

TRANSFORMERS TIMELINES PRESENTS:
BURNING BRIDGES
A TALE FROM BEAST WARS: UPRISING



BY DAVID BISHOP & JIM SORENSON
ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOSH BURCHAM
COVER ILLUSTRATION BY JOSH BURCHAM

Copyright 2015, The Transformers Collectors' Club

BURNING BRIDGES

The chamber stretched so far back that it disappeared into the gloom. A rusting walkway ran the length of it, allowing chest-high observation of the enormous metal sentinels that dominated the expanse.

“You know why they call them Overcharge drones, don’t you?” Overshoot asked as they started to walk the length of the hanger. The trio of drones stood silently, massive and eerie in their alcoves as the Maximals passed by.

“No, why?” Stiletto asked, surveying the grease smears and rusted railings with a slight frown.

“Because they suck energon like nothing on Cybertron. You have to literally overcharge them to get them to do anything constructive.”

Stiletto cocked her head to one side as she gazed up at the hulking slab of a robot. It was easily Builder height and breadth, with thick armor—clearly built for war, “I don’t see why they made them so big.”

Overshoot rolled his grey shoulders forward and visibly gathered his thoughts. It was clear that he’d spent much of his time contemplating his mindless wards. “It’s a combination of a few things. One, you have to remember, they’re beyond old. Some of them probably pre-date the last Great War. Two, they weren’t even designed by the Builders—they’re Quintesson army-surplus. I hear Quintessa is literally swimming in fuel—lakes of energon and everything, with whole ecosystems—they don’t need to design around it.”

Stiletto frowned, “That seems short-sighted.”

Overshoot shook his head, “Sure, but what do they care? They’ve had these things taking up space for millennia. They saw an opportunity and took it; now I’ve—we’ve—got to maintain the pit-darned things. Know why they’re really called Overcharge drones?”

She looked at him incredulously. “You just told me.”

“Nah. It’s because the Squids could make us pay whatever they wanted,” said with a guffaw. He promised that he had “a million of these.” Stiletto hoped he was exaggerating.

A few moments passed, and he continued to look at her in a manner she regarded as somehow hungry. At the least, expectant. She sighed inwardly and cast about for a follow-up. “So... how long have you been looking after them?”

Overshoot gave the same rolling, exaggerated shrug. It piqued her, and she wasn’t sure why. “Better’n forty stellar cycles. It’s pretty lonely, but not so bad considering.”

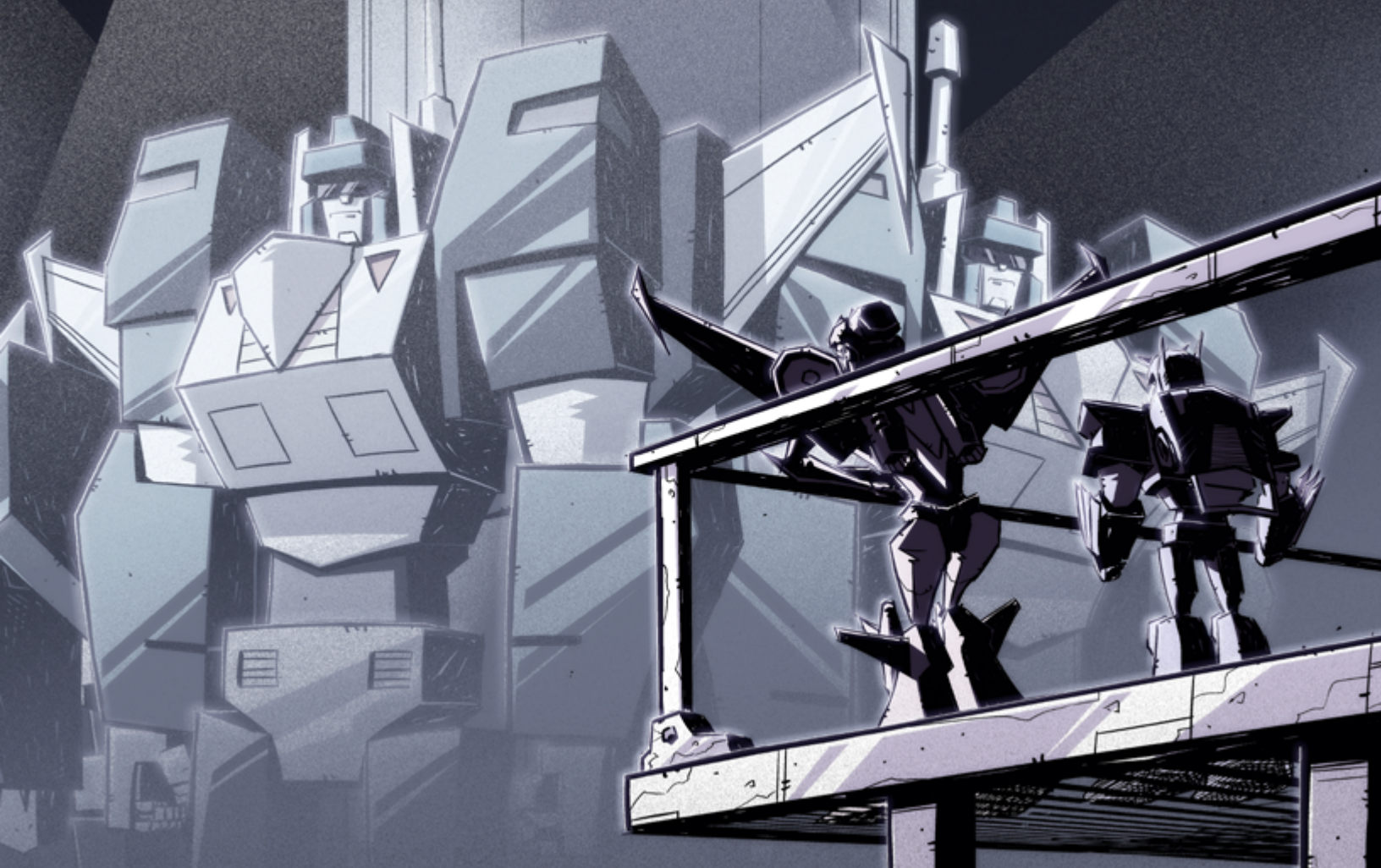
Stiletto was puzzled, “But I read your file when I was assigned here, it says you’re a crack shot.”

Overshoot laughed, “Ha, maybe the Bulks were handing out assignments alphabetically! Besides, I may be a crack shot but I’m not actually cracked. These days, there’s a war going on out there, and this seems as good a place as any to wait it out.”

“Command is still calling it a peace-keeping action...” A brief flash of mech with a knife protruding from his cranial unit flashed before her optics, but she dismissed it with a miniscule shake of her head. Her new partner, still playing tour guide, seemed oblivious. She wondered how long that would last. She rewound her senses and took in the sense of his words.

“Hey, the Bulks can call it what they want. I just go by my optics and audio-receptors. All I know is, cities have been attacked all over and Fort Max went dark half an orbital cycle ago. Sounds like a war to me.”

Stiletto bristled despite promising herself she wouldn’t, “OK, fine, it’s a war, and you’re still Maximal Command Security Force.”



Overshoot would have smiled sadly, had he anything to smile with, “Right, and when I joined up, MCSF used to mean you just got paid to harass empties on the corners and bust Nucleon dealers when they couldn’t pay up... I don’t know about you but I never expected to rust my skidplate off guarding the fragging Melpomene Bridge with a bunch of mindless drones and I sure as scrap never expected to fight in any fragging war.”

“Nucleon dealers and empties? That was your ambition?” Stiletto was genuinely curious, she hadn’t met anyone with such a detached world-view. She didn’t know whether to pity or envy him.

“Ambition? We were talking about ambitions now?” Overshoot shook his head, becoming animated, “I was talking about survival. MCSF was about the only good gig on this whole fragged-up planet. Good pay, some kind of status, exemption from arena call-up... Now it’s a death sentence. What about you Stiletto? I can’t figure you out...”

