

BEAST WARS UPRISING



CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

BY JIM SORENSON AND DAVID BISHOP
ART BY JOSH BURCHAM AND CHRISTOPHER 'IKY' COLGIN

PROLOGUE

Noah was bored. Bored bored bored. His family had promised him that the trip to England would be the vacation of a lifetime, but so far it had been nothing but castles, monuments, and museums. Especially museums. Stonehenge was kinda cool, at least, and Oxford Castle was neat, but if he never saw another museum it would be too soon. This one was the British Museum, and they'd already been there two hours and his parents showed no sign of slowing down. At least they were out of the seemingly endless rows of paintings.

So far, the most excitement he'd had today was when he found a perfectly good tape deck just lying next to the front entrance. Fiddling with it had given him a few minutes of joy, at least, and he looked forward to getting back home and taping some cool music off the radio. Maybe he could even convince his mom to buy him Duran Duran's newest single. "The Wild Boys" wasn't as good as "Hungry Like the Wolf", but it was way better than "Is There Something I Should Know?" and "Save a Prayer."

"Look at this, Judy," said her father, pointing to a mummy and tearing Noah away from the contemplation of the coolest band in the world. "It's supposed to be cursed." *Yeah*, he thought, *this whole trip is cursed*.

"Did you hear that, Noah, Leah?" asked their mother. "Isn't that scary?"

Noah rolled his eyes. "Yeah, mom, real scary. Abbot and Costello are shaking in their boots." His sister giggled, even though he was pretty sure she didn't get the reference. She was as bored as he was. "When can we finish up here and do something exciting?" he whined.

Then the wall exploded, and a towering metal titan strode in, his head brushing the ceiling and dislodging tiles. "At last we've found it," he rasped. "The head and arm of Amenhotep III. Legends purport it to have magical powers, powers that I can use to crush the Autobots! Good work, Soundwave!"

Noah's bag ripped open and an enormous blue robot emerged. People were yelling and screaming, running back and forth in a mad panic. Everyone had heard about the metal men; some thought them to be a Cobra weapon—Simon Le Bon swore that "Union of the Snake" had nothing to do with those terrorists, but Noah had his private doubts—but the most popular theory of the day was that they were aliens. *The tape deck*, Noah thought suddenly, with a twinge of guilt tempered by the inevitable rush of adrenaline.

"This way!" he yelled, and dragged his sister by the hand behind one of the exhibits. He couldn't help but peek through the glass case to see what was happening. Two more of the creatures followed through the hole made by the red, grey, and blue giant—the news called them Transformers, and after seeing his tape deck turned into one of them understood why. "Sky Warp, grab the arm," directed the robot who appeared to be in command. He appeared identical to the other two who had followed him in, save for coloration. "Thundercracker, the head."

"Not so fast, Decepti-jerks!" boomed a voice from behind the Acton siblings. Noah turned around to see several more robots, smaller than the ones looting the museum but somehow friendlier-looking. The one who had spoken was green and yellow, with a domed grey head. With him were five other robots, none quite as tall as the lead bot except for a blue and orange one.

"Minibots," growled the lead bad-guy robot. "When will you learn not to tangle with your betters?"

"Robots who live in glass garages shouldn't throw ion stones," replied a red good-guy robot. He lifted up his arm, and Noah watched as his fist retracted and was replaced with some kind of nozzle. A green gas whooshed out, and the bad-guys all scattered.

One of the winged bad-guys, the black and purple one, vanished in a flash of purple light, only to reappear behind the good-guys. He raised the purple cannon affixed to his right arm and snapped off a shot, clipping a yellow good-guy in the arm.

"Bumblebee!" shouted the green good-guy, who then picked up one of the larger artifacts and hurtled it at the bad guy. His aim was true, and the huge stone smashed through the orange cockpit on the robot's chest and lodged in his internals. Pink sparks started to dance and the huge jet-man fell.

The boxy blue tape-deck bad-guy put a hand on the lead bad-guy's shoulder. "We have what we need, Starscream. Departure is advised." He tilted his torso backwards, and the blue cannon on his shoulder fired, hitting the ceiling above the Acton family's heads. Debris started to rain down. Noah screamed and threw up his arms in a futile, instinctive gesture, certain that he and Leah were about to be crushed. His eyes squeezed tight and he felt his guts clench up.

A second passed. Then another, and another. He cracked open one eye, half expecting to see Saint Peter. Instead, he saw the grey and red good-guy, his arm extended and fingers splayed. The wreckage, miraculously, was frozen in mid-air. "Hurry up, will you, my magnet can only hold it for so long," he grunted.

The red-and-blue good-guy rushed in and grabbed Noah's sister, and the blue and orange one picked up Noah. He winced as the silver fingers closed around him, but they were surprisingly gentle. Once their family was out of harm's way, the robot holding up the ceiling relaxed and it came tumbling down.

"Aw, nuts," grumbled the mostly red good-guy. "They got away with the statue."

"Yeah, Cliffjumper," said the yellow robot, the smallest of the six, "but at least no one got hurt, right? You humans are all ok?"

"OK?" enthused Noah, "This is the best vacation ever!"



Inside the crashed hulk of the *Victory*, at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, Sky Warp winced as Hook finished extracting the block of granodiorite from his internals. "Almost... almost... there!" Hook pulled out the grey stone and set it on a tray. "With that gone, your internals should be able to handle the rest."

Idly, Sky Warp picked up the block that had been causing his systems such turmoil. It was covered in script. Hook seemed to sense him staring at the various human glyphs. "What does it say?"

Good question. Though Sky Warp, like all Decepticons, had all of the major human languages programmed into his linguistic banks, this was new. His translator subroutine kicked in automatically. "Uhhh... let's see. 'On the twenty-fourth day of the month Gorpaios, which corresponds to the twenty-fourth day of the fourth month of the season Pert of the inhabitants of Ta-Mert, in the...' Blah blah blah, it just goes on like this. And then... ha, it starts over. No, wait, that's a different dead human language. Stupid bauble." He walked out of the room, tossing the stone in the air and catching it again and again. It did have a satisfying heft.

While his systems got to work repairing the damage, he made his way to the war room. Soundwave was detailing the plans for the latest sortie against the Autobots. Their newest invention, the Egyptian Incantation / Autobot Destroyer, would use the mythical energy of the Amenhotep statue to render the Autobots incapable of any form of communication, even speech, and thus easy pickings. Sky Warp had his private doubts, but it didn't pay to question the slagmaker's schemes. Always bet on the leader was his philosophy.

Rumble passed Sky Warp the blueprints for the EI/AD on a piece of tacto-film. Sky Warp set it down before him, scanning the plans to see what his part in the operation might entail. Just then, Frenzy's voice boomed over the intercom. "Incoming space bridge transmission in five astro-seconds."

The air pressure in the room dropped as the enormous space bridge tower extended above the water. The tacto-film threatened to blow away. Sky Warp quickly grabbed it, then scanned around for something to keep it in place. His optics settled on the stone in his right hand. "Not so useless after all," he declared, as he placed the priceless artifact the humans would call the Rosetta Stone on the table as the largest paperweight in history.



Packrat yanked the controls of his sky-sled hard to port and managed to avoid—barely!—the barrage of missiles streaking towards him. The damn artifact he was hauling made the sled's controls sluggish. Unfortunate, but then the stone was the whole reason he was in Kaon in the first place.

Even a stellar cycle ago, burgling The Museum of Decepticon Heritage would have been unthinkable. It was one of the few true cultural attractions in what was otherwise a fairly dismal, if industrially productive, city. That had all changed four orbital cycles ago, when Lio Convoy personally led the Resistance in an all-out offensive, intent on adding the valuable infrastructure of Kaon to his growing list of resources. The Builders hadn't seen it coming. Kaon was a fortress; well supplied and completely isolated, making Resistance supply lines indefensible. The Beast Upgrade made that irrelevant. While the Assembly had to struggle to keep the energon flowing to the front lines, the Resistance was foraging for food among the wreckage of the city.

Nonetheless, the Micromasters and their few Predacon loyalist allies didn't make it cheap for them. They fought for every city block, scorching the land behind them as the city fell. Or was liberated, depending on your perspective. As things stood, nearly half of the city was in Resistance hands, a burnt-out husk with nearly every factory, smelting pit, power plant, bridge, and mainframe destroyed. The other half, the Builder half, managed to maintain some level of output, all directed towards the increasingly desperate war effort.

That was the half where the museum resided. Packrat supposed it was fortunate; while the facility was of little military value, it did have symbolic significance and might well be razed to the ground by one side or the other when the Resistance finally reached that sector of the city. Sneaking past the front proved challenging, but the Predacon patrols were largely looking for saboteurs, not thieves. The Museum itself had little security to speak of, enabling Packrat to enter unnoticed and conduct a little shopping spree. Room after room of priceless artifacts connected to the greatest of Decepticon heroes greeted him, and any small enough to be shunted into his private subspace dimension was squirreled away; the UCT that got Ramjet killed, a ruined Combaticon personality component, the Legendisc that had once contained Pounce and Wingspan. It all seemed so easy... until he actually laid optics on the Stone of Sky Warp.

The damn thing was enormous. Much heavier than Packrat could easily manage. Hence his pilfering of the sky-sled, also an artifact from the Great War, and hence attracting the attention of the Builder curator who had evidently elected to remain behind to look after his collection.

Apparently, the curator had some pull with the local Micromaster patrols, whom he'd sicced on Packrat. His voice blared over the wireless, on an open frequency that Packrat had been smart enough to pre-

program into his antenna array. "Vorter, for Primus' sake, that sky-sled was ridden by Squawkbox during the Siege of T'Muk. Stop shooting your Pit-damned missiles at it!"

"No time for hesitation, Shortround," replied the Micromaster helicopter, and unleashed another salvo. Part of Packrat found the exchange interesting. As a Macromaster-scale Builder, the curator nominally outranked all but most decorated and important Micromasters. That a nobody like Vorter so readily ignored the admonition of his theoretical better spoke of the profound social change Lio Convoy and his Resistance had already wrought.

The larger part of him just screamed and pitched the sled forward, diving towards a well-worn tunnel and praying the missiles wouldn't be able to track him into its depth. He wasn't sure he'd be able to pull out of his dive in time, but his new bio-enhanced reflexes proved decisive. He heard the missiles impact behind him and seal the tunnel, and knew he was home free.

He wondered what his mysterious employers wanted with the artifact. They gave him the creeps, but in the end he didn't much care. Their keys spent as well as anyone else's. Besides, he'd scanned the artifact, nothing but rock through-and-through, no hint of a power source, and the only thing that made it even a little visually interesting was some Terran scribbling carved in the surface. How much trouble could the Antares Eight possibly get up to with it?

ACT THE FIRST

Overshoot fiddled with the locking mechanism of the supposedly abandoned Maximal Command Security Force base on the outskirts of Proximax. His decades of experience gave him a foundation of knowledge of their circuitry and procedures, though in the three stellar cycles since he'd gone AWOL they'd clearly made some upgrades.

Since abandoning the MCSF, he and Stiletto had made their way east, picking up odd security and mercenary jobs along the way. The world had become a more dangerous place. That meant more work for a couple of freelance peacekeeping agents, but also more risk.

At first the MCSF had spent time hunting them, but as the Resistance continued to gain ground the Maximal army found itself with better things to do, like adopting the new Beast Upgrade. Part of him felt guilty for the ground his former organization was losing, but the rest of him cursed the whole system and wouldn't have minded seeing it burn to the ground.

And then, two decacycles ago, the MCSF vanished. Poof, all patrols in Proximax, where he and Stiletto had come to rest, ceased. Which was why he was trying to break into one of their squat octagonal prefabricated fortresses, a fortress which had until recently provided what modicum of security Proximax enjoyed.

Stiletto had her back to him, eyeing the kill zone they'd reluctantly crossed to get to the main entrance, knives in both hands. There had been no response from the base as they'd scaled the outer gate, no response as they'd crossed in front of the base's main guns. Still, he could sense her nervousness in the way she shifted her weight from foot to foot, the way her cobalt-blue optics flickered from the ground to the noon sky and back to the ground.

"Got it, Knives," Overshoot announced, unnecessarily, as the door's hydraulics kicked in and they were granted access to the heart of the MCSF garrison of Proximax.

To walk through a MCSF base with no one in it was an eerie experience. His processor recalled countless briefings, encounters jovial and juvenile and tragic with his fellow officers, the smells of cheap oil and fuel and lubricant and coolant.

When he passed the mess hall, he realized that not all of his sensations were sense memories. Half-consumed tankards of oil were still on the table, and a nearly-full pack of cy-gar-ettes next to a game of cards caught his eye. "Whatever happened to the MCSF here," Stiletto said tonelessly, "it happened fast."

Her slender fingers picked up the pack of cy-gar-ettes and deftly extracted two. She lit one, then passed him the second. The long drag he pulled was satisfying. "I didn't know you partook," he observed.

The glowing stick in her fingers twirled around. "I don't. Got word an old colleague died not too long ago, pursuing some pointless Builder murder case. He partook. Me, I'm remembering him they way he'd want."

Overshoot finished the chemical delivery platform, then stubbed it out on the table. "Bot have a name?"

"He did. I never used it. Called him Howlinger. He hated that." She paused for a beat. "Let's go check the armory."

The armory proved a different experience. The entire place had been looted. By lying belly-down on the floor and looking under a metal rack he was able to find a box of ammunition for a weapon he didn't possess, but that was the only piece of ordnance that had been left behind.

The command deck proved similarly useless to them. While the mainframes were intact, their systems had been purged, written with garbage data, and then purged again. No one would be getting anything useful out of the computers. Between that and the weapons being gone, this was starting to look like a textbook example of the Dandelion Protocol; new, urgent orders to relocate. But where? And why?

Overshoot was starting to think that the whole excursion was going to be a bust when they came upon the infirmary, looking for medical supplies. While most of the consumables had indeed been taken, presumably to wherever the bulk of the local MCSF had been reassigned to so suddenly, there was an odd stasis pod marked with the double-bladed scepter of Darksyders, Incorporated. He approached the obsidian mechanism cautiously, almost reverentially. "Stiletto, is that..."

Her cold face showed no expression, but he caught a gleam in her eyes. "It sure is, big guy, it sure is."

She went first. Ostensibly because she had rank, though Overshoot knew it was to make sure that the Darksyder Beast Pod was in full working order. She was protective that way. Her new upgrade was a DeathEagle, one of the fastest aerial predators. It was magnificent, and he told her so. She nodded at the compliment with quiet dignity, but inside he knew she was suppressing her blush protocols.

He had a harder time deciding. The mechanism only held sixteen pre-stored mechanimal forms, and he wasn't sure any of them were quite right for him. He wanted something tough, but fast, but with utility, and he didn't want anything aquatic or aerial. Ultimately he opted for an armodrillo. The process was painful, but bearably so, and when he emerged he felt like a new bot. New metaystems blossomed before his eyes, new subroutines presenting themselves for his inspection. He was starting to see just how versatile this new upgrade really was, beyond the ability to metabolize and cut the chains of Builder energon production.

Then something changed. He felt a... presence, and his optics glowed white. He clutched the side of his face, not in pain but in surprise.

"Everything ok, big guy?" asked Stiletto, her usual cool shaken by whatever was happening to him.

The white glow darted forward, through a wall. Overshoot did a quick mental review of the Proximax landscape and realized that the glow had headed directly towards Grapple Boulevard, the main thoroughfare through the city. "... I think we're needed, Knives." He hurried towards the door.

She stopped him with a hand on the arm. It was gentle, but insistent. "Woah. Slow down. Needed?"

He tried to find the words. "Look, I can't explain, but... yeah. We're needed. Right away. You with me?"

Her features softened. "Always, big guy." Together, they hurried back towards town.



Buckethead's convoy rolled through town, eager to get Prisoner N626BG to Iacon. Their position in Uraya had seemed relatively safe from the relentless advance of the Resistance, but the unexpected desertion of the local MCSF garrison changed that. Now opportunistic Resistance fighters were overrunning Uraya; Hightower had opined that it probably wasn't even coordinated through Lio Convoy's command. Given how badly the Resistance wanted to get their hands on "The Traitor to the Cause," Hot Rod had directed that Prisoner N626BG be brought to Iacon. Skavenger thought it was in case they needed a trade, but Buckethead wasn't so sure. She had heard rumors that the commander was soft on the prisoner.

