."

Gnash's grip on his glass tightened. "It wasn't the flagship twenty stellar cycles ago."

Double Punch attempted to calm the Predacon. "No, that's down to you. But every other plant is administered by a Builder. Do you really think they would take orders from you?"

The glass in Gnash's hand shattered, and energon wine spilled onto the imported bauxite floor. "They've been following my orders for stellar cycles!"

Double Punch was shocked. In all the stellar cycles he'd known Gnashteeth, he'd never seen this side of him. "But they don't know that. All plant improvement initiatives have come through me. And whoever replaces me, well, they're not going to know just how talented you really are." He tried to keep his voice level, though when Gnash turned his back on him it gave him a flash of anger. "I'll do my best to shield you, but..."

Gnashteeth had stalked away a few feet, but the veiled threat whirled him around. "Are you telling me that even my position as administrator is at risk?"

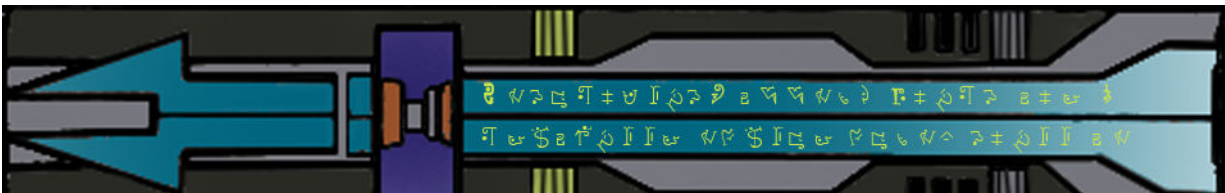
Again, with the disrespect. "Watch your tone! It'll be the new chairman's prerogative. I'll mention what a good job you're doing, but that's all I will promise."

"You wouldn't even be getting promoted if not for me!" Gnashteeth exploded.

Despite himself, Double Punch matched his rage, his old circuits energizing with fury as they had in his youth. "You think I don't know that? Of course I know that! But you've risen higher than any Predacon has a right to, so how about a little gratitude for your betters?"

The exo-walker took a step forward, though he wasn't consciously aware of sending the command, and Double Punch's enormous bulk forced Gnashteeth to step back lest he be bowled over. "Gratitude? You expect..." Gnash's fist was shaking. He seemed to focus on it, willing it to still, then dropping it to his side. A moment passed while he visibly composed himself. Then another. When he spoke again, his mellifluous tones were back. "Of course I'm grateful, and wish nothing but the best to you in your new political career. I suppose I'll just have to trust in the good judgment of your successor and ensure that the Iacon D.E.D. facility continues to run as smoothly as ever. Now, perhaps it's time for me to be going. Thank you for giving me the courtesy of a face-to-face meeting to inform me of this new turn of events."

As Double Punch watched Gnashteeth go, he couldn't help but feel apprehensive. He knew how brilliant Gnashteeth was, but had never really suspected how much anger there was in him. Even though he was a Builder and Gnashteeth but a lowly Predacon, part of him feared what should happen if he should find himself in the way of all that rage and brilliance.



The two deca-cycles since his meeting with the administrator--try as he might, he couldn't think of him as Gnashteeth--were the best of Scorponok's life. He had been promoted to senior programmer the

very next solar cycle. With his new title came an upgraded computer rig, a small budget for work-related expenses, and even a private, if tiny, office. Best of all, two of his seven work megacycles became dedicated 'variable time', for use on any project Scorponok saw fit, with results reported directly to the administrator whenever Scorponok was ready to share them. When the administrator checked up on him two solar cycles after his promotion, he encouraged Scorponok to use his VT to find a way to make his theoretical improvements to plant efficiency a reality.

So when Scorponok was called to the administrator's office on the 21st solar cycle since their initial meeting, he was excited, expecting to find the same affable leader who had given him such inspiration. He was mistaken.

From the moment he entered the office, Scorponok could tell something was wrong. The administrator sat behind his desk, staring out the window with his back to the door. His hunched posture implied brooding. Scorponok cleared his throat, but got no reaction. He waited for a moment, weighing the merits of speech versus silence, when the administrator finally acknowledged his presence.

"Look at them all, Scorponok, scurrying about. They seem so... insignificant... from this height."

Scorponok had never really thought about it. He wasn't sure what the etiquette was but made his way to a window, being careful not to intrude past the invisible line represented by the administrator's desk. "They sure do look busy, sir."

"Busy..." he sounded lost in thought. Then he straightened in his chair, spun around, and rose. Suddenly he was all charm. "How is your new position working out?"

Scorponok gushed with gratitude, quickly going into specifics and not noticing the lack of interest in the administrator's optics. Finally he was gently cut off. "Yes, quite. And your VT? I believe you promised me an 8% increase in efficiency?"

"If anything, that's a conservative estimate. By timing the interference phenomena, there's no reason we can't get as much as a 10.3% increase in overall output, provided we--"

The administrator cut him off. "How soon can we get this implemented?"

"Hmmm..." Scorponok pondered for a moment. "I think I can get a proposal to fabrication for a 1:244th scale model ready in three or four solar cycles. If that shows the predicted behavior without any worrisome feedback loops, we could probably roll out to, say, 5% of rectifier arrays in two or three orbital cycles. Then we watch that behavior for a few deca-cycles, make sure it conforms to the model--"

Again, the administrator interrupted him. "We can't wait for the better part of a stellar cycle to implement. I need improvements today!"

"Today?" Scorponok was flabbergasted. "This is a highly theoretical model. *Maybe* we could skip the model, but there's no way we could implement plant-wide without a pilot program first. If we don't

verify that it works on a small test case, then gradually scale up, we could short out the whole network, maybe even cause an explosion."

The administrator's voice was uncompromising. "I'm willing to risk that."

Scorponok knew this would be a disaster. He cast about, searching for an argument that might convince his superior. Superior... that had potential. "But... even if you were, there's no way the Chairman would ever sign off on it."

The administrator's lips curled into an ugly snarl, and suddenly the administrator had lifted Scorponok by his torso so they were at eye level. "The Chairman? The Chairman can..."