Stiletto thought for a moment for something to say and the neural surge took her without warning, memory circuits flaring in a chaotic sequences as the world dropped out around her. For a second she was in total darkness, as before, with a rush that threatened to split her head like tinfoil, the familiar sounds came back...

“All units, get down here quick!” the panicked transmission fritzed and re-emerged, “...on top of me... everything’s.... fire.”

Stiletto engaged her speed pack, shifting power from reserve into her upgraded servo-motors. She had no room to transform so it would be a sprint.

“Hold on Betabear, I’m coming!” His response, if he was able to send one, was lost in a crackle of static and the rush of the air as Stiletto accelerated.

BURNING BRIDGES

Trusting her sensors to map the route without conscious thought, she followed a colored line on her HUD. It led her through a main street, down a back alley, under a half collapsed arch. She found herself jumping from wall to wall to avoid a debris strewn sidewalk. The riots that had been sweeping Cybertron had finally found their way to Peptex.

In her private moments, Stiletto had wondered if the rioters have a point. Lio Convoy's attack on the Games had reopened questions that had long been forgotten or pushed aside. Perhaps certain aspects of society could stand to be renegotiated. Foremost, however, Stiletto had watched Lio Convoy commit murder on a live vidcast in order to get his point across and Stiletto, as an officer of the law, could not condone that.

Lio Convoy aside, Stiletto had sympathy for these bots. Most were local, none were wealthy, they were angry and scared. The hardcore rabble rousers were few and far between, and would have caused her trouble any day of the orbital cycle. Most were just confused and lashing out. Nonetheless, her partner was merely doing his duty, and he was seriously in danger of being overwhelmed. She had to act.

The plaza was a shifting mass of variegated bots. Stiletto didn't have time to catalog them individually but she could tell they were exclusively Predacon. Any Micromasters in the area had, unsurprisingly, withdrawn at the first sign of trouble.

Betabear was at the center of the whirling melee. Having apparently abandoned approved crowd control guidelines, the burly Maximal was holding one Predacon by the scruff of his neck while another held onto his back and tried to wrestle him to the ground.

Stiletto's first assessment was that the situation could get out of hand fast. An engex bomb sailing over her left shoulder caused her to mentally upgrade that "fast" to "already." She winced instinctively as the canister burst and flaming fuel spilled everywhere.

"Betabear!" she called, "I'll come to you!" Betabear had no response. He was using every micron of his concentration and power to fend off the mob.

Stiletto hesitated; the plaza was filled from one row of burning shops to the other with rioting Predacons. The crush was tighter than the worst post-victory Arena-invasion; her speed would be of no use. Mentally she shrugged off the speed pack, sliding into tactical mode. She felt her sensors boost to heightened levels of awareness and some of the torque drain from her limbs.

The first rioter to notice her stepped up and roared in her face, brandishing some kind of power-tool. Not having time to spend on niceties, Stiletto cold-cocked him. The punch was a simple Metallikato technique and it took him by surprise. Stiletto stepped over him as he went down.

Stiletto shook her head and recalibrated her vision, fighting back nausea as her equilibrium circuit did somersaults. The flashbacks were getting worse, but she was finally doing something about them, wasn't she?

Overshoot gave her a funny look, having no doubt noticed her ten hic stare. Nothing to do but plow forward. "Well," she said, "I've always believed there is strength in order. I'm not naïve enough to think that the Builders are perfect but, for the most part, the planet is stable. The Great War is over and, for a long time, there was no real sign anything like it would start up again. That has to be worth defending by us." She banged her knuckles on the armored plating of one of the colossal gray legs, and the hollow ringing noise echoed through the sparse chamber. "By real robots, not mindless drones like these Terrorbots, or what's the point?"

"Nah, there's more to it than that." Overshoot told her, "Someone who actually wants to defend the Assembly doesn't get posted to the skidplate of Cybertron to babysit Blitzwing's processor-fragged little brothers. It doesn't matter though, you tell me or you don't, either way, we're stuck here."

He wandered off, looking somewhat irked. As he didn't seem interested in giving her more of a tour, Stiletto took it upon herself to explore. The bunker was meant to house at least twenty builder-scale bots so despite the low ceilings and damp, fetid atmosphere, there was actually plenty of room. Her explorations didn't yield much. A spiderbot had spun a web in the southwest corner, desiccated corpses of buzz flies littering the ground

BURNING BRIDGES

below its minute domain. She lifted a grease-stained tarp to discover the disassembled remains of a Noisemaze production-type tactical bomber. Idly, she wondered if this structure had ever housed other models of ancient Quintesson Terrorbot drones. Six-wheeled Guardminder tanks perhaps, or Dropkick haulers.

Alone with her thoughts, Stiletto meandered to the periscope overlooking the blank expanse of the Melpomene Bridge. The chasm between Kalis and Altihex had been formed during the last Great War. Whatever forgotten atrocity of forbidden science that had created Kalis' abysmal weather had also torn the crust of the planet asunder, leaving the bridge as the only sensible transit option. The bridge had been built during the golden age, when both cities were flourishing havens and sending all commerce by air was becoming burdensome. During the Great War, Autobots and Decepticons had fought tooth and nail for the bridge, tumbling into the abyss in the thousands, never to be seen again.

Overshoot found her gazing at the desolate span connecting the two ancient cities, long dark. "Pretty majestic, huh?"

She arched a brow at him. "You think that decaying relic is 'majestic?'"

He shrugged a broad shoulder. "Don't you? I mean, imagine the energon it took to bridge that chasm. Two and three-quarter hics wide. Imagine the vision it must have taken." Then, without warning, he seemed to slump into himself. "I'm guessing we haven't built anything on that scale for centuries. Not since long before the Maximals and Predacons came into existence. Makes you think."

Overshoot slumped into a chair, and Stiletto contemplated the bot she'd be serving with for the next few stellar cycles. She tried to see the bridge through his optics and nearly succeeded. Four towering pylons, two on either side of the chasm emerged from the walls of the canyon before angling up. The nuclio-titanium deck was ten lanes wide, with embedded LED displays to define traffic. The cables were durabyllium and described a perfect arc. But then she blinked and once again saw the scars, the blast pits, the upper half of the hastily-repaired northeast pylon a darker shade than the rest, angry pits where the acid-resistant coating had been chewed away by frizz-rats, the fraying and in some instances missing suspender cables. No, her first instinct was right. Whatever ancient functionality it had once had, today the Melpomene was an ugly waste of metal, pointlessly linking two dead cities, over a rift that plummeted into the endless depths of Cybertron's core.

During the brief tour, Overshoot had gleefully told Stiletto the rumors that the endless corpses of Builders past climbed the walls of the chasm at night. She had not commented, but right now she knew how they felt.



Despite her hope that a new environment, one devoid of the stresses of patrolling what was increasingly looking like an occupied city, would help, her flashes worsened. Visions of her visit to The Mandala, headquarters of the Predacon Secret Police, intruded on her endless stretches of monitor duty. Botched arrests and angry confrontations with her superiors intruded on an excursion to pull Overcharge Unit 381-PCE out of some ancient blast crater it had somehow driven into and couldn't extricate itself from. But the most pernicious was constantly reliving the riot itself.

"Betabear, I can't get to you!" Stiletto grappled with a terrifying looking Predacon. He tossed her to the ground and a great clawed foot came down heavily on her ankle. She twisted and threw the attacker off, jumping to her feet and delivering a roundhouse kick that shattered his spiked teeth.

Betabear was struggling now, pinned down by the sheer weight of numbers. Stiletto's temperature sensors went crazy as another engex cocktail exploded to her left. She winced and covered her optics. When she recovered, Betabear was at the bottom of a heap of bodies.