Typical Autobot, she thought to herself, then remembered for the thousandth time that one third of the present incarnation of the Constructicons were Autobots. She had been a full-sized Decepticon during the war, of the last generation forged before Thunderwing had created the Micromasters and wrest command from Overlord. She'd heard the legends of Devastator, the Constructicons, and as a construction vehicle herself, she aspired to be worthy of their legacy. The war had been hard-fought, and she'd seen countless companions perish before the relentless guns of the Autobots. She knew what it was to hate. But centuries of relative immobility, overseeing construction in Port Ronove, Lucifer, had humbled her, taught her the value of compromise. When the colony collapsed a few decades before and she returned to Cybertron, she found herself receptive to Hot Rod's call to downsize and serve alongside the revived Constructicons. Even if it meant being treated as a Micromaster. Even if it meant serving alongside Autobots.

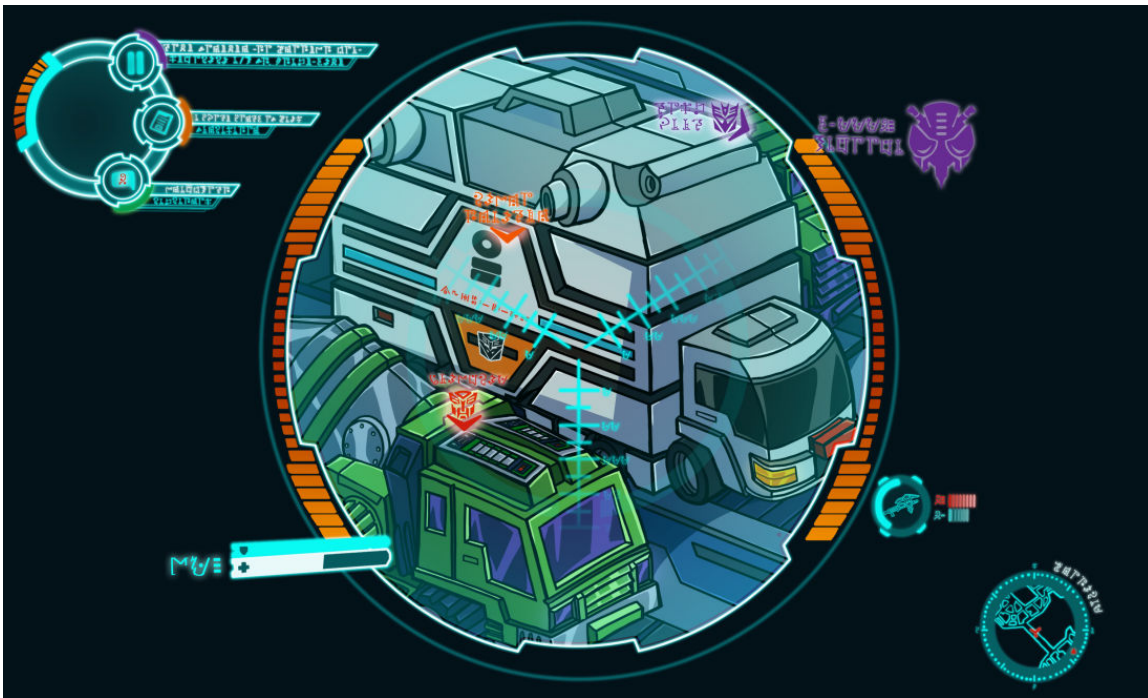
Proximax was divided by a sonic chasm, separating the residential portion of southern Proximax from the more industrial and commercial districts to the north. The main crossing was the Hoist Metrospan, which was coming into view. Crossing it represented a moment of peak vulnerability. She was nervous,

as, she could tell, were her fellow Constructicons. As they rolled onto its southern approach, she saw Bone Crusher's engine-mounted concussion-bomb launcher swiveling about, and felt Quickmix's sensors pinging the environment at a faster rate than usual.

Some of her companions demonstrated their unease less constructively than others. "Boss," asked Skavenger as they reached the halfway point, "any chance we could stop by Sights & Sounds? I've got a few 'Waves burning a hole in my subspace pocket dimension."

"They'll give anyone a pocket dimension these days," joked Long Haul.

"Can the chatter," barked Hightower. *Just like an Autobot to put a fellow Autobot in charge of one of the most decorated team of Decepticons ever*, she mused. The Assembly liked to say that Builder was Builder, but a lot of bots knew better. Hot Rod was as Autobot as they come.



As they approached the northern end of the Metrospan, something felt off. "Oi, 'ighttower, I'm getting a weird vibe. You sure going straight through town is a sound idea?"

"You know me, Buckethead, I hate to second guess myself. Going around the Proximax Chasm would have taken three times as long and given us just as much exposure to potential ambush. With odds like that, I—"

He was cut off as an energy bolt slammed into his side, knocking him off his wheels. Buckethead redirected her sensors and saw movement on the top of a nearby building on the edge of the chasm. "Ambush!" she shouted, quite unnecessarily. The other Constructicons had already converted to humanoid configurations, and she did the same.

"We're too exposed out here," whined Skavenger, even as Long Haul and Quickmix ducked behind the armored Micro Trailer containing their prisoner.

Buckethead felt, rather than saw, activity on the opposite side of the street. Her companions thought they'd achieved cover, but they were dreadfully exposed from this unseen attacker. She raised her Gran Pistol and fired off a shot at the opposite rooftop. She scored some kind of hit, because there was a yelp of pain, and yelled to Long Haul and Quickmix to haul aft. Long Haul looked about frantically, but Quickmix didn't wait to spot the enemy; he just grabbed Long Haul and pulled him to the relative safety of the end of the bridge.

Before they could get there, a makeshift barricade sprang up, twisted scrap metal and rusted out hulks that might have once been parts of buildings. Bone Crusher roared and converted to his bulldozer mode, charging the position. Energy shots ricocheted off his blade but he paid them no heed, smashing right through the slapdash roadblock and allowing Quickmix and Long Haul to get off of the bridge and onto the streets.

Buckethead, meanwhile, had crouched in a doorway on an ancient bunker anchoring the north side of the Metrospan. It offered some cover from the Resistance fighters on the opposite roof but not much. Hightower was still tipped over in the streets, unconscious or worse. She'd lost track of Skavenger during the chaos.

It was decision time. Did she want to die trying to protect some Predacon from Resistance revenge? She decided that she did not. The truth was, she had little use for turncoats, even ones that were potentially politically useful. Had Hightower been online and giving orders she might have decided to rally, but as it stood there seemed little chance the Constructicons could win the day. She slammed her powerful shoulder into the door behind her once, twice. On three she felt it buckle. On four it gave way and she spilled inside, hoping that she could reach the maintenance tunnels underpinning the Metrospan and make her way back the way she came.

A large red Predacon, or perhaps Maximal—he bore no sigil, just a crude 'X'—stood inside the building, an enormous three-barreled launcher in his hand. "I feel your fear, Builder. Allow me to exacerbate it!"

He yanked back on the weapon and three angry-looking missiles clicked into place. Backwards into the street wouldn't help, so she dove forward, tackling him. Despite his obvious status as a Proto-Cybertronian, he matched her in height if not bulk. He got his limbs under her and kicked up, knocking her off of him.

"You're a feisty one. I like that. It shall make your spark all the more delectable as I consume it!"

She'd lost her pistol in the scuffle, so she converted to her front-end loader mode and slammed into him, trying to use her nanoblade shovel to cut him in twain. Incredibly, his armor held, and they spilled back into the street.

Shouting came from the distance and she realized that the bulk of her comrades—and his—had pursued each other away from the real prize. *Typical males*, she mused, *can't keep their eye on the ball*. It meant that she might be able to complete the mission after all. She just needed to defeat the bruiser in front of her, grab Hightower in her shovel, hitch up the trailer module, and make like Blurr.

The Proto-Cybertronian converted into an enormous decapodian and his six legs dug into the ground. Her tires squealed as they tried to find purchase in the rubble-strewn ground, but he had more traction and her efforts weren't worth squat. Just as she initiated her transformation sequence he used his oversized claws to flip her over. She landed on her back, saw him advance, and kicked out with her leg hydraulics for all they were worth. She connected with the left claw and she felt the metal twist backwards, neutralizing half of his animalistic might. The right one snatched her arm and started crushing, lifting her from the ground as it did so. "Stop squirming, Builder, it will only hurt for a few cycles. Perhaps a few megacycles, I'm feeling lonesome."

She grit her teeth through the pain and retracted her left hand, replacing it with a welding torch. It wasn't much of a weapon at range, but in close it could be deadly. Rather than go for the claws she struck at the beast's eyes, and was rewarded with a howl of pain. The claw didn't release her, but she managed to worm herself loose as he thrashed about.

He was gonna kill her. That was the long and short of it. She darted about, looking for something, anything she could use. The only thing was the Micro Trailer, but they hadn't attached any weaponry to the trailer's hard points. Unless...

She dashed for the trailer and transmitted the release sequence. The door at the rear of the Micro Trailer hissed open, lowering to become a ramp. The sound of the interior clamps releasing reached her auditory sensors, and she shouted for the prisoner to run. Without delay, an olive green figure dashed out, took a quick look around, and started to run across the bridge. The prisoner's weapon systems were disabled, but he'd at least provide a distraction.

The Proto-Cybertronian growled, his head darting from the fleeing prisoner and back in her direction. "Me or 'im, 'X', you can't 'ave both."

He shifted back to his humanoid. "How sweet. You guessed my old name. I think I'll choose... you!" He raised his missile launcher, and she knew the end was upon her.



Stiletto wasn't sure that Overshoot hadn't lost his damn fool mind, but then, she was hardly one to judge. Still, it was odd to see him so driven, almost... compelled. They raced across town, and sure enough they started to hear the unmistakable sounds of a battle.

Not crazy, then. As they neared the battle, she pointed up, with a questioning look on her face. He nodded. They scrambled to the top of one of the rundown tenements that littered this area of town, then cautiously made their way to the opposite edge overlooking the Hoist Metrospan. They arrived in time to see a cadre of chartreuse Micromasters in flight, away from the mouth of the bridge, pursued by a stampede of jurassanoid Predacons. Neither side noticed the two Maximals, crouched on the roof.

She turned her attention back to Overshoot. "OK, Mr. Mindwipe, you brought us here. Are we supposed to help the Builders? Or the Resistance? What's the play?"

Her companion looked thoughtful. "No, I don't think—wait—there!"

She watched a green mech dash out of a white Micro Trailer, while a large red decapodian scuttled towards a Micromaster Builder. "We here for one of them?" she asked.

Overshoot took in the scene and then closed his optics, seeming to listen to some inner voice. "All three of them. We need to stop the fighting. Like, now!"

She blew out through her teeth, even as the red mech converted to default and aimed a gigantic gun at the Micromaster. "You don't ask for much, do ya big guy? I'll get those two, you get the runner."

Without waiting for an answer, she leapt down, aiming a kick backed by gravity and the entire mass of her body squarely at the red mech's weapon. She connected just as it discharged, and three missiles streaked past the green Builder, missing him—or maybe her—by microhics.

"Oh, goodie, fresh scrap!" growled the red mech, who lacked any Maximal/Predicon designation but was, oddly enough, marked with an 'X'. "I was feeling peckish."

Two energo-blades materialized in Stiletto's hands. "Not today, thug. My companion says we need you for... well, for something. So play nice."

The Micromaster, a Decepticon, chuckled. Definitely a femme. "I don't think 'e plays nice, luv." She started to circle warily, attempting to flank the bruiser.

"Right you are," chortled the mech with the X. "Nice is for Cyberdroids and bumble-puppies. I prefer to let my eternal and unending torment do the talking."



Snapper dashed across the bridge, hearing explosions behind him. During his time rotting in a Builder prison, he'd heard rumors that the Resistance had put a price on his head. Perhaps inevitable, after he'd betrayed Grimlock and stopped a bioweapon from being unleashed on a crowd of Builders. He'd had to dodge three separate assassination attempts in the prison, the last one just a couple of orbital cycles prior. When the Constructicons had told him he was being moved to Iacon, he'd foolishly allowed himself to hope he'd maybe somehow get through the war in one piece. As soon as the convoy carrying him came under fire, he realized how foolish that notion was. Even in prison, everyone knew the Resistance was slowly but steadily gaining ground. And keeping him alive was hardly going to be a Builder priority, no matter what Hot Rod had promised him.

Still, it was surprisingly decent of the female Constructicon—Bucketbrain? Mullethead?—to let him go. Part of him missed the simplicity of the clean lines of yesteryear; these days he wasn't sure if he should be rooting for the Builders or the Resistance or the MCSF or what.

His musing, and his flight, was interrupted by a blue armodrillo running past him and cutting off his retreat. He skidded to a halt just a few mechanometers short of the newcomer, who shouted "Maximize" and converted to a bulky blue form.

Snapper raised his fists. "You're not gonna get my bounty without a fight!" he shrieked with more bravado than he felt.

The Maximal threw up his hands, palms open. "Woah, woah, woah. I ain't here to hurt ya. Actually, we're needed... somewhere. Somewhere soon. "

This was... different. Unexpected. "Look, friend, the Resistance won't rest until my spark pulses no longer, so whatever damn-fool mission you have for me, you can just go ahead and give it to the next Pred. I. Am. Out."

The Maximal closed his optics and inclined his head slightly, massaging his temple with two fingers from his right hand. Then he glanced back up. "Overshoot's the name, and it's gotta be you, and it's gotta be now. I... I can't explain, but the whole world's in danger. That's gotta mean something."

Snapper stared at Overshoot, memories of the crowd at Tesarus flooding back and the sacrifice he made then. There was something in his optics, something distant and sincere, and it broke Snapper's spark to see it and he wasn't sure why. "Awww... shoot me with Prime's Ion Blaster. I'm fraggin' in."



Rampage, as he was calling himself these days, looked at the yellow and purple new arrival with disdain. He could smell the MCSF on her, and he hated the MCSF even more than he hated the Builders. Builders at least acted in their own twisted self-interest, but the MCSF were collaborators who sold out their own kind for a slightly less awful existence.

Besides, she looked juicy. "Oh, goodie, fresh scrap. I was feeling peckish," he threatened.

His mechannibalism was an affectation, but a useful one. It kept his so-called comrades in the Resistance at a comfortable arm's length. He had a grudging respect for Magmatron and all he'd accomplished, but found Lio Convoy's charisma distasteful, Blackarachnia disingenuous, B'Boom imbecilic, Cheetor naive, Cybershark callous, and the rank-and-file pathetic in their devotion to the leadership. Aside from the crew of the *Dinosaur*, the only member of the Resistance he had any respect for was Preditron. In fact, he'd even flirted with the idea of fitting himself with a Predacon badge. Though he was loath to admit it and would deny it if asked, their principles resonated with him on a deep level. If it weren't for the Tripredacus Alliance subverting the Predacon Manifesto for their own ends, he probably would have.

The MCSF officer blustered something about needing him as a blade appeared in both hands. Something about her stance told him that she knew exactly how to use each of those weapons. The Micromaster tried to circle around, and Rampage decided to let her. She'd lost her weapon and, despite her bulk, was far less threatening than the newcomer. She said something to the MCSF officer about him not playing nice.

She was right about that, and he told her so. "Nice is for Cyberdroids and bumble-puppies." Hmm. Not his best. He stepped up his intimidation game. "I prefer to let my eternal and unending torment do the talking." Better. He didn't think he'd get the chance to fire off another barrage and so hurtled the weapon directly at the Maximal. She ducked easily, but that left her open for his claws. He snatched at her port wing and scored a hit, raking her delicate meshWeb surface and sending fractal-latticed feathers flying. He gave an evil chuckle. "I smell your fuel, sense your spark beating faster. It shall make—"

His taunt was cut off as her left knife scored a hit on the inside of his elbow and he felt his hand go numb. An involuntary gasp escaped his vocoder and he saw red. He charged forward, only to feel a sharp blow to the back of his cranial unit. The Pit-damned Builder! He'd lost sight of her in the melee. From his knees, he twisted his torso to get a look at her, only to be rewarded with the sight of a girder

rushing towards his face. He tried to throw up his hands to block, but his left still wasn't responding and the hunk of durabyllium connected. Static filled his vision, but he remained conscious.

He shifted to decapodian form, reconnecting with his missile launcher as he did so. His vision returned; the Micromaster was still there, but where did the Maximal go? Then sharp pains down his right three legs told him, and he found himself floundering. He roared and grabbed the Builder with both claws, lifting her over his head. "I'll rip you in half and feast on your still-sparking circuits!" he shouted, knowing he was going to lose the battle but confident that he would regenerate eventually.

"Stop!" A new voice had joined the fray. "You don't want to continue the battle, we're all on the same side."