Scorponok was quaking at this unexpected violation. The administrator began again, seemingly calmer this time. "Hmmm... you're right, of course." He lowered Scorponok gently to the ground, then wandered over to the framed picture on the wall. For a moment he pondering it. "I don't believe you took the time in our last encounter to properly examine this little gem, no."

It was true. Scorponok had admired the relics, but never so much as glanced at the artwork. As he turned his attention to it, he realized it wasn't a picture at all, but an ant-droid colony effectively compressed to two dimensions behind a pane of transparent aluminum. "Aren't they magnificent, Scorponok? An entire community, all directed from a single queen." He gestured to a large chamber, and there it was, an ant-droid three times the size of the others. "It's really quite remarkable. Any one ant-droid can be easily crushed, but gather a hundred, a thousand, a million, and they can move mountains."

The creatures marched through the tunnels they'd hollowed out in the soft cesium substrate, purposefully moving from one chamber to another. Worker units brought materials down from one spot at the top of the colony, where Scorponok noticed a small hatch by which the administrator could 'feed' them. All material was brought to a staging area, where it was processed and brought to other chambers. In one, specialized insectoids with microscopic tools at the end of their manipulators were building new creatures. In another, boxy creatures were consuming the silicates brought to them and excreting tiny glowing pellets... energon? Those pellets were then brought to the queen, who was herself consuming some but also retained a small stockpile. A steady stream of droids came to the chamber, interfaced with her, drank a pellet, and then went off to toil away at some task. It was a fascinating process, certainly; somehow, on a primal level, it called to mind the elegance of the best algorithms he'd ever managed to design.

His thoughts were interrupted by the administrator. "So, Scorponok, we have something of a conundrum. You have a process that could increase our output significantly, but by the time I can implement it properly I will likely be replaced with a Builder, who would no doubt claim all the credit for himself."

Things clicked into place, and Scorponok felt a burst of sympathy for the administrator. "Oh. Ooooooh. I'm sorry, sir. I heard that we were getting a new Chairman. I didn't stop to think--"

"And why should you have? This is hardly your problem." The administrator strolled over to his desk, picked up a datapad, and began making notes. "I had hoped we could rush to production and prove my worth, but doing so openly will only get me shot down. And doing so in secret is hardly an option, because besides the risk there'd be no way to explain all of the extra energon."

"Builder world problems," Scorponok muttered. At the administrator's inquiring glance, he repeated it more loudly, then explained. "It's just ironic. Having too much energon. How often does that happen to Predacons like us? I mean, if you did find a cache of energon, left over from the war maybe, you'd probably just sell it under the table and live like a king."

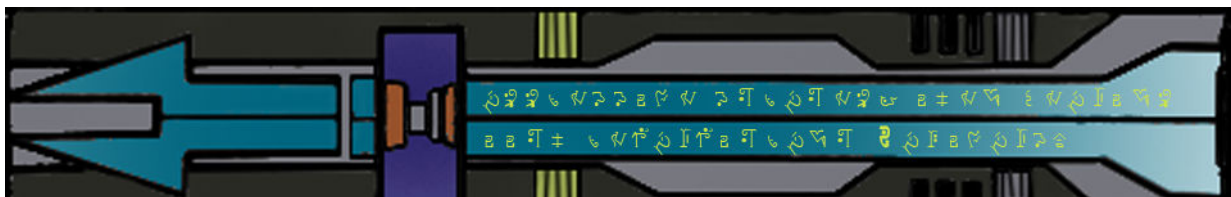
The administrator dropped the pad, which hit the floor on its edge with a loud clang, then bounced to its other edge before coming to a stop face-down. "Scorponok, that's brilliant. Our plant produces thousands of ECEUs per day. Even with only 5% of our rectifier arrays modified, we could easily walk away with... call it 18 energon cubes a day that no one would expect us to have, no!"

Scorponok wasn't sure he was following. Or, rather, he feared that he was following all too well. "Well, sure, but... wait, what?"

The Administrator barely heard him. "Exactly. Then we sell them, stockpile wealth, beat the Chairman at his own game! How soon can we get our secret pilot program in place?"

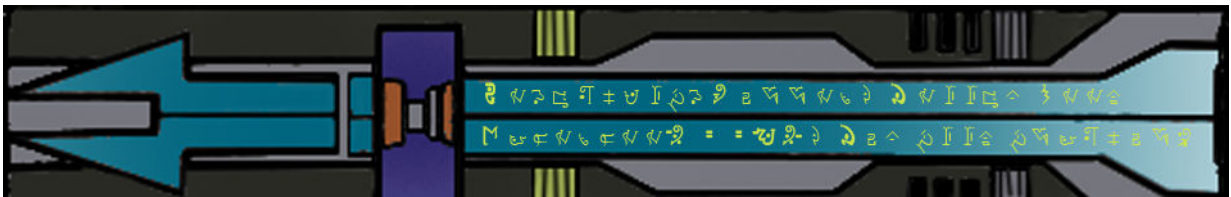
His processor was spinning. Embezzle energon? Sell it on the black market? And yet, the administrator was looking at him expectantly, and for the first time in his life Scorponok felt truly needed. "If I have unlimited access to Array Л, I can have it live in two solar cycles."

The administrator steeped his fingers and rapped them together. "Excellent."



Despite his apprehension, Scorponok's initial modifications were put in place with little fanfare. The supervisor of Arrays И-П, a bored-looking blue Predacon named Hydrax, barely glanced at the work order on Scorponok's shiny new datapad before yelling for all Maximals to clear out of Л. Scorponok spent several megacycles uploading and modifying his program, then conducted a test-boot to make sure the system would work. It did, which meant it was time for the dangerous part; running a secret power conduit from Л to an unused utility shed located outside of the security perimeter of the plant.