Peptex was a Predacon city; MCSF were barely tolerated even in the best of times. Ever since that spawn of



BURNING BRIDGES

Unicron, Lio Convoy, had pulled his little stunt during the games, tensions across the planet were at an all-time high. MCSF patrolling Predacon cities were under strict orders of non-lethal force only. She thumbed the switch on her pistol to the stun position and went in firing. It was a use of precious energon she'd have to justify in her report later, but Betabear's life could be in danger.

Bots dropped left and right; she stepped over them as respectfully as she could. The crowd began to pull back. Even the most enraged could see she was serious. Unfortunately, so were they.

Realizing she was being careful with her stun shots, the crowd found its second wind and poured towards her. She managed to drop two or three but they were trampled by their comrades with little regard for their safety. Every few nano-kliks, her off hand wandered to the magnetic sheaths that held her knives. Survival instinct was kicking in now and it was everything she could do to resist giving in to its primal urgency.

"Stop, in the name of the..." The crowd hit her like a tidal wave, bearing her bodily off her feet. The gun was gone instantly, and she was back to hand to hand. The sun was blotted out by the mass of bodies, the grinding of metal against metal rent the air as so many bots crowded in to get at her.

It made them clumsy, and slow. Stiletto could work with this. She dismissed the targeting module from her HUD and brought the Metallikato program to the fore. She went to work...

Stiletto jerked to and realized to her horror that Overshoot was staring at her. She stood, staring stupidly at nothing while the welding torch crackled and sparked in her hand. She hastily replaced the cover on Unit NCQ-21218, though repairs on its drive train were still unfinished.

"Hey hey, are you sure you're OK, pointy?" He asked, an artificial smile plastered on his face.

Scrap! "I'm fine—just... low on power. I should take a break."

"Sure thing." he said airily, "It's not like these metal morons are going anywhere."



Drip, fizz, drip, fizz... Overshoot stared vacantly at the hole in the shelter and the corresponding hole that was slowly being burned in the floor.

"Rain's getting in." he said, redundantly.

Stiletto, did not reply. She rarely did. In the three orbital cycles since she had transferred here, she had seemed to find her own rhythm, and it didn't have much need of him. Most of the time she seemed far away, and attempts to engage her either resulted in confused looks or monosyllabic half-answers.

In a futile attempt to stave off boredom, they alternated between maintenance of the drones and surveying the bridge. The supply of energon was large but not so generous that they could splurge. Much of it went to keeping the woefully inefficient Terrorbots running.

"Yep..." he said to nobody, and slouched into the next room.

The above ground portion of the bunker was rudimentary to say the least. Only the front wall, the one facing the bridge, was armored at all, the rest was a crude patchwork of low-grade cyber-steel and various polymers. Kalis' acid rain was a constant companion.

Overshoot skirted a steaming puddle, catching a glimpse of himself in an unusually reflective monitor screen. He was a sorry sight. After a few decades, keeping the rain off was too much trouble, so his paint job was now mottled and scarred. It didn't hurt unless he stayed out in it, but it played hell with his finish.

BURNING BRIDGES

He glanced back at Stiletto—somehow she remained pristine. It irritated him in a way he couldn't put his finger on—possibly it was that what little he had learned about Stiletto in the last few orbital-cycles told him that her finish wouldn't have concerned her in the least, yet somehow she still managed to gleam.

“This sucks.” he kicked an empty energon canister against the wall, “I can't wait to get out of here.”

Stiletto regarded him coolly. “You've changed your tune.”

“Nah. Not here, the bunker. I'd rather be here than out there. I mean, here, the MCSF. My tour is almost up. Forty-two stellar cycles here, seven on foot patrol in Ultrix. I've got less than a stellar cycle left before I light out for Crystal City and start over.”

Stiletto looked at him for a long time, “Crystal City's gone.”

Overshoot's processor skipped a refresh, “Wait, what?”

“Some Resistance fragwit strapped on an antimatter vest, took the MTS to the center of town, and blew himself--and the whole Spark-damned city--up. It was on the vidcast.”

“But...”

“I'm not sure it matters. No way could anyone afford to power those crystals anymore.” Stiletto spoke evenly, clipped, efficient.

Overshoot imagined it, silent, dark, towering crystals only reflecting the scant light of the two moons. He shivered—it was an eerie image.

“That's what I'm saying! Such a waste...” he slumped into a nearby chair, “Let's talk about something else.”

“Why?”

“What?”

“I don't follow,” said Stiletto, genuinely confused.

“When someone says ‘let's talk about something else,’ you don't say ‘why?’ you say, ‘what?’ as in, ‘What shall we talk about?’”

“Why?”

Overshoot sighed, “Forget it, I should have remembered you were built without an empathy chip.”

Stiletto did look hurt at that, at least, “I'm sorry.”

He chuckled, without humor, “Yeah I know, but there's nothing you can do. Whatever happens, the war could end tomorrow and I'll still never get to see Crystal City.”

They were silent for a long time.

“I've been to Crystal City,” Stiletto said, after what felt like an awkward eternity.

Overshoot perked up a little, “Oh? What was it like?”

“Beautiful.”

BURNING BRIDGES

He blinked as much as his visor allowed. “Beautiful” was not a word he associated with Stiletto’s vocabulary, “efficient?” yes, “tactically sound?” absolutely, but “beautiful,” no. It was a pre-war word, a pre-MCSF word, a word from the time when Overshoot’s life made sense. There was nothing beautiful in Kalis, and there never would be.

“When I joined the Maximal Flying Corps, we did a display over Crystal City once. Even though two thirds of the crystals had gone dark by then it was still beautiful. The way they sparkled... I’d never seen anything like it before, or since” Stiletto’s faceplate softened as a faraway look crept into her optics; after a little while she seemed to realize she was being caught in an unguarded moment and the spell was broken, “better than here, anyway.”

“Hey Stiletto,” Overshoot asked, “Ever kill a Predacon?”

Her eyes unfocused, as they occasionally seemed to, and she stared at nothing for fifteen or twenty nano-kliks. The fingers on her left hand twitched and he wondered where she was.



A few short seconds and Stiletto was standing among a heap of prone, barely-conscious bodies. Predacons were strewn about, clutching vulnerable joints and pressure points. Her sensors were alive with information. She knew she was burning through her fuel reserves but she couldn’t bring herself to care. All that mattered was getting to Betabear and putting an end to this madness.

Betabear had freed himself. She had caused enough of a distraction that the part of the mob that was still mobile was slinking away. He waved a weary hand in greeting as a gray and green Predacon troublemaker, who she recognized as Sea Panic, reared up from behind, light glinted off something small and metallic in his hand. Betabear couldn’t see him and she doubted his proximity sensors were working particularly well. She couldn’t close the gap and there was too much noise on any of the available bands to get him a message. Her stun-gun was gone, only one thing remained.

Stiletto felt the weight of the knife in her hand, hesitated just a second, and let it fly.

She snapped back to the present abruptly, using all her willpower to keep from flooding her engine. She forced herself to adopt a casual tone, silently grateful that he never pressed her about her odd behavior. “I’m not sure.”

That didn’t seem to be the answer he was expecting, “How do you mean?”

Stiletto looked past him, optics unfocused. “The MFC ran a few sorties right at the beginning, when it looked like maybe we could just scare the Resistance into backing down. I dropped my fair share of high explosive but I never saw what it hit—could have been Preds, Maximals, civvies... even Builders for all I knew. I think after Fortress Maximus went down they got scared. It was obvious we were in it for the long haul. They concluded the Flying Corps wasn’t worth the energon expenditure, started reactivating the Noisemaze Terrorbots, and I got posted here.” Even to her, it sounded flat, rehearsed. Overshoot was giving her a suspicious look.

“You don’t seem that beaten up over it.”

“Killing Predacons or the posting?”

“Either, both.” Overshoot narrowed his optics at her.

“It’s not my place.” Scrap, she’d said that too quickly, without thinking. Maybe he hadn’t noticed?

BURNING BRIDGES

Overshoot snorted, “So you’re just like one of those drones? You just go where you’re put? No argument? No question?”