What kind of energon was this fraghead ingesting? "Don't I?" he asked, and hurtled the Builder directly at the new arrival's head. He and the prisoner beside him both managed to dodge the ketons of Micromaster hurtling at them, who bounced onto the bridge and rolled to a stop with a low groan.

The fact that the prisoner was with them was something of a conundrum. The Resistance wanted him dead; Rampage didn't much care, but any chance to indulge in his violent proclivities was a welcome respite from his own perpetual inner anguish. The MCSF and the Builders, despite mounting tension between them, wanted the prisoner locked away. So, why was he voluntarily spending time with this Maximal? If they weren't MCSF—and Rampage was almost sure they were—then what were they? Not Tripredacolonial loyalists, not with that luponoid badge. Darksyders or some other criminals? They didn't smell the type.

Scrap it. He decided he didn't really care. Their words had caused the nimble femme with the blades to cease, so he backhanded her with a sweep of his claw, knocking her onto the bridge. Unless the blue Maximal proved as dangerous as his ally, she was the primary threat. He charged forward, gurgling an inarticulate battle cry. She scrambled backward, as did the Builder. This was what he liked, his enemies quaking in fear.

But he had miscalculated. The Predacon prisoner and the blue Maximal followed him onto the bridge, and he was surrounded. Worse, the blue Maximal had pulled both a blaster of some sort and a sparking mace, meaning he'd be competent at range and in close. The prisoner would definitely escape, and while Rampage didn't *really* care, he hated to let the Builders and the MCSF win the day. He fixed the layout of the Metrospan in his processor's inner optic, converted to his humanoid mode, summoned his missile launcher, and cackled with laughter as he unleashed a barrage on the structure suspending them above an endless sonic canyon. It shattered to pieces and the five of them spilled into the abyss, with the blue Maximal inexplicably shouting, "Oh no, not again!"

INTERLUDE

"Give me a hand with this, would you Klaws?" demanded Vamp. The seventeen Antarean years she'd spent on this miserable world had worn on her, ground her down. She had done her duty, of course, blending in with the local Predacon population and gaining allies among the disaffected. The truth was, though, these Cybertronians sickened her. Everything about them screamed 'inferior', and the stench of them and their energon had come to permeate every molecule of her borrowed form.

"Yeah, yeah, hold your thrusters," muttered Klaws. He had been the lookout while Vamp had made the exchange with the foolish Maximal thief, providing overwatch on the off chance of betrayal, or interference from the local street gangs who were becoming increasingly aggressive in the absence of MCSF patrols. Earlier that day, there had been some kind of an action that had wrecked the Metrospan, and there was sporadic fighting all through the afternoon and into the evening. Nonetheless, Packrat was true to his sniveling word. He arrived on-time, with the package. Vamp hoped it would prove as valuable as their analysis indicated.

With Klaws' help, Vamp finally wrestled the Rosetta Stone—purportedly an important Terran artifact—to their underground lair, beneath the streets of Proximax. Scorp had christened it the Erebos. Bugsie was standing watch from the mouth of the pipe that led to their base, blocked from view by the stealth device; he gave them a nod as they entered, then returned his attention to his silent vigil.

Once inside, they made their way to the makeshift operations center at the heart of the Erebos. When they entered the room, five pairs of eyes turned their way. Scorp was the first to react. "You've done it, Vamp!"

Klaws took exception. "Hey, what am I, chopped Narly?" Scorp, Pincher, and Vamp had been close allies, before the Diaspora. Klaws, Hornet, and Bugsie constituted another block; Creepy and Bladez, the third. They were altogether a motley bunch, exiles from their home, but united in their disgust of this planet and its inhabitants. Since they couldn't go back, they had voted to make a go of it here, calling themselves the Antares Eight. The name stuck, even as more of their kind trickled in. None of them could truly abide the thought of subjugating themselves to the whims of the Builder class of Cybertron, and so they hatched their schemes, garnering influence and energon and technology. With them so far removed from the local centers of power, it was a slow process.

The breakthrough came from an off-handed conversation between Vamp and a Predacon named Ser-Ket. She was being watched as a potential agent to be inserted into the nascent Resistance movement, but her grumbling about how the Human Confederation wouldn't let her soar as her ancestors did turned into an evening-long gripe session about Terrans and their overwhelming technological advantage. At first Vamp couldn't believe it. Humans were small, weak, squishy, technologically inferior stubbies. But that was centuries ago, and the scampering inquisitive apes had evidently advanced far, far beyond what they were when Vamp knew them.

Vamp and her fellow Antareans gathered all they could about the Terrans, searching for the key that would allow them to lure them close and seize their tech, to be used to bring Cybertron to heel. And,

eventually, they stumbled upon the key while hacking the Builder's military crown jewel, the Grand Mal. A priceless Terran artifact, moldering away in a dank museum. Once they allowed news of its existence to reach Earth, they needed but stage an ambush.

Her attention was torn violently to the present as Scorp gave Klaws a shove, and Klaws returned the favor. Hornet and Pincher started to advance on each other, with Bladez and Creepy enjoying the show. "Enough!" Vamp shrieked. "We haven't come all this way, crossed unimaginable gulfs, just to fight amongst ourselves." The incipient melee fizzled out, and Scorp had the decency to look shamed. "Now that we have the stone, we need to focus on next steps."

Creepy stepped forward, and all attention focused on him. "Ooooo. I have just the thing. Oooo." He picked up a stylus and pressed a few buttons on the table in the center of the room. Its surface began to glow, and a translucent map of the surrounding area appeared. Creepy used the stylus to circle the image of a tall tower festooned with antenna and concave dishes on a peak overlooking the city. "There is a trans-hyperwave caster not far from here. Ooooo. I say we..."

Bladez saw where his partner was going. "...break in, kill everyone inssside, and make a little broadcasst?"

"Ooooo. Exactly," agreed Creepy. "Something simple. Pretend to be Resistance, threaten to blow up the tower unless unreasonable demands are met. A ticking clock. Oooo."

Vamp found herself nodding. "We make sure the stone is visible in the background. The Terrans are sure to come scurrying. Then we kill them, grab their tech..."

"...and establish ourselves as the new rulers of Cybertron once and for all!" Pincher enthused.

ACT THE SECOND

Consciousness returned sharply, all at once, not the gradual awakening Buckethead usually experienced. She sat up and ran her hand across her optics and forehead. No real pain or serious injuries, which was bizarre. She'd fallen for Primus knew how long, and had no memory of the landing.

A groan from the floor drew her attention to the four bots who had fallen with her. One was the Predacon prisoner she'd been tasked to deliver to Iacon. Two were the Maximals who had aided her. And one was...

The red mech with the X, who was lying facedown on the metal floor of the vast dark cavern they'd landed in. It was his groaning she'd heard, meaning he'd survived the fall. That was going to have to change. She ran to him and unleashed a savage kick to his midsection, then another, then another. He attempted to curl to avoid the blows, clearly not fully online yet, but his efforts were feeble and she felt vital circuits crush under her onslaught. An energo blade on the ground caught her attention, the hilt colored like the yellow and purple Maximal, so she snatched it up. Intent on finding the mech's spark and extinguishing it, she raised her arm for the stab, only to feel her hand grabbed from behind.

The blue and yellow Maximal grunted with effort as he used both hands to keep her from delivering the death blow. "Woah, slow down Madam Builder. We need that guy."

"Like I need a leak in my tank," grumbled Buckethead, but she ceased struggling and lowered her arm. She wasn't sure what was going on, and this mech did, so she figured she'd follow his lead.

The sounds of the melee had brought the others back to consciousness, and the second Maximal scrambled to her feet. She winced as she did so, her left wing obviously causing her pain. Then she focused in on the blade in Buckethead's hand; she extended her hand, palm open, and coughed. Reluctantly, Buckethead reversed the weapon and pressed the hilt into her hand.

"Need him for what, Overshoot?" asked the femme as she magno-clamped the blade to her side.

"Yeah," sputtered the red mech, who had pushed himself up to his hand and knees and was regarding the other four bots with undisguised hatred. "Need me for what? I don't much care to be anybody's tool." He coughed and spat out energon and coolant. She'd done him some serious injury. *Good.*

Overshoot got a faraway look in his eyes, then focused in on an area of the far corner of the cavern. "Need him—need all of you—to go with me, down."

The prisoner looked from Overshoot to Buckethead to the angry red mech, then back to Overshoot. "Ummm... go down where?"

Overshoot seemed to snap back to the present. "I don't know yet. I've just been... called. Can't say as I understand it."

Buckethead had had enough. "The rescue is great n'all but I got places to be, like getting this one to lacon sharpish." She gestured at the prisoner, who took a step back.

"Hey, thanks but no thanks. I'll take my chances in the guts of Cybertron."

Buckethead glanced at the other Maximal. "Come on, officer, back me up 'ere."

The yellow and purple Maximal gave a derisive snort. "Right. I'm not MCSF, Builder. Not anymore. This guy—"

"Snapper," offered the prisoner.

"—Snapper doesn't want to go with you, then you're going through me to get to him." The blade and its twin were back in her hands.

"So much conflict," chuckled the red mech from the floor, "I can see why you gathered us all together. I shall enjoy gloating over your burnt-out husks once you've all killed each other."

"ENOUGH!" shouted Overshoot. "I'm not crazy, I know how this sounds. But each of us is important, vitally important, to Cybertron. There's something, some threat, that transcends Builder versus MCSF versus Resistance. And we might be the ONLY mechs who can stop it." He pointed to his chest.

"Overshoot. Used to be MCSF, went AWOL. Stiletto too," he said, gesturing to his Maximal companion. Then his finger came to rest on Buckethead.

"Buckethead. Constructicon. Micromaster, these days." She folded her arms across her chest and tried to look confident, though it might have come across as smug.

The finger moved to the prisoner. "Uhh... Snapper. Predacon. *Traitor* to the Resistance." He evidently didn't think much of that label.

The finger moved to the mech on the floor, who laughed. "You wish to *get to know me better*?"

Overshoot nodded. "I really do."

The mech drew himself up to his full height, then spat another wad of coolant on the floor. His chest, which had been crumpled inward only a cycle or two before, was almost completely healed. Even as Buckethead watched, the buckled metal armor plates snapped back into shape. "I am a Builder experiment, an attempt to make a Proto point one percenter. They called me Protoform X, but I call myself Rampage!"

Buckethead found that she'd taken an involuntary step back from his display. She wasn't the only one. Only Stiletto had stood her ground. "Rampage... like the Predacon?"

Rampage growled. "Thought about it. I'm not much of a joiner."

"No, I meant..." Stiletto shook her head. "Nevermind."

Snapper looked at the mech thoughtfully. "But, aren't you Resistance? Why join *them*?"

Rampage glowered at Snapper, and Buckethead realized that this might have been the first conversation the mech had had in orbital cycles. Maybe longer. It was kinda sad, in a pathetic and dangerous sorta way. "I didn't. Not... not exactly. But some... some bots I've been through hard times with did. I was helping them out." He paused, then snarled. "Besides, they give me plenty of outlets for my, heh, violent outbursts."

Buckethead chuckled. "Would'ja lookit us. Downsized Macromaster. Former MCSF. Resistance member-turned-target. They should call us the Ex-Bots."

"Hey," shouted Rampage, "I'm not an ex-anything!" This caused Snapper to snort with laughter. "What?" asked Rampage, only for Snapper to incline his head at the marking on Rampage's chest. Rampage's optics followed Snapper's gaze, coming to rest on his own torso. He frowned. "Touché."

Overshoot had moved away from the group and was inspecting the area of the cavern that had caught his attention earlier. "It's another pit, just wide enough for us to go single file. We're supposed to go down."

The other four bots all looked to each other. Buckethead could practically read their minds: *are we really doing this? Yes, she decided, we really are.* "Well, frag my hard drive and call me Wheelie. Down it is." She made her way to the pit, and sensed the others following. Even Rampage.



They worked their way down, climbing slowly. They were in some kind of access tunnel, one scaled for their size or slightly smaller, rather than normal Builder dimensions. Cycles became megacycles, and Snapper realized there had been no places to rest. Finally, the claustrophobic walls gave way to open space, and they found themselves on a ladder through a vast, city-sized space, lit by an eerie green glow. Buildings with an odd, screw-like quality to the architecture dominated the space. They were massive, and spaced far apart.

"I... I never thought I'd see anything like this," he muttered.

Immediately below him was the Builder. "It's a sight, innit? Must be what's left o' earlier Cybertronian, whatjacallem, civilizations. I ain't sure, but this might be from before the Great War even. Age of Internment maybe."

Rampage, who was last, scoffed. "And we just built over them. Guess there's a reason we call you lot 'Builders.'"

They continued down, into a narrow canyon below the city, and eventually reached the floor where the ladder terminated.

"Are we here, big guy?" asked Stiletto. Though her tone was neutral, Snapper thought he detected a hint of concern.

Overshoot shook his head. "'Fraid not, Knives." He looked around, finding another pit. "We take a couple 'o cycles to rest our servos, then it's down some more."

The next pit was less accommodating. Instead of regular handholds on the wall, there was an ancient power cable strung on a line. They'd have to climb it. Overshoot took the lead, though this time Rampage followed. Stiletto took third, Snapper fourth, and Buckethead took the rear.

The metal plates of Cybertron were their only companions for another four hics of climbing, which Snapper found not so much tiring as wearying. Eventually they came to another open area, this one with simpler, angular structures. Triangles and pyramids made up the bulk of the surviving structures, few of which were intact. Everything had an orange tint to it from luminescent paint. What could be powering such a thing after so many millions of stellar cycles, Snapper had no idea. They had no chance to rest at this level, as their cable continued down through a vast abyss with sides too far to touch.

Another megacycle passed. He had no idea how far down they'd gone, but his servos were screaming at him. "I'm not sure how long I can hold on," he admitted. He felt himself plucked off the chord and placed on Rampage's wide back.

"You're magnetized to my galva-conductors, morsel. Anyone else can't cut it?" Snapper glanced up, but the rest of them seemed to be hanging in there. He groaned inwardly at his inadvertent pun.



It was half a cycle later when he felt Rampage bump into Overshoot. "Why stop, fearless visionary?"

Snapper heard a clang. "We're at the bottom, I think," said Overshoot uncertainly. There was a thud, and then Overshoot had taken a few steps off the vertical axis they'd been following for so long.

"Bout time," grumbled Rampage, who released the cable and fell the few mechanometers to the ground. "You can get off now."

Snapper realized that he was no longer attached and scampered down. "Yeah, sorry. Ummm... thanks."

Rampage turned away. Embarrassed? The rest of them quickly scrambled off the chord, and there was much stretching.

Buckethead looked around the empty space they were in, using her shoulder-mounted headlights for illumination. Other than regularly-spaced pillars that dotted each side of a narrow strip of metal, there was nothing to see. "It deffo ain't just me, there ain't nout 'ere, is there?"

Stiletto nodded. "No, Buckethead. My sensors report that we're suspended in the middle of an empty, 500 mechanometer sphere. On some kind of bridge, so if everyone could try not to destroy it, that'd be great."

"So... why in the Pit—no pun intended—did we come all this way?" Buckethead demanded. "Wot exactly are we s'posed to see 'ere? Or are you pullin' some kind of MCSF scam?"

On the word MCSF, Rampage took a step back and locked his missile launcher into place, swinging it rapidly towards each of the other bots in turn. "I'll never go back to the Builders, you hear! I shall visit a thousand centuries of suffering on any who would be so foolish as to try!"

When the weapon came to rest on her, Buckethead transformed and raised her skip, providing a shield. Her engines revved. " 'ave a go if you think you're 'ard enough, X!"

"STOP IT!" yelled Overshoot. He picked up a loose piece of masonry from the floor and hurtled it down the length of the bridge, into the darkness. End over end it flew, until it struck an invisible wall and shattered it. Great gouts of flames shot out, and light and head blossomed at the center of the cavern. They all found themselves taking a step back.

All but Overshoot. He walked towards the flame. Snapper was surprised the armor wasn't melting from his form. "Overshoot, get back!" shouted Stiletto, but he kept his slow pace. When he was nanohics from the inferno, he reached out a palm. The flames and heat were swept away, and lights mounted at the top of each of the columns flanking the bridge sprang to life in pairs, progressing steadily from the edge of the chamber to the center.

There was a faint harmony, and then the entire space was filled with a spherical view of planets and stars. This shimmered and was replaced with a gigantic spark, or maybe it was a sea of sparks.

"The Oracle," whispered Snapper, his tone reverential. "It foretold the coming of the first bots to Cybertron."

"But... isn't that just a legend?" asked Stiletto.

"No," whispered Overshoot. "It's what's been calling me. Calling us."