The entire time he was running the cable, he was certain his spark was pulsing furiously enough that it must be sending out EM waves in all direction. His fears were confirmed in the loading dock, when he passed one of the many Dropkick-model haulers and caught Impound's optic. "Oi, Scorponok!" The security bot jogged over, Scorponok all but certain he was about to be sent away to the Games. "That looks heavy," said the bulky green mech. "Need a hand?" Not trusting his vocoder, all Scorponok could do was nod. Together they ran the cable past the multitude of idling Builder-scale trucks, through an access panel to the outside of the plant, all the way to a rickety, freestanding structure just outside the D.E.D. plant's fence. The entire time, Scorponok's processor raced, trying to come up with a plausible reason he'd need to be sending power here, but nothing came to mind. Finally, Impound put down the spool with a grunt, just inside the metal walls. "Here good for you?" the mech asked. Scorponok nodded again, prompting Impound to give a half-salute and start walking away. Then he stopped and turned back. "Oh, just one more thing," he began, and Scorponok braced himself. Impound strode purposefully back to Scorponok's position. "If you're gonna be doing any work out here, I'd suggest locking up." The security officer's optics turned skyward and he produced a sturdy looking padlock from subspace. "Here you go. Just set it to any combination you like. Can't be too careful, right friend?"



In the border regions of Iacon, underneath the glowing antler mark of the Kospegos, they made their first sale. They brought with them an astounding 54 energon cubes, enough fuel to power Scorponok at his current energy level for the better part of a stellar cycle, or at full power for nearly three orbital cycles. Yet, despite that, it represented only three solar cycles of their scheme. Scorponok handled the transaction, with the administrator waiting a block away as backup in case there was any trouble. The hulking mech they sold it to stuck mostly to the shadows, but was more than happy to pay them 2000 CPKs for their bounty before skulking off.

A few cycles later, in a run-down bar on the corner of a neighboring street, Scorponok could barely contain his excitement. "I can't believe it," he enthused in a low whisper, "two *thousand* cyber planet keys! I've never seen this many in my life."

The administrator looked down at him with evident disdain. "I have. And I thought the going rate was 100 CPKs per cube."

Scorponok raised his voice a little, as the administrator didn't seem to be whispering. Truthfully, no one was paying any attention to them, and being furtive would probably attract more attention than simply having a conversation. "Well, maybe, if you're selling them one at a time on the street. But we got rid of them all in one go, and I think Ped might--"

The administrator's left eyebrow rose. "Ped?"

"That's the name he gave. Ped the Pred. I think he'd be game for more."

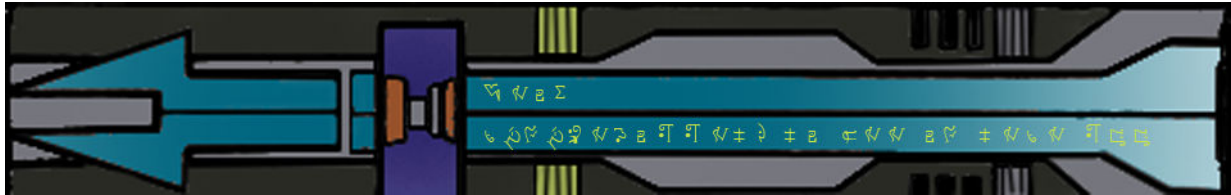
"Of course he would. I would too if I was paying a third the going rate. Next time, Scorponok, we sell directly to consumers."

"Ummm..." Scorponok knew he'd need to handle this delicately. "Administrator, I'm not--"

"By the Inferno, just call me Gnassteeth." The administrator's impatience bled into his tone and his voice raised a hair. The navy-and-teal Cyberdroid bartender glanced over, gave a twitch of his lip that might have been the barest suggestion of a smirk, and then returned his attention to a monitor playing highlights from the latest Game.

"Sorry," Scorponok said, and he genuinely was. The administrator had always been a little odd about his name--it was one of the reasons Scorponok thought of him by title. He tried to continue gamely, but he was in truth off balance. "But Gnassteeth, sir, I'm not sure how realistic that is. You need dealers, territory, clientele, and we don't have any of those things."

The administrator--Gnassteeth, he corrected--was silent for a moment, appearing lost in thought. Finally, he focused on Scorponok. "We'll get them. The 2000 CPKs is a start. We'll use it to purchase weapons, expand our influence, make our presence felt. This, Scorponok, this is life!"



It took time to get their next batch of energon cubes ready for sale. Scorponok was put in the uncomfortable position of slumming it in establishments with names like The Scourge of Athenia and Three Busted Optics, looking for mechs desperate enough to peddle their illicit wares. Over several solar cycles, he assembled a small gang of hollow-eyed Empties, willing to work for energon, and began parceling out their stockpile.

Things began to go sideways almost immediately. One of the Empties, Tappet, absconded with the four cubes he was given to sell. Gnassteeth was furious, and demanded he be made an example of. Scorponok pointed out that he had no onboard weapons, and no particular way to track down the Empty. Gnassteeth fretted over this for some time, then told Scorponok to put a bounty of 20 cubes on Tappet's head.

This posed its own set of challenges. Scorponok had no real idea how to 'put out a hit'. The bartender of his chosen establishment solved that problem. An unsavory Headmaster named Krunix who still seemed

hollowed out by the loss of his partners centuries ago--which explained both the name of the joint and the slightly de-rezzed hologram of an organic humanoid in high-tech armor labeled 'Fracas' kept behind the bar--offered to spread the word for a 10% commission up front. Scorponok was sure he was being scammed, but less than a solar cycle later an unsavory Maximal named Gauntlet claimed the bounty. Scorponok felt his insides churn when the tall, silver mechanoid covered in chains presented a holovid of Tappet's burnt-out husk for inspection. That did keep the rest of Empties in line, though.

As solar cycles became deca-cycles, the CPKs started rolling in. Some of their crew took longer to move their cubes, some had the knack. Their best seller, Dipstick, sold his four cubes his first solar cycle. He repeated this feat with six, then nine cubes, which was as many as Scorponok could give him a day given the other three Empties also shilling cubes. Then his mangled corpse was found in the alley outside of Protoforms of Anarchy, his spark extinguished by a single shot to the back of the chest.

Scorponok heard about his execution only when the rest of his crew failed to report that evening for their re-up. By this point, at Gnashteeth's suggestion, he had quietly kept tabs on his dealers and knew where they crashed for the evening. He found the terrified Skater in his shanty underneath the Uraya Bypass, who filled him in on Dipstick's murder at the hands of the Kospegos before bolting.