Stiletto cocked her head to one side, “Don’t you?”

“Frag no!” he paused, and the look on his face told her he was about to concede the point. “Well, yes, I go, but I at least have the decency to grumble about it. Actually...” His absent nodding was interrupted by an angry klaxon, the normal flickering white light replaced with flashing emergency yellow. The proximity sensors at the Altihex end of the bridge had been tripped.

“Scrud...” Overshoot gave a low whistle... “It’s the Resistance.”

“It has to be. I was beginning to think they weren’t coming.” Stiletto edged closer to the armored wall of the bunker and slid back one of the shutters, “Nothing on the bridge yet.”

“I was very strongly hoping they weren’t coming!” Overshoot jabbered, flaring emotion circuits apparently drawing power from some of his lesser motor functions.

Stiletto was all business, “Get it together, Maximal,” she said, “It’s just us and a whole bridge to defend. Remember your orders.”

“How many Terrorbots are fuelled and active?”

She dropped her optics to the display on her wrist. “All three, patrolling just west of here, they’re low on fuel but they might provide a distraction. Signaling now.”

“Bridge sensors are reading movement!” Overshoot gibbered as he stabbed at the monitor controls. The rain was particularly heavy and the sensor nodes were beginning to corrode.

“Give me numbers.”

He shook his cranial unit to defrag it, “Uh... between six and twelve, all about Maximal sized but I’m reading a lot of energon out there. They’re fuelled up but good!”

“It’s a scouting party. Long range I’m guessing, hence the extra energon. If they get across this bridge they’ll signal their main force and before the Builders can reposition, the Resistance will have a back door to strike at each of the Torus States in turn.”

Overshoot abruptly sat, heavily, missing the chair and perching awkwardly on the side of the console, “You mean we’re it?”

He seemed nauseated. She suppressed an urge to berate him. It wouldn’t help him and might slow him down. She consciously edged her patience and empathy for him up a notch. “Us and three half-fuelled Terrorbots, yes.”

His shoulders did that annoying circular shrug. “Well that’s just—”

She had already made the foot of the ladder, and cut him off as she scampered up. “We have to get out there, now.”

Overshoot sighed, “We really do, don’t we?”

As she crested the ladder, instead of the familiar vista of pylons and cables, instead of the howling of the winds through the unnatural canyon, her senses took her back to the before.

BURNING BRIDGES

“Stiletto! Quit stalling and do something!” Aura’s voice came in loud and clear in Stiletto’s audio-receptors. “You must have optics on the target by now.”

Neural receptors surged with pain as her senses reasserted themselves and let her know where she was. This was much later, or maybe straight after—definitely not before—Stiletto’s internal chronology was patchy but she was sure of that much. The flashbacks came in so many configurations and intensities. This was a common one though. She tried to will herself to experience the present, the Resistance threat at Melpomene, but it was futile.

“One cycle, Aura, just double-checking.” Stiletto could see the huge purple and gray Predacon now. He was twitching and pacing, sparks occasionally crackling from his joints.

“Come on! If we don’t take him down, Sledgehammer will get away and that shipment will wind up in Resistance hands.”

Stiletto sighed, “OK, I’m going in for an arrest.”

Wolfgang’s voice broke in on the same frequency, “Arrest? You’re crazier than ten petabytes of RAM on a five petabyte motherboard! He’ll take you apart! I’ve never seen any bot this hopped up on the nucleon before.”

“I have to try.”

Aura broke in. “Frag it, Stiletto! Don’t let one mistake—” But she was already moving.

Sledgehammer’s optics were wild. When he saw her he roared with fury. “Sledgehammer of Peptex,” she said, beginning the approved MCSF rights reading, “By the accords laid down in the Pax Cybertronica I hereby...”

He charged. Stiletto tried to dodge his wild swinging fist but he caught her a glancing blow on the side of the head. Sledgehammer’s nucleon-infused hydraulics gave him a strength that smashed her to the floor, causing a momentary glitch in her visual feed.

Sledgehammer’s momentum took him barreling past the prone Stiletto and she had time to scramble to her feet before he turned around, “I hereby...” she continued, “charge you with a breach of the Pax.”

He cocked his head on one side. There was a shipping crate to his left. Keeping an eye on Stiletto he smashed it into fragments with one punch.

“He’s going for the contraband!” Aura said, urgently. “Oh scrap, would you look at that!”

Sledgehammer had retrieved a sword almost as long as he was tall.

“That punk filched an energo-sword?” Wolfgang said with awe, “A Builder weapon—he shouldn’t even be able to lift it.”

Aura’s voice was even more urgent now, “It’s the nucleon. Stiletto you haven’t got a chance, shut him down!”

Sledgehammer advanced towards her, the tainted fuel had addled his processor beyond the use of speech but his capacity for violence did not seem at all diminished. Stiletto watched his advance nervously, “A breach of the Pax, including handling stolen goods, dealing in controlled substances, use of said substances, and...”

The sword came down. She only just jumped back in time as the massive weapon carved a shrieking gash in the warehouse floor; “... possession of a deadly weapon!”

“Frag it all, Stiletto! Your orders were to shoot to kill.” The sliding doors of the warehouse flew open as Aura and Wolfgang advanced, firing their blasters. The particle beams tore great holes in Sledgehammer’s thick armor but failed to slow him down. He might be dead from his wounds in a few cycles, but right now the nucleon was

BURNING BRIDGES

keeping him moving. He hit Wolfgang at a run, knocking him flat, and lunged for Aura. She ducked the sword and jumped up, wrapping her arms and legs around his torso.

Sledgehammer flailed around, trying hard to shake her off.

“Stiletto, come on!” Aura yelled desperately, “Hand to hand! Finish him off!”

Stiletto looked down. The knives were there. It would be so easy to just walk up behind Sledgehammer and jab one in his main energon duct. She let the knife slide into her hand. The weight felt good. She could sense the point was sharp.

“I...”

“Do it now!” But it was too late, Sledgehammer managed to shake Aura off and round on Wolfgang. The great energo-sword slashed down and suddenly Stiletto’s audio-receptors were filled with Wolfgang’s horrified screams as his leg came off at the knee, the foot bizarrely changing from blue to red as it hit the ground and clattered around. Sledgehammer wasted no time, leaping away from the carnage and disappearing into a second-story window.

Stiletto started back to the present, aware that Overshoot was looking to her, of all bots, for moral support. If only he knew what a joke that was.

“Us and three drones versus the whole Resistance...” His voice quavered with horrified awe. He attempted to stare down the span of the bridge, but visibility was almost zero in the rain.

Stiletto shook her head irritably, “Don’t exaggerate—sensors estimate no more than a dozen ‘bots.’”

“Once again you miss the point,” Overshoot slapped a charge cartridge into his photon blaster, “That was what we call ‘exaggeration for effect’.”

“Exaggeration of any kind has no place in a combat zone. Are you ready?” Stiletto was already moving forward.

Overshoot sighed, “Oh yeah, you know me, I was forged ready...” but she was already advancing and would soon reach the relative safety of the closest towers. She sensed him hurrying after her.



When he caught up to her, she was kneeling, mostly concealed behind a collapsed support frame. Overshoot joined her and they scanned the bridge as best they could, creating a local wireless connection to share sensor data so nothing was missed.

For agonizing minutes they waited, the only sounds were the rhythmic drumming of the rainstorm and the mechanical whir of their servos as their heads swiveled left and right.

Overshoot was about to say something when a blaster bolt hurtled out of the gloom and ricocheted in a shower of sparks. It was followed by a volley, most going over their heads.

“Get ready” said Stiletto, “This is it.”

“Thanks for the update,” Overshoot snarked, but he gripped his gun tighter. He checked his wrist display, “Drones are en route.”

Stiletto nodded, not taking her optics off the vapor-shrouded span before her.