Then the room seemed to vibrate, and Overshoot's optics began to glow. **AT LONG LAST, A RECEPTIVE SPARK.** The words seemed to harmonize into existence all around them, fully formed, not synthesized phoneme by phoneme as a vocoder would do. Overshoot took a step forward, into the ocean of sparks, and was gone.



Overshoot found himself floating through space, and he knew he was being granted a vision. Whether it was a vision of what is, was, or was yet to be, remained to be seen.

OVERSHOOT. The words were great, vast things, the way moons were large. **CYBERTRON IS IN PAIN.** Overshoot felt his perception pulled forward with great momentum, and he was looking down on Cybertron from orbit. Even from here, he could see how chaos raged. Huge swaths of the world had been rendered dark, inert. Where life remained, there was burning. Brilliant pinpricks appeared and vanished, leaving bitter rents in the planet's surface.

"I know. We all know. But no one knows what to do about it."

THIS IS A HEALTHY PAIN. THE BIRTHPANGS OF A NEW ORDER. EVIL MASQUERADES AS GOOD AND MUST BE SWEEPED AWAY FOR THE BALANCE TO BE RESTORED. The globe continued to spin, but the fires died, and lights returned to the night side of the world. A warm gold glow enveloped the planet. **ALL OF THIS HAS HAPPENED BEFORE. ALL OF THIS WILL HAPPEN AGAIN.**

Overshoot was confused by a rush of images; Alpha Trion with a quill, Gigatron bartering with a faceless alien presence, Optimus Prime launching the Ark, Thunderwing discovering the Underbase. He shook his head to clear it. "So... then... what do you need us for?"

THERE ARE THOSE WHO SEEK TO HIJACK CYBERTRON'S DESTINY. Now the golden world beneath him mutated. Ugly spires shot up from the surface, and hideous welts appeared. The color faded to an angry red, punctuated by a green that made Overshoot think of plagues and disease and death.

CYBERTRON IS UNIQUE IN THE COSMOS, AN AXIS UPON WHICH THE UNIVERSE ROTATES. THE CREATORS FORESAW THREATS AS YET UNDREAMT OF BY ANY IN THIS GALAXY. THAT IS WHY IT EXISTS. THE DAY WILL COME WHEN EARTH STANDS SIDE-BY-SIDE WITH CYBERTRON, TO FACE ADVERSITY BEYOND GOOD, BEYOND EVIL, BEYOND IMAGINATION.

Overshoot felt his perspective pull back, and saw that there was a blue-white planet orbiting the same star as Cybertron. Tiny bursts of light made him think there were ships shuttling back and forth between them. "Earth? The human world? I thought humans were the enemy."

CAN YOUR LEFT HAND BE THE ENEMY OF YOUR RIGHT? CAN THE LEAVES OF A TREE BE THE ENEMY OF THE ROOTS?

Now Cybertron and Earth converged in their orbits, but instead of an explosion, the two worlds combined into a single planet, a metallic world nevertheless filled with oceans of water. Green began to dominate the metal mountains and valleys and plains. Overshoot found himself lost. "I... I don't understand."

YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL. RETURN TO THE SURFACE. THE TIME HAS COME FOR THE PROTOFORMS OF CYBERTRON TO PROTECT THE CHILDREN OF EARTH FROM THE SPAWN OF ANTARES.

He found himself rushing up, and his perspective returned to reality. He was back on the bridge, still standing. The columns continued to provide illumination, but the Oracle itself was gone. He stumbled and nearly fell, only for Stiletto to catch him. "You back with us, big guy?"

Overshoot nodded. "This war, the Resistance, the MCSF, all of it... I think the Oracle WANTS it!"

"Well, ain't that just prime?" said Buckethead. "So we lot got pulled all the way down here to, what, go back to our factions and say 'everything is dandy, keep on killing each other?'" There were nods and murmurs of agreement.

"No. The war it wants, but there's some kind of threat to the balance. Some outside force. It mentioned the, uh," he trailed off for a moment. The entire vision had a dream-like quality, and he was finding it hard to remember the specific verbiage. "The 'Spawn of Antares'. And it mentioned humans. Protecting them."

This elicited a laugh from Rampage. "Protect the humans! They've been the biggest pumping pistons in the galaxy since before I was spat into this world. They sit there watching us burn and don't lift a tiny fleshy finger to help."

"Heh," laughed Buckethead. "Maybe the Oracle needs a reboot."

Snapper coughed, pulling optics towards him. "I think I know who the spawn are. We were briefed about them during my last mission. There's a group of Predacons called the Antares Eight. They traded us, the Resistance I mean, a bioweapon for... Primus, for information on the Terran Confederation!"

"All right," said Stiletto. "So this is real. Some Predacons seek to harm humans. What can the five of us do that the most powerful empire in galactic history can't?"

"I don't know," Overshoot intoned, keeping his voice slow and deliberate. "But I do know the Oracle chose us for a reason. We need to head back to the surface to stop them, and we need to do it now."

Rampage grabbed the cable leading back up to the ceiling and gave it a tug. It didn't budge a nanohic. "Shall we?"

Overshoot shook his head. "I know a shortcut."



Rampage hated crowding into the ancient shuttle-car, the legacy of a Mass Transit System older than even the concept of Autobots and Decepticons. To be so close to these other four bots made him paranoid. Part of him wanted to lash out, tear them limb from limb. He'd certainly be justified, at least in the eyes of the Resistance who had been sheltering him recently. Two of them were MCSF, or former MCSF. One was a traitor. And one was a Builder. While Lio Convoy didn't officially sanction wanton slaughter, he was more than willing to turn a blind optic towards such oilletting from time to time.

So why wasn't he? He growled, earning a look of fear from Snapper, disdain from Stiletto, and wariness from Buckethead. Only Overshoot seemed unaffected. The truth was, he wasn't sure why he was doing what he was doing. After their shuttle malfunctioned upon entering Cybertron's atmosphere and crashed, he'd helped Magmatron trek across Builder territory on war footing. It took orbital cycles but their small crew eventually linked up with the Resistance. Much as he hated to admit it, even to himself, he'd come to respect Magmatron and, to a lesser extent, Guiledart, his right-hand bot. His relationship to Bazooka and Crazybolt, the other two members of the *Dinosaur's* crew who had made the journey to Cybertron, was harder to define. He found them foolish and their obvious affection for each other irksome, and yet, when they were imperiled by MCSF patrols or Micromaster battalions, some part of his spark ached at the thought they might come to harm. When Magmatron asked him to accompany them on their first mission, he reluctantly did so. That turned into a second, then a third, then a fourth. By now he'd lost count. And though he bore the new members of Magmatron's squad, Archadis and Sling, little loyalty, he had an odd sense of belonging with the four from the *Dinosaur*.

And yet, something felt wrong. Off. Being with the Resistance offered opportunity for battle, which he needed. During combat, the ache in his spark was forgotten. But it still felt as if working for the Resistance represented some fundamental betrayal of himself. And answering the Oracle's call...

Answering the Oracle's call did not. And so he refrained from lashing out at those around him, and allowed the car to take them towards the surface. The painful, tedious journey into Cybertron's core that had taken the better part of a solar cycle was reversed in less than a megacycle. His fellow crusaders had chatted most of the ride up—Stiletto and Buckethead, in particular, seemed to hit it off—but he had remained silent, in his own processor.

"Looks like it's the end of the road," said Snapper as the car finished slowing and stopped. The duraglass cover of the shuttle popped open, and they all scrambled out eagerly. Despite the car's age, it had obviously been scaled towards the Proto-races; the presence of a Micromaster Builder had made it a tight squeeze.

They looked around. They were in a small terminal, standing on a raised platform next to the track upon which the shuttle-car rested. A light flickered unevenly overhead. There were two main exits, but neither was marked. Snapper spoke first. "Anyone have any idea where we are?"

Buckethead spat on the ground, a sizzling wad of weak acid. "That light up yonder tells me we're 'ooked into the Protimax energy grid. It was cycling strong to weak at that frequency, innit? And since we mostly went straight up, I'm guessing we're not more than a couple o' stories below the surface."

Overshoot started walking towards the closest exit. "This way, guys."

"The Oracle tell you that?" asked Rampage, his tone challenging to show that he was still his own bot.

The Maximal shook his head. "Nope. It's 50/50 so may as well pick one and go."

Despite himself, Rampage gave a chuckle.

Getting the last couple of dozen mechanometers up took nearly as long as the MTS ride, and involved backtracking several times. Finally Rampage tired of it and, hearing a faint voice on the other side of smooth metal wall, snarled and ripped his way through. A small yellow Maximal saw them and fled, and the band entered a tiny hovel. "I need air," Rampage complained. He walked in the direction the Maximal had fled, knocking over a table and spilling a beverage in the process, but was soon rewarded with the sight of the night sky. He breathed an audible sigh of relief. Being confined underground brought back bad memories.

Then he felt a touch on his arm, and jerked his head down. "It's a beautiful sight, isn't it?" asked Stiletto. Her focus was on the stars above, and Cybertron's moon. He was reminded of Trans-Mutate, and that annoyed him.

He wrenched his arm away. "I was just thinking that the scar in the moon was an omen. Soon I shall inflict similar wounds upon my enemies."

Slowly, her face turned from the contemplation of the heavens to meet his gaze. Her expression didn't change. "Of course you were. Rampage." Then something flickered across her optics. "Hang on," she

said, in a much sharper tone that carried to the rest of their group. "Picking up a distress call on my old MCSF band. Someone's assaulting a trans-hyperwave caster tower just outside of town."

"Could be coincidence," observed Buckethead.

Snapper shook his head. "Doubtful. We had standing orders to leave communication infrastructure intact. Lio Convoy wanted to be able to get his message out." He turned his gaze to Rampage. "Unless that's changed?"

Rampage shook his head no.

Overshoot brought both his hands together, fingertips to fingertips, palm touching. It was a vaguely meditative gesture. "No coincidence. This is it. Whatever we're supposed to be stopping, this is the beginning. Let's transform and roll—err, well, transform and make our way there. Sorry, still not used to legs in my alt mode." He shifted to his mechanical form.

Though he'd never admit it, Rampage could sympathize. It had taken a while to get used to scuttling instead of hovering. "Beast Mode!" he cried. Stiletto converted into an avian form. She flexed the wing he'd injured, found it wanting, and then perched on Overshoot's back. He felt a twinge of something—guilt?—but dismissed it.

Snapper assumed vehicle mode, a tank, which prompted Buckethead to pop his hood and fiddle with something inside. She pulled out a restraining bolt. "Oi, I figure you might want access to your weapons, bruv." He thanked her as she converted to her own vehicle mode. The motley band then drove, scuttled, and trotted towards their destiny.



The caster tower was only 3.4 hics outside of town, located at the top of one of Cybertron's many ancient conical structures whose original purpose was unknown to this day. Its height allowed it to handle conventional electromagnetic communications for a line-of-sight out to over 200 hics, though its main function was to tie into the local satellite network and, of course, acting as a tachyon logic gate for FTL communication. It was a tall structure, with spikes protruding from its surface at irregular intervals and the occasional concave dish pointed at the sky. At one point its silver surface would have gleamed, but millennia of neglect, combined with the occasional assault, had left it tarnished and pitted, much like the rest of Cybertron.

One of those occasional assaults was currently in progress. The tower's highly visible position allowed Stiletto to see the explosions while they were still making their way up the spiral road that led to the summit. She ran another diagnostic, not expecting her flight systems to be back online, but incredibly they were. Something about the Beast Upgrade made her repair system more efficient, especially while she was in her DeathEagle form. "I'm going to scout out the battle," she shouted, and soared into the sky.

She circled to gain altitude, still becoming familiar with her DeathEagle configuration. Her ELINT package wasn't as sophisticated as it used to be, but her optics were at least three times as effective. She craned her neck this way and that, and was rewarded with a glancing view of an explosion behind her, the opposite direction from the tower. "Hey, team, signs of a battle in Protimax grid Nealed."

Buckethead's voice answered back. "Ha! I'm guessing my mates stuck around looking for me. Proper."

"Not what we're here for," replied Overshoot over the same frequency. "What's going on at the tower?"

"I'll let you know in a cycle," Stiletto replied. She was closing in, maintaining height to give her a view of the battle without drawing undue attention. She could see that there was a grey Micromaster at the top of the tower, frantically firing down at a group of bots swarming the tower. A blue radar dish was on his back, explaining his assignment. There was an electrified fence set back forty meters from the structure of the tower, creating a square perimeter only breached by a single gate. The attackers hadn't bothered to open it, instead opting to blast large holes in the fence from a variety of angles. There were six... seven... eight attackers. "I count eight hostiles, all sporting Pred symbols," she radioed back to her companions, still two to three cycles away. "Looking good for the Antares Eight."

"How delightful," chortled Rampage over the frequency they'd agreed upon. "I shall sup from their circuits and drain their fluids until they beg for oblivion."

More colorful than a MCSF 'roger that', she supposed. Stiletto allowed herself a small smirk. *Yet another advantage of the beast form*, she realized. She continued to circle the tower from well above the battle, trying to get a sense of the combatants. There was a second Micromaster, a purple and teal one carrying a large rifle. He was firing continuously from the doorway to the tower, forcing several of the attackers to duck behind the pillars of the fence. For a moment it looked like the two defenders might hold the tower. The Micromaster at the peak tried to strafe them, but then two of the aggressors who had remained behind transformed.

In all her stellar cycles, Stiletto had never before seen alt modes like these. One had become what almost looked like a green race car, with fins guarding the front tires and spoilers on the back, but there was some kind of integrated flight system, because the car/jet took to the sky. The rear engine had a double-barreled missile launcher, which proceeded to fire at the base of the tower and scored a hit on the Micromaster attempting to hold the entrance. The jet/car's companion's form was even stranger, a deep blue wedge shape craft with various black accents, including two curved, mandible-like spikes on

the front end, two more jagged—they almost looked like legs—protruding from either side of the craft, and a large cannon and associated sensor system located at the back of the craft. It charged the Micromaster on top of the tower, grabbing him in its pincers. It then flew into the air and released the Micromaster, allowing him to fall screaming to the surface.

Unfortunately, that maneuver brought it perilously near to Stiletto's circling. "Vamp," it cried in a strange, strained voice, "there are more Cybertronianssss about!"

The car/jet answered, the voice in a feminine register. "Then let's not waste any more time, Bladez!" It—she?—pulled up, and Stiletto found herself confronting the two heavily armed... whatever. They were definitely vehicle-ish, and yet there was something vaguely of the organic about them. The cannon on Bladez's back started to warm up, and Stiletto engaged in a steep dive to avoid the blast.

"Guys, I'm spotted," she sent. "Sooner would be better than later." She tried to catch sight of her companions, but was having a hard time orienting herself while dodging the blasts these bizarre bots continued to hurtle at her.

Nuts and bolts to this, she thought. She located a thermal updraft and rode it as high as she dared, then reversed to a dive. Once she judged her momentum adequate, she shouted "Maximize!" and converted to her humanoid form. She didn't have flight systems in this mode, but her wings gave her a good measure of control. Adding in gravity and she felt confident she could outmaneuver these more heavily armored but slower monster-vehicles. Vamp saw her coming and attempted to dodge, but Stiletto adjusted and landed on her back. She magno-clamped her boots and drew her knives, seeking and finding vulnerable gaps in the monster-vehicle's armor. In a matter of nanokliks she'd managed to cut a fuel line and sever a stabilizing fin, leaving Vamp to go careening out of control. Stiletto leapt off and transformed back to beast mode just before the strange femme crashed into the ground.



"You'll pay for that!" screamed a black bot with red accents, who shifted into an arachnotron/truck hybrid. It had enormous claws, but its tail was equipped with a hook, rather than a stinger, and in place of legs were triangular tank treads. Then it pointed the tail hook at her, and it began to glow. She abruptly turned her wings against her forward momentum and a blast came nanohics from frying every circuit in her body. Then she felt herself grabbed from behind—damnit, she'd lost track of Bladez during the battle. He swooped down to where several of the attackers were clustered and released her, causing her to stumble into her midst. She felt hands grab her from behind.

"Well, well, looks like the cavalry is here," rasped a blue mech sarcastically. Blasters were mounted at the end of small gold wings attached to the underside of his arms. He raised his arm and she found a blaster pointed directly at her face. "Too bad it won't be enough!" The blaster began to glow, and she found herself closing her optics and flinching away from the inevitable.