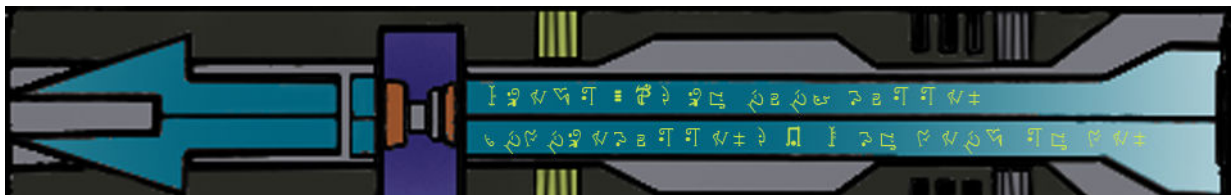
The next morning, at the plant, Gnashteeth was in a particularly foul mood. The incoming Chairman of Dynamic Energon Distilleries, Ego, had appointed a new administrator the prior day. Administrator Datamine seemed particularly venal during his inaugural holo-address to the plant. Gnashteeth was half-heartedly thanked for his service, then summarily demoted to co-deputy administrator, sharing responsibilities with Budora, his own former deputy. Even Scorponok saw that Datamine was setting up his two underlings to compete for his favor, a game he knew Gnashteeth would have little patience for.

Scorponok entered the office with little fanfare, as had become their habit. Much to his surprise, Gnashteeth was supervising two large Maximals removing the trappings from the wall. "You're moving?" he asked lamely, then clarified his thought. "I thought Datamine would be working remotely. So why..."

"To put me in my place, Scorponok. To remind everyone who the alpha mech is. Now, if you gentlemechs would excuse me for a moment, I believe my colleague has plant business to discuss." Once they were gone, Scorponok brought Gnashteeth up to date, his expression becoming more and more clouded. "To the Pit with the Kospegos! I will not be forced from my office by day and the streets at night! Spread the word that I want a meeting with them. And get me some muscle."

Scorponok found his circuits tingling. The thought of tangling with a gang like the Kospegos should have filled him with dread, would have done so as recently as an orbital cycle ago, but his faith in Gnashteeth was fast becoming absolute. "I'll get it done, Gnashteeth."

His boss nodded. "You and I, Scorponok, we shall make them all respect what we've accomplished."



Acid rain drizzled from oppressive purple clouds. It was a night that kept honest bots inside, thankful not to be exposed to the corrosive toxins that were the byproduct of Cybertron's faltering industrial base. Scorponok twitched nervously, the blaster he'd procured earlier that evening uncomfortable in his servos. He looked up to Gnassteeth, standing tall, and was certain that the meet would go well. Behind them, the enormous Raze and his smaller partner Sting provided extra firepower, in case negotiations broke down.

Gnassteeth's crew had arrived five cycles early at the appointed place, an alley behind Three Busted Optics. Raze made a show of inspecting their environment while Sting stood by the mouth of the alley, watching the street. Raze's grey and green bulk tested a fence at the back of the cul-de-sac, finding a gate secured with a simple padlock. He crushed it in his oversized fist, then nodded at Gnassteeth. "Just in case we need to beat feet," he grunted. Gnassteeth had nodded knowingly.

The appointed time came and went, and still no Kospegos. At five cycles plus, Scorponok was starting to fret. Where were they? He comforted himself by thinking that probably gangs didn't hold timeliness to the same regards as computer programmers and plant administrators. Ten cycles passed, then fifteen. Finally, Gnassteeth seemed to decide he'd had enough. "This was a waste of time," he declared, and started walking to the entrance.

Almost as if this was some kind of signal, a large blue Maximal sporting a huge rack of antlers strode confidently into the alley, trailed by a slightly larger winged red mech carrying an enormous double-barreled rifle easily in his right hand, a metal case in his left. The rifle hung easily by his side, not aimed at anything but menacing none-the-less. Scorponok clutched his own, tiny weapon and was suddenly certain that they hadn't brought enough firepower. He glanced back at Raze and Sting, finding them tense and alert.

"So," began the mech who could only be the lead Kospego, "you twos are the bozos who been muscling into Kospego turf."

Gnassteeth marched forward. "Indeed we are," he said, oozing charm. "And apologies if we've transgressed somehow. We are both new to the, ah, 'game', as it were."

The red mech cackled. "New, huh? Welcome to the dark side."

Gnassteeth's optics flitted between the red mech and the leader, then extended a hand to the blue Maximal who was evidently in charge. "Er, quite. But we are eager to pool our resources with yours."

The Kospego looked down at the hand as if it were a dead retrorot, and Gnassteeth slowly retracted it. For the first time Scorponok could recall, Gnassteeth looked ill at ease. The Kospego, in contrast, looked as if he were in total control of the situation. "So, you're the boss-man, eh? The glitch who would be king? That about right?"

On the word 'glitch', Scorponok caught a twitch in the corner of Gnassteeth's lips, a barely-suppressed snarl, but his boss managed to control it. "We, ah, merely wished to move some product in the most

efficient and profitable way possible. This need not represent a threat to Kospego interests. I see the possibility of a win-win here."

The Kospego nodded, sending the long shadows of his antlers bobbing up and down the wall. "A win-win. I like that. You talk good. And that energon you're sellin', mwa!" He kissed his fingers and expanded them with a flourish on that last word. "You must be pretty cultured to get so much energon like that. Not like me and Terrorsaur here." The red mech, Terrorsaur evidently, cackled dutifully, but his laughter didn't reach his optics, which never left Gnashteeth.

Gnashteeth, for his part, didn't seem to know exactly how to play this situation. "I, ah, I assure you, we have nothing but the highest levels of respect for all that the Kospegos represent."

The lead Kospego nodded again. "Respect. That I like. You respect us. You respect us so much, you come down to our territory and move energon without so much as a by-your-leave. That how bots show respect in your world?"

Scorponok caught Gnashteeth glance back at their two hired guns. They were still there, still holding their bodies at the ready without escalating. "As I said, we are new to this world."