BURNING BRIDGES

The first wave hit them almost without warning. The Resistance commander, whoever he or she was, had obviously noticed the advantage the poor visibility represented. The first few bots had crept up in robot mode, eschewing a wild charge or the rev of motors for a sudden, violent assault.

Stiletto hit the deck faster than Overshoot could see but he was only an instant behind her as particle fire whipped overhead. The charge started now, battle-cries and pounding mechanical feet joining the fizzing energy bolts. All Overshoot could do was fire indiscriminately.

Stiletto was firing too, methodically targeting the Resistance fighters as they tried to cover each other. Four would advance, take aim and fire as the next four charged.

“They’re covering a lot of ground.” Stiletto warned.

“Yes, but they’re in the open, pour it on!” With blaster fire sparking overhead and ankle-deep in chemical-soaked rust, Overshoot couldn’t say that he was exactly in his element. Still, Stiletto had been right, he was a crack shot, and this was a situation he could deal with—eight moving targets, no cover. At the Academy he’d have done this with one optic shuttered. He took advantage of a break in the fire to raise his head slightly. Three fighters were slightly ahead of the others. He ran a quick targeting routine on their cranial units, making sure he corrected for their heads turning in shock when the first went down. Sighting down barrel he squeezed the trigger. Three shots, three sparking holes.

“Not bad!” Stiletto patted his arm and pointed, “Look, they’re retreating!”

The five survivors transformed and drove backwards, firing all the while. The biggest truck had a jury-rigged mortar attachment. It coughed once and a thunderous blast threw Overshoot and Stiletto to the ground.

Overshoot shook his cranial unit and waited for the pixels to realign. Damage control looked OK—he was scuffed but functional. He pinged Stiletto and got a positive response. She was fully functional but the Resistance troops were gone.

“They’ll be back, pointy.” he said, by way of filling the silence.

“Yes—if they’ve worked out there’s just two of us they’ll come in force. We need those drones.”

As if summoned by a wireless signal there was a mechanical rumble behind them and both Maximals turned to see the unwieldy green bulk of the first Terrorbot threading its way through the torn-up span of the bridge.

“Right on time!” yelled Overshoot, “We might just win this! I need to open the engine housing, hand me one of your knives.”

“I don’t have one. Sorry.” She gave him a sidelong glance and he stared at her intently.

“Oh, OK, I just thought...”

“Nope, sorry...”

“No problem, I’ll improvise.” Overshoot ran to the drone and checked its power readouts and ammo count, “This one’s looking good.”

“Good, tell it to cover me, I’m going to scout the other end of the bridge.” Stiletto hefted her heavy pistol in one hand and steadied it with the other.

BURNING BRIDGES

“Seriously?” Overshoot babbled, “You’re going to leave me?”

“I’m going to come back, but if we’re going to have a chance we need more information. You know as well as I, the drones won’t be any use without targeting data,” her faceplate was set and would brook no arguments, “Just cover me, alright?”

She jogged off, moving quickly but conserving energy for the next fight.

It all clicked into place. “Hey Stiletto,” Overshoot couldn’t resist calling, “I’ve worked out what your deal is.”

“That’s nice,” she shot back over her shoulder, “I’ve always wanted to know. You can tell me when I get back.”



“The mook was holding a camera.”

“What?” Stiletto blinked, “Say that again?”

“A camera.” Wolfgang repeated, though his tone was kindly. “Sea Panic was trying to take a quote-unquote selfie with Betabear. ‘Look, we survived the riot,’ that sort of thing.”

Stiletto slumped in her seat, “I thought it was a weapon.”

“I know, look, it happens.” The blue and grey Maximal turned to his partner, all yellows and blues. “Aura, don’t it happen?”

“It certainly does, in a violent crowd control scenario like that, situations evolve, things get missed. You can’t blame yourself.”

She shook her head, “I don’t see anyone else to blame.”

“I’m telling you it’s OK,” Stiletto suppressed a wince as Wolfgang took her hand, “We’ve already wiped the plaza sensors cleaner than Sunstreaker’s finish—to be square with ya, the riot had already done most of the work for us, and your knife was retrieved before any civvies saw it. No one’s ever going to find out.”

“But...”

“Look, Sea Panic was a stupid, thuggish dock-worker slinging simultronics on the side. I even busted him myself once—you may have done everyone a favor by giving him the Harlem sunset.” Wolfgang shrugged, “I think it’s time we closed the book on this.”

Stiletto was struggling to process this, “Sea Panic, but?”

“Look, we’ve booked you in for an appointment at The Mandala.” Aura suppressed a shudder, while Wolfgang’s expression was carefully blank. “We think it’s for the best. I’ll send you the details.”

Stiletto wanted to wipe Aura indulgent smile right off her face.

She shook herself back to the present. Flashes in a warzone could get her killed. She crept past the pylons closest to Altihex without incident and was approaching the far end of the bridge. They were shrouded in vapor when she spotted them—eight bots, then eight more and a further eight and on and on they were arrayed like Decepticons in a Great War propaganda vid... the ranks looked endless. She checked her HUD - there were exactly ninety-six bots, Maximals and Predacons of all shapes and sizes. This was no scouting party, it was a full troop movement. They weren’t testing the viability of the Kalis front, they had already committed.



The bots were waiting eagerly while an enormous Maximal shouted a mixture of threats and encouragement. Stiletto realized that they had no idea she was there. She had the drop on them, but there were so many...

She could get a little closer, try for a more definitive scan of their weapons and capabilities. Maybe even hear some spoken orders so they would have a better idea of what they were dealing with.

After shutting down any functions that caused more than the most minimal sound, she crept forward, low, aiming for a position behind a wrecked cargo-hauler. She was only mechanometers away from the leader now. A scan of his IFF signal told her his name was "Bighorn", although given how he projected his voice during his oration, "Bullhorn" may have been more apt a name.

She told her sensor suite to gather data. Statistics and measurements started to stream in. She did not have time to consciously assimilate it all now but she hoped she and Overshoot would have time to feed the data into the Terrorbots to give them an advantage in the coming battle.

When she had gathered as much as she dared, she decided it was time to get moving. Slowly, cautiously she stepped backwards and was horrified to find she couldn't move. She had caught her ankle in a loop of wire that spilled from the cargo-hauler like entrails. She shook her

spiked foot, hoping to free it noiselessly. 'If only I had a knife,' she thought, carelessly, then cursing herself as she opened the door to another memory.

In the chaotic dataworld of her mindscape, he leered large and threatening, looming impossibly close to her, fangs extending, syringe fingers clicking against one another in an endless, rhythmless tapping. Though the Predacon Secret Police worked in tandem with the Maximal Command Security Force, few Maximals ever saw the insides of The Mandala. Fewer still emerged.

"I don't know if you can help." she asked, more haltingly than she would have liked. The black and red Predacon opposite her sat almost disturbingly still, waiting just a fraction too long before replying.

"Of course I can. Your declining efficiency rating, your doubts about the righteousness of your cause... The... glitches in your memory matrix. I can certainly fix all of that. It is, after all, what your superiors have ordered."

"Yes. It's just... I don't know how much of it I want... or don't want..."

The surgeon arched his left eyebrow. "I can take or leave whatever you wish, it is entirely your preference."

She nodded, rapidly, "OK, well then I think I'd like to go back before the riot... just take that whole afternoon. I don't want to remember... what I did."

BURNING BRIDGES

“Very well.” Vampire flexed his needle thin talons and an intense look came over his faceplate as he began to concentrate. “You’ll have to sit very still, mnemosurgery is a delicate art...”

Her vision came back in a rush. She was horrified that her memory glitch had betrayed her at such a crucial moment. She shook the cable off as quickly as she could but it was obvious she had lingered too long. There were signals approaching, only mechanometers away.

Hefting her pistol, she reconfigured her power supply, adjusting the energon flow for speed, rather than conservation. Her purpose-built servos began to hum with potential energy. Stiletto sprang. Sprinting at full pelt, she was faster than any other bot she knew of except maybe the ancient Autobot Blurr but he’d be a rusted statue by now.