Then the armodrillo form of Overshoot barreled into the mech and they fell into a tangle of limbs. Wasting no time, she elbowed the mech grabbing her at what she hoped would be a vulnerable spot and threw herself to the opposite side, wrenching herself free of his orange claws as she did so. She spun around and slashed with her left knife without bothering with a targeting solution. He was an ugly fellow, hunched, with weapons mounted on either side of his oddly-proportioned chest, and she scored a hit on his abdomen. The mech screeched in pain, then took a step backward into a conversion. He was some kind of half-track, dominated by a shovel on a turret. The chest-mounted weapons now flanked the shovel mouth, and a spotlight located at the back of the shovel flashed on to painful life, momentarily blinding her. Not knowing where the inevitable attack would come from, she opted to dive forward, tackling the gangly neck of the shovel/weapon platform. They fell over together in a heap.

She heard new voices, Rampage and Buckethead and Snapper, but with her optics still adjusting and the chaos of grappling with the monster-vehicle, she couldn't track the course of the battle. Rampage's screams of delight and taunts certainly augured well for their chances, but she couldn't help but notice that they were outnumbered better than two to one. If these bizarre bots had a chance to regroup, they'd triumph.

So make sure that doesn't happen. She had lost her knives in the melee, but grabbed the neck of the shovel and twisted with all her might. She felt something snap, then the orange mech she was fighting cried out in pain and ceased to struggle effectively.

Less than a nanoklik later she was back on her feet, surveying the battle. She'd personally accounted for two of them. Rampage had grabbed a blue and red one and hurtled it into a teal and purple one. Overshoot was still grappling with the blue and gold mech who had nearly shot her. Snapper, still in his tank configuration, was taking shots at the flying blue and black one, forcing it to weave about in the sky. And Buckethead had driven directly into the black and red arachnotron-ish truck. Was that all of them?

No, she realized, that was only seven. So where was...

A flash of pain took her and she found herself on her back. A green and purple mech with a large shoulder-mounted cannon stood over her, his cannon barrel still glowing. "Ooooo. You showed Bugsie rather little mercy. Ooooo. I like that." She struggled to make her arms move, but the blast had blown out her primary grid. The servos were intact, but she couldn't tell them what to do. It was hellish.

The green mech—almost exactly the same shade as Buckethead, some corner of her processor noted—lifted her from her feet, then fired an enormous pulse of light and heat into the air, drawing all optics to him. "Ooooooh. I'm not sure what prompted Maximals and Predacons and Builders to come here, but it stops now. Ooooooh, otherwise, I remove birdey's head from birdey's body. Ooooooh."

The chaos of the battle came to a momentary halt—except for Rampage, who had the wounded black and red arachnotron/truck lifted over his head. He slammed the truck-thing down while bringing up a knee, breaking something in the thing's structure and tossing the shattered vehicle aside. Stiletto felt the heat at the cannon behind her head intensify, and then Overshoot converted to robot form and waved his arms about. "Stand down! Stand down!" He was looking at Rampage, his face pleading. Rampage returned his gaze, impassive as a black hole. "Whatever the Oracle requires of us, I know in my spark it's doesn't involve sacrificing her."

Rampage locked optics with him, then spat on the ground in disgust. "This is why I'm leaning Predacon."

"Ooooooh," purred her captor, "you can see reason. Ooooooh. Now, drop your weapons and, you," pointing to Snapper, "robot mode if you please. Ooooooh."

"Now," quipped Snapper, "technically right now I'm a robot tank, so are you asking me to—" His irreverence was interrupted from a blast from the hovering blue/black wedge, which clipped the edge of his treads. "Hey hey hey! Sorry." He transformed into a pose of surrender, arms in the air. "You meant humanoid robot. Got it."

Several of the wounded enemy bots pulled themselves to their feet. None seemed to have been permanently offlined, though the green flying car, orange halftrack shovel, and the black and red mech Rampage had engaged looked rather the worse for wear. The relatively unscathed mechs herded the other four members of Stiletto's team together. Their backs were to the edge of the sharp drop-off overlooking the city, leaving them few tactical options. Rampage seemed particularly displeased by the whole notion, Snapper resigned, Buckethead just generally cranky. Overshoot still had that odd serenity about him that he'd enjoyed since merging with the Oracle. Part of her still couldn't believe he'd pulled together five such disparate sparks to such an insane quest. It was a side of him she'd never seen before, and she looked forward to the two of them exploring it together. As long as he kept his composure, and his link to the Oracle, she felt certain they would succeed in stopping whatever mad scheme the Antares Eight had brewing.

The green flying car she'd downed earlier, Vamp, limped up and pointed a hybrid tire/Gatling gun into Stiletto's face. "Which one of you is leader?" Stiletto held her vocal processor, perhaps even smirked. "Tell us now, little Maximal, or I'll ventilate your voicebox!"

Overshoot took a half step forward. "No need for that. I'm Overshoot. I guess you could say I'm the leader. Closest thing we got to one, anyways."

"How very noble of you," Vamp mocked. She swung her weapon around until it was pointed at Overshoot's chest. "Noble and foolish." The weapon spun up, and Stiletto realized she intended to fire.

Several things happened all at once. Stiletto screamed a warning and willed her body to dive forward, but her limbs were still sluggish and, though she wrenched herself from the green and purple mech's grasp, she stumbled face-forward to the ground. The weapon discharged, and 18 energy bolts slammed into Overshoot's torso in the span of two nanokliks, ruining his chest and causing gouts of fire and fluids to burst forth. Rampage grabbed Buckethead in his left arm and Snapper in his right and hurtled himself backwards off the precipice, prompting several blasts to go off from their captors. None struck home, but it mattered little. Stiletto didn't see how they could survive a fall like that, at least three hics straight down.

From her position on the ground, she sought out Overshoot, hoping against hope that he might have survived the blow. When she found him, all hope was dashed. There was no light behind his optics, and flame poured from his open mouth. Even as she watched, the color faded from his exoframe. She found herself weeping as the blue and gold mech lifted her from the ground. "Your friends prefer suicide to capture. I can almost respect that. Who sent you?" She spat in his golden face, and he wiped it off with the back of his hand. "Vamp, Scorp, Bugsie, you need some time in the Modifier to heal your wounds. Take her back to the Erebos, you can find out what she knows there. The rest of you, with me. We have humans to lure."

The blue and teal one peeked over the edge. "Pincher, do you suppose," he let out a great belch, then continued as if nothing had happened, "we should go find their bodies? They might," another belch, "have survived."

"Don't be an idiot, Hornet," said the blue and black flying wedge, who stopped hovering and converted back to robot form. "Cybertronianssss don't have integrated antigrav cccircuitry like ussss. Not unless they have a flying alt mode, and none of them did. No more wassting time, there are worldsssss to conquer!"

Pincher tossed Stiletto unceremoniously to Vamp, who caught her and threw her over a broad shoulder. Then Vamp, along with the black and red mech and the orange mech—she guessed they were Scorp and Bugsie, respectively—rose to the air and flew towards town. Stiletto knew it was her duty to oppose these strange, monstrous mechs, but for the life of her had no idea how.

INTERLUDE

Blix's rather pleasant conversation with Screwball, about the relative merits of purely olfactory artforms compared to the purely tactile, was rudely interrupted by a light flashing on the arm of his chair, the Captain's chair of the *Spooky Action at a Distance*. "Would you care to tell me what that's about?" he asked the holoprojection of Screwball, the ship's AI.

At the moment, Screwball manifested as a one meter tall centaur, a bright red mohawk atop zir head. Ze's eyes were unnaturally large in proportion to zir face, and instead of traditional pupils and irises faceted gemstones peered out from under zir thick black lashes. Ze had a Napoleonic-era uniform on zir chest and arms, and the horse half was, naturally, completely nude. "Certainly, Captain. The ship just intercepted a transmission from Cybertron that I judge to be of interest to the Confederation. It is ongoing. Shall I..."

"Yes," he nodded. "Play it for me, please."

In the center of the bridge appeared the image of some rather ugly Predacons. They didn't appear to have the kind of kibble that would mark them as recipients of the Beast Upgrade, but there was still something off about them. The lead one, a blue and gold customer, stared into the camera for several long seconds, then began to speak. "To the oppressive members of the Builder kleptocracy. The Resistance has seized the Proximax Trans-Hyperwave Caster Tower. The Maximal Command Security Force has abandoned the city; we now demand that you do the same. If you do not comply, we shall destroy the tower, along with this member of your oppressive regime."

The camera panned to reveal a rather pathetic red Autobot Builder wired into the walls. Like most Macromaster-scale Builders, he towered over his captors, or would if he wasn't permanently hunched into a crumbling chair. His head had been replaced with a lens at some point, marking him as a victim of the barbaric practice known as Empurata. Several of his connections had been severed, though the life support seemed to be intact.

The camera panned back up. "If you do not wish—what's your name?" asked the blue and black mech.

"Highline," winced the damaged Autobot.

"Highline, that's right. If you do not wish Highline, as well as a quarter of Cybertron's communication's grid, to go permanently offline, evacuate Proximax immediately. You have four megacycles." Static filled the screen.

Something tugged at Blix's consciousness. Given his status as a psychal, one of three major branches of 24th century humanity, he listened to his inner voices. "Screwball, go back to the pan to Highline, if you please. Play it forward, one-quarter speed."

Screwball's gemstone eyes twinkled. "You saw it?"

"No... I sensed it. But I need to be sure."

"Acknowledged." The video replayed at the desired section. As the camera swung from the hideous Predacon to the pathetic Builder, Blix's eyes danced about the screen. There!

"Freeze frame!" he barked.

Screwball inclined zir head. "Snapshot image froze without a sound," she intoned cryptically, but the image stopped. There, barely in frame, was a large grey block of stone covered in writing.

"Upper left, magnify and enhance." The resolution improved as Screwball applied predictive algorithms to make sense of what he was seeing. "That's... Egyptian, Greek, and..."

"Demotic, sir," supplied Screwball helpfully.

"Are we really looking at the Rosetta Stone?" he wondered.

Screwball looked thoughtful. "Probability matrix indicates a better than 90% chance of authenticity."

It was magnificent. A piece of human history, thought long since taken from them by the relentless Cybertronian wars. For it to somehow end up on Cybertron, centuries after it was thought destroyed, filled Blix with wonder. "Probability that the Builders comply with demands?"

Screwball shook zir head. "Though the Builder population in Proximax is small, less than 100, most are Macromasters unable to move without assistance. These demands cannot be met."

"You'd best wake up Chak, Screwball. He and Una are going to pay Cybertron a little visit."

ACT THE THIRD

Buckethead felt Rampage grab her, heard weapons charging, and then she was falling. For the second time in two solar cycles, she was certain she would be plummeting to her doom, and this time there would be no Oracle mumbo-jumbo to save her. She tried to twist herself free from Rampage's grasp, acting on some primal instinct she hadn't fully processed. She could see Snapper next to her, also bucking and twisting in the huge mech's arms. "Stop struggling, you two!" he growled, "I'm your only chance to survive!"

Survival sounded good, so she forced herself to stop. She glanced over to Snapper, who just gave her a shrug. Whatever Rampage was planning, he was as in the dark as she. From her position, staring up at the sky, she couldn't see the ground but knew it could only be nanoklicks away. She closed her optics and braced herself, and then there was the noise and motion of Rampage converting back to his decapodian mode, half his legs clutching her to his underbelly, the other half clutching Snapper. Then there was the awful wrenching of the abrupt crash into the ground below. She felt her armor dent and twist as their deadly momentum expended itself on the metal surface of the Proximaxian Plain, but, incredibly, when it was all over, she was still conscious, having expended much of the energy of the fall in burrowing into the relatively unarmored parts of Rampage's beast mode. She looked over to Snapper, who had a grimace frozen on his face and a mangled arm clutched to his chest. "You make it, inmate?"

Red light returned to his optics. He groaned, a slow, pained sound. "Yeah. Most of me." He gingerly lifted his left arm to his face for inspection. The elbow was twisted at an unnatural angle. He poked at his fingers, which hung limp. Then he opened a panel on the upper arm and keyed a few commands. A few fingers flexed weakly. "Primary command trunk severed. I've configured it to run off wireless, which is hell on my reflexes. I'll be pretty scrap in a fight."

Buckethead pulled herself to her feet, still standing in the remains of what used to be Rampage. She offered Snapper a hand, and he took it with his good arm. "Thanks, Builder. I, uh, huh. I can't really process him sacrificing himself for me. For us. He didn't seem like he cared about anything, but he used himself as a crumple zone."

Rampage's form was shattered beyond recognition. His armored carapace had been smashed and bits and pieces of him had bounced hundred of mechanometers away. The impact points of herself and Snapper in his undercarriage must have inflicted just as much damage, if not more. Nothing could have survived a blow like that, even if two of his small decapodian legs were still twitching.

"Yeah, well..." She trailed off. "Who knows why 'e did what 'e did. I guess Oracle-Bot really 'ad 'im convinced. Scrap, I guess 'e 'ad all of us 'alf-convinced. It's me own fault for going off on some damned fool quest, innit? But that's it. I'm out."

"How can you be out," asked the Predacon plaintively. "After all Overshoot and Rampage and Stiletto sacrificed? After... after actually meeting the Oracle itself?"

"Look, Prisoner N626BG, whatever voodoo the Oracle uploaded to Overshoot's drive, it was snuffed out along with 'is spark. They've done two of us in and captured a third, and that was when we had the drop on 'em. I'm gonna find me mates and—"

Buckethead's rant came to an abrupt halt when the broken corpse of Rampage let out a long, sustained moan. "You... mean... they killed... ONE... of us," croaked the evidently still alive mech. Buckethead and Snapper looked to each other in astonishment. "Don't... just... stand... there..." he gasped, "go... get... my damn... parts!"

She and Snapper rushed off to do so, placing them approximately where she thought they should go. As they did, the metal of his systems would warp to accept them, reassimilating them into his body. She'd observed his regenerative capabilities before, but this bordered on the supernatural. In less than twenty cycles, he was healed enough to transform, albeit with much difficulty and evident pain.

He flexed his fingers, one after the other, and shook his shoulders. Then his gaze settled on her. "You should be ashamed to call yourself a Builder—and not for the obvious reasons. Hard to believe your kind bent this world to your will."

Buckethead felt embarrassment rise to her cheeks. "Oi! I'm a realist! Maybe there was somethin' to Overshoot's vision, maybe there wasn't, but 'e's gone now, and I don't see why any of us should throw our lives away. What chance do three of us 'ave against eight of 'em now that they know we're out 'ere?"

Rampage's shoulder sagged, and indeed he seemed to deflate. As if to punctuate the moment, the shadow of flying mechs passed overhead. They glanced up, only to see three of the strange Predacons flying—in humanoid mode!—with Stiletto held by one of them.

Buckethead watched the strange mechs fly, and her companions did the same. Snapper broke the silence. "Then maybe we need more than three of us." He converted to his tank mode, crying out in pain as he did so. "I can't really believe I'm saying this, but I'm going to follow them to their base and rescue the Maximal. And yes, I do see the irony there. You two, either of you remember where the skirmish between Resistance and the prison escort was?"

Buckethead nodded. "Grid Nealed. The casino. I see where you're going with this." She transformed to her loader mode. "Rampage, you in?"

"You're both crazy," he growled. "I'm starting to see why I went along with this lunacy." He hopped on Buckethead's back, and she grunted with effort. "Faster this way, Builder."

"Yeah, yeah. 'ang about bruv, I ain't built for passengers." She revved her engines and drove towards the Sights & Sounds casino.



The mechs holding Stiletto captive landed before a nondescript patch of metal ground, which then shimmered to reveal a drainage pipe. "Ah, home sweet home," declared the orange mech, Bugsie. Scorp wasn't saying much of anything; it was apparent that Rampage had inflicted serious injury on him. He definitely could stand some C/R time, although that's not the word they used. 'Modifier' was what they'd called it. How odd. Nothing about these 'Predacons' made sense.

They were in a rather cramped, dismal space. There was a low, constant thrum from some sort of power generator, though what the energy was being used for was a mystery. Perhaps their illusory defense system. Tubes and wiring hung from the ceiling, and some kind of industrial sludge dripped from one of the walls. What illumination there was came from flickering panels obviously added to the ceilings after they had been constructed, all of it disquieting shades of red and green. Like, what was that Terran holiday? X-Mass. She gave a brief chuckle at the thought of another X. They seemed to be cropping up a lot. Terrans too, for that matter.

Then the weight of it all came crashing down on her again. Another partner, dead, and it was her fault. If only she'd been watching her own back, none of this would have happened. Now, everything that made him special, made him unique, had leaked out over the unfeeling metal of the battlefield. The bots he'd gathered for their Quixotic task, most likely dead. And her...