The Kospego gave a mirthless chuckle. "Real new. Maybe you need a little schoolin'. Lesson one: you get only as much loyalty as you can afford." He refocused his attention. "Hey, Raze, how much this bozo payin' ya? Your standaad?"

From behind them, Raze answered. "He tried to negotiate, then he tried to pay us in energon, but in the end he agreed, 1500 keys for the night. In advance."

"1500." The Kospego seemed to mull that over, making little popping noises with his mouth. "Tell you what. Hows about I pay yous two 5000 to go take a walk for a couple of cycles." Without waiting for an answer, Terrorsaur lowered the case he was carrying to the ground and gave it a kick with the inside of his left foot. It slid past Scorponok, coming to rest at Raze's side.

The huge Predacon bent down slightly, all while keeping his optics on the tableau before him, and scooped up the case. He flicked it open and allowed his optics to briefly drop. Then he closed the case. "Word gets out--" he began, only to get cut off by the Kospego.

"It won't. Take a hike."

Raze's optics dashed between Gnashteeth and the Kospego. "Sorry, boss," he said to Gnashteeth, then turned and left by the gate in the fence he'd opened up just a few cycles before. They closed it behind them, and Sting gave the fence a quick blast with his arm-mounted sonic disruptor, mangling the mechanism and sealing off any hope of escape.

"Now that this alley is a little more, what's the word, capacious," gloated the Kospego as he closed the distance between them, "let's get down to brass tax. You're a business-bot, newbie, I respect that.

You're new, don't know how things work, make rookie mistakes. Hey, we all been there." He draped his blue arm around Gnassteeth's shoulder. Scorponok thought he noticed Gnassteeth suppress a shudder. "That's why I'm gonna be the bigger mech here, cut you a little break. You got what seems like an endless supply of high quality energon. I've got the organization to move it, and enough muscle to keep my hustlers safe. So, we team up."

Gnassteeth's reply was uncharacteristically hesitant. "I'm listening."

"Course you are. Course you are. I've been keeping track of how much product you're movin'. I'm guessin' you're just shy o' 200 cubes per deca-cycle, am I right?" Gnassteeth said nothing, but Scorponok was privately impressed by the accuracy of the estimate. "Let's assume that's right. We'll call it 175. For that, I pay you... call it 3500 keys."

The next thing Scorponok knew, Gnassteeth had the Kospego pinned against the wall. He quickly shifted his gaze to Terrorsaur, expecting to see the red rifle aimed at Gnassteeth's head, but the flier maintained his relaxed pose. Gnassteeth, meanwhile, was shouting in the Kospego's face, drops of spittle escaping in his fury. "3500 is an insult! Those cubes are worth five times that!"

The Kospego kept his cool. "On the open market, sure, but I got expenses to pay, MCSF to buy off, enforcers to hiah. But ok, you got moxie. 5000. But that's my final offah. And it's contingent on you gettin' your servos off me right. This. Nanoklik."

A beat passed. Then another. Finally, Gnassteeth released the Kospego, who theatrically brushed imaginary dust from himself where Gnassteeth had gripped him, then wiped the spit from his optics. When it became clear Gnassteeth had no intention of saying more, the Kospego prompted him. "So, we have a deal then?"

Gnassteeth tilted his head and gave a lopsided smirk. "I would rather clean a Builder's intake valves with my tongue."

Without warning, the Kospego's calm demeanor dropped, and he unleashed a savage punch to Gnassteeth's gut. The Predacon doubled over in pain, but maintained his footing. The Kospego put a hand on his shoulder and shoved, knocking Gnassteeth to the ground in a fetal position. Scorponok started to rush forward to help, but heard the click of Terrorsaur's rifle. He turned to look at the large red Predacon, who now had his rifle aimed squarely at Scorponok. The red Pred shook his head, and Scorponok got the message.

"You think you're smaat?" The Kospego unleashed a kick for emphasis. "You're clevah?" Another kick, and Scorponok winced. "This is *my*--" kick "--world. I'd extinguish you right now, but your energon is the purest I've tasted in decades. So you're gonna be my suppliah, whethah you like it or not. Capish?"

Somehow, Gnassteeth managed to fumble to his knees. Fluids leaked from his mouth, and one of his optics was cracked. The pattern reminded Scorponok of his own cracked datapad. "I shall rip your antlers from your cranium and see them hung from the Golden Spires!"

The Kospego gave a hearty laugh. "Woah, look at you! A regular Emperor of Destruction, you are."

Terrorsaur gave another cackle. "Maybe we should just call him Megatron."

The Kospego chuckled. "Megatron. I like that." His expression changed, becoming all business. He gave a curt nod to Terrorsaur, who took a careful aim, then squeezed his trigger. Gnassteeth howled in pain as his left leg was blown off at the knee. "Tell you what, 'Megatron', hows about I give you a solar cycle or two to think my generous offer over. 5000 keys a deca-cycle for 175 energon cubes. Choose. Wisely."

With that, the Kospego turned and walked away. Terrorsaur gave Scorponok a tiny shrug,

just enough to indicate that this was nothing personal, then followed his boss out of the alley. Scorponok gathered the still groaning Gnassteeth into his arms, but realized he couldn't lift his boss' bulk. He looked around the alley and spied a broken cart. He spent the better part of a megacycle repairing its bent axle, then levered Gnassteeth onto its bed. He converted to his six-wheeled configuration, hitched himself with rear manipulators that extruded from his rear bumpers, and shifted to low gear to drag Gnassteeth back to the plant and the emergency C/R tank within.





The plant ran ten megacycles a day, so it didn't take long for him to be noticed, sitting besides the lifesaving tank on an uncomfortable bench. A fussy Maximal clerk asked him to file a workplace accident report for whomever was inside, and Scorponok scribbled something down without giving much thought to the plausibility of the lie. Less than half a megacycle later, Budora put in a personal appearance.