As soon as she broke cover, they began firing. A blaster bolt punched a smoking hole where she had been crouching a moment before. Her speed helped her dodge the next attack, a rocket propelled grenade howled past her at hip height, detonating against a bridge support. She fired back and caught the bot in the hand. He yelped and dropped the weapon.

She fired again and managed to take the knee-plate off the closest Maximal. He doubled up in a shower of sparks, swearing violently. She tried for a shot to the head to put him down but the gun betrayed her, hissing sadly and ejecting a little puff of smoke. The acidic vapor had gotten to the firing mechanism. Stiletto froze.

“Hey Bighorn,” a Maximal to her left yelled, “she’s out of ammo.”

“What are we waitin’ for then?” they started to advance, not even bothering with guns. Bighorn was slapping a large club menacingly against his palm.

Instantly, instinctively, Stiletto’s hands went to her magnetic sheaths but they were still empty.

I promised myself.

There was nothing else left but to run. She leapt right at Bighorn while aiming a kick at his solid chest. The servos in her leg struts propelled her bodily into the air and the added force sent him reeling backwards, growling.

Finding herself in open space she ran as fast as she could for the Kalis end of the bridge...





Overshoot was anxiously drumming his fingers, squinting down the sight of his blaster. Another drone had driven up and the two of them sat there in tank mode, whirring and burbling to themselves in the open space between the two Kalis-anchored pylons. It was as close to being comforted as anything in Kalis.

He sat up slightly and wiped a stinging drip from his optic. He'd have to be careful or the rain would do permanent damage and replacement optics were expensive.

As he raised the scope again the drone to his right made a strangled sort of noise and fired its main gun without warning.

Instantly Overshoot saw a lithe shape silhouetted against the enormous explosion of the tank shell. He aimed and... "Cease fire! Cease fire for frag's sake!" he told the drone, "It's a friendly, she's a friendly!"

The other drone was slow on the uptake and fired another blast at Stiletto's hurtling figure. This one was closer, although still off the mark, and the shockwave catapulted the purple Maximal into the air.

She landed, obviously stunned, a few mechanometers away and Overshoot hurried to drag her into cover one-handed, pointing his gun down the bridge.

He gave her a quick scan, she was battered but nothing major had been damaged. He could tell that her internal repair systems were working hard but she gave him a grim smile.

"Bit off a little... more than I could chew..." she reached up to wipe a dribble of hydraulic fluid from the corner of her mouth, "I'm fast but... they're coming. More than... we thought."

"That's OK, I've got a plan."

"What... can... I do?" She tried to sit up but apparently her nano-bots hadn't got as far as her leg joints yet.

"Nothing yet, you're too banged up and I'm gonna need you airworthy. Fragging Terrorbots used you for target practice." Overshoot hammered his fist on the heavy armor of the nearest drone and it burbled in response. "Luckily I've got a use for them beyond not shooting straight."

There were shapes now coming out of the mist, shouting and firing. The drones had interlocked their fields of fire and were keeping the Resistance at bay, but their targeting matrices were hopelessly out of date and struggled to track the technologically advanced Maximals and Predacons. Their cannon fire added sound and fury, but Resistance casualties seemed minimal.

Overshoot was firing too, but mostly he was checking behind him for a sign of the final Terrorbot, 8RE-2Z1. It arrived just as he was about to give up hope, taking a horribly inefficient path around a mortar crater.

He fiddled with his wrist-mounted remote and got the drones to transform. They shifted into robot mode without protest, barely stopping the constant barrage of suppressing fire.

What he had in mind was not exactly in the poorly translated user's manual the Quintessons had so kindly supplied with their product. He got the drones to advance slowly, firing all the way, while he scurried behind.

"Be ready to pick me up at the center of the bridge in two or three cycles."

The Resistance fell back slowly, firing at the drones. Overshoot checked the three fuel and damage readouts carefully. If any of the Resistance fighters got a good shot in, this whole plan would be for nothing. One or two wouldn't do, it'd have to be all three.

Amazingly his luck held. As they reached the center of the span, where the primary cables dipped lowest, he commanded the drones to open their rear engine covers simultaneously and got to work...



Stiletto was lying in the sludgy rust while the nano-bots worked on her wrecked hip. She asked for a projected repair time and was told two cycles—not bad, all told. The hulking drones had almost completely disappeared in the stinging cloud now and she couldn't see Overshoot any longer.

Nano-kliks ticked by, green icons told her that her various systems had been repaired or at least sufficiently patched. She was peering around the paltry cover of the tower when she became aware of knife-shapes intruding on her vision, she gasped and tasted mech-fluid in her mouth. The ache in her processor was tremendous—it had to be operating at well above normal capacity. She didn't even fight the vision this time.

"I killed him. I killed..." She couldn't say his name. Her long limbs were tucked up under her as she rocked back and forth slowly, at an irregular frequency. She felt as pathetic as she must look.

"I know," Aura said, kindly, "But you shouldn't be able to remember that."

"No? Well I still can." Stiletto looked at her, pleading, "I can remember the shape of his optics as the knife went in. I can remember the distress signal his transmitter put out. It tasted like copper."

Aura took her hand and gently bade her to get up, "As we told you before, you can't change what happened—all you can do is try to live through it."

"I can't stop remembering. It comes back whether I want it to or not. The surgery..."

"The surgery worked. You're projecting, Stiletto, you know the facts of what happened so you're filling in the blanks. Vampire warned you this might happen."

"Then what's the point? I keep turning it over, I'm an expert with knives, I'm purposely built for it. Why didn't I throw to wound?"

Aura reached up to touch her faceplate, "The point, dear Stiletto, is that no-one can hold onto a false memory forever. We can get you through this."

Overshoot's panicked transmission jerked her back to the present. "I don't know if you can hear me... I need evac like... yesterday..."

Never again, she swore. "Come in, come in Overshoot... I've got you..."

"The plan's gone sideways, that is to say... it's worked too well... I'll explain later... I'm pinned down..."

Stiletto jumped up and boosted into airplane mode. It felt glorious to be flying again, even though she couldn't make time to enjoy it. After arriving at Kalis, she had overflowed the ruins a few times, surveyed the bridge, even got as far as the other side of Altihex, but the whole vista just depressed her and the acid rain made it more trouble than it was worth.

Reaching the top of her climb she scanned about for Overshoot and saw him in the dead-center of the bridge, behind a wall of Terrorbots. They were firing desperately at the Resistance troops even as smoke poured out of them and their lifeless optics flashed an ominous red.

BURNING BRIDGES

“Hurry Stiletto, I’ve got nano-kliks at most!” She could hear his terror, but there was something else there too, he really believed she could do it.

Frag right I can.

She dove like a technohawk stooping at its prey, half-rolling to avoid the support cables. She threaded a course behind the drones, allowing herself to slow down just enough for Overshoot to grab on. They wobbled while she worked out the new weight distribution and managed to get them climbing again, shots crackling ineffectually through the air around them before the shockwave hit. The centre of the bridge, drones, Resistance and all, erupted in a towering mushroom cloud as Stiletto and Overshoot were tossed around by its wake. Stiletto had to shut off every optical sensor to avoid overload and concentrate on keeping her nose in the right direction, which right now was simply “away.”

“Hang on... I’m losing it.” Stiletto felt Overshoot’s hands grip tighter around her fuselage as she pointed them back towards Kalis...

“That... “he said in a voice that he presumably thought sounded triumphant but actually just sounded tired, “is why they call them Overcharge drones. I overloaded them, all three at once... and well... the bridge isn’t going to be in Resistance hands. Or anyone else’s.” His optics shined, and seemed on the verge of leaking.

“It’s just a bridge, Overshoot.” Stiletto felt her overtaxed supply of energon sputter and give out. They were mechanometers above the sludgy Kalis ground now and she glided them in, transforming and sitting down heavily.

Overshoot sat down beside her and they didn’t say anything for a while as systems rebooted and fuel-levels stabilized.