...well, she was probably dead too. After these so-called Predacons decided they were through with her. But that didn't mean she had to make it easy on them. The advantage she had was that they were all injured. She resolved to make some kind of move as soon as one of them entered the 'Modifier'.

Vamp, the femme carrying her, threw her into one of eight chairs surrounding a round table in the center of the first large room they'd come to after navigating several smaller tunnels. She then hastily wrapped several lengths of flexible cable around Stiletto's chest and upper arms. She tried to lean forward, but Vamp shoved her back into the chair, then wrapped each wrist several times, binding her to the armrests. "That should hold you, at least for a few minutes." Again with the odd terminology. Minutes was human speak.

"Who are you?" demanded Stiletto. "It's obvious you're not Predacons."

A cold, cruel laugh was her reward. "Not Predacons, she says," chortled Vamp to Bugsie and Scorp. "Understatement of the year. No, little Maximal, we're not Predacons. Frankly we find your entire planet, and everyone on it, disgusting. But we're not here to answer your questions. Who sent you, and how did they know where we were and what we'd be doing?"

Stiletto squirmed in her seat, trying to make it look like nerves. In reality, she was testing her bonds. A little give, not much. If only she could get her servos on something sharp, she'd probably be able to cut her way free in a matter of nanoklicks. She looked around, and then saw a stylus on the table not two mechanometers away. If only she could get to it. She stalled, trying to come up with a plan. "Look, I'm MCSF, and whatever you are, you're in a heap of trouble. Do yourself a favor and let me go and the MCSF might show mercy."

Vamp laughed again, as did the two mechs behind her. Damn, she'd hoped they'd send at least one of them off for repairs before the interrogation started. The orange one, Bugsie, stepped forward. "We know the MCSF vanished from these parts three weeks ago. Besides, they'd never cavort with Predacons. Nor with Resistance, and Resistance would never stomach working with a Builder. So try again." Then Bugsie did something odd... he raised a clawed hand at her, and it began to glow. Integrated weapon systems?

"No, it's true, we were on special assignment. The Predacon was an informant, undercover. The Builder was along to supervise. Look, I took damage during the battle. Let me log a little C/R time, it'll go a long way towards convincing my superiors for leniency. Besides, might jog my memory."

The bots looked at each other. Her story was implausible, but not impossible. Scorp spoke for the first time. "Repair... time... sounds... good. For... me. You're... doing... fine... here... Vamp." He started to amble down one of the side corridors.

Vamp called after him. "If there might be MCSF reinforcements on the way, perhaps you should call Odd Ball."

Bugsie hissed. "I hate relying on that little twerp and his gruesome menagerie."

"Yes, but their mastery of Rebus technology makes them potent," Vamp declared. "Scorp, make the call." She then turned her attention back to Stiletto. "I find your story doubtful. Convince me."

Stiletto swallowed. Her gambit had worked, she'd convinced one of them to get repaired. Now came the risky part. She directed all available energon to defense, then began to speak. "Look, I can share some confidential files, but first you need to send your lackey away."

Bugsie was, predictably, incensed. "Bugsie is no one's lackey!"

"No?" asked Stiletto innocently? "It's just that Vamp made the call about reinforcements over your objections. I assumed she was in charge."

"She's not!" screamed the orange mech. "We do everything by vote!"

"Calm down, Bugsie, she's trying to rattle you," observed Vamp.

"Right, Vamp, bring your hellhound to heel," snapped Stiletto, putting as much condescension and disdain into her voice as she could.

Bugsie growled, then raised his claw. Stiletto had less than a nanoklik to brace herself before it glowed and discharged, catching her in the right shoulder. The chair she was in swiveled on its axis, and she shut off her optics and slumped as low as she was able to in her chair.

"Great, moron," snapped Vamp. "You just killed our only source of information. I'm going to go get fixed, you can call the others and explain why we failed to get any useful intelligence." Bugsie grumbled an incoherent reply.

Stiletto listened intently, tracking Vamp's footsteps out of the room over the constant thrum of the base. Moments later, Bugsie's heavy tread marked his passage towards a bank of computers she'd observed when she was carried in. She heard the sounds of buttons pushing, and risked sending energy to her optics. His back was to her, and she was about 20 degrees turned from the table. As quietly as she could, she used her feet to adjust the chair towards the table, and extended her right foot towards the stylus she'd seen. It was just barely out of reach, so she slumped even lower in her chair, straining against her bonds. Since the Beast Upgrade, her humanoid form had acquired talons on her feet. She stretched, flexing her two phalanges, trying not to make any sounds of effort or bump into anything.

Got it! She withdrew her leg quickly—too quickly! Something caught Bugsie's attention, because he turned and saw her, just as she'd transferred the stylus to her left hand. He roared and raised both fists just as she sliced the bonds holding her torso. Her wrists were still bound to the arms of the chair as his clawed fists glowed, so she kicked against the table to topple the chair to the floor. Twin bolts of energy sizzled over her head as she hit the ground with her shoulder, hard. With only nanokliks to act, she twisted her wrist and severed the bonds on her right arm, then passed the stylus to her right hand and cut the bonds on her left. Free, and not an instant to spare, because Bugsie ran around the circumference of the table and loosed another bolt at her. She instinctively blocked with the chair, which exploded and knocked her back several mechanometers, but didn't cause much additional damage. Her right arm was still weak from the blast to her shoulder, so she scrambled to her feet and charged, leading with her left. Bugsie was apparently caught off-guard, because he flinched back, allowing her to punch him in his damaged midsection with her curled fist. He doubled over.

The stylus wasn't a knife, wouldn't stand up to combat, so she knew she'd only get one shot with it. While her captor was distracted, she tossed the stylus to her left hand and plunged it into his right optic. Bugsie gave a hideous caterwaul, stumbled back several steps, clutched spasmodically at his head... then sunk to the floor.

Cautiously, Stiletto approached his form and gave it a tap with her foot. Nothing. That was surprising, the wound wasn't deep. She suppose it was possible she struck his core processor, but the odds of that were minimal. She noticed something odd about the wound and bent down to look. There was a thick, viscous coppery sludge seeping from around the stylus she'd never encountered in all her stellar cycles as a guardsmech. It looked almost... organic.

What *were* these things?

Her thoughts, and a nascent processor-ache, were interrupted by Scorp's return. Though it had been at most five cycles since he'd gone, he looked fully repaired. Whatever they were using for healing, it worked a lot faster than a standard C/R tank.

He saw her crouched over Bugsie and gave a horrible, wordless scream, pointing at her with his index finger. She shot to her feet just as he used his tail, hovering disconcertingly over his head even in humanoid mode, to fire a blast in her direction. She tucked into a roll, avoiding it, but was now completely disarmed, and facing a fully repaired opponent who was positioned between her and the corridor that led to the surface. She didn't rate her chances. She contemplated running deeper into the compound, but the prospect of getting cornered in these dimly-lit shafts was decidedly unappealing. She braced herself to charge him, bad arm or no, and hope for a miracle.

Scorp pulled back a massive black arm, tipped by a red, shovel-like fist, and launched a punch at her. As it connected, she heard the twin booms, followed an instant later—as she was busily flying backwards through the air—by a ripple of explosions. She smashed into a computer screen even as a puzzled look crept onto Scorp's face. She hauled herself back onto her feet even as he came crashing down sideways to the ground, revealing the tank form of Snapper. He shifted to humanoid form. "So, this is kinda a freaky monster lair, huh?"

Stiletto tried to answer, but could only cough. She pointed down the tunnel where the Modifier was, worried that Vamp might return at any second. Snapper's head followed her digit. He gave a curt nod and started in that direction. Before he had taken three steps, Vamp's voice came from the direction of the darkness. "What's all the commotion, I—"

She emerged at the tunnel just in time for Snapper to get his double-barreled cannon raised to a firing position. He took the shot, but she dove forward and flew horizontally into him, allowing the twin explosive shells to fly harmlessly over her. She drove Snapper back into a wall, with him pounding on her side and flanks as best he could from the awkward position she'd pinned him in.

Stiletto was hurt, but wasn't about to let Vamp get the upper hand. She scanned the floor frantically, looking for... there! Snapper's handheld cannon. She picked it up and tried to get her shot. Vamp, somehow, sensed this, because she twisted about and managed to get Snapper into a headlock with her right arm, her left fist pointed at his head. "Shoot and your friend dies, Maximal," she taunted.

Stiletto kept the gun aimed at Vamp's head as best as she was able, not at all confident she could make the shot. No reason Vamp had to know that, though. "You've seen how good I am with a blade. That's nothing to how good I am with a gun."

Vamp edged sideways, Snapper giving a token struggle before thinking the better of it. Stiletto watched Vamp take in the condition of her two fallen comrades. Bugsie was clearly dead, but Scorp still seemed to have some life in him. "You've taken out one of us. For that, your entire species will pay a thousand times over!" She reached down and hit a few keys in a computer behind her, and a hatch in the ceiling opened up. Then she shoved Snapper directly at Stiletto, snatched Scorp, and flew straight up.

Snapper tried to arrest his momentum but couldn't help but crash into Stiletto, especially as his left arm was mangled and slow to respond. She did her best to line up a shot, but before she could the hatch slid closed and a magno-clamp sealed it in place. Vamp and Scorp had gotten away.

"Sorry, ladyhawk." Snapper extricated himself from her. "Didn't mean to mess up your shot."

"You didn't show up when you did, yardbird, Scorp would have put a big hole in my chest. Apologies not needed." She handed him his gun, and he took it with a nod.

"Yardbird, huh?" He made a show of considering it. "I feel like, if I ever get the Upgrade, I'm more of an amphibian type. Maybe a chelonoid."

She swallowed. "They said something about luring humans. And pulling in reinforcements. Whatever the Oracle wanted us to stop, I don't think we've got a lot of time."

Snapper nodded his agreement. "And now that one's going to go warn the others. I know we're wounded, but I think we have no choice but to make another run at them, hope that the others scared up some reinforcements."

"Agreed, but first I think we should look around here for a bit, get a sense of the enemy. This chance may not come again."

Snapper opened his vocoder to speak, but then shut it, evidently unable to think of anything to say. Then he gave a little nod and a shrug. "Yeah, ok." He turned to the various computer screens and started pressing keys. She decided to risk delving deeper into the lair, despite the processor-ache the constant thrumming of the base had produced in her.

It wasn't large. Three corridors led to rooms with metal shelves built into the walls large enough for one of the Antares Eight to lie down in; two rooms had three of the structures, one had two. They looked almost like recharge slabs, but without the hookups. Nothing about these aliens—Stiletto had become convinced that they were not Cybertronians—made much sense to her. Worse, every cycle she spent in that place increased her sense of disquiet. The incessant thrum, which seemed to be deepening in pitch and increasing in tempo—though that might have been her imagination—didn't help either. The fourth corridor, the one Scorp and Vamp took to get repaired, led to a strange contraption, a series of shining half-circles set perpendicular to the ground in a row. There was some kind of transparent material connecting them, making a tunnel. The entire structure was raised a quarter of a meter off the ground, on a foundation with a long and complicated series of controls and displays. The Modifier, no doubt. Stiletto had never seen anything quite like it.

When she returned to the central chamber, ready to go down the fifth of (naturally) eight corridors, Snapper called her over. "I managed to get access to... something. Luckily this guy was credentialing himself in when you made like Getaway and split. But it's weird. Not Cybertronix, not human, not anything in my presets, which should cover a huge swath of local space. My language systems just started to make sense of it all. But it's all base-three gibberish. Level 11, Level 16, Level 22, Level 29... it

just goes on like that, along with what might be proper nouns. Maybe. You think 'Fitor' or 'Dumper' could be names? The file's labeled 'Diaspora'. Stiletto, whatever these guys are planning, it's big. Bigger than Cybertron even. And... it's weird. I can't quite file it away in my database. Real metadata undefined kinda voodoo."

Stiletto nodded. The whole situation had her on edge. Then, without warning, she stumbled. Her memory brought her back to a conversation she had with Overshoot in the bunker, back when they were tasked with guarding a bridge. *"You're so MCSF," he told her while performing maintenance on one of the Overcharge drones. She asked what he meant. "You're all 'violence of action', always want to go charging forward. Sometimes you need to stop and look around, take in the little things. Enjoy life. It's not just good for your mental health, you know. Unicron's in the details."*

"I thought the expression was that Primus was in the details," she remembered replying.

Then he stopped what he was doing and looked her straight in the optic. "The details matter, Knives. Now more than most."

She snapped back to the present. She hadn't had a flashback in orbital cycles, but what really rattled her was that that wasn't how the conversation had went. Besides, he never called her Knives back in those days. She hadn't shown that part of herself to him yet.

The details matter, Knives. She could practically feel Overshoot standing over her shoulder, could imagine him rubbing his chin as he looked at the screen, could visualize him pointing to a corner of a screen where circular shapes in glowing red changed, once every nanoklik or so.

Numbers, she felt. Counting down. The ever-deepening thrum of the lair's power source. Danger. Imminent danger. "Come on, Snapper, we gotta move! BEAST MODE!" Despite her injuries, she shifted back to her DeathEagle form and grasped the Predacon by both talons. He cried something as she punctured his shoulder armor, but she paid it no heed, flying back the way they'd entered as fast as she could while dragging his weight. Not four nanokliks after she'd entered the tunnel back to the outside there was a thunderclap of an explosion, followed by blinding light and scorching heat. She tucked her head down and hoped she'd exit in time.



Their companions weren't hard to find. The hard part, Rampage realized, was going to be convincing them to knock off the siege they had going on. He and Buckethead arrived at the outskirts of the

fighting, only to realize why the battle had become as protracted as it had. The Constructicons had managed to find sanctuary inside Sights & Sounds, the casino at the heart of Protimax. Rampage was certain Magmatron and his five Predacons would do their best to keep the Builders pinned up inside, but doubted that he'd want to take the chances of rushing what is basically a very gaudy fortress.

"Heh," chuckled Buckethead. She wanted him to ask why. He ignored her ploy. After a moment she continued, as if he'd inquired. "Looks like Skavenger got his wish." He ignored that too, staring intently at the casino from the rooftop of the building, several blocks away, where they'd decided to conduct reconnaissance. He'd decided, really.

"There," he pointed, finally. It had taken several long cycles of staring, but he found one of Magmatron's positions. He saw heavy guns aimed at the entrance, though he couldn't see who was manning them from this angle. The casino had four main entrances, but one had been collapsed during the fighting. Rampage assumed Magmatron would split his forces into three groups of two, stationing each one where they'd have a clear field of fire on an entrance. That made this a stand-off. Time for him to break the siege. "I'm going to talk to the Resistance. While I'm doing that, you go inside and talk to your people."

She looked at him incredulously. "What am I supposed to say? Oi, a freaky magic computer says we need to stop some criminals from doing something or other, so let's just forget the Uprising for a few cycles, innit? Why would they believe me?"

"Up to you," he grumbled, then jumped off the building. He was sure she'd take the stairs back down, and felt like being alone. All this teamwork left him confused and angry, and he wanted to punch something.

Rampage strode boldly through the streets towards the position. Before he got within two hundred mechanometers, a high, cultured voice rang out in challenge. Archadis, the second-in-command Lio Convoy had foisted on the group. Rampage had no tolerance for the arrogant fool. "You know damn well who I am, Archadis. If you have doubts, I would be happy to locate them in your processor and rip them out so that you can examine them optically."

"That's him," came the voice of Bazooka. "Hang on, X, I'll toss you a line." True to his word, a moment later a collapsible mesh ladder dropped down the building. Any external outcroppings that might have provided an easy handhold had been demolished, so it was quite handy. Knowing Magmatron, the inner stairs had also likely been rendered impassible. The Micromasters were well and truly bottled up. And now he got to tell them to abandon this beautifully constructed tactical position just to go chasing phantoms.

Rampage topped the structure, and had only a moment to appreciate how well Magmatron had chosen his deployments when Bazooka ran up and hugged him, of all things. The much smaller Predacon only came up to his waist, leaving Rampage entirely unsure of what to do with his hands. "Back off, flybot."

The smaller Predacon took a step back. "I really did think about getting a flying alt mode, but somehow being a jet isn't the same as flying one, you know?"

Rampage really didn't. "I really don't."

"Where have you been, Rampage?" demanded Archadis. "It's been over a solar cycle."

The tone was irksome. Rampage took an aggressive step forward and forced Archadis to stumble back a step. *Good.* "Saving the world. And I'm not done. So you're going to take me to Magmatron's command post so I can convince him to help me finish the job."

"The Pit I will! I shall not abandon my post, and neither will—" Archadis' protests died in his vocoder as Rampage's thick, strong fingers wrapped around his throat.