"Well, Scorponok, looks like my co-deputy has gotten himself into a passel of trouble." Scorponok didn't answer, didn't make eye contact. He stared at a fixed point in the middle distance, oblivious to the world. "He was a mentor to me for stellar cycles, so I ain't gonna yank him outta there. But you'd better believe Datamine will hear about this. It would probably be best for everyone if he up and resigns quietly. If not, well, whatever he's been getting up to, we will get to the bottom of it." He punctuated that last sentence by pantomiming a gun with his fingers, then abruptly clicking his thumb-hammer down to mime shooting Scorponok.

For over a solar cycle, Scorponok waited, muttering silent supplications that may as well have been prayers to no one in particular. Finally, at just under 13 megacycles from when he entered the tank, his purple hand emerged, and Gnassteeth hauled himself up, dripping silvery drops of concentrated nanobots. "Oh, thank the Allspark. I wasn't sure you'd recover, boss."

Gnassteeth shook himself off, flexing his left knee several times. "That was... unpleasant, yes."

A quick glance confirmed that the corridor was empty, and it was safe to speak. Scorponok dropped his voice to a whisper anyway. "Not half as unpleasant as it's going to be once Budora forces you out and you're unable to get the Kospegos their energon." At Gnassteeth's inquiring expression, he filled his boss in on Budora's threats. "I can probably keep up energon production for a couple of deca-cycles, but without access to the plant's software, it'll go out of kilter sooner or later and then we're hosed. So, I was thinking, we get as much energon cubes as we can, head south, reestablish ourselves somewhere else, and--"

"No." Gnassteeth cut him off, quietly but with surety. "The plant may be lost to us sooner than I anticipated, but that was always going to happen eventually. No, Scorponok, I tried playing by the rules, but a Predacon can only rise so high climbing that path. We shall not surrender, nor retreat. We have entered the shadow economy, the world of criminals and thieves and thugs, and we shall *dominate* it!"

Without meaning to, Scorponok's gaze fell to Gnassteeth's recently reattached left foot. "Ummm... is that realistic? The Kospego showed us just how unprep--"

A single raised palm silenced Scorponok mid-word. "No, Scorponok. The Kospego leader showed me that I've been thinking too small. One tenth of one twentieth of the plant's energon? Pathetic. If we are soon to be exiled from the world of light, then when we depart we shall take it all."



His first meeting of the Builder Assembly was exhilarating. The backstabbing, the subtexts, the tenuous and ever-shifting alliances; it was everything he had hoped for and more. Naturally, he'd kept his patronage in mind, voting with Halogen and Sigil on every bill put before him. But he'd also seconded a motion from Traachon clarifying that regulations on flying alt-mode Maximals and Predacons extended to hovering mechs capable of reaching heights of more than two mechanometers; a minor bill, sure to pass in any event, but it signaled to the Autobot block that he was open-minded.

His hover-limo pulled up to the gate of his mansion, but the bars failed to open. This was odd, usually Cerberus was more on top of things. He made a mental note to chastise his Predacon bodyguard as he transmitted the codes to gain entry. The limousine traversed the long path to his domicile, pulling into his immense circular driveway. It was rare for him to travel physically, and he took a moment to marvel at the fine sculpture of Floron at the center of the driveway. Yes, the Decepticons of antiquity were something to behold.

His exo-walker clanked and banged up the ramp to the cumbersome portal that afforded entrance to his domicile. The two halves failed to automatically swing forward, giving him a moment's concern. It was conceivable that Bruticus had been otherwise occupied when he had arrived at the gate to the entrance to the estate, perhaps performing rounds. But the moment he entered the grounds of the estate, Cerberus should have been alerted. He briefly wondered if he should possibly contact the MCSF, but the thought of grubby Autobot-descendants pawing through his property was anathema. He again transmitted the codes, and the two doors swung opened.

Determined to discover what exactly was transpiring inside, he ordered his walker to march him into his home. That the lights failed to come on did not surprise him at this point, though their failure to respond to his mental commands did take him aback, as did the sound of the portal behind him slamming shut without any authorization from him. Fortunately his walker was equipped with a spotlight, a feature he'd never before needed to use. It snapped on, and he aimed it about the grand hall. As the circle of illumination traversed the room, he quickly discovered that several of his weapons had been removed from the wall; in their place was glowing blue graffiti. He shook with rage at the violation. Those weapons were trophies of his days as a gladiator, and the thought of them being used by petty vandals

offended his sensibilities. He played the beam on the design, seeing a branching symmetrical pattern... tree branches?

A slow clapping noise pulled his attention, and his spotlight, to the magnificent ramp. There, descending from the top was Gnashteeth, of all mechs. "The conquering hero returns, triumphant from slaying the twin dragons of bureaucracy and procedure. How satisfying it must be to hang up your gladiatorial accoutrements in favor of the quill and the scroll."

Double Punch could only stare at his former protégé. "Gnashteeth? What..."

"And, since you are no longer using such crude tools as petty armaments, allow me to put them to their intended use." Double Punch focused and saw that Gnashteeth did, indeed, have one of his weapons attached to his back. The Tyrant Blade functioned as a dagger in Gnashteeth's Decepticon hands, but in the minute hands of a Predacon it would functioned more as a spear.

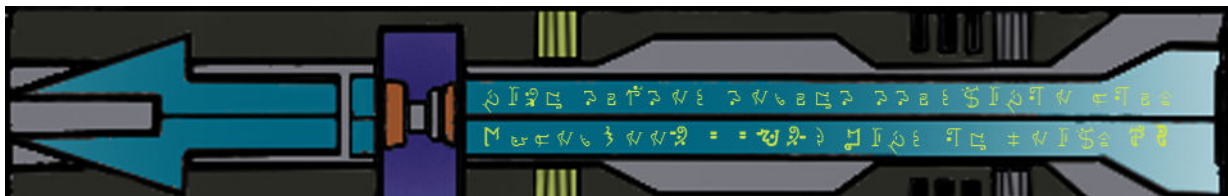
"I... you... I'm a member of the Pit-damned Builder's Assembly! I'll see you flayed alive for this! Cerberus!"

"I think not. Your bodyguard is quite, ah, indisposed." Double Punch turned his walker laboriously around, its spotlight flitting from one corner of the room to the other. "Over by the wine cabinet," Gnash suggested with a tonality that somehow blended helpfulness and menace.