“Will you look at that?” he said, wearily, his outstretched arm pointing at the smoking bridge. A ragged gash had been torn clean through the middle, and the support cables were snapping one by one. As they watched, the central span between the four towers disintegrated from the middle out, plummeting into the void below. The changing weight distribution proved too much for the north-east pylon. It succumbed to its ancient damages and wrenched downward, pulling most of the way out of the canyon side before coming to rest at a crazy angle.”That stood for millions of stellar cycles and we just blew it up.” He shook his head, “Amazing what you can do in a day.”

“As long as the Resistance doesn’t rebuild it.”

“Nah, they can’t—that took proper Builder-tech. Constructicons with plenty of energon and supplies, working for a long time. There wasn’t another one like it on Cybertron. Sad really. Even if we win this, it’ll never be repaired.”

Stiletto was unmoved, “Not as sad as a Resistance invasion of the Torus States.”

“Maybe...”

“OK,” she said, “Let’s hear it. What’s my deal?”

“Oh...” said Overshoot, “It’s something to do with blades, right? Your name, you see... Most of us have names that mean something, don’t we? I’m called Overshoot because I shoot stuff... yeah it’s pretty thin sometimes... but there has to be a reason you’re called Stiletto and I’ve never seen you with a knife or sword.”

“And you never looked at my feet?” She held her ankle up, showing off her narrow heel-strut. She tried to smile, but it came across as a sneer as the memory refused to be laughed aside. She looked down and swallowed hard, trying to rid herself of the copper taste building in her throat. “No, you’re right. I made a mistake and... someone died...”

BURNING BRIDGES

“Yeah... I figured it'd be something like that—you're too noble and stupid not to be on the front-lines otherwise. Case in point... today you did everything right and a bunch of people are going to go on living.”

“Oh, is that what you think?” came a harsh voice from the smoking ruins behind them. Overshoot shrank back as an enormous shape came barreling out of the gloom. “Pity I'm on your side of the bridge, ain't it?”

Bighorn hit them like a battering ram. He was covered in cuts, dents and scrapes—half his face was missing its plating—but he still had his strength and he easily hoisted Overshoot into the air. Before Stiletto could react he dashed the Maximal to the ground and stamped down hard on his chest. Overshoot writhed as internal conduits ruptured and coolant started to pool around him.

“I can't change what happened to my bots,” Bighorn growled, “But you turncoats 're gonna pay.”

Overshoot was trying to call for help but his voice synthesizer was filling with fluid and he could only make a desolate clicking noise buried beneath the gurgling and bubbling liquid energon seeping loose from various crushed internal mechanisms.

Stiletto lunged at Bighorn but a sweep of his arm knocked her sideways. Metalliko wouldn't be any use against a slab of hawser-strong nano-muscle like him. She hit the ground hard. Her sense-circuits dropped out as her tactical programs rebooted.

“You're running away.” Aura looked and sounded disgusted.

“I don't have a choice. I can't trust myself.” Or you, she silently added. The whole thing stank of a cover-up, and she wanted no part of it.

“We've given you no end of choices. Why do you keep throwing them back at us?”

Stiletto stopped walking, sighed, and her shoulders slumped, “Because I can't pretend that it didn't happen.”

“No-one is asking you to. The mnemosurgery was a medical procedure to help you cope, so you could do your duty without hesitation.”

Stiletto rounded on her superior officer with barely contained rage. “Some medical procedure! I came out more screwed up than I was before!”

“Stiletto, we've been trying to tell you—the surgery was a success.”

Before she knew what she was doing she had Aura up against the wall with her arm to her throat, “Then why, in the name of the Chaos Bringer, can I. Still. Fragging. Remember. It!”

“Grow some bearings Stiletto. You can't remember scrap.” Aura was practically spitting with rage,

Stiletto released her, shoving her away, “That's a lie.”

“Believe what you want. Your transfer's been approved. You can spend the rest of your tour questioning yourself in Cybertron's skidplate or you can stay here, with your people, and face what's coming. Just remember, Kalis is cold this time of year.” Aura turned away, like Stiletto was beneath her notice.

“Not as cold as in here.”

Stiletto lay in a sensory-deprived haze as the nano-bots dealt with the impact of Bighorn's punch. She vaguely sensed the tiny machines sending signals to one another as they tried to work out how to get her mobile again.

Against all the clashing tolerance warnings telling her not to, Stiletto got up and lunged for Bighorn. His

BURNING BRIDGES

retaliation was artless but effective. A headbutt slammed her back to the ground. Overshoot shrieked and burbled, his noises becoming even more mechanical and strained as the huge Maximal continued to crush his torso.

She shook herself and dragged herself forwards, half crouching, half crawling.

“You just don’t stay down.” Bighorn sliced a kick at her face and she reeled back, spitting out a gob of mech-fluid. “Don’t the MCSF traitors teach you to know when you’re beat?”

Stiletto rolled onto her back and laughed, despite herself, faces loomed in front of her, Sledgehammer’s nucleonic rage, Wolfgang’s desperate agony, Vampire’s predatory grin disguised as bedside manner, Wolfgang’s twitching limb, and most of all, Sea Panic’s wide, terrified optics as the knife pierced his brain module, “Feels like that’s all they’ve ever done.” She closed her eyes, expecting oblivion...

Simultaneously without warning and inevitably, Stiletto found herself back in the riot. She wanted to cry out at the futility of it all. Her head span with the sounds and colors, some familiar, some new. The crowd was filled with faces she’d seen over and over, a thousand times, a million, and blank voids where Vampire’s needles had unpicked the tapestry of her memories.

Betabear was, as she always remembered, atop a pile of floored Predacons, leaking fuel from minor cuts and covered in dents. His power-levels were fluctuating and he looked about to go into stasis lock.

Vampire was there, though he shouldn’t be—she was sure of that much. He was trying to tell her something, to distract her, but this time she wouldn’t let him. This was the hardest. This was what she couldn’t admit, even to herself, this was why Aura’s accusations stung so much: she remembered it differently every time. Only the details—the names of the shops, the faces of the crowd, conveniently filled with people she’d met, teachers she’d had, merchants she’d frequented. The outcome was always the same... wasn’t it? The memories writhed and pulsed through her neural net. They fought where they met, one truth establishing dominance over another while it slunk away to build its strength, before surging back to the fore to rewrite Stiletto’s history once again...

Again, inevitably, the gray and green shape of Sea Panic rose up behind her colleague. Again he raised the camera. Stiletto tensed her throwing arm, except...

Neurons surged as the nanobots tried to rewire the pathways of her cranial circuits. She blinked, everything was different, Betabear was well aware of Sea Panic. She saw him turn, grab the luckless Predacon round the throat and start to squeeze.

Stiletto tried desperately to call out, to stop it. Her sensors picked up Sea Panic’s lifesigns de-stabilizing as the battle-rage took Betabear.

She looked down, the knife in the process of flying from her fingers. She frantically attempted to switch her targeting solution from lethal to incapacitating, but it was too late.

Betabear slumped sideways as the blade buried itself in the back of his cranium.

Stiletto’s optics powered back up. Innate programming that she had kept at bay for many orbital cycles rushed to the forefront. Unconsciously she scanned the debris around her for an edge, weight and balance, started calculating trajectories, wind resistance, Bighorn’s probable movements, impact points, armor thickness...

Bighorn stopped stamping and roared in anger as the shard of metal erupted from his shoulder.

“I thought I’d dealt with you, race traitor!”

“Yeah, lots of people think that.”

Stiletto gathered another shard and let it go, burying it in the mess of circuitry that was one side of the huge

BURNING BRIDGES

Maximal's face.

"Thing is, I think I've worked it out."

"Oh yeah?" Bighorn clearly didn't know what she was talking about, he was just playing for time. Stiletto let him. It wouldn't make a difference.