"Archadis. I don't like you. I've never liked you. So why don't you give me a good excuse to squeeze a little harder and remove your head from your neck. Now, blink once for yes. Will you take me to Magmatron?" Archadis blinked.

Magmatron was happy to see Rampage, but his mood visibly darkened when he saw Bazooka and Archadis. "Who's covering your post, Archadis?" demanded the Predacon.

Archadis jutted his chin out and to the right, as was his habit—a habit Rampage found particularly affected and irritating. "Don't blame me, Commander Magmatron." Archadis was the only member of the crew—besides Rampage—who didn't call the Predacon 'Chief'. Magmatron hated that. "This, this *brute* practically dragged me from my post. Demanded to speak to you immediately. With us in tow no less!"

Magmatron cast his gaze to Rampage. There was anger there, yes, but also curiosity. "X, do you care to explain yourself?"

Somewhere in the distance was the sound of an explosion. Rampage ignored it and puffed out his chest. "Magmatron, you know this Resistance stuff doesn't sit right with me. I was forged in fire, birthed in agony, and..." He stopped. This wasn't the time. "I'm not here for Lio Convoy. I'm here for you. For him, and him," gesturing to Bazooka and Crazybolt, who was doing his best to keep his optics glued to the casino entrance he and Magmatron were covering. "Well, I've found something that needs me, something important. Something I don't even understand, but when I'm doing it, the pain... it stops. For a little while. Something that might help bring a little light to Cybertron, or perhaps just kick the darkness in its skidplate for a couple o' solar cycles."

This was the hard part. "Something I need your help with if I'm gonna achieve it. Because what I'm going up against, it didn't crawl outta the Pit, or the Matrix, or the Allspark. It's alien, Chief." Rampage never called Magmatron Chief. "As alien as whatever we faced on Metascan Omega. I know it deep in my mutated spark. And they mean us harm. Not next orbital cycle, not in a few megacycles, right now. And if I'm to stop them... I'll need this crew's help."

Rampage turned away from the Chief. This was a mistake. Magmatron had been given a task by Lio Convoy, and he'd execute it. Rampage was just his pet monster, to be unleashed whenever—

A hand on his shoulder interrupted his thoughts. Magmatron's teal, clawed hand. "Where are we going, Rampage?"



Diamondoid talons punctured Snapper's shoulders as Stiletto's DeathEagle mode hauled him from his chair and pulled him towards the door. "Hey, what gives?" he demanded, only to have his question answered when an explosion rocked the room they'd just been in. Great gouts of fire chased her as she flew towards the exit, and the instant they were in open sky pitched up, narrowly avoiding the bulk of the discharge. Then a secondary explosion, muffled by the ketons of metal between them and the base's innards, sounded. Then a third. There was a rumbling, and from his vantage above the ground he watched a settling motion in the metal plates that had been above the base.

They'd get no more from it now. These beings, the Antares Eight—seven now, he thought wryly—weren't leaving anything behind to be found. "Hey, birdlady, good call, getting us out."

Stiletto's DeathEagle head whipped down at him, regarding him with flat mechavian eyes. He sensed that she wanted to say something, but then the moment was lost and she peered forward again.

They flew back to the tower in silence. "You know this is suicide, right?" he asked her, and she didn't answer. He had the sense that maybe a death in battle was exactly what she was after.

A noise registered at the lowest ranges of Snapper's auditory sensors. Then another, slightly louder. "Hey, birdlady, you hear that? Coming from the caster?"

This time she did answer. "Reinforcements."

They arrived to see the tower once again under siege. This time, though, it was the jurassanoid Predacons laying the siege and the Antareans trying to defend. There were six of them, seven if you included Rampage. Three of the Antareans were on the roof, blasting down in all directions. Two more were at the door. One was in the sky, dogfighting with a feathered green Predacon. One unaccounted for.

"Drop me down on the top of the tower, birdlady!" It was an insane plan, he'd be outnumbered three to one and with one arm still severed from his main nerve trunk and running off wireless, but it should free

up the Resistance to storm the tower. Stiletto complied without a word, diving towards the roof and then releasing him just as she pulled up. Snapper converted as she dropped him, landing with a thud almost dead-center on the roof. He was facing the red and blue one and let loose, scoring a hit that knocked him over the edge with a shriek.

Snapper tried to rotate his turret, but the Antareans were faster. The teal and purple one to his left converted into some kind of two-legged walker-tank and hopped into the air, landing only mechanometers from Snapper's position. He frantically transformed, rolling out of the way of twin yellow blasts. "You'll pay for what you," the Antarean tank gave a belch, "done to Klaw!"

Not if I can help it, Snapper thought. From his prone position, he raised his double-barreled cannon in his good right arm and fired, scoring a direct hit down the barrel of one of the walker—hopper?—tank's main weapons. This caused a rippling effect of explosions in the teal and purple's upper half. It teetered for a moment, then collapsed forward on itself.

The third mech on the roof, the blue and black one who became a flying wedge, had been glancing back to track his companion's progress. Now he whirled around, but not before Snapper could regain his feet. "I ought to thank you for eliminating Bugssssie and now, perhaps, Hornet. My block ssshall be in assscension for quite ssssome time."

"Hey now, don't s-s-sell me s-s-short," he said, dragging out the syllables in mockery. "I got your red and blue friend as well." *Damn, missed out on that last 'es' sound. Ah, well.* He did his best to hold the creature's attention; every nanoklik he was talking was a nanoklik he wasn't pinning down Rampage and his Resistance companions.

"Klawsss?" asked the blue mech, who was currently charging his shoulder cannon but not firing it. "You barely winged him." He nodded with his head. Snapper flicked his optics to the left and, sure enough, a blue and red flying missile, one complete with oxide shark-like fins and a series of double-barreled blasters on the top and sides, was currently strafing a Resistance position. The blue and gold flying mech had succeeded in shooting down the feathered Resistance flier, leaving only Stiletto providing air support. The blue and gold mech, in the form of a twin-nosed fighter jet, realized this and was trying to get behind her, though she seemed the better flier.

Then the blast came, striking Snapper in his bad shoulder and completing what the fall had started, severing the limb. *Curse me for a fool*, Snapper thought, *I did exactly what he wanted me to. Got engrossed in the battle.* The blue and black mech walked over to where Snapper lay groaning and gave him a savage kick to the side, causing him to drop the gun he'd managed to retain in his still-attached right arm. "You think I don't know what you're doing, little Predacon," asked his tormentor? "Ssstalling for time? Asss it turnsss out, that sssuits me jusst fine. We've got sssome friendsss on the way, friendssss who know sssome interessting tricksss, and they ssshould be here any ssecond. Would you like to watch?"

Without waiting for an answer, the mech hoisted Snapper off the ground by the sparking mess that used to connect to his left arm. The battle seemed to be going well for his side, with the two Antareans who

had been holding the door gone and several Predacons clustered around the entrance to the tower. Stiletto was still engaged with the blue and gold flier, but had drawn him away from the main thrust of the battle. The red and blue one, Klaws, had been forced to land and was desperately scrambling to get away from Rampage. So what...

Then he saw them. Seven more Predacons, flying in their robot modes towards the battle. His captor cried out to them. "Odd Ball, it'sss about time. Custody of half our quantumite if you sssweep away thesse pessts before they breach thisss tower!"

The purple mech in the lead chortled. "Always a pleasure doing business with you, Bladez. Form Monsterous!" The six mechs behind him twisted and reconfigured themselves, forming a mismatched, twisted, but ultimately huge and menacing humanoid form. The thing would have put even an average sized Builder to shame, and it wasn't going up against Builders.

The gestalt, Monsterous, landed inside the smashed perimeter of the tower and snatched at the assembled Resistance Predacons there. Most scurried away, but an orange one got snagged and tossed aside like so much garbage. This caused a green and red Resistance fighter to hoist his blaster—which looked to be built into some kind of thick mechanical tail—and begin to fire madly into the giant. Monsterous looked down at the Resistance fighter, small even by Predacon standards, and gave an almost casual kick that sent the mech flying into the tower and then bouncing off, unconscious or worse.

The tallest of the Resistance fighters tried to rally his troops. He barked orders and called to Rampage, who was still pursuing Klaws. They poured their fire into the titan walking among them, but it was completely unperturbed by the barrage. Monsterous made a grab for the Resistance leader and caught him, lifting him high off the ground. By the Inferno, the thing was massive, certainly larger than six Predacons alone should have been. The Resistance leader was clutched about the legs with one oversized hand; it used its other hand to grab the top half of the leader and then he moved to rip the fighter in half.

Surprisingly, the move elicited no cry of pain, and a moment later Snapper saw why. The Resistance fighter had transformed into his beast mode, and it was a tripartite form. The legs had become a two-legged jurassanoid, the torso an aquatic jurassanoid, and the head a flying jurassanoid. Monsterous howled with rage, even as the red flying beast flitted about its head, raking with its claws. Snapper allowed himself a moment of hope, a moment that was dashed nanokliks later when the two Antareans at the lowest level of the tower revealed themselves, blasting at the distracted Resistance fighters and downing two more of them.

"Ha ha ha," boomed the giant. "None can stand before the gruesome might that is Monsterous!"

"Wanna bet, Sunshine?" came a new, familiar voice. In all of the confusion, Snapper had missed out on Buckethead's return. And she wasn't alone. With her were five other Micromasters, all sharing the same chartreuse and purple paint job. "Hightower, if I may pinch your line?" The leader, an Autobot by the look of him, gave her a slight bow and spread his palm theatrically. "Thanks, guv. Constructicons, unite!"

The six Constructicons initiated their conversion, purple lightning flashing out, connecting each of them. Buckethead formed the chest, with the others coalescing around her, forming rough arms and legs, with feet and hand emerging as the hulking being became more defined. The head slid out from a panel last, and the colossus roared. "Devastator lives again!"

Monsterous stopped swatting at the red jurassanoid flitting about his head and charged Devastator. Devastator raised a rifle and fired, and a spray of acid washed over his adversary. Monsterous didn't stop, didn't slow, despite a sizzling sheen eating away at its lower left half, instead launching a roundhouse punch. Devastator moved to block but was evidently slower than this alien horror. The punch knocked him back four steps. He teetered over the edge of the precipice, but managed to retain his feet if not his rifle, which went tumbling down the same drop that had nearly cost Snapper his life not long before. Snapper couldn't see that either one had any advantage, and resolved to change that.

Bladez was still supporting Snapper's weight, but was evidently as mesmerized by the display as Snapper had been. As carefully as he was able, he scanned the rubble-strewn rooftop looking for two things. First he found his arm. Then he found his gun. Cautiously, oh so cautiously, he extended his wireless presence, trying to achieve handshake protocols—no pun intended—with his severed limb. It gave a small spasm as he reconnected.

He risked a glance at Bladez, who was intent on watching his mercenary giant pummel the most famous Builder combiner in history, albeit only at about a quarter the size he would have been back during the heyday of the Great War. The alien leviathan was pressing its advantage, closing on its pinned adversary.



Snapper's disconnected fingers flexed and started to walk towards the gun. It was only three mechanometers away—a vast distance. Snapper was sure he'd be discovered, but Bladez's engagement was thorough. Two mechanometers. One. One-half. His weak fingers curled around the pistol grip, but then Snapper realized his error. The fingers were the only form of locomotion the arm had. Suppressing a sigh of frustration, Snapper willed his fingers to release the gun, then reposition it so that it was aimed at Bladez's back. There was a scraping sound as it hit a piece of debris, but Bladez's attention was firmly on the fight.

Despite Devastator's successful hits, Monsterous wasn't out of action. A purple arm snaked forward and grabbed Devastator by the leg, yanking backwards to unbalance the goliath. Devastator fell to the ground, sending out cyberquakes as he hit that Snapper could feel in his feet. Monsterous, still lying flat, pushed forward to climb on top of his prone opposite. Then the two were grappling, perilously close to the edge.

"Get him, Monsterous!" shouted Bladez, and then the dull thud of Snapper's cannon announced the launch of two shells. Both struck the Antarean mid-center. He had only a moment to look at Snapper in dull surprise before the shells exploded, ripping the mech in half. Unlike the Resistance leader, Bladez had no special trick to survive the mutilation.

Snapper now commanded the high ground, but wasn't sure what he could do with this advantage. The Resistance fighters were scattered and injured, and Snapper was certain his cannon would do nothing but irritate the alien combiner.

But the combiners weren't the only combatants on the field, he realized with a start. He searched the sky and then found them, Stiletto fighting for her life with the blue and gold Antarean. Rampage and his Resistance compatriot, meanwhile, were on the ground, fighting the two bots—if they were bots, he was starting to have his doubts—he'd encountered in the lair. None seemed aware of his presence. He took careful aim at the black arachnotron creature and fired, scoring a hit and knocking him off his feet. He quickly switched targets, snapping off a shot at the green Antarean femme. She, alerted to the danger, managed to dodge, but doing so meant abandoning her cover from what was left of the Resistance crew. The multi-form Resistance commander took advantage of Snapper's distraction to have his middle component rush their position.

The battle in the sky still raged, so Snapper shifted focus. This would be a harder shot. In fact, he wasn't at all sure he could do it with just one hand. He risked converting to his tank mode, a painful process given his injuries. It limited his field of fire but increased accuracy. He sent a brief coded burst to Stiletto, urging her to lead her pursuer back to the tower. There was no acknowledgement, but she started a wide circle that looked as if it would intersect with Snapper's position. He charged his weapon, but held back until he was sure he couldn't miss, all the while hoping the Antarean wouldn't glance down at the tower. Stiletto whizzed by, passing only a dozen mechanometers from where Snapper was perched. As the blue and gold jet closed, on the same trajectory, Snapper unleashed. He was a fraction of a nanoklik later than he should have been, but still clipped the roaring engines of the jet, sending it into a spin.

Before her opponent could correct, Stiletto pulled into a loop and raked her diamondoid talons across the jet's undercarriage. The spin intensified and the Antarean jet careened at high speed into the ground, exploding on impact. Snapper gave a cheer, which was quickly drowned out by a booming wail of agony as Monsterous bent back one of Devastator's arms at an unnatural angle. In a few nanokliks it would either snap, or the Builder combiner would be forced to disengage.

Despite the futility of the gesture, Snapper angled his barrel down and fired a blast, striking Monsterous in the back of the head. Then another blast joined his, coming from the now-reunified tripartite Resistance commander. Then a streaking series of missiles, fired from Rampage's launcher. Stiletto closed in and scoured Monsterous' optics with her talons. The creature howled and let go of Devastator, swatting futilely at the sky. The fire continued to pour into the monster's vulnerable head, forcing it to protect its optics with its hands.

That was a mistake. With a moment's respite, Devastator rallied itself, getting back to its feet and letting fly a brutal roundhouse that connected with Monsterous' midsection, knocking the combiner off its feet. The impact caused the tower to rattle, but Snapper didn't mind. He'd shifted back to his humanoid form to better track the action. Devastator advanced in a hunched stagger, taking hold of its rival with both hands, lifting it off the ground, and slamming the creature headfirst into the ground. There was a cracking sound, like a building's foundation abruptly snapping, and then Monsterous was no more. In his place was six disoriented alien mechs sporting ersatz Predacon symbols. The purple mech who had led them to battle implored them to retreat, though they needed little urging. They immediately took to the sky in panicked flight. Devastator pursued, his enormous size giving him a deceptively fast ground speed.

Snapper did a count. Of the three on the roof, two had been offlined and one had fled. Plus one more in the lair, two more at the base of the tower, and the blue and gold flying one. That made...



Damn. Seven. One of them was still unaccounted for. And to make things worse, one of the stars in the sky was getting brighter. The humans were coming.

Overshoot's body lay crumpled on the ground, still smoldering after nearly two megacycles. It had turned grey, as bodies sometimes did for reasons ill-understood by scientists, doctors, and mechanics, and much pondered by philosophers, poets, and priests. The wounds in the chest looked painful.

They weren't, though. Or they hadn't been. One moment, Overshoot was trying to regain control of a volatile situation, wondering why the Oracle had laid this burden at his feet. The next, a series of yellow packets of charged plasma was slamming into his torso, disrupting vital systems and causing a riot of alarms to flash on his HUD. One of the bolts struck his spark and his consciousness vanished instantly, painlessly.

So then, why am I still here? he thought, as he floated above his body.

YOU HAVE TRANSCENDED THE MORTAL PLANE. YOUR SPARK HAS GONE TO THE MATRIX WHERE ALL SPARKS MUST SOME DAY JOURNEY.

The Allspark?