The spotlight moved to the corner of the room containing his many vintage bottles of mild intoxicant, and there was his red, black, and yellow bodyguard, crumpled lifelessly with an expression of surprise frozen on his face. Until that moment, Double Punch had held out hope that he could survive whatever game Gnashteeth was playing, but now he knew his fate was sealed. His subordinate's--former subordinate's--gloating only confirmed it. "I'm afraid he interrupted a burglary from the Kospego cartel. I imagine the Builder Assembly will come down hard on them for murdering one of their own."

Double Punch turned his attention back to Gnash, who now had the Tyrant Spear pointed directly at his chest. All those arena fights, and he never felt fear like this. Perhaps it was the betrayal. Perhaps it was his age. "Why, Gnash?" His voice cracked pathetically but he didn't care. He just had to know. "You were my friend."

The end of the spear glowed as Gnashteeth snarled. "I was your pawn! To be sacrificed the moment it became embarrassing to have a Predacon in your company. But this pawn... has become a queen." 500,000 volts shot from the spear, and Double Punch felt every circuit in his body short out, before he felt nothing ever again.



The double-barreled 'Blacking Cannon' in Scorponok's hands had a wonderful heft. He was almost disappointed to send it back to subspace, but it was of course necessary. He couldn't very well be seen walking into the plant packing military-grade hardware.

They walked in together, their swagger radiating confidence. By now, the rank and file had heard rumors that the former administrator was going to be leaving soon, but nothing in his body language suggested that to be the case. "Scorponok," he commanded regally, "to the loading dock." Scorponok gave a quick nod, then hurried forth. Gnassteeth, he knew, was headed to Budora's office, who would not profit long from disloyalty.

When Scorponok arrived at the sea of Dropkick trucks in the loading bay, he got to work, pulling out the industrial cable that had been surreptitiously directing energy to their shanty and plugging it into the distribution network that serviced the delivery fleet. When a large gold Maximal worker asked what he was doing, he merely waved a work order at him and grunted "Administrator's orders." It didn't take long to get everything physically wired the way he wanted it.

A vidscreen chimed, and the Maximal answered, then called out, "Are you Scorponok?"

Scorponok jogged over and elbowed the larger mech out of the way. "Is it done?" he asked.

Gnassteeth stepped back from the camera lens, which auto-focused on the room behind him, revealing the still twitching body of Budora. "Quite." Scorponok nodded. The custom software package was now in the plant's root system. "Is all in readiness at your end?"

"Flip the switch, boss."

Gnassteeth grinned. "Excellent." He pressed a key on Budora's computer, and for a moment nothing happened. Then klaxons began to blare. It was a full-scale evacuation, indicating a meltdown. Scorponok had been ready for this, and keyed an override and caused the enormous segmented metal gate to the bay to retract into the ceiling. Given a quick path to evacuation, the workers in the bay flooded out. Scorponok then locked the heavy door to the interior of the plant, bracing it with a metal bar to be extra cautious.

He glanced around the room again, just to be certain he was alone. When he was confident he was, he activated the distribution protocol, and the fleet of Dropkick haulers, preprogrammed to head to their newly leased warehouse, began to fill to the brim with energon. 30%. 40. 50. He checked the network, and indeed the reactors were starting to overheat. He thought he'd timed it right, but evidently he had been too aggressive in his modeling. Perhaps there was some inefficiency in the ancient Quintesson transports he hadn't taken into account. He called up his program and wrote some on-the-fly code to dial back the overload protocol, aiming to give himself a few more cycles to get the trucks filled to capacity. He had finished the code but not yet committed it to production when he heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Hey, Scorponok, we gotta get you outta here!" He turned, and saw Impound. He glanced back at the computer console. He only needed another 20 or so nanokliks.

"Just let me finish, I might be able to save--"



Impound jogged up and grabbed his elbow. "No time, friend. Those klaxons mean the plant could well blow. I thought I detected a spark still inside, I should have known it was you playing hero again." He began to drag him out.

Scorponok pulled his arm free of the guard. "Look, the plant might be a loss, but I can still save the haulers." He gestured at the Dropkick drones. "That's worth doing."

"Sorry, friend, I can't let you risk your neck. D.E.D. can always buy new trucks." He took hold of Scorponok's arm again, and this time hoisted him up in a firebot's carry and began to hustle out of the docks.

"Put me down!" he shouted, but Impound ignored him. The plant would blow in another cycle, two tops, and all their energon would go up with it if he couldn't slow down the overload cycle they'd initiated. Seeing no other option, he summoned his stolen weapon, then pointed it at Impound's back. "Please put me down," he whispered. "Please."

Impound, blissfully unaware of his danger, continued to jog. They were almost at the entrance. Once they were outside, someone was sure to see. Scorponok closed his optics, and pulled the trigger.



A deca-cycle as public enemy number one had Thunderhoof on edge. He'd directed all Kospegos to lay low until all the craziness about murdering a Councilbot blew over. It was driving him crazy, imagining what the Minions or the Firestormers would be getting up to while his people lay low. That ginormous plant explosion at least took some of the heat off him, as the media went crazy trying to figure out who was to blame for a disaster that left four missing, presumed dead, and a whole city without power for almost three solar cycles. Smart money was the new administrator, some Builder putz called Datamine.

The inactivity was driving him nuts, and he was itching for an excuse to get back on the streets and bust some heads. So when Snitch gave him the message, that the newbie wanted a meet, he was naturally skeptical. Still, business was business. He sent word to Terrorsaur and Scavenger to meet him at their usual hangout, Three Busted Optics, and after conferring with his enforcers decided to head to the rendezvous site.

The newbie had picked a good spot for the meet, he grudgingly conceded. It was a dilapidated warehouse, close enough to a Rust Sea tributary that its tangy scent filled his olfactory sensors. From what he could see, all was quiet, though the large number of ancient, Builder-scale trucks parked on the street was odd, to say the least. He directed Terrorsaur to survey the scene from above in his jet configuration, and his enforcer did two low passes before landing and reporting no hint of ambush. He wouldn't put it past the purple Predacon to demand a little payback after the beating he had received last time. On the other hand, Thunderhoof sensed real potential in the purple Predacon, and had hoped that by bringing him to heel early he'd get a loyal minion in the future.