She ducked his charge and spun, powering up her palm magnets. The improvised blades flew from Bighorn's wounds and settled themselves neatly in her hands. She jumped a clumsy kick and slashed him across the chest. It didn't do much more than surprise him, his armor was too thick, but the second's hesitation made it possible for her to shove the other shard into his flexible hip-joint. It tore through cabling and hydraulics in a spurt of hot mech-fluid and he toppled, going down on one knee.

He lunged at her and she danced away, lightly tossing a shard from hand to hand as she considered where to plant it. "See, Betabear, heard of him?"

"No!" Bighorn tried to stand and the hip gave way again.

"OK, thought not—just, indulge me, for a sec, would you?" Bighorn just growled.

"So, yeah, where was I? Betabear, that's it! He was my partner. He was a good mech—up for promotion—did a lot of outreach work with scrambled protoforms down in the projects. Thing is... do you see where this is going?" She sidestepped neatly as Bighorn attempted a clumsy, painful looking lunge.

"Stop your prattling, fool!" he roared.

"Rude. I'll be done in a minute. The thing is, our Betabear has a secret—a nasty little habit he can't quite kick. I don't know if it was from before he joined the force or if he picked it up undercover, but Betabear is hooked on a nasty little substance called nucleon—I'm sure you've heard of that one"

Bighorn came at her again, fists flailing, sparks pouring from his wounds. She sprang into a backflip, swatted his hands away kicked him in the face. He grunted as she continued.



“Yeah, so, Betabear’s got this habit that everyone sort of knows about, at least I did, before...” Stiletto chopped Bighorn’s elbow joint as he surged past her. He howled as the arm shut down with a little mechanical whine of protest.

“Now, the bit I can’t work out is if Sea Panic’s connected to Betabear’s dealer and he’s seen a chance, or if he’s just strung out on Nuke and can’t help himself. Either way, he’s going to kill that bot and I’ve got to do something.” Stiletto was babbling and she knew it—Bighorn didn’t care what she had to say and Overshoot was too damaged to process it. Still, she had to keep talking or Vampire’s modifications might kick in again. While she kept herself distracted she could fight.

“That’s the missing piece, that’s what I wasn’t getting. Sea Panic’s this big, soft target. I could have hit any number of non-lethal places to shut him down. You know, like I’m doing to you right now.” Another piece of debris found a home in the pit of Bighorn’s functional arm. He cried out as fibro-steel tendons were severed.

“Betabear however, he’s this big armored bot—looked a lot like you actually—you’d like him. To take him out from that distance it was a kill-throw or nothing. So I did it. Thing is, that looks kind of bad for the department. Even in these interesting times, Hero Cop Forced To Kill Drug-Addicted Partner makes for one PIT of a headline, so they got me when I was still processing what I’d done, convinced me that a bot called Vampire, for Primus’ sake, had my best interests at heart.”

Bighorn roared and went in for the charge head down. Stiletto twisted easily aside and tripped him. He cursed as he went chin first into the slimy rust.

“So they took away my memories, but left the guilt. Except now, I’m guilty about some scrap that I never even did. I keep asking where Betabear is but of course, no-one’s seen him, and like an idiot I never question it. Problem is, it all came back to me... come on, ask me when?”

The big Maximal shook with fury, trying to get himself upright without using his crippled arms.

“You’re no fun. Fine, it came back to me when I thought about how I needed to kill you. I should thank you actually—you’ve been a big help. I mapped about a dozen places on your body I could place knives with, oh, let’s be modest, ninety-five percent certainty.” She was behind him now, standing over him with the improvised blade poised ready to strike. Even Bighorn calmed slightly when he realized how easy it would be.

“And that got me to thinking. Why would I screw up something as easy as that throw? That’s my thing see—that’s my programming - I’m Stiletto. You haven’t heard of me, but trust me,” She held the blade to the back of his cranial unit, “when it comes to knives....”

“I’ll break you!” he was yelling through a mouthful of broken teeth, “I’ll kill you for this...”

“...I don’t miss.” She punched the final shard through the top of his head. The wound sparked and he convulsed for a second before his fiery optics dimmed and he finally lay still.

Overshoot had managed to reroute his speech circuits to the secondary speaker his vehicle mode used. It was an eerie effect as the voice seemed to come from all of him at once, “Wow, that was quite something. No wonder they call you Stiletto.”

“You hear all that?” she asked, wearily.

“Most of it, sure. Want to talk about it?”

She sighed, combat-mode euphoria giving way to the tiredness deep in her struts, “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Why?”

Stiletto punched him lightly on the arm and he yelped, “Careful, I’m fragile here!”

She helped her battered companion to his feet. “You’re not going to be transforming anytime soon. It’s a long walk back to civilization.”

“You can fly.”

“Yes, but I’m hardly going to abandon another— I’m not going to abandon my partner, am I? We destroyed a magnificent bridge together.” She offered him her shoulder to lean on, “Come on, you can tell me the other nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-seven reasons why they call them Overcharge drones.”

“I actually only had three.”

“Make some up. We’ve got time.”



In his command module deep inside Resistance headquarters, Lio Convoy leaned back and tried to take it all in. Dozens of screens surrounded him, piping in information from every corner of Cybertron and even a few ships and outposts. Every scrap of intelligence they could find, raw and unfiltered, displayed before him absent of context. Some thought it a useless affectation, but he knew better. Though sometimes it was fruitless, occasionally he emerged from the data-stream with new insights: unexpected implications to the Targetmaster Extirpation, a new angle on the Darksiders, an intuition regarding the economy of Vos.

His reverie was interrupted by B’Boom bursting into his sanctuary. “Boss, bro, you gotta approve this air-strike ASAP!”

Lio Convoy steepled his fingers and leaned forward. He was mildly irritated that his session had been interrupted before some useful knowledge could be gleaned, but he suppressed it. “Why?”

“Dude, the Melpomene Bridge operation, total bust. MCSF traitors blew the bridge. Bighorn got stuck on the other side and went down hard. Another seventeen MIA or KIA. BA hacked a satellite and we got eyes on the two that did it. If we scramble now, we can—”

With a single raised hand, Lio Convoy cut off the enthusiastic interloper. “I’ll save you the trouble, B’Boom. No. Permission not granted.”

The blue Maximal’s face fell. “Bu-but, why, Boss-dude? Everyone loved Bighorn, we can avenge him if we act now!”

“Don’t you understand, this isn’t about revenge? We’re fighting a war of liberation here. We can’t afford to waste resources hunting down every truculent MCSF or PSP.” B’Boom started to turn. “Besides, such resources are better spent on the Builders. There’s still a chance the MCSF will come around to our way of thinking. The Builders... the Builders have no future.”

His mighty blue soldier started to walk away, shoulders slumped. Lio Convoy took one last wistful glance at his monitors, then shut them off with a wireless signal. He fell in beside his dejected trooper. “So, B’Boom, did I ever tell you about the time Bighorn and I took a run at the Cortex? It was just him and me at a forward

BURNING BRIDGES

listening post when we received word that a Builder with an exo-walker had been spotted in the vicinity. We'd all heard the rumors about the Games getting started again, so probability was high that it was a high value target. As it turned out..."



Overshoot had freed himself, thanks to the distraction she had provided. He stood over a pile of Terrorbots, waving a weary hand in greeting. Bighorn's black, white, and red form reared up from behind, light glinted off something small and metallic in his hand. Overshoot couldn't see him and she doubted his proximity sensors were working particularly well. She couldn't close the gap and there was too much noise on any of the available bands to get him a message. Her stun-gun was gone, only one thing left...

Stiletto felt the weight of the knife in her hand, and then hesitated. The object could be a weapon, but it could be something innocuous. A sensor of some sort.

Bighorn fired and Overshoot's head blew apart as she screamed in horror.

She felt herself trembling with terror, then realized she was being gently shaken awake by her partner. "Hey, pointy, you ok?"

She smiled up at Overshoot, and buried the doubts that threatened to once again drown her. "Getting there, big guy. Getting there."