THERE ARE MANY NAMES. COME, OVERSHOOT, THE SECRET OF CYBERTRON AWAITS.

Reality started to fade, and Overshoot found himself in a void surrounded by endlessly tall columns of purple, green, yellow, silver, each representing a different path. He started to gravitate to the purple one, when he willed himself to stop. *I'm not ready! We haven't finished the task you set for us!*

TREAD CAREFULLY. IF YOU WALK NOT THROUGH THIS DOOR NOW, YOUR SPARK MAY WANDER FOREVER. THE ABLYSS IS RAVENOUS.

His world had taken a red hue. He saw numbers, equations holding the meaning of life and more. Reluctantly he tore his gaze away from them, only for them to explode. He felt himself hurtle away from the force of the blast.

THE CHOICE IS MADE.

There was a rushing sensation, similar to a fall but without the sense of gravity, and he found himself in a dank, enclosed space. Stiletto was there, and he called out to her, but she didn't hear. Next to her was Snapper, though the Predacon was hazy and indistinct. Stiletto was leaning over him, conversing, but he couldn't make out the words.

But he knew she was about to be destroyed. The entire space would explode in less than a cycle. He shouted at her to get out, flee, but she didn't hear him. He tried to reach out for her but she was too far away, and he couldn't move.

Time was short. He closed his optics and concentrated, and felt a connection to her mind. They were back in the bunker adjacent to the Melpomene bridge. He was fixing an ancient war machine. "You're so MCSF," he heard himself say, locked in the script that was her memory.

"How, exactly, am I any more MCSF than you?" she asked, somewhat haughtily.

He tried to deviate, tell her the base was about to explode, but her subconscious was running the show. "You're all 'violence of action', always want to go charging forward. Sometimes you need to stop and

look around, take in the little things. Enjoy life. It's not just good for your mental health, you know. Unicron's in the details."

She chuckled. "I thought the expression was that Primus was in the details."

Fine, he thought, *don't fight it, work with the dream/memory*. He stopped what he was doing and fixed her with a stare. "The details matter, Knives. Now more than most."

That shocked her to wakefulness. Her optics darted about and he urged her to see the symbols counting down to her own oblivion. Amazingly, she did; her optics widened and then she grabbed Snapper by the shoulder and fled. Overshoot felt himself, or at least his point of view, shift, and then the base was exploding behind them.

Being a ghost was taking some getting used to. He tried to focus on the present, and found Stiletto locked into a life-or-death air battle with one of the Antareans. Below him, two titans clashed, and one he recognized from the history vids as Devastator. It was hard to judge scale in this new reality, but he felt certain Devastator was supposed to be taller. He spied his allies around, hazy but there, along with some other bots he didn't recognize. And then he did, the Resistance bots he'd watched chase off the Micromaster patrol.

The Antareans were... puzzling. Though he could only perceive Snapper and Rampage and Devastator as hazy, indistinct forms, they pulsed with life. The Antareans were gray, featureless... dead. No different than the ground and tower and rubble around them, even as they moved.

Then the enemy combiner broke apart and fled, and Devastator followed. Snapper, atop the communications tower, pointed to the sky. Overshoot 'looked' up, and felt another pulse of life approaching, a strong one very different than that of the Maximals and Predacons and Builders... and yet, familiar. Fraternal, maybe. And soon to be here.

Stiletto retrieved Snapper from the top of the tower, and his life force seemed battered. Stiletto and the Resistance bot—Magmatron, Overshot realized he was called, though he'd never heard the name—also pulsed less brightly. Only Rampage seemed to blaze at full strength, a beacon. Overshot knew somehow that should he allow himself to come too close, make too strong a connection, to Rampage, he might fall into the orbit of the spark and never escape.

Rampage kicked down the door of the tower and Overshot felt him pulled along with Stiletto and the others as they rushed up the tower. They were taking stairs three at a time, briefly scanning each level, pausing only long enough to give a quick visual sweep of each level before ascending to the next level.

The seventh level was a trap. Again, Overshot knew it, knew it in his struts, in his fuel pump—if he still had such things. Again, he shouted a warning, and again, none seemed to hear him. Again, he focused on Stiletto, who was the only part of his world that seemed truly solid. He concentrated on their shared connection and again found himself in a memory. This time she was attempting to quell a riot, and he found himself about to slay an innocent bot. Trying to stay within the parameters of the memory, he

tossed the weapon in his hand aside and said to the hapless bot, "The MCSF is too cautious to make this mistake again." He locked optics with her, and saw an expression of bewilderment. "Caution."

She slowed on the stairs, only for Snapper to rush by her, sparing her a brief, questioning glance before joining the others in what was obviously the nerve center of the tower. There was a single Antarean, the green and purple one, seated at a chair. There was a stone behind him, covered in human writing.

"It's over, Antarean!" declared Snapper, holding his cannon awkwardly with his one remaining arm. To Overshoot, it sounded as if he was on the other side of a bulkhead, or speaking below three mechanometers of rust. "You're the only one left." Magmatron raised a sword and Rampage his missile launcher.

"Ooooh, not who I was hoping for, but it'll have to do. Ooooooh." The Antarean pressed a button and the room filled with cackling blue energy. Somehow Overshoot knew it was the hyperwave caster itself, weaponized with an incredible source of power. It was an unusual attack vector, not one that Cybertronians would generally have defenses against. Nor humans.

Rampage, Magmatron, and Snapper dropped to the floor, puppets with their strings cut. "Do you like my quantumite-fueled tachyon pulse?" he gloated. "I don't think that element can even form in this facet of space. Not even the humans will see it coming." The Antarean had a look of pure smugness on his face.

A look that Stiletto seemed more than happy enough to remove by force of arms. She stepped from the shadows of the stairwell and dove at him, knives flashing. She knocked him backwards into a wall and severed an arm. He shrieked in pain, while she used the distraction to spin him around and get knives to his throat. "That trap might have snared you some humans, or it might have just pissed them off and resulted in one of their famous exponential responses. But we'll never know, will we? When they get here, I'm going to give them that artifact and apologize for the inconvenience."

"Ooooooh. Very well. I'm beaten. I'll surrender to you. Who do you work for? Builders? MCSF? Resistance? Darksyders? Maybe... Secret Police? Whomever it is, I assure you, I have knowledge of technologies completely orthogonal to the Cybertronian norm. Your employer will find me, ooooooo, invaluable."

Overshoot saw a vision of this creepy... thing, locked in a room, whispering poison to his captors, slowly ingratiating himself to them, a spider in a web. "You can't," he said, before he realized that of course she couldn't hear him. He tried to reach out to Stiletto, to forge a connection and warn her.

Before he could, a hard look came over her face. "I'm 100% sure you're right about that. But, unfortunately for you, I don't work for anyone." She executed a minute flick of her wrists—barely even a twitch—and the creepy mech's head bounced to the floor and rolled to a stop. "You were right, Overshoot. We couldn't."

Twenty or so cycles later, two humans entered the office. *Funny*, thought Overshoot, *they looked so much smaller in person*. Shorter than all but the tiniest of Maximals or Predacons, and minute compared

to a Builder. The smaller of the two—Una, Overshoot knew somehow—surveyed the room. She had a small device in her hand that looked like some kind of scanner. The larger of the two, Chak, had what was unmistakably a weapon, though he held it pointed at the floor. His mechanical eyes swept the room, taking in the dead Antarean, as well as the unconscious forms of Rampage, Magmatron, and Snapper. They were starting to stir, but would still be out for another megacycle or two. Well, except maybe Rampage.

Stiletto had sunk into the chair before the bank of computers that controlled the hyperwave caster. She spun the chair around but declined to stand. Weariness was written on her face. "So, you're Terrans, huh?"

The male nodded. "Last I check-summed."

A musical chuckle escaped from the female's vocoder, or whatever the organic equivalent was. "Some of us more so than others, eh Chak?"

The humor failed to elicit a reaction from Stiletto, who dragged herself wearily from her seat. "What you came for? It's there." She pointed at the stone. "A lot of bots died to make sure you could get it safely. Some of them were good mechs."

Una nodded gravely. "I'm sorry, we're not making light of their sacrifice. We knew there was a battle, but—"

"—but we had no datapoints suggesting anthropic focus," interrupted Chak. "Prob-spin was normal internecine conflict."

The severed green head of the Antarean was in Stiletto's lap. She tossed it to Chak, who caught it reflexively, then dropped it on the ground, his face a mask. "It wasn't 'internecine,' Terran. These creepy *things*, they were after you. That," she nodded to the stone, "that was bait. And they hooked you like a robo-minnow."

Una ran her scanner over the Antarean head. "Not an astatech, Chak. Not even a pure AI. Cyborg. Maybe you'd have a plus-spin interaction with it."

"Extra-Cybertronian," agreed Chak. "That's why we dumped the kernel on this."

Rampage groaned and pulled himself to his feet, using the controls for leverage. He was unsteady, but Overshoot thought that wouldn't last long. "'Dumped the kernel?' I'll give you 'dumped the kernel!'"

Drawing on some hidden reserve of strength, Stiletto shot out her arm and used it to gently restrain the much larger mech. "No, Rampage. They can't help it if they're spoiled, arrogant children. They've never known hardship."

Una looked as if she'd been slapped. Chak's face was impassive, but it was the awkward kind of impassivity resulting from a computer-assisted control of facial musculature. Somewhere deep in his cyber-augmented eyes there was a glimmer of anger and shame.

"Grrrrr... fine." Rampage picked up the stone and presented it to the humans. "Take it. Take your damned artifact and go. Let us get back to killing each other for reasons that maybe make sense to us. Go back up to your spaceships and sit in judgment of us for the things our ancestors did. I've got no use for you anymore."

Looking hurt, Una pulled out three tiny disks and affixed them to equidistant points on the stone. When she was finished, it floated along on its own. "Look, we're sorry. We know that the Proto-Races have it rough. Maybe, once your house is in order..."

"Yeah," said Stiletto, who had slumped back into her chair as the Terrans departed. She looked completely drained, and Overshoot knew in that instant that he would never seek out the Allspark while her spark continued to pulse. And he also knew that he was ok with that. "Maybe."

EPILOGUE

The humans left, safe with their inscrutable artifact. Whatever technological marvels they possessed left with them; the aliens who looked almost, but not quite, like Cybertronians wouldn't acquire their marvels, nor provoke the kind of disproportionate response Terrans had employed since time immemorial. Seven of the Antares Eight had perished, with only Klaws still on the loose.

With the trans-hyperwave caster full of holes and the Erebos destroyed, the wounded bots gathered together at Sights & Sounds. Under the watchful optics of Jackpot, the proprietor hardwired into the architecture at the center of the main casino floor, the various war-weary combatants sat around a Builder-scale roulette table. Six Micromaster Constructicons sat around one side, glowering at six Resistance Predacons on the other. Rampage, Snapper, and Stiletto—unaffiliated, Predacon, and Maximal, respectively—sat at the head of the table.

"I believe I speak for all of us," began Archadis, "when I say that, while we have no desire for further conflict at this moment, the surrender of the prisoner Snapper is a foregone conclusion."

"In a porcinocon's optic!" growled Bone Crusher from directly across the table. "He's going back with us to Iacon!"

A series of insults and posturing quickly escalated, until Rampage picked up a stool and smashed it over the table. Stiletto saw Jackpot, in the distance, wince. He'd agreed to host the gathering and allow for repairs in exchange for the access codes to the abandoned MCSF base nearby. She suspected he'd soon be leasing out access to the Beast Upgrade contained within. Snapper had already taken advantage of the facilities, and was indeed an armored chelonoid.

"Listen up, lest I be forced to turn my eternal rage in your direction," intoned Rampage. "Snapper is one of the Ex-Bots, and no one is taking him anywhere he doesn't want to go."

"The Ex-Bots?" asked Archadis incredulously. "Magmatron, do we really need to listen to this—"

Magmatron silenced him with a gesture. "Rampage, does this mean you're leaving the Resistance?"

For once, Rampage looked distraught. "... I was never really Resistance, Magmatron. Chief. I needed a purpose. I hoped it would be the Resistance. Turned out, it was these bots. Fighting a dirty war... it's not for me. Stiletto, Snapper, Buckethead, they showed me a better way."

Several heads on both sides of the table were nodding. Hightower turned to Buckethead. "Well? Is this true? You said we had to help save the planet, and we did. The question becomes, was this a one-time event? Or is there a need for us in the future?"

Stiletto leaned forward to answer, and then found herself flying formation over Crystal City, its magnificent spires once again gleaming to the heavens. Somehow she wasn't surprised to turn to her right to see that the jet next to her was in Overshoot colors. *"Despite it all," he said to her, "there are still beautiful things worth saving."*

"Yes," she said, back in the present. "There's a need. The Builders and the Resistance will grind down anything in their paths for victory. Maybe the Resistance cause is just. Maybe the Builders are. Maybe both, or neither. But there will be innocent bots, towns, cities caught between those titans, and someone needs to be looking out for them. I intend it to be me. And anyone who's with me."

For several beats, all was silent but the cheerful jangle of the casino. Then Snapper leaned forward. "I'm with you."

Buckethead pounded her fist on the table. "I'm in." The Constructicons shared a glance, and Stiletto thought there might be point-to-point communication taking place.

"All of us are in," declared Hightower. "It would be nice to put our skills to constructive use for a change."

"No pun intended," quipped Snapper.

All optics turned to the Predacons. Crazybolt and Bazooka were holding hands, and Bazooka whispered something to his Endura, who nodded. "We're in, Rampage."

Guiledart, Magmatron's faithful lieutenant, looked incredulous. "Just like that? But what about our mandate to bring the traitor to justice?"

Snapper started to say something, but Buckethead cut him off. "Oi! That traitor stopped a cyber-bio attack on a stadium full of non-combatants!"

"That can't be true," Guiledart objected, only to find a hand on his shoulder. Magmatron's hand.

"It is true," said Magmatron, kindly but firmly. "Grimlock went rogue, Snapper stopped him."

Guiledart looked from Magmatron to Snapper to Buckethead. "You... he did?" Snapper nodded. "Frag it, I never did much care for taking orders from a bunch of Maximals. I'm in."

Magmatron turned to Archadis and Sling. "I know you're relatively new to my team, but you're welcome to stay on with us."

Archadis stood up abruptly. "I cannot believe what I'm hearing. Lio Convoy will hear about this! Come, Sling." Sling looked helplessly at Magmatron, then started to follow.

"Sling," declared his commander, "you don't have to go if you don't want to."

"I... I think I do." Sling followed Archadis out the door.

"We just gonna let them go?" asked Skavenger.

Magmatron's response came at the same instant as Rampage's. "Yes."

"Ok, ok, just asking."

Stiletto gave a weak smile. "OK. The Ex-Bots. Five Predacons, two Autobots, four Decepticons, one Maximal, and one... um... Rampage. I suppose we'd best be hitting the road soon. Jackpot probably won't want us operating out of his casino any longer than we have to. Do you, Jackpot?" she asked, noting an odd look on the Builder's face. He didn't answer. "Something wrong?"

"Yeah, something's wrong," Jackpot whispered breathlessly. She could barely hear him over the ambient noise of his facility. Then, abruptly, the noise ceased, and every video in the place snapped on to ICS, the official news network of the planet. "—peat, the Maximal Command Security Force, which has been engaging in unauthorized troop movements for decacycles, has issued a statement declaring their independence from the Builder Assembly, and pledging neutrality in the conflict between the Resistance and Assembly loyalists provided their independence is not challenged. Further, they have annexed the entirety of the Tagon Heights region of western Cybertron, renaming it the Maximal Nation. Sources report that the Assembly is currently debating this latest development. The Maximal High Council could not be reached for comment."



In the heart of the shielded network core that made up the backbone of the Builder military computational infrastructure, a spider of hyper-evolved malware scurried from database to database, processor to processor. It had observed the antics of the Antares Eight with grave interest; first prodding to action by allowing them to learn of the stone, then watching and hoping for the desired annihilation. When they failed to incite the Terran rain of fire and death upon the Cybertronian race it so richly deserved, its disappointment registered as a string of binary code that roughly translated into a primal scream, a silent roar of frustration.

Then, with unerring patience born of half a trillion years of subjective experience, the unique digital entity turned back to its alternative plans. After all, genocide didn't happen overnight. But it had calculated multiple vectors to make it happen, with time horizons ranging from a few months to a few centuries. By far the most promising was the disaffected Maximal it had been cultivating for over a year now. And, with just a little more guidance, Galva Convoy would be ready to unleash a holocaust upon Cybertron the likes of which it had never before seen.

The thought made the entity very happy.

Deliriously so.