The newbie and his right hand bot appeared a few cycles before the appointed meet time, just like last time. He did notice that the smaller one was packing a bigger gun. Unlike last time, they brought no extra muscle. That augured well for him. Once again, he let them stew, but after 10 cycles with zero sign of them getting rattled, he figured the time had come to meet. They met by the side door to the warehouse.

"Hey, look who the cybahcat dragged in. My old pal Megatron, lookin' none the worse for weah."

The Predacon kept his composure, betraying no hint of emotion. Thunderhoof turned his attention to shorty, whom he'd previously identified as the weak link, only to be confronted with hollow optics devoid of any hint of emotion. Huh.

The purple mech finally spoke. "Megatron. Yes. I rather like that, Thunderhoof."

How did this mook know his real name? Sensing he was losing control, he took a couple of steps forward and jabbed a finger into the Predacon's chest. "You called this meet, I assume you got my 175 cubes."

The purple Predacon began a slow chuckle which turned into hearty belly laugh. "175. Oh, my, you certainly do think small. I can see why your minions have so little regard for you."

A trickle of fear crept up his backstrut, but he ignored it. Show no weakness. "Newbie, I want to like you, I do, but you gotta show respect. Terrorsaur, teach this clown some respect." Terrorsaur cocked his gun, but then continued to hold it at the ready, not taking any further aggressive action. "You deaf or somethin'? Shoot him." Nothing. "Scavenger, tear him a new vent!" Scavenger, too, took no action. "What the frak is this?"

The purple leaned forward, unable to contain his smirk. "Lesson one, Thunderhoof. One gets only as much loyalty as one can afford."

Thunderhoof wheeled around. "You tellin' me you twos sold me out? For what?"

Terrorsaur and Scavenger shared a glance. "Warehouse full of energon, boss," croaked Terrorsaur. He opened the door to the warehouse and sure enough the warm pink glow of energon spilled out. Even from here, he could see that it was more energon than most bots would ever see in a lifetime, even in their line of business.

"Sorry," growled Scavenger as he converted to his odd tank configuration, swiveling its extended neck and aiming three orange missiles and his four-barreled cannon squarely at Thunderhoof's chest, "just business."

Despite the display of firepower, or perhaps because of it, Thunderhoof lowered his antlers and prepared to charge at his disloyal lieutenant. "I'll give you the business!" Then he felt searing pain in his abdomen, and he was flat on his belly. He flailed about and managed to get himself onto his back, but that was as much as he could accomplish. Scorponok's weapon was still smoking from both barrels. Whatever reluctance he'd had to employ violence just a few solar cycles before had evidently been burned away.

From where he lay, Thunderhoof could do nothing but watch as the purple mech casually strode to his side, then unleashed a violent kick. He felt his internals shatter, and coughed up a spurt of oil. Then his tormentor gestured to his disloyal flunkies. "Terrorsaur, if you would be so kind..." His former lieutenant aimed his signature rifle at Thunderhoof's chest, directly at the spark chamber.

"I'll fragging kill you!" he tried to yell, but it came out wet and painful, a fine spray of pink energon on his lips.

"Goodbye, boss," crowed Terrorsaur, and his rifle erupted. Thunderhoof's optics just barely had time to register the flash, but by the time the sound reached his audio receptors a fraction of a nanoklik later his spark had been annihilated, leaving no Thunderhoof left to hear it.



From the roof of the warehouse they'd rented with keys stolen from Double Punch, Scorponok and the rest of Gnashteeth's crew admired the sight of Thunderhoof's severed head, hanging in the distance from the pinnacle of the Golden Spires of Iacon. Already, news drones were flitting about, capturing the image for all the world to see; the macabre image would certainly dominate the media cycle for several days. Members of the Maximal Flying Corps would no doubt arrive soon to remove the grim spectacle. Scorponok was confident that, in the underworld, rumors were already flying about the mech who had literally decapitated the Kospego gang.

"The king is dead," croaked Terrorsaur, raising a can of engex in the general direction of the Spires. Then he swung his arm around to where Gnashteeth sat. "Long live the king."

The assembled crew raised their cans, mumbling "hear, hear" in deference to the archaic human ritual. Scorponok looked back at the Spires, and had nothing but contempt for the former Kospego leader. "I bet the other gangs get the message loud and clear."

"Message? No, Scorponok. This was poetry. Improvisational verse between Thunderhoof and myself. Perhaps more crude than I intend to strive for moving forward but a promise--even one made in the heat of the moment--simply must be kept."

"Huh, just had a thought," grunted Scavenger. "Can't call ourselves Kospegos no more, can we?"

There were murmurs of agreement. Scorponok leaned forward in his rickety chair, undoubtedly fished from some trash heap by warehouse workers ages ago. "What was it you said when we first met up, Terrorsaur? 'Welcome to the dark side'?"

Terrorsaur nodded in affirmation. "Dark Siders," Scorponok suggested, rolling it around on his vocoders. There were nods all around, from everyone except the one bot that counted. "You like, Gnashteeth?"

Gnashteeth narrowed his optics. "Don't call me by that name anymore, Scorponok."

Suddenly nervous in the presence of his leader, Scorponok stammered an apology. "Sorry, uh, boss, no disrespect intended."

His leader snorted a half-laugh. "None taken, no. But the name Gnashteeth was never really mine, not in my spark. It was an ill-fitting suit of armor, donned hastily and just as hastily discarded. 'Gnashteeth' was a Builder lackey who tried to turn the rules to his own advantage. That mech died when his plant exploded. No, the leader of the Darksyders needs a more appropriate moniker." There were nods all around. After all, the late, unlamented Thunderhoof had abandoned his own name long ago.

"So, whudda we call ya?" asked Scavenger.

The purple Predacon stood, and gazed into the distance. "You shall call me by the name I was truly protoformed to hold. A name torn from prophecy, and from history. From now on you can call me... Megatron